



The Littlest Fox

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It was the year that the harvest never came that Sascha began to fear for his life. When the crops withered and dried to husks in the south or froze to death in the north, the hunters ventured into the woods to keep themselves alive, and Sascha knew they were looking for easy prey just like him.

The little fox lurked at the small outpost just beyond the veil of trees. The dying leaves were only now beginning to fall, covering the dirt floor in various shades of red, yellow, and orange, allowing his family to blend in. The moon hung dauntingly low in the sky, shining the slimmest amount of light over the otherwise darkened houses, and Sascha trained his eyes on the candle-lit rooms through thick windowpanes.

He watched as people sat down at the table in view. All heads were hung low. His gaze hardened as mothers brought out what scraps could be scrounged up for their children. He shifted his gaze to peer as others unloaded their bags of squirrels, rabbits, and occasionally, foraged fungi. Some families had tried their luck and picked at the forest's wild plants, while others gambled with starvation over poisoning. The fox adverted his stare from the unlucky ones who met their fate.

Sascha's stomach churned as his family observed the townsfolk. The heavy weight of sympathy was hanging over his tiny body. He made a half-hearted attempt to refocus his eyes on the array of hunted animals just like him, lifeless on the tables of the people, but had no choice but to turn away. That could be him. It was almost surprising that it wasn't at this point. The rest of his family may be clever, but it wouldn't matter in the end for Sascha, not when he would be the scrawny one left behind.

Sascha wasn't fast, his crippled back leg had seen to that. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd been left behind or had to trail the others for hours to catch up. He had seen the rest of his family bolt on numerous accounts without a thought paid

to his well-being and wasn't too inclined to think that if they were hunted this time the outcome would be any different.

He shook his head. There was no point in dwelling on worst case scenarios.

"We will be fine," his elder brother said, noticing Sascha's downward gaze. "The woods are thick with animals, and the trees are even thicker. Some must be hunted eventually anyways; it happens every year. No reason to fret."

Yet his soothing did nothing for Sascha. This year feels different, he thought. The woods may be thick, but now the hunters were desperate, now they needed more.

"Some must be hunted," Sascha repeated in a whisper to himself, turning back to gaze through the windows once more.

Some must be hunted.

The only question was, how was he going to make sure he wouldn't become part of the 'some'?

Days went by. The poachers came in hoards, the forest began to grow quiet, and Sascha was feeling the weight of the situation. Winter drew nearer every day and despite the rest of Sascha's family seeming to be oblivious to the current circumstances, he couldn't help but worry.

The snow-coated ground, which had once been covered in an array of animal prints from the residents of the woods, had been trampled by foreign feet. This year the white powder had been stomped over with thick treaded boots and disrupted by tricky snares laying beneath the surface.

Although, it wasn't until the first blizzard of the season when the woods seemed to ease at last, and all retreated back to town that Sascha was finally caught.

The wind wailed and the trees fractured in response. The skies had been leeched of their color until only an opaque white was left. The flakes were dense, coming down in impenetrable sheets, with unfathomable speed. Sascha was disappearing in the storm, the tip of his own nose was no longer visible.

The fox's ears twitched, seeking out sound in the silence that had settled with the snow. He was blind and deaf, moving through the trees based on faith alone. Keep moving, he thought to himself, he needed to keep moving. Even his thoughts felt muffled. As if somehow the storm had crept inside his head and was filling him up with snow from the inside as well.

It would have been impossible for Sascha to have noticed the hunter behind him, just as it was impossible for him to get away.

Sascha felt the arrow pierce through his back leg first. An uncanny warmth from the pain spread throughout his chilled body. Second was the tilting of his world as the hunter dragged the fox into the air by his tail. Third was sharp pressure of the man's

slim blade against his neck.

Sascha stilled in the man's grasp. He knew there was no way for him to escape, just as he knew there was no way he would be satisfied without making an attempt, nonetheless.

The fox cocked his head and looked into the eyes of the huntsman.

"You don't want me," Sascha pleaded. "I am but a scrawny fox with a bad leg. I would be no use on your table."

In spite of the blizzard, or perhaps because of it, the man guffawed at his words. His eye lined with tears was quickly wicked away by the wind as he shook his head at the fox.

"That may be so, but the fields are barren, the crops are dead, and your woods are sparse with meat. You, my friend, are the only straggler they left behind."

Sascha wanted to argue. He wanted to try to outsmart the huntsman as all the other cleverer foxes did in the tales his mother told. He wanted to trick the man with the click of his tongue and saunter back to his family victorious for once in his life. Yet no words seemed to come as the huntsman gave a meager wince at the little fox and finished the inevitable.