

Epics of Isavoire

Bountiful Hunt

Franklin was silent as he sat behind the bush, as he had trained himself to be so long ago. He had discovered that in his line of work, patience was necessary, as was attention to detail.

He noticed the small, beaten path not too far ahead of him and he knew that it led to a small pond. That could only mean his quarry would appear before long.

Watching carefully, he saw a doe and its young were with it. There were three in all, the group of them traveling slowly.

Notching his arrow and drawing his bow, Franklin calmed himself. He had to wait until the doe was unsuspecting, its guard entirely down, only then would he need to shoot.

A few quiet, solitary moments passed, until from the silence came a thunderous roar. From the other side of the brush emerged a large, wolflike creature, though it was far larger than any other wolf and its teeth had a silver shine to them, as if coated in metal. The same could be said of its claws. The enormous creature was a unique being, so far as the hunter knew, going by the moniker woodsbane.

Almost immediately, it tried to go after the woodland creatures before it, but Franklin was ready. Firing two arrows, the first dug itself into the foreleg of the lumbering predator, while the second went into its back.

Franklin watched as blood began to drip from the injuries, but now his position was given away, and there was every possibility that the monster could somehow get his scent from the arrow shaft, so he had made sure to move quickly before readying more arrows.

As the woodsbane snarled and began to skulk around, the deer now forgotten, Franklin tried to think of where he could hide next, when he noticed a small thicket. He did his best to sprint to it, but the noise of his movement was enough to clue in the wild hunter.

There was a loud snarl before the creature began to sprint towards the archer.

“Damn it!” There wasn’t time to get to cover. Reaching to his quiver, Franklin stood still and got a single arrow out. No time to move; no time to panic. Franklin breathed slowly, in, then out, and looked at his nearing target.

He could see the sheen of its claws, the saliva dripping from its open maw. Finally, he waited until he was ready and loosed his arrow, and watching the projectile fly until it buried itself in the woodsbane’s skull, killing it.

Franklin watched as its body hit the ground with a thud before becoming entirely still. For several moments he breathed heavily until he fully processed the danger had passed. “Well, that was fun...”

Looking down at the great creature, he realized he had almost no way of carrying it back home by himself. As a result, his only option was to try to remember the spot where he made the kill and come back later.

In the meantime, he would collect as much as possible. Reaching for his knife, he drew it and began to gather what he could, cutting off the creature’s metal claws and storing them for later.

Once he finished, wiping the blood from his blade, Franklin went back towards the village. The path wasn’t terribly long, but still took plenty of time as Franklin began to worry about how he would collect the rest of the kill. Granted he had done his initial job, as the woodsbane had been killing most

the wildlife in the area, but there were still plenty of resources that could be made from their remains. Leaving them where they were would be a waste. Still, he knew one person who could maybe help him, but he was reluctant to ask her. Eventually, though, he finally climbed the hill that led back to his home village, the small, humble settlement as peaceful and quiet as always.

Walking down the well trodden road, he came to his family's cabin before long, the pens in back full and the sound of rustling in the shed. Stepping inside, he saw his father at the hearth, stoking the fire inside. "Dad, I'm home!"

The older man turned around. Like Franklin he was also dark skinned and had a firm strength to how he stood. Even so, the man's face donned a warm smile as he faced his son. "You're back just in time, Franklin. I was worried you got lost."

"I haven't gotten lost since I was nine, but I do have this." The young man dug into his bag and revealed the claws of the monster. "Proof of death."

The man took the claws in his hand and began to look them over closely. Once he was fully aware of what it was, he spoke with pride. "You did well, son."

"You taught me well," Franklin said to his father. "Anyhow, I left the body behind. I know where it is but I need to go retrieve it."

"I see." Franklin's father started to ponder the matter, subconsciously gripping his cane as he did. "I can ask Jarvis or Heike to help you out, though they'll each want some of the spoils."

"Too much for the work they'd be doing," Franklin sighed. "Either way, I already have someone lined up. I just wanted to let you know."

"Glad to hear. Once you bring it back we'll get the rest cleaned and ready for use."

“Thanks...Also, where’s mom?” Franklin asked. “I wanted to double check if she needs any of the parts for medicine.”

Franklin’s father gestured towards the back door. “She’s in the enclosure with Roven. She’s making sure he’s not sick.”

“Alright. I’ll go say hello to them both before I go.” Giving his father a brief hug, Franklin was soon on his way. Passing through the door, he was soon outside and saw his mother, a woman dressed in beige sitting in front of a large, black bear with white spots on its fur.

The creature gave a low roar of excitement before lumbering over to Franklin, who soon hugged the bear around the neck warmly.

“Roven, so good to see you!”

“Be careful, Franklin. I don’t want him accidentally laying on you,” Franklin’s mother said warily. “He’s gotten too big for that.”

“I guess so.” Franklin rubbed the bear’s head before getting up and facing his mother. “How is he?”

“Healthy, though I still want to check up on him now and again to make sure he stays that way.”

“Thought you might.” Franklin smiled at his mother before speaking again. “How was work?”

“It went well enough. I had to treat a couple of dogs that got into fights and a horse that strained a ligament. Their owners have them, but it should be enough to make ends meet.”

The archer nodded before showing his mother the woodsbane’s metal claws. “I took care of the woodsbane, but I was going to take in its remains. Do you need anything from it before dad and I prepare it for sale?”

Franklin's mother thought on it for a moment before speaking. "It's body fat is supposed to be good for alleviating abdominal pain, but I would need to consult my apothecary friend to double check."

"Even so, figured it's best to ask the best healer in the village."

"You mean the only healer," she chuckled. "At least recently I've had more need to help livestock than people."

The young hunter felt a pang of shame. Despite also being glad that others were healthy, part of him imagined his mother could make more money if there were more unhealthy people in the village to help. Even so, Franklin would do his share. "Still, I'm gonna go get the remains soon. We'll have it back, but will you and dad have Roven in his shelter so he doesn't bother it?"

"Of course. You should eat and rest a bit first, though. Which reminds me, Genevieve came by."

"What did Genne want?" Franklin asked.

"She said she wanted you to help her with singing practice, but since when did she start singing?"

"Oh, er...Months ago. She just got into it," Franklin replied hastily. "Anyway, I better find her. I'll see you later."

"Be safe!"

Waving goodbye to his mother and Roven, Franklin went back out into the village to find Genne. He was less than amused by how she had spoken to his mother about "singing" but at least it meant he would see more before long.

Walking, he soon came to the Forda family's home. There, he saw the old couple talking outside their home. He waved to them before speaking. "Mr. and Mrs. Forda, is here Genne?"

“Greetin's, Franklin, she's finishin' her chores 'round back,” Mr. Forda pointed to the back of their house, towards the field. “She's checking on the crops.”

“Alright, thanks!” Hastily, Franklin rushed on and went to go see his friend. Once he reached the back, he saw that Genne was sighing, looking out at the tilled field and looking over her work with pride. Franklin then shouted. “Hey, Genne!”

“Franklin! Ya made it after all.” Genne smiled. “Gimme a bit, I just need to rest for a spell.”

“Sure.” Franklin watched as Genne sat on a nearby stump. There was no doubt that she had been working as hard as him, with her tiredness showing as she sat down and tried to compose herself. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, just a lotta plantin'. I'mma be fine in a bit.” Genne sighed. “Anyhow, I was wonderin' where ya went. Tried ta find you earlier.”

“I was hunting, which reminds me, I need your help to bring back the rest of the remains.”

Genne narrowed her eyes. “Franklin, I know I'm strong, but I don't think you an' me can carry an overgrown carcass.”

“With your “singing” you can,” Franklin replied. “You apparently needed to practice anyway.”

Genne's eyes widened and she gasped, starting to understand. “Ah, gotcha. Well, I figure I can help ya out!”

“Good. We better get going.” Franklin smiled. “You rested enough?”

“Mhm!” Hastily, Genne jumped to her feet before smiling. “Oh, check out what I can do now.” Slowly, Genne began to breathe in and out, focusing herself before a light began to emit from behind her.

Franklin watched in awe as Genne began to channel her magic. The young woman's powers were a secret to everyone, save for Franklin. Soon, he saw her floating in the air, albeit very slightly, her feet just barely coming off the ground. Before long she was gliding around, spinning without a worry in the world.

“Yahoo!”

“Genne, not so loud!” Franklin said, but she merely kept laughing. “C’mon, slowpoke. Ya gotta go faster!”

Shaking his head, Franklin followed up behind her, hoping that her magic would make things easier rather than harder.

Half an hour later, the duo were approaching the forest. By the time they arrived, they entered quietly, save for Genne's snickering. They had taken a back path to the woods, allowing Genne a chance to use her magic freely without worry.

“So, when did you learn that floating trick?” Franklin asked as he walked with her, finding his way back to the trail.

“About a week back. I kept fallin’ over the first couple a’ times.” Genne landed down next to Franklin.

“Can you fly?”

“Nah. I tried, but I kept getting’ dizzy or feelin’ nervous, plus it got harder the higher I went up.” Genne shrugged. “But floatin’s fine by me.”

Franklin laughed. Part of him felt envious of her powers. Franklin had only learned about Genne's magic a year ago, but he was amazed by what he saw. It had simply been Genne making the illusion of fireflies at first, but as Franklin saw her make them disappear she had little choice but to ask

him not to reveal her secret. From there, however, she often asked him to watch her practice her magic, which had made them come up with the lie of singing lessons. “It’d be neat to do use that in hunting. I wouldn’t even make a peep.”

“Why not use it for somethin’ fun?” asked Genne. “After all, y’gotta like somethin’ other’n huntin’.”

“Can’t see Roven finding me floating as too much fun. Might make it harder for the big guy to catch me, though.” Franklin imagined his pet trying to chase him, when he looked at the path. “The woodsbane should be just ahead.”

“Ah, the trip was shorter’n I expected.”

“They can’t all be long.” Franklin went ahead toward where he thought he left the body, when he discovered it wasn’t there. “Someone took it.”

“Huh?” Genne looked closely. She saw bits of fur and blood on the ground, as well as what looked like a trail. “Think it was an animal?”

“Doubt it. There are footprints back there.” Franklin pointed further out near the bloody trail before it disappeared altogether. Looking closer, he drew near the footprints. “At least four, big guys by the look of it.”

“What makes ya think that?”

“The depression their boots made, even before they began to carry the carcass.” Franklin gestured to the footprints on the ground. “They’ll be easy enough to follow. We just need to be careful.”

“Wait, you’re goin’ after ‘em?”

“Yes. I need that kill to sell, otherwise my family will go hungry.” Franklin’s tone was firm, but he was nervous. Hunting animals was one thing, but people were dangerous and cunning. If he couldn’t

get it back via negotiation, he would have to do something more drastic. As he thought it over, he heard a noise. It was faint, but unmistakably that of footsteps. “Who is it?”

“A man who means no harm,” came a voice. It came from a young man, apparently in his late twenties. His eyes were sharp and his brows furrowed as he walked closer. The olive skinned man bearing a small scar on his right cheek had his hands up. On his back was a bow and quiver as well. “I am Androcles.”

“Why’re you here?” Franklin asked.

“I’m a bounty hunter and my marks are in these woods.” Androcles gestured to the path. “If I’m not mistaken it’s a bunch of poachers wanted for stealing livestock and domesticated animals in the region.”

“I see. So you want to bring them in?”

“Sort of.” Androcles then looked Franklin in the eye, his gaze firm. “Mind if I assist?”

“Not at all,” Franklin replied, lowering his bow. “I’m Franklin and this is Genne.”

“Greetin’s!” Genne waved warmly.

“Nice to meet you both. Franklin, lead the way.”

“Wow, down ta business, ain’t’cha?” Genne shrugged before she and Androcles followed Franklin.

Their path took them through a set of bushes, disturbed plants and upturned earth hinted at the location of the thieves.

Eventually, they reached a clearing of some size and saw a camp where there was not just four, but eight men.

Inside the area that made up their camp, there were many cages filled with wildlife and crates they were filling with goods. Among them was what Franklin recognized as the pelt of the woodsbane.

“Damn it, they already stripped it.” Franklin frowned as he saw not even a hint of the remains were left behind.

“Aw, darn... Maybe we should go?” Genne asked.

Androcles stepped up, holding his bow at ready. “You two can. I need to go collect my bounty.”

Franklin thought about it, but shook his head; if he couldn't take back the woodsbane he would take some other form of repayment. “I'll get what I can...” Before Genne could respond, he and Androcles moved ahead toward the camp. The two of them kept low for their approach, but by then a few had taken notice.

Franklin began to notch his arrows, when Androcles took a step ahead, taking his shot and piercing one mans heart immediately.

Franklin stared in awe at Androcles, taken by the archer's talent. He and Genne watched as the archer had loosed three arrows, each one piercing the bandits. Androcles' form and precision filled Franklin with admiration. As the bodies of the thieves hit the ground, Franklin saw they were still, killed in one shot with great ease.

“Whoa.” Franklin stared at Androcles at a loss for words.

Androcles just notched another arrow and went ahead. “Try to keep as silent as you can. There are four more.”

Franklin nodded while Genne came closer, going with them further into the encampment. Once they had, Franklin decided to draw closer to where the stolen supplies were. He saw several large crates

and in the cages nearby he was surprised to see not only a young lynx and two bear cubs, but even a couple of captured kobolds raging against their cages and a chained minotaur of some size.

Franklin was awed by the last creature, which was easily twice as tall as him and colored a light, hay yellow color. The large scraps of cloth the creature wore were a faded lilac and magenta color. “Wow, an actual minotaur. They must’ve captured all of these creatures.”

“What for?” Genne asked. “Sellin’ em in the black market?”

“I wouldn’t put it past them.” Franklin looked at the minotaur and the kobolds, feeling anger well up inside him as he saw them chained and captured. “Genne, can you use your magic to undo the locks?”

“I can try.” The locks glowed as Genne moved her hands toward them, until there was a sudden “click.” Afterwards, both the cage locks were undone. “I did it!”

The kobolds began to communicate with each other, making hissing noises before facing Genne. They both gave her a single, grateful gaze before scampering off out of the camp area.

“Well, two down.” Franklin had been hoping for their help in case the bandits drew near, but couldn’t blame the creatures for fleeing. Just then, though, shouts were heard.

“Who let those damned lizards loose?”

“Did Klar forget to lock the cage again?”

“They’re comin’!” Genne gasped as she turned, seeing two burly looking men draw near. One had a large axe, while the other held a spear and shield.

“Let them.” Franklin focused his anger at the targets before him. When one came into sight, he took his shot, the arrow missing, but narrowly as it cut one man on his arm. He watched as the man with the shield took lead, blocking the volley of arrows Franklin began to let loose.

The hunter had only a moment, but thought of another target. Aiming lower, he shot an arrow through the man's leg, watching him stumble and his ally trip over his body.

By then, Franklin had to prepare for another shot, but before he could there was a loud, booming noise, followed by the giant arm of the minotaur knocking the axe-wielding thief several feet away until he landed on a tent with a loud crash.

Turning, Franklin saw the minotaur was standing there, snorting before looking down at him. He froze in fear until it stood at his side, bending down and offering a hand. Franklin was confused until he realized it was a show of thanks. He placed his palm on the creature's. "Thank you."

"Nice work, you two," Genne said, smiling. "Did we get 'em all?"

"No, there are two more. Let's leave the animals alone and check on Androcles. Stay sharp, you two."

Genne and the minotaur both followed behind him, when they saw Androcles was under fire by both magic and arrows. Looking, they saw blasts of bright blue energy and arrows. He was hiding behind a few crates, trying to take cover.

"We need to help him!" Acting quickly, Franklin tried to locate the assailants. When he looked he saw both a magic user and an archer were attacking at the same time. Franklin needed to take them out before either noticed his group. Taking careful aim, he loosed an arrow at the mage, deeming him the more dangerous of the duo. He watched as the arrow was about to make contact, when a magic barrier appeared. It appeared like a transparent, but blue-hued wall, stopping the arrow in its path before the projectile harmlessly fell to the ground.

"What the hell was that?" Franklin asked himself aloud, catching the attention of the foes.

Turning their attention from Androcles, they faced Franklin, Genne, and the minotaur. The magician raised a hand and chanted to cast a spell, but Genne started her own.

“Genne! Get out of the way!” Franklin shouted.

“No, I can stop it!” Genne insisted. She stood in front of the others as the mage cast a spell at them.

For a moment, Franklin could have sworn he saw her eyes flash as the same light as before appeared. Then, as the mage's spell nearly hit Genne, it dispersed.

Genne's expression was of genuine surprise, but she acted fast. Hastily, she threw a spell of her own, also taking a form similar to a glowing sphere of light, flickering in and out. Franklin watched the magic go to the mage's barrier, pressing it for a moment before the spell failed.

The mage turned, giving them both full attention. Ready to cast a more powerful spell, the magician's hands gathered a mass of energy. Genne and Franklin both scrambled to move out of the way, but the mage's attack was stopped by an arrow Androcles loosed, killing the spellcaster.

By then, the archer who had been targeting Androcles took notice of the others. The enemy went for cover before shooting several arrows towards the young duo.

Narrowly, the minotaur managed to shield Genne from the other archer's arrow. The arrowhead buried itself in the back of the minotaur's hand, but Franklin took a shot of his own.

The arrow Franklin loosed found its target, hitting the other archer in the shoulder before Androcles finished with an arrow of his own, felling the poacher.

In the aftermath, Franklin, Genne, Androcles, and the minotaur were left in the ruined camp. The caged animals were still present, though Androcles had a grim look on his face.

“What's wrong?” Franklin asked. “We stopped them just like we planned.”

“Yes, but it will be hard to take the remains back.” With measured caution, the bounty hunter went to the bodies and leaned down. He looked them over, checking to see who was alive and who was dead. “They're dead, thankfully. I'll need to check the others.”

Genne looked at Androcles. “Mister Androcles, are ya gonna be alright?”

Androcles nodded before pulling a hunting knife from a sheathe on his upper leg. "You should take what you need and go. The village path is to the west."

"What about these guys and the livestock?"

"I need to collect my bounty proof; Trust me, you don't want to look. I'll leave the animals here if you decide you want them."

Franklin didn't much like the idea of leaving the stolen animals alone over night, but he liked the idea of overlooking Androcles' work even less. “C'mon, Genne. We better go.”

“Okay,” she replied reluctantly. As she walked forward, she noticed the minotaur was standing still. “Hey, aren't you coming with us?”

The creature looked at her, surprised.

“C'mon, we're friends now, right? It's only fair ya come with us.”

Slowly, the minotaur nodded before following along too while Androcles went about his business.

It was the next day when Franklin and his mother were with Genne and the minotaur, the three of them looking over the tall figure's wound while the inured creature was petting a curious Roven.

“How is his hand, Mom?” Franklin asked.

“Thanks to the first aid you gave it should be fine. She'll just need a week to heal up.”

“”She”?” Franklin asked.

“Yep. Your Mama was giving her a check up while you were explaining to your daddy what happened.” Genne smiled. “We even named her Oksana.”

Oksana mooed, as if in approval.

Franklin smiled. “Well, glad we got a name to call her at least.” He faced Oksana and smiled. “Thank you again for helping is.”

Oksana snorted, but Franklin could have sworn she was smiling.

“I'm just glad all of you came back in one piece, and the extra spoils didn't hurt.”

“Yeah, I just feel kinda bad. Maybe those things had rightful owners an' whatnot,” Genne posited.

“It's not like we could track them down,” Franklin replied. “Besides, better it helps our families than some ruffians.”

“True. So, did ya want to go back to the camp and see if there's anything more there?” Genne asked.

“My dad and I did early this morning,” Franklin said. “When we went back we found a few shallow graves. The poached animals and a few supplies were still left over, though.”

“I guess Mr. Androcles did his work, then,” Genne commented. “Whatcha gonna do with the stuff?”

“Sell it. But we'll split the money with you. We couldn't have done it without your help, after all,” Franklin said.

“Golly. I didn't do much but it's still flatterin',” Genne said. “ I gotta practice more if I really wanna help next time. Still, that was a little fun to have an adventure.”

“Not to mention dangerous,” Franklin's mother admonished before folding her arms. “I know you two didn't intend to look for danger but you both could have been killed.”

Franklin agreed halfheartedly, but in truth he would have done much more if it meant his family would be safe and provided for. After that, Franklin and his family went about selling the goods they had gained and the animals to trustworthy owners, splitting the earnings they made with Genne. Franklin was pleasantly surprised by the fact that Oksana had found a home with Genne's family, choosing to stay rather than leave Springstone. It had taken some small urging on Genne's part, but her family warmed up to the idea of having Oksana around.

Once a month had passed since their adventure, Franklin was feeding Roven when he heard a familiar voice.

“Finally, I found you.”

Franklin turned to see that Androcles was behind him, now looking more relaxed. He noticed the man had a brand new bow and clothing, including higher quality leather guards . Franklin was in awe of it. “Androcles!”

“I'm glad you remembered me. Has your family been well?”

“As well as we can be.” Franklin patted Roven's head as the bear lumbered forth. “Thank you again, because of you my family was able to live well for another part.”

“That's in no small part due to you and your friend,” Androcles said honestly. “You did well and I was able to collect my bounty. I felt it was only fair I give you and your friend a portion.” Reaching into his bag, Androcles produced a relatively large satchel before tossing it to Franklin.

The younger archer caught it quickly, feeling the weight of many coins within. Opening, he gasped when he saw how many gold and silver coins were within. “This is just a portion?!”

Androcles smiled. “It turns out they had made a lot of enemies. Regardless, it was only fair I give you some.”

“And you can make this much bounty hunting?” Franklin was stunned; the money his family had made in the past month paled in comparison to what he held in his hands.

Androcles nodded. “Smaller bounties are more common but this is far from the biggest haul I've made. Altogether that's one-fifth of the bounty.”

The hunter was at a loss for words.

“Please pass some along to your friend and both of you take care.” After waving, Androcles turned to leave.

“Wait! Please, let me bounty hunt with you. Both of us!” Franklin said. “It would really help, and we could help you.”

Androcles shook his head. “Sorry, but I travel alone. If we ever cross paths I'm more than happy to work together, though.”

“I see.” Franklin felt downcast; an opportunity to be a true help consistently had come and gone in an instant.

Androcles stared at him. “You don't need to travel with me, you know. If you do think about bounty hunting you have promise. You just need to think hard about it and realize it won't be easy.”

Franklin nodded. "I will. Just please take care, Androcles."

"I'll do my best, Franklin." Offering his hand, he waited for Franklin to take it.

Holding the bag in his other hand, Franklin took Androcles' hand and shook before the veteran bounty hunter went his own way.

Looking at the money and thinking about the possibility, Franklin decided to mull it over on the way to Genne's, as well as considering asking her and Oksana to come with him.