

When his dead father touched his hand, Athson almost dropped the arrow. He squeezed his eyes shut. Ignore him. Focus. He took a slow, deep breath. Not this, not now.

*"That's it, slow breaths, steady your hands." His father helped him nock the arrow.*

"You're not here. You're dead." Athson whispered lest he startle his prey. He didn't need help with the arrow.

*"And Athson, make sure you keep that secret I trusted with you." Ath's hand dropped away.*

"I've held my tongue." Athson's lip quivered and he forced his hands steady. A memory and nothing more. That's what he got for forgetting his medicine. But he had kept the secret over the years since his father taught him the bow that day.

Athson knelt on one knee with an arrow nocked and gauged each target. Wind gusted and flattened grass in its weaving dance. Waves boomed against the Sea of Mist's rocky shore beneath the cliff's edge two hundred strides distant. The pheasant was trickier, he decided. The rabbit would do. His gaze shifted between the two animals. No shakes, no more old memories while cleaning the kill. He brushed the vane feather with his thumb. But the memory didn't bode well.

Athson eased into his stance at the shaded edge of forest, waiting unseen by his prey. The wind fell still. He drew the arrow to his cheek, aimed, and exhaled. A litter of kits hopped near his intended meal. He blinked. No killing a mother. He shifted targets and released.

The arrow sprang away in silence and pierced the green-feathered head.

Athson strode from hiding, high grass tangling at his shins. The rabbit and her litter scrambled into their hole. "You're safe this time."

He squatted by the pheasant and plucked out chestnut tail feathers. When he cut the striped neck, Athson shut his eyes. The less blood seen, the better, to avoid the memories. Athson yanked his arrow loose with a grunt. "Sarneth sends me to the middle of nowhere so I waste time hunting." Father plucked the arrows with more care. Maybe his father should have used other things with the same care.

He thrust with his belt-knife and gutted the bird. Torn innards stank. Images flashed behind his eyes of bodies writhing as weapons were yanked free. He swallowed. Why this, why now? He sat on his heels and counted the months since his last fit. Over a year, and his elvish tincture of Soul-ease lay forgotten at the ranger station. Not good. He needed that medicine. He

rubbed his temples. Fits were hard, but seeing things later confused him. Days of parsing reality flooded him with dread. Gweld, his elven friend and fellow ranger, would be disappointed at his laxness with the medicine.

He buried the bird's offal well away from his camp. Athson brushed a hand over his eyes with a sigh. No shakes, no memories. He took a deep breath and marched away, teeth grinding. He needed to seek peace and not anger. The wind picked at foliage and birds called in the forest. But tension clung to his shoulders.

At his campsite Athson hung his kill over his fire from a makeshift spit. Early chill sent him gathering more firewood, a worthless duty at an empty border. He eyed the stand of fir trees, doing anything but thinking. They were a good windbreak but wouldn't guard against that night's nip. Building a canopy of fir limbs near the fire at the opening would warm his cold feet.

The breeze rose stiff with the promise of a frigid bite later as Athson gathered armloads of deadwood. "I'll need that canopy." The gust blew stiffer.

Athson frowned at the smoke marking his position for miles when he approached his camp and muttered in dissatisfaction. Rocky ground and no smokeless pit-fire. He shrugged off the irritation. "There're no trolls this far west in the Auguron Forest."

Racing the dusk while gathering firewood was all the excitement Athson encountered. He snagged another fallen limb, hurrying more now to check his roasting pheasant than to beat nightfall.

The wind shifted and carried the hint of smoke from his campfire. Sudden nausea left him unsteady. Memory of other fire on a different night quickened his heart. Athson snagged the last of the wood for his final armload.

*"You take this bag and hide."*

"Leave me alone mother, you're long gone." Athson coughed and stumbled over roots.

*Smoke curls through the thatch over the rafters. His mother shoves food and a coat into the bag.*

That wasn't now, that was ten years past. He groaned and blinked a tear away.

Athson sank to his knees and coughed against choking smoke. *His mother acts calm but he sees fear in her wide, hazel eyes and her rigid movements. Smoke thickens and flames roar beyond the door. The warning horn blows. Screams erupt outside and mingle with joyous snarls of attacking trolls.*

*Athson's mother heaves him out the window. "Hide as best you can."*

*They both cough. Athson nods and opens his mouth.*

*The door slams open. His mother snatches an iron skillet and cracks a hobgoblin in the face. The attacker collapses but others leap through the door. His mother yells and flails with the skillet.*

*Athson ducks away and runs into the night amid the dancing light of burning Depenburgh.*

He coughed and shook his head and found himself on trembling hands and knees. The armload of wood lay scattered where he had fallen. He swore and ground his teeth. "Get up and see to the bird."

Athson lunged from the ground, forgetting his wood, and wrenched his gaze away from the mound of the pheasant's buried offal. Dinner needed attention. Athson's dragging boots as he stumbled along sounded like shovels biting the dirt.

*"This is taking too long." Athson's father stands massaging his back, his haggard face smudged with soil. The other men pause, sweat drenching their chests. "We need a pyre for this many bodies. We need to search for prisoners." He means his wife, Danilla. The men nod and shift scarves over their faces against coffin flies and stench as they trudge off in search of surviving wood.*

Athson braced himself against a tree. "Go away, father. You're dead." Fir limbs caressed his face and clothing as Athson marched into his camp. "Forget the past. They're gone!" He kneeled and reached for the spit with a trembling hand.

The wind shifted and billowed smoke into his face. Athson choked, coughed, and turned his face from the smoke.

*Ath scratches the dark bristles grown over his face during the days of troll-hunting since they set out from Depenburgh. "We take back Danilla and the others now. If the wizard arrives, we have no chance." Athson's father hisses plans to his seven comrades - huntsmen turned would-be rescuers. Bon-fires flicker along the Funnel where the trolls hold their prisoners at their altar. Ath fixes each man with his dark-eyed gaze.*

Athson grabbed his head. "Go away, leave me alone!" His shout echoed through the forest, startling a dove. They were all gone, but he'd still never tell anyone.

*Whispered plans meld into action as Athson's father leads the other hunters toward the*

*leaping troll-fires. Shouts and clanging steel announce the raid. Shadows weave among the blazes in the night wind. Fierce snarls answer angry shouts. Trussed prisoners wail for help.*

*Ominous silence interrupts the clash of weapons.*

*His father shouts. "Run, Athson, run!" The desperate command echoes in Athson's memory.*

*Another voice laughs in mockery. "Run, Athson, run."*

*Athson crouches and hugs himself. The fear and cold bite him into shivers.*

*Another man stands visible in the troll camp. His bald head glistens in the firelight while his hooked nose lends him a lingering sneer. "I'm Corgren. Come into my camp, boy, and I will welcome you. You will be safe. I can help you."*

Athson squeezed his eyelids but the face remained. He would find the wizard—no, he couldn't seek revenge. He wouldn't even search. Athson hunched and gasped.

*Athson wants to comply, wants a warm fire but hesitates.*

*"If you don't come, bad things will happen." Corgren waves trolls into the concealing heather.*

*The choice hangs in the air like meat smoking over a fire. Athson weighs his choices and almost shouts for his father.*

*"Run, Aths—" His father's voice cuts short in mid-shout with a muted grunt. The frightened boy trembles.*

*Trolls snort and tramp into the undergrowth.*

*Athson bolts into the night and falls into a crevice along the Funnel's rocky edge. Trolls miss him in the dark. The next day, Athson finds his father's broken sword in the abandoned camp.*

Athson startled from his fit. He squatted among the trees, poised for dashing away as his escape from trolls faded. Athson's chest heaved. Sweat beaded his face and stained his tunic. He gripped handfuls of dirt and fir needles.

"You are safe in Auguron, among the elves. Heth and Cireena raised you. Mother, father, and the others died years ago. You have friends like Gweld who helped you." But he would never forget their names or their faces. Danilla. Ath. He exhaled raggedly. He hugged himself and rocked while he hummed a lullaby his mother sang when he still clung to her skirts.

He swore again. The bird hung unturned, scorching over the fire. He scrambled to his feet

and rushed to his burning dinner.

Meat sizzled over the fire as Athson knelt and tended his meal. His trembling hands grew still over slow minutes. Memory-fits! They froze him like wounded prey. They were gone. Why now? Not the dead bird. The smoke? "There's no peace in western Auguron either. It's what I get for a good deed with that rabbit." He pulled an angry frown and threw a pebble into the fir trees.

Athson turned back to his fire. A two-toned dog sat by his pack, brown sides flexing with each pant. "Spark?"

The dog's pointed ears twitched at his name and his tail thumped the ground.

Athson squinted at the Mountain Hound's shiny black back. "Where've you been?" He knew the answer. He always saw Spark after a fit. "You're not real." But the dog comforted him. Still, it was bad when Spark appeared. Soul-ease left the body too soon.

Athson sighed and rubbed the heels of his palms against his eyes. Calm returned, and he went back for his dropped armload of wood. He gathered what he could find as dusk faded to night. On returning to camp, he fed the fire and then from his pack pulled dried fruit brought to the ranger station from the trading post in Afratta days earlier.

He tore a leg off the pheasant and tasted hot meat, then offered some to Spark. As usual, the dog took nothing. Athson scratched the dog's ears and smiled. "Well even if you're not real it's still good to see you."

After eating, Athson built up the fire and warmed his hands against the chill sweeping inland from the Sea of Mists. The moon rose in the east, lighting the promontory named Eagle's Aerie, rumored home of a Withling. The pinnacle jutted into the sky above the surrounding fir trees, stretching north into the Sea of Mists' crashing breakers. He spied in the glow of moonlight the slender shadow of the endless stair stretching like an age-line along the cliff's face.

Gweld and other elven rangers had told him stories about Eagle's Aerie when word of Sarneth's assignment to Western Auguron got out. Tales spoken in the barracks hinted of hidden treasure and attempts to climb those stairs, but no one ever completed the task that Athson heard. Athson snorted. "Wild tales made up for my benefit."

Rangers told Athson that travelers reported an old woman of the mystic Withling order appeared in the area, lending aide or leading folks to dire ends. "And Withlings are good and wise agents of Eloch? Thanks for the fool's errand, Captain Sarneth." Athson tossed a stick into the fire with an irritated grimace and saluted the air. Sarneth either didn't trust Athson with more

serious assignments or suspected him for some reason. How could Sarneth know more about him than Athson told or knew of his past?

At least Gweld was on the same duty. Athson would meet his oldest friend back at the ranger station in several days' time.

He muttered the elvish festival song, "Dance with the Moon." He smiled at the thought of elves dancing on a midsummer night and sighed as tension left his shoulders. Spark groaned in relief. Strange that he could hear the dog when nobody else did.

Athson yawned. Weariness gripped him soon after his memory-fits. Best not to fight sleep. He fed wood into the fire, pulled his blanket from his pack, and spread it over himself as he stretched out. Sleep soon covered him like a blanket, his thoughts of making a fir-limb shelter forgotten along with enigmatic Withlings and ten-year-old sorrows.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

*He struggles to breathe. Trolls stab helpless villagers through sliding curtains of choking smoke and raging flame. Dying children wail as mocking slayers howl. The violence fades into darkness. He flails and fears he lies in a grave yet finds emptiness instead of dirt.*

*Silver light rises and Eagle's Aerie soars beneath the moon. Athson climbs the weather-worn stair and scraps his hands as he gains speed. The rock-face blurs as Athson swoops onto the pinnacle towering over the ocean, stands where no one ever has, sees what has been hidden.*

*Athson pauses and then floats toward a voice murmuring by a swaying flame within a shadowed crevice.*

*A silhouette kneels and rocks, dark against the fire beyond it. A woman's uneven voice chants:*

*"The bow shall be hidden from heart..."*

*The swaying speaker feeds wood into the fire. Sparks snap from the coals and whirl amid the orange-blue tongues. An arc forms in the smoke and fades into the stars.*

*"The eagle will guide the heir..."*

*An eagle's scream pierces the night wind.*

*"The bow shall be found at need..."*

*Wrinkled hands tie a wad of cloth with string – a bowstring.*

*"And the arrow shall Eloch prepare."*

*A shooting star streaks across the horizon and drags Athson's attention from the*

*crouching figure before the popping fire.*

*The eagle screams again – louder and nearer.*

*The figure half-turns and tosses the packet at Athson's feet. He stares at it, then back to the kneeling woman. Her face half-lit by the firelight reveals a pointy nose that overshadows her receding jaw. Grizzled wisps of gray hair wave in the wind. "For you who suffers in silence for a secret."*

*Athson stoops and inspects the package. He unties the knot and pushes the string into a pocket. Within the cloth he finds a tattered note and more fabric he guesses is a pennant.*

*"Zelma's done it." She gazes skyward and raises her arms.*

*"Why more now when so much has been taken already? Why me?" His anger flares and he tosses the packet away. "This isn't mine." He whirls and stumbles into darkness.*

*"He needs to see." The woman's voice screeches and slices through whistling wind.*

*The eagle's deafening scream stabs his awareness as immense wings snap like a clap of thunder. Talons tear clothing, pierce flesh and snatch Athson into the air. He dangles and kicks as he yells while silver landscape yawns beneath him. The curious sound of joyous cackling trails into the distance.*

*Athson squeezes his eyes shut but dares squinting at the moonlit sky that stretches overhead. The land wheels as the eagle glides over earth mottled by shadow and pale light. The world unfolds as Athson glimpses far beyond the distant Drelkhaz Mountains to the far eastern shores of the great Endless Sea.*

*His vision focuses on an old woman as she rests by her campfire on an empty plain south of Auguron. She stirs from sleep and cocks her head as if listening. She gazes at Athson. His vision whirls away from her as she rises in her gray dress.*

*A beautiful young woman rides along a road beneath tufts of glowing clouds. Her braided hair dangles over her left shoulder and she wears pale leather armor and leggings made for dueling. The hilts of two of swords protrude above each of her shoulders. She brushes her face as if wiping away a tear.*

*Darkness descends over both Athson and the eagle. The giant bird glides in silence.*

*A knife glitters pale in the darkness. It slashes in a vicious arc and then pauses. Blood covers the weapon and drips from the tip. Athson shouts in dismay but wind thrusts it back into his mouth. His own Rokan dagger bought in a fit of anger when Sarneth withheld his father's*

*sword. The blood chills him worse than the wind or the eagle's hold.*

*The eagle's screech pierces his hearing and its wings drum thunder. Athson trembles as darkness recedes. The bracing wind slaps his face.*

*Shadowy wings ride wind from the south. The figure blots out stars as it swings north and glides on a shifting course. The eagle shrieks in defiance at the approaching beast. Fire belches amid an answering roar. Athson yells as the giant bird dives at the black shape. Ragged wings so dark they drink moonlight flutter against frigid air. Eagle and dragon glide and twist past each other.*

*The streaking shadow trails fire and a rotten stench. Athson struggles to name the creature until one thought flares: Magdronu.*

*The eagle dives. Athson flails his arms and legs as he screams.*

*And then the talons release him.*