

# CHAPTER 28

“FLETCHER, WAKE UP!”

Othello’s green eyes looked down at him, matching the canopy above.

“Malik and his team have left without us.”

Fletcher sat up, Athena’s memory still vivid in his mind.

“Why?” he mumbled.

“They left a note, said they decided to make the most of the sunlight and leave early. They didn’t want to wake us.”

“Fine with me.” Sylva yawned, stretching her arms. “If there’s trouble ahead, they’ll run into it before we do.”

Seraph and his team were packing up. They had their demons out, and Fletcher was pleased to see that Rory now had a second Mite, smaller than Malachi with a yellow shell.

Still, it was Atilla’s demon that most surprised him, a dove-white bird with long tail feathers, perched on the young dwarf’s shoulder. It was a Caladrius, a level-six demon with the ability to heal wounds by laying its feathers over them.

The demon was one of four rare, equally powerful avian cousins,

including the fire-born Phoenix, the icy Polarion and lightning-powered Halcyon, with red, blue and yellow plumage respectively. He had a sneaky suspicion that it was not just Arcturus who had received a gifted demon from King Harold. Fletcher bet it was an apology to the Thorsagers for what had happened to Othello. He wondered what demon Atilla had before, and if he still had it in his roster.

“We should follow their example,” Seraph called, distracting Fletcher from his thoughts. “We’re heading off in a minute, with or without you.”

Sacharissa was already nosing the ground, eager to lead her team in the direction of the river. She whined as Fletcher hesitated, indicating that Arcturus wanted them to stay together.

It did not take long for Fletcher’s team to get ready, the biggest delay being Cress, who did not take kindly to being woken at such an early hour.

“Can’t you get Solomon to carry me, Othello?” Cress groaned, heaving her heavy satchel onto her shoulders.

“Carry you? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” Fletcher laughed.

“Actually, Fletcher, he probably could,” Othello said, flushing with pride.

He pulled a roll of leather from the side pocket of his satchel and laid it on the ground. Then, with a touch of his fingers, the Golem materialized in a flash of violet light.

Solomon had grown. He was as tall as Othello himself now, but wider and thicker-limbed. As soon as he caught sight of Fletcher, the craggy face split into a smile. The Golem surged forward with his arms open wide, and Fletcher had to skip back to avoid the bone-crushing hug.

“Solomon, no!” Othello remonstrated, then rolled his eyes as the demon hung his head in shame. “He doesn’t know his own strength yet.”

“So much has changed in a year. He’ll be my height soon enough,” Fletcher marveled.

“Aye, that he will. But let’s not hang about, they’re off.” Othello

nodded at the forest behind Fletcher, where Seraph's team was already on its way out of the swamp and into the thicker jungle.

"We'll look like the lazy ones if we're not careful," Sylva said, tugging Othello forward.

She nodded at Lysander, who was tactfully looking up at the sky. "Remember, the world is watching. This is more than just a mission."

Othello and Sylva hurried after the others, leaving Cress and Fletcher to trail behind them. Lysander walked sedately at their side, somehow managing to avoid the tangled undergrowth with feline grace. In contrast, Athena leaped from tree branch to tree branch above, showering Fletcher with leaves and dislodged insects. He did not mind, for he could sense the demon was missing the ether. After all, she had spent the past seventeen years there.

Fletcher's thoughts turned to his parents. He had spent so many years searching faces in Pelt, wondering what they looked like. Now he knew. He had his father's thick black hair, and the man's hazel eyes were just like his own. But he had the same pale skin and straight-edged nose of his mother.

He had been loved, once. He had felt it in that dream, so strongly that it made his heart clench with joy. But it had all been brutally torn away from him.

Soon the world turned dim as the canopy grew thicker, the sun just managing to filter through the leaves for a darker shade of green.

The path was clear, for the thicker plants had been torn asunder by the Wendigo and then trampled underfoot by Malik's team. For now, the going was easy, and they fell into a comfortable pace that ate up the ground.

As they walked, Fletcher tried to commit his parent's faces to his memory, but he cursed himself as they blurred in his mind. It had all happened so fast.

"So . . . is this the first time you've seen a dwarven girl?" Cress asked, noticing the awkward silence. "Properly, I mean."

“I saw Othello’s mother once,” Fletcher replied.

He paused, unsure of what else to say. His mind was still on Athena’s memory.

“Are we pretty?” she asked, grinning as Fletcher reddened. She was teasing him.

“As much as any other girl,” he replied, and as he looked into her smiling face he realized it was true. In fact, now that he had spent more time with her, Cress was beginning to grow on him. She reminded him a little of Seraph—blunt, even a little coarse, but charming in her own way.

“The dwarven boys tend to agree with you.” Cress laughed, after a moment’s thought. “It’s not unknown for a young dwarven lad to run away with a human. I bet Atilla is worried I might do the same.”

She winked at him, and Fletcher couldn’t help but laugh at her forwardness. Her eyes twinkled with merriment and he felt the weight on his shoulders lift.

“Would that be so bad?” Fletcher asked. He realized he knew very little about romance between the races.

“Well, it’s taboo, on both sides,” Cress said, shaking her head. “Unseemly, so they say. It happens, though, and it’s the kids who have it the worst. Some get away with being short humans for a while, but people always find out, especially if they follow the dwarven customs. Shunned by both races, the families travel to the lands across the Akhad Desert, or sail the Vesianian Sea to Swazulu.”

“I’d heard of half elves, but never half dwarves,” Fletcher murmured.

“It’s even worse for the half elves, though it’s rarer to come across one of them—the elves are very against mixing even between the castes of high elves and wood elves. Half elves’ ears aren’t as long as Sylva’s, but they stay pointy.”

“You seem to know a lot about this kind of thing,” Fletcher said. “I’ve never even thought about it before. I’m kind of ashamed, actually.”

“Don’t be. I take a special interest in this stuff. My brother . . .” She looked away for a moment. “He ran away from home to be with a human woman. I’m the only one in the community who will talk to him now.”

The pace ahead quickened as the morning turned to noon, and their conversation was cut short, replaced by heavy breathing as they jogged through the undergrowth. This time the silence was comfortable, even if the atmosphere wasn’t. At the swamp it had been hot but bearable. Now, it was sweltering, despite the breathable fabric of the jacket.

Even the sounds had changed. Above the chorus of whining insects, the flutey mating calls of birds filtered down through the trees.

“Shall we let our demons stretch their legs?” Cress asked, slipping a satchel strap from her shoulder and clutching it to her chest. “It’ll give me a chance to test out the battle gauntlet Athol made for me.”

“Battle gauntlet?” Fletcher asked, intrigued.

She rummaged within the satchel as they walked and pulled out a leather glove. The back had been armored with bands of steel, extending down to the wrist, but that was not what made it stand out. The palm and finger pads had been branded with the same marks that were tattooed on Fletcher’s hand.

“I’m not a fan of needles, so no tattoo for me.” She winked. “I’m surprised these haven’t come into fashion yet! Guess most summoners are stuck in their ways.”

Tugging on the glove, she pointed the pentacle at the ground ahead of her. To Fletcher’s amazement, there was a flash of violet and a demon tumbled into existence.

It appeared much like a cross between a raccoon and a squirrel, with dark blue fur speckled with jagged dashes of teal. The demon’s round yellow eyes focused on Fletcher as soon as it materialized, and the bushy tail whipped back and forth with excitement. Despite all of his studies, Fletcher had absolutely no idea what it was.

“It’s a Raiju,” Cress said, patting her shoulder. The demon had padded fingers and hooked nails for climbing, allowing it to scamper onto the proffered perch with two languid leaps.

“Almost as rare as your Salamander, or so I’m told,” Cress said, laughing at Fletcher’s mesmerized expression. “Level five too. Tosk can blast lightning from his tail like a storm cloud, so mind you avoid touching it. It can give you quite a shock.”

“That’s amazing! I don’t think I could have snuck that gauntlet into the tournament, though. How did you get such a rare demon?” Fletcher asked as the Raiju preened his whiskers at him almost flirtatiously.

“King Harold. He’s quite the collector, being such a high level and all. When he heard two more dwarves were heading to the academy, he offered his Caladrius and Raiju to us. He really is on our side.”

Before Fletcher could pry further, there was a cry of excitement from ahead of them, and the group came to a halt. The jungle had opened up, and from the sound of rushing water, Fletcher could tell why.

The waters from the swamp and a dozen other streams beyond had come together into a network of inlets that poured out over a waterfall. Far below, water crashed and exploded in a haze of white mist that extended for miles around, until a great, snaking river emerged in the distance, carving its way through twin valleys on either side. At the very edge of their site, a triangular hump of dull yellow revealed their destination. The pyramid.

“So how are we going to get down?” Othello wondered aloud.

There was a steep climb to the ground on either side of the falls, but Fletcher was glad that he did not have to cross the river at this point, for the multiple streams that fed the waterfall looked daunting, with thin patches of soggy land between them.

“I guess Malik’s and Isadora’s teams have already crossed,” Seraph said with a hint of disappointment. “I’d have liked to watch them wade through that mess.”

“Well, let’s hope our crossing is as easy as theirs,” Fletcher replied.

They surveyed the land before them and it was soon clear that there were two ways down. One was a rocky path beside the waterfall itself, while the other was a thin forest trail that curved toward a hilly region to the east.

“Well,” Fletcher announced, slapping Seraph on the back. “This is where we leave you.”

# CHAPTER 29

FLETCHER SHIELDED HIS EYES, gazing at the setting sun as its last light filtered through the tangled branches. He was glad they had chosen to make camp before it grew dark, for the moon was barely more than a slit in the sky and wyrdlights would attract too much attention.

Dusk's arrival was heralded by the gruff bellows of howler monkeys, echoing through the forest in the canopy above. The team settled down for their first night alone in enemy territory, choosing a clearing a safe distance from the forest trail.

As Ignatius scampered onto his neck and began to doze, Fletcher reflected on their journey so far. The natural trail had diverged toward the river on several occasions, but they made sure to head uphill, curving away from the water. Despite the incline, they had made good progress, and Fletcher felt confident they would reach their rendezvous at the pyramid in two days' time.

Sariel and Lysander had acted as rear guard the entire day's journey, watching for an ambush. Athena worked the canopy, occasionally fluttering above the tree line so Fletcher could make sure they were on course using his scrying crystal. Meanwhile, Ignatius and Tosk protected

their flanks, slipping through the thicker undergrowth with barely more than a rustle. It was Solomon who was left out, for he was too slow and clumsy. Instead, he became their pack mule, carrying their supplies on his stony shoulders when the weight became too much for them.

“Now that it’s just four of us, it’s more real,” Sylva said, prodding their unlit campfire with a stick. “I felt like we could take on an army when we were all together.”

“I don’t know,” Fletcher said, tugging Ignatius from his neck. “I think we’re a pretty formidable team. We have two tournament winners, and two runners-up. If we encounter an orc patrol, I reckon we could take them.”

Ignatius mewed with annoyance at being woken and, after some mental cajoling, reluctantly spat a ball of fire at the pile of wood.

“It’s not beating them that I’m worried about,” Sylva said, shielding her face as the sticks burst into flames. “It’s about one of them getting away during the battle. If they raise the alarm, then the mission is over.”

“Well, Sariel and Lysander can chase them down,” Othello said, groaning as he removed his boots and socks. “Because this great lump isn’t going to be catching anyone any time soon.”

He rubbed Solomon affectionately on the head, and the demon rumbled with happiness. Just as he had back in the shed outside of Corcillum, the Golem dutifully held Othello’s socks up to the flames. For the first time in what felt like years, Fletcher felt contented.

“So how’s everybody feeling?” he asked, opening his pack and removing a wrap of dried venison. He spat a piece onto a nearby twig and held it to the flames.

“About as good as I smell,” Othello said, and grimaced. “Which isn’t great. This heat doesn’t agree with me, or you lot for that matter.”

“You can say that again.” Cress laughed, holding her nose. “The orcs can probably smell us from miles around.”

She rummaged around her pack for her own food, then paused.

“Hey! I’m missing some bolts from my crossbow.”

Cress frowned and showed them the quiver strapped to her satchel. It was no longer full, leaving the quarrels to rattle loosely within.

“Same here,” Sylva said, brandishing her own quiver. The fletching on her arrows, as well as Fletcher’s and Cress’s bolts, had been dyed blue, the team’s color. They were beautifully made and the points were slimmer and sharper than Fletcher’s own, better than even his best efforts when he had fletched his own arrows in Pelt.

“Maybe they fell out?” Fletcher suggested.

He ran his fingers over his own quiver, but all the arrows seemed to be there.

Cress shrugged and laid the quiver back down.

“Still plenty left, but let’s be careful. Orcs don’t use arrows—if they find one on the ground they’ll know we’re out here.”

Sariel and Lysander, who had been patrolling around the camp, returned and lay behind the fire, their broad backs making a comfortable pillow for the others. In fact, Fletcher saw that all but one demon had returned, with Tosk settling on Cress’s navel, curled up like a dog.

Fletcher strapped his scrying glass to his eye so he could see where Athena was, her view appearing as a pink-tinged overlay of half his vision.

Athena was standing vigil on a high branch, her owlish eyes able to see through the orange sunset as clear as day. Every few seconds she swiveled her head, like a sentinel standing guard. Fletcher urged the Gryphowl to come down with a thought, but sensed her desire to remain.

“Well, looks like we don’t need to arrange a night-watch schedule,” Fletcher said. “Athena intends to stay there all night.”

“Good.” Sylva yawned. “I don’t think I’d be able to keep my eyes open.”

They lay there in comfortable silence, allowing the campfire’s heat to seep the ache from their muscles. The night sounds of the jungle had

already begun, with the chirps of crickets adding a dull buzz to the quiet, interspersed with the occasional call of nocturnal birds. It was strangely soothing, reminding Fletcher of the sounds of Pelt's nearby forests.

Jeffrey, who had been silent for most of the journey, spoke up for the first time that night.

"I don't know why I'm here," he sobbed, the fear in his voice cutting through the cozy crackle of their campfire. "All I have is the short sword Uhtred gave me. We're not going to run into any dead demons out here and when the raid begins, dissecting one will be the last thing on my mind."

"I'd take you as a guide over any of the others," Sylva said generously. "We're barely hungry with all the fruit and vegetables you gathered as we were hiking, and we've refilled our water flasks from those vines all day. We don't need a navigator with that great big pyramid marking the way, and we have a map of their camp. Just make sure you hang back when the fighting starts and we'll deal with the orcs."

"Thanks," Jeffrey muttered, but it was obvious he was unconvinced. He rolled away with his back to them, and Fletcher thought he caught a glimmer of a tear on the lad's cheek, reflected by the firelight. Then the glimmer flashed again, and he realized it had appeared in the overlay of his scrying crystal.

"What the hell is that?" Fletcher muttered.

A fire had been lit only about three hundred feet away, right on the forest trail. For a moment he thought Athena had been looking down at them, so close was the light.

He removed his eyeglass and the others leaned in, squinting at the coin-sized crystal.

"Orcs?" Jeffrey asked, his voice trembling.

"I'll send Athena closer," Fletcher said, conveying his orders to Athena with a flash of intent.

Soon, the crystal showed the rushing canopy below, as the Gryphowl

glided over the treetops. It took but a few seconds for her to reach the spot, and she landed with feline grace on a broad branch. It creaked under her weight; Fletcher could hear all that she did in his mind. He winced at the noise, but the figures below seemed not to react.

It was too far up to see their faces, but the monstrous creature standing watch beside them left no doubt as to who they were.

Isadora's team was following them.

"What are they doing here?" Sylva hissed. "They're supposed to be on the other side of the river!"

"I don't know, but they're up to no good," Othello whispered. "Thing is, they can't do anything with Lysander watching. Not unless they attack in the dark. . . ."

They paused for a moment, contemplating his words.

"Maybe they got lost, or decided against crossing the river," Cress suggested.

"You don't know them," Fletcher said. "They're trying to sabotage us to prove that a team with dwarves and elves doesn't work. They could take us out with spells in the darkness. It would look like orc shamans had ambushed us."

"It's incentive enough for them to ambush us," Sylva said. "Not that they need a good reason. They hate us enough as it is."

Fletcher sat up, looking out into the gloom around their camp.

"We need to move at first light, put as much distance between us and them as possible. Athena will keep an eye on them, make sure they don't know we're so close."

He looked at their bright fire, then began etching the ice spell in the air. With a pulse of mana, a stream of frost crystals enveloped the wood, casting the camp in pitch-darkness.

"Get some rest," Fletcher said with a sigh, settling down against Lysander's soft underbelly. "It might be the last we have for a while."

As the others pulled blankets from their packs, Othello wriggled in beside him.

“Trust you to hog Lysander as a pillow,” Othello whispered, “Move over.”

Fletcher shuffled to the side and Othello stretched out beside him. It was comforting to have Othello there.

“You’ve been brooding all day,” Othello said under his breath, so that the others couldn’t hear. “Something on your mind?”

Fletcher paused. He knew they should be sleeping, but he was sure he would be up all night thinking of Athena’s infusion dream. Maybe it would help to talk about it.

“I saw my parents die,” Fletcher murmured.

“You remember it?” Othello asked.

“No . . . I saw Athena’s memories. You know, from infusing her,” Fletcher replied, as tears welled in his eyes. “They were so happy, and then . . . it was horrible.”

“Oh . . .” Othello whispered. He paused.

“I’m sorry.”

Silence. Then Othello spoke, his voice throaty with emotion.

“Did you know I had another sister?”

“No,” Fletcher said, creasing his brow. Had?

“Essie was born when we were three, two years before my mother became pregnant with Thaissa and the laws were relaxed. We had to keep her hidden—dwarves were only allowed one child back then, and what with Atilla and I being twins we had already got away with two on a technicality. We kept her underground, hid her under the floorboards when the Pinkertons did their inspections. But when Essie turned one she got sick . . . really sick. So we took her to a doctor, a human.”

Othello stopped, and Fletcher saw his friend’s face was wet with tears.

“He called the Pinkertons, Fletcher, and they took Essie away from us. We don’t know where. A few weeks later they told us she had died from the illness. Just like that—she was gone. They never even returned her body.”

Fletcher reached out and lay a hand on Othello's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Othello. To your sister. To your family. I can't imagine how that must feel."

"We never talk about it," Othello said, wiping his tears with his sleeve. "Thaissa doesn't even know. But if I had the chance to know what really happened to her. To hear her laugh, to see that smile one more time. I'd do anything for it."

Fletcher knew he was right. It was a blessing—to see his parents, know their voices, their faces. What had happened to them was a tragedy, and the truth of their death was painful to know . . . but necessary.

Above him, Lysander turned his head and stared down at Fletcher's tear streaked face. Gently, he raised a talon and wiped brushed Fletcher's cheek, the movement too human for the demon to do alone. Then he lay a wing on top of them, like a blanket. Fletcher knew that Lovett was watching over them.

"Thank you for sharing that with me, Othello." Fletcher whispered, "I'll remember it."

# CHAPTER 30

IT WAS EARLY MORNING, and the team was moving at a fast pace through the jungle. They were even more careful to cover their tracks, but fortunately the trail they were on was regularly used by the jungle animals, confusing the ground with dozens of different claw-and-hoofprints.

Most disconcertingly, they had found the flat-footed prints of orcs there too, not unlike a human's but larger and with deep toe indentations. It was difficult to say how long they had been there, but Fletcher was glad that Athena was watching from the canopy above, her view translating directly to the scrying crystal strapped to his head.

"Can . . . we . . . slow . . . down . . . yet?" Othello gasped, readjusting his pack with a bowlegged jump. Solomon had been infused within him, for the Golem was too slow to keep up and his weighty legs left deep impressions on the ground. As such, the heavy satchels had once again been strapped to their backs, making the going even tougher.

Jeffrey's asthma made him take deep breaths through an herb-filled cloth, and Cress's short legs forced her to travel in short bursts of speed, as Othello did.

“Five-minute break,” Fletcher announced, his heart thundering in his chest, sweat trickling down his back. After a year in captivity with no more exercise than a few push-ups, he too was struggling. In fact, only Sylva seemed to be faring well.

They stopped and collapsed to the ground, pressing their backs against tree trunks on either side of the path. There were a few minutes that were filled only with the gulping of water and chewing of fruit and root tubers. Then Sylva pointed back down the path and groaned.

“Even at this pace, Isadora and the others could catch up with us by nightfall. We just can’t travel as fast as they can.”

“Well, it’s worth trying,” Othello groaned, laying his head on Fletcher’s shoulder. “We should reach the pyramid late tomorrow. If we can avoid them until then, all will be well.”

They continued to sit, and even though five minutes had passed, Fletcher let them rest a little longer. He had spent much of the previous night watching the other team through his scrying crystal, hoping to hear their conversation. To his dismay, the Wendigo prowled the edges of their camp for most of the night, keeping Athena at a distance until he fell asleep.

Fear pulsed into Fletcher from the twin consciousnesses of his demons. Ignatius burst out of the jungle, and in the overlay of his scrying crystal he saw a disturbance on the path up ahead.

“Get off the trail!” Fletcher hissed, and then he and Sylva were scrambling into the jungle, while Othello, Cress and Jeffrey dived into the bushes on the other side of the path. Lysander and Sariel followed the others, pressing their bodies low to the ground and wriggling into the thicker vegetation. It was just as well, for it was not long before the new arrivals revealed themselves.

Three rhinos, long horns plowing forward like the prows on a fleet of warships, emerged. Their skin was thick and leathery, the gray color matching perfectly with that of the herculean giants that rode them.

Seven-foot bull orcs, matured to their greatest size, with three-inch tusks and bodies adorned with whorls of red and yellow war paints. They carried great macana clubs, shaped like flat wooden bats with rectangular shards of napped obsidian embedded along the edges, sharper than even the finest blade. Fletcher imagined they could probably decapitate a horse in one stroke. Baker's journal described them as both mace and sword, crumpling armor and quartering flesh in equal measures.

Behind the orcs, loincloth-clad goblins rode in rows of two, armed with stone-tipped spears and misshapen clubs carved from tree branches. They appeared much like the specimen Fletcher had seen at the great council, shorter than him by a head and scrawny to boot, with long noses and flapping ears.

Their steeds were cassowaries, great ostrich-like birds with black feathers so fine they almost appeared like fur. The long featherless necks on their flightless bodies were a bright blue color, and long red wattles dangled from their chins. Strangest of all, they had humped casks cresting their heads, not unlike a short, blunt horn embedded in their skulls. Fletcher shuddered as their raptor talons ripped up the ground beneath them, each one capable of disemboweling a man with a single kick.

He knew from the findings in Baker's journal that cassowaries were only ever ridden by younger orcs, when they were small enough that the birds could bear their weight. With the arrival of the goblins, the orcs had found another use for them.

"My god, there are so many of them," Sylva whispered.

There were at least fifty goblins in the column, their frog-like eyes scanning the forest for movement. Trotting at the heels of the cavalcade were two spotted hyenas, their powerful, squat bodies ranging up and down the column, sniffing at the ground. For a moment a hyena paused by the trail, its pug snout snorting at the ground directly ahead of where

they stood huddled. They watched in silence as it moved closer . . . It began to growl, and Sylva grabbed Fletcher's arm in alarm . . . but a guttural bark from one of the orcs sent it scampering back to the front of the war-party.

Fortunately for the team, the goblins seemed to be following the scent they had left down the trail. It occurred to Fletcher that they might be smelling something else, not far away. Perhaps the Wendigo?

It took no more than a minute for them to pass by, but it felt like an age before Fletcher gathered the nerve to step out on the path once more. As he did so, Athena swooped down and alighted on his shoulder, while Ignatius leaped into his arms and buried his head in Fletcher's chest. It had been a close call.

"Right, I say we get off this trail," Fletcher announced, his voice trembling with nervous energy.

"Agreed," Othello said, emerging from the forest with the others. "When the trail runs cold, they'll come back this way."

"Those birds looked like demons," Cress said, staring after them. "I've never seen anything like that before."

"Trust me, they're a real animal," Jeffrey lectured. "They're fast as hell and kick like a mule. You should see their eggs, giant green things, you'd take one look at them and think they could be a goblin's eggs. Try having one of those for breakfa—"

"You realize they're heading right for Isadora and the others," Cress interrupted, looking in the direction of the column.

"That's perfect," Sylva said. "Maybe they'll take each other out."

But Fletcher looked to Lysander, who was watching the retreating army with a concerned expression. Lord Forsyth would have one of Lysander's scrying crystals with him, so Hannibal would be able to relay a warning to Tarquin and the others. But he knew that with the Wendigo's size and stench, they would find it difficult to avoid the

prowlng hyenas. It was tempting. The thought of Didric and the twins being ambushed by orcs was an image he had pictured on many a lonely night in his cell, but then he felt a twinge of rebuke from Athena's consciousness. Fletcher sighed. She was right. He turned to his friends.

"Why are we here?" Fletcher asked, looking them all in the eye.

"To destroy a few thousand goblin eggs and rescue Rufus's mother, Lady Cavendish," Sylva said, already swinging her pack onto her shoulders.

"No. Why are *we* here?" Fletcher asked again.

They stared at him silently, as if confused by the question.

"Our team is supposed to be a shining example to the world of cooperation between the races," Fletcher said. "We are to prove that dwarves and elves are worthy of humanity's respect. Now, I want them dead as much as you, I'd kill them myself if I had a chance. But how will it look if we abandon Isadora's team, leaving them to be slaughtered?"

Othello and Sylva avoided his eyes, but they knew he spoke the truth.

"They're hunting us," Sylva whispered. "This *is* our chance."

"We don't know that," Cress replied stubbornly. "They could have changed their minds about their route in."

"If they're killed, that's one team fewer to join the raid. Even if they manage to escape, the orcs will raise the alarm," Cress said, lending Fletcher her support.

"But it's Didric, Tarquin, Isadora, even Grindle! They've all tried to kill every one of us. You're naive, Cress—the world would be a better place without them," Sylva snarled, and Fletcher couldn't fault her words. Was he really going to save the people who had plotted his execution? He hesitated, but then Cress spoke again.

"What about Atlas? Does he deserve death just because we don't like the company he keeps?" she asked quietly. "If we let them die, we

would be no better than they are, putting our own ends before the safety of Hominum.”

Sylva exhaled with frustration, then turned back the way they had come, unslinging her bow as she did so.

“Let’s get this over with,” she growled.

# CHAPTER 31

THEY SHADOWED THE ORC PATROL for half an hour, using Athena's vision to make sure they stayed just out of sight. Fortunately, the riders were upwind of them, so the snuffling hyenas could not smell their approach.

"Wait," Fletcher hissed, holding up his fist. "They've stopped."

From her vantage point above, Athena could see that the trio of rhinos at the front had come to a halt. Just ahead, the hyenas were yipping with a high-pitched cackle at the trees around them.

"No guns," Fletcher whispered. "Bows only. Loose on my signal."

They took up positions on either side of the trail, keeping to the bushes. It had been a long time since Fletcher had used his bow, but as soon as it was in his grip it all came back, the string gliding easily along his fingers as he nocked a blue-fletched arrow to it. Beside him, Cress grunted as she wound her crossbow, the metal lever on the side slipping in her sweaty fingers.

"Jeffrey, stay back and cover our rear," Fletcher ordered, lining up his shot. "If another patrol comes I want to know about it."

He did not pull back just yet, for he knew that he shot better in

a single, fluid motion. Instead, he concentrated on the orcs as the first dismounted and peered into the forest.

A fireball took the orc in the chest, blasting him into the jungle. More sizzled through the air like meteorites, throwing the column into disarray. Isadora's team had prepared an ambush.

"Now!" Fletcher shouted as the goblins at the back turned to flee. Two arrows and a bolt thrummed into the heaving creatures, plucking them from their mounts with deadly accuracy.

"Again," Fletcher growled, and another volley followed the first, thumping into cassowary and goblin alike. At the head of the column, the Wendigo burst through the trees, slashing left and right at the two remaining orcs while fireballs, lightning and kinetic blasts buzzed inaccurately through the air.

Miraculously, a goblin made it past their barrage of arrows, his cassowary hurtling them down the trail, away from the battle. Fletcher shouted a warning.

"Don't let him get a—"

A hurlbat axe whirled through the air and took the cassowary's right leg off, sending it head over heels. Then Othello erupted from the undergrowth, dispatching the goblin and bird with two chops of his battle-axe.

Dozens of goblins shrieked with fury and thundered toward the exposed dwarf. But a screech from above gave them pause. Lysander hurled himself out of the branches above, bowling through the cassowary riders in a whirlwind of wings and talons. Even as the goblins fell to the ground, the birds kicked and jabbed their beaks, and the Griffin roared with pain.

"Close in!" Fletcher ordered, and then he was running, khopesh drawn, heart pounding as hard as his feet did against the ground.

The first goblin swung his club, still dazed from being knocked off his mount. Fletcher parried and riposted, taking it through the sternum and blasting it from the blade with a shot of kinetic energy. Cress's torc

knocked another goblin to the ground, while Sylva decapitated a flailing cassowary with a sweep of her falx. Othello's hurlbat axes peppered the massed goblins from over Fletcher's shoulders, thrumming dangerously close to his ears.

It gave Lysander enough time to throw himself back into the air, sprinkling the ground below with droplets of blood. There was no time to assess the Griffin's injuries, for as the first row of goblins went down, another took its place, lunging at the trio with howls of anger.

"Back," Fletcher gasped as a club struck his left elbow, leaving his tattooed hand to hang limply by his side. Othello stepped in beside Sylva to protect the right of the trail, while Cress and Fletcher held the left.

Goblins and cassowaries crowded toward the thin line of summoners, spreading into the jungle in an attempt to flank them. A gout of flame from the undergrowth sent a group of goblins scrambling back, one spinning away and screeching as Ignatius scabbled at its face. After one last slash, the Salamander dived back into the bushes, daring the goblins to leave the trail once again.

On the other side, lightning crackled into the massed creatures, dropping several to spasm and twitch on the ground. Cress's demon, Tosk, had joined the battle.

"Where's Sariel?" Fletcher shouted, sweeping his khopesh in a wide arc, and a goblin skittered back with a deep gash along its rib cage. "Solomon?"

There was a splintering sound from behind, and half of Fletcher's question was answered. Tree branches arced overhead, slamming into the snarling goblins, and the guttural roar told Fletcher that Solomon was making use of his great strength.

Sariel erupted from the bushes, snatching a cassowary by the legs and dragging it into the greenery. Sylva gasped with pain as the two creatures tore into each other, the crackle of broken branches accompanied by snarls and screeches.

“Battle spells,” Fletcher ordered as the feeling returned to his arm once more. “But conserve your mana.”

Sylva’s etching was so fast that he had barely finished his sentence before her fireball buzzed into the nearest goblin, blasting it down to twist and wail on the ground, scrabbling at its chest. More followed from Cress and Othello, while Fletcher whipped a tongue of kinetic energy into the air, sending the few remaining riders tumbling.

Still the goblins pressed in, their gnarled clubs parrying Fletcher’s thinner blade to jar his arm up to the shoulder. A hurled spear sliced past Fletcher’s face. He felt a flash of pain as it caught his cheek, the trickle of hot blood mingling with the sweat pooling at the base of his neck. He shook his head and slashed a goblin across the face in return, sending it spinning away, clutching at its head.

A kick from a squawking cassowary hurled Cress back, but it failed to pierce her jacket. She responded with a bolt of lightning that took off its head in a spray of blood, and staggered back into the fight.

Flame flared from Ignatius, spiraling into the goblins as they surged forward once again, blinding them. Tosk added a jagged streak of electric blue, hurling the front-runners into those behind in a tangle of limbs and clubs. In the brief respite, Fletcher took the opportunity to concentrate on his scrying crystal, the overlay showing him the full picture of the battlefield.

The two orcs were holding their own against the Wendigo, while Isadora’s team stayed hidden in the bushes, keeping the goblins at bay with the liberal use of spells. It depleted their mana reserves, but was a winning strategy; dozens of the convoy’s corpses littered the ground and the rest were huddled behind the corpses of the rhinos, which had already been dispatched. Of the fifty mounted goblins that had started, no more than a score remained. Even the hyenas were dead, their heavysset bodies splayed out in a macabre slumber.

That was when it all went wrong. One of the remaining orcs broke

from the pack, bolting into the jungle. With Lysander out of the picture and Sariel locked in a life-and-death struggle out of sight, Fletcher had no choice but to break from his team.

“No survivors,” he yelled over his shoulder.

Then he was deep in the forest, following the sound of crashing branches as the orc tore his way through the undergrowth. The air was suddenly still and silent, disturbed only by a poorly aimed spell whiffing through the leaves above. He sensed Ignatius following but did not have time to wait for him. Instead, he instructed Athena to remain above the battle and watch for more runaways. From her vantage point, he could see that Solomon had taken his place in the line, using a small sapling as a club to batter the goblins and cassowaries aside.

In the new quiet, the adrenaline began to leave Fletcher, his cheek stinging with each pulse of his rapidly beating heart. He was bone tired and his lungs burned in his chest. Still he staggered on, ignoring the flies that buzzed around his head, hungry for the salt in the blood and sweat that coated him.

He followed the crash and snap of the retreating orc, wishing he had thought it all through. The two orcs had battled the Wendigo without difficulty. Now he would face one alone.

There was a rattle of disturbed vegetation, then a gray-skinned orc appeared just ahead, cleaving at a thick patch of thorny branches with its macana club. Up close it was enormous, towering over him. He thought it as broad and muscular as Berdon and Jakov put together.

Fletcher didn't hesitate. He leaped with his khopesh in both hands, the point aimed squarely at the center of the orc's back. It missed the spine by a hand's breadth, spitting the orc through its midriff, the resistance a fraction of what Fletcher had expected.

He yelled with triumph as the orc stiffened, a guttural bellow spraying heart-blood on the leaves ahead of it. Then Fletcher's head exploded with pain and his mouth was filled with the taste of rotting leaves and blood. The orc had spun, backhanding him into the ground.

A callused foot slammed into the earth beside him as he rolled away, just in time. He fired a kinetic pulse, blasting himself from the earth to stand once again. No sooner was he on his feet than he was diving aside, the macana chopping through the air in a great, swinging arc. He sprawled into the thorny bush the orc had been blocked by, his jacket caught on the hooked thorns, arms spread like a crucified man.

Bloody froth bubbled from the orc's mouth as it bellowed in triumph, lifeblood pumping from around the blade in its chest in dark gout. It raised the macana, chuckling throatily as it lifted Fletcher's chin with the flat of the club. The obsidian shards on the tip dug into the soft flesh of his throat as the orc leaned forward, almost gently. His would not be a slow death.

Ignatius barreled out of the undergrowth, a sweeping tidal wave of flame heralding his arrival as he landed on the orc's face. His tail struck like a scorpion's, stabbing madly at the orc's eyes, nose and mouth, while the flames flowed over the orc's face in great pulsing waves. Fletcher tugged himself free, ripping the coat from the thorns' embrace after a few moments' struggle. It was just in time, for the orc chopped blindly at him, even managing to slice a button from Fletcher's sleeve. Then it was finished, the orc falling to its knees and keeling over, the last spurts of blood from its chest turning into a trickle.

Ignatius sprung into Fletcher's arms, mewling with sympathy and licking at the wounds in his throat. They stood like that for a while, basking in the glory of being alive. The wounds on Fletcher's neck stung as Ignatius lapped his tongue along the wounds, but soon the feeling was strangely soothing. He ran his fingers along his neck tentatively, only to find the wounds had gone.

"Bloody hell," he exclaimed. He held Ignatius up to his face and the demon yapped happily, licking the tip of Fletcher's nose.

"You must have a healing symbol hidden in that tongue somewhere." Fletcher laughed, rubbing Ignatius's head affectionately. "Even after all this time, you still manage to surprise me. Best not tell Jeffrey,

though—he'll have that tongue out and on his operating table if we're not careful."

Ignatius wriggled in his grip and he set the Salamander on the ground. As he did so, he saw the orc's face and winced. It had been burned away, leaving only a blackened skull beneath, while the leathery gray skin of its belly and legs was covered with blood. Red and yellow whorls and stripes of war paint adorned its chest and what was left of its cheeks. Without it, the orc would be practically naked, were it not for the rough-spun skirt that protected its modesty.

Fletcher's khopesh was stuck fast in the orc's flesh. He grimaced at the grisly sight and bent to tug it out.

A crossbow bolt hissed over his head like a striking snake, thudding into a tree behind him. Fletcher fell to the ground and pulled the orc's corpse onto its side as a shield. Another bolt sailed right toward Fletcher a moment later, but it stuck into the orc body's shoulder, the force of it so strong that it broke through, the tip stopping an inch from Fletcher's face. The accuracy and speed was astounding, that of a trained assassin.

Then, as Fletcher powered up his finger for a counterattack, the ambusher retreated, leaving the crash of broken branches in his wake. The grinning skull of the orc seemed to laugh at Fletcher as he shoved the corpse aside in disgust. Fletcher took a moment to catch his breath. If he hadn't bent to pull out his khopesh from the orc, he would have been skewered through the chest.

He tugged the crossbow bolt from the trunk and held it up to the dim light of the jungle. Blue fletching. Just like Cress's.

When Fletcher returned to the others, the battle was over. Solomon was busy digging a large grave, his great hands shoveling aside the dirt in a small clearing. It was good thinking; a pile of corpses would bring forth all sorts of carrion eaters, and the clouds of vultures above would attract too much attention. Jeffrey was farther up the trail, examining a goblin corpse and writing notes in a leather-bound journal. His hands were shaking with adrenaline, resulting in an uneven scrawl.

Othello had just healed Lysander, the last traces of white light dissolving from the bloodied feathers along the Griffin's side. Cress was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is Isadora's team?" Fletcher shouted, brandishing the bolts.

Sylva looked up from where she kneeled, in the middle of healing Sariel's wounds.

"They ran off," she said, her voice dull with exhaustion. "Didn't even thank us for our help."

"One of them tried to kill me," Fletcher announced, holding up the blue-fletched crossbow bolt. "With these."

"Aren't those Cress's?"

"I don't think she lost them after all. I think they stole them."

"You're joking," Othello growled, unrolling his summoning leather for Solomon to stand on. He infused the demon in a burst of white light, for the poor Golem was staggering with exhaustion.

"I wish I was," Fletcher said. He paused, realizing the implications. The attackers could have used a spell, or an arrow of their own. Instead, they had chosen ammunition that only Cress could have used. They wanted to frame her for the attack.

Othello had clearly been thinking along the same lines.

"If we had come across your body with that stuck in you, the whole of Hominum would think Cress had killed you," the dwarf said, snatching the offending projectiles from Fletcher's hand. "They might even think Cress was working with the Anvils."

"I don't know . . ." Sylva said, examining the bolt. "We're jumping to conclusions. We barely know her. Maybe she is working for the Anvils."

"Yeah, and I'm a goblin in disguise," Othello scoffed. "If she was a traitor, I'd know about it. The dwarven community is a small one; there are barely a few thousand of us left. I know who the trouble makers are."

Fletcher looked around.

"Speaking of Cress, where is she?" he asked.

“Right here,” came a voice from behind him.

Cress emerged from the jungle, Tosk perched on her shoulder. Her face was drenched with sweat and her crossbow hung limply in her hand.

“I see you caught the orc,” she said. “Well done. I tried to catch up with you but got lost—” She stopped as she caught the stunned expressions from the others.

“Where did you get that?” she asked, catching sight of the quarrels clutched in Othello’s fist.

“You tell me,” Sylva said, standing up and narrowing her eyes at the dwarf. “Someone just tried to kill Fletcher with it.”

Cress remained silent, her eyes still fixed on the bolts. Sylva motioned with her chin at the jungle behind the dwarf.

“In there.”

“I—I lost them,” Cress stammered, looking over her shoulder. “Whoever it was must have taken them from my quiver back at camp, like I said earlier.”

“That’s a convenient story,” Sylva said, crossing her arms and studying Cress’s face.

“Your arrows are missing too,” Cress countered.

Something stung Fletcher’s neck and he slapped at it irritably.

“It was Isadora’s team, I know it,” he said, putting an arm around Cress’s shoulders. He suddenly felt very weak, and it was a relief to lean against her. “This is exactly what they want, for us to turn on one another. Now we know why they were following us.”

Sylva glared at him, then jumped up and slapped at her thigh.

“Damned insects,” she snarled, plucking something from her leg. But what she held between her fingers was not an insect at all. It was a tiny dart.

The projectile swam in Fletcher’s vision and suddenly he was on his knees. The ground rushed up to meet him.