

# Refuge

Short story

by b.b.brown

The axe bit into the wood at an angle, jumped out, then bit into a different spot at an opposite angle. A chunk of fallen limb spun away and left a gap of brownish-white wood exuding the strong fresh odor of sap. The large woodsman wielding the axe saw without thinking that the size and shape of the cut were precisely correct and fit well into the shape of the early summer afternoon with its living breeze that swayed the limbs of trees. Tears of sweat streaked down through the dust on his face. While the wind powdered his face with more dust, he continued to chop.

Two dark spots appeared down the long dirt road. *Guests*, thought the woodsman. Shuffling closer, the slightly bobbing shapes became a girl helping an old man along the road. The old man used a staff. The girl was neither woman nor child, but a young creature beginning to feel its own strength and dignity. Both travelers were tired and wore dusty, torn clothes.

The woodsman leaned his axe against the tree limb. Wiping dust and sweat from his face and neck, he waited. The pair approached him without pause although the girl's eyes were watchful.

"Good day, sir," said the old man.

"Good day."

"We are beggars, sir, mendicants of the endless road. We have neither drink nor food."

Studying the old man's face, he saw that the eyes had been torn out, and the brows and cheeks were scarred. The hands gripping the staff, as well as the curled feet barely protected by old sandals, were calloused and hardened until they resembled less flesh than bark.

The woodsman looked at the girl. Her figure stiffened, her eyes grew wide and lips compressed. Her figure would soon be fully feminine. Supporting the old man with one hand, the other clenched torn parts of her clothing in a tight fist.

*It's as if*, thought the woodsman as he studied the slim child and crooked old figure, *they are bound one to the other by the invisible iron of Hephaestus.*

"May we, sir," asked the blind old traveler, "have water to quench our thirst and wash away the dust?"

While busy birds gathered chattering in the encircling forest, the sun was slipping down in silence to rest. The wind no longer whirled dust so densely and settled itself for the evening. Picking up his axe, the woodsman saw clearly that the sightless old man could wait until the woods themselves spoke in answer, but that the girl's jaw trembled.

"By the sacred law of hospitality, I greet you," said the woodsman. "Would you prefer to bathe before eating?"

"Yes, gracious sir, thank you."

"Follow me, please."

He provided their bath and laid out fresh clothing. There was no request from the girl about the old man's toilet, for she did the necessities from fierce habit. Her old companion took the silent cleansing of his road-worn sores with a still gratitude. Food was prepared, wine set out, and cool water poured in clean cups. They sat around the only table in the hut. The man who was blind spoke a simple prayer and they ate. When they were finished, the woodsman and the girl cleaned dishes and wiped the table, while the old one sang a low song to ease the day into night. They lit lamps and sat in the warmth of the early evening.

"You're an unusual host," said the old man. "And quiet."

"Yes."

"You don't state your terms yet," said the girl.

"Daughter, hush!"

"I have no terms."

"You see, my child?"

"We have yet to meet anyone without something to demand. Work to be done. Curiosity satisfied. Entertainment provided."

"But, dear, just the other day a gentleman gave us water and let us rest in the shade of his trees."

"Until a neighbor saw us."

"And he asked nothing of us."

"There was no time."

The woodsman brushed and smoothed his clothes with a rough hand as he stared at the girl. The girl's eyes were wide and bright and he felt the pleasant warmth of the night. Looking from her to the father, he saw a fragile creature held together by the rawness of life itself.

"Since you are uncomfortable without an obligation to fulfill," he said, "I will lay a

task on you. Tell me something of your past.”

“I thought so.”

“Hush!” snapped the father. “Don’t insult the host.”

She lowered her eyes, but her jaw remained tight.

“Sir, I am an outcast,” the old man began. “My daughter eases my pain by choice.”

“Your eyes?”

“My eyes. One should see before blindness.”

“May I touch your face? It is not part of the obligation.”

The girl clenched both fists.

“You may.”

He touched the face gently following the brow across the scars and down the cheek to jaw and lips.

“You are not so old, old man.”

“No, not so many more years than yourself, most likely.” He smiled faintly. “But enough that I am her father.”

“Life has been stern with you.”

“Beaten and exhausted by rain and sun, finding home and scourge in the dirt, woods and weary road,” the blind man said, “we are strangers who must do as we are bid in all lands.”

“Tell your story now.”

“I was great with the love of the gods which men call luck. Ambitious, proud, and in power. But the law was executed justly by my hand: the great paid equal measure with the poor. For a deed of which no one but myself proved fit, they made me their leader, and gave me a wife of strength and feeling and mind. We bore children, of whom this girl is one, while around us the land grew heavy in fruition. It was the spring of life and land.”

The storyteller coughed a bitter laugh.

“I knew nothing. As the prophet foresaw, my luck destroyed me, my love of god’s will destroyed me.”

“You were too rigid?”

“I was blind, more blind than these eyeless sockets. Yet, how could I know? The oracle spoke of disasters, and so I fled head first into disaster. You judge: a stranger attacks me, so I defend myself. He is killed. I save a people from a vicious beast, and in honor they give me a woman to wed. We bear children. Is this unnatural?”

“T’is common.”

“Oh, gods, that moment! That pitiless moment when the truth arose and mocked me. More than one had tried to stop me, but I said no. More than one gave sound reasons for being satisfied, but I had to know.”

The blind man pressed both hands against his temples as if to squeeze out the pain. Beside him, sitting tense and silent, the girl stared at the floor.

“Please continue,” said the woodsman softly.

“The truth came out. The man I killed was my natural father, the woman I loved was his wife and my mother. All destroyed: my parents, my life, my family. But the gods gave me this, decreed it before my birth. How was I to know?”

“Did they blind you?”

“No, the madness did it. When my wife destroyed herself, I destroyed my sight in grief. My mother had been my wife, my children were my brothers and sisters.”

“You dwell too much on such matters,” said the woodsman. “It will sicken you.”

“You’ve spoken enough, father.”

“How can I forget? When the madness passed, and I sought reconciliation, the people cast me out. There are more years to endure before my pain is erased in the sacred grove foretold by the oracle.”

“Don’t juggle with names and judgments, old man. You’ve not enough life to make the muddy world green.”

“But was this right?”

“Be still, father.”

“Very well,” sighed the old, blind man. “I shall be still.”

And the night was silent and warm. The woodsman put out a light. In the half-shades of the room, the girl was drawn still and taut as if listening.

There came a scream, a sound whose very shape was cold. The ice of the scream chilled the woodsman.

“They have come,” said the old man, “to chide us for our leisure.”

The scream came again and a rhythmic thump struck the walls of the room. The woodsman and the girl trembled, but the old man was still.

“They follow you?”

“They pursue us,” said the daughter.

“Shhh, now,” whispered her father. “They guide us.”

The pounding continued but the scream was not repeated.

“The Kindly Ones,” said the old man.

“The Erinyes,” whispered the woodsman.

The girl’s eyes snapped with fire. “The Furies.”

Standing slowly, the weary old traveler drew soft clothing against his body and turned to the door his sightless face. His daughter put the straight, hard staff in his hand, and they walked together to the door.

“No,” said the woodsman.

“But, sir--”

“No.”

“What are you doing?” asked the girl.

“I must greet the sacred visitors.”

She looked from him to her father and back again.

“Why?”

“To draw them away.”

“Why?”

“So that an old man and a young girl might rest in peace for one night.”

“Why?”

“Because I chose to be host.”

“Don’t look into the eyes of the gods,” said the blind man. “Not even the lesser gods.”

“I know.” The woodsman stared at the door in the half-light and listened to the pounding on the walls and the beating in his chest.

“You don’t owe us this.” The girl’s face had softened, but her voice was hard. “You don’t owe us.”

“And you don’t owe me.” He looked at the eyeless face with its trembling lips. “Let me have your staff.”

“One cannot strike the gods.”

“It’s not wise, that’s true.” He took the staff and turned back to the door. “It is not wise.”

“What--” asked the father as he gently touched the woodsman’s arm. “What is your name?”

“I don’t remember. Give me one to remember. Make it quiet.” And he smiled. “Make it true.”

“As you wish. Until morning, then.”

“Until morning.”

Handling gently the hardened staff, the woodsman opened the door and shouted into the black night.

“Get off my roof, you blasphemous scavengers!” The night sucked at him and his body disappeared. “Fly back to your filthy pit!”

The door slammed. And the screaming began.

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