

## Frog Gigging

Bethany crouched low in the shrubs, damp heavy on her skin like a liquid cloak. The high heat simmered the thick vegetation, lightning bugs danced in the deepening twilight, and for one blessed moment a breeze kissed her lightly. She wiped a hand across her brow only to have sweat immediately pour back into her eyes, stinging and blurring. It was miserable, and it was her job.

She knew her papa had wanted a boy, and when mama died he more or less raised her as such. It wasn't so bad, but she worried what would happen as she got older. Kids at school already talked about changes to their bodies. It sounded strange, confusing, scary. She tightened her grip on the miniature trident in one hand, flashlight in the other, and fell into her imagination.

Now she was an Amazonian princess, self-assured and hunting beasts better than any man. Her tattered clothes transformed into tribal garments, the familiar swamp an exotic jungle. The heat could not soften her resolve the way it did lesser hunters who melted like cheap chocolate under its withering oppression. Game feared her, and it should, for none could hide from her predatory gaze.

Night settled in and Bethany was still as stone. She wrapped the darkness around her, became one with the plants, and watched the water through a veil of green. Patience was deadly, and her concentration honed to a razor's edge. The evening may have buzzed and bobbed and splashed in a cacophony of life but from her perch she surveyed all with sinister calm, waiting for the target of her lethal affection.

There!

A fat green blob floated just above the surface of the inky pool. Slowly Bethany raised the sleeping light. A click and she pierced its eyes with a yellow beam freezing the amphibian in place. Her opposite hand flashed forward spearing the slimy prize and dragging it back behind her cover of leaves. The light winked out and all returned to darkness, a momentary stillness descending on the area.

She shoved her catch into a sack at her side and waited for the evening chorus to start up again. Creatures near sensed a fellow denizen had succumbed, but so too would they all, and it was not long before they sang and danced in the manner of life. Bethany knew from experience the deadly nature of the swamp. In the end all things returned to nothing, so better to live until that end as animals did than hope against reason for a reprieve from the inevitable.

The evening wore on and her sack began to bulge under the weight of her proficiency. Her spots, acquired over the course of many similar nights, offered up their riches with the consistency of a farm and she was pleased. The hunt had been a great success, and she would return home and present her kills to her father the king. He could not deny her ability even if he resented her gender, and she was certain pride was in his heart even if it never escaped his lips.

Walking back in near perfect darkness would have been difficult for anyone else, but Bethany knew the way by heart, her feet following a memory. She was careful none-the-less. The swamp was an ever changing place and hastiness tantamount to recklessness. When she reached the place where the wild became slightly less wild her gear and her catch were well secured and she was ready for rest.

She stepped into a clearing and there beneath the silver moon rested the palace of her family. What it lacked in grandiosity it made up for in character. The roof leaned on one side where a fierce wind had buckled the frame, and gaps showed in places where the heat and damp had warped the ageing wood. Her father's chariot rested amongst the tall grass and weeds, its

chipped and faded paint testament to the labor performed in service of their family on the twisted dusty roads of their homeland.

Slumbering comfortably on his porch throne was her father the king. His snores carried through the humid air and an empty bottle of spirit lay on its side beneath the dangling fingers of an outstretched hand. He was stately even at rest, the slightly stained blouse paying tribute to the common ancestry of their line, the sturdy pants made to endure the rigors of their harsh climate. The girth he carried was appropriate for one who led, and even though his hair was receding from the stress of rule his pride prevented him from covering his head or manipulating what remained into a semblance of cobbled together indignity.

Bethany was careful not to wake him as she climbed the creaking steps into their home. She put her haul away for cleaning and returned the hunting gear to its appropriate place. Once inside a feeling of loneliness swept over her. The task completed there was nothing left but sleep, and in the emptiness of their remote structure it felt like the moon had pulled them into space where only dead and forgotten things resided.

The sun would rise again, and she would enjoy the company of other citizens of their noble far-flung kingdom. The heat would fade, the seasons would change, and time would push her beyond the borders of the only world she'd ever known. These were the things she told herself as she lay down on the musty mattress in her little room, a thin sheet that itched and a tattered elephant her only comfort. Yes, the sun would rise tomorrow, and one day perhaps when it did she would wake to find herself in another room, in another land, in another life.

Princess Bethany closed her eyes and hoped for that tomorrow.