

## Excuses, Apologies, and Regrets

We sat down for our supper. It was always quiet the night before a hunt. Yllane was kneeling over the pot, filling bowls with a mix of carrots and beans. Her hair was tucked behind her ear, revealing her face's soft skin glowing warm against the heat of the embers. I passed the bowl to my right, over Dani's empty spot to my daughter, Noren. She accepted it and carefully rested it in front of her little sister. A soft smile tensed my face as I turned to meet Yllane's gleaming eyes, they were proud but tired.

As we ate, I couldn't help but guess at what Yllane was thinking of, what the whole village was thinking. Three hunts had gone by and we had come home empty handed every time. We needed to bring back food, but the men were exhausted. Ellio, our marksman, was having an especially hard time. It was no secret; his age was starting to show. At first it was just little things, like falling behind during long hikes and stopping to set his equipment down. Recently, however, it had gotten worse, his balance began to fail him. We needed a new marksman.

After supper, I pulled on my furs and left for the village center, a large clearing enclosed by the thick log walls and thatch roofs of our homes. As I approached, the silhouettes of the other two hunters eclipsed the roaring bonfire, their shadows dancing on the dry ground. Puffs of white floated from their heads, they were speaking with someone. When I reached the flames, the face peering over the tips caught me by surprise. Narrow jaw, long face, red hair. It was the boy Sid, his young green eyes glimmered against the bonfire's flames.

"Jako, let me come on this next hunt. I am ready and you need the help." Irritation swelled in me before I had time to understand why. My fellow hunters, Jan and Ellio, observed silently.

“No,” I snapped, “I will not risk the lives of the other hunters because a boy tells me he thinks he is ready.”

“Even Ellio has given me his blessing!” Sid countered, “Maybe he hasn’t said anything to you but he has been very clear with me”

Ellio broke in, “Jako, I could really use the good night’s rest. The hikes are getting-”

“I know,” I interrupted, “it’s been hard on all of us. But we have been through worse. I need the best we’ve got and you are it. That is my final decision.”

Sid flung his arms out at Ellio, exasperation consumed his face. Ellio’s eyes flickered towards me, “Jako, I know it’s hard to talk about and we are all still grieving Dani, but you can’t let what happened to him risk the wellbeing of –“

“Don’t”

“I only want what is best for-“

“Enough!” I demanded. “I have made my decision. Get some rest, we need to leave before sunrise this time if we want to beat the elk to the feeding grounds, we are hiking up the mountain valley tomorrow.” And with that I turned before any more discussion could arise.

The argument followed me all the way back home. My thoughts flashed to Dani, to the hunt that I should have never let happen. To the lifeless look in his green eyes, the same green eyes I saw in Sid. It wasn’t until I was home and saw Yllane and the girls, wrapped in thick furs on the ground next to the refueled fire, that I snapped back into reality. I pulled the furs that had slipped back over Noren and then settled into my own. Sleep did not come easy, old memories have a way of getting in the way of peaceful rest.

The Night Watch's, whistle woke me. My stirring woke Yllane. With her eyes still peacefully shut she whispered, "The spirits will bless you today," she clasped my arm, opening her eyes, "just come back safe."

Ellio was waiting at the center, sitting on one of the bonfire's log benches, his bow resting by his side and his quiver strapped over his shoulder. He wore the thick fur pelt of a wolf around his shoulders, long brown hide pants covered his legs. He was massaging his right hand as I walked up. "Where is Jan?" I asked.

"I haven't seen him."

As fast as Jan was in the hunt, he was always slow in the mornings. Every time my respect for Jan grew he found a small way to make me doubt his discipline. I took a seat next to Ellio, I was giving Jan a few minutes before marching over to his home myself.

I broke the silence "I'm sorry about the way I handled myself last night."

Ellio glanced up at me, and then returned his gaze at the ground. The silence seeped back in. "I can't keep hunting forever. You know this."

"I know."

"The boy is good with the bow," he continued "I have helped him improve."

"He is still young."

"No younger than you were on your first hunt." Ellio paused, stopping himself from whatever he was going to say next. He returned his gaze to me, "We have been hunting together for twelve years, and I hunted with your father for fifteen more years before that. So believe me

when I say I would like nothing more than to continue hunting for the rest of my life. But I am no longer helping and you know that. You need a new marksman.”

I met his eyes. I was fighting myself to come up with an excuse to stop the discussion when a voice behind me made me jump. “Apologies.” Jan had appeared next to me. That man can be as silent as a fox when he wants to be. Silently thanking him for the excuse, I got to my feet “Let’s go then, the sun will be up soon.”

Our usual hunting grounds had failed us the first two hunts. Last morning, we tried going further upstream to see if we could catch any elk who had fallen behind during the migration. There were none left. We needed to go up the mountain if we wanted to find any who had taken shelter from the icy winds.

The hike proved more taxing than I had hoped. I lead the group, Jan behind me, and Ellio behind him. The rocky cliffs made it so that we needed to lift each other over the boulders. The icy coating didn’t help make them any easier to climb. First Jan would hoist me atop one of the rocks, and then I would help pull the other two up. We had Ellio go second so that Jan could hoist him while I pulled.

We made it to a clearing as the sun reached its midday high. We sheltered on an overlook, with a great view of the valley beneath.

“There they are!” Jan hissed as loud as he dared.

And there they were, two fat elk feeding on the few patches of grass that remained on the valley floor, the rest was bare ground and clumps of snow and dotted the landscape. Jan and I locked eyes and gave a quick nod. He broke off and silently descended the left side of the overlook. I placed my hand on Ellio’s shoulder, there was a gleam in his calm eyes. “Let’s bring

these two home.” I said. He nodded back and with that I began descending the right side of the overlook. I was almost at the base when my left foot slid from under me. I caught myself on the slope looking up to make sure the elk hadn’t been startled. They weren’t.

Jan covered the valley’s northern exit, I covered the southern exit. When both of us were in position, I made a hand motion to Ellio and waited. I was close enough to see the white frost clouds coming from the elk’s muzzle. A few silent moments passed. The whistle of the arrow whisked overhead and ended with a *thunk* as it sunk into the elk’s hind leg. He got it!

The elk stumbled back a few paces, its head snapped back as it let out a chilling screech, its legs began to run out of pure instinct. Jan and I rushed in from either side as the injured beast darted towards me. I lanced my spear into the its neck, but even as it collapsed to the floor, I felt all my excitement drain out of me when the coarse howls of wolves echoed across the mountain sides. I looked up to see Jan freeze, the side of his head tilted towards the sky. The second elk escaped up the valley hill behind him.

The chorus of howls continued to reverberate around us as Jan and I trotted up to our kill. We needed to get out of here as fast as possible, which meant going down the valley path. I turned to Ellio, signaling him to come down. With a wave, I saw him swing the bow over his head. I pulled the bloodied weapons out of the carcass and then hoisted it up by its front legs and Jan caught the hind legs. We had begun to rush down the valley path when Ellio’s scream froze me. Jan dropped the dead elk and ran towards the base of the overlook, the carcass’ weight twisted me around. “Jako, come back!”

Jan was huddled over the body when I caught up. Ellio had landed with the side of his head on a solid rock. Blood streamed down the side of his head and he had no pulse. I still can’t

explain, even to myself, what was going through my head. I felt no grief, no trauma or panic. Jan and I needed to get out of there, the howls were getting closer and growing in number.

Jan's composure was in a much worse state than mine. I hoisted Ellio's body on my shoulders and pulled Jan onto his feet. We descended the valley path, taking turns carrying Ellio. I hesitated when we reached the elk, its carcass lay twisted on the patchy ground. We wouldn't be able to scale the icy rocks with two extra bodies. The elk would hold the wolves off, giving us time to get Ellio home. We kept moving.

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Sid waited by the bonfire. He looked at me then behind to Jan who was now carrying the body over his shoulder. "You got something!" He exclaimed, rushing up to us. His grin evaporated when I did not return the enthusiasm, his gaze settling on Ellio's bow which I held with tight fists. "Where is Ellio?"

I met his green eyes, they held a mix of confusion and alarm. My mind was overloaded excuses, apologies, and regrets but I couldn't form them into responses. A small crowd began to gather as Jan lay Ellio's body over a log by the bonfire. I watched Yllane catch Tuli, Ellio's wife, as she collapsed over the body, wailing. Her cries pierced my ears and mind like the gusts of winter winds, sharp and unrelenting. I couldn't stay here, I felt my legs begin to crumple beneath me. I broke my haze and stumbled back behind the houses.

*Not in front of the village*, I told myself. Holding my composure did not come easily. A bubble of pain began swelling up at the bottom of my throat, threatening to break my mask of stability. I collapsed into the back of a storage barn, pent up grief releasing all at once. Ellio was gone and it was my fault. I cried for Ellio and I cried for Dani.

Strange thoughts go through a man's head when everything he has ever worked towards comes crashing down around him. I wanted to pass the torch so badly at that point. Rid myself of responsibility and let someone else lead the hunts.

I had failed. We had no room for failure and yet I had failed.

Ellio's bow rested on my lap. I ran my fingers along the wood, beautiful carved patterns decorated the length of it. Hidden within these patterns I found words. The first to catch my eyes were my father's name, and then further down the bow, past the names of other hunters, was Dani's.

I don't know how long I sat there, tracing Dani's name with my thumb. His green eyes invaded my thoughts again, and with them the same green eyes in Sid. This was my fault. I shouldn't have forced Ellio into the hunt. I tried to protect Sid's life but I just ended up taking Ellio's. I should have listened, I should have accepted Sid.

Yllane's touch woke me from my trance. Wordlessly, we made our way back to the center.

The village was gathered around the bonfire as Yllane and I walked up. Jan was speaking, explaining the events to a solemn crowd. I was ready for my trial. I wanted to be accused; To be yelled at. But there was no anger in the peoples' eyes, only grief.

As the crowd dispersed, Tuli embraced me. "Don't blame yourself" she said. "He loved you like a son."

Eduardo Gorinstein

I found Sid. There was a moment while I tried to find the right words. I raised Ellio's bow, extending it out towards him. He accepted it, staring down at it wide mournful eyes. "Let's go bring a kill home."