Albynnon the Dragon Hunter,
Or: Searching for Anodyne

By Sionnach Wintergreen
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For Royce,
who laughed at all of the right parts.
I buried all my shining fortune yesterday and headed for home, where the skeletons of my departed kin sway from the tall trees alongside the curly gray moss, where the sweet, fetid air swarms with glittering flies. Yesterday changed everything—a single night and everything looks different. Maybe it’s always like that for man people. Life’s usually a bit more slow moving for us Ferlkin. Even the way we walk is slow. Folks like Sir Albynnon tend to step lively, fast, with their chins pointed out. Ferlkin like me, we amble. Some might say shuffle, but I prefer amble. Shuffle sounds like a condition, whereas amble is more of a choice.

See, it’s not that I can’t move fast, it’s just that my tail’s pretty heavy, so I usually just let it drag, and, besides, it kicks up a fair amount of dust if I go too fast. No Ferlkin likes dusty fur—it dries out the moss on our backs and makes it nearly inedible. And it’s just like my mur-mur always used to say, “If you can’t eat your own moss, Gwagalor, don’t expect anyone else to do it.” She was a wise one, all right, my mur-mur. I always thought Sir Albynnon was wise, too. Well, maybe not wise, exactly, but brilliant, and by brilliant, I really mean shiny. Those two are kind of confusing sometimes. I like shiny a lot.

That was the real reason I followed Sir Albynnon those many years ago—he was just so amazingly brilliant. When I first saw him, the autumn sunbeams poured through the leafless trees and glinted off his shiny plate armor like...like sunbeams glinting off something really shiny, like plate armor. I guess plate’s not always shiny, but Albynnon’s always was. Anyway, I like shiny.

Whenever Sir Albynnon tells this story, he says he knew I had been stalking them since they crossed the Black River. Usually, I give him that, but this is my story, and I can tell you that’s just proof he really had no idea where I was, because I started following him and his squire back in the Muskyhedge Grove, which everyone knows is well before the Black River. It is true, though, that he saved my life. But I saved his, too, and somehow he always forgets that part.

I grew up in Muskyhedge, was born and lived all my life there in the shade of the tall, twisting hedge walls. Those tailess patchy man people of Albynnon’s usually stay clear of our territory. I always thought it was just because of the sorts of beasts that also make their home around the hedgerows—the loud, squawky ghoulv ice birds (they channel the restless dead), the giant, sticky-briar toads (sure they prefer monkeys, but they’ll eat anything), the swarming hedgerow hogs (where there’s one, there are
always at least two dozen more, and all completely mad, bristling with spines and dagger-like tusks), but I learned later that most people are actually spooked by us Ferlkin.

They call us brutes, or savages, or worse, but mostly they call us hedge trolls. They don’t like the way we look, or the way we smell, but I think it’s also the way we hang our dead from the trees that bothers them.

It wasn’t like I really wanted to leave Muskyhedge Grove, either—the cool shelter of those sacred trees, the dense thickets where the clouds of white gnats billow through the stray beams of sunlight, the fragrant blanket of decaying leaves over the moist, black soil, the swollen toadstools, the fleshy petals of the rat-trap lilies redolent with sweet rat sauce.

No, I loved Muskyhedge from its highest, vine-tangled branches to its grub-rich roots. I just felt a little empty somehow, a little brittle at the edges, like a clean bone when all the marrow has been sucked out. And when I saw those outsiders ride past in their shiny garb, so strange with their hornless, furless faces—like a Ferlkin pup too soon taken from the pouch, so appealingly ugly in their unfinished nakedness—a fascination awoke within me and I had to follow them.

The two men had stopped at the foot of the Brenhok Mountains, just outside of Nargwalf, one of the smaller Urgan villages, when the wyrm attacked. It was not a very big wyrm, maybe a yearling judging from its bristles, but it was in full rut and pretty cranky. Swamp wyrms never scared me much—I don’t scare too easily—but those horses were plenty afraid. The squire’s gray nag reared up and flipped backwards on top of its rider, while Sir Albynnon’s big chestnut scraped him off on the nearest tree and tore through the woods. I think the men were scared, too. At least, I think Sir Albynnon was because he screamed like a hurt rabbit; the squire just laid there and stayed real still.

I could have let that wyrm eat them. Things probably would have been a lot simpler if I had, but my mur-mur always told me, “Gwagalor, you don’t have horns just so you can’t wear a hat.” So I took up my axe and put down my head and lit into that wyrm with all my might, and might is something I have about as much of as moss.

The wyrm put up an admirable fight, but he did not struggle too much once I lopped off his head. Twitched a good bit, but that’s about all. I walked over to the knight, then, feeling good about myself and
hoping I might get something shiny, when I stepped right into this wicked-jawed trap. It snapped shut just below my knee, popped the bone in two and knocked it out the side, nearly took my leg right off.

I don't remember much about everything that happened next, but I do remember Albynnon, in his haze of shining armor, standing over me and saying in his oddly-pitched little man voice, "Don't tell anyone you killed that wyrm, and I'll make sure you don't die." Sir Albynnon was always a very reasonable man.

Like all my kind, I heal fairly quickly. Not as quickly as in men's legends, but still pretty fast, which is probably the only reason I can still use that leg. Albynnon put his hands over the wound and mumbled a bunch of stuff, but really I think it was the stitches and the splint that helped the most—those and my own natural powers.

I don't mean to sound ungrateful, though. I was fortunate. I was lame for a few days, but I did live, which is more than I can say for Sir Albynnon's squire. He had to go into the ground because their folk plant their dead like seeds or egg pots or dung. I tried to hang his poor little body up in the trees so the wind could carry his heartself off to the Waylands, but Sir Albynnon cut it down and stuck it back in that hole. He was very angry with me. He called me a hairy pagan and a lot of other not-so-nice-sounding things, too. We did not understand each other very well back then. That came in time.

We lashed the wyrm behind the horses and hauled it all the way to a little man village called Lordsfield. I had never even heard of the place before. They were all very nice, though, especially after Sir Albynnon told them how he had slain the wyrm that was stealing their goats. Swamp wyrms don't usually eat goats—they don't like to be long from the mud, but I didn't tell anyone that. Albynnon had saved my life, after all. It's like my mur-mur used to say, "The best friends are like ticks; they dig in and hang on." That was the origin of her nickname for me, too. Nearly as often as she called me Gwagalor, she called me Tickhead. I never told that to Sir Albynnon, though. I made him call me by my rightful name, although he never did pronounce it correctly. He always said it like GWAGLER, kind of flat and quick and squashed altogether. Ferlkic is a rich and beautiful language. It rolls thickly on the tongue, smacks a bit in the back of the mouth, like eating honeycomb that's partially gone to sugar or a great big hot bite of overcooked turnip.
But that's not really important, I guess. The important part is that Lordsfield’s kindly people gave Sir Albynon a nice big bag of shiny coins, and I even got some, too. They looked so pretty in my big hairy hands. Sir Albynon and I went back to his own village, then. We had many serious discussions along the way, and it was decided that I should be his guide, seeing as I owed him my life and all. I knew that wasn’t exactly true, but those coins made such a pleasant little jingle when I shook them, and they were so, so shiny—like tiny bits of sunlight on rain that I could hold right there in my palm and stare at as long as I wanted, like magic out of a rat sauce dream.

We picked up a new squire in Gulldive, where Sir Albynon kept his residence, and the story of the Terrible Goat-Gulping Swamp Wyrm of Lordsfield was told all over again. It was even grander this time. That's how it is with most of our adventures. Sometimes, when I’m listening to a minstrel sing one of the ballads about Albynon's deeds, I find them so exciting, I almost forget that I was there myself.

Anyway, it was in Gulldive where I first met Ealine, Sir Albynon’s lady. I’ve never thought much of women. I know that men like ample milkteats and flowing head hair and so forth, so I think Albynon’s lady was probably a comely one by his people’s standards. She was too frail and patchy to rate very highly to a Ferlkin’s eye, but she had this way about her. It was different. Her voice was very soft, like the sound of a tail’s wag, and she had these tiny hands. When I told her my name, she scrunched up her brows and repeated it very carefully, and said it closer to right than any other of her kind ever has.

She wanted to look at my hurt leg, to make sure it was not infected. I don’t know how such small hands can be so warm, but they were, and soft as kittens. She told me she had never been to the Ferlkinlands, or seen one of my kind until then. Other people that have never seen a Ferlkin before are usually afraid of us, even when it’s obvious that we are trying very hard to be nice. But Ealine was not afraid at all, and I think maybe I loved her for that as much as for anything else.

The good people back in Lordsfield had not let me inside their doors. I had to sleep with the horses while Albynon stayed at the inn. I hadn’t really minded that much, but I was tail-whipping happy when Ealine told Albynon I could sleep in their home. It wasn’t a very big house; it was really more like a cottage—and not a very stout one at that. Still, I felt privileged to be invited inside.

None of the furniture was made to accommodate my bulk, let alone my tail, so I had to curl up on the floor beside the fire. Albynon and Ealine slept in the back room. They were not just sleeping, though.
They made a lot of noise. I know I probably shouldn’t have felt bad about it, but I did a little—sort of how I felt in Lordsfield out with the horses—but different, too. I pulled some of my longest shoulder hairs around me and chewed on my moss. That didn’t make me feel better, though, just more sad.

Ealine padded out and stoked the coals while I was chewing. She sat down on the hearth and smiled. “Thank you for helping him get back to me in one piece.”

Remembering my arrangement with Albynon, I scoffed. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I know my husband better than the bards do.” Her eyes were sharp as a crow’s. “Just accept my gratitude, Gwagalor. It isn’t easy waiting for your dragon hunter to return…. What are you eating?”

“My moss.” I held up a hunk of fur.

“That’s convenient,” she said. “Carrying around your own food like that.” I guess she caught my sheepish look, for she cocked up one of those skinny dark brows at me and asked, “Hedge trolls don’t often eat their moss?”

“Usually, you share moss with someone else during grooming.” I glanced at the back room where my friend was now snoring. “Someone special.”

“You have a good heart,” she said kindly. “You’ll find that special mossy someone one day.” Then she patted my snout with a warm hand and went back to bed. I was not sure then that I would ever meet anyone quite as special as Ealine, even if she didn’t have any moss on her back.

Albynon and I left the next day, hunting. Although we made most of our fortune saving villages from various kinds of wyrm that probably weren’t harming them, I learned that our main goal was searching for the famed white dragon, Anodyne. “I got a glimpse of her once before,” Albynon told me. “Of her great and powerful tail. You have never lived until the day your eyes have held a true dragon.”

The wyrm we slew were not true dragons. They were usually wingless, always flightless beasties—smaller than real dragons. They were dangerous, with dragon breath and dragon blood—but they were not true dragons. The real dragons are nearly as old and wise as the world itself. They have power—true power, legendary power, but few have ever seen them.

A pattern developed over the next few years. Albynon and I traveled far and wide, slaying wyrm and searching for Anodyne. We killed bears, wolves, lions and giants, too, and lost a number of goodly squires and horses along the way. I collected so many shiny coins that I was forced to part with a couple
of them to buy a big bag to tote the rest. Anytime I felt bad about anything, I’d just take out a few of those glistening raindrops and look at them until I felt better. It worked almost every time.

We returned to Gulldive at least once a year, to acquire a new squire, tell our tales, and see Ealine. Albynnon, I noticed, didn’t spend much of his time in Gulldive with Ealine, just at night when they would make noises and go to sleep. I couldn’t understand that. Visiting Ealine was my favorite part of going to Gulldive. She always seemed happy to see us, and she always gave me a big slab of bread. She wasn’t stingy with the butter, either, which is a sign of a truly good person as far as I’m concerned. She didn’t like to see us leave, though. She never cried or anything, but I thought her smiles were sadder than if she had wept. She had one baby, then two more, and seemed more and more upset when we left. She never said much, though. “Trees wilt quietly,” my mur-mur used to say.

It was always cold in Albynnon’s drafty house. He spent all of his shiny coins on weapons and supplies for hunting the dragon; I’m not sure he gave his family much of anything. I felt so awful about it, I tried several times to give Ealine some of mine, but she always refused it. “All the coins in the world won’t pay for life misspent, Gwagalor,” she would say, “Won’t make the grave any brighter.”

During one of our visits, while Albynnon was at the tavern regaling the townsfolk with his adventures, Ealine looked especially sad, and, although pleasant as always, spoke even less than usual. The two older babies were big enough to be fun, so I played with them, tumbling them over with a swipe of my tail, lifting them up by an ankle or armpit, blowing mouth farts into their little bellies. I didn’t even mind too much when they pulled my beard or whacked me across my snout with their silly wooden swords. We had a tremendous time until they wore themselves out. Then they curled up next to me beside the fire.

As Ealine eased herself into the chair beside the hearth to nurse the newest babe, she asked me, “Why aren’t you out at the tavern?” Her wise eyes stared out from dark hollows, her naked face drawn and wan.

I shrugged. I shrug a lot. But I liked Ealine so very much, I decided to give her an honest answer. “People are much friendlier to me than they used to be. They admire Albynnon, and since I’m with him, they smile at me and some even let me in their doors now. But it’s the way they smile somehow that bothers me, and the way they look at me when they think I can’t see them. I don’t know how to explain it,
but after a while it makes my stomach hurt. I don’t like being around people.” I thought maybe I had been just a smidgen too honest, so I added quickly, “I like you and Albynnon, and Egant and Oswell very much, though—and I’m sure I’ll like Estrid, too, once she’s big enough to wrestle, you know, instead of just all wet-faced and wobble-headed and soggy-like.”

Ealine nodded.

I continued. “It’s just sometimes… I fell empty deep inside. Hungry, but bread doesn’t fill it. Even with lots of butter.”

Ealine’s eyes were the color of steppe sage, and they seemed the only part of her body with any life as she smiled her sad smile and sighed. “Life’s lonely in the shadow of a dragon hunter.”

I had to yawn and excuse myself to go to sleep, hiding my face in Egant’s curly hair. I just couldn’t look at her when she looked like that. It made me feel almost as sick as if I’d gone to the tavern. When we left the next morning, Ealine asked Albynnon to stay. It was the first time I’d ever heard her ask anything of him. “It’s going to be a bitter frost this year,” she said. “Leave the dragon to her den just a while longer. Let her sleep this winter. Stay home.” She touched his face, but he was somehow immune to the spell of her warm little hands, so we left like we always did.

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When we returned to Gulldive a few dead wyrm’s later, though, things were different. Albynnon’s drafty cottage stood empty. “The fever took your children,” the blacksmith told Albynnon very solemnly.

“So where’s Ealine?” I asked, before Albynnon said anything.

“She died after the last one, by her own hand.”

I couldn’t even breathe. I felt like a wyrm had sat on my chest. I wanted to howl. I wanted to shake that blacksmith until he told us a better answer. Feeling like my head would never stop spinning, I looked to Sir Albynnon, suddenly imagining how he must have been suffering. He was quiet and his face was very still. After a long moment, he cleared his throat and said to the blacksmith, “I want you to look at that bay’s near hind leg. I think he’s about to lose a shoe. And I need you to shape another head for this spear. I discovered a new map in a cave up near Wickway. I think we’re closer to finding Anodyne than ever before.”
So Albynnon went to the tavern, while I went to his empty house and sat there alone with the dust and the memories, while the frayed edges of a cut rope swung from the doorway of the back room. I sat in the dark, before the burned-out log in the fireplace, listening to the rats in the rafters and the wind whisper through the cracks, imagining man-children snuggled up beside me and Ealine with the youngest in the forlorn wooden chair.

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In the morning, Albynnon and a new squire came to collect me. I'm usually nice to the lads. They never last long, but I admire their courage, and I see no reason to be distant. I didn’t say a word to this one, however. I had no voice for his master, either. I just walked beside the horses and kept my thoughts to myself. I probably would have remained silent for a long time, too, if the squire hadn’t asked Albynnon if he had been to visit the graves. I had almost forgotten about that until he mentioned it—someone would have stuck Ealine and the children in the dark ground.

"Are they somewhere pretty, at least—like a garden?" I wanted to know. "Or somewhere with berry bushes or toadstools?" Albynnon couldn’t say, but he did know they weren’t all together. The children were planted somewhere in the sacred ground, but he explained that Ealine had been buried in a pit outside the graveyard, away from her children, because she had taken her own life. Barely missing a beat, he started in on that dragon again.

I stopped walking and stood where I was. "I'm not doing this anymore," I announced.

"I thought you were looking for adventure," said Albynnon.

"This isn’t adventure. This is just dying slow."

"You have to come with us," he said. "We’re so close to finding Anodyne. We’re going to get lucky this time—I can feel it."

"I don’t think you can feel anything, Albynnon. You already were lucky. You were just too busy chasing the dragon to notice." And with that I was gone. Like I said, I can move quickly when I want to, and I ran all the way back to Gulldive. That evening, I sniffed around until I found where they had dumped Ealine’s body. I took her corpse into the forest and hung it from the tallest tree I could climb, then I rescued her dead children from their holes in the graveyard and tied their little rotting bodies on the branches as well, and then I sat in the tree and whistled for the wind to carry their heartselves away. I
spent the rest of the night up in that tree, keeping the wind aloft with song and ensuring the safe passage of my friends.

That was my last night as a welcome guest of Albynnon the Dragon Hunter. When morning came, the villagers were horrified at what I had done. They chased me out of town with pitchforks and torches, and I doubt I’ll go back to Gulldive ever again.

Since then, I’ve been shuffling—no—ambling about for a while, avoiding people and feeling empty and lost.

Last night, though, I planted all my shiny coins in the dirt—buried them like dung or some dead squire, climbed a tree, and wished the wind would come take me to the Waylands. I spent the whole night in that tree, thinking about things and wondering just how I fit into my own life. I whistled up a delivering wind, let it tug at my fur and pull my tail, but it wouldn’t take me anywhere; it just doesn’t work that way. But when I saw the sunrise, I knew, somehow, that everything was different. All the shiny glamour of those coins was gone, and the world was clearer; I could see it better. Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe the world didn’t change at all. Maybe I did. Either way, I got down from my tree and headed straight home to Muskyhedge Grove.

I guess Sir Albynnon the Dragon Hunter is still out there searching for Anodyne. Me, I’m just looking for someone to share my moss with.

THE END

**Author’s Note: If you enjoyed this story, please consider posting a review wherever you found it. It can be very brief like, ‘it was crunchy and chewy.’ (Maybe that’s better for calamari, but you get the idea.) Thank you for reading!**