

THE
NOVICE

CHAPTER

1

IT WAS NOW OR NEVER. If Fletcher didn't make this kill, he would go hungry tonight. Dusk was fast approaching and he was already running late. He needed to make his way back to the village soon, or the gates would close. If that happened, he would either have to bribe the guards with money he didn't have or take his chances in the woods overnight.

The young elk had just finished rubbing its antlers against a tall pine, scraping the soft velvet that coated them to leave the sharp tines beneath. From its small size and stature, Fletcher could tell it was a juvenile, sporting its first set of antlers. It was a fine specimen, with glossy fur and bright, intelligent eyes.

Fletcher felt almost ashamed to hunt such a majestic creature, yet he was already adding up its value in his head. The thick coat would do well when the fur traders came by, especially as it was now winter. It would probably make at least five shillings. The antlers were in good condition, if a little small, they might fetch four shillings if he was lucky. It was the meat he craved the most, gamy red venison that would drip sizzling fat into his cooking fire.

A thick mist hung heavy in the air, coating Fletcher in a thin layer of dew. The forest was unusually still. Normally the wind rattled the branches, allowing him to stalk through the undergrowth unheard. Now he barely allowed himself to breathe.

He unslung his bow and nocked an arrow to it. It was his best arrow, the shaft straight and true, the fletching from good goose feathers rather than the cheap turkey feathers he bought in the market. He took a shallow breath and drew back on the bowstring. It was slippery on his fingers; he had coated it in goose fat to protect it from the moisture in the air.

The point swam in and out of focus as he centered it on the elk. Fletcher was crouched a good hundred feet away, hidden in the tall grass. A difficult shot, but the lack of wind brought its own rewards. No gust to jar the arrow in its flight.

He breathed and shot in one fluid motion, embracing the moment of stillness in body and mind that he had learned from bitter and hungry experience. He heard the dull thrum of the bowstring jarring and then a thud as the arrow hit home.

It was a beautiful shot, taking the elk through the chest, into the lungs and heart. The animal collapsed and convulsed, thrashing on the ground, its hooves drumming a tattoo on the earth in its death throes.

He sprinted toward his prey and drew a skinning knife from the slim scabbard at his thigh, but the stag was dead before he got to it. A good clean kill, that's what Berdon would have said. Killing was always messy. The bloody froth bubbling from the elk's mouth was testament to that.

He removed the arrow carefully and was happy to see the shaft had not snapped, nor had the flint point chipped on the elk's ribs. Although he was Fletcher by name, the amount of time he spent binding his arrows frustrated him. He preferred the work Berdon would occasionally give him, hammering and shaping iron in the forge. Perhaps it was

the heat, or the way his muscles ached deliciously after a hard day's work. Or maybe it was the coin that weighed down his pockets when he was paid afterward.

The young elk was heavy, but he was not far from the village. The antlers made for good handholds, and the carcass slipped easily enough over the wet grass. His only concern would be the wolves or even the wildcats now. It was not unknown for them to steal a hunter's meal, if not his life, as he brought his prize back home.

He was hunting on the ridge of the Beartooth Mountains, so called for their distinctive twin peaks that looked like two canines. The village lay on the jagged ridge between them, the only path up to it on a steep and rocky trail in clear view from the gates. A thick wooden palisade surrounded the village, with small watchtowers at intervals along the top. It had not been attacked for a long time, only once in Fletcher's fifteen years in fact. Even then, it had been a small band of thieves rather than an orc raid, unlikely as that was this far north of the jungles. Despite this, the village council took security very seriously, and getting in after the ninth bell was always a nightmare for latecomers.

Fletcher maneuvered the animal's carcass onto the thick grass that grew beside the rocky path. He didn't want to damage the coat; it was the most valuable part of the elk. Furs were one of the few resources the village had to trade, earning it its name: Pelt.

It was heavy going and the path was treacherous underfoot, even more so in the dark. The sun had already disappeared behind the ridge, and Fletcher knew the bell would be sounding any minute. He gritted his teeth and hurried, stumbling and cursing as he grazed his knees on the gravel.

His heart sank when he reached the front gates. They were closed, the lanterns above lit for their nightlong vigil. The lazy guards had closed up early, eager for a drink in the village tavern.

"You lazy sods! The ninth bell hasn't even rung yet." Fletcher cursed

and let the elk's antlers fall to the ground. "Let me in! I'm not sleeping out here just because you can't wait to drink yourselves stupid." He slammed his boot into the door.

"Now, now, Fletcher, keep it down. There's good people sleeping in here," came a voice from above. It was Didric. He leaned out over the parapet above Fletcher, his large moonish face grinning nastily.

Fletcher grimaced. Of all the guards who could have been on duty tonight, it had to be Didric Cavell, the worst of the bunch. He was fifteen, the same age as Fletcher, but he fancied himself a full-grown man. Fletcher did not like Didric. The guardsman was a bully, always looking for an excuse to exercise his authority.

"I sent the day-watch off early tonight. You see, I take my duties very seriously. Can't be too careful with the traders arriving tomorrow. You never know what kind of riffraff will be sneaking about outside." He chuckled at his jibe.

"Let me in, Didric. You and I both know that the gates should be open until the ninth bell," said Fletcher. Even as he spoke he heard the bell begin its sonorous knell, echoing dully in valleys below.

"What was that? I can't hear you," yelled Didric, holding a hand up to his ear theatrically.

"I said let me in, you dolt. This is illegal! I'll have to report you if you don't open the gates this minute," he shouted, flaring up at the pale face above the palisade.

"Well, you could do that, and I certainly wouldn't begrudge you your right to. In all likelihood we would both be punished, and that wouldn't do anyone any good. So why don't we cut a deal here. You leave me that elk, and I save you the trouble of sleeping in the forest tonight."

"Shove it up your arse," Fletcher spat in disbelief. This was blatant blackmail.

"Come now, Fletcher, be reasonable. The wolves and the wildcats

will come prowling, and even a bright campfire won't keep them away in the winter. You can either leg it when they arrive, or stay and be an appetizer. Either way, even if you do last until morning, you'll be walking through these gates empty-handed. Let me help you out." Didric's voice was almost friendly, as if he was doing Fletcher a favor.

Fletcher's face burned red. This was beyond anything he had experienced before. Unfairness was common in Pelt, and Fletcher had long ago accepted that in a world of haves and have-nots, he was definitely the latter. But now this spoiled brat, a son to one of the richest men in the village no less, was stealing from him.

"Is that it then?" Fletcher asked, his voice low and angry. "You think you're very clever, don't you?"

"It's just the logical conclusion to a situation in which I happen to be the beneficiary," Didric said, flicking his blond fringe from his eyes. It was well known that Didric was privately tutored, flaunting his education with flowery speech. It was his father's hope that he would one day be a judge, eventually going to a law house in one of the larger cities in Hominum.

"You forgot one thing," Fletcher growled. "I would much rather sleep out in the woods than watch you take my kill."

"Hah! I think I'll call your bluff. I've a long night ahead of me. It will be fun to watch you try and fend off the wolves," Didric said with a laugh.

Fletcher knew Didric was baiting him, but it didn't stop his blood boiling. He gulped the anger down, but it still simmered at the back of his mind.

"I won't give you the elk. There's five shillings in the fur alone, and the meat will be worth another three. Just let me in, and I'll forget about reporting you. We can put this whole thing behind us," Fletcher suggested, swallowing his pride with difficulty.

"I'll tell you what. I can't come away completely empty-handed, that

wouldn't do now, would it? But since I'm feeling generous, if you give me those antlers you neglected to mention, I'll call it a night, and we can both get what we want."

Fletcher stiffened at the nerve of the suggestion. He struggled for a moment and then let it go. Four shillings were worth a night in his own bed, and to Didric it was nothing but pocket change. He groaned and took out his skinning knife. It was razor sharp, but it was not designed for cutting through antlers. He hated to mutilate the elk, but he would have to take its head.

A minute later and with some sawing at the vertebrae, the head was in his hands, dripping blood all over his moccasins. He grimaced and held it up for Didric to see.

"Alright, Didric, come and get it," Fletcher said, brandishing the grisly trophy.

"Throw it up here," said Didric. "I don't trust you to hand it over."

"What?" cried Fletcher in disbelief.

"Throw it up now or the deal is off. I can't be bothered to wrestle it from you and get blood all over my uniform," Didric threatened. Fletcher groaned and hurled it up, splattering his own tunic with blood as he did so. It flew over Didric's head and clattered on the parapet. He made no move to get it.

"Nice doing business with you, Fletcher. I'll see you tomorrow. Have fun camping in the woods," he said cheerily.

"Wait," shouted Fletcher. "What about our deal?"

"I held up my end of the bargain, Fletcher. I said I'd call it a night, and we'd both get what we want. And you said earlier you would rather sleep in the woods than give me your elk. So there you go, you get what you want, and I get what I want. You really should pay attention to the wording in any agreement, Fletcher. It's the first lesson a judge learns." His face began to withdraw from the parapet.

“That wasn’t the deal! Let me in, you little worm!” Fletcher roared, kicking at the door.

“No, no, my bed is waiting for me back at home. I can’t say the same for you though.” Didric laughed as he turned away.

“You’re on watch tonight. You can’t go home,” yelled Fletcher. If Didric left his watch, Fletcher could get his revenge by reporting him. He had never considered himself a snitch, but for Didric he would make an exception.

“Oh, it’s not my watch,” Didric’s voice shouted faintly as he descended the palisade steps. “I never said it was. I told Jakov I’d keep an eye out while he used the privy. He should be back any minute.”

Fletcher clenched his fists, almost unable to comprehend the extent of Didric’s deceit. He looked at the headless carcass by his ruined shoes. As the fury rose up in him like bile in his throat, he had only one thought in his mind. This was not the end of it. Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER 2

“GET OUT OF BED, FLETCHER. This is the only time of year I actually need you up on time. I can’t mind the market stall and shoe the packhorses at the same time.” Berdon’s ruddy face swam into view as Fletcher opened his eyes.

Fletcher groaned and pulled his furs over his head. It had been a long night. Jakov had made him wait outside for an hour before he let him in, on the condition that Fletcher bought him a drink next time they were in the tavern.

Before Fletcher had a chance to bed down, he had to gut and skin the elk, as well as trim the meat and hang it by the hearth to dry. He only allowed himself one juicy slice, half cooked on the fire before he lost patience and crammed it into his mouth. In the winter it was always best to preserve the meat for later; Fletcher didn’t know when his next meal was coming at the best of times.

“Now, Fletcher! And clean yourself up. You stink like a pig. I don’t want you driving customers away. Nobody wants to buy from a vagrant.”

Berdon yanked his furs away and strode out of Fletcher's tiny room at the back of the forge.

Fletcher winced at the loss of his covers and sat up. His room was warmer than he had expected. Berdon must have been at the hot forge all night, preparing for trading day. Fletcher had long ago learned to sleep through the clanging of metal, the roar of the bellows and the sizzle as the red-hot weapons were doused.

He trudged through the forge room to the small well outside, where Berdon drew his dousing water. He hauled up the bucket and, with only a moment's hesitation, poured the freezing water over his head. His tunic and trousers were soaked as well, but since they were still covered in blood from the night before, it would probably do them some good. Several more bucketfuls and a brisk scrub with a pumice stone later, Fletcher was back in the forge room, shivering and clutching his arms to his chest.

"Come on then. Let's have a look at you." Berdon stood in the doorway to his own room, the light from the hearth illuminating his long red hair. He was by far the largest man in the village, long hours of beating metal in his forge giving him broad shoulders and a barrel-like chest. He dwarfed Fletcher, who was small and wiry for his age.

"Just as I thought. You need a shave. My aunt Gerla had a thicker mustache than that. Get rid of that wispy fuzz until you can grow a real one, like mine." Berdon's eyes twinkled as he twirled the red handlebar that bristled above his grizzled beard. Fletcher knew he was right. Today the traders were coming, and they would often bring their city-born daughters with their long pleated skirts and ringleted hair. Though he knew from bitter experience that they would turn up their noses at him, it wouldn't hurt to be at least presentable today.

"Off you go. I'll lay out the clothes you're going to wear today whilst you shave. And no complaints! The more professional you look, the better our merchandise does."

Fletcher trudged back outside into the freezing cold. The forge lay right by the village gates, with the wooden palisade edge just a few feet from the back wall of Fletcher's room. A mirror and small washbasin lay discarded nearby. Fletcher removed his skinning knife and trimmed away the fledgling black whiskers, before scrutinizing his face in the mirror.

He was pale, which was not surprising this far north in Hominum. The summers were short in Pelt, with a brief but happy few weeks spent with the other boys in the forest, tickling trout in the streams and roasting hazelnuts by the fire. It was the one time when Fletcher did not feel like an outsider.

His face was harsh, with sharp cheekbones and dark brown eyes that were slightly sunken. His hair was a thick, shaggy mess of black, which Berdon would literally shear when it got too wild. Fletcher knew he was not ugly, but nor was he handsome compared with the rich, well-fed boys with ruddy cheeks and blond hair who populated the village. Dark hair was unusual in the northern settlements; yet since he had been abandoned in front of the gates as a baby, Fletcher was not surprised he looked nothing like the others—just another thing to set him apart from the rest.

When he returned, Fletcher saw Berdon had laid out a pale blue tunic and bright green trousers on his bed. He blanched at the colors but swallowed his comments when he saw Berdon's remonstrative stare. The clothes would not look unusual on trading day. Traders were well known for their flamboyant garb.

"I'll let you get dressed," said Berdon with a chuckle, ducking out of the room.

Fletcher knew that Berdon's teasing was his way of being affectionate, so he didn't let it get to him. He had never been the talkative type, preferring his own company and thoughts. Berdon had always been respectful of his privacy, ever since he had been first able to speak. It was

a strange relationship—the gruff, good-natured bachelor and his introvert apprentice—yet they made it work somehow. Fletcher would always be grateful that Berdon took him in, when nobody else would.

He had been abandoned with nothing, not even a basket or swaddling. Just a naked baby in the snow, screaming at the top of its lungs outside the gates. The snobby rich folk wouldn't take him in, nor could the poor afford to. It had been the hardest winter Pelt ever endured, and food was scarce. In the end, Berdon offered to keep him, since he had been the one who had found him in the first place. He was not wealthy, but he had no mouths to feed and he did not rely on the seasons to work, so in many ways he was ideal.

Fletcher harbored deep hatred for his mother, even if he had no idea who she was. What kind of person would leave her naked baby to die in the snow? He had always wondered if it had been a girl from Pelt itself, unable or unwilling to raise him. He would often look searchingly into the faces of the women around him, comparing their features with his own. He didn't know why he bothered. None of them looked anything like him.

Fletcher's stall, now laden with shining swords and daggers, was already set up by the main road that ran from the gate to the back of the town. His was not the only one. Along the way there were more stalls, heavy with meats and furs. Other wares were on display, furniture hewn from the tall pines that grew on Beartooth and silver petalled mountain flowers in pots for the gardens of the rich city housewives.

Leather was another of Pelt's famous wares, their jackets and jerkins prized above all others for their fine craftsmanship and stitching. Fletcher had his eye on one jacket in particular. He'd sold most of his furs throughout the year to other hunters, and had managed to save over three hundred shillings for this one purchase. He could see it hanging farther down, although Janet—the trader who had spent several weeks making it—had told him he could only buy it for

three hundred shillings if nobody made a better offer by the end of the day.

The jacket was perfect. The inside was lined with downy mountain hare fur, soft and gray with a peppering of hazel. The leather itself was a deep mahogany color, hardy and unblemished. It was waterproof and would not easily stain, nor would it be torn as he chased his prey through the forest brambles. It was closed by simple wooden toggles and came with a deep peaked hood. Fletcher could already picture himself crouched in the rain, warm and hidden with an arrow nocked to his bow.

Berdon was seated behind him outside the forge, beside an anvil and a pile of horseshoes. Although his weapons and armor were of high quality, he had found that there was plenty of money to be made in re-shoeing the packhorses for the weary traders, whose long journey to the remote villages along Beartooth had only just begun.

The last year the traders had stopped by, Fletcher was kept busy the entire day, even sharpening their swords after the stall had been emptied. It had been a good year for selling weapons. The Hominum Empire had declared war on a new front on the northern side of the Beartooth Mountains. The elven clans had refused to pay their yearly tax, money that the Hominum Empire demanded in exchange for their protection from the orc tribes of the southern jungles, all the way on the other side of Hominum. The empire had declared war to extract their dues and the traders had feared elven raiding parties. In the end, it became a war of principle with a few skirmishes, but nothing more and ended in a gentlemen's agreement not to escalate. There was one thing that both nations agreed on implicitly: The orcs were the true enemy.

“Will I have time to look around this year?” Fletcher asked.

“I should think so. Not much call for new weaponry at the moment. Beartooth's new military may be old men and cripples, but I think the traders believe the presence of troops will dissuade brigands from

roaming around here and attacking their convoys. The worst part is they're probably right. We won't get much business from *them*. But at least we know there's still demand for my services from the military, after your visit to the front line last month."

Fletcher shuddered at the memory of his journey over the mountain to the nearest fort. The front line was a grim affair, full of dead-eyed men, waiting for release from their military contracts. The elven front was the dumping ground for the men the military didn't want. The empty bellies who could no longer fight.

Chaffing. That was what the soldiers had called it. Some considered it a blessing, away from the horrors of the jungle trenches. Men died in their thousands on the orcish front, their heads taken as trophies and left on spikes at the jungle's border. The orcs were a savage, mindless race, dark creatures with merciless and sadistic intent.

Yet it was a different kind of horror on the elven border. A steady degradation. A slow starvation from half rations. Endless drills from tired sergeants who knew nothing else to do. Uninspired generals who would stay in their warm offices, while the men shivered in their cots.

The quartermaster had been reluctant to buy anything, but his quota needed to be filled and the supply lines over Beartooth had long been reduced to a trickle as the demand on the orc front increased. The bundle of swords Fletcher had been carrying on his back since that morning were sold for far more than they were worth, leaving him with a heavy, but considerably lighter load of a bag of silver shillings. If he had brought muskets he would have been paid in gold sovereigns. Berdon was hoping that the traders might trade firearms for swords. If that happened, he could upsell the muskets to the quartermaster next season.

As Fletcher lay in his borrowed bunk in the barracks that night, waiting for the morning so he could return to Pelt in the light of day, he resolved that should he ever join the military, he would never allow himself to end up in such a place.

“You boy. Move your stall back from the gates. You’ll block the way for the traders,” an imperious voice snapped at him, breaking into his thoughts.

It was Didric’s father, Caspar, a tall, slim man dressed in fine velvet clothing, hand stitched from purple cloth that had been delicately embroidered with gold. He glared at Fletcher as if his very existence offended him. Didric stood behind him with a grin on his face, his hair plastered with wax into a blond side parting. Fletcher looked at the next stall over, which was considerably closer to the road than his.

“I won’t tell you again. Do it now, or I’ll call the guard,” Caspar barked. Fletcher looked at Berdon, who shrugged his broad shoulders and gave him a nod. In the grand scheme of things, it would make no difference. If someone needed weapons, they would find them.

Didric winked and made a shooing motion with his hands. Fletcher reddened, but moved to do as Caspar asked. Didric’s time would come, but his father was an incredibly powerful man. He was a moneylender and had almost the entire village in his pocket. When a baby needed medicine from the city, Caspar was there. When the hunting season went poorly, Caspar was there. When a fire destroyed a home, Caspar was there. How could a villager who could barely sign his own name on the lengthy contract understand the concept of compound interest, or the complex numbers written above? In the end, they all found the price of their salvation came at a cost higher than they could afford. Fletcher hated that Caspar was revered by many in the village, despite being nothing more than a con man.

As Fletcher struggled to shift the stall backward, dropping several carefully polished daggers in the dirt, the village bell began to toll. The traders had arrived.

CHAPTER 3

IT BEGAN, AS IT ALWAYS DID, with the creaking of wheels and the crack of whips. The path up the slope was uneven and steep, yet the traders would push their horses to the limit in the final stretch, eager for the prime locations at the end of the village's main road. Those who were last inevitably ended up by the gate entrance, away from the milling crowds deep inside the village.

Caspar stood at the entrance and waved them through, nodding and smiling to each of the drivers of the heavy-laden wagons as they rolled through the gates. Fletcher could see the horses had been pushed hard on this journey; their flanks shone with a froth of sweat and their eyes were wild with exhaustion. His face broke into a guilty grin at the state of them, knowing Berdon would be kept busy today. He hoped they had enough horseshoes for all of them.

As the last of the wagons pulled through the gate, two men with heavy blond mustaches and peaked caps trotted into the village. Their horses were not the plow horses that pulled the wagons, but heavy chargers with wide flanks and plate-sized hooves. They tossed their bridles

as they moved from the dirt path onto the uneven cobbles. Fletcher heard Berdon curse behind him and grimaced with sympathy.

The men's dark blue uniforms and brass buttons identified them as Pinkertons—lawmakers from the city. The muskets they held in their hands left no doubt of their status. Fletcher glanced at the metal-studded truncheons that sat holstered by the panniers in their saddles. They could break an arm or a leg with ease, and they had no qualms about doing so for the Pinkertons were only answerable to the king. Fletcher had no idea why they were accompanying the convoy, but their presence meant that there would be little need for protection on the route. There would be few sales at his stall that day.

The two men looked so alike they might have been brothers, with curling blond hair and cold gray eyes. They dismounted and the taller of the two strode up to Fletcher, his musket hanging loosely in his hands.

“Boy, take our horses to the village stable and have them fed and watered,” he said with a hard voice. Fletcher gaped at him, taken aback by the directness of the order. The man motioned at the horses as Fletcher paused, unwilling to leave the stall unattended.

“Don't mind him. He's a bit slow in the head,” Caspar's voice cut in. “We don't have a village stable. My son will see to your horses. Didric, take them to our personal stables and tell the stableboy to take extra care.”

“But, Father, I wanted to—” Didric began, his voice wheedling.

“Now, and be quick about it!” Caspar interrupted. Didric reddened and flashed Fletcher a black look, before taking the bridles of the two horses and leading them down the street. “So, what brings the Pinkertons to Pelt? We haven't seen any new faces for several weeks, if you are chasing outlaws,” Caspar said, holding his hand out.

The tall Pinkerton shook his hand reluctantly, forced to be civil now that his horse was in Caspar's care.

“Our business is with the military on the elven border. The king has expressed a desire to conscript criminals into the army, in doing so writing off their prison sentences. We are investigating whether the generals would be amenable to that, on his behalf.”

“Fascinating. Of course we knew that the enlistment rates had dropped recently, but this comes as a surprise. What an elegant solution to the problem,” Caspar said with a fixed smile. “Perhaps we can talk more about it over dinner and some brandy? Between you and I, the local inn is filthy, and we would be happy to provide you with comfortable beds after your long journey.”

“We would be grateful. We have traveled all the way from Corcillum and have not slept in a clean bed for almost a week,” the Pinkerton admitted, doffing his cap.

“Then we must draw you a bath and have a hot breakfast brought to you. My name is Caspar Cavell, I am a village elder of sorts here . . . ,” Caspar said, leading them down the road.

Fletcher considered the news as their voices faded. Criminals’ being pressed into the armed services was something he had never considered. Rumors had abounded that forced conscription for all young men was right around the corner, something that both worried and excited him. Conscription had been implemented in the Second Orc War, centuries ago. That war had been fought over orc raiding parties that stole livestock and slaughtered the townsfolk in the fledgling Hominum Empire. Hundreds of villages had been wiped out before the orcs were driven back into the jungles.

This time it was Hominum who had started it, clearing away their forests to fuel the industrial revolution that had just begun. That had been seven years ago, and the war showed no sign of ending anytime soon.

“If I could forge those muskets, there would be no need to open the stall at all,” Berdon grumbled from behind him. Fletcher nodded in

agreement. Muskets were in high demand on the front line, manufactured by the dwarven artificers that lived in the bowels of Corcillum. The techniques used to create their straight barrels and mechanisms were closely guarded secrets that the dwarves harbored jealously. It was a lucrative business, yet the technology had only been recently implemented in the military. Where before the orcs could often endure a hail of arrows when they charged, a barrage of musket fire had far more stopping power.

It was then Fletcher noticed a final traveler enter through the gates. He was a grizzled soldier, with gray hair and an unshaven face. He wore a red-and-white uniform, the cloth tattered and worn, spattered with mud and dust from the journey. Many of the brass buttons from his coat were missing or hanging loose. He was unarmed, unusual for a member of a trading convoy and even more so for a soldier.

He had no horse or wagon, but instead led a mule that was heavily laden with saddlebags. His boots were in a sorry state, the soles worn through and flapping with each staggering step he took. Fletcher watched as he settled in the space opposite him, tying the mule to the corner post of the next stall over and glaring at the vendor before he could protest.

He unpacked his saddlebags, spreading out a bundle of cloth and arranging several objects upon it. The soldier was likely on his way to the elven front, culled for being too old to fight as a soldier any longer, yet too incompetent to have been promoted to an officer. As if he could sense his gaze, the old man straightened and grinned at Fletcher's curiosity, showing a mouth full of missing teeth.

Fletcher craned his neck to get a better look at the soldier and his eyes widened as he saw what was for sale. There were huge flint arrowheads the size of a man's hand, the edges pitted to create barbs that would snag in the flesh. Necklaces made from strings of teeth and desiccated ears were untangled and laid out like the finest pendants. A rhino's horn,

tipped with an iron point, was arranged at the very front of the collection. The centerpiece was a huge orc skull, twice the size of a man's. It had been polished smooth and bleached by the jungle sun, with a heavy browridge jutting unnaturally over its eyeholes. The orc's lower canines were larger than Fletcher had imagined, extending out into tusks that were around three inches long. These were souvenirs from the front lines, to be sold as curiosities to northern cities, far from where the real war was being fought.

Fletcher turned and looked beseechingly at Berdon, who had also seen what the man had for sale. He shook his head and nodded at the stall. Fletcher sighed and turned his attention back to the arrangement of his own goods. It was going to be a long, fruitless day.

CHAPTER 4

A SMALL CROWD HAD GATHERED around the soldier, children mostly, but also a few guardsmen who had nothing to trade and no coin to spend.

“Come round, all of you! Everything you see here is the genuine article, the real deal. Every item has a bloodcurdling tale that will make you thank your lucky stars you live in the north,” he yelled with the flourish of a fruit vendor, tossing a spearhead high in the air and deftly catching it between his fingers.

“Perhaps I could interest you in a gremlin’s loincloth or an orc nose ring? You, sir, what do you say?” he said to a young boy with a finger firmly inserted in his ear, who was certainly not qualified to be called “sir.”

“What’s a gremlin?” asked the boy, his eyes widening.

“Gremlins are slaves to the orcs. One might compare them to a squire to one of the knights of old, tending to his every need. Not great fighters, it’s in their breeding to be servile. That and the fact that they

barely come up to the height of a man's knee," he said, demonstrating with his hand.

Fletcher eyed the trinkets with renewed interest. Most people had some idea of what gremlins were, even this far north. They stood on two legs, as the orcs did, but wore nothing but tattered scraps of cloth around their waists. Their large bat-like ears and long crooked noses were distinctive, as were their elongated and nimble fingers, expert at prying snails from their shells and insects from rotten logs. Gremlins had gray skin, just like an orc's, and their eyes were large and bulbous with sizeable pupils.

"Where did you get all this stuff?" asked the boy, kneeling to take a closer look at what was on offer.

"I took it from the dead, my boy. They have no use for it, not where they're going. It's my way of bringing a little taste of the war up here."

"Are you on your way to the elven front?" asked a guardsman. Fletcher saw it was Jakov, and ducked behind his stall. If Jakov noticed him, he might extract the price of the drink Fletcher had promised. He needed all his money to purchase the jacket.

"I am indeed, but not because I'm a useless bag of bones, no siree. I was the only survivor in my squad. Got caught in a night raid whilst on a scouting mission. We barely had a chance." His voice had a hint of grief in it, yet Fletcher could not be sure if it was genuine.

"What happened?" Jakov asked, his voice dripping with disbelief as he looked the old man up and down.

"I'd rather not say. It's not a memory I relish," the soldier murmured, avoiding Jakov's gaze. He lowered his head with apparent sadness. The crowd jeered and began to disperse, taking him for a liar.

"Alright, alright!" the soldier yelled, seeing his customers slipping away. This was probably his last stop before reaching the elven front, and he would likely find it difficult to sell his goods to the soldiers

there, many of whom would be all too familiar with the goods he had to offer.

“Our orders were to scout out the next forward line,” he began, as the crowd turned back to him. “The lines were advancing again. You see, the wood behind us had all been cleared, and we needed to move the trenches up.”

He began to speak with more confidence now, and Fletcher could see he was a natural storyteller.

“It was darker than a stack of black cats that night, barely a sliver of a moon to light our way. I can tell you, we made more noise than a rhino charging as we made our way through the thickets. It was a miracle we made it more than ten minutes without being noticed,” he intoned, his eyes seeming to mist over as if he were there again.

“Get on with it!” yelled one of the boys from the back, but his comment was met with glares and shushing as the crowd listened eagerly.

“Our battlemage led the way, his demon had good night vision, which helped somewhat; but it was all we could do not to accidentally fire our muskets, let alone keep our footing. A suicide mission if I’ve ever seen one. A waste of good men, that’s for sure,” the soldier continued, twirling the spearhead between his fingertips.

“They sent a summoner with you? Now that is a waste. I thought we had only a few hundred of them?” Jakov asked, his skepticism replaced with fascination.

“The mission was important, even if it was misguided. I didn’t know him well, but he was a good-enough fellow, although he was definitely not a very powerful summoner. He was fascinated by the orc shamans, always asking the soldiers what they knew about them and their demons. He was constantly scribbling and drawing in his book, investigating the remains of the orc villages we had passed over, copying the runes they painted on the walls of their huts.” The soldier must have noticed their faces begin to go blank as he went off topic, so he hurried on.

“In any case, it was not long before we were lost, the few stars we had been using to navigate covered by rain clouds. Our fate was sealed when the drizzle began. Have you ever tried firing a musket with wet gunpowder? It was one disaster after another.” He dropped the arrowhead on the cloth and balled his fists together with emotion.

“The orc’s chosen projectile is a javelin. When one hits you, it sends you flying like a cannonball, pinning you to the ground if it doesn’t go clean through and into the man behind. They whistled through the trees and plucked us from the earth like the world had flipped sideways. We didn’t even see who was throwing them, but half the men were dead in the first volley, and I didn’t want to hang around for the second. The summoner made a break for it, and I followed him. If anyone could make it back in the midst of that god-awful mess, it was him. We ran in a panic, following the chirps of his demon.”

“What kind of demon was it?” asked Jakov, his hands clasped together in rapt attention.

“I never got a good look at it in the dark. It looked like a flying beetle and it was ugly as sin, but I’m thankful to it; without it I would be a dead man. In the end, the summoner stumbled and fell, and I saw a javelin had winged his side. The bugger was bleeding like a stuck pig. There wasn’t much I could do for him, but the damned demon wouldn’t leave without him, so I picked him up and carried him away. The poor bastard must have died before we reached the trenches, but the demon led me back all the same. The little varmint wouldn’t leave his side when I brought the body back. They tried to do me for desertion, but I told them I was carrying the wounded and the rest of the troop got lost behind. They didn’t know what to do with me, with my squad dead an’ all and my age being what it is. So in the end, they chaffed me. My only consolation was the summoner’s pack, full of some of the goodies you see before you. But that wasn’t the real gem . . .” He rummaged through the saddlebags by his feet and suddenly Fletcher realized what it had all been

leading up to. Perhaps the soldier did this with every crowd, reeling them in with his story, then bringing out the most expensive piece.

Yet what the soldier removed with a flourish was not the shrunken head or preserved demon he had been expecting. It was a book, bound in heavy brown leather with thick vellum pages. It was the summoner's book!

CHAPTER 5

IF THE SOLDIER HAD EXPECTED to impress his crowd, he was mistaken. Most looked on ambivalently and there were even a few groans. In a small hunting town such as Pelt, the ability to read was far down the list of priorities. Many villagers would struggle to get through the first page, let alone the entirety of a thick book. Fletcher, on the other hand, had been put in charge of Berdon's finances, which required him to be both numerate and literate. The many long hours he had spent sweating over his numbers and letters had cost him precious time to play with the other children, but he was proud of his education and was sure he was just as refined as Didric, if not more so.

The soldier smiled as he brandished the book, holding it up in the gray winter light and flicking through the pages, giving Fletcher a tantalizing glimpse of scrawled handwriting and intricate sketches.

"What else you got?" asked Jakov, the disappointment clear in his voice.

"Plenty! But they don't get much better than this, if you will allow

me to explain. Let me show you, before we move on to the next item,” the soldier implored.

The crowd, though disinterested in the book, was not going to let free entertainment go to waste. There were nods of assent and urging from them, and the soldier broke into a snaggletoothed grin. He hopped onto an empty crate from the next stall and beckoned the crowd closer, holding the tome above his head where everyone could see.

“This battlemage was the lowest rank a summoner can assume, a second lieutenant to a regiment that hadn’t even finished their training. But he volunteered for that fateful mission, and when I looked through his book I understood why. The man was looking for a game changer, a way of summoning something new.” He had their attention now, and he knew it.

Fletcher gazed across the street slack jawed, earning him a warning cough from Berdon. He straightened and busied himself with the stall, though it was already impeccably arranged.

“The orc shamans summon all manner of demons, but they are mostly base, weak creatures, no match to what our own summoners can bring forth. Yet there are only a few species of demon our summoners are able to capture from the other world, with the occasional rare exception. So although our summoners are more powerful than orc summoners many times over, that leaves us with only a few strings to our bow, so to speak. And what this battlemage was trying to do was to find a way, using orcish techniques, to summon the *really* powerful demons.”

During his night in the barracks on the elven front, Fletcher had overheard reminisced accounts of horrifying demons that slunk in the night, slitting sleeping throats and slipping away. Beasts that came clawing out of the jungle like wildcats and fought until their bodies were ragged with musket balls. If these were the base and weak creatures

that the soldier spoke of, then he would not like to meet the demon of a fully fledged battlemage.

“So we’re to believe that book holds a secret that will change the course of the war? Or contains instructions on how to summon our own demons? Perhaps it is worth its weight in gold,” a familiar voice scoffed, dripping with sarcasm.

It was Didric, back from the stables. He had been standing behind the next stall along, out of Fletcher’s view.

“Your words, not mine, my good sir,” the soldier said, tapping his nose with a knowing wink.

“It would be better to invest money in even the pitiful weapons across the road than your book!” Didric smirked as Fletcher reddened at the jibe, then strolled around the crate to the front of the crowd, carelessly kicking the rhino horn over as he did so.

“Why would the summoner volunteer for such a mission, if he had already discovered this great secret? And why would you be selling it here, if the book was worth so much? As for it containing summoning instructions, we all know only those of noble blood and a few lucky others are blessed with the ability needed to summon.” He sneered as the soldier gaped, but then the soldier rallied with surprising alacrity.

“Well now, sire, he probably was eager to see an orc demon up close. I don’t know my letters, and so I don’t know its worth, and it would be confiscated from me as soon as I tried to sell it to any battlemage, since it was stolen from one of their own.” He spread his arms, his face a picture of innocence.

“Of course,” he went on, “if it changes the course of the war, then I will likely hand it over when I get to the elven front. But if I can make a few shillings on the side, knowing that the book will reach a battlemage eventually regardless, well, who could begrudge me that,

after carrying the man halfway across the jungle?" He lowered his head in false modesty, peeking through his greasy locks. The crowd was uneasy, unsure which party to side with. Didric was certainly popular, especially when he was being free with Caspar's money in the tavern. Yet the soldier was exciting, and Fletcher could see the crowd wanted this story to be true, even if they knew in their hearts that it was not.

Even as the crowd jeered and Fletcher began to grin at the bully losing this battle of wits to a common soldier, Didric interjected.

"Wait. Did you not say earlier that you knew the focus of his studies by looking through the book? Surely you would need to read to know about any of this? You are a liar and a fraud, and I have a good mind to send for the Pinkertons. They might even throw a desertion charge at you too." He laughed as the soldier spluttered.

"You have him dead to rights now," Jakov said, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"There are pictures in the book . . . ," the soldier stammered, but was immediately shouted down by the crowd, who had begun to mock him. Didric raised his voice and held up a hand for silence.

"I'll tell you what. I like the look of the book. It is curiosity and the need for learning that drives me, not the desire for riches," he declared nobly, even as the gold trimming on his clothing glistened in the sunlight.

"I will come by later to pick it up. Shall we call it . . . four shillings? I just so happened to sell a pair of fine antlers for the same price last night," he said, giving Fletcher a gloating look. He did not wait for an answer, but instead strode off in triumph, followed by Jakov and most of the soldier's customers.

The soldier looked after him in fury, but soon dejection took over.

He sat down on the crate with an audible sigh, dropping the book onto the ground in defeat. Crestfallen at Didric's victory, Fletcher watched as the wind sent the pages ruffling.

He did not know how, but Didric was going to pay that night. One way or another.