

Before Albanians had a name for their land, or even their tribes, there was one among them who was sharper with the bow than any other. He was only a boy but he could launch an arrow through a running rabbit across a moonlit field. His father had gone into the mountains on a hunting party when he was a child and never returned. Without a man leading the family more burdens were placed on his mother and siblings. To help his family he taught himself to be the best hunter. And he was. And he knew it.

Once, when he was barely into his teen years his sleep was fitful and his dreams dark. In his mind he saw a great eagle soaring over the land. He could feel the wind lift the wings, the feathers fluttering and the clouds passing. In his mind's eye he saw what the eagle saw, farther than any man could ever see with only human eyes. He saw with the sharpest clarity a mare on the plains by the sea, even though to walk the distance would take days. He felt the eagle's pride knowing it was the finest hunter anywhere throughout the mountains.

The next few nights were the same, always dreams of hunting, of flying, wings beating and eaglets crying out for protection. In the way of his people reoccurring dreams were a calling. One morning he rose early to go and find his dream.

So he climbed high up into the crags, where it was unsafe even if you weren't foolhardy. He saw his small village, little more than a collection of his extended family, nestled between two peaks. He climbed higher and saw the sea to the west, shining as the sun set behind it. After wandering the high peaks for three days he finally spotted his dream, he located his eagle. It could hardly be any other. Now that he saw it with his own eyes he realized he had been dreaming of the Great Eagle, the source of wind and storm that his father had told stories of when the village children gathered.

Unsure of his purpose, the boy waited and watched. He saw nothing when the eagle was present or when it finally took flight. He waited long into the night until his body dropped off into exhaustion. Through a haze of drifting images he suddenly heard the crack of thunder in the distance. Half-awake he looked to the sound and saw ribbons of lighting cutting among the snowy mountains. A raging storm was rapidly forming. It grew in intensity, with brighter flashes and deeper booms, the winds raged for what seemed to be hours. Rain slashed at him as he huddled between rocks, wind raked through the mountains, and lightning cut into stone. He wondered if time had stopped. He knew eagles were mystical and powerful, the storm could have taken all night, or he might still be sleeping, or maybe it was only a moments. In the eerie aftermath of silence, the chilled rain still fell.

The boy realized he was cold and getting colder. Without shelter he would surely die. Without other options, dreading every step, he quietly made his way towards the nest. He could not climb down in the wet cold, the slippery mountain rocks would surely kill him, and at least near the nest he could find warmth. Dangerous as it was he had no choice.

The breeze suddenly became an updraft as the eagle returned. She beat her huge wings and with each stroke thunder rolled over the country. In her beak she carried the limp form of a massive, dead snake. As the boy looked on, the Great Eagle lay the snake down next to her nest. From his hiding place among the lowest branches of the nest he saw the mother eagle snap her head around. She looked out over the countryside. Something had caught her attention. He could sense her unease as well as her wrath. She took flight; with a beat of her wings that nearly knocked him over she was gone.

Then his gaze fell on the mammoth snake. As he watched it opened one slit eye. Seeing nothing of its former adversary it cautiously opened the other. Then it lumbered its sulking mass, and

with a slither down its spine rose up to twice the height of the nest. The boy could feel its need, its hunger, as its eyes settled on the eaglets nestling inside. The snake reared back, choosing its prey. It snapped forward with jaws wide... and collapsed into the upper nesting branches.

The feathers of a lone arrow protruded from under its jaw. His shaft had buried itself almost completely into the soft spot beneath the jawbone, killing it before it could strike. He looked down in mild surprise to see his bow in hand. He hadn't been aware he'd even strung it.

*His dream!* It *did* make sense! By the ancient laws of trial and combat he had saved the young eaglets from certain death. He could choose one to keep as his own, and with such an animal at his side, trained to hunt the skies like no other predator, his family need never go hungry again. He looked into the nest and carefully removed the largest of the hatchlings.

As he turned with his prize the air suddenly became heavy with downward pressure. Thunder boomed and he was knocked to the ground. Their mother had returned.

"Why have you stolen from me?" she demanded. Her voice was smooth as mountain water. "By what right do you take one of my children?"

He answered her truthfully, "By right of trial and savior. Look there, the serpent you yourself brought back lies dead upon the nest. Had I not struck it down *all* your children would be dead!"

The Great Eagle regarded him silently for a moment, then spoke, "What you say is true. I cannot stop you from taking what you have earned. But it is important for you to understand exactly what you have done. I beat my wings and the air shudders. When I scrape my claws on these rocks the clouds reflect the light. Surely you saw and heard the battle when I defeated... *this*." She pronounced the last word and lashed out a talon to kick at the snake.

"I saw the fight. I saw the storm you made. My father told us stories of your battles. How you could shake the ground with a single beat of your wings. How when you fought with beak and claw the air crackled with lightning. He told us of how you and the snake-demons have been enemies and how always your fights bring storms and ill omens."

"Then you have some small idea of how much I hate them. These are not my first eggs to hatch; wherever I have built my nest this brute has found my children and destroyed them. You have done what I could not. As such, you may take my son and raise him as you will."

He did not move. The Great Eagle was quite capable of killing him regardless of ancient laws. Being right in an argument is no comfort for the dead. "Your son is rightfully mine, but I needn't raise him. You may keep him in the nest as long as I am compensated."

She looked him over, one eye rolling down as her head turned aside. "I offer a trade then. You are a skilled hunter; you killed *that*," she spat out the word and kicked the snake again, "after all. I will give you my eyesight so that you never miss a target."

"Ah, majesty, thank you. But your son is more precious than a single gift. I also want your strength so that even without my bow I can defend my people." He was treading dangerous ground, but even with an eagle's eyesight his arrows could only go so far. But with her strength too... even bare-handed he would be a match for any fighter from among all the neighboring tribes.

The huge bird was silent as she regarded him. “You have shown bravery coming here, and courage. You shall have both my eyesight and my strength for the service you have done me.”

The deal was struck. In gratitude the boy was borne home by the mother eagle. She drew a great storm around them as she flew down the mountains so that he arrived under the cover of clouds and darkness. No one saw her; no one knew where he had been. He grew from boy to man and his prowess as a fighter was unmatched. None could beat his marksmanship. No one could stand against him. In time he became king.

For his enemies, the most fearsome of his battles always brought on a storm. In the flashes of lightning they swore they saw an eagle always above him.