

A detailed illustration of a huntress with dark hair tied back, wearing a light-colored, worn tunic and a dark leather gauntlet on her right hand. She has a knife tucked into a scabbard on her back and a bloody forehead. The background is a dark, moody forest with greenish light filtering through the trees.

CHARACTER STORY: HUNTRESS

This world has always taken from us more than it gave in return. "The Dark" they call it – ever since the horrors of the Cataclysm plunged our lands in eternal gloom, filling hearts with eternal despair.

A fitting name for a world abandoned by light. You can sense it in the ash-filled air, in the malice of the corrupted forests, in the eyes of the people – terrified and desperate, ready to inflict any ill on others to survive another day.

My sweet little star, you are the purest and kindest soul among this shadow, an echo of a love that ended much too soon. You have my eyes but his smile. It is that smile that I miss most during my long hunting journeys into the wilderness while the elders of the village looked after you in exchange for some of the meat I'd bring back. As I waded through pools of foul stagnant water, ripping my cloak on the crooked branches of the gnarled trees I thought of your sweet little laughter and it kept me warm as I got drenched by the freezing rain. As I held my breath, concealing myself from the marauding greenskins, I thought of how you played with my fingers and it brought a smile to my face. You are the most precious gift this cruel world has ever offered.

And now it wants to rip you from my grasp.

You were such a strong baby – it caught everyone off guard when the sickness came after your sixth name day. Pale and feverish, you wouldn't stop coughing for days. My poor little girl, shivering, delirious, your light almost extinguished. I tried whatever I could. None of the poultices and cures that I could procure in our backwater hamlet did a damn thing. You were fading. The wise woman who would watch you sometimes mentioned that there was a place far to the south – away from the corruption of the Scarred Lands, where the learned sages could help stave off even the cruelest of maladies. The Blackmoor Circle. I could not lose you and I embarked on a journey the next time I could join a caravan heading south.

It seemed you got better on the road – maybe it was the change in your surroundings, or just wishful thinking. People of the caravan treated us well – out of pity or gratitude for the meat I brought back from my hunting forays.

We finally made it to the Circle. A mysterious set of buildings on the edge of a huge marshland – all made of dark stone overgrown with vines – ancient-looking but far from decrepit ruins. The wise men and women who greeted us there exuded an air of knowledge and quiet confidence. I knew they could help you. They could cure all ills it was said, and people from far and wide came seeking their aid.

It turned out we were lacking the one thing that made all the healing possible. Coin. Lots of it. The meager contents of my purse – whatever remained after paying for the road, was not enough to cover even a portion of the cost. They turned from me, these sages in their flowing robes, holding hostage the very life of my daughter and they left. I begged, I cried, I threatened, I promised the world but with no payment for their services – no salvation was to be delivered in the Blackmoor Circle. I collapsed on my knees next to the bed where they looked at her. She held my hand asking if we were going home soon in her weak raspy voice. My little star. I kissed her fingers, containing the tears as much as I could. If no aid was possible here – I would find another way.

It felt like a defeat coming back to our home in the village. She started feeling much worse on the road back and it didn't get better when we finally arrived. I went hunting as much as I could, hauling heavy deer carcasses back from the twisted woods to sell for extra coin, almost being spotted by the monstrous inhabitants of the Scarred Lands a few times because of my carelessness.

The disease progressed faster than I could earn enough to pay the healers. Despair descended on me, with only the light of my child's eyes to guide me out of it. And even then – exhausted beyond description from overexerting myself – I felt like I was letting her down, not doing enough.

That's when the offer came. One of the elders who used to watch my child when she was little, came to see me. An expedition, he said, one in need of a tracker. An expedition to a place where great treasure may be found, though the journey was sure to be fraught with peril. It was the chance I could not pass on – any risk was worth it if it meant I could bring my daughter back from the brink of death.

I sheathed the hunting knife and tightened the straps on my leather armor, giving my girl a long kiss before leaving her with a young woman who agreed to look after her while I was gone.

I swear, my little star, soon you will shine brighter than ever. I will not let The Dark consume you.