

The Hunter

This is what the old men told me when I was a boy.

— Common beginning to Cherokee stories

From the time he was old enough to listen, his parents had warned him about the dangers that lurked in the woods. His Scottish mother had lectured him over and over about the fair folk and what to do if he encountered one. His father passed down stories from his ancestors in North Carolina and Tennessee and Alabama and Georgia, stories of the Uktena, the great horned serpents who'd only been bested once, of Kâ'lanû Ahyeli'skî, the raven mockers, who snuck into the houses of the sick and dying and stole their hearts, and of giants and of water cannibals and of Yunwi Tsunsi, the forest spirits. Most of the stories were just that— stories meant to keep him close to home and prevent his adventurous spirit from taking him somewhere his family couldn't follow— and most of them went in one ear and out the other. Sure, when he was five, they kept him from staying in the woods past the time the sun dipped below the tree line, but once he was six, he was much less scared of things that made babies cry for their mothers. He was a big boy, and he was brave.

By the time he was ten, all but one of his parents' warnings had fallen by the wayside. He no longer feared the horned serpents but scoured the woods for them instead, because if anyone could defeat one and bring back the diamond secured in the center of its head, it would be him. He wouldn't run into an Uktena, of course, because those were back east in the homeland, and

when the soldiers had forced his people out, the serpents had stayed. If he had come across an Uktena, despite what he might have believed, the large stick he'd found at the base of an ancient post oak was far from the bow and arrow Agan-uni'tsi had used to slay the mighty beast by shooting it in the seventh spot from its forehead. Brave as he may have been, he was not foolish, and while he ran through Cookson Hills searching for the serpent, he always kept a watchful eye for the one thing he still feared. Most things he was no longer scared of. Water cannibals were no match for him, and Kâ'lanû Ahyeli'skī were no worry as he was not sick, and the giants lived back east in the homeland.

She, however, was everywhere. She was called U'tlûñ'tă, spear-finger, for the bone finger on her right hand, which she would use to stab anyone who she could get near, and once they had died, she would take their liver and eat it. She could change shape at will, she could bend rocks to do her bidding, and her skin was as if it was made of stone, and no weapon could pierce it. She had roamed the mountains of the homelands, most of all Tennessee, and many of his ancestors had fallen prey to her traps. The stories said that she had been killed by a group of hunters who had shot her in her long finger with an arrow, piercing the only part of her which was not made of stone. He took no solace in this, though, as his father swore he'd heard her voice when deployed in France, and anything as evil as her could surely not be stopped by something as simple as death.

By the time he was fifteen, he had grown braver once again, and no longer feared her or any of the other stories, and freely roamed the woods, now armed with a real bow and the ability to hunt.

By the time he was eighteen, he had grown braver still, and was strong and fit, and the

best hunter among his friends. He was a very good tracker, and an even better shot, and his eyes were like those of a hawk, and could see long distances clearly, even at night. This was a good thing, because a great darkness had fallen over his country, and young men like him were being asked to fight.

At first, he would not go, because he was young, and he could not understand why he should leave Tahlequah and his home to fight for a country which had taken his homeland and slaughtered two-thirds of his people. He certainly did not understand why he should go to another country far from his home and fight against people who were trying to fight for a land which was theirs. Then the draft came, and while he did not want to go fight, he did not want to be in jail, either, and when the man on the television spun the bingo cage and pulled out ball number 187, he knew he must do as he was told, or risk bringing dishonor to his family.

His return to the homeland was not what he had intended for it to be, but he was with the ancestors nonetheless. The sick irony was not lost on him— he was to be trained in killing for the country which had wronged his people, in North Carolina of all places. He decided that since he had no choice but to fight, he would honor the ancestors by doing it well. He was a warrior in body and in spirit, and the men in the Marine Corps realized this and told him as much. His eyes saw what others missed, and his hands were steady, and his aim was true. Though he had grown up with a bow and arrow, the transition was an easy one, and soon he was the best sniper in his group at training camp. Then the training was over, and he said goodbye to his homeland and was shipped to Vietnam.

What kind of horrible place is this? I can never stay here to live with snakes and creeping

things.

— *Hunter, Cherokee myth*

He was good at what he did. That didn't make him feel any better about what it was that he was doing, but he was good nonetheless. When they'd handed him an M40 he had told himself he would never pull the trigger. He was the invader on foreign land, and he didn't quite understand what they'd done wrong. The government had wronged them, and he knew from his ancestors all too well what that felt like. Even when he heard the stories of the tunnels they dug and the way they rose silently from the ground in the middle of the night, took out entire camps, and vanished before anyone could make so much as a sound, he told himself that he wouldn't pull the trigger. *It's their land*, he told himself. *They just want their home*. He wasn't a monster, and he wasn't going to change that anytime soon.

His spotter shared his sentiments, even if he didn't have quite the same reasoning. He was from Louisiana, the descendant of those brought over on slave ships, and his ancestors had been hurt by the same United States that they now fought for. Though they weren't brothers in blood, they were brothers in spirit, and they had vowed to each other to keep their hands clean.

Being the new boys, they got stuck with the night watch. In a way, that made John feel better, because he got to sleep during the day, and you could see the tunnels during the day. At night, it was much less hot, and the humidity wasn't quite as oppressive, and most importantly most of the snakes were asleep.

One night as they were stationed along a ridge looking out over a field scarce with trees

surrounded by forest on either side, scanning the darkness with their binoculars and finding nothing, he turned to his spotter.

“Hey, Beau,” he whispered.

Beau either didn't hear him or didn't care, because he kept his gaze turned towards the field, which remained motionless and devoid of life.

He tried again. “Beauregard.”

Beau grunted softly. “What'd I say about that, John?”

“Sorry,” John whispered back. “I was tryin' to get your attention.”

“You've got it,” Beau said, still watching the field.

“What happens if we ever do see a Vietcong?”

“We already talked about this. Shoot the gun out of his hand if he's got one and leave him be if not.”

“Yeah, but what if I miss?”

Beau lowered the binoculars for a second and glanced at him. “Don't miss.”

John shook his head and raised his binoculars again, scanning the field. Again, nothing but some trees and a whole lot of grass.

He sighed and put down the binoculars again, this time to check the jungle behind them. The mass of trees was dark, and the banyans and kapoks were not the oaks and elms and redbuds of home, but he had always been drawn to the woods, and despite the situation, he felt safe.

He turned his gaze back to the field and his binoculars. The same trees were in the same spots, and while he couldn't account for each individual blade of grass, he was pretty sure that hadn't moved, either. He was still staring at the field when Beau spoke up.

"What do you think about the ghost stories?"

John shrugged. "Where I'm from, so long as you don't make a spirit mad, you'll be fine."

"No," Beau said. "Not ghost stories in general. I'm talkin' the ones the older soldiers tell."

John chuckled softly. "They're tryin' to mess with us. Ain't no such thing as voices in the trees. And if there were, you'd be stupid to do anything but ignore 'em."

"Ain't you ever seen somethin' you can't explain?" Beau whispered. "I don't know what you got over in Oklahoma, but the Bayou has... *things*. Sometimes you're out there at night, and you see somethin' movin' in the fog, and then there's a pale lady lookin' at you, and then you turn your head for a second and you look back and she's gone. And we got this werewolf thing called the Rougarou, which all the Catholics are scared of 'cause it'll go after them if they mess up during Lent."

John lowered his binoculars. "Sounds like they shouldn't mess up during Lent."

Beau shook his head. "Nah, 'cause we've got other things, too. There are these kids that haunt the cane fields, they call 'em Lutin. And if you're out there at night by yourself they'll come after you. Surely you've got somethin' like that."

"My mama always had her stories about faeries," John said. "But those are from Scotland, and so I never really listened to those. She said she left the fair folk behind when she

came over to the US.”

“What about your dad, then?” Beau asked. “The Cherokee gotta have some ghost stories.”

“All of our stories are from the old country,” John said quietly. “And most of our ghosts aren’t worried about the living. The asgi’na, the vengeful ghosts, those are mostly animals. Again, if you haven’t done something to upset a ghost, you don’t need to be afraid of them.”

“You got to have somethin’ you’re afraid of,” Beau said. “Something to scare the kids at the least.”

“We got those,” John said. “We got lots of those. But those ain’t about ghosts.”

“Tell me ‘bout ‘em,” Beau said.

John raised his binoculars again and looked at the field, which remained as it had been, and he told Beau about all the stories he’d heard growing up.

“Any of them true?” Beau asked.

“Course they are,” John said. “All of ‘em. My auntie said she’s seen Yunwi Tsundi tons of times. And my grandma swears her sister was killed by a water cannibal.” He shuddered. “And Dad will go to his grave sayin’ he heard U’tlũñ’tã when he was deployed in France.”

“How’s she supposed to have gotten over there?”

“She’s a witch. Witches are everywhere.”

“Even here?”

John looked out into the darkness. “Sure as hell hope not. We got enough to be worried about without her out there.”

“Yeah,” Beau said quietly. “Guess we do.”

Then he fell silent again, and not a word passed between them the rest of the night.

Let us not see each other this summer.

— *Hunter to first snake of the season, Cherokee legend*

As time passed and they were stationed at ridge after ridge, John counted himself as the luckiest man in the world. Somehow, he and Beau had managed to get the one area in all of Vietnam where nothing ever happened. Every few days they moved locations slightly, to a place a mile or so from where they'd just been, and each time they moved, John knew that it was just a matter of time before one of those new locations would show him a figure moving through the night, and he would have to make a choice between pulling the trigger and ending a life now, or letting the figure continue to move and risk letting it kill some of his fellow soldiers.

He and Beau settled into a routine with their watches— they'd sit in silence for a few hours, and then once the darkness got too loud, one of them would start to whisper some sort of story, and they'd exchange those for a few hours, before they'd fall back into silence once again for the remainder of the watch. Sometimes John told the stories he'd heard from his father, of the Uktena and the Yunwi Tsundsi and all the other legends. Sometimes he'd talk about life back home. Beau would tell stories from his job back home working a cash register, and sometimes

he'd talk about his family. Most nights, though, one way or another, it came back to ghost stories. Once they'd run out of their own ghost stories to tell, they would ask around camp to try to find the best ones other people had, and then they'd try to one-up each other with their stolen goods. Once those ran out, they started making up their own, although these were of a much lower quality than the others.

Sometime in the second or third month they'd been there, Beau was in the middle of a story he'd made up involving something with an Army doctor in the Korean War when John saw something moving in the darkness.

At first, he thought it was another false alarm—they were in the jungle and while a lot of local wildlife avoided humans when possible, there was still a lot of fauna out there.

There was no mistaking the distinctly human shape, though, and when John looked through his scope, it was clear that the shape was not only human, but it wasn't alone. Several more shapes flanked it, and they all had the clear outline of weapons with them.

"Beau," John whispered. When Beau didn't respond, he tried again. "Beau. Beau. Beauregard."

As usual, that got his attention. "What?"

"Movement about 500 yards out, near that big kapok tree. You see it?"

After a few seconds, Beau grunted in affirmation. "We're 'sposed to be the only forces within five miles."

"You sure? I don't wanna shoot our own guys. I don't really want to shoot anybody."

“I’m sure. Look at the rifle outlines.”

John looked through the scope at the outlines of the rifles the shapes were carrying, and though he couldn’t see much, just the barrels, he could tell at a glance that Beau was right. They were AK-47s, shorter than the American M16s, with the sight at the end of the barrel instead of the middle. “Shit.”

“I count five. Gonna have to be quick.”

“They’re too close,” John whispered. “They can shoot us from here. I can’t just shoot the weapon out of their hands.”

“I know,” Beau said. “I’m sorry.”

John knew his weapon inside and out. His M40 had 5 rounds in a magazine, and it took him about 5 seconds to get the bolt and find his target again, and another 5 to get a good bead on them. At best, it would take him a little under a minute to take down all five of the Vietcong, and that was if he didn’t miss.

He took a deep breath and looked down the scope, lining up his shot. His finger curled around the trigger. He could almost, but not quite, see the outline of the person’s face. His heart dropped. This was a person, just like him, who was only trying to protect their land. He was the stranger here, the invader, and he felt tears begin to well in his eyes.

“I can’t do it,” he whispered. “Beau, I can’t do it.”

Through the scope, the figure turned their head and looked straight at John. There was a flash of metal, and John saw the barrel turned towards him. A flash of light filled his scope and the sound of gunfire split the night as bullets flew over them. One grazed his left shoulder, and

John pulled the trigger.

The flash of light that followed blinded him briefly, and his body acted before his mind could think. He pulled back the bolt and readied his next shot, listening to Beau's directions as the light faded and he could see again. Bullets kept whizzing past, and this time John didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. This time he closed his eyes to avoid the blinding flash of light, and as his body remembered its training and pulled the bolt back again, the forest around him faded away, leaving only him and his rifle. He didn't consciously hear Beau's directions, but his hands did as they found his next target and again pulled the trigger. Two bullets and twenty seconds later, it was over.

"Clear," Beau whispered.

John didn't say anything. He just cried.

The hunters are among you.

— *Warning alerting others to the presence of water cannibals, Cherokee legend*

In the months that followed, John became what he had so desperately tried to avoid. When he would line up a shot, he would think about the person that was the dark shape in his scope, and he would hesitate, not wanting to pull the trigger. *This is a person. I am on their land. I am the invader.*

Then his arm would burn where the bullet had grazed him, and a little voice in the back

of his head would whisper with the face of the enemy, *so many of your people have I killed, and so many will I yet kill*, and John would pull the trigger.

This happened at least two nights a week, and John did his best not to keep count of the men whose lives he had ended. As he sat on each ridge and scanned whatever point they were overlooking that day, he would pray over and over that his eyes would not see movement, and that the forest would remain quiet.

The ridge they were on that night didn't feel any different than the others. It had been a long march the day before, and two nights ago they had taken out a group of eight enemy soldiers, so their commander had given the watch to someone else the night before. They were further out from the camp than normal— about a mile away— but this area was free of tunnels and had the only ridge in the region, which overlooked a swath of forest that was dense enough John was confident he wouldn't need to fire his rifle. Even if there had been Vietcong slowly picking their way through the trees, he wouldn't have been able to see them through the thick canopy of leaves. He did his due diligence and kept watch through the binoculars, but all he could see was darkness.

It was a nice night for once. The humidity that normally choked the air was noticeably absent, and for the first time since he'd arrived, John almost felt cold. He welcomed the chill as it reminded him of home. The forest sang with wildlife, and for once John welcomed the chorus. There were no clouds in the sky, and it was a new moon, and through a gap in the trees above him, he could see a swath of sky that was painted with millions of stars. If he looked hard enough, he swore he could see the Milky Way, and he told himself that was a good sign.

As he tore his gaze away from the heavens, John felt a chill run up his spine. Something

in the pit of his stomach dropped, and he glanced at Beau, who was staring back, eyes wide with fear.

The night was silent. Dead silent. John had grown up in the woods, and he knew the only thing worse than a lot of noise was no noise at all.

John put his finger to his lips and looked at Beau, gesturing for him to pick up his weapon. If John was right and some form of predator was in the area, his M40 wasn't going to be much good. Beau's M16 was much more suited to close-range combat. Still, as Beau picked up his rifle, John took the M40 as well. Something was better than nothing.

Then the silence broke, and suddenly John was a child again. His heart was pounding in his ears, his breathing frantic. His veins turned to ice, and his mouth filled with the metal taste of fear. He'd only ever been this scared once before, when he was 8 and he'd run up over a hilltop and right into a water moccasin.

Through the trees, a soft voice floated into his ears, singing quietly to itself. He gripped his rifle so hard his knuckles turned white as he realized instantly that he knew the song.

Uwe'la Nátsikû' Su' Sá' Sai'

It was *her* song. It meant *the liver, I eat it*. He knew the voice, too, though he'd never heard it before. *Her* voice, U'tlûñ'tă's voice, grew closer.

Beau locked eyes with him. "Those ghost stories," he whispered. "The ones the other soldiers were tellin', the ones the locals told them. They're true. The spirits, they're singing in Vietnamese."

John shook his head slightly, not wanting to say it. "That ain't Vietnamese, Beau. That's

Cherokee.”

“The hell is someone speakin’ Cherokee doin’ here?”

“It’s *her*,” Jon hissed. “U’tlûñ’tă. Spear finger. Guess Dad wasn’t lyin’.”

“Shit,” Beau said, a little too loudly.

The singing suddenly stopped, and as much fear had come from hearing her voice, John decided that he liked it better when he could tell where the monster was. Now he was clueless as to where the thing had gone, and for all he knew, it was right behind him.

He turned suddenly, ready to fire. It was not right behind him, but that didn’t make him feel any better, because that meant it was somewhere else.

There was a sound in the forest to their right, and both he and Beau turned instantly toward the source, weapons ready. There in the trees stood an elderly woman, smiling softly as she shuffled towards them.

Her skin was dark, her face wrinkled from years in the sun. Her hands were rough and worn, her clawed fingers clutching at her knobby cane. She was dressed in what John could only describe as a grandmother’s church outfit, and a pair of glasses rimmed her face.

When she spoke, it was not the soft Cherokee speech John had heard through the trees but a heavy Creole drawl that John had trouble understanding.

“Beau, boo, come on over here. Give your MeeMaw a hug.”

“You ain’t my MeeMaw,” Beau said. “She’s seventy-five and she’s back home. You ain’t her. And she ain’t been ‘round since Mom died anyways.”

The woman— *no, not the woman*, John told himself, *the thing pretending to be a woman*— looked genuinely sad. “Beau, it’s me. Your MeeMaw. I’ve missed you so much since you left home. Come on and give me a hug.”

“You ain’t my MeeMaw,” Beau said, raising the rifle. “Get back.”

The thing began to cry. “Beau, it’s me. It’s your MeeMaw. Please.”

Beau began to cry as well. “No, you ain’t. You ain’t. You ain’t.”

John, still shaking with fear, raised his rifle even with her and looked through the scope, aiming for her right hand. He got a bead on it and fired.

The flash from the shot lit the night, and for a brief second, everything was bathed in light, and everything was frozen, and John felt at peace with his rifle. Then the moment shattered as the bullet deflected off of her forearm. The creature laughed, and the image of the elderly woman dropped away, and there in all her awful glory stood U’tlũñ’tă.

Her skin was a deep gray stone, covered in crags, her muscles quite literally chiseled. Her face was constantly shifting— first it was that of Beau’s grandmother, then John’s mother, then John’s grandmother. John wasn’t looking at her face, though— he was looking at her hand, or her lack of one. Her right arm ended in a club-like fist, where John knew from the stories her heart was. Protruding from it was the namesake spear. The stories didn’t do it justice. “Spear” was too generous of a word. Where her fist ended was a single slender shard of bone, pale and shining in the night. Its jagged, broken point reminded John more of a fracture than a spear, but he didn’t think the ancestors had really stopped to get a good look at her.

“Jesus Christ,” Beau spat. “What the hell—”

“That’s not Jesus Christ,” John said, pulling the bolt back and readying another shot.

Beau took aim and started firing at the *thing*, and as the bullets bounced harmlessly off her stone skin, John shot again for her hand. She saw it coming and moved out of the way, and her head snapped towards John, fire in her eyes.

“Aim for her hand!” John yelled to Beau, pulling the bolt back to fire again. As he raised the rifle to line up his shot, suddenly she was upon him, quick as a snake. The fractured bone sliced through the air, straight towards John’s heart. She was too close to him and much too fast for him to get out of the way, and it was all he could do to turn his shoulder to block the blade.

As the bone cut into his skin, John’s whole body instantly lit on fire, tearing him apart from the inside out. It felt as if the threads that held him together were being ripped away from him one by one, each one leaving him weaker. An icy pain throbbled in his shoulder, and his vision darkened. He instinctively dropped his rifle and grabbed the shoulder with his opposite hand, trying to stop the bleeding.

Then the blade withdrew and everything was clear again, and the blade was raised again, coming back for another hit. John reacted this time and rolled sideways as the blade slashed past his head. He watched as Beau took aim at the monster’s hand and let loose another volley of shots, then cursed as his magazine ran out.

Then John was moving again, except this time it wasn’t him that was doing the moving. The ground beneath his feet was shaking, and then it lifted into the air, and with horror he realized that he had been standing on a rock.

Stupid! he cursed himself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid! How the hell did you forget she can*

control rocks? He jumped down while he still could and ran to his rifle, dodging another swipe from the finger as he did.

Beau cursed as more rocks went flying at him, and John saw that the thing's attention was off of him for a second. He pulled back the bolt, took aim, and fired.

As John pulled the trigger, the world froze and for a moment he *was* the bullet, watching its path through the air as it left the barrel of his rifle and buried itself in the monster's hand. As the bullet struck, the hand exploded outward in a rush of bone and blood, and for one horrifying moment the creature turned, locked eyes with John, and smiled. Then the smile turned to pain and it screamed, a train whistle shattering through the forest. Somewhere in the night an owl took flight, and then the world was silent once more. U'tlûñ'tă fell to the ground, dead.

"Holy shit," John whispered. "Holy shit."

Beau didn't say anything, and the forest was silent save for their heavy breathing. It took about ten minutes before John's heart calmed down and he was able to think straight again.

It was about then when Beau spoke. "Was that real?"

John looked down at the cut in his arm, which was very much real. He checked his rifle's magazine, which only held two cartridges. "Think so."

"We should probably go back," Beau said. "Get your arm looked at."

John nodded silently.

"Do me a favor," Beau said. "From now on, I don't wanna hear the name Beau ever again. That *thing* wore it out. Actin' like my MeeMaw. I ain't wanna hear Beau ever again."

“Thought you hated Beaugard,” John said, half smiling.

“I hate it a lot less now,” Beaugard replied.

“Okay then, Beaugard,” John said. “Let’s get back to camp.”

Beaugard nodded, and as they started walking, he got a little smile on his face.

“What’re you smilin’ ‘bout?” John asked. “Ain’t nothin’ funny bout what just happened.”

Beaugard shook his head. “No, ain’t nothin’ funny. Sure ain’t nothin’ funny ‘bout that, about none of it. But it’ll make one hell of a ghost story.”