



Bonus Short

HUNTER'S
DESCENT



ALICE WINTERS

*Please read Hunter's Descent before you read this short story! There are spoilers for Hunter's Descent sprinkled throughout! Please remember to not share, this short story is exclusively for newsletter and Wonderland members!

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Indigo

"Do you not like the mouse glasses I got you?" Lake asks as he scrutinizes me.

"I absolutely love them, Lake. My favorite part is the way they dig into the side of my face and leave indents. For such a cheap pair of glasses, they sure have some strength!" I say.

"That's because your head is horribly large," Lake says because his goal in life is to be dreadful to everyone but that stupid fish of his.

"It's because they're children's glasses," I explain as I continue to tinker with the pair that was broken by Lake's menace of a furball. "I gave them to my daughter, and can I just say she looks absolutely *darling*."

"I'm still betting Aurora's not yours. She's too cute to be yours," Lake says.

"Too smart, too," Sy inputs because for him and Lake, being evil is their favorite pastime. I guess at least it's better than how he acted when I first met him.

"Well... I've had my fill of meanness for the day. I'm going to head home and get my fill of staring at Sir Reginald before Declan comes home and I force him to stare at Sir Reginald with me," Lake decides as he stands up and claps his hands.

"Do you ever wonder why Declan stays with Lake?" I ask Sy.

“Every day,” Sy says as Lake claps his hands again.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Trying to get your pet’s attention. I need him to drive me home.”

I clap my hands and my pet comes dashing onto the scene.

“How the fuck does he know the difference between your clap and mine?” Lake asks in disgust.

“He is *my* pet, not yours. Pet, Lake said he’d give you fifty dollars to drive him home,” I say.

“Of course!” my pet says as Lake’s face screws up into a look of disgust.

“I could hire a taxi for less than that!”

“He’ll drag you behind the car on Aurora’s little plastic sled for half that price,” I say.

Lake seems to debate that for a moment. “That’s extremely tempting because I only have a twenty in my wallet.”

I shoo them out the door where they can make their own decision on how Lake will get home.

“You know you don’t need to fix those dumb glasses, right?” Sy asks as he stands up, like he doesn’t know what to do in a room alone with me now that Lake is gone.

“But they’re my favorite! I will fix them! I got this snazzy little repair kit to make them all better.”

“They’re well beyond a repair kit,” he grumbles as he heads out the door.

I find that I don’t really know what to say, so I’m left watching as he walks out the door, likely to find some warm spot to lie and read or do something until Aurora comes home from school.

Past

As I walk down the hallway, I hear a weird noise coming from the supply closet. I stop and back up before swinging open the door. Inside is a boy younger than me, probably eight or nine. The moment he sees me, he cowers back, like he thinks he can hide among the brooms and mops.

“Just leave him,” Lake urges. “Mona said that we had to get to training. I tried talking to him earlier and he doesn’t like anyone talking to him. Mona said to leave him alone.”

“Where’d he come from?” I ask as I let the door swing shut and trail after Lake.

“I don’t know. I’m sure my father thought he could get some use out of him and brought him back home to have him train. He must be pretty strong for him to bother. He bothers with little else,” Lake says, a bit of venom to his words. He’s never been overly fond of his father, but I really can’t blame him. The man is a bit dreadful.

Training stretches on until I’m exhausted and my body aches from the amount of times Basil pummeled me into the ground while reminding me that I wasn’t good enough. Even though Lake is leagues more talented than me, he gets the very same treatment.

As we leave the training hall, I see Lake’s father dragging a rather unwilling boy out of the closet by his arm. The boy doesn’t say much as he stumbles after the large man and is tossed toward Basil who will likely make his day a living hell. That’s just what Basil does. He did it to us, he’ll do it to him.

In the dining hall, we grab our plates filled with beef, corn, and bread before hurrying over to find a good spot to sit. Lake is silent as he eats—he’s become much quieter lately—and I find my mind wandering over to the new boy who is going to miss dinner if he doesn’t come join us soon. The

kitchen staff are very particular about when people are allowed to eat. I pick a roll off my plate and carefully slide it under the table to slip into my pants. It's hard and dry, so it crumbles some as I stuff it inside.

"You'll get in trouble if they see that," Lake warns.

"Eh, I get in trouble all the time. Might as well have a reason to! 'You talk too much.' Or 'You were too slow as I pummeled you to the ground with ten more years of training.'"

Lake grins at me. "You know you could get out, right?"

"And where the hell would someone like me go?" I ask.

Lake shrugs because isn't that the truth. The world isn't safe for chimeras like us; definitely not when we're still young and have no way to protect ourselves.

After we finish eating and clean up, we head to the hallway for our rooms. Lake is almost to his room before he pauses. "If he's not in the closet, he's been hiding out in the woods behind the house," he says before giving me a wave and wandering off.

I hesitate because I know I'd get my ass beaten if I left to wander the woods, so I grudgingly head back for my room. I mean... really, it's just curiosity, right?

For about an hour, I pace my room before sneaking out into the hallway and hurrying back for the closet. When I don't see the boy, I head out the back door and sneak toward the trees behind the main house.

Once I'm in the trees, it's not hard to follow the boy's scent until it disappears up a tree. Sure enough, when I look up, I see a small beast staring down at me. Seeing that I've noticed him, the chimera tucks his tail and tries shrinking into the tree like it could possibly blend in.

"I just brought you bread since it didn't seem like you'd eaten anything," I say as I hold it out. It's a bit crumbly from being in my pocket,

but it should still be as tasteless as always.

*He watches me closely as I shrug and leave the bread on the ground.
“I’m Indigo. What’s your name?”*

He’s completely silent as I shrug again and decide to head back before I get in trouble. So without another word, I hurry back to my room, feeling a weird dash of excitement after my expedition.

“How many days have you fed him now?” Lake asks.

*“I don’t know. It’s kind of like feeding birds or squirrels at this point,”
I say.*

“He talk to you yet?”

“Not a word.”

“Mona says he hasn’t talked to them either. She thinks he’s a waste of time, but my father seems to see potential in him. And he hasn’t run off yet, which has honestly surprised me more than anything.”

“True,” I say as I wrap up some chicken in a napkin with the plans of tucking it into my pocket.

“You know you’re going to smell like chicken now, right?” he asks.

“I know, but this bread is so dreadful that maybe he doesn’t want to eat with us because he’s afraid he’ll have to eat more of it,” I joke.

Lake grins as he tosses it up in the air and listens to it hit the table with a rather hearty thud. “It is pretty dreadful, isn’t it? I once told the cook that I bit into it and nearly cracked my tooth, and I’m pretty sure she considered roasting me.”

He tears off some of his chicken which he adds to the pile. “Don’t get caught. I’m not saving your ass. They’re already mad at me for some reason. I don’t quite remember.”

I raise an eyebrow because I'm sure he remembers, but he just gives me a grin instead.

For the seventh time, I head out to the woods and wander until I find where the boy has taken to hiding. This time, he's found himself a crevice he's crammed himself into to the point where I can't even see him. I set the food down and think for a moment. I have trouble refraining from talking during class and yet he can remain silent for a week?

"I mean... it can't be all that fun hiding, can it?" I ask.

Of course I'm ignored.

"Every day I see them come out and drag you in to teach you and then off you scurry back out."

More silence.

"You're horribly boring," I say.

Again, nothing.

"Fine, fine. Maybe I'll stop bringing you food. Maybe you'll come eat with us then."

With that, I head off, but instead of going all the way back to my room, I circle around and sneak back toward the crevice. By the time I've returned, he's slowly crawling out in his human form, which makes sense since I doubt he'd have fit inside too well in his chimera form.

I jump out and snatch his arm before he can scurry back.

"Finally got you!" I say as he looks up at me warily. When he doesn't struggle, I realize that I don't actually know what to do with him now and end up letting him go.

He then proceeds to one hundred percent ignore me as he eats the chicken.

"I'm Indigo!"

Silence.

“I’m going to rename you if you don’t tell me your name. Something like Tree Boy since you’re always clinging to trees.”

His eyes flicker over to mine and he offers me a glower. An actual glower! After all I’ve done for him!

“Are you... seriously going to glare at me? After all I’ve done for you? I gave you pieces of my delicious chicken and had to eat that horrid bread instead!”

He shrugs and keeps eating, clearly caring little about my peril.

“At least give me something or I’m not coming back.”

He hesitates at that before tucking his head even more to eat faster.

“You don’t want me to come back?” I ask.

“I didn’t say that,” he mutters.

“Oh? So you can talk. What’s your name, Tree Boy?”

“Sy,” he whispers.

“Sy? Huh. What are you so scared of, Sy? Why don’t you come inside and stop living out here like you want to join the wolves?”

He anxiously looks toward the main house before staring down at his empty napkin. “I don’t want to go back.”

“I mean, yeah, they can be tough as hell, but they’re not awful,” I say.

“I don’t want to go back home.”

“Your former home? Then why not try harder here?”

He’s quiet as he apprehensively stares at the building beyond the trees. “They’re all the same.”

“You’re strange,” I decide. “Now come on. You smell horrid.”

I grab his wrist and pull until he grudgingly follows. When I reach the main house, I freeze when I see Niles standing outside the door watching me, but he says nothing as I scurry past. Sy, on the other hand, is shaking

like a leaf. He looks quite distraught as I take him into the bathroom and aim him toward the shower.

“Clean up, I’ll find you different clothes. You reek.”

He immediately rushes back to me. “You’re leaving?”

“Just to get you clean clothes.”

“I don’t need clothes.”

“Well... I don’t want to see you all naked and stuff, so I’d prefer if you have them,” I say. “What the hell happened to you at your last home? You live with your mom and dad?”

He shakes his head. “No, humans killed them and took me.”

“Oh...” So was he one of the ones they did experiments on? Did they torture him just to find out more about him? He’s staring at me like he’s in the process of drowning and I’m the only life jacket left.

“Fine, fine, just go shower and I’ll wait right here,” I say.

It takes a lot of coaxing but I eventually get him cleaned up, though when I go to take him to his room, he follows me to mine where he seems to decide he’ll live on my floor for now.

“Did you finally get him out of your room?” Lake asks as we watch Sy train with Basil. He’s small and quick so even though Basil is stronger and more skilled, he can’t catch Sy.

“Only took a month of him sleeping in my closet or under my bed...” I say.

“You know... my father is taking my siblings and going somewhere for the weekend. That means that no one will be watching the three of us.”

“And?”

“And we could sneak into the city...”

“They would murder us if they found out... let’s do it,” I say.

Lake grins at me. “You taking Sy?”

“I don’t know. I guess if he wants to go.”

It was foolish of me to even ask when he was done with training because Sy would follow me off a cliff if I jumped first. So the moment the house is free of Lake’s family, the three of us scurry out. We shift to cover more ground faster, carrying backpacks with our clothes so that when we get close to the city, we can shift and clothe ourselves.

Once we reach the main road, the three of us gawk at all we have to explore.

“Where do we go first?” Lake asks as he spins around, looking absolutely thrilled. It’s nice to see him relaxing and having fun... and kind of rare since they’ve started forcing him to train harder. “Let’s go in here!”

And off he dives into the first store we come across. It’s expensive, far more money than either of us brought for even the most mundane of things, but Lake’s family dresses us well, so we don’t even stand out among the other customers.

They never actually give us any money or allow us anything frivolous, so it’s not like we could have any of this stuff. But Lake still scoops up a hat and tries it on when none of the employees are looking our way.

“I feel fancy,” he says.

I grin at him as Sy stares. “It’s going to take a lot more than that hat to make you fancy,” I say.

He laughs and finds a scarf to set off the look as I notice a pair of sunglasses that I pick up and try on. “Ooh. I want these. Check out how cool I look!”

Lake laughs. “You look ridiculous,” he says, even though he’s now pulling on fur gloves.

“Sy, do I look ridiculous?” I ask.

Sy stares at me for a moment before giving me a very noncommittal shrug.

“You both are evil!” I decide, which makes Lake laugh and even gets a smile out of Sy.

“Let’s go someplace we can actually afford things,” Lake says as he pulls the stuff off before putting it back. I grudgingly set the sunglasses down and head out the door with Lake. Once we’re outside, I realize that we’d left Sy behind, which I thought was impossible to do when he’s generally Velcroed to me.

But just as I turn to go back for him, the door opens and he hurries out.

“Where to now?” Lake asks before freezing. “Ice cream!”

“I could handle some ice cream,” I say. “Sy, do you want ice cream?”

“I... I’ve never had it,” he says.

Lake looks like his brain has just exploded, so he quickly grabs Sy’s wrist and starts dragging him. “Oh, Sy, Sy, Sy... you are about to meet one of the greatest wonders of the world!”

Sy doesn’t seem sure about that, but he gives him a smile and lets us rush him along.

We end up spending far too long roaming about the city, but somehow, we make it back home without any of the staff or those who stayed behind noticing. As we part for the night, Lake has strict stipulations that everyone must shower and make sure their clothes don’t smell like the greasy restaurant we’d ended up in lest someone finds out what we’d been up to.

After my shower, I head back to my room and notice that on the desk near my bed is the very pair of sunglasses I’d tried on at the store. Slowly, I

walk over to them and pick them up, feeling oddly confused. Did Lake buy them?

No... he'd gone out of the store when I had. It must have been Sy. Did he steal them? I doubt he'd had the money to afford them... but... he's clearly giving them to me. I don't know the last time someone gave me a gift... the last time someone gave me anything like this.

I slip them on, wishing I had a mirror in my room to look at them. I know I won't be allowed to wear them outside where others could see, but for now, I can wear them as much as I want. I can't stop smiling as I slide them on and off and on and off again.

Now

I sigh as I realize how hard it is to fix something so broken. Maybe I could find a professional to do it?

Something smacks me in the chest before falling into my lap. "Your sad face was irritating me," Sy says.

I glance down at the box in my lap that I pick up before opening and look down at a nearly identical pair of sunglasses.

"I didn't do it for you. I did it to save my sanity," Sy says. "It's not like they're all that great."

I glance over at him and can't help but smile. "They are to me. Thank you, Sy. For the last pair and this pair." I can't stop the emotions running through me as I stare at them.

"You *should* extra thank me for this pair. I didn't realize how damn expensive they were when I stole the first pair. I should have pawned them off instead of giving them to you," he says.

"I... loved these damn glasses so much. I'd never really gotten a gift before. Lake's family sure didn't do stuff like that, and mine... I don't even remember mine."

“It was just... to pay you back for sharing your food and room with me,” Sy says, looking embarrassed.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when things went bad, Sy. I’m sorry that I left you. That I got preoccupied with Aurora’s mother and then Aurora. And that I thought it was then my right to come in and dictate what happened to you,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Please don’t talk about that now.”

“Okay... thank you,” I say as I nod at the glasses.

Sy gives me a smile. “I’m not sure a pair of sunglasses, no matter how expensive they are, is a good exchange for saving my life, but oh well... you’re a pretty strange guy.”

I grin at him. “That I am.”

I hear the sound of Aurora’s feet running across the porch a moment before she hits the front door, flinging it open.

“DADDY! I got an A on my science project!”

“You did?” I ask as I force myself to tear my eyes away from Sy.

We used to be so close until I got scared. Until I ran from what I could have had. But when I glance over at Aurora... I know I wouldn’t change it for the world to keep her by my side... but maybe it was just a bump in the road... maybe he’d give me another chance.

“Did you make the volcano explode like I told you to?” Sy asks.

“I did! The fire alarm went off and everything!”

“Good. Good,” Sy says as he pats her on the head.

I mean... would it be too greedy to ask for both of them?

