

Excerpt

All Castor's traps were empty. They weren't simply untouched; they were ruined. Torn out, damaged, snares released. One of them had a branch stuck in it, another, an old bone. One of them had obviously caught a rabbit—Castor noticed that there were some droppings nearby—but the string had been carefully grated or maybe chewed through. Just the last snare was still unsprung, with a carefully placed pile of dung for bait.

Castor balled his fists helplessly. It was the elves. They couldn't touch Castor, but apparently took a lot of pleasure in messing with him. Even though he took care of Mouse, who was practically an elf. And he'd never hunted more than they could eat. If the snares had caught several rabbits, Castor had kept only one or two. But now, the elves wouldn't let him hunt in peace. For them, he was worse than any beast of the forest, worse than a fox or a wolf, or a bear. Perhaps they knew what he'd be called now: Faulty Arrow, Empty Trap, Unlucky Pit. A hunter who couldn't take care of himself and his people.

Castor forced himself to calm down and put an arrow on the string of his bow so that he'd be ready as soon as he noticed any prey. The anger stayed deep in his chest, a roiling ball of fire, but his hands were calm and cool, and his eyes sharp to penetrate any shadow. There was no prey. The rabbits were hiding in their holes, the birds stayed high in the treetops. Castor considered shooting anyway, if only to vent his anger, but realized that he mustn't. He'd most likely just lose another arrow.

His string of misfortunes likely meant that he wouldn't be able to find an arrow he shot, or maybe it would tangle in the branches, refusing to fall down. So he trod carefully, checking the ground under his feet at every step, noticing dry branches. He even walked where there was wet moss to be even quieter. "You cannot guide luck,"

Sorrow Bear had told him once, “but you can guide your actions.” And Castor found a strange comfort in this. Even though everything went wrong, he was still hunting right. If there was any animal at all, he’d find it sooner or later. By any means, even if he’d have to spend half of the day holding his breath.

Today, his string of bad luck had to end. And it did end. He stopped even before seeing it. Stopped when he felt somebody’s presence, somebody’s gaze. Unmoving, Castor looked around. And there it was. To the far left, in the bushes, completely calm. A stag. Up till now, Castor had noticed only rabbits and birds, and a fox or two, but that was understandable. He hadn’t been looking for anything larger. Rabbits were enough. But there, a stag was standing. Castor evaluated its height and slowly blew out his breath. It was the largest one he’d ever seen. Majestic. It could feed a whole tribe for a long time. Without thinking, Castor moved toward the deer, step by step. Slowly enough for the stag not to notice, but not too slowly, since the animal could decide to bolt any time.

The deer moved. Castor froze, convinced that the prey would run away. But, instead, it advanced, deliberately placing his slender legs. Castor counted the steps. Just a few more, and the stag would be within shooting range. Just a few more, and an arrow would pierce his skin and strike his heart. If only Castor could manage a precise shot.

Slowly, very slowly, Castor raised the bow. The stag looked straight into his eyes, and then bowed his head as if looking away. His enormous antlers moved the foliage of an oak tree, which rustled and whispered, leaves sliding through the rich branches of the horns. How old was this deer? Was he the leader of his herd? How many children had it had, and what was his name? Suddenly Castor realized that

animals this grand must have names that cannot be pronounced either by humans or elves.

The deer took another step and raised his head again. Just a bit more. Why are you coming here? Castor wondered. Go away, stupid deer, you're coming within range of my arrow, and you know—no, perhaps you don't—that it is a certain death. How much did the stag know? How much reason shone in these large brown eyes? Castor didn't know, and he didn't let himself think about it.

True hunters can shoot a stag. Even one like this, large and beautiful and proud. They do it to feed their tribe, to avoid shaming their name. Castor's hand didn't shake, and the arrow lay on the string, straight and firm. The stag took the last step. Castor aimed at his heart, slowly let out his breath and, in between two heartbeats, let the arrow go.

[End]