

## **Battle With A Butengram**

By Kirstie Olley

Hayd followed Even, placing his feet just as the young monster hunter had taught him. He kept his eyes on everything, looking for signs of prey, his bow half drawn just like Even's.

Even moved like a spirit, ghosting through the wood with silence and speed that belonged more to a Shain than to a human. He stopped, feet well grounded and raised his bow, aiming for something Hayd couldn't see yet.

Hayd stepped forward to try and see what Even was aiming at. Whatever the creature was, it was unlikely to be a bird from the way Even was aiming at roughly his own shoulder height.

A twig snapped underfoot as Hayd shifted his weight to his toes and sighted the deer.

The deer's head jerked up, large dark eyes looking straight at where Hayd stood. He tried to freeze so the deer might think he was merely an unusual tree. The deer clearly possessed more intelligence than that, because in the next instant it bounded off into the bushes.

"Well Light-foot." Drawled Even. "There goes probably the best meal we would have enjoyed between here and Elta Capa."

"I'm sorry." Hayd let his shoulders slump.

Even's head snapped up and turned slightly, his eyes staring into the bushes beyond Hayd. There was more than a passing resemblance between Even and the deer.

"Get up the tree now." Even whispered.

"Huh?"

"Tree. Climb, now!" Still a whisper but the urgency twice as powerful.

Hayd still didn't understand, but he grabbed the low hanging branches of a camphor and swung up, clambering up another branch as Even sprang up after him.

As usual Even was quick, quiet and agile, several branches above him in moments. Even paused, seated carefully in the fork of a branch, re-nocked his arrow and drew the bow, aiming for the ground.

Hayd looked down and saw nothing.

A snuffling noise, thick, bordering on a growl announced the beast. A long hog's nose wriggled, scenting the grass. The bulky beast held its hairy weight low to the ground, six legs keeping its belly from sliding along the grass.

Upon reaching where Hayd and Even had stood only moments before it sniffed with extra enthusiasm and looked about from side to side, the rolls of fat on its neck limiting its movement. It sniffed again, slower, as if savouring the scent. It snuffled along the ground

nearby, searching for the continuation of the scent, unable to understand where this captivating new scent had vanished to. It looked about again, grunting all the while. It tried to lift its head, but was incapable of looking directly above itself, where the prey it wanted hid. Hayd breathed a sigh of relief as quietly as he could.

The creature snuffled the air, such deep breaths they sounded like a reverse snarl. A bird in a nearby tree took flight startled by the noise. The sound of flight snatched the beast's attention only momentarily, it drew in more breaths and stumped its way over to the tree trunk.

Snuffle-snuff. It sniffed the bark, the end of its nose bumping chunks away. It had the scent. Ponderously it lifted its forelegs onto the trunk, propping its body so its beady dark eyes, all six of them, could catch sight of the tasty morsels in the tree.

The beast's cry was like a horse's whinny, but thick with malice. The long sniffing snout opened like the maw of a crocodile, bristling with fangs.

A cry tore itself from Hayd's chest and his muscles stiffened throughout his body.

Even showed no such tremors. He fired the drawn arrow down, but missed the goal of the soft interior of the mouth. Instead the arrow head drew blood in a nasty gash along the beast's cheek. It shrieked, the noise horrendously like a woman's cry. Thick, bristly brows wriggled and set low. Even swore.

"What is that?!" Hayd wished he didn't sound quite so high pitched.

"Butengram. Female by the looks, which means we're for it if we can't kill her." Even was already nocking another arrow and aiming at the whinnying beast below. "In fact, the way butengram feed they're a danger to their own environment. I'm surprised there was a deer left around for you to startle."

The arrow flew, sinking into one of the butengram's eyes.

She reared, shrieking that human scream again. Even drew another arrow from his quiver, shifting his weight as he did so, wrapping his legs tight around the branches of his fork perch.

"Hold on." Even advised, aiming with care and waiting for the thrashing to stop so he could gain a clear shot.

The butengram slammed its front hooves into the tree trunk. The whole tree shook with the fat beast's force. Hayd screamed again as he was jostled from his seating. His hands were scraped by the rough bark as he caught the branch that he, only an instant ago, had sat on. With great strength he kept his legs from hanging low, pulling them up and wrapping them around the branch as well. Through every inch of him he could feel his pulse pounding.

Though he did not see it he certainly felt another rear and stomp on the tree trunk. The wood splintered beneath the force of the hooves, the powerful scent of camphor rushed up and flooded his nostrils. There was also a reek of rotted meat, rising out of the gaping mouth of the beast below.

The world shook. At least to Hayd – hanging from the branch for dear life – it seemed to. He pulled himself close enough to the branch to feel the bark scratch his cheek.

A twang sounded, letting him know another arrow flew from Even's bow. Another horrid scream followed a thick, meaty thwump as the arrow sunk into its target.

Taking advantage of the small gap in the butengram's attack, Hayd swung back up to sit atop the branch.

Looking down at the butengram he felt his stomach clench. The beast weighed ten of him easily. Even's arrows, lined up closely along the eyes of the beast, did nothing to lessen the visual ferocity of teeth and hairy leather bulk.

Even swore from his perch above Hayd, and Hayd looked up. "I can't nock and draw fast enough to shoot inside its mouth."

"I can help."

"Your arrows are on the ground." Even pointed to the splintered remains beneath the butengram's hooves with his arrow head.

"I can borrow yours."

Even glanced to the quiver. "I only have three left."

The tree vibrated again, but Hayd kept his saddle this time. Even rode like a rodeo expert.

"I can do it."

"You'll be under pressure."

Hayd scowled. Did Even think he couldn't do it? He might not be much of a hunter yet, but he was a warrior damnit, a bit of pressure wasn't going to affect him. He hoped.

"Fine then." Called Even. "Catch." He tossed one arrow down. "You aim for the eye as soon as you see an opening."

"Why not the neck?"

"Skin's too thick on top, only soft right near the bottom." It was unusual to hear Even speak improperly. It was the most potent proof that they were in real danger. During the fire-water slaven attack Even had still managed to speak properly the entire time.

"Ok, so eyes."

"Yep, I'll aim for the mouth, when it opens it's a harder target."

Hayd nodded, and aimed with care, reciting mentally every tidbit of advice Even had given him about archery. He bit his lip and shot.

The arrow sunk into an eye. Hayd couldn't keep his cheer in, though the sound of it was utterly swaddled within the butengram's scream.

Even's bowstring sung again, followed shortly after by a swear word so nasty Hayd had always been told the word came from the Shain and could be used to summon their ire. He looked up to Even with a paling face for the word's use.

The butengram was still screaming.

Hayd turned back to face the monster.

Even's arrow sat wedged between two fangs on the top jaw, buried in fleshy pink gum. His heart faltered. He could understand why Even had used that word now – they already appeared to be Shain-cursed.

The hooves pounded the trunk again. The splintering, tearing noise louder. The tree swung away from the offending hooves, but did not spring back as before. Even cried with horror, his own scream a girlish in its pitch.

The butengram wailed, thrashing her head, stomping her back four legs in rage while blood striped the side of her face.

Hayd felt like his mind took a step back and out from his body to survey the scene. The tree trunk broken, leaning back. Would those hooves strike two more blows before the tree was felled, or only one? Even was struggling to regain his seat, still gripping his bow, the last arrow in his other hand.

“Can you make the shot this time?” Asked Hayd.

“How will we get the mouth open?”

“I've got it.”

“Hayd, no!” Even's terror was genuine, but Hayd was already shifting his weight. His sword scraped from its sheath and he took his own sort of aim as he hurtled himself toward the neck of the butengram.

Even's scream faded in Hayd's ears, not because it actually silenced, but because Hayd was so focused.

He was running a gauntlet straight into the realms of the Shain. The reek of camphor made his eyes water, but it was gone in an instant as the smell of unwashed carnivore slammed into him. He ran through the walls of scents, eyes on the beast's jaws. They were slowly opening, no doubt intending to snap down on some part of him.

A sharp thrust with his left leg and a slight twist of his body and the straight ahead momentum of his body shifted. He would lose a lot of power now he had altered course, but all that power would have given him if he had kept driving forward would be a new home in the butengram's stomach.

His feet fell into the grass and he ignored the jarring, bending his knees to try and accommodate it somewhat, then used his bent knees to propel him, allowing himself to spring in, this time from the side.

Once the revolting smell of dirt and meat and sweat and sick was all around him – smothering him like the sinking bog had tried to – he thrust the blade at his side forward with all the strength in his arms.

Skin tore. The flesh on the butengram's neck resisted. It was thicker than leather, tough like Hayd imagined armour might be, but it yielded. Skin tore and crimson leaked out. The bright blood drenched his blade, it splattered his hands, coloured the grass. Skin tore and the butengram raged. She raged with her voice, crying louder than before, loud enough to echo through the forest with vibrant power. A hoof flew and Hayd lost his breath when the limb connected. The force of the kick flung him back, tearing the sword from his hands while it stayed buried in the rolls of the beast's neck.

Hayd hit the ground. The force would have pushed the breath out of him had the hoof not already done that job. He skidded through the grass, his clothes gaining green and brown streaks in his progress.

He couldn't get up again. There was no breath and his body was nothing but pain. He could hear the screaming of a woman. As the shrieks faded to nothing he realised those were not the cries of a woman, but the butengram.

Even's face, haloed with his bizarre hair sprung into view.

“Hayd, are you alright?!”

Hayd croaked.

Even chuckled then asked, “Were you turned into a frog?”

“Don't laugh at me.” Hayd wheezed, slowly rolling onto his side, raising himself on one elbow while his mid-section throbbed with agony.

“Should I get Mannandam? Do your ribs hurt? Are you getting your breath back?” Even dropped to his haunches like a puppy and watched Hayd with shaking hands.

“My breath's coming back, but I hurt like a Shain cursed me.”

“Shain don't actually curse people you know.”

“Really? Met many?”

Even chuckled again. “None I suppose.”

“I'll take that healing, as long as there's no more of those ghastly beasts around.”