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## *The Woodsman*

Pendred Noyce

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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## THE WOODSMAN

by  
Pendred Noyce

I realize that my part of the story isn't what you want to hear. I'm supposed to make a short, heroic appearance and then exit without a fuss. But you see, I knew him. I had known him since my adolescence, that lean disreputable creature with the ragged black fur who used to trail me through the forest at a lope, a shadow detached but dogging me, gait undulating, tongue lolling, head low. In the daylight he skulked, belly low to the ground, eyes flashing with dishonorable plans, grinning up at me sidewise. At night he seemed to loom taller, and his eyes were firecoals. For weeks he might be gone, but then I heard him rustling again like a breeze through the undergrowth, or felt him skulking like shame at my back.

I first encountered him when I was still half a boy, my chest smooth and my voice uncertain as a frog's. I had sat by the hearth of my foster-mother's cottage shaping and smoothing a long ash bow; my mother spun the bowstring out of tailstrangs left in a hedgerow by the galloping troops of the king. She meant me to learn archery and become a soldier. I played at shooting gophers in her garden until one evening, filled by the moonlight with a restlessness I could not name, I slipped through the hedge and set off running on a path leading northwest. Soon ahead of me I heard panting and soft footfalls. A deeper shadow seemed to part the darkness of the undergrowth before me. The shadow

led me over hilly ground to a clearing bordered by a thick growth of blue spruce. Within the clearing in the moonlight grazed the shy and silvery deer. My eyes lit on a doe who raised her head and shuddered at our scent. I lifted my bow. Off to my left the shadow spoke, one sharp note. She leapt, and met my arrow.

In the seasons following that first kill I wandered deeper in the forest, leaving my mother's house behind. One afternoon I came upon a maiden washing her hair in a stream. A basket of herbs lay spilt beside her, rosemary and rue strewn over the bank. I stooped to help her gather them and she threw her long wet hair back over her shoulder, laughing. Near that stream I drove the four corner-posts of our cottage into the earth.

At the time the story speaks of I was very strong and the woods were home to me. Even at night my feet knew the paths. By daylight I worked as a woodcutter, chopping winter fuel and hauling kindling for all the cottages in that section of the forest. At night, in defiance of the king's decree, I hunted. I brought rabbit and deer meat home to my wife or bartered it at cottages deep in the forest, where officers of the king seldom venture. Sometimes, drunken with my luck, I threw a haunch to my shadowy, drooling companion. In this way I provided for my wife and for our yellow-haired twins, boy and girl, who grew as fast as dandelions.

Whenever I entered the cottage I did my

best to leave the wilderness behind. If I had been hunting I washed my hands and face in the stream and shook the twigs from my hair; if the wolf was trailing me I drove him off. Yet after a few nights' rambling I used to see the fear flash across my wife's face as I passed the threshold, and the twins would whimper when I took them on my knee. So I would hold myself close to the cottage for a few days, fixing the roof and the stone walkways, building benches and tables to peddle among our nearer neighbors. When out of sight, I would set the woods ringing with the sound of my axe, so that my wife would know I was near.

And then I would grow restless, and stir awake during the night, and my rustling would awaken her, and I would see my own burning gaze reflected in her eyes. We flung ourselves on one another in the darkness; but a day or two later she would say to me with her eyes turned half away, "You'd better go, then." She knows me and knows that she does not know all of me.

Once she began to sicken, and coughed and grew pale, and flinched sometimes as if my touch burned her skin. She could not eat the meat I brought her, so I traded it for cheese and milk at the southern farms, and that seemed to please her. She poured the milk from a blue pitcher and placed the cheese on a blue plate, and smiled up at me with a bit of pink touching her cheeks again. I wanted to buy her honey and white bread and a feather comforter; for a moment I thought of hunting for bounty. For there is one creature whose hide buys silver from the king. I imagined the chinking of coins. But as I say, I knew him. How could I strike him down when he circled me like an admirer, grinning up at me as if we shared some shameful secret?

Then one sunny spring afternoon, a few leagues from home, as I lifted my axe to let it bite into the flesh of a fallen beech, I heard a child shriek in terror like a hare. I did not hesitate. I lifted the axe and ran toward the sound. Light sprinkled into the beech grove like a spring shower as I ran. Rising in terror, falling in sobs, the child's voice drew me through the trees. All at once I broke into a clearing and found myself standing at the door of a small stone cottage. I paused: the timid old woman who lived there had never invited me inside. But I heard a tearing, crashing sound, and the child shrieked again. At my touch the door swung open, and I stepped inside.

He stood against a closet door on the opposite wall, tall as a man. It was a shock to see him indoors, the fur on his neck standing up, his flanks quivering with hunger. He turned his head at the sound of the door, and I saw that he was drooling. I had never been so close to him before. He smelled like burning cloth.

From within the closet the child whimpered. "Get down," I said.

He put back his head, flattened his ears, laughed at me silently.

"Get down!" I said again, sharply. He dropped to all fours and backed away from the closet, turned and fixed me for a moment with his yellow gaze, then snarled, swung around, and threw himself against the closet door. It splintered before him. I caught a glimpse of pink flesh and yellow hair. Reversing my axe I stepped forward and slammed the dull edge of the blade into the middle of his spine. I felt the bones crunch. He screamed and whirled, his long jaws snapping at me, his yellow teeth glistening

with saliva. But his hindquarters did not turn with him. They dragged around; they grovelled. He lunged for my throat, eyes dripping with rage, but his haunches dragged him down, and his chin struck the floor. I turned the axe again and buried the blade in his snarling face. It stunned him, and he died.

The child's small hand reached out between the planks of the splintered door. I stepped over the wolf and pulled at the planks to widen her passage. She climbed out, chubby and pale, two pink spots of terror fading from her cheeks, the red hood of her cloak flung back and her yellow hair all in a storm beneath it, the red skirt hiking up as she climbed out, revealing a chubby, rosy knee. She circled the corpse of her assailant and caught me with her blue ingenuous gaze. "Grandma's inside," she said.

So I took the axe and lightly slit his belly as you would gut a fish. A steamy corruption rose from him. I put my hand inside him, expecting to feel the fragments of an old woman's bones, but he was empty except for the slime of his hunger. Then I heard a scratching from underneath her bed. Dustballs fringed her nightcap. At the sight of me she shrank back, and I knew myself tainted with gore. So I rose and left them, only stopping to wipe my hand and axe-blade on the grass outside the house.

I lost my stomach for hunting after that. Right away I felt it, and began to worry about how to feed my family. Then I remembered the bounty. Some part of me was reluctant, but in the end I set off for the old woman's cottage to collect the pelt. From behind a locked door she told me that the child's father had carried away my prize.

A few minutes' walk along a flowery path brought me to the child's house, which sat on fat stone haunches, its red shutters gazing blandly at me from beneath a roof of yellow thatch. Red and yellow tulips huddled at the house's knees, and the child stood watering them from a can as I approached. When she saw me she gave a little cry and ran around the corner to bury herself in her mother's skirts. The mother was short but ample like the house, and she was pinning shirts on the clothesline. Among them hung the great black pelt of the wolf.

"I've come for the wolf skin," I said.

"I don't know," she said. "My husband cleaned it."

"I killed him," I said patiently. "The bounty is for killing wolves, not for cleaning their hides." I took the pelt as they hung back, watching with resentful eyes.

I will not tell you how many swindlers tried to cheat me of the pelt on the two days' journey into the capitol, nor what the prices were in town nor how the people dressed. I delivered the pelt directly to the back door of the castle, where I received my silver and wrapped it in a cloth to tie under my shirt. It was on the second day of my journey home that my real trouble began. My feet stumbled in the half-light of the deep woods; branches struck my face. In the descending darkness I could no longer feel my way. At one point I lost myself entirely, and turning in circles underneath the trees I caught my foot beneath a root, wrenching it as I fell. I sat on the forest floor tugging on my throbbing ankle, and all around me I heard the rustling and moaning of the forest. I thought of the broken wolf and felt a hundred

nameless creatures lurking in the darkness. Like a child I shrank against the tree trunk, whimpering with fear.

It took me all of the following day to hobble home. I drew the cloth chinking with coins from beneath my shirt and stuffed it in a hole beneath the floorboards. My wife, her eyes bright with a return of fever, watched smiling, and never asked where I had been.

Winter approaches, the price of firewood is low, and I no longer hunt. Only that small pile of silver stands between my family and hunger. Yet at what cost I earned it! Since that journey through the forest my foot pains me. It seems actually to be growing twisted, like a root itself; above it the muscles of my leg are wasting away. And my wife's illness is growing

One of our primary goals is to encourage new writers and provide a helpful forum for feedback, response, and critique. We believe that young writers should have a chance at some of the same exposure their elders receive and thus we present our first focus on youth with Neve Mattaliano, a high school student from New Jersey.

## EMPRESS BLUE MEETS PHAROAH

by  
Neve Mattaliano

Empress Blue lived on a terrain of purple grass and snow white trees. Pink and aqua petals hung from the long, slim branches and dripped honey when the sun shone strongly. She would lie on her big brass bed among the tall violet weeds and let the little droplets of sweet honey fall into her big mouth. She had long, weedy, blue hair --as dark as the deepest indigo-- which she braided into thick locks, weaving in little gems and pieces of silver. They hung heavy so she would pull them back and pile the mass high on her head then surround it with a delicate silver crown. The crown was made of thin strips of an ancient metal perfectly formed and entangled between each other with nuggets of garnets forming little flowers and paisleys. Her skin was practically transparent and tinted periwinkle. Empress Blue's eyes were huge and lavender and when she shut them her long lashes would brush against the sides of her cheeks. From her pointed elfin ears she wore opalescent mother-of-pearl hoops which always had beads of blue dew cascading from them. The drops would fall to her narrow shoulders and evaporate into the big, drapey, dark blue dress she wore, sending constant deep purple swirls and spirals all over it.

Day after day the Empress would lie on this bed and eat honey. Her languid legs would hang off the edge, her narrow toes brushing against the soft blades of grass, turning them blue, too, just during the seconds that her body touched them. When the toe would sway up, the grass would turn purple again. Or she would turn her head and gaze at the clear green river alongside her tree and bed. Everyday it flowed in the same direction, carrying clumps of aqua and pink petals with it. She could see through the water and watch the orange sea horses cling to big, yellow stems growing out of the red, pebbly river bottom.

worse; she coughs all night. There is no meat to feed her, and the pile of silver shrinks to buy her milk and cheese.

I spend my evenings docile by the fire, with the children crawling over me. This is where heroism has brought me, to this cottage close with the smell of smoke and sour milk. Once only, as my family lay sleeping, the moon struck through the window, and I crept to the door; but when I opened it, the wind howled out its loneliness and accusation; night snapped at my face. I slunk back to bed. Now I lie awake in darkness, listening to my family breathe about me. I remember how the moon shone once. But when beyond our wooden walls I hear the night pant in hunger, fear holds me in its jaws.

It was on one of these days, while Empress Blue was eating honey and staring at the blank sky, that a sparkle hit her left eye. She turned and looked at her river. There, drifting placidly along was a dark figure adorned in golds, coppers, deep reds and bright yellows. The Empress's foot stopped. The figure was nothing that she had ever seen. She was the aura of peace and serenity and had never encountered another spirit or being. The fiery

