

The Boar Hunt

“Lester! Lester, get over here!”

Lester the farmhand rushed over to his employer who was standing in one of the unused stalls of the stable.

“What is it Toby?”

“Look at this.” He pointed to a medium sized barn cat who was nursing a tiny white piglet. “I swear, Missy here was just about ready to give birth, but there's no sign of her litter.

Lester squinted at the strange sight. “I don't know boss, maybe they died or something and she went to find something else look after. Haven't you been wanting a pig anyway?”

Missy purred contentedly as her strange offspring switched teats. “Yer right I guess. I think I'll name the little guy Eirwyn.” He still looked pensive however.

Over the next week Eirwyn grew quickly, doubling, then doubling again in size. Toby had Lester put him in a pen, but soon he was the size of a carriage and escaped to the north rampaging through the countryside.

Eirwyn's rampage soon attracted the attention of the local duke who rode out with all of his men deal with the beast. The boar made quick work of its pursuers however, slaughtering them before crossing into the country of Yuden. The Dukes grieving widow sent a warning Yudens king.

'This creature is like nothing we have seen and is by all reports is still growing. Whatever you decide to do, be warned that it may eventually become unstoppable.'

A call was sent out to all the Kingdoms of Lareen for a great hunt and soon those willing to risk there lives for glory began to gather in Yuden.

.....

A young noble rode into the courtyard of Caer Ruag, the castle walls towering above him.

“Your name, my Lord,” asked the gatekeeper.

He sighed, why must these commoners question their betters. “Lord Fredrick “Lamarchen.”

“Are your servant's travelling behind you? It's almost nightfall.”

“I find that I travel much faster on my own,” he said unstrapping his saddle bags. “Take my gelding to stables would you.”

“My Lord, I'm afraid that's not really my-”

“The young lord wasn't listening as he strode quickly to the main door. In the entrance hall he was greeted by a large man with saggy brown hair. Fredrick, my friend! I didn't think anyone else would make it before we left tomorrow.!

“Bran,” Lord Lamarchen said warmly. I'm surprised to see someone else from Kunti here.

“I would never miss such a rare chance for glory!” The big man threw his arm around his shoulder and guided him along. “That Boar has been wrecking villages, eating crops and slaughtering livestock. Why it even smashed up a crystal farm, the mages aren't happy about that, I can tell you. They say it's bigger than a carriage with skin like iron and shining tusks. This shall be a hunt for the ages my friend!”

Lamarchen gently pried Bran's arm off of him. “So who among our fellow nobles has gathered for this?”

“You'll have heard of a lot of them, at least. There's Noden from Ajun along with those hounds that he breeds. Math travelled by boat from Fara, apparently he has some enchantments that he wants to try on our gear. Tapio's here from Ode of course, eager to add that boar's head to his trophy room. From Voxia, there's Nori, with some kind of new invention. Our host for this evening is none other than Crown Prince Alden, this kingdom's heir. Apparently his father's health is failing, otherwise the old man would be here himself.”

“Anybody from Lunia?”

“Nah, they're talking about going to war with Madri again.”

“Maybe Yan will finally pick a side,” Lamarchen mused. The pair were heading towards the guest wing. “Is there anybody else?”

“I don't remember the others names, but I'll tell you this, most of our peers are afraid to rough it! They brought too many servants to cook, carry tents and all that nonsense. I just brought a couple of bards to sing about my deeds! Har, Har, Har!” Bran paused, “Come to think of it I'm surprised to see you here. Have you finally given up on catching that thief girl.

Lord Lamarchen glared. “Never! That vile woman has taken far too much wealth, from far too many people! I will catch her and she will learn that she is not that character who she's modelled herself after, then she'll be duly executed.” He sighed, “for the moment however I'm out of leads, so since I was in the area, I decided that this hunt would prove to be a pleasant diversion.”

That night crown prince Alden threw a grand feast for the hunters. He gave a speech warning that no ones safety could be parented in this endeavour and several men backed out. At dawn the hunting party headed out. For many miles they journeyed north, following the trail of destruction that Eirwyn had left in his wake. Following at a respectful distance were many servants, cooks, and of course bards.

On the fifth day they had left behind all traces of civilization and were deep into the wilderness. Lord Lamarchen rode his gelding next to Bran's massive charger. “That beast has left no visible trace since yesterday evening, how do we know we're even going in the right direction.”

“All part of the chase,” the large man replied. “Soon enough it will slip up and leave us a sign or- Ah Lyr's back.”

Lamarchen had been quite impressed by duke Lyr's steed, a large bronze automaton in the shape of a horse. While not very lifelike, the machine made up for it by being tireless. Often while the others had been resting their mounts Lyr had been scouting ahead, now he seemed exited.

“There's a peasant a few miles ahead,” he called, “they may have seen something. The Party journeyed on and soon saw for themselves. The man was on the short side with skin burned a deep brown by the sun. He was wearing

nothing but a green tunic crafted from leaves, more leaves and twigs were arranged in his hair. In the mans left hand, he carried a walking stick.

Not a peasant, thought Lamarchen, a member of the threefold. A strange race, the tree-folk belonged to no kingdom, but instead lived in much of the wilderness between towns. These people treated leaves with some unknown process to make them durable and then sewed the result into clothing. The race mostly kept to themselves, but occasionally you might see a few passing through a town on their way to some other piece of wilderness.

“Hail good tree-folk,” prince Alden called, “Have you seen a massive Boar around these parts?”

“Oh yes armoured ones,” the leaf clothed man said in his strange singsong accent. “Tusked one knocked over tree near our home. We decided it was a good time to visit cousins to the south. Many strange things on the wind these days,” he added, “tree snakes are breeding, moon mantas fly closer to the ground. Perhaps earth is waking up?”

“Yes well....” Prince Alden sputtered “We intend to kill the Animal, if you tell us where you saw it you'll soon be able to return home.”

The man cocked his head to the side seeming to listen for something. “The wind says it’s resting near south end of Great forest. But no need to worry Armoured ones, the whole world is home. Our stead can easily be replaced. With that the tree folk said something else in his musical language and began to wander off to the south.

Upon consulting some maps, the hunters realized that they were less than a day from the great Gemwood forest. With nods, they hurried on. “What a queer people,” Lord Lamarchen said to himself. “Why haven't we put them to work or something?”

Math steered his horse beside Lamarchens. “Its fascinating really, whenever a nation tries to bring proper civilization to one of their steads, we simply can't find them. It has to be some form of magic, yet on peaceful visits theirs never any sign of crystals. On the other hand Tree-folk never do anything aggressive, so figuring the matter out is never really a priority.

Soon they arrived at the edge of the Great Gemwood Forrest. A noble named Musa asked for a rest at the edge. Some of the others could see signs of their prey and quickly agreed. While Math gave their weapons some short term enchantments and servants watered the horses Musa approached the tree's.

Lamarchen approached Musa as the man knelt at the edge of the forest. He watched as he removed a few coins from his belt poach, mouthing words as he laid some copper coins in the grass. "What are you doing," he asked.

"I am making an offering to the forest gods, so that they will bless our hunt."

That is just an old superstition, rocks and tree's don't have spirits. Nobody believes in that nonsense anymore.

"They believe in us," Musa replied, "That is enough."

.....

Leaving their servants behind, the nobles ventured into the vast forest, its ancient tree's towering overhead with plenty of space for horses between their trunks. Tree snakes flew between branches in search of birds and the world took on a faint green tinge from the light filtering through the canopy far above.

Before an hour had passed, the party came across a large clearing with their prey sunning itself in the center. The mighty Boar lay on his side, pure white coat spotless and its large tusks shining in the sun. The beast was even larger then the stories said. Eirwyn climbed to his feet and regarded his hunters with unnaturally intelligent eyes.

Rolf sent his hawks soaring to blind it, but with one quick bite Eirwyn snapped them up. The boar stepped forward menacingly, but Math road to the front clutching a crystal, he quickly drew a sigil in the air. Eirwyns eyes widened, filled with a terrible fear. The beast wheeled around and fled to the north. "After it," cried Tapio and the hunters spurred their horses into hot pursuit.

Lamarchen drew his bow and fired shot after shot, but they all seemed to miss or glance off its tough hide. He saw some with Maths enchanted arrows who seemed to be having better luck, but none penetrated deep enough to bother the boar.

The beast turned to the west, with the hunters keeping pace, Lyrs automaton steed put on a burst of speed to cut it off, but Eirwyns shining tusks gored holes into its side. The mighty boar threw back its head, sending both duke and steed flying through the air, smashing hard against a tree.

This small delay cost Eirwyn dearly, as Nori threw a bola which wrapped around its hind legs, sending the animal tumbling to the ground. Eirwyn struggled and squealed, attempting to reach its bindings with its tusks. Seizing the opportunity Bran leaped from his horse and with all of his mighty strength, drove his spear through the boars right eye and deep into its brain.

With an awesome squeal, the white one thrashed, throwing its head back and forth in its death throws. One tusk slashed deep into Brans arm, as he leaped back. Soon with a final shudder, Eirwyn died. While servants arrived to check on Duke Lyrs injuries, the other hunters gathered around the corpse. They stared in awe, "Truly," breathed Musa, "Eirwyn was like no other beast.

Tapio gave Bran a low bow, "To the victor goes the spoils, the head is yours."

Bran grimaced in pain, clutching his arm. "Thanks, but lets leave the butchering till we're back at the castle. I want people to see us lug it back." His eyes drifted back to the corpse, "why did it run, this creature could have killed us all?"

"A simple fear spell," Math said, "I suspected that such a monster would never have felt the emotion and wouldn't be able to handle it. Nori, what enchantment did you use on that rope, its strength would have broken my strongest.

Nori finished collecting his bola. "Actually its made of woven metal, something I've been working on and even this nearly wasn't string enough." He stopped short and ran to examine the boars head. "Everyone come look at this, these tusks are made of steel!"

"Are you sure," asked Lamarchen.

"Yes and its the finest I've ever seen! No wonder it was able to gore Lyrs metal steed.

“Milords,” a servant said timidly. “Lord Lyr is in a bad way, I don’t suppose any of you gentle folk have some magic.”

Math rushed to tend to Lyr and the rest of the hunters decided that there was as good as any place to camp for the night.

.....

That night Lord Lamarchen found himself running through a forest that seemed much older and darker then the Gemwood. Behind him wolves. Behind him wolves howled and before him deer fled. After what seemed like hours the lord found himself in a clearing, the deer vanished before his eyes and the sound of wolves faded like it had never been.

He collapsed onto a tree stump utterly exhausted, as he panted there was a ruffling and a young boy dressed only in a loing cloth stepped out of the bushes. He could not have been older then elven, fair skin, nut brown hair and soulfull blue eyes. The boy almost seemed to glow with good health and growing from the top of his head were a pair of deer antlers.

“Who- what are you?” Lamarchen gasped fumbling for his nonexistent weapon.

The boy smiled showing a set of razor sharp teeth. “I am the hunted and I am the hunter. All that are chased, and those who chase are my subjects.” A wolf and a deer apeared on either side of him and the horned boy patted them absent mindedly.

“What are you talk- No! I’m dreaming, I must be!”

“Of course you are, but why would that make this less real? I have come to you because you are truly a relentless hunter. You will never give up until you are successful, and so I give to you this boon: You will always find what you seek, however it will be up to you to catch it.”

With that pronouncement, the antlered boy and his two companions darted off back into the bushes, disappearing unnaturally fast.

.....

Lord Lamarchen found himself being roughly shaken awake by Bran. "Your gonna want to see this," the big man said, temporarily driving away all memory of the strange dream.

His Lordship climbed blearily out of his bedroll and studied the camp, a few servants seemed to be trying to wake up unconscious lookouts, but most of them, along with the bards and nobles seemed to be standing around the corpse of the steel tusked boar.

Lamarchen pushed through the crowd to stand at the front with his peers. Somebody had carved through thick hide of Eirwyns underbelly and carefully cut out its heart. He ground his teeth to see, placed carefully atop the bloody grass was a pair of dice with the two ones facing up, snake eyes.

.....

A month and a half later and few hundred miles away, Melody strolled to the heart of a different forest. She whistled a song which she'd allowed to catch up with her, What a story! A hunt for the ages dispoiled, nobles from several countries humiliated, and the heart of a legend stolen! Truly a perfect story for 'The Legend of the Lady Mask!'

True a lot of the song spoke of the skill and courage of the hunters. Of Brans strength Maths spells, of Noris amazing rope, but what people really care about is the ending!

It was just a shame that this particular adventure wasn't one she'd chosen to go on." I was beginning to wonder if I'd have to find a way to kill that pig myself," she grumbled.

"We both know that that particular task would have been far beyond you dear one," said a sly voice. Your skills have been honed in a different direction.

Above Melody loomed a huge reptilian head, far bigger than Eirwyns whole body had been. "I would not have helped you if you'd tried that. The young woman broke eye contact and stared at the creatures long, sinuous neck which disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

"I've brought what you wanted," she said digging through her satchel and reaching beneath the false bottom. "The heart of the Steel Tusked Boar."

The Lady Mask held up the huge organ which had strangely not rotted. It glistened redly in the dim light, for a moment it almost looked like it might start beating again.

A long forked tongue reached down and plucked Eirwyn's heart out of her hands and with a tilt of the nightmare beast's head it was swallowed. "Your debt to me is paid, So what is the legendary Lady Mask going to do next?"

"Well... I've heard of a certain fair that's happening this autumn, maybe I'll take a look at that."

The beast chuckled, "Whatever you decide dear one, I'm sure it will be highly entertaining."

"Yes it will," Melody smirked. With a spring in her step and her shoulders light without the weight of her debt, she strolled back in the direction of the forest's edge.