

## Chapter 1

### HITTING THE MARK

The arrow lay quivering in the ground a full five feet from the large rabbit that nimbly hopped away to preserve its life. The boy could see the white of its tail disappear into the hazel thicket as he retrieved his errant arrow.

“You gave him plenty of time to plan out his escape, Timon,” called a young man from the other side of the clearing. “I am certain he will have a captive audience around the board tonight as he tells of his exploits today and, I must say, his very narrow escape.”

“Please, Cirin, I can see how terribly I missed. Do you have to give me misery,” answered Timon.

“Ah,” said Cirin. “Misery may be an important teacher for you this day. Do you wish to hear how you erred?”

“Only if you do not tease me more.”

“That I will not do, Timon. Do you see the small log there to your left?”

“This one?”

“Yes. Take the log and place it where your coney friend was and bring your arrow back to me.”

Timon picked up the log and placed it where he had last seen the rabbit sitting still.

“Not on its side, Timon,” corrected Cirin. “Stand it on end like a rabbit sitting up to listen to the sounds of the wood.”

The young boy did as he was instructed, picked up his arrow and made his way back across the clearing to where Cirin awaited him.

“I thought I had him, Cirin. He was lined up with my arrow perfectly.”

“I do not doubt you at all, little hunter.”

“I am not little. I am nine summers old.”

“So you are, yes, so you are,” said Cirin laughing. “Forgive me. I am so old myself that sometimes I forget how grown up you are.”

“You are not old. You are only eight years older than me.”

“Oh, yes, Timon. We are so close in age we could be twins. Now. Do you want my advice or not?”

“Yes, please, Cirin. You always win the hunt at the Autumn Remembering. If I can learn to shoot like you, perhaps I could win as well.”

“I am sure you will, brother.”

“Thank you for not calling me little brother.”

“You are welcome. So, where were you standing when you loosed your arrow?”

Timon moved ten paces away and stood in the gap between two ancient oak trees.

“I was right here.”

“I see. Well let us take a look,” said Cirin as he moved to position himself behind Timon. He knelt on one knee to get a better look over the boy’s shoulder. “Nock and arrow to your string and take aim at the log.”

After an arrow had been put to the string, Timon drew his bow and sighted in on the log. Cirin smiled as he watched his brother's intense concentration. His brows were knit together tightly and his nose wrinkled.

"Now tell me," continued Cirin. "How does the ground look to you between where you stand and the log?"

Timon opened his left eye and peeked around his bow to look across the clearing.

"It is sloped. There is a rise to the ground from here to the log. Why is that important?"

"If I sent you to stand by the log and I stayed here would you then be taller than me because you could look down on me from the top of the slope?"

"Of course not, Cirin. You are twice my size. Standing on a hill does not change that."

"It does not. You are right. So, when shooting your arrow will it fly straight at your target if it is higher than you?"

"I see now. I should have aimed higher."

"Yes. But not overmuch, Timon. Sight your arrow again and this time sight it three fingers above the log."

The boy took aim. His face was a mask of intense concentration. He breathed in and out deeply four times. On the fifth breath he held it and let his arrow fly. The arrow zipped across the clearing in the blink of an eye. Timon shut his eyes but they opened quickly when his ears were rewarded with the solid thunk of the arrow hitting its mark. He saw the log teeter and fall over softly with the brown feathers of his arrow pointing triumphantly to the sky.

"I did it? I did it! I did it, Cirin! I hit the log!"

“That you did, Timon. You let the arrow fly like a true archer. Next time that coney had best stay in the thicket if he wants to avoid ending up on your roasting spit. Go retrieve your arrow. We should be returning home before father sends out the hounds to find us.”

Timon hurried across the clearing to pull his arrow from the log. He dashed back to join Cirin and the two made their way down the path that led through the wood to their home on the edge of the river. Their father was a herder who kept a large flock of sheep and goats. He had chosen their home because of the lush grass that grew along the Delling River. The river ran from the mountains in the south all away across the land to the sea in the west. They lived just outside the village of Ragsdale where their father was well respected and admired. The flock of Galien was the finest in all the land. Whenever Cirin and Timon drove the flock to market, they swelled with pride for their flock was always the first to go and brought the highest prices from the traders. As they came out of the wood into the sun, they could see their father, Galien, tending to some lambs near the barn.

“Father!” cried Timon, running to greet him. “Father! Cirin showed me how to aim my bow uphill and I hit the log on the first try!”

“But he missed a coney by a good four paces before that,” said Cirin coming casually behind. “Don’t let him impress you overmuch. Although I am certain, father, that I will have heated competition in the hunt at the Autumn Remembering.”

“You said you wouldn’t tease, Cirin,” pleaded Timon.

“That I did and I am not teasing, Timon. You show great promise.”

“So that is where the two of you wandered to when there were lambs to be tended,” said Galien sternly.

“Sorry, father. Timon had just made a new bow and was anxious to try it. We were not gone long.”

“I know, son. I am sorry. I guess I got over concerned. I was in the village today and there are many rumors floating on the wind. There is talk of foul creatures roaming as far north as Hadding. Something is attacking flocks and rural homes. I let my imagination best me. Why don't you help me finish up here, Cirin? Timon, you go on into the house and help your mother get the supper laid on the board. I reckon it will be soon time to eat.”

“Yes, father,” said Timon turning to leave. He stopped suddenly and faced his brother. “Cirin?”

“Yes, Timon?”

“Thank you for helping me with my archery...big brother.”

Cirin chuckled and said, “You are very welcome, Timon.”

Timon once again turned and dashed for the modest home, disappearing through the door as Cirin watched him fondly. The bleating of the lambs brought his attention quickly back to his chore.

“Will we be taking many young lambs to market this Autumn Remembering, father? Timon has grown attached to this flock of little ones for some reason.”

“Aye,” answered his father. “This lot does seem special. Still, market is what we raise them for. Timon will just have to accept it just as you had to every time we had lambs to market when you were his age.”

“I was never that attached.”

“No you were not. You, Cirin, were worse. You always had a care for the small and helpless. You still do, I reckon.”

“I only wish to help...to make things better for people.”

“Aye. That you do. Hand me that bowl of mash, will you?”

Cirin handed his father the bowl of mashed oats that sat just outside the fence.

“Here you go, my little ones. Eat your fill.”

The lambs bleated and jostled for position as Galien spread the oats around the small pen. As Cirin watched him, his thoughts returned to what his father had said about the rumors he had heard.

“About the rumors, father. That is all they are, right? Rumors?”

“I wish I knew, Cirin. There seems to be a foreboding behind them that speaks true.”

Galien stood and arched his back to stretch out the kinks. He ran his hand over his face as if trying to wake up then looked toward the south with concern.

“It has been too quiet in the south these last two summers. It feels as if trouble is waiting for the right opportunity to move. Before long, you and I will need to talk, Cirin. There are some things you need to know if things take a turn.”

“What do you mean, father?”

“Not now, Cirin. Soon. When the time is right. Now let’s go wash up and get in for supper. Your mother will be calling soon.”

Cirin watched his father scoop the rest of the mash out to the lambs. When Galien was done, Cirin turned toward the river and walked to the edge. He saw his reflection in the slow moving water and was startled to see the mature face staring back at him. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t seen himself lately but today he looked different. It was as if the serious talk with his father had made him look older and more wise. He thrust his hands into the water to wash. The reflection scattered into dozens of ripples, reflecting the light of the waning sun.

“Cirin! Galien! Supper,” came the voice of his mother from inside the house.

“Hungry, son?” asked his father, startling him from his musings.

“Yes, very.”

“Then, let us not keep your mother and brother waiting. We will finish tending the flock and settle them in for the night after we eat.”

Cirin and his father walked into the house together, the door shutting quietly behind them.

Cirin pushed himself away from the table and stretched his legs.

“The meal was satisfying as always, mother.”

“Thank you, Cirin. It was a modest meal but you always seem to speak of it as a feast.”

“Ah, but a feast it was, my dear,” said Galien.

“I agree, mother,” said Cirin patting his stomach. “If you continue this way I shall soon need to find all new trousers.”

“There is no danger of that, son. You are still young.”

“Mother?” said Timon. “I liked your supper as well.”

“Not wanting to be left out, eh, Timon?” teased Cirin.

Their mother smiled and squeezed Timon’s shoulder. “Timon, you always know how to make me smile.”

Timon smiled, proud that he had been singled out by his mother.

“Now, if you are all finished complimenting my cooking, I need to clean up and you need to go out and finish tending to the animals with your father, Cirin.”

“Yes, mother.”

Galien pushed himself away from the table and said, “Well, son, it seems you and I are no longer needed. Come, the sooner we finish, the sooner we can settle ourselves in for the night as well.”

Crossing to the door, Galien took a lantern from a shelf. He moved to the hearth and lit the lantern with a smoldering twig from the fire.

“Do hurry, Galien. I am nervous with the two of you out there under a darkening sky.”

“We will, my dear. No need to worry. Are you ready, Cirin?”

“Yes, father. I am right behind you.”

The two men went out into the yard together and made their way to the small pen where the lambs bleated softly. Cirin unlatched the gate and entered the pen. He gently began to coax the lambs out the gate and toward his father who waited by the open door of the barn. Once the lambs were settled in with the other sheep, Cirin busied himself with spreading new hay in the stable mangers while Galien stood silently watching him from the barn door.

“Father?” said Cirin after he had finished.

“Yes, Cirin?”

“These rumors you spoke of? Mother seems concerned as well. Is there more going on than you are telling me?”

“I am afraid there is, son. I spoke with Baldrin when I was in the village last week and he had ill news to tell, ill news indeed, Cirin. So much is soon to change, especially for us, I fear.”

Cirin looked at his father, who suddenly looked much older in the dim light of the lantern. Galien stood silent for a few moments, uncertain of whether he should go on. He sighed deeply and sat down on a bucket that was upturned on the floor.

“Baldrin’s brother was returning from trade in Hadding two evens ago. Just as he was leaving the downs he heard a chilling roar from the darkening hills behind him. When he turned to look, what he saw was enough to stop his heart in his chest.”

Galien paused. Cirin could see his father’s hands trembling. What could this news possibly be that could cause his normally unshakeable father to react so? A shiver passed through Cirin as he thought about what may be the source of Galien’s concerns. His father remained silent, lost in his thoughts.

“What, father? What did he see?”

“Crag Dwellers, Cirin. Great, massive Crag Dwellers from the southern mountains, taller than this barn in which we now sit.”

“Crag Dwellers? But, father, no one has seen a Crag Dweller for...well, for a very long time. I have always been taught that they all died in the Great Cataclysm or that they never existed at all and were just stories to scare children around the hearth.”

“They are not stories, son, I assure you. And they did not all die. Those that survived the Cataclysm blundered off to await another time. They have cowered among their crags and preyed on anything that got near enough for many, many years. Perhaps they have finally come into the time for them to again bring their terror into the hearts of men.”

“That is ill news, indeed. He is certain of what he saw? I have heard that Baldrin’s brother is a lover of ale. Perhaps his perception was altered by the ale he consumed with the traders of Hadding.”

“Aye, Cirin, he is certain. Even if he had taken ale that even, a man sobers quickly in the face of such a terror. And that is not the illest of the news.”

“There is more?”

“Aye. Aye, there is. Baldrin himself has lost several cows and two prize mares.”

Cirin started at this news. He leaned back against a post and slid to the floor tucking his knees under his chin.

“Crag dwellers have come as close as Baldrin’s farm?”

“More evil than that, I’m afraid. He saw one of the mares stolen off yesterday.”

“What was it, father?”

“A foul creature indeed. It seems that the knuckers have awakened again.”

“Swamp dragons? It can’t be. I thought Master Varick’s hunting party killed off the last one two springs ago.”

“Baldrin saw the glowing breath of the fell beast as it dragged his mare into the bog outside his farm. He followed it for two miles into the swamp and watched helpless as it pulled the poor horse down into its knucker hole.”

“Baldrin’s farm is still thirty miles to the south. Perhaps they will not range this far north of the swamps.”

“Perhaps. Either way, we need to be ready, Cirin. We cannot stand idle or hide away on our farm while our friends and neighbors fight the encroaching evil. Soon, we must act, son. Soon there will be much else I must tell you.”

“What is there to say, father, that you cannot tell me now?”

Galien was silent for a moment. His eyes were fixed upon the light that flickered in the lantern as if it were a beacon that would guide his next move. He opened his mouth to speak twice but both times quickly shut it to prevent himself from saying something he did not want to say. Cirin studied his father’s face. It was obvious that he was in the midst of an intense inner battle. What secret could Galien possibly have that required such care and guardedness in the

presence of his own son? He decided not to press him further. He trusted Galien implicitly. His father would tell him what he needed to know exactly when he needed to know it. Rising from his place against the post, Cirin crossed to Galien's side. Reaching out, he placed his hand upon his father's shoulder and squeezed gently.

“It is all right, father. I will wait until you are ready. Should we go into the house before mother comes looking for us?”

At first Cirin thought his father had fallen asleep for he simply sat there. Cirin squeezed his shoulder again.

“Father?”

Galien started this time and looked up at Cirin as one awakening from a deep dream.

“Cirin? What? Did you say something?”

“I said, perhaps we should go inside.”

“Inside. Oh, yes. Yes, we probably should. We must not worry your mother more than necessary. I am sorry, son. I am not ready just yet to tell you all you must hear.”

“I trust you, father. Come, let me help you up.”

Galien took Cirin's hand and rose to his feet. Putting his arm around Cirin's shoulder, the two of them walked side by side out into the dark. They secured the barn door against nighttime invaders and walked silently back into the welcoming light of their home. Later in the night, Cirin could hear the muffled voices of his mother and father as he lay in bed. Listening carefully, he was only able to catch a few words here and there. He once thought he heard his father say something about the “Bright Land” but could hear nothing else after that. A few hours later, Cirin still lay awake in the silence of the sleeping house. He could feel that there was a change coming soon. His mind wrestled with the possibilities of what that change might be. In

the end, he resolved that all he could do was trust his father and trust Leois, the Eternal Protector to guide him through whatever might come. Galien had always taught him that Leois would be relied upon in all things. This seemed like a thing that might require that kind of help. Finally, Cirin closed his eyes and let sleep take him to a place where he could be at peace.

Three weeks passed and much remained the same around the farm. The biggest change was the leaves that were beginning to turn. Some were even finding their way from the boughs of the trees to the ground below where they danced and swirled playfully when the wind stirred. Autumn Remembering as still one week away but Cirin spent much of his time caring for the sheep so that they would be ready come the Festival. Festival had always been Cirin's favorite time of year. The Remembering was a time of much gladness; full of merry-making, games, and reflection upon all the blessings Leois had showered down on the land and the people. It was also the time when the flock was in most demand among the traders and citizens of Ragsdale.

Cirin had sheared the sheep carefully two weeks prior. The wool was stored in sacks stacked carefully in the barn. The wool would go to market as well where it would be made into blankets and clothing to keep people warm during the coming winter. Any spare time Cirin had usually found him practicing with his bow or teaching young Timon how to use his own. Under, Cirin's watchful eye, Timon had become quite capable. He had even successfully brought home two young rabbits that mother had made into stew and Timon had served to the family with much solemn ceremony. Cirin smiled as he thought of how quickly Timon was growing up. Soon, he really would give Cirin a serious threat in the Autumn Remembering Hunt.

“Your mind seems to be somewhere besides the sheep pen, son,” said Galien coming up behind him.

“Father, no, I...well, actually I was just thinking of what a fine archer Timon has become.”

“He has had a good teacher.”

“That remains to be seen, father. You’ve come from Baldrin’s? What says he about his herd? Have any more been taken?”

“No, Cirin. It has been quiet. He did take a group of men into the swamp last week. They sought to drive the knucker from its hole but they were unable.”

“It may be then that there is nothing to worry about,” said Cirin hopefully.

His father shrugged his shoulders and absent-mindedly fiddled with a loose pole on the pen fence. Cirin studied his father’s face. There was no mistaking the lines of worry that creased his forehead. After a few moments, Cirin broke the silence that had crept over them.

“You think there is still cause for worry?”

“I think, Cirin, that we should not be comfortable with our time of peace. There is an ill foreboding on the wind. I cannot help but be ill at ease. It seems that I need to follow my own advice and be more trusting in the hand of Leois to guide us through the times before us.”

“What do the Freres say, father? Have you spoken to any of them?”

“Frere Garmund was here yesterday before I left for Baldrin’s. You and Timon were out shooting your arrows in the wood. He had not much to say about fell beasts or ill winds.”

Cirin spirit rose. He loved Frere Garmund dearly. It was Frere Garmund who taught Cirin to craft his first bow. If Garmund was at ease with the news of recent weeks then perhaps things may still be all right.

“Frere Garmund, father? Is he well? Will he be at Autumn Remembering to lead the Festival singing?”

“Fear not, son. Garmund would not miss the Remembering or Festival singing and he most certainly would not miss the Hunt. He may be a Frere but he does enjoy basking in the successes of his star pupil, especially when that pupil wins yet another golden arrow; though why a young man with a quiver full of golden arrows needs another, I know not.”

“There is no certainty that the golden arrow will be mine. Rylan has improved much since last Remembering.”

“You say your best friend would rob you of your golden arrow?”

“He would not rob me, father. I welcome the challenge. If he wins I will be pleased and happy for him.”

Galien smiled warmly at his son.

“You make your father proud, Cirin. Leois has indeed given you a kind heart.”

“Thank you, father. I am sorry to keep pestering but did Frere Garmund have anything to say at all about Baldrin’s griefs?”

“Only to say that the Eternal Protector’s will is foreign to us and we can do naught else but trust Leois to carry us from sun to sun. You know Garmund, Cirin; he is not a man to linger long on tidings of gloom. He seems to have confidence that the story ends in celebration and all things that happen only lead us closer to that end.”

“Well then, we can still enjoy the Remembering with as much cheer as ever.”

“Yes, Cirin. You can enjoy Autumn Remembering. But before you begin enjoying it you still need to complete the work that needs to be done. It is still a week away and much remains unfinished.”

“I will get it done, father, I hope you know that I am trustworthy to complete all my tasks.”

“You are more than trustworthy, Cirin. Now, I must hitch up the horses and take the wain into Ragsdale while morning yet remains. Your mother requires that I be trustworthy and replenish her larder so she can bake her prize winning cakes and pies for Festival.”

“Will you take Timon, father? It would be helpful to be able to complete my chores without being begged to help the young archer surpass his teacher.”

“Consider it done. I would not mind young Timon’s company this fine morning.”

“Thank you, father.”

Galien turned and set off in search of Timon. In short time, the two of them had hitched up the horse and were ready to leave but not before Timon ran excitedly to his brother’s side.

“Cirin! Father is taking me into the village.”

Timon stood as straight as he could and raised his chin proudly.

“He needs my help to get some things for mother’s Festival baking. It is too bad you have so many chores to do.”

“Yes, Timon, I am jealous of you. You enjoy the ride and try not to fall out of the wain this time.”

“Cirin!” said Timon pouting.

“I am only teasing, Timon. Do not be defensive.”

Timon began to answer but was interrupted by Galien’s call.

“Timon! Come, son. We need to leave or we will never get home in time for your mother’s fine supper.”

“Coming, father! Goodbye, Cirin. I will see you this even!”

“Goodbye, Timon!”

Cirin watched Timon run to the wain. He hopped into the seat next to Galien and chattered ceaselessly to his father. Galien smiled, nodding his head repeatedly, then coaxed the horse forward. The wain shuddered then rolled off down the well-traveled road toward Ragsdale with Timon’s young face floating back on the wind.

That evening at supper, the family listened patiently as Timon told of all he had seen in the village.

“It was marvelous, Cirin. So many things in the village are already prepared for Autumn Remembering. The pavilion for Festival singing is being raised on the village green. There are many, many craftsmen setting up their booths and, mother, I saw the place where they will be judging the cakes and pies.”

“That is wonderful, Timon. It is exciting to hear about all you saw but I do hope that you were of some help to your father.”

“Oh, he was, Eslyn, my dear. He almost single-handedly loaded the wain,” said Galien, smiling at Timon’s enthusiasm. “I do not know what I would have done without his help. We even saw your friend Rylan, Cirin.”

“Did you, father? How was he?”

“He seemed fine, although he wanted to be certain that I tell you to be prepared to have one less golden arrow. Apparently, he has been practicing much.”

“He cannot beat you, Cirin” chimed in Timon. “Everyone says that you are the best the Hunt as ever seen. You will win easily.”

“Thank you for your confidence, Timon. But if Rylan wins this year it make will me try that much harder next year. I already have many golden arrows. Rylan has none. I would be happy for him if he can win one.”

“Enough talk of golden arrows,” interrupted Eslyn. “I would appreciate help with clearing the table if you are all finished eating.”

“The boys will be glad to help you,” said Galien. “I, on the other hand, need to brush down the horse. I will be back in shortly.”

Galien pushed himself away from the table and began his chore of lighting the lantern. Once the flame flickered strongly within, Galien stepped out into the night.

“Well, mother, let us get these dishes cleared and washed for you,” said Cirin. “You go on out to the barn and keep father company.”

“I would like that, Cirin. Are you certain?”

“I am, mother. Now go. We can handle things in here.”

“Thank you, son. This is most thoughtful.”

Eslyn pulled a cloak from a hook by the door and wrapped it around herself to ward off the night chill. In a moment, she too had stepped through the door into the night.

“Come, Timon. It would do us well to work quickly and have the work done before mother and father return. It may well earn you a few extra coppers to spend at the Remembering.”

The two brothers worked swiftly and happily together. When Eslyn and Galien returned from the barn they found the kitchen in order but their two young men playfully wrestling each other on the floor before the hearth. To their surprise, Galien jumped into the fray. The three men of the house tumbled about on the floor laughing happily while Eslyn watched smiling and

treasuring the moment. When at last they had exhausted themselves, they lay back catching their breath.

“Well, now” said Eslyn, “if you three are finished wiping my floor for me I guess I will be off to bed.”

Before she could turn to leave, Galien and Cirin grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to the floor with them where they all lay laughing together again for a good long while.

That week passed quickly as all the preparations were made. Eslyn baked her cakes and pies, Cirin and Galien worked tirelessly with the flock, and Timon helped wherever he could. Finally, the day of Autumn Remembering arrived. Early in the morning, the wain was loaded. Just after the family broke fast together, Cirin and Timon started off ahead of their parents driving those of the flock that would be going to market ahead of them. Minutes later, Galien and Eslyn, started off in the wain. They caught up with their sons a mile before the village.

“We will see you at the market, boys!” called Galien as they rode passed them.

Cirin and Timon arrived in Ragsdale one hour later. Their father was waiting for them. He helped them get the flock settled in the pen that had been reserved for them then pulled a small leather pouch out for each of them. Both boys opened the pouches to see what was inside.

“Ten copper pieces!” exclaimed Timon. “Father, thank you!”

“You are welcome. It would be difficult to fully enjoy the bright booths and activities of Festival with no coppers in your belts.”

“Thank you, father! Thank you!”

With a whoop, Timon ran off in search of his friends.

“Thank you, father” said Cirin slightly more subdued.

“Go, Cirin. Find your friends. I am certain you are anxious to get yourself signed in for the hunt.”

Cirin found his friend, Rylan, waiting for him with his other friends, Dan and Aiden on the edge of the village green.

“I see you lazy layabouts have no responsibilities to tend to today” Cirin joked.

“Aye,” said Dan. “None of us work as hard as you, Cirin. If not for you, we would not know what work was.”

The four friends laughed together. They made their way across the green to a booth that was selling roast turkey legs. Aiden tugged at the money pouch at his belt and looked to the others.

“All of my not working has given me a terrible hunger.”

“And a terrible aim” said Rylan. “You should have seen him practicing with the bow this morning, Cirin. It would have pained you greatly.”

“What are you talking about, Rylan?” asked a defensive Aiden. “I hit my target every time.”

“That was my target, Aiden,” said Dan. “Yours was on the other side of Rylan’s.”

“It was not. Your target was...” Aiden stopped short when he realized his friends were trying to get the better of him.

“Oh, I see. You are all just trying to distract me so you can best me in the Hunt.”

“At least you three have had some practice” interjected Cirin. “I have been working since sunrise. I have had no time for practice.”

Rylan looked at his best friend and pounded him on the back with the palm of his hand.

“The Golden Archer needs no practice. None of us can see why we even try. We already know who will take home the golden arrow.”

“Do not be so certain, my friend” said Cirin smiling. “Your bow shoots truer with each Hunt. Perhaps I have only been lucky these past few Hunts. I look forward to the possibility of losing to my friends.”

“And we look forward to watching you add yet another golden arrow to your quiver, Cirin. Now give me two coppers so I can buy us some meat to strengthen our arms” said Dan.

“I give you two coppers?” asked Cirin. “Why must I pay to feed your bellies?”

“Because last Remembering I paid and this year it is your turn. Your arrows may fly true but your memory certainly does not.”

“Oh, but you cut me to the heart, Dan.”

Cirin dug into the pouch at his belt and tossed two copper pieces to Dan who caught them easily.

“Take what little I have and feed your hungry belly.”

“Gladly, I will, Cirin. I’ll be right back with our feast, my friends.”

Dan made his way to the booth to barter for food. Cirin was humored by his friend’s antics but was soon distracted by the crowd that was gathering on the other side of the green. The Hunt registration booth stood out with its bright colors. A busy crowd bustled around outside and around it.

“Have you registered for the Hunt already?” Cirin asked his friends.

“Yes,” replied Rylan. “The three of us registered this morning as soon as it opened. Have you not done so?”

“No. I have not. Perhaps I should.”

“Well, yes, you should, Cirin,” ordered Aiden. “The Hunt begins very soon. We will be hearing the Gathering Horn any moment now.”

“I will meet you there,” said Cirin starting off across the green. He stopped after six paces. “I cannot,” he said with desperation in his voice.

“Why not?” asked Rylan.

“My bow. I have forgotten it. I packed it in my father’s wain and forgot to retrieve it when we arrived. They will not allow me to register without seeing the bow I plan to use in the Hunt. It seems the three of you may have less competition after all.”

“It may be they will let it pass since you have been champion so many times before,” offered Aiden.

“I doubt that, Aiden. They are very particular about the rules, even for past champions.”

“Here we are, friends!” called Dan returning from his errand. “Let us feast as we cross the green to the Hunt.”

Dan passed a large turkey leg to each of his friends even as he stuffed the largest one into his own mouth.

“Why does everyone look so ill?”

“Cirin cannot register for the Hunt. He does not have his bow,” explained Aiden.

“I do not see a problem with that. You can have my bow, Cirin. I have not a chance at winning anyway.”

“No, Dan. You enjoy the Hunt as much as any of us. I will stay back and cheer the one of you who is victorious.”

Suddenly, a loud horn blast rang across the green. The Gathering Horn had been sounded. The busy activity around the booth increased to a frenzied pace as boys rushed to

complete registration and take their places at the Gathering Point. Cirin pushed his friends across the clearing toward the booth.

“Go now. Or must I herd you as I do my sheep?”

“Cirin, please, take my place,” protested Rylan.

“Thank you, my friend, but no. There is no need to sacrifice on my account. I am satisfied to sit out. Really.”

Dan, still munching on his turkey leg, said between bites, “Clearly, Cirin fears us this year. He most likely left his bow behind on purpose.”

The friends reached the booth and stood among the participants to listen to the already well know rules of the Hunt.

“Quiet, now all!” boomed the voice of the Hunt Master. “We need quiet so all may hear the rules. If you have not yet registered you can do so after I have given the rules. Be quick about it because the Hunt Horn will sound soon after I am finished. Now, most of you have been on the Hunt before but I will refresh your memories. The boundaries will be from the western edge of the wood behind me, east to the Dwarven Pillar. It will run north from the river to the southern edge of the wood. You will all be given a quiver of arrows as you enter the wood. These arrows have a mark upon them that indicate that they are yours. This way we can verify that a kill belongs to you. You will receive points for clean kills, as well as the size of your game. Game that will be considered for points will be quail, pheasant, turkey, rabbit, fox, and deer. Leave your kills on one of the marked paths with your arrow still in it. One of the Hunt Wardens will see that it is brought back here where you will receive due recognition. Remember to be careful and honorable. Now, if you will please form a line over by the path to receive your

quiver. May he whose skill is greatest take the golden arrow. The Hunt Horn will sound to begin the Hunt shortly.”

The Hunt Master stepped through the crowd of boys and made his way to the Path. Cirin’s friends did not move. They stood looking uncomfortably at each other then at Cirin with concern.

“Are you certain you will not take my bow, Cirin?” asked Aiden for the second time.

“I am certain. Before another of you asks, go and get your quivers.”

His friends moved off hesitantly toward the path to take their place in line. They looked over their shoulders to see if Cirin would call one of them back. Finally, they all resigned themselves to the fact that he would not request them to give up their place. Anxious glances were soon replaced by excited conversation as they took their places in line. Cirin watched as Dan, Aiden, and finally Rylan each received their full quiver of arrows.

“Should you not be joining your friends?” a voice said from behind him as a hand clamped on his shoulder.

Turning, Cirin saw Galien standing before holding his wayward bow.

“Father! Oh, thank you. I was not going to...I mean, I was satisfied with...Thank you, father.”

Galien handed Cirin his bow and pushed him gently toward the Hunt Master.

“I have already registered you, son. Enough thanks. You had better make your presence known to the Hunt Master before the Horn sounds.”

“I will...but I...”

“Go, Cirin!”

His father's strong hand propelled Cirin toward the Hunt Master with such force that Cirin nearly ran into the big man. The Hunt Master turned, a smile breaking out upon his broad face.

“Cirin, my lad! I thought you were going to hold out on us this Hunt. Hurry, boy! Take your place in line and get your quiver!”

For the second time a strong pair of hands set him moving, this time toward the end of the line. Cirin saw the queue shift and sway on that path that led to the woods as the boys jostled each other with excitement. Taking his place, Cirin checked his bow over carefully, pulling back the string to check the tension. Just as the Hunt Warden handed him his quiver of arrows, the loud blast of the Hunt Horn rang in his ears. The note sounded loud and clear, causing the line to move as one toward the entrance to the wood. The joyful cries of young men and boys soon overpowered all other sound.

“If any game is left around here after all this noise, I will be greatly surprised,” thought Cirin.

Soon he was caught up in the fervor himself easily. His heart raced as he navigated toward his favorite hunting ground. The sounds of the other hunters soon faded into the background. Cirin's instinct took over. This was a good day indeed. The Hunt had begun.

The game path was easy to follow. Autumn storms had left the ground soft, making it simple to track the deer that seemed to favor this particular path. Cirin moved quietly forward. He could hear a rustling in the thicket ahead. Something large was

attempting to move through it. From the noise it was making, Cirin thought that it was very large indeed. It was quite possibly the grandfather of all bucks. Cirin nocked an arrow to his string.

The noise from the thicket grew louder. Whatever was in there was getting closer and seemed more desperate in its efforts to get out. Cirin set himself. He drew back the arrow and sighted on the point at which he thought the beast would come out of the thicket. An unearthly moaning began to rise from the brambles. This was no deer. A debate began in Cirin's mind whether to stand and face the beast or move on to another spot.

His curiosity won the battle. He stood still with his hand as steady as his nerves would allow. Any moment his target would be in sight. He could see the thicket shaking and quivering as the mysterious beast fought its way out. Finally, with a loud groan, the creature burst out of the thicket. Cirin caught a flash of tan and horns followed by a mossy green. His fingers loosened on the string, ready to let the arrow fly. At the last instant he held back. On the path before him he beheld his friend, Dan, sprawled across the game path over the back of a young buck.

“Ow!” cried Dan. “Thorns!”

“There are a few choice ones sticking out of the back of your leg, my friend. Would you like me to remove them for you?”

Dan looked up, a grand smile coming to his face.

“Cirin! So you did make it after all.”

Dan picked himself up off of the buck and stood proudly over his trophy.

“This is some buck, eh, Cirin? I see you have some catching up to do.”

“That I do, Dan. Let me help you get this magnificent creature down to path to the marker and I’ll be off then.”

“You will do that?” asked Dan.

“You are my friend, are you not?”

“Thank you, Cirin. Yes. You are my friend.”

Together, the two of them carried the buck to the pick up marker at the head of the game path. Once they had it secured, Cirin helped Dan pluck the last of the thorns from his clothes.

“Thank you again, Cirin,” said Dan gratefully. “May Leois shine upon you for the rest of the Hunt.”

“And may He shine on you as well, Dan.”

“Oh, He has, Cirin. That He has. I will see you at Hunt’s End.”

There was a flash of green as Dan plunged back into the wood. Gathering his thoughts, Cirin readdressed his plan and decided to try in the area of the Dwarven Pillar. Few hunters went there because they were superstitious. Cirin, on the other hand, hunted the area frequently. He had always been fortunate when hunting that plot. He enjoyed being in a place that had ties to the ancient times, times when Dwarves and Elves lived among men. Now they were but the things of legend.

All the remained of the ancient times were places like the Dwarven Pillar and the River of Stones that separated Barger from Shuffle-Barger. These ancient places were rarely seen and many people stayed clear of them. People were often fearful of things they did not know even though there was much to learn from the ancients. Cirin shook his head to clear his thoughts and focus more clearly upon his purpose for being in the wood. He made his way through the wood

knowing each game path well. His previous successes with the Hunt came in part from the long hours he had spent roaming the wood and learning its secrets.

At last, he came into the clearing that held the Dwarven Pillar. The ancient stone pillar stood in the center of the clearing. Vines grew up its sides but Cirin could still clearly see the skillfully carved animals and faces that covered every side. He walked around the pillar to the side that faced north. Unlike the others, this side also held ancient runes. Not even the Freres on Palamoun could decipher the ancient language of the Dwarves. The runes contained the thoughts of those who had carved them since before time remembering.

Cirin traced his fingers over the carved runes. He had always been certain that they meant something important. A piece of such beauty and artistry had to serve a greater purpose than a nest for birds and a backrest for tired hunters. The runes still fascinated him. His eyes were ever drawn from the incredible carved figures of animals and Dwarven faces back to the runes.



One day he would know the secret. Today, however, Cirin knew he needed to refocus his attention on the Hunt. There was a small stream that ran from the north end of the clearing,

around the pillar, then to the southeast corner and into the wood. Cirin walked along the stream's course. There were many prints of smaller animals that had found this a peaceful place to quench their thirst. What piqued Cirin's interest were the tracks that led away from the stream near the pillar and into the northern border of the wood. The tracks were fresh, only recently made, possibly even shortly before he had entered the clearing himself. They were the tracks of a deer; half again as large as the one Dan had dragged out of the thicket. It may have been even larger than that.

"I could still have a chance at the golden arrow if I can track this one down," thought Cirin.

He moved into the wood, carefully following the prints as they continued on a straight line north toward the river. Not long after he began tracking, he was rewarded with the sound of the deer rutting against a tree no more than forty paces ahead of him. With expert speed, Cirin had an arrow nocked and was making his way stealthily toward his prey. He saw it when he was twenty paces from the kingly creature. The buck was still rubbing his enormous antler rack against an equally enormous, ancient walnut tree. The deer's strength was such that walnuts were crashing down from the tree's heights with each stroke of its antlers.

Cirin knew that his shot had to be very well placed to bring down this magnificent animal. He drew back his bow and aimed for the spot just behind the deer's right foreleg. With enough force, the arrow should penetrate the muscle and travel straight into the buck's heart. With many practiced breaths, Cirin was ready to loose his arrow.

The arrow hit its mark before the animal had time to react to the sound of it leaving the bow. Powerful hind legs lifted the deer into the air as the sharp pain of the arrow shot through its body. It attempted to bolt but was only able to take two short steps before it fell to the ground.

The life breath had left it even before Cirin had made it to its side. He knelt beside the animal and laid a hand on its head.

“Thank you, friend,” he said. “Your death will not be in vain. You will feed many and warmly clothe those in need. For sharing yourself with me I am grateful.”

Cirin pulled back his hand then looked upward through the forest canopy to the sky.

“I thank you, Leois, for the skill to hunt this creature of yours. Thank you for providing it and all things.”

Galien had taught him to respect the animals that provided them food and, most important, to be thankful to the One who provided them. He looked down at the buck again. Now the task lay before him to move his kill to one of the checkpoints. It would be hard work, but rewarding when everyone saw what a prize he had. Slings his bow across his back, Cirin set to the task with much satisfaction. This was a Hunt to remember.

When the hunt horn sounded again four hours later, it was to signal Hunt’s End. All hunters were to gather on the village green and await the decision of the Hunt Master and his Wardens. All told, Cirin had done well. He had not taken any other game that could compare with his buck but he did bring many fine pheasants, a few quail, a fox, and two enormous turkeys. As he came out of the wood, he saw his friends already standing together comparing stories.

“Ah, the Golden Archer returns from the hunt,” called Aiden. “Is there any chance for the rest of us?”

“There is always a chance,” returned Cirin. “I know for certain that Dan fared well.”

“That was just the beginning, Cirin. I did not stop there I assure you.”

“Then Leois did smile upon you indeed.”

Two short blasts sounded from the Hunt Horn to draw everyone’s attention to the Hunt Master who now strode onto the green. In his hand he held a single golden arrow. All eyes fixed upon the arrow, then turned as one to look at Cirin. Many of the young men whispered to each other and nodded Cirin’s way. They all suspected what the outcome of the Hunt Master’s decision would be.

“Well, my lads, it has been a good Hunt!” boomed the voice of the Hunt Master across the green. “First, let me thank you for your more than ample provision for the Remembering Feast. There will be no one who goes away hungry tonight. Also, let me congratulate all of you on your fine effort. You carried yourselves as truly honorable young men. It seems that it has been a tradition these last few Hunts to present the golden arrow to a young man who has excelled again and again. His arrows flew no less true this year.”

Cirin’s friends patted him on the back vigorously and began to push him out of the crowd toward the Hunt Master.

“However...”

The entire green became hushed. What was this?

“However, this year another’s arrow flew truer. This year the Hunt welcomes a new champion. The golden arrow is awarded to Dan, Cailson. Dan, come forward to receive your due reward.”

Cirin stepped back smiling. He placed his hand on Dan’s shoulder and gently nudged him toward the Hunt Master. Dan timidly walked across the green. He stood before the Hunt Master still uncertain that he had heard correctly.

“Dan, son of Cail,” proclaimed the Hunt Master proudly, “Receive now your golden arrow. Well done, my lad.”

“Thank you, Hunt Master,” said Dan softly as he took the golden arrow. “I...”

A loud cry interrupted the ceremony. Everyone on the green turned toward a haggard rider who had ridden out into the middle of those gathered.

“Help! Please, you must help! The village of Hadding is in flames!”