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Sweetwater Kill

By

Christie Yant

In a family of twenty, over a period of seven years, only Lynaeve had the opportunity to make a mistake. Her head ached from the flicker of candlelight and the stench of wood smoke. Around her the incomprehensible quickbloods spun madly through the ballroom, all powdered wigs and syphilitic beauty. Her family had tried to tell her, but she hadn't listened. This was Lynaeve's night out of the grove and she wanted to see them for herself. Now that she had, she wanted to leave.

She took a careful step toward the east wall and immediately tripped on the hem of her lichen-green gown.

Enormous skirts lifted to reveal quick-stepping feet. She watched the dance and tried to understand the patterns and rhythms of it, wondering how they all knew what to do. When the dancers came close the smell of them threatened to choke her. Sweat and costly perfume -- a mockery of flowers -- made her eyes water and her lungs scream for air.

She sensed the raw earth beneath the manor house, cool, slow and inviting. She wished she could reach under the foundation and feel it for herself.

Something touched her elbow and she turned to find a man peering down at her. Flesh hung on the bones of his face like a sodden spider web after a rain. He belched when he leaned in to speak. She recoiled.

"Where is your chaperon, my dear?" Thin lips pulled back from decaying teeth in a smile that looked like a threat. "Or perhaps you have none? That will never do. I will be your chaperon." His hand snaked up her arm. She stiffened and took

a step away, which he matched instantly as if it were the next step in a dance. "How uncommonly lovely you are. You're not from here, are you? No, I thought not. And here you are with no one to look after you. I am Reynald. What shall I call you?"

"You can call her Donato's lady, sir." A warm hand gripped her arm and led her away. This new stranger pressed a cool earthen cup into her hand. "Water. Drink it; you'll feel better."

She pulled away and turned to face him. A lean figure in gray velvet looked back at her with golden eyes, his lips curled in an amused smile that embarrassed her and made her wonder if he was making fun of her.

The smile vanished when the disgruntled Reynald sidled past. A low growl came from Donato, a threatening sound that made Lynaeve think of the grove and the creatures that made their homes around it.

"Drink," he said again.

"Thank you. I don't know what he wanted, or what I was meant to do."

"You should know what you're getting into before you come among these creatures. They're not to be trusted," he said.

"I'm surprised that your people allowed you to come."

"What do you know of my people?" Her body tensed as she prepared to run for the first time, back to her grove and the safety of her own tree. She wondered how hard it would be, to run.

He laughed.

"Relax, Dryad. I may be the only friend you have here, but I am a true one. I can smell the green on you, and I can hear the slow movement of sap in your veins."

"And what runs in your veins if you're not one of them?" she asked. She studied his golden eyes and lupine grace, and thought that she knew the answer.

"Hot, fast blood, the thrill of the hunt, and moonlight." He winked, and she knew that she was right. She felt the tension slide out of her as she realized that here was a creature she could understand.

"Why would you befriend me?"

"Because we are both friendless here."

They stood for a moment in a pool of silence. Around them people jostled and spun.

"You would be from the grove at the far edge of the forest. Has it been seven years already? Strange that our nights should fall together. I suppose it was bound to happen sooner or later." The revelers drifted into an adjacent room, servants helping them find their way. "Why have you come here, of all places? Usually you cross a river, or visit a distant hilltop. Catalogue another species of flower or bumblebee. I followed the last one for a while -- a stout, mossy-smelling fellow -- but he didn't do anything very interesting."

"It may be uninteresting to you," she said, indignant, "but we see the world quite differently. It was magnificent. He showed us the other side of the stream, and the fish --"

"The fish! I gave up on him when he found the fish. At least he moved until then. I dare say he spent his entire night staring into a pool at a slippery, wet, slow-moving thing. Such a waste when you have to wait so long for any new experience."

"Seven years to you must seem very long, given your incredibly brief and hurried life. It's a wonder you experience anything at all." She hoped the words stung him, at least a little. If they did, she couldn't tell.

"But you came here among the humans, knowing nothing of them or their ways. Why would you do that? Didn't anyone tell you that it was dangerous?"

"Yes."

"And still they allowed it?"

"It was my choice. I came because no one else had."

"A simple reason, perhaps, for a simple kind of being." He smiled. "Let's go in to dine. I hope it's something rare." His nostrils quivered. "But what will you eat?" he asked, his attention only half on her. "You won't eat, will you. How will you pass among them? Do you know how it's done?"

"No." She hadn't known this was coming. "I've seen your kind. I don't think it's the same, though, is it?"

"They use *tools*." He spat the word, and surprised her with his sudden passion. "Do you know what I would love to see? Them -- stripped of their false furs, false claws, and false dens. I want to see one of them come into our world and just survive, without their clothes and tools and manners." His lips curled back in a way that reminded her of the horrid Reynald.

"Hunting in the woods with teeth and strength and speed, coupling under the moon after a sweetwater kill." He turned to her, eager for validation. She took a step back.

"I know nothing of these things," she said.

He looked hard at her for a moment, then turned away, embarrassed.

"Of course not. I have forgotten myself. I apologize."

"No, don't apologize. They are as foreign to me as they are to you. Maybe more so, because they could do the things you speak of, and I cannot. Tell me again how you came to be here?" she asked, though he had not told her.

He didn't seem to hear her.

"Look at them. They don't look like they would be a threat, do they? So soft. So weak and slow." His voice was low, his speech mumbled, as if he was talking to himself. "How have they done it?"

He brought his attention back to her.

"I come out of curiosity, and a desire to know my enemy, when the moon allows. It's lucky that I came tonight. For both of us." He smiled and offered his arm. "Shall we dine?" He sniffed at the air. "Venison," he said with longing.

"Go," she urged him. "I will wait for you."

"No, you must come. I won't leave you to be molested again by another wretched man. Come and sit beside me. We are our own pack -- we who don't belong here."

"Our own grove," she corrected with a blossoming smile, and laughed as he wrinkled his nose.

"You smell as bad as they do."

"So do you. Like wet dog." She took his arm when he offered it again, happy in their new friendship, and let him lead her into the dining hall.

The room was as obscenely lavish as the ballroom, with crimson linens on the tables, leather and velvet on the cushioned chairs, and silver utensils gleaming in the candlelight. Steaming trays of meats made Lynaeve cringe, and she tried not to look at the dishes piled with plant foods, cooked and uncooked, all scrubbed, diced, and unrecognizable. She reluctantly accepted a piece of bread from an attendant, and

drank another cup of cold water. The roasted leg of some unfortunate bird appeared on her plate.

"Move it around," Donato instructed through a full mouth. She dutifully pushed the leg around on her plate and tore her bread into little pieces that she rearranged when she thought anyone was looking.

She sipped water and breathed deep, and soon and felt renewed. She waited to speak until Donato's zeal for his dinner waned.

"What was it you said before about a sweetwater kill? I have not heard this before. What does it mean?"

Donato leaned back in his chair, satiated, and picked at the scraps of meat left on a bone.

"We run all night in pursuit," he began, then stopped.
"Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Lynaeve nodded.

"We run. Muscles straining, burning with the fire of life, chasing the scent of our prey. Hunger drives us after the kill, of course, but there is more. Hard and fast, the earth under our feet, scattering the leavings of your kind as we run --"

"Leaves," she corrected.

"Leavings, that's what I said. The pieces you leave," he snapped, irritated at the interruption. "As I was saying. The world is a riot of smells, a labyrinth with a single thread guiding us on, the scent of our prey. It's the life, the chase, the challenge. An easy kill feeds the hunger in our belly, but it does nothing for the hunger in our hearts, which grows in us each day. Do you understand?"

She nodded tentatively.

"I think so. Go on."

"The chase leaves us with our bodies burning as we outrace the pain, just as we outrace the hunted. When we finally bring the animal down, taking its life to extend our own,

we are exhausted, true -- but we're also ecstatic. The world is clear and alive, and as tired and overheated as we are, the water of a cool stream tastes sweeter than at any other time. Nothing compares to it, not the joy of pack or pups. That's a sweetwater kill."

"I see."

"Do you?"

What challenge was there in her life? Was there really anything to overcome? A long life of wind, water and sun.

"You defeat it, the thing that you hunt?" she asked.

"In a sense, yes."

She nodded.

"Yes, yes. We defeat the shadow." She remembered the moment she broke through the crust of earth, having struggled against the barrier of dirt and mulch only to find herself still in the dark, in the shade of older trees who would have her fight for her share of the light.

There was no time to explain this to Donato as a commotion erupted at one end of the table. A woman burst into the room screaming, carrying a young woman -- a girl, really -- in her arms.

"Camille! Camille is dead! Bound and defiled, and dead on the staircase. Who has done this?"

Around them people were on their feet, voices raised in horror and disbelief.

"Camille, the daughter of the duke," Lynaeve heard someone say.

"Only thirteen," another voice said. Then she too was on her feet, and Donato's firm grip pulled her away from the table and against the wall, pressed against it to let others by.

Cries of confusion and grief created such a din that Donato winced, his eyes shut tight and his hands over his ears. Lynaeve pressed a cool hand to his face.

“Come,” she said when he opened his eyes. She led him along, weaving in and out of the press of bodies. Men shouted and woman fainted around them.

They reached the far end of the ballroom and escaped into a quiet courtyard and the cool night air.

“Thank you.” Donato sat on a stone bench and breathed deeply.

“What happened?” Lynaeve asked, looking back at the open doors, where servants scurried to right overturned seats and erase the evidence of strife. “Did you understand it?”

“A girl was killed, by another human. They won’t find the villain in the dark, either. They’re blind at night, you know.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“They’re crippled beings, and yet they not only survive, they dominate. They hunt my people, and I’ve seen what they do to yours.”

“Why do you hate them so much? Why do you come among them when you clearly despise them? I know you said it was curiosity, but I don’t believe it.”

“You know nothing about it. You don’t know what they’re capable of.”

“Tell me.”

“No.”

"Then why don't I tell you what *you're* capable of?" she retorted. "You come among them, calling them 'enemy.' Yet you eat the food that *they* hunted -- not you -- and you do it without honoring them for the kill. They lose one of their own under your very nose, and instead of pity you pour out contempt." She noted with satisfaction that he would not meet her gaze. Emboldened, she continued. "You would shame your pack with your behavior tonight, wouldn't you."

She was suddenly cold as she realized her mistake.

“No,” she corrected herself. “You’ve already done that. You have no pack at all, do you? You’re alone. Is that why you hate them? Did a man have something to do with that?”

Donato lifted his head slowly, his teeth bared and his eyes full of pain.

“I am no doe to have a taste for sap, Dryad, but right now I could tear you apart, bark and branch.” Lynaeve froze. “I hate them because their existence is a mockery of mine. I hate them because they are so deficient that they allow me among them, never guessing that I hunt them. One less human in the world is an improvement.”

“You are as savage as they,” Lynaeve said, dismayed. “The child was an innocent. A moment ago you deplored what happened to her.”

“None of them are innocent,” he snarled. Language suddenly sounded unnatural on his tongue. “They have no innocence in them from birth. What do you think would have

happened to you tonight if I hadn't found you? You could have been that girl on the stairs. Your tree would dry up, a hollow, splintered remnant for your grove to see for years to come -- a cautionary tale for the young. That is the vision and experience you would have brought back this seven-year. And yet you defend them."

The wind shifted. Dry, brown leaves stirred on the stone floor of the courtyard, twisting into a flurry that reminded her of the dance. Something moved past the low outer wall. A glimpse of pale blue flashed past in the moonlight.

Donato sniffed the air.

"Blood," he informed her, "and fear."

He sprang to the top of the wall and looked back at Lynaeve.

"Return to your grove and wait for me there," he said, and was gone.

Lynaeve paced for a moment, indignant at being told what to do and disappointed at losing her companion. The glimmering ballroom lay on the other side of the double doors, servants scurrying to restore the manor to its pre-festival state. Hoof beats receding into the night told her that the horrified party-goers were rushing away from the scene of grief and devastation.

There was nothing for it, then. Lynaeve started the long walk home, becoming more sure of the use of her legs as she went. She tried to remember the details of the evening, and specifically of her new friend. The grove would have it all from her instantly, but she wanted to make sense of this night for herself. She couldn't remember a seven-year when anyone had come back with a new relationship outside their own kind. The night had been marvelous -- if only it hadn't ended so soon, and so tragically.

The sounds of the forest were familiar and reassuring. The hum and rustle of scurrying night things followed her as she picked her way through the dense woods. She thought of the girl, limp and broken, a mushroom shade of pale that was so different from the powdered ladies. That is how it looks when a human is felled, she thought.

A crash off to her right startled her and she hid behind an ancient oak. She froze in fear and watched wide-eyed as a stand of overgrown brush waved wildly in the moonlight. The crack of branches breaking underfoot punctuated the motion, until finally the thicket expelled Reynald into the clearing. He fell to the ground with an outraged curse.

He thrashed on the ground, trying to disentangle his booted foot from exposed roots and broken branches. Lynaeve was trying to decide what to do -- continue hiding, flee, or engage him? -- when his frantic kicking stopped. She followed his gaze to the edge of the clearing.

A thin gray wolf stepped into the glade toward the cowering man, hackles raised and teeth bared. She was sure it was Donato who advanced on Reynald, who was climbing clumsily to his feet.

Moonlight gave everything in the glade a silvery sheen, from the wolf's dripping jaws to the moist, dead leaves that clung to Reynald's bedraggled finery.

"Ragged mongrel, why aren't you dead?" he growled through clenched teeth. A glint of moonlight flashed off the long, thin blade clutched in his hand.

Reynald backed away toward the far edge of the clearing, the blade held out in front of him like a talisman while Donato continued his advance. He took a step forward, then stopped short with a yelp of pain. Lynaeve, unthinking, stepped out from her hiding place. A closer look in the gray shades of night revealed a dark, glistening wetness that covered Donato's side.

Reynald stopped his backward scramble when Lynaeve appeared.

"You," he rasped with exhaustion and spite. "Where did you come from?" He looked back and forth from the wolf to the woman, then staggered toward her, his face alive with a desperate hope.

Lynaeve became aware of the fragility of her human form. A murderer approached with a knife; beside her crouched a thwarted hunter, all teeth and claws and furious blood. Until tonight there had been so little that could hurt her: a howling gale, a raging river, a jagged spike of lightening, or a chance swarm of inimical beetles – or a human being. She understood now what Donato had tried to tell her about the humans. They were so fragile, as vulnerable every moment of their lives as she was right now, but still the most dangerous things she would ever know.

Reynald's hand shot out and caught her by the wrist, dragging her toward him. The point of the knife pressed against her side. She tried not to breath. She tried to will herself back to her tree, regretting the decision to come here amongst these unfathomable creatures, regretting the decision to leave at all.

A sound came from Donato, almost imperceptible at first. To Lynaeve it was like the sound that the planes of the earth make as they grind inexorably past each other over a period of decades, a crescendo that ends in devastation.

He tensed and sprang, bringing Reynald tumbling to the ground, and Lynaeve along with him. A claw caught her leg as she rolled away from the fighting mass of man and wolf. She stared at the darkness that seeped out of her wound, so unlike the thin, sticky stuff that covered the quickbloods in the center of the glade.

She watched helplessly as they came at each other again and again, curved claws and snapping teeth against a single

shining blade, four legs against two. She didn't understand how it could go on so long, when Donato seemed the sure victor.

A wrenching, animal cry pierced the night. Reynald pulled himself up, back bent under the weight of exhaustion, and stood over the body of Donato. Lynaeve's breath caught in her throat and her eyes stung with unexpected tears as she stared at the motionless shape of her murdered friend.

Reynald's chest heaved as he fought for air, his face slack and drooling. His hair hung in filthy, matted ropes, except where Donato had torn a mass of it away, exposing pale and spotted skin. Reynald turned to face her and took a step toward her, leaving a pool of blood behind him.

She ran. As fast as she could, her feet pounding the hard earth, she ran for her grove. She tried to guess how far away she was – she couldn't judge. She had never moved this fast.

At first her unfamiliar limbs screamed and she stumbled, but she pushed on, trying to put the scene of horror and loss

behind her. Her feet learned the way. She leapt over fallen trees and dodged sharp rocks and protruding roots. She thought she could sense something just beyond sight racing alongside her, something hot and breathless. She felt the joy of motion. The atrocities of the night seemed distant, and only the thing that stayed with her was what her friend had told her about thrill of his life, lived in this dense forest.

A life ended, she thought. The grove would have the whole story of this evening instantly, every detail, and they would mourn his fate with her. She would weep for her friend when she returned to her tree.

But not yet.

Her gait slowed, and she turned back.

She knew the way. She ran again, and encountered the forest as he must have; the cold air scented with damp earthy, tangy greenery, and a hint of smoke from the distant manor's many chimneys. She wasn't sure what she would do when she

found her friend's murderer, but it didn't matter. What mattered now was the chase.

She marveled at the way her senses extended beyond herself. She could feel her grove growing distant behind her, and feel the emptiness of the tree that waited to welcome her home. She knew what was ahead before she could see it; treacherous pits, fallen branches, and finally a clearing, Donato, and her prey.

She burst through the thick foliage and flew at Reynald's slouching form where he rested. His eyes were wide as her outstretched arms struck him and knocked him backward onto the ground.

He grabbed at her, trying to throw her off, but she had hold of what was left of his tattered vest. At the back of her mind she knew that she was too tired, that she had worked this form too hard, but she pushed the thought away. She shook him as he grappled with her, knocking his head repeatedly

against a fallen log – not enough to disable him, but enough to keep him from gaining an advantage.

The realization that she didn't know what to do next hit her like a winter river, and she was finally afraid.

Doubt and fear must have shown on her face. His eyes narrowed and with a renewed burst of strength he pushed her hard away.

Lynaeve was on her back, staring up at the stars that passed in and out of view as tendrils of cloud moved across the night sky. A sharp rock pressed into her back, bruising her. Her arms ached from the impact with Reynald, and the place where Donato had cut her leg burned like fire. For an instant she wondered how these injuries would translate when she returned to her tree – if she returned at all.

She lifted her head in time to see Reynald coming at her, reaching for her throat. She grabbed at the arm nearest to her face, caught his wrist and struck out at his stomach with her

foot. The unexpected leverage and his own momentum carried him right over her, where he landed in a heap with an outraged curse and a clink of metal.

She twisted around to see her enemy and found herself an arm's reach from Donato's bleeding form — and lying beside him was the dagger that had taken him. She reached for it without a thought.

They both struggled to their feet. Reynald was bent and enervated; his arms hung at his sides, pulling him down with them. He turned his face up to see her through heavy-lidded eyes.

The dagger was cold and smooth in her hand. The fine ivory hilt felt reassuring. Reynald looked from the blade to Lynaeve, and came at her.

She brought the blade up as hard as she could and felt a warm wetness cover her hand as it went in. He fell at her feet, the hilt jutting out of his chest at an angle. One hand reached

for her in a pleading gesture, his eyes wide and mouth gaping; then his arm fell, his eyes closed, and the chase ended.

The sound of running water reached her, a gentle murmur that told her to come, put down roots. In a daze she followed the sound away from the scene of death, and collapsed at the stream's edge. She plunged her hands into the cold water and watched the current carry the blood away. She bent and drank greedily from cupped hands.

Water had never tasted so sweet.

The glow of dawn had leached the drama from the scene when she returned to the glade. Broken bodies and scattered leaves lay where she had left them. She knelt one last time beside the body of her friend, and said her farewells.

She ran for the last time, trying to stay ahead of the sun and to recapture some of the exhilaration she had felt during the night's pursuit. Her limbs stiffened in the growing light and it was only moments before the sun's first rays reached the

treetops that she reached her home. She pressed herself against the empty shell of her tree, taking one final breath. She relished the scents of morning and of her own lush tree, and sank back into her true body. She was eager to show them what she had learned and be embraced by her own kind again.

The night's events were given to the grove in an instant, the beauty alongside the depravity. They absorbed it, understood it – and recoiled.

She had known that Reynald's violence and Donato's death would be as difficult for them as they had been for her. She tried to soothe them mind to mind, but she could not calm them. They continued to withdraw from the experience, and from her.

Sudden isolation was followed by confusion. One moment she was firmly rooted in the cold, dark quiet of the earth, solid and strong, and the next she felt thin and faded, her senses dulled, like a ghost of herself.

At the last moment she understood. It wasn't Reynald that repelled them. It was her.

She lay looking up into the branches of her grove, scattered rays of the morning sun dancing on her alien skin. She sat up, scattering dozens of yellow leaves as she did. Her hand lingered on one and she picked it up. She turned her tear-filled gaze to the branches of her own tree, already turning gray and bare as it died.

"No!" She flung herself at her tree, throwing her arms around it. She pressed her face into the abrasive bark, trying to will herself back home. The drying husk would not yield.

She ran from one grand and lofty tree to the next, pounding each with her fists until they bled.

"Why? How could you?" she cried, spinning in wild circles with imploring arms outstretched. She could not hear their answer if they gave one. She would never hear them again.

All for nothing – for less than nothing. She was a soul without a home, and she would wait here on the forest floor for time to show mercy and let her fade away. She wondered if this hateful body would leave dry bones the way quickbloods did. She curled up on the unforgiving ground, taking some comfort in the familiar sensation of beetles acquainting themselves with her form, and settled into her grief and a long wait.

Warm hands touched her in the dark of an unknown night, and a water skin was brought to her lips.

“Drink,” a voice whispered, “you’ll feel better.” Lynaeve stirred painfully and opened her eyes. Donato’s human face looked back at her, his brow creased with worry. “Let me help you, my friend. We must help each other, we who are alone together.”

“Our own pack,” she whispered.

“Our own grove.”