

The Woods
Ashleigh Parker
(2019)

Thorns slashed against pale skin splitting Henna's leg open. Groaning with pain she examined her wounded leg as blood trickled down to her ankle. Then the seriousness of the scene set in. Henna gasped and spun around looking for the reason she was running in the first place. A loud shriek echoed through the forest. A shriek only Henna would recognise. She had to get out of here. The sound of hooves clattered around the forest ahead of her. *I have to call out to Liana, but I don't want the King's guards to find me!*

Henna's head felt light and she struggled to stay standing. Another shriek rang through the trees. "Liana," she whispered. Fear burst through her veins and Henna wondered if her best friend was alright. She had been separated by the King's men in the forest earlier on when they had come to "rescue" the Princess Liana from "the witch".

'Me, a witch! How absurd!' she said.

The Princess had wanted to be whisked away from her husband-to-be so she could be with her friend, so Henna had done as the girl wished. She used a leaf to scrape off the blood and tore the hem of her black dress to use as a bandage. She looked at the spot where the scream had come from and started sprinting. Wind whistling in her ears, dress billowing, she flicked her hair out of her eyes. She stumbled, tripping over brambles and logs. The sound of hooves thundered behind her and she looked over her shoulder to see the shadow of a tall, spike haired boy upon a horse. Heart pounding faster with every second she scuttled behind a large arch shaped tree that had fallen over. The shadow approached the clearing and a tall boy with spiked raven hair and a hulking frame sat upon a large black steed. His alabaster skin tight around his strong biceps, blue veins pulsing. 'Her tracks lead this way,' he mumbled to himself. 'My Princess must be this way.'

Henna fingered a rock and threw it in the opposite direction, sailing over trees before landing behind the King. He turned his horse toward the sound before looking behind him. Translucent green eyes fixed on the spot where Henna was hiding. He then turned toward the sound before throwing his horse a 'yah!' Henna's breathing slowed. She swallowed and thought of her friend, out there in the woods alone. Scared. *Maybe I shouldn't have taken her from the safety of civilisation.* Again, the sound of hooves startled her.

'This way!' said a deep voice belonging to the young King.

Hennah started running. She looked over her shoulder. She did a full 360 and landed flat on her back. Pain throbbed through her head and she heard footsteps, soft ones, coming closer.

‘Liana,’ Hennah moaned.

The footsteps ceased.

Hennah’s eyes opened and she thought she was hallucinating. A large face covered in white and black fur was above hers. ‘Liana? Liana, is that you? You look different. Odd almost,’ she said.

But as she blinked, she saw it wasn’t Liana at all. It wasn’t even human. A huge white wolf loomed over her, teeth gnashed, masculine body braced for attack. Hennah held her hands up to shield her face from the animal’s hot breath. Suddenly, the hard stare the animal had been giving her softened and the wolf sat on its haunches like a dog waiting for its owner to give it orders. Hennah pulled herself up, wary of the carnivorous animal in front of her, but the canine stayed put, not moving a muscle until she stood up. Slowly, the canine approached Hennah.

‘Sit!’ Hennah ordered.

The wolf sat.

Phew! she thought. It wouldn’t eat her after all.

Taking in her surroundings, Hennah realised she was only twenty metres away from the point where she had almost encountered the King, only now everything was darker. The sunlight left on the horizon was a golden orange colour. Hennah’s eyes moved from the sunset, to the wolf, to a shiny thing glinting in the sun. Hennah looked closer. A queen’s diadem was lying on its side ten metres in front of her. A trail of shallow footprints led into the marshland. She bent down to feel the mud. It was dry. A fresh track of hoofprints followed it.

‘Oh no! Liana!’

King Raven was on Liana’s trail, she realised. She picked up the queen’s diadem and held it in her hand. A large amethyst sat in the middle reflecting her creamy skinned face and long gold-spun hair.

‘Me, a witch! I look nothing like a witch,’ she muttered, pursing her beestung, pink lips. She saw the trail lead off towards a palm forest and she stopped. There were more shallow footprints in the brown sand but no more than fifteen metres away the footsteps stopped at the foot of a large banana tree. Hennah raced over to it, the wolf following.

‘Liana!’ she called into the branches.

Maybe she's asleep.

The canine settled in under the tree, pawing at the sand. Hennah yawned and sat down on the ground next to the dog and closed her eyes. Hooves.

‘This way. I must find Liana. Search every inch of this forest until you find her, and the witch,’ shouted the boy on the black horse.

Hennah’s eyes opened and she crept behind the tree. The white wolf stayed where it was, obscuring the tracks made by the girls. A boy rode into view, his sword glimmering in its sheath. He rode out of view after noticing the white wolf. Suddenly, there was a rustling of leaves and something as big as Hennah fell out of the tree. The mass of brown stood up and Hennah backed against the tree.

‘Hennah!’ the muddy person grinned.

‘Liana?’ Henna gasped.

The two stood looking at each other until finally they embraced.

‘You won’t believe the night I’ve had,’ whispered Liana.

I smell blood, fresh and sweet. The stench of a mangled rabbit corpse lying close. The footprints of a curious creature distract me for they lead into the deepest part of the forest. I trot over to them. They are fresh and smell strongly of sweat and fear.

Time to hunt.

I sprint after the footprints, trying to stay quiet, so I can surprise my prey. The sun is lowering itself into the space between night and day. The footprints lead further into the forest, but I know my way around this place better than I know my own paw. I’ll take the shortcut around the large river on the south.

I reach the river and leap over a rock; I stalk across the fallen tree, its upper surface bare from my frequent crossings. I keep walking and find myself at the area where I usually find my prey. Little light is showing, except for a small patch of orange in the centre of a thicket.

The fear is close. Its sweet scent sends my pulse racing. So close that I crouch and wait. Not long now. Heavy footsteps filter through the trees. Then with the speed of an eagle, it crashes into me. I tumble over and shake my head. This thing is bigger than me. I can’t take it down alone. But it is wounded. I scramble to my feet and approach it as it moans with pain. Its fur is strange, yet familiar. Not like mine at all. It speaks a strange language, but it also is familiar. So, I stop. Its eyes are close to mine and I look down at them. They are blue like the sky. It moves and I snarl.

The creature moves to cover its face. I stop snarling and look at the frightened creature with pity. I move back to watch. It grows before my eyes to a height three times mine. Again, I stand and move towards it, sniffing its feet. The creature yells a word that I remember. A distant memory flitters through my head. The word means sit and don't move. I don't obey immediately, for I am still curious whether it will attack, but it doesn't seem to mean me any harm.

The creature looks about again with fear. It picks up something from the ground then walks away from me. Still curious, I follow it at a safe distance. It appears to be hunting, following footprints the way I do. I follow the prints as well; the creature loses them a few times but manages to keep on the trail of its prey. I can smell the prints lead to a tree, so I stand beneath it and wait for the creature to catch up, but in the distance, I hear a horse crashing through the forest.

Again, more of the language I recognise, but the tone sets me on edge. The creature on the horse seems bad. A feeling of protection rises in me, and I move to shield the wounded one who is hiding behind a tree and breathing loudly. The horse and rider pass. The breathing of the wounded creature quiets again and it speaks. Moments later, something crashes from the tree, landing on the wounded one, but this creature is covered in mud. I brace for a struggle but find there is no animosity between these strange animals.

*

'What do we do now?' Liana asked Henna.

Henna thought for a moment. 'I don't know, but we're going to have to do something about that King.'