

## Falling Short



**R**YANN WAS SURE if they took a vote, no one but Carwyn would choose to go to Myraddin. The previous evening, they had relayed stories of the past two years. The Chosen had traveled throughout all the known lands of Aeliana. Some citizens had welcomed them, while others viewed them as crazy hooligans, ignoring anything they had to say. It was apparent to Ryann that Garnock, Ireth, and the bulls struggled with Carwyn's teachings of tolerance, while Sorcha, Adain, and Rowan admired that about him. Sorcha was adamant no one in Aeliana could teach the way Carwyn did. The sage dragon, who had lived so much longer than any of them, was unable to counter the unicorn's discernment and new way of looking at things. These new ideas he brought up, seemingly out of nowhere, were what caused ongoing debate among them. They did seem to be united around the miraculous wonders Carwyn performed.

Ryann stumbled on the narrow path as they descended from one of the foothills in the shadows of the Marrow Mountains to the grassy plain below. With Liddy in front of him and Terell behind, they peppered him with questions concerning his meeting with Carwyn prior to breaking camp.

"Why do you think you were completely dry when you returned, despite being in a waterfall?" Liddy asked.

"For the third time, I don't know." Ryann rolled his eyes. "One minute I found it hard to keep my balance because of the amount of

water pouring over me, and the next I was walking alongside Carwyn completely dry.”

“I’d be trippin’ out if that happened to me,” Terell said.

Ryann held his nose and blew gently to clear his ears as they descended to the rich green grass of the valley plains. “I’m ready to walk on flat ground.”

“Yeah, it’s easier to talk walking side by side,” Liddy said.

Walking next to one other, they navigated a short rise, which took them between two massive boulders spread about ten feet apart. The sound of galloping hooves approaching took them by surprise.

Ryann pointed in front of them as they passed through the boulders. “Look.”

Two fauns raced back and forth across the plain, so focused on what they were doing that they hadn’t noticed the large party moving up on them. A few steps later, the surprise was gone. The two stopped to study the intruders.

Terell provided his own commentary. “Look! They’re shootin’ arrows.”

“Sheesh,” Liddy chided him. “We call that archery, genius!”

The half-human, half-goat creatures closed the short distance between them in a frenzied gallop. Eager smiles adorned their faces as they came to an abrupt stop in front of Carwyn and Adain. The rest of the Chosen bunched into a small crowd as they caught up to their leader. Turning away from their new acquaintances, Carwyn announced, “I would like everyone to meet Jasper and Jett, two young brothers who appear to be engaging in a little competition today.”

A mixture of hellos and “nice to meet you’s” were followed by Jett responding to Carwyn’s statement with a broad grin. “It’s actually not much of a competition, but we’ll call it that for the sake of argument.”

“I like him,” Terell whispered to Liddy and Ryann.

“You would,” Liddy snipped back.

Both of the fauns had bows slung over their shoulders and across their backs. In the distance, a bold target painted on a large hay-stuffed sack sat like a little island in a sea of green. “Would you mind a small audience?” Carwyn asked.

“Ha! We don’t mind. Do we, Jasper?”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” Jasper mimicked his brother’s enthusiastic voice. “Jett’s the archery champ in these parts, so a little exhibition should suit his ego just fine.”

The Chosen gathered in a semi-circle behind Jasper as Jett raced out to position the target in front of them. Jasper pointed toward his brother, who was arranging the burlap sack, and explained the rules. “The red outer circle is worth one point; the inner white circle counts for three points; and if you hit the black spot in the middle, you get five points.”

“Sprit,” Ireth said.

“That’s right,” Jasper spoke to her. “The game is called *sprit*, and whoever scores the most points with three arrows wins. Have you played before?”

“A time or two,” Ireth answered with no hint of emotion.

“Yeh, don’t let her fool ya,” Garnock said. “Elves are raised with a bow in their hand.”

Jett galloped up with a broad grin on his face. “Ready to go, brother?”

“Looks like you have some competition today,” Jasper replied.

Jett looked his brother up and down. “What?” he sneered. “Did you get a quick lesson from someone while I was settin’ up the target?”

“My brother, your humility is only surpassed by your quick wit.”