

Duel

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Long before pistols and rifles, the main missile weapon was the bow and arrow.

Duels between two warriors were usually carried out with swords and daggers.

Archers rarely had that opportunity.

In this story, however, they duel in an unusual fashion.

Mya crept through the undergrowth. She passed by the fallen limbs, stepping quietly through the dried leaves. It wasn't difficult to do once you knew how. Her father had taught her years before that melding into the forest allowed you to move unhampered and to find the game where it lay. The stubby bow she carried was slung over her left shoulder and the quiver strapped to her left hip. Each arrow was firmly embedded in it and none made a sound as she crept through the underbrush.

Brushing long locks of black hair from her eyes, Mya smelled the doe before she could see her. If she were down here in the valley, then the buck would be on the high ground. Since Mya was here for meat, it really didn't matter to her which one she found.

Only the meat mattered. Her pace slowed, maintaining her downwind position in relation to the doe. Her scent was masked but she took no chances. Once she caught sight of the doe, but the shot would not have been clean. Moving closer, she edged to the limits of the thick brush. The doe stood amid the clearing, sniffing the moss-covered ground for roots and fallen nuts. For a long moment Mya watched the doe graze.

Suddenly the head of the doe snapped upwards. It looked to Mya's left and then to her right. As Mya watched, a blue fletched arrow went streaking past the doe. Missed. Mya chuckled to herself, knowing first hand of the hunter's annoyance. The doe, startled, began bounding away, disappearing into the thick brush that surrounded the clearing. Mya stood and skirted the clearing, looking for the lost arrow. She had to be cautious, she did not want to become the hunter's new target. She unslung her bow and notched an arrow, just in case.

Hearing a moaning sound, she increased her pace, finding a man propped up against a wizened old tree. A blue fletched arrow protruded from his left side. The way he wheezed when he gasped for breath told her that his lung had been punctured and was rapidly filling with blood. A dark patch was swiftly expanding around the wound. He looked up at her, his eyes pleading.

"Please, help me," he gargled. Blood flecked his chin as he spoke. "I have money..."

The sound of an arrow traveling through air is very distinctive. Mya spun to her right, watching, almost in slow motion, the arrow travel past her and into the wounded man. He now sported a second arrow, this one centered in his chest. He whimpered with finality as Mya crouched down. She looked back towards the way the arrow had come, seeing the figure standing a short distance away. The form was that of a woman, dressed all in black leather. Her long black hair was braided and hung down over her shoulder. Her blue eyes provided the only color on her body. Another arrow was already notched in her bow which she held by her waist. Mya knew the woman was one of the assassins employed by the merchants in Jarinthia. The silver sigil on her left shoulder confirmed Mya's suspicions.

Mya froze, trying to determine what the assassin's next move would be. "What did he do?" she asked from where she squatted. She was waiting for the moment to move and disappear.

"Does it matter?" The voice was cold, making Mya wish she hadn't spoken at all. The pause was interminable. Nothing more was said. Seconds ticked by as both women stared each other down.

Mya barely sensed her beginning telltale movement in time. Mya was quicker on the draw, pulling back her string and letting fly from her crouched position. The assassin's arm holding the bow rose up and in one motion she drew and fired her arrow as she dodging Mya's loosed projectile. Mya was already moving, spinning upward and pushing off with her foot. The assassin's arrow skirted her upper leg, cutting through the thick leather hide of her britches before continuing on through the underbrush. Mya tried to grab another arrow from her hip as she tumbled through the underbrush. She heard the swish of another arrow and changed her course.

Dashing through the forest, she crossed a clearing knowing an arrow would be coming. Sensing it, she threw herself to the side, feeling it carve a deep furrow across her lower back. Mya cried out and fell onto the moss-covered ground. Her arrows scattered around her as the quiver emptied. Grabbing a pair of the fallen projectiles, Mya forced herself to ignore the pain and wetness creeping down her back as she crawled into the undergrowth. She kept moving, her bow in her left hand and her only defense in her right.

Stopping, Mya notched an arrow and lay down propping her bleeding back onto a tree. She was now facing the blood trail that she was sure she had left. Calming her breathing, she quieted herself. The forest was quiet. She was sure to come to finish the job. Assassins never left witnesses. They would pursue until their quarry was eliminated.

Time passed and the forest resumed its natural sounds. All around her the birds began to sing again and she smelled another deer approaching. The scent of blood would keep them from her. A subtle and faint rustling sound wafted up behind her. For a moment, Mya believed the assassin had somehow gotten behind her. She arched her head back, seeing the upside down image of a well-endowed buck sniffing the air a short

distance behind. The buck lowered its head and took a step, crackling a branch. A half second later an arrow plunged through the neck of the buck. Mya turned her eyes back to where the arrow had come, seeing the assassin standing just a short distance away next to a mature oak. Mya heard the buck begin its panicked dash through the forest.

Mya watched the assassin's lips form a profanity as Mya drew back her arrow from where she lay. The bow was held sideways and Mya knew she had her. She released the arrow, watching it streak towards the assassin. The assassin sensed the arrow, but the distance was too short. She turned her body to dodge, but the arrow found its mark. It embedded deeply into the assassin's left chest, piercing her breast and through the ribcage. She fell back against the tree.

Mya had the second arrow in the air before the first one had struck. The second also found its target, penetrating through her body and embedding into the tree. The assassin grunted in pain and her bow fell from her hands. She was no longer able to hold the weapon, much less use it.

Mya painfully stood, glancing down at the pool of blood she lay in. The wound was superficial, unlike the near mortal ones she inflicted on the assassin. She approached the dying assassin cautiously, picking up another of her fallen arrows and notching it in her bow. Her hands were wet with her own blood. She drew the arrow back aiming it at the assassin's head.

She debated just leaving the assassin alive, Mya hated killing unless it was for food. The assassin could possibly survive if she found help quickly. A mage could likely save her, if one could be located. The assassin stared up at her coldly. Not a flicker of remorse, only anger and hate. Mya could almost see the fires of abhorrence flickering in her eyes. She was unsure of what to do.

Her bloodied fingers slipped on bowstring and her choice was made for her. Moments later, after overcoming the shock of her brutal and unexpected mistake, Mya walked away to begin to track down the buck.