

## The Truffle Hunters

They emerge from the burrow to a bloody sunset, and the hare.

Stood frozen, mad eyes very wide. Sighted.

Then Pod snorts, nudging Voynich's legs, and the hare streaks off across red doused fields. He exhales slowly and starts walking. It isn't an omen. Just an animal that knows better than to linger.

Pod's tail flicks from side to side as she trots ahead. She's happy to be out and it makes Voynich smile, lengthening his stride to catch up with her. Not that she'd ever leave him behind, glancing back every few metres to check he's still there.

(The castle agent had called her "unlovely" as if Voynich had cared to know his opinion on an earless runt of a sow, as if it mattered, as if Voynich would suddenly realise he didn't want a pallid, round-headed mutant creature. Pod was his. No one was queuing up to offer him a better animal that didn't burn in the sun and shiver in the cold. He wouldn't have wanted one if they were.)

Out of sight of the burrow and into the trees, Pod stops and waits for Voynich to unbuckle her harness. He makes sure to scratch the skin the straps covered for her as she rumbles in relief. Pigs are supposed to be harnessed and leashed at all times out of doors but Pod hates it and she's never run off. Never been more than a few feet from Voynich's side in her whole life.

They walk on together in the long sunset with Voynich leaning on his stick and Pod snuffling. Too close to home to really find anything not uncovered by the others in the daylight but Voynich thinks it's the search she enjoys. Mist creeps over the leaf litter and between the straight trunks, lit up by the dying light, everything pink and gold.

Pod picks their path. Toward the ruins this time.

Dangerous to go too close but the pig knows things a man can't. Voynich trusts her.

She stops by a hornbeam at the edge of the stone garden and digs, snout working, until Voynich helps with his stick and trowel. He's careful for the last bit, brushing earth away to uncover her prize. A good sized black truffle. Voynich beams and plants a kiss on that muddy snout. Pod gets an apple slice to whuffle down as he tucks the truffle away. That alone has made the evening worth it but they've barely started yet.

Pod trots onwards with no care paid to the tilted or broken slabs of stone around them. Voynich peers past the moss and lichens at the unknowable letters, words.

What was important enough to carve into stone and leave standing here for eternity? Not that Pod knows, or cares, pausing to look back at Voynich until he hurries up to join her at the hollowed shell of a building. It must have been grand once. Stone too, carved blocks of it, broken figures and ornate windows. The tree roots break through the worn slabs of the floor and their branches reach for the sky where there was once roof.

With Pod snuffling around the trees and broken down walls, Voynich stands in the cross section, the middle of what it used to be, head tilted back to watch light and shadow play

on stone.

He closes his eyes and listens.

Somewhere far away people sing. Lots of them, high and ethereal, like Voynich imagines ghosts would. Maybe there are ghosts here. It's not a hostile place though. Not a sad place. A peaceful one.

Pod nudges against his legs and turns her snout up into his hand. He scratches her head and she moves on and out, knowing he'll follow. Down the hill they find a smaller couple of truffles beneath a young ash. Pod is well pleased with her apple slices. They stop by the pond so she can drink and Voynich can crouch to squint into the murky depths. It's too dark to see anything. Sometimes there are great golden fish that can be good to eat, if you cook them right.

Birds argue in the birches as pig and man pass beneath, roosted and settling for the night, heedless of anything below. Pod's trotters click on old, broken tarmac. Voynich wonders if she knows this is risky. Forbidden. They're almost in the ruins proper.

Eyeless houses with jutting beams and rusted nothings abandoned outside. Twisted gates with what used to be an eagle carved in. Half a red pillar with a slot in it, innards open.

Another truffle under a half fallen down birch and a squirrel that watches as they dig. It's quiet.

They'll go to the river, if that's what Pod wants, decides Voynich. The river and back.

There's a distant thrumming in the sky to the south and the glittering lights of a castle. It moves so slowly you could barely say it does at all, hanging there, laughter carrying to Voynich on the cold wind. Maybe he imagines it. It's a world he's never seen and never will see, but works to enrich. The truffles in his pouch will be in a place like that by week's end. They still need them, up in the castles.

Pod shoves her head in an abandoned barrel and startles a cat. The brindled creature hisses and scrabbles into one of the ruined buildings, something clattering in the dark. Pod must have scented it. Been curious. Voynich lays a hand on her back to reassure her.

Disturbed dust swirls around them as they pass through the most dense part of the ruins. Exposed cables twist, broken glass crunches, a can rolls along mournfully. Voynich can hear the singing again, but here it's sad. This isn't a peaceful place. It's where the ghosts should be.

The light dies as they reach the river. The bridge is intact, if a little cracked and crumbling. They could cross if they wanted. Pod doesn't want, and Voynich is glad. He's never been that far. Instead they wander along an old path and Pod finds him another truffle from one of the old planes that tower over blank ruins. He relies more on the stick to feel his way around obstacles.

Pod decides to sit at the water's edge for a little while and Voynich joins her to share the last half of the apple before they go back.

She can't have noticed the silence like Voynich does, but Pod freezes all the same. Does

she hear the singing inside her head even though she's got no ears? Voynich isn't always convinced it comes to him by way of his own ears, so it would make sense.

That doesn't matter now.

It's stopped and Pod is so still.

She lurches up as a howl cuts the dark. Voynich finds himself on his feet too with terror flashing through him.

Barks follow hollowly. Hungrily.

A real laugh.

Voynich looks at Pod. There isn't time to harness her. He'll need to trust in her ability to follow him.

He takes off running, not as swift as the hare was, relying on his stick. It's too dark for this.

They're both graceless.

Blood pounds in Voynich's ears, thudding with his feet on broken concrete. He dares a glance and sees a flash of pale pink by his side. Pod is keeping up.

Something snarls.

Pod squeals. A horrible noise. One she rarely ever makes. She can smell them. She's scared.

So is Voynich.

A dark building rises ahead and then light.

Flickering. A doorway.

Are they trapped? Caught between?

There's a shadow against the light, a person, and Pod runs for them. Voynich can't call to her, can't tell her that people doesn't always mean safe. She won't hear him. He has to follow, putting on speed, reaching for Pod but there's nothing to grab. No harness.

They both tumble through the doorway and it snaps shut behind them. The dogs bark, but outside. The dogs' people growl.

Pod has skidded to a halt in the unfamiliar space, some kind of passageway, leading into dark. She sniffs.

Voynich doubles over to drag in stale air and clasps his stick.

The figure peers between man and pig with their head tilted. Voynich finally gets a good look. Small, grubby, bundled up. Cropped dark hair and weathered skin. Not old. Big eyes that are very gold in this light. Wrapped in a blanket poncho and furs.

No dog.

They might not be safe yet but this is an improvement.

“Thanks...” mumbles Voynich, head ducked.

“No problem,” answers the golden-eyed saviour. They let Pod sniff them and begin to smile, if reluctantly. “Why’s your pig got no ears?”

Voynich shrugs. “Born like it.”

“S’cute. Come on. They’ll not break the door down, they know better. But they’ll lurk.” They jerk a thumb back at the door and scoop up that lantern to lead the way down the passageway. And it is down, if slowly. A ramp.

Pod keeps close to Voynich but she’s not as fearful as he is. He starts to hear the sounds of people. Talk and cooking. Children playing. Through another door to a big, big room. The ceiling is lost in darkness. There are more lanterns, more than the burrow has. Gas bottles by the stoves.

And there’s the wall. One massive wall that’s covered in... in pictures? But moving ones. Flickering ones. Voynich stares. People in weird clothes do things he doesn’t understand in bright daylight, under a blue sky. He’d heard the sky was supposed to be blue once.

Pod is staring too.

Their saviour realises they aren't following anymore and turns to look back with a knowing smirk.

"Come and sit," they say, waking Voynich from his reverie. He nudges Pod and they both get moving again.

The others watch as they pass and Voynich feels conspicuous in his blue coat. The truffle hunters all wear blue, because the pigs can see it, but it has always felt like a lot when most of the other groups wear whatever they can find or make. Which is usually brown and grey. The blue cloth comes from the castles.

But these people have power and gas so they can't be badly off. They must have a relationship with the castles.

Voynich keeps his head down and Pod close.

They're taken to sit near one of the stoves, on floor cushions, and a hot drink is pressed into Voynich's hands by another indeterminate person in grey. Their saviour finds a bowl of scraps for Pod, who leans against Voynich as she eats.

"My name is Hare, by the way," says the saviour.

Hare.

Voynich stares at them.



He realises he's being rude.

"Ah, I... I'm Voynich. This is Pod. Thank you, Hare. For saving us. And the hospitality. We... owe you."

Hare smiles and sits too, peering at Voynich. "You do. But it's not urgent. Wasn't going to hide and listen to the dogs crunching your bones."

"What is this place?" asks Voynich, forgetting his manners again, but Hare doesn't seem to mind.

"The Pictures," they say, the flickering light of the big wall playing over their face. "And our home."

Voynich shuffles so he can see the wall and Hare both. The strange people up there are dancing now, in such bright clothes as it almost hurts to look at.

Several children, well bundled in blankets, shuffle closer to Pod. She lies down to show she's gentle and they swarm to pat her with soft giggles.

"Why are you down here at night?" asks Hare. "You have to know it isn't safe."

"Pod's got sensitive skin. She burns in the sun. And she wanted to come down here. I tend to let her lead the way. Trust her."

Voynich refuses to feel self-conscious or stupid about that. Dogs can come out of nowhere. Even in the day.

Hare stares at him incredulously, but it's not like they need to say anything more.

Obviously the truffle hunter is mad.

Voynich is used to people looking at him like that. So he just shrugs and sips his hot drink.

It's good. Hot and sweet with a burn of something stronger.

"Right..." mutters Hare. "Well. You can both stay in here until dawn and then I'll walk you back up to the park."

"Thank you. You're very kind."

"I know," they say. "Don't let the pig do her business anywhere. Unless she can do it in a bucket."

They move off to speak to the old woman, and then others, leaving Voynich to answer childish questions about Pod, and where he's from, and what it's like being a truffle hunter, and does he really live under the ground in a big burrow?

Eventually the children are taken to beds behind curtains at the back of the big room but the images on the wall never stop. They change, a lot, and most of the adults keep half an eye on them. Some make notes about what they see.

Voynich leans back against Pod to watch until he slides away into sleep with shapes

dancing in his mind and the sounds that go with the pictures playing only for him.

He dreams the stories they tell.

Dancing and singing in a smart black suit.

Standing, bereft, in the rain as his lover walks away from him.

Digging graves in the darkness.

Flying up in the blue sky in some roaring metal machine.

Gunning down the people that want to hurt him.

Riding a white horse by an endless expanse of water.

Hare shakes his shoulder to wake him. There's a beam of light cutting through the quiet dark of the room from some distant crack in the roof. It sounds like most of the others are asleep. Pod is awake, but she hasn't moved yet. Apparently content.

Voynich sits up and eats the strange kind of flapjack that gets pressed into his hand. He drinks purified water as Hare pulls on a scratched up leather jacket and hides knives in their sleeves.

He thinks he probably likes Hare. And imagines they like him. They do smile at him a few

times as he finishes his food and rises to go and wash his cups in one of the buckets for the purpose.

Pod is allowed at the scraps again before Hare leads them out and up into the late dawn.

The dust beyond the door has been disturbed in the night, as if something twisted and fought there, turned on itself. Voynich hears snarling without his ears.

Pod doesn't seem worried.

Hare takes them back the way they came the previous evening but keeps to the shade.

Voynich wonders why until he realises they're being mindful of Pod's skin. He's unspeakably grateful. He glances at the sky and tries to imagine it blue, like in the pictures. It stays stubbornly yellow.

They don't talk. Voynich isn't good at it, and Hare doesn't seem inclined. Pod couldn't hear them even if they did.

Voynich wasn't sure what Hare meant when they said the park, but it turns out to be the fields with the pond and golden fish. They pause by it and turn to him.

"There. You'll be safe from here, dogs prefer the ruins."

Voynich ducks his head again. "Thank you. You're welcome in the burrow, if you ever get up that far. We're beyond the stone garden at the top of the hill. Through the trees."

He chews his lip as Hare considers him, then digs into his pockets and comes out with a

conker. It's very near perfect, oily smooth, deep copper highlights in the surface and very round. Found a few nights ago and treasured but he owes Hare something. More than this, really, but what else could he give?

He offers it to Hare, feeling his cheeks heat up.

It's a long moment until Hare takes the conker and tilts their head to study it, cradled in both grubby hands.

"You found this?" they ask, rubbing their thumb over the soft surface.

Voynich hums an affirmation. "I still owe you though."

Hare smiles and clutches the conker tight. "You do. I won't forget. But try not to get eaten again, yeah?"

Voynich finds himself smiling too as he nods. "Do my best. Be safe, Hare."

They laugh and crouch to ruffle Pod, then watch as man and pig turn to trail around the pond and off through the grass, keeping to the shade of the trees.

Pod glances up at Voynich. He looks down at her and shrugs, so she trots onwards with her tail flicking happily.

