



Gorse felt the scratch of thorn, the trickle of blood. But still he ran on, ducking along the undergrowth and diving through bramble. The forest's canopy rolled by above his head, and though his breaths came loud and hard, he could hear his pursuer gaining on him, kicking through shrubs not far behind.

*"Hop with haste, oh little hare,"* sang a panting voice. *"This hungry hound your flesh will tear."*

Gorse couldn't outrun Burdock—he'd always been the slower of the two—so he tried to outmanoeuvre him by gripping a low branch and swinging himself around its tree. He was sprinting suddenly in the opposite direction, and Burdock—skidding to a stop as Gorse whipped by—swore and stretched out his fingers. He grasped at empty air, just short of Gorse's sleeve.

Gorse thought he'd gained a decent lead until a misjudged step sent him staggering across some roots. He cursed himself for tripping—he knew these woods so much better than that—and tried to recover his pace. Burdock howled, his laughter growing shriller as the distance shrank between them. Gorse heard a grunt, felt hands grasp his ankle. Burdock had thrown himself forward to grab his leg; they tumbled together through dirt and scrub.

"Got you!" cackled Burdock.

Gorse laughed with him—the music of boys not quite a decade of age. Still floored on the mossy ground, he tried to pull his leg free. But Burdock held fast.

"Sing it," said Burdock. "I won't let go 'til you sing it. You know the rules."

Sighing, Gorse sang the old song. "*Oh hungry hound, tear the ears from my skull. Together as dogs these hares we'll cull.*"

"That's right." Burdock let go and slapped Gorse's arm as they got to their feet. "You're a hound now. We need to find the last hare."

Gorse turned on the spot, searching the dimming woods. "Tansy," he said, then felt Burdock touch his cheek. He glanced across to see Burdock tilting a finger towards him. A streak of blood was glistening on its tip.

"You've cut yourself," said Burdock, a note of concern in his voice. His eyes were wide beneath his ruffled hair, which had a touch of strawberry to it, compared to the blonde of Gorse's long curls.

"Just brambles," said Gorse. He dabbed his stinging cheek, then eyed the blood before sucking it from his finger. The taste was like copper on his tongue.

"Looks deep. Does it hurt?"

“A bit. It’ll heal.” Gorse shrugged. “Let’s get Tansy.”

The pair of them scanned the forest. While they stood back to back, the chirps of birds, the sighs of leaves and all the rustling of creatures unseen filled the lull between the boys.

“She ran the opposite way,” said Burdock, “when I found you both hiding in the ferns. That way.” He pointed deeper into the woods, which stirred with shadows as the sun continued to fall.

“No.” Gorse nodded in the direction of Mainsbury. “That way. Back towards the village.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

His friend scoffed. “Then you’re a fool and you’ve got stones for brains.”

“Let’s split up, then. And if we don’t have Tansy before the day’s near done, we’ll holler a truce and get home.”

Burdock’s eyes flashed with his grin. “Keen to get back, are you?” He peered theatrically over both shoulders, then wriggled his eyebrows at Gorse. “You scared Dandyclogs’ll get you?” He mimed the slicing of a blade across Gorse’s chest, hissing all the while.

Gorse gave him a shove. “Even if Dandyclogs were real, I’d be more scared of my mother. She told me to stay home tonight. She’ll be mad enough that I snuck out to play—and all the madder if I’m out after dark.”

Burdock shrugged. “Let’s get a-hunting, then.”

With that, the old friends exchanged grins. Gorse dashed one way, back towards the forest’s edge, while Burdock ran the other, deeper into the woods.



A short spell had passed; Burdock was already sure he'd prove Gorse a fool. He'd found a trail left fresh in someone's wake, marked by disturbed leaves and twigs on the ground, and by ruffles and folds in the bracken and ferns. These tracks were too big for the forest's boars, badgers and deer. They could only belong to Tansy.

The snap of a stick pierced the forest's whispers. Burdock peered ahead, searching for the source of the sound.

There. Quite some distance away. Just the briefest flash of a face, pale against the gloom of trees, and gone as quickly as it came. Burdock didn't quite catch its features but was sure he'd glimpsed long, dark hair.

He'd have Tansy soon enough.

So Burdock began to run — though not as quickly as he could. He wanted to draw out the chase. At least for a little while.

*"Hop with haste, oh little hare,"* he sang again. *"This hungry bound your flesh will tear."*



Gorse continued slowly in the opposite direction. The sun had sunk further, its bronze speckles now dimming on the forest floor. So Gorse listened intently, relying as much on his ears as his eyes while stepping across ivy and roots. He breathed as softly as he could, taking in the scents of earth, sap, blooms and wild garlic.

He tried Tansy's usual hiding places as he went. The hollow in the oak tree with the swing on a rope. Beneath the ivy on Fable's Hill. The tunnel of briars by the lichen-flecked cairn, which locals said would crumble were it ever given a name. Nothing.

Something darted over Gorse's head, fluttering between leaves, and he looked up to see a rook watching him from a nearby branch. Gorse gave it a respectful nod, raised his finger to his lips. And when the rook blinked its beady eye, Gorse smiled to himself; he'd just thought of somewhere else to look.



Burdock was still heading deeper into the woods, though he'd slowed to a trot and then to walking pace, for something bothered him about the trail he was following.

He crouched by a patch of ground clear enough to allow a footprint. And indeed, there was a print. It wasn't as he'd expected, though, for it had the faint outline not of a shoe but of a bare foot. And not only that—the footprint was damp.

That's what had been puzzling Burdock. Though twilight now wove its way between trees, there was light enough for him to see the water drops scattered along Tansy's trail, darkening the earth and glimmering on brambles. But it hadn't rained in days.

He put a finger to the footprint, felt the wetness in its heel. Why was Tansy barefooted and wet?

No matter. The darkness was thickening, and the forest's sounds had started to change, the way they always did when nightfall came. An owl hooted in the distance. Insects toiling out of sight started buzzing all the louder.

Time was running out, and Burdock was determined to catch his hare before dusk forced a truce. He'd caught Gorse and would have Tansy too.



Gorse skulked, quiet and low, closing in on a ring of trees known as the Seven Druids. He was careful to avoid any twigs that might snap beneath his feet, for he was eager to catch Tansy and end this game, and even the slightest sound of approach—assuming she was in the bowl of roots between those trees—would see Tansy fleeing like a mouse from a fox.

He knew he'd have to give her warning. Those were the rules of the game. He'd have to sing the song. But the closer he got before doing so, the less of a lead she'd have.

When he glimpsed dark hair between those circling alders, he almost gave himself away with a sigh of relief. This game would soon be over; not long now before he'd be heading home. He might get back before his mum returned from wherever it was she'd rushed to. Perhaps his dad hadn't noticed he'd slipped away.

Perhaps he'd get away with this. His mum had been particularly stern about Gorse staying home tonight, even though she'd been too distracted to give him a reason why. It didn't seem fair to Gorse, to be trapped indoors without good cause. But he knew his mother would take it badly if she found out he'd disobeyed.

Gorse was close now. He could see Tansy crouched in the hollow. Luckily she had her back to him while she kept a lookout between two trunks. Gorse resisted singing until he was right next to the trees. "*Hop with haste, oh little hare,*" he began, already launching himself from his haunches. "*This hungry hound your flesh will tear!*"

Rather than tackle the hollow's roots, Gorse dashed around the circle's rim, just quick enough to grab Tansy's waist while she scrabbled over the cavity's edge. "Got you!" he cried, and Tansy laughed, wriggling in his arms.

“Fine,” she giggled. “Fine! You got me.” When she finally stopped squirming, Gorse let go.

Getting to her feet, Tansy clapped the soil from her summer dress and hands. “Is that all the hares caught?” she asked.

“It is,” replied Gorse, before joining her in the song that declared the game’s end. *“Hounds we’ll all be, for the hares are dead. Anon we’ll find prey to hunt in their stead.”*

As soon as they’d finished, Tansy frowned at Gorse’s cheek. “What happened to your face?”

Gorse touched the cut. It was sticky now, just starting to crust. “Caught a thorn. It’s nothing.”

Tansy shrugged. “If you’re sure.” She glanced about. “So where’s Burdock?”

“He was convinced you’d run the other way. Went looking in the other direction.”

Tansy frowned. “Really? He’d better be heading back by now. It’s almost dark.”

“Almost. Come on.” Gorse led the way, back on the course he’d come from. “Hopefully he’s given up and we’ll meet in the middle.”

So Gorse and Tansy left the Druids behind, calling out for Burdock as they went.



Burdock couldn’t hear his friends’ cries. He was too deep in the woods, still following a trail left damp between trees.

It wasn’t merely distance that swallowed his friends’ calls. A new sound now filled Burdock’s ears. The hiss and gush of water.

Burdock knew the River Yeelde was a little way ahead, and wondered why Tansy had strayed so far from the usual bounds of their game. It seemed an odd thing to do, especially so late in the day. Mainsbury's children were encouraged to be well out of the woods by dusk.

As Burdock peered about, he realized he'd let nightfall creep up on him. Only the faintest light remained now. The air beneath the branches was a dim blueish purple, the trees as black as coal. Burdock could just make out the bats that flitted above his head.

He stepped into a clearing and saw the stony slope that led to the river. The rocks were of the same slate that climbed the waterfall to the right. The waterfall wasn't particularly tall, but the Yeelde's broad width—about two dozen yards from one side to the other—meant the span of falling water drowned out the forest's sounds. Burdock no longer heard the trilling of birds and the humming of bugs. There was only the sound of the waterfall.

Burdock moved forward onto the rocks. He had to step carefully, for the crags were wet, even though these rocks were too far from the Yeelde to be touched by its spray. Burdock's confusion grew as he continued across the stones, observing that the rocks here—still some way from the river itself—were dotted with rotting flora. Duckweed, crowfoot, bladderwort—plants that didn't belong on these barren stones.

Something moved by Burdock's shoe—a black water rat scabbling up the rocks, probably headed for the burrows that scarred much of the bank.

Burdock was close enough now to see the river, its foam and froth pale in the dusk. It took him a moment to spot the whitish face in the water, not far from the rocky bank.



“Tansy!” shouted Burdock, waving his arms and continuing along the stones. “Get out of there! What are you doing?”

Burdock could tell she’d seen him. She was too far away for him to make out her features, but he could see that her eyes were fixed in his direction. She didn’t move at all, though, let alone respond. She just stayed where she was, her head barely out of the river, with its black current flowing around her chin.

“Tansy! Get out! The game’s over. You win!”

Burdock drew closer to the bank, though the slippery weeds made his progress slow. And still, Tansy didn’t move.

Burdock could just about see the long hair that floated around her head, pulled and buoyed by the Yeelde’s steady flow. But it was the only part of her that moved. That pale face was still fixed upon him, its dark eyes not even blinking.

“Tansy?” croaked Burdock, for he was no longer sure who this was in the water. He was almost close enough to make out the girl’s features. He edged forward, slowing now, blinking in the gloom, trying to focus.

And then he stopped.

The face in the water wasn’t Tansy’s. It belonged to a woman he’d never seen before. A young woman who’d be beautiful—in that haughty, alluring way he often saw in girls nearing adulthood—if her expression wasn’t so entirely devoid of life.

Every one of Burdock’s instincts told him to get away—to flee from this stranger with her clouded dark grey eyes. But the moment he took a trembling step backwards, the woman swept forward and clawed her way onto the rocks.

Burdock span and clutched at stones, pulling himself desperately up while his feet skidded against weeds. His breaths came in bursts and his heartbeat filled his ears. He’d made it a

little way up the slope and glanced over his shoulder when he heard the woman closing in. Her face—white, nymph-like and lifeless—was still fixed on him while she moved quickly—so horribly quickly—up the bank. A white dress streaked with weeds clung to her body. She scuttled with ease as if she knew every rock, every hollow—almost flowed upwards against the bank—while Burdock skidded and struggled and felt his lead slip away.

Burdock screamed. There were no words in the sound; just a bewildered, terrified, animal cry. And as he gulped wildly for breath, he caught the rank stench that filled the air. He smelled putrid flesh and stagnant weeds and could almost *feel* the hunger of the thing that slipped breathlessly up the slope.

He tried to scream again but the cry never left his throat, for the thing had wrapped its damp, swelling fingers around his nostrils and mouth. That fetid stench filled his nose and sent bile up his throat.

His cries were muffled while the woman dragged him backwards down the slope. He struggled with every ounce of his strength against the grip that pinned his arms, but the woman was too strong.

Burdock saw the slope rising away, heard the slosh of water, felt the river seeping into his shoes, soaking his legs, his waist, his chest. While the woman pulled him deeper into the current, he managed to twist his neck, just enough to glimpse that face—delicate and pale and marbled by veins, with eyes as dark as the river itself. Small movements seemed to swell beneath her skin, rippling up her throat to raise the sides of her lips. It was almost a smile.

Still Burdock struggled, trying to kick at the legs behind his own. But the deepening water slowed his thrashing and

sapped his strength. The stars blinked out when his head disappeared beneath the surface.

Burdock held his breath as the darkness pulled him down, still kicking feebly while sinking in the woman's embrace. But the more he sank, the less he kicked. A heavy tiredness took hold.

And still they were sinking, down and down, deeper than Burdock thought was even possible. Down and down into that cold abyss.

Burdock's lungs strained and burned. He no longer had a choice. He thought of his mother. He thought of his father. He thought of his friends. And he thought of Speck, his ever-loyal dog, who would at this very moment be waiting for him at the cottage door.

Burdock breathed in. His tears were lost to the Yeelde.

And while the river filled his lungs, he tipped his head downwards to glimpse impossible, sunken things, before closing his eyes for the very last time.



Later that night, Gorse and Tansy weren't alone in the search for their friend. The entire village was in the forest with them, searching that wild, ancient darkness with their lanterns and lamps, and calling Burdock's name in increasingly worried tones.

A village of hounds in search of a hare.

