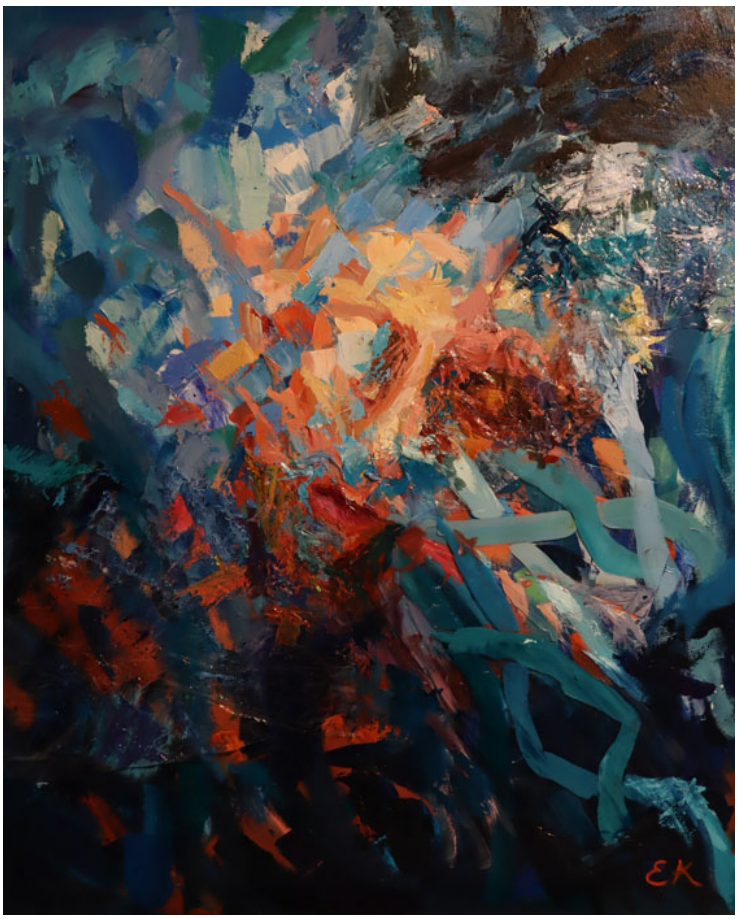
SHORT STORY

Hunter

by Roya Zendebudie



"Dragging My Feet" by Ellie Ko

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A feather wakes me up.

It’s a shade of white I can’t put my fingers on, ivory, vanilla? It is light, a slice of air, really.

“I could fly with this,” I find myself saying. I was in the forest the night before, hunting a rabbit just to let it live in the end. The rabbit had the galaxy in its eyes, and the pink of its ears was pure. I let my heart melt, as if I had any. The sun set before I had a chance to find my way out. Putting my sack against the ancient roots of a birch tree, I lay down, letting my eyelids close for a while.

It is bright when the feather grazes against my cheek. I wake up with a peace of mind that only comes with isolation. I am alone in the woods. Only I’m not.

“Try it, then,” a voice whispers in my ear. The voice of a pesky child, a young angry man or an anxious woman — I can’t tell. I would’ve been startled, if it wasn’t for the vermilion spreading on my chest.

“I am… dying.”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic,” the voice is giggling. I feel a breathing, weightless entity near my face.

“It is bad, though.” A hand, invisible, almost ethereal, stretches on me. “You’re ruining my feather!”

The feather has landed on my chest, right on the puddle of blood, slowly sinking in.

“It was meant as a gift, you know,” the voice sounds irked but amused: a scenario is unfolding before its eyes, a scenario it had long anticipated, or composed.

“How did this happen?” I can hardly breathe. The forest is blurring before my eyes.

“You know, the usual.”

“But it’s not usual.”

“Why, do you deem yourself special, Hunter?”

“No, but…”

“There are no buts in mortality,” the voice pauses, “if only you were… immortal.”

Playfully, the feather touches the skin on my face. Blood trickles down. It stings.

“Are you … Death?”

It’s not a giggle this time, but a hearty laugh. “I am not.”

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The black-capped chickadees are chittering on a nest above my head. I have heard them before, and I know the meaning of their raspy notes.

“Is Death on its way?”

“No. Not yet.”

We are quiet for a while, and I find my breath steadying, the blood on my chest not in a rush anymore.

“Why did you want to fly with my feather?” she asks.

I have finally decided it’s a she. It might be the voice, knowing and sly; it might be the projection of my own loneliness. I have longed for a female companion.

“I saw a fairy when I was a child. Since then I have been dreaming. Flying, floating, anything that let my feet release their grasp on earth. I am sick of gravity.”

“Gravity is the essence. There wouldn’t be an earth or living or Death, if it wasn’t for gravity.”

“Do you worship gravity, as humans worship God?”

She chuckles. “Do you know who I am?”

“Almost. You are flickering in my mind, like a memory or meaning of a word I have long forgotten.”

“Let it flicker. You don’t want my name.”

There is a movement in the branches. The chickadees flock, painting the sky in patches of black and blue and white.

“Here comes Death.” A long, ice-cold finger caresses my cheek. I tremble and then don’t feel the pain anymore. She has healed me.

“We have to run.”

She lifts me up effortlessly, almost like a newborn. We tread through the forest and squelch through the mud. I feel like I am riding the wind. I feel like flying.

“Can you heal my chest wound?”

“I can, but I need time. If only Death wasn’t following us.”

I can hear the footsteps, menacing and full of wrath on the forest floor.

“Why are you saving me?” I ask, a breathless delirium rising in my veins.

“There is no saving from Death, I am buying time.”

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We are at the front door of a derelict cottage. Before we go in, Death's thunderous voice echoes in the air. "Unforgivable!"

"Why are you after me?" I am desperate, but relieved. It's almost over now, and the waves of pain are surging through me.

"Hunter, you had one job!" Death snaps furiously.

"It's not a job I want, and you know it."

"Hunting mortals and delivering their souls to me? It's honorable, and rewarding."

"The reward is ripping my soul."

"How long have you lived, mortal?"

"I don't remember. I don't want to remember."

She speaks now, her voice like sparks of light in absolute darkness. "Not more than me. Every soul adds a year to your life, and a decade to mine."

"I thought you were immortal!" I say, bewildered.

"She wishes!" Death is laughing throatily, "you refused to kill the rabbit, and she refused to kill you."

"What do you do now?" there is no fear, but insolence in her voice.

"Huntress, remember, you were not a fairy first. You were promoted, just so you could rid me of disobedient Hunters. And you couldn't even do that!"

I can see her dimly now. The fairy is floating above the ground, her gossamer hands making circles in the air. "I am a shape shifter too, you know."

"I know everything."

"That's debatable," she sneers.

Death is turning to a strange shade of purple. He asks slowly, "what are you implying, lowly creature?"

"You put a wound on his chest. Is he dead now?"

They both look at me, as if for the first time; realization as well as shock falls on Death's face.

"That took you a while." She points her hand at a direction I cannot see, a direction out of the time-space continuum. But it's not a place she's pointing at. It's everything a place is not: it's a void. Death, purple face and all, is pulled into it.

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She turns to me now, and I realize her invisibility has been receding. I've begun to see her without knowing. She takes my breath away. There is the galaxy in her eyes, and the pink of her ears is pure. I let my heart melt, as if I have any.

"Hunter, you know my name now."

"Are you … The Spirit, The Unknown One, God?"

"I prefer the first term."

"How did you… why…"

"I have dreams too. You dream of flying, and I dream of running. Sometimes I do that in the form of a rabbit. They are strangely agile."

"But why did you let Death follow us? Aren't you, you know, almighty?"

"Oh, Hunter. Haven't you noticed? I'm really fond of games."

My wound is gone, and I feel alive, more alive than I've ever been.

"Welcome to my humble abode," she motions to the run-down cottage, "and you aren't a Hunter anymore. I always suspected a heart in you."

"What do I do now?" my voice is soft, susurrus.

"You can live with me. I will teach you the ways of shape shifting, and flying, if you wish."

I already am flying, or if not, floating. My new life has begun.

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