

The Hunter and the Yelenoshena

Once YISUN observed the vastness of her creations and saw that it had grown stalled and close to reaching a path towards equilibrium. Strife, toil, and anguish had become constant rather than permanent, the machinations predictive and the cycles circular, and entropy increased at a nearly steady rate, as did the Wheel's turn. Hence, with motherly love and fatherly concern, YISUN took a well-rounded stone from a mountain, smoothed by countless years of winds grinding it into its polished shape. Then he broke off a leafed branch from one of the oldest trees in this realm's forests. Finally, she went to her peridotite palace, where she put them into a bowl of water most fine, whereupon he breathed onto it and out sprang a magnificent creature with the four legs and hooves and tail of a doe and the face and torso and arms and hands of a woman with long chestnut hair. They say that she was both beautiful and graceful to behold, and both those things were a lie.

"This is Yelenoshena," spoke YISUN, and everyone listened, "a creature most elusive and shy. It is said that she may evade any trap, arrow, bullet, and hunter, for it is I who says it. And I furthermore say that whoever shall catch her first shall receive their wish granted, whatever it may be." And before YISUN had spoken that sentence to its conclusion, the capricious yelenoshena had leapt with astonishing speed and grace and had escaped through the palace's gates, vanishing into the depths of the forest as tracelessly as the winds.

This had caused a great commotion, for there was none who still drew breath that had not known desire and greed burning and tearing deeply in their breast, and none were strangers to want. Some sought riches, others glory and fame, yet others powers and knowledge and wisdom, whereas some merely craved for their survival; And even those who had long renounced their quests and hungers felt its raging embers once more as soon as the unheard-of prize to ask of YISUN any

boon they may think of was announced in this manner.

Thus, they all hustled and bustled and rushed and pushed and pulled into the woods after the poor creature. Some felt it was best to follow her while the trail was fresh, while others deemed it wiser to hastily make preparations beforehand. But, all in all, none who could afford it let this opportunity slip by, and so began the great hunt for the yelenoshena.

Among the hunting party was a hunter whose name I cannot remember; perhaps it'll come to me later. It shall suffice to know that he was a young mortal man who had seen, say, no more than three decades of YISUN's creations. He was of humble origins, for his father and his father's father too were hunters. As is common to many young mortals, he had a deep and quiet desire to etch his name into the annals of history and the Wheel. But, even more so, the siren song of a hunt most difficult called him adamantly and undeniably, and so he joined the great hunt all too eagerly. With him, he carried but his great hunting knife, some rope to build traps and shelter with, a bow with three arrows, and a flute to pass the time in the long nights. Since he would not even have dreamt of owning a horse, let alone a carriage, he quickly fell behind to the rear of the hunting party, along with everybody else giving chase on foot.

The yelenoshena turned out to be just as elusive as YISUN had told it. She ran faster than any hound or horse, she fled speedier than any hawk flew, and she could gallop for a day and a night without halt. At fifty paces, her spotted fur and chestnut hair made her indistinguishable from the woods. When she dove into the waters, the sun's reflection made her look no different from one of the hundreds of passing waves. And when she climbed into the rocky mountains, she swept steep stones and climbed cliffs as swiftly and precisely as goats would do, her spotted fur seemingly taking on the colour of lichen. On those rare occasions where one of the chasers had by some miracle neared her enough to attempt reaching for her, they would find her slipping through their fingers most quickly, more slippery than a fish, and some even swore that their hand had passed through her as if she was made of naught but breath. But those who had gotten lucky enough to approach her to that extent would also find that their luck would turn instantly, as her hooves were a formidable force too, splitting their shields in two and denting their armours

beyond repair, and let us not speak of those poor fools who had reached for her without donning any armament.

Thus, the crowd, as rabidly as they had joined the chase, thinned out quickly over the span of the first dozen days. All their spears and arrows and guns had proven useless, all their traps ineffective, all their horses and carriages and hounds and hawks too slow. So, many proclaimed having better things to do than to waste their lives on the yelenoshena, whom they decried as but a trickery of YISUN's, and they declared the task impossible by design and abandoned the quest. Others readily admitted the limitations of their prowess, realising the futility of their attempt, and returned to their lives humbled and pensive. Hence, it took but a few weeks for only a handful of fools to persevere in the chase, our hunter among them. But as time went on, the elusive yelenoshena shook them off, one by one. "It can't be done," some said. "It's not meant to be done," others said. "If I can't do it, then no one can. You should give up, too," they said as they left. Even YS-Shkela, god of the hunt, eventually shook his head and let out a bellowing laugh as if he had just understood the joke and then gave up on the hunt, returning to YISUN's Speaking House to recount what he had learned about the universe at the divine court.

Yet the hunter persisted, for he was first and foremost a hunter. Moreover, he was a hunter who had laid eyes on his prey, and that was his undoing; for a chasseur without a chase was none at all. Each day, he would rise with the sun and give pursuit, and each day the yelenoshena would elude him masterfully and with ease. Then, when the sun reddened, the hunter would seek a place to rest for the night, and he would build a simple shelter and a small fire and play his flute to pass the time until sleep found him. And so the days went on, and the weeks turned to months, and eventually the hunter was the last one to stalk the fabled yelenoshena.

It was around that time that the yelenoshena had, or so it appeared to the hunter, grown bolder. As if the months of the fruitless hunt had made her overly confident in her skills of flight, she let him near her further than before. She stepped closer to each trap he had laid down, yet still never sprung one. She cheekily looked in the other direction as her lone stalker approached. And, as time went on, she even neared his encampment at night, observing his shelter and his tools and the fire he had lit with curiosity flickering in her eyes. The hunter noticed her, of course,

for he was a skilled hunter, but he knew better than to rabidly give chase through forests engulfed by nightly darkness, and so he lay back calmly and continued playing on his flute to pass the time.

It was precisely while he was playing his flute that the yelenoshena first spoke to him.

“What are those sounds you make?” she said, hidden well in the night’s blackness between the woods.

“We call this music,” said the hunter.

“I’ve never heard anything like it,” said the yelenoshena. “No bird I’ve seen sings in that manner, no animal cries that way. Why do you produce it?”

“I do it to pass the time,” said the hunter. “Do you like it?”

But his only answer was the sound of galloping hooves.

The next night, when the yelenoshena returned, the hunter interrupted his playing and greeted her.

“Welcome, oh master of flight, undefeated lord of the hunt,” he spoke, not expecting a response. “I have been a hunter for many years, but never have I heard of or seen a chase such as yourself. Each day you escape my grasp effortlessly, for what has now become months, as if it were no more than a child’s game to you. Know that I have much admiration for your prowess, unparalleled in all of YISUN’s realms, and I hold equally as much desire to best you in your game someday, for if there ever was a true measure of a hunter’s skill, it must be to overcome the challenge that is the yelenoshena.

“But tonight, my weary bones need rest. Until the sun rises on the morrow, I shan’t be hunter again, of that I give you my word. So, be at peace this night. Stay and listen to this flute of mine, if you harbour such inclination, or go wherever your path takes you, and go in assured calm.”

The yelenoshena once again said nothing, but no sound of escaping hooves reached the hunter either, so he leaned back and played his flute until sleep took him from

this realm.

The next day, as the sun rose, so did the hunter. Once again, he gave chase, and once again the yelenoshena would evade him effortlessly, and once again she would seek out his makeshift shelter at night to listen to him play his flute, and it was in this manner that the days went by. And when the cold autumnal winds swept through the lands, once the sun had set, the hunter would invite her to join him by the fire to keep warm, and she did, for she rightly understood that he had every intention to keep true to his word and to best her in her flight through the woods only and in no other way. And when winter's frost came biting from the ground they stood on, the hunter lit larger fires, and they shared the bedding and covers he had made of furs he had obtained through his hunts to keep warm throughout the night. He would then play his flute for her as they lay side by side, and each morning, just before the sun rose, Yelenoshena would leave their bedding and disappear wordlessly into the woods again, whereupon the hunter would stalk after her as fruitlessly as ever, only for her to return to him at night. And even after spring's arrival, they still shared their nightly camp, not out of necessity for warmth any longer, but because nightly company had turned into habit and admiration had turned to adoration and friendship.

It was on such a warm late spring's night, as they lay by the fire and the hunter rested his head on Yelenoshena's back and played his flute as her fingers combed through his hair, that she asked of him, "If one day you caught me, what would you do?"

The hunter halted his music and laid his pipe down, saying, "I don't know, I haven't thought that far."

"Will you not ask your wish of our motherfather, YISUN?" Yelenoshena asked.

"Maybe," he said.

"What will your wish be?"

"I don't know," said the hunter, "I haven't thought that far."

"Have you not joined the hunt for the prize?" said Yelenoshena.

“No,” said the hunter, “I came for the hunt.”

“And what does a hunter do after a successful hunt?”

“He goes back home,” he said.

“Will you go back home, then?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I’m yet to catch you first. Though I carry many doubts that shall happen soon. You remain too fast for me, you see through all my traps before I even lay them into the ground, you hide too well from me.”

“Will you admit defeat, then, like the others?”

“Why would I?” said the hunter, “To chase after one so extraordinary and so beautiful, I wouldn’t know what else to want.”

“Then will you remain, chasing me in daylight forever more, and keeping me company and playing those sweet melodies of yours in the nights?”

“That is my intention,” said the hunter, “I wouldn’t know what else to want.”

“Good,” said Yelenoshena and smiled shyly upon him as her fingers swept through his hair, “for you are my last pursuer. I fear I may grow terribly bored once my last playmate abandons my game before its conclusion.”

“A game, you say?” said the hunter. “I called it that once too, but I wouldn’t name it such no longer. For I see it more as a dance, where you, a dancer without her match, rightfully takes the lead which is yours, while I, a clumsy clog-foot, attempt to match your swift steps.”

And Yelenoshena, who had learned of music and dance from the hunter, said, “You must keep up before the tempo changes, lest I lose my hold on you,” and she playfully tapped his nose.

“I was never a good dancer,” the hunter said, “but I’m bound to learn eventually.”

This amused Yelenoshena. “If it were on you, how would you lead this dance of ours?” she asked giddily.

“Like this,” he said and kissed her tenderly, and she too embraced him tightly. And as their lips parted, Yelenoshena fell into the hunter’s arms, devoid of any life.

The hunter, once he regained his wits, held her closely as he so bitterly wept over her demise. And when he finally ran out of tears one day and one night later, he pulled out his great hunting knife and cut so many branches that the pyre he built was the height of his shoulders. Then he carefully placed Yelenoshena atop and crowned her coldened chestnut hair with a handful of white blooms, which was all he could find in the vicinity, and he set the pyre ablaze. Once its embers had cooled, he reached for the ashes and rubbed them over his face and his arms, and he mourned her for three days and three nights, as was custom, after which he made for the road back.

When he returned to YISUN’s peridotite palace with empty hands and ashensmeared cheeks and forearms, the hunters both divine and mortal who had given up the hunt long before him recognised him and ridiculed him.

“The fool has returned!” they chuckled.

“We told you it couldn’t be caught!” they laughed.

“We told you you couldn’t best our skills!” they snickered.

But the hunter, having laid his eyes upon his prey, paid them no heed and made for YISUN’s throne, the Great Seat of the Queen of Queens, for he was owed and he had come to collect.

“Lord of Lords, I have returned,” he said to her, “Yelenoshena is no more.”

And the other gods and mortals present laughed even nastier. “So he claims!” they bellowed. “But he brings no proof but the dirt on his face, which surely he obtained as he tripped and fell into a puddle of mud!”

“I bring no proof for I have burned her remains,” spoke the hunter, “as is custom. Then I have rubbed my face and arms in her ashes, as is custom. And then I have offered her ashes to the sixteen winds, as is custom. By the end of the third night of my wake, there was no proof left to bring.”

And the others laughed even more. "What hunter gives his prey the rites!" they cackled. "What hunter mourns his game!"

But YISUN looked him up and down and smiled in the seventh way.

"You have earned your prize," said YISUN, and the palace's halls filled with the deadly silence of disbelief and shame and jealousy. "Speak, hunter, and name the reward you are owed."

The hunter looked at YISUN and spoke firmly, "Oh King of Kings, my wish is for you to bring her back, for my hunt is not concluded."

YISUN's smile vanished as she said, "That, I cannot do."

"I thought so," said the hunter. "Then, my wish, oh Lord of Lords, shall be for you to bring her into existence."

And YISUN smiled in the nineteenth way and said, "*That*, I can do." Then she knelt and touched the ground beneath her feet with the palm of her third hand, and the ground split open before their very eyes and out sprang a magnificent creature with the four legs and hooves and tail of a doe and the face and torso and arms and hands of a woman with long chestnut hair, and they say that she was both beautiful and graceful to behold. The yelenoshena took a look around, seeing all the gods and mortals and hunters gathered there. Then she looked at the hunter before her, and the hunter saw naught but fear and dread in her eyes, and that very same instant she fled with astonishing speed and grace through the palace's gates into the depths of the forest as tracelessly as the winds, and the hunter leapt after her into the endless dark of the woods and gave chase.

They say that, as he ran past the gates, he was smiling in three ways without even knowing, and indeed he wouldn't have known, for he was a chasseur with a chase and the ways of smiling were no concern of his.