

There was something about the forest that had always felt comforting to Rosalind. Maybe it was the light breeze that danced across her face, or the way that the sunlight bathed everything in a yellowish hue. Perhaps it was the loaded crossbow in her hands and the arsenal of weapons at her side. She had practically emptied the trunk before she left, but she doubted anyone would mind. They had been hunting him for the best part of twelve years and every time they got close to minimizing the threat, he disappeared. His attacks were getting more frequent, more violent, and if they were sending Rosalind in, it meant that he had to be stopped.

The blanket of leaves cushioned the sound of her boots against the forest floor, but there was little she could do to cover the sound of rustling leaves as she walked. The only solution was to move slowly, which she despised. It made her feel like the hunted instead of the hunter.

"How are we doing, Rosalind?" Jake's voice said in her ear.

"Slow but steady," She replied, her voice less than a whisper. The microphone taped to the inside of her cheek caught every vibration her mouth made.

"Do you have his position yet?"

She caught the sound of someone typing faintly through the earpiece. She heard a twinge of uncertainty under Jake's Scottish drawl, "It's hard to determine exactly where he is, you know with the lack of a heat signature, but the closer you get to him, the clearer it'll become."

"So, in other words, you won't know where he is until he's right on top of me." Rosalind said, her voice was punctuated by a hint of annoyance. She started to stray away from the path and stood on the edge of the sloping hill beneath her.

"That's another way of putting it," he said. Rosalind rolled her eyes as she crept down the path.

"Be careful here. The path drops and you need to make as little noise as possible to avoid alerting him with your movements."

She bit her lip as she concentrated on her descent. The sound of leaves rustling made her skin pickle. She swung her crossbow over her shoulder, poised to shoot in the direction of the sound. "What was that?" She murmured, her eyes scanning the area.

"Maybe just a small animal?" Jake suggested. "There's nothing big coming up on the thermal scan."

Rosalind shook her head. "No, it was more than that. I felt something," she said as she kept her eyes on the direction of the sound.

"It might just be all that hair getting in your ears. I don't know how you can hear anything through it," he said jokingly.

Rosalind's hair was thick, auburn coloured, and fell in loose waves. She was used to Jake teasing her about it and the fact that he had chosen now to joke about it meant that he didn't think that she was in any immediate danger.

"Jake. I'm serious," she said as she relaxed her grip on the crossbow while keeping her gaze on the sound. Her skin bristled with restless energy. The adrenaline that buzzed through her system seemed to be working against her and she was struggling to keep her hands steady.

"So am I," Jake shot back. "I honestly think the best option is to have your head shaved and be done

with it.”

Rosalind suppressed a sigh. “Now really is not the time, I—” Her foot slipped on a wet leaf and knocked her balance off, sending her tumbling down to the bottom of the hill. She landed on her back, winded and covered in leaves, with throbbing pain in the back of her head. She lost her crossbow in her fall, the knives at her waist had fallen out of her belt and were scattered on the ground around her.

“Rosa!” She heard Jake shout, his voice muffled and slightly distorted. Her earpiece had been knocked out of place slightly in her fall but remained otherwise undamaged. She sat up slowly and gently pushed it back into place.

“I’m fine,” Rosalind said, “Just a headache.” Once she sat up, the throbbing in her head had escalated and it felt as if someone was drilling into her skull.

Jake’s voice was loud and frantic, “He’s coming towards you, fast. Twenty feet and counting!”

She scrambled to her feet, her eyes darting around for her crossbow when *he* crashed through the leaves. He was seven feet tall, his arms reached down to his midhigh, ending in stubs of wrists. His skin was ghostly, and he was dressed in a black suit, yet by far the creepiest thing about him was his face—or rather his lack of it. Instead, there was a smooth stretch of skin where his features should be.

The man with no face barreled toward Rosalind, his overly long arms swinging. The pain in Rosalind’s head blurred her vision. He swung his arm at her, she ducked, still searching the ground for her crossbow.

And then she remembered the other weapons she had.

Rosalind jumped up punched him in the stomach, putting all the force she could muster behind the blow. The faceless man hissed as he staggered back. Rosalind raced towards him, this time aiming a kick at his neck, but the pain in her head was gradually worsening and it threw her off her balance. She caught the side of his ribcage instead and fell, landing awkwardly on her side. She pushed the hair out of her eyes and jumped to her feet. He ran toward her again and pushed her hard against the trunk of a tree, the bark rough against her spine.

“Rosalind,” Jake was in her ear suddenly. She winced as the microphone he spoke into gave off feedback. He spoke over it, his voice loud and urgent. “Hitting him in the stomach is no use. The weak point is his face.”

The faceless man stood back before lunging for her throat. She ducked.

“But he doesn’t have a face!” She shot back. The tree shook as he collided with it. Rosalind leaped past him, slightly disorientated. She felt something wrap around her leg and looked down to see his suit-clad arms clutching to her ankle. He gave a tug and she fell. His long arms pulled her towards him like a prized catch on the end of a fishing rod. As she was being dragged across the forest floor, her skin scratched by stray pine needles, she saw something gleam in the sunlight.

The crossbow.

Her ear filled with the sound of static and Jake’s voice trying to overpower it. “I mean the area where his face should be... he’s... before...” His voice was drowned out by static.

Rosalind dug her nails into the dirt and felt the faceless man stop for a second, confused. He wasn't used to his victims fighting back. His pause gave Rosalind the advantage she needed, and she used her elbows to crawl towards the weapon. He recovered from the shock quickly and Rosalind felt him pull on her leg again. Her fingers were inches from the hilt and she was determined to survive.

She pushed her elbows into the ground, suddenly glad that she had chosen to wear a waterproof jacket and used her knees to push her body along. Her fingers closed around the edge of the crossbow and she held onto it as she rolled onto her front. Rosalind retrieved an arrow from her jacket pocket and loaded it into place. Rosalind's finger hovered over the trigger as she tried to aim for the center of his face. Her vision was blurry, but the paleness of his face stood out against the lush background of the forest. She waited until he was stood over her to take the shot.

She let the arrow fly.

It landed just off the center of the space where his face should be and he let out a high wailing sound. Rosalind covered her ears as she watched his knees buckle beneath him before he fell to the ground. She got to her feet slowly, as the pounding in her head settled, and her vision returned to normal.

"Is he dead?" She said aloud, not bothering to be quiet.

There was the sound of typing before Jake answered, "I think so. How's your head?"

Rosalind touched her temple gently, "Better. Much better actually."

"Huh. I guess he's dead then."

"What does that have to do with my headache?" Rosalind asked, she held onto her crossbow, poised to attack, just in case.

"I'll explain when you get back to HQ. Sit tight, I'm sending a team in to relieve you."

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