

Chapter 1 – The Hunt

The stag bowed his head to drink from the loch. The arrow struck his right side, piercing his lung and heart. The beast bucked and threw its body back away from the water. It hit the pine needle floor, exhaled the last of the life from its body, and then lay still. Drudith Tilian crouched down to look into its eyes. He unsheathed his hunting knife and cut a line down the palm of his left hand, exactly where he had held the bow moments ago. The rush of pain caused the hairs on his body to stand on end. Dark red blood pooled in his palm. With a finger, he painted a red circle on the forehead of the fallen stag. The mark was part of the ritual. He said a quiet prayer for the animal and himself.

"Respect for the Circle, the seasons and balance in all things." Drudith was in the autumn of his life, but was still keen with a bow. What came next was the hard part. The stag was twice Drudith's weight. He now wore the deer on his back, a foreleg over each side of his head. By the time he had climbed up and out of the valley, his legs were spent, and his lungs worked like the smith's bellows. He bound the body to the simple sled waiting next to the trail.

The sled would make the journey home easier. Two lines were carved into the dirt track as the bulk of the deer weighed down on it. The cut in his left palm burned as he gripped the rope. The reminder was served.

The padded thud of hooves rose up over the scraping of the sled on the trail road. A horse pulled a cart level with him.

"Hail, Huntsman. A fine trophy you have made."

"Hail, Traveller. A gift from Druann himself to help see my kin through the winter. I felt his own eyes upon my arrow." Drudith smiled.

"Druann himself, you say? So you are a man of nature." The driver awkwardly climbed down from the seat and began to inspect the stag. He moved as if both feet had fallen asleep on the ride. His hands and arms also. He wore a long black coat and hat, which he did not remove upon greeting Drudith. His face bore the signs of some affliction; it was a ghastly grey and didn't move enough when he spoke. "I am also a man who appreciates nature. I enjoy the hunt. The kill." Drudith stopped smiling. "I have many stuffed and mounted beasts, but few as fine as this." The stranger gripped the antlers and posed the head, this way and that.

"I hunt because I must." Drudith's words were unheard as the stranger was lost in his thoughts of where to position such a trophy in his home.

"I would offer you five silver in exchange for the carcass." The traveller was already untying a small leather coin pouch from his belt.

"Your offer is fair, but I cannot accept." Drudith picked up the ropes of the sled.

"Business at the market has been good this week. I can see that you value your kill. Eight silver." Drudith slung the ropes over his shoulders and started to drag the heavy sled.

"Again, I must thank you for your generous offer, but I cannot sell my kill." The Trader stared intently at the back of Drudith's head.

"One Crown. One golden crown for the stag." The pain in Drudith's hand entered the negotiation. It begged him to empty the sled, and take the single coin for his pocket. A crown would mean fresh meat from the market every day instead of salt-cured. He focused his mind and remembered the reason for the Ritual.

"Again. No." This time he spoke flatly and plainly.

"Tell me, Noble hunter of Druann. What is your name?"

Drudith stopped. It was not polite to ask for a name. Not in these lands. A name is offered, not asked.

"You have no business with my name, nor I yours. Good day."

Drudith pushed his hand harder into the rope, using the pain to quicken his pace. After a few moments, he was alone again and settled back into a sustainable rhythm. He focused on his breathing and the breath of nature around him.

Thumping hooves once again rose up behind him. This time much faster. He turned to see the horse and cart being driven hard, directly at him. Drudith dropped the ropes before leaping out of the path of the cart. The wheels crushed one of the antlers into the ground, causing it to lever the skull of the animal up off the sled. The other antler caught in the spokes and twisted the body around. The driver laughed at the sight of the stag's legs flailing as the body was tumbled and slammed into the ground, over and over. A final rotation saw the stag fall loose. The Trader laughed as the cart disappeared down the trail.

Drudith hoisted the huge stag up to hang by its hind legs. It almost stretched the height of his shed. He surveyed the damage. The antlers were shattered and broken, one down to a stump. The hide was torn in places and scraped raw in others. He patted the beast on the hindquarters and sighed as he turned away. The cold night would chill the meat for him to butcher in the morning.

His son was asleep by the time Drudith entered the cabin. He cleaned his hands in the kitchen sink. Then tore a hunk of bread. He chewed the tough crust while staring out of the small window into the night. The events of the day played over in his mind. Picking up the trail of the stag at first light. Tracking him all day, over miles of untamed forest. Finally, finding him next to the loch in the last good light of the day. Druann's blessing. The moment between loosing the arrow, and it finding its mark lasted forever. The twitch of the stag's ear as it turned to look at him. No. That's not right. That's not what happened today. The animal was completely unaware of his presence this morning. Drudith shook his head and focused on what he had been staring at. He had left a lamp lit in his work shed. It cast a warm orange glow, which the roughly hewn wood of the work shed failed to contain. He made a note to seal the wood with tar before the first snow.

As Drudith walked across the yard, He felt the first chill of winter in the air. "It's not the cold from the mountain which kills you; it's what follows." His old granny would say. The mountain range was a featureless sheet of black on this moonless night. Winds from the west came down over the snowy peaks, which brought the cold down into the towns. She was right. What followed the freezing cold was gnawing hunger as the stores ran empty. Frozen ground too hard to dig up the winter vegetables. Frozen Lochs make it difficult to fish—livestock dying off as grass was frozen. "Don't be tempted by the warm waters on a cold night". Drudith would have welcomed a warm bath after the day's hunt. But he heeded his granny's words and saved the firewood. He washed up in the sink and went to bed.

Drudith and his son ate large bowls of porridge for breakfast.

"What work is there for me today, father?" Osgar asked.

Drudith smiled and then looked up.

"There is a fence which needs mending, north, out by the brox dens. I imagine they dug at one of the posts and pushed it over. The rabbiting is good up there, so set up snares."

Osgar loved the brox despite all the problems they caused around the farm. He pictured their white and black striped faces and giant paws.

Many generations ago the brox were badgers. They were favoured by the god of strength, Neart, when he walked the lands. Upon his return to the pantheon, he left behind his hand wraps. He had taken them off to stroke the badger's coarse fur. The badgers chewed and ate them. For generations, every litter of badger was larger and stronger than the next. They were more curious than intelligent, and it was this curiosity which caused them to dig and chew at everything they touched. They had paws like a bear, and almost as much bulk, which they used to dig huge sprawling tunnels called 'deep sets'. With the strength of Neart, they had been known to push large boulders out of their homes. Osgar saw a deep set entrance once, which looked like it had a fortified wall protecting it. So great was the volume of stone which had been excavated.

"Take a dirk from my work shed, and sharpen it with oil on the whetstone. Make sure it is keen, and your eyes more so." Drudith said.

"But, brox are rarely seen in the day, and most are placid. Only looking for orc beetles and grubs."

"Aye, that is the truth, but it's not just hungry brox and mad goats you need to look out for. I had a run-in with a stranger on the trail home last night. He almost ran me over with his cart. I can't place it, but I get a sick feeling about him."

"Did he not see you on the trail? Was it dark?"

"He saw me. There was no moon, but we exchanged words before I found myself face down in the earth"

"Did you argue?"

"No, he wanted to buy the stag. I refused his offer."

"You finally caught it. May I see it?" Osgar's face lit up with excitement. He was already up off of his stool.

"Finish up your breakfast, and you can pay your respects."

Drudith felt a sadness for the animal. Such a proud beast now hung, broken, and torn.

"What happened to his antlers?"

"That stranger took his cart right over the top of them. Ruined. They were magnificent."

Drudith heaved the stag onto the thick heavy workbench. He ran his hands across its hide and noted the faults. None of them were too bad to be repaired. A patched-up skin isn't worth nearly as much as a pristine one. Drudith always had to repair one hole. He traced his fingers over the small circle of dried blood from the arrow wound in the stag's side, through the lung, straight into the heart. It was the kindest way. The heart was a small target, but the lungs were large. If he missed his mark, the animal would bleed out in a few seconds. If his shot were true it would be almost instant. He'd known hunters who would shoot for the heart from head-on, in an attempt to leave a hole in the pelt which could easily be cut away during tanning. He'd also seen stags brought through the town soaked in blood with an arrow in their throat.

Osgar ran his hands over the remains of the shattered antlers. He tried to imagine how glorious his bone crown would have been.

"Ouch!" Osgar recoiled his hand in pain. A splinter of broken antler had caught his finger. He watched the bright red bead form and slowly roll down his skin.

He traced the circle of blood on the stag's forehead with his finger.

"Respect for The Circle and The Balance of all things."

He looked to his father for approval.

"Good lad."