

PROLOGUE

MIDNIGHT HUNT

The mulch of autumn leaves was soft underfoot as we crept between dark silhouettes. Half-dead forests always reminded me of hunting, but something deep within asserted that we were not playing the part of the hunters. I squinted, struggling to see through the trees which were growing tall and dense. Dusk was shining its last brilliant rays of orange light across the sky, breaking the dark canopy of pine needles and ash leaves with small arrows of burning light.

The time of day had arrived when the worst things that crept the earth were invited to emerge from their burrows and hiding holes. That same gut feeling as before told me that we should turn, run back the way we had come, and never return.

I growled at myself, unwilling to stray from my course. There was an advantage before us that was too good to turn down. My mercenary band and I had set out to find the bandits, and we would not be satisfied until that chest of gold was ours.

“Does any of this seem strange to you?” Jash asked, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword with a strangling hold.

His ears were green as grass, and I’d foolishly relented to his pleas to tag along. At the time, his request had seemed reasonable enough. But the dark was dangerous to a knowledgeable hunter. For a boy like him, it would only be treacherous. His attachment to me was dog-like. Where I stepped, he stepped. I wasn’t blind to the humor in his actions. Tonight was just the wrong one for such musings.

“Should we keep following them into the dark?”

His question spoke to the very problem my mind had been contemplating. Hearing it voiced aloud did something I did not expect. All the built-up tension melted from my shoulders. I paused, leaning against the trunk of a twisting oak, and placed my hand on Jash’s shoulder.

“So long as you keep calm and quiet, nothing is going to happen.” The confident lie left my mouth before I even realized the words were coming off my lips. The best thing for any of us to do would be to continue into the night. “If you want to be a mercenary, you can’t be afraid to go into the dark. There wouldn’t be gold to claim if just anyone would do it.”

I watched his jaw clench, changing his boyish face to one of a man. His eyes betrayed his terror, but a determination burned there also.

After a moment of pause, I added, “Stay close and stay alert. You’re ready.” If I didn’t believe he could do this, he certainly wouldn’t be able to. The others that followed me all showed the confidence and poise I’d come to expect.

I looked them over, one by one, their eyes meeting mine. Kori’s thin face shrouded beneath an evergreen hood. Evand, tall and thick shouldered, wielding a well-worn battle axe. And Merek, scouting the rear, wore dark spectacles which reflected tinted orange light. His owl eyes could see better in the dark than mine during the day.

I began again, leading my band through the woods, creeping forward single file. The leather armor we wore was muted by our woolen cloaks. Soundlessly, we crept through the woods like cats stalking prey.

“How do you know we’re on the right path?” Jash asked, a slight tremor cutting through his breath.

“See those broken branches?” Kori said, pointing a few steps ahead. “They weren’t careful when they plowed their way through here, and it’s clear they were in no hurry.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Wouldn’t you be a bit more cautious if you’d just burned down one of the great houses?” Merek’s voice was deep and clear. He stumbled a bit as his foot turned on a branch, and glass clinked from within his cloak. Tilting my head, we shared a knowing glance.

So, I thought, I wasn’t the only one a little overprepared.

"It's not like they didn't just provoke some of the most powerful people in a thousand leagues," Merek added.

"Let's not mistake foolishness and confidence," I said, pressing forward through the brush. It was difficult to see by the faint light. "They might be smarter or better prepared than anyone has given these bandits credit for."

"I heard they massacred the entire guard force before anyone could respond. They say the men were torn apart like they'd been attacked by a wild—"

"Enough Jash," I snapped. "We were hired to track them, not fight them. That's why they hired us in the first place. Once we find the camp, we only need to count the number of bandits and survey the surroundings. I suspect the Queen will send her legion to handle the actual attack."

"Relax," Evand said, accentuating the word. "You're hunting with the best. People don't come to Ravens Cross with contracts because they think we're incapable."

"It's the only mercenary guild for a reason, Jash," Kori added, her soft voice soothing away his fear.

"Make it out of here alive," Merek teased, "and our team will take you on as our apprentice."

"I'm already an apprentice," Jash moaned, followed by a sharp snort to accent his annoyance.

"So no pressure then," Merek placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Hilarious," Jash said, enduring the banter as good as any disciplined lad would. I noticed his posture was a little straighter and the fright had left his eyes. The banter had relaxed us all a bit.

Time passed slowly as we continually crept forward through the woods and moonlight began to break through the canopy. Her silver light illuminated our way in the wake of a forgotten sunset. The sharp scent of smoke began to drift upon the air, and I followed it to a cluster of boulders that created a bend in the wood. Light shone on the far edge, illuminating the wall of trees which blanketed the mountainside.

I paused, felt the tension return, and listened to the wind. There were no voices; there were no sounds. Only the wind broke a troubled silence. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and I froze in place. A subtle refusal to accept the quiet. I knew I had to be missing something.

Merek was the first to move, stepping beside me, his hand searching beneath his cloak. He adjusted the right lens of the dark spectacles, head moving slowly as he searched the night.

"Merek? What do you see?"

"Nothing. It's too bright for the eyeglass to make out what's by the fires, although the trees are empty. It seems everything is staying away from this camp."

"These animals aren't used to people and fire," Evand said, his slow words humming as he spoke. "I can smell burning meat, which means something bad is going to take notice."

A snapping tree branch caused me to leap in the air slightly. My sword was halfway out of its sheath before I caught myself. Sliding the steel back into place, I looked up and saw a branch high above us swaying. I kept my grip on the blade, ready for someone to drop from the darkness above to kill me. I studied the tree with the snapped branch and noticed it to be old with diseased limbs. Leafless and brittle, the dead tree was a black silhouette against the stars. The branch was certainly decayed enough to have broken from its own weight, but I didn't trust that it had snapped by itself. That would be an excellent way to get killed.

"Merek, keep an eye on things. We're going to need the owl tonight." The glass of his lens reflected orange firelight. Merek's face curled in a half-smile when he looked at me.

"You can count on it." He ran his fingers along the side of his eyeglass, the lens turning slightly, expanding outward. The brilliant spyglass-like device gave us an advantage that no bandit would ever hope to replicate.

"Jash, follow me and watch my back. Kori and Evand, the two of you stay back and keep an eye out with Merek. It won't surprise me if they are preparing an ambush from above."

They each nodded their agreement. Getting as low to the earth as I could, I slunk forward around the boulders. We didn't move fast, but we proceeded with the resolve of a predator who needed a meal.

"I'm worried," Jash said. "Should I be this terrified?"

"Yes, it is perfectly normal to be afraid. That doesn't mean you can't use it to your advantage. Take your fear and use it to keep you alert. Pay attention to what your senses are telling you and let the animal part of yourself take control of your movements." I tried to sound encouraging, but that was hard to do in hushed tones. "We just need to get to the firelight to get a better idea of their numbers. We're not here to fight them. But if there's any fighting, fall back to the shadows and let me take care of things."

If circumstances had been different, I would have looked forward to the fighting. It had been too long since my last good fight, and I was itching to get some action. But this was my band, and I don't get others killed because I want a challenge. If things worked out, perhaps I could see myself included in the party that will undoubtedly be sent to kill them. They would need a guide, after all.

"You're not what I expected."

"No?" I asked, ducking behind the final boulder. "And what were you expecting?"

"The mercenaries at Ravens Cross say you're dangerous, hot-headed, and arrogant."

"All true," I admitted.

"But you're smarter than any of them give you credit for."

"Thanks, I guess. But you just need to give it time. I may not be as smart as you say, just experienced." Looking down at the tracks, I prepared myself to move around the boulder. The trees across from us lined in a crescent shape, indicating a massive clearing. "Stay quiet." My whisper was little more than a breath, and Jash froze, not daring to follow me to the edge.

Peeking around the misshapen lump of stone, I saw a large encampment of tents that swallowed a meadow. Several large glowing fires raged in stone fire pits, cook pots hanging above them. Nothing else moved. My eyes finally adjusted to the light, and I noticed them.

Bodies, bent, twisted, and mutilated, were strewn about. Blood covered the trodden grass and spotted the canvas of every tent.

Releasing the tension from my chest with a quick breath, I straightened and stepped into the open. I walked into the ruined meadow and began to count the dead. Forty-eight bloody corpses were strewn about, trampled grass and flowers painting a picture of the now-dead bandits' movements. I scanned the area once more for life and found none. The camp had been here for some time, but the killings had happened recently. The blood was fresh, but it had begun to darken, hardening clumps floating in vast pools.

"Merek, Evand, Kori! Come see this!" Jash called out, the sudden noise causing me to jump.

Sword raised, I turned and glared at the boy who shrank down. I had to force myself to relax my white-knuckled grip and adjust my blade so its point wasn't aimed directly at Jash's throat. He mouthed an apology as I raised my finger to my lips.

Fool, I thought, resisting the urge to harshly rebuke him.

Jash followed me closely, his pink, boyish face looking aghast at the death. My ears shivered as they examined the stillness of the air. Still, nothing moved, and the wind which caused the trees to sway and the leaves to flutter grew still.

I heard the pounding of boots on earth as the others ran around the bend to join us at the edge of the camp. I watched them come into view, curious faces suddenly changing to horror.

“Boy, if you ever do something so foolish again, I’ll...” Evand’s words trailed off as he took in more of the carnage.

“Kori, how long ago do you think these killings happened?” Merek asked, stooping next to one of the bodies. Together, they began to examine the spilled blood and open wounds. Without hesitation, I began to walk around, investigating body after body. I left the two of them to figure out the when, and that left me with the troubling task of discovering the how.

Their flesh was torn in horrible ways. Twisted entrails were strewn about. Crouching down, I turned the corpse of a woman over and jumped back in surprise. Half of her face was missing, and the torn-away skin dangled from her skull. Long slashes ran down her chest, and I could see past broken ribs and into her gut. Four cuts, long and clean, had sliced through the bandit’s armor and flesh. No weapon I’d ever seen could have delivered a blow so careful and precise. The little comfort I had conjured up in my mind, thinking they could have been butchered by swords, evaporated.

Something rustled beneath the canvas of the tent to my left, causing me to freeze. Holding my breath, I looked, eyes wide, and focused on the moving fabric. The canvas shifted back and forth, the tent pole bouncing up and down before collapsing. The movements became more frantic as whatever was within struggled to escape. Sword ready in my hand, I waited as it emerged from within the folds of canvas. The creature had large, bat-like ears, three glossy black eyes, and a dark fur coat matted with blood. Its monkey-like form crouched low to the ground as it crawled onto the body which laid before the tent, feasting upon it with ferocious vigor. Its belly

was bulging and bloated, but it continued to gorge itself on its meal. It took no notice of me. Raising my sword, I prepared a swift killing strike.

“By the Valon! What is that?” Jash shrieked. The sound of his voice startled the creature, whose vicious stare snapped towards the boy. Blood dripped from needle-like teeth, a lump of flesh falling out and onto the ground.

Growling at the fool’s stupidity, I drew my sword and turned to face the Night Howler. An apish scream rang out again in the night, and the creature spun about and noticed me. It fixed its three eyes on my face, opened its mouth wide, and displayed its tooth-filled maw.

I turned up the one-sided blade, and it watched it gleam red in the firelight. The strange dark vein of metal which ran inside the sword was dark against the steel sides. The creature growled, low and angry like a stray dog, before it darted towards me.

Readying myself, I held my blade to the side with a loose grip. The monster leaped into the air; steel flashed before my eyes, then blood splattered my boots. Jash stood beside me, my stained sword pointing to the sky, the creature on the ground at his feet. The Night Howler’s legs had been severed by the attack, which seemed to have left the animal stunned. Everything changed in an instant.

The quiet stillness was shattered abruptly by an atrocious scream. This sound filled the air with chilling ferocity, causing Jash to drop to the ground and cup his ears with gloved hands. The infamous howl that birthed this monster’s name was worse than I had ever experienced.

Even beneath my armor and cloak, I felt exposed. I thrust the tip of my blade through its head with a quick jab, silencing the scream. Blood sprayed out the back of the Howler’s skull and splattered the corpse it had been feasting upon.

The silence returned and, like a noose wrapped around my neck, left me feeling strangled. Jash was grimacing as he got to his knees. I couldn’t help but shake my head as he looked at me like a wounded dog. Looking up into

the trees above, I searched for any significant movement or any indication of another beast. There was none.

This is bad, I thought. These things are never alone.

As I looked about, the glow of the meadow, from fire and moonlight, caught my attention. The mix of cold blue and bright red light lit the fog that clung to the tree line. A purple haze seemed to surround us like noxious fumes of a slush pipe.

"Foolish boy," I growled, my eyes darkening as I looked at the lad. The chagrin on his face was highlighted by flickering firelight, and his eyes looked down at the ground in shame. "You survive in this world as a mercenary by not making mistakes. What you just did is a great way to get yourself killed."

The young apprentice nodded, picking up his dropped sword, this time holding it with steady hands and a firm stance. "I'm sorry." His voice sounded utterly defeated.

"It'd be wrong if I didn't admit that we all got here by surviving our own share of mistakes. Just learn from them, alright?"

"I will," Jash said, the words more to himself than to me. "Caden, what was that thing?"

"A Night Howler. And not with his pack."

"Shit!" The curse echoed my own anger. Evand looked from the dead Night Howler to the trees, just as I had. "Blood of the Valon, could this be any worse?"

"Whatever killed these bandits could still be here," Merek commented as he joined the group.

"One of these days, I'm going to kick your teeth in," Evand said to Merek. "That way, you won't be able to say things like that."

"Just trying to be honest."

"Let's go," I said, taking a step back to where we had come from. "We should get out—"

My sentence was cut short as a shrill sound echoed that of the fallen beast. It traveled through the trees, a distant echo. The cries sounded first from the south, then from the north. The calls mirrored each other before blending into a single vicious cry. They weren't close; they were here.

"Son of a bitch, Caden," Kori shouted, rushing from the corpses she'd been studying to where we'd gathered. "What do we do now?" She looked around at the trees, overwhelmed by what was happening.

"We fight," I said, angry and frustrated.

"Boy, I swear, you're going to be sleeping with the pigs for a month because of this." Evand looked at the boy as he said it.

By the end of the night, a bed of pig shit would be a welcome reward. That means he survived.

"Here they come." Evand's face spread in a wide smile as he held up his axe. "I need a good fight."

As if to answer to his ill-considered words, a string of throaty calls began to sound from beyond the tree line.

"I really don't like the sound of that." Merek spun his twin axes in his hands, the small, curved blades forming hook-like shapes. "Bastard! Be careful what you wish for."

"Somethings not right," Kori said, her long blade wavering as she shifted stances. "Why are they surrounding us?"

"Kori," Merek said through gritted teeth. "How about we ask them when we sit down for some tea."

“Jack ass.”

“Quiet!” I shouted. Calming my face, I fell into an attack stance, my sword pointed forward. “Kill enough of them quickly, they should retreat long enough for us to leave.”

“Won’t they chase us?” Jash asked.

“With a feast like this?” I gestured to the corpses with my free hand.

“Please.”

The sound of moving branches to my left drew my attention. I watched for movement and saw several limbs sway up and down, the irregularity in movement was distinct among the wind-ruffled leaves. My bare arms felt chill in the night, and each hair seemed to stick up. Years of practice allowed me to mask my emotions behind a stone-cold face. The reputation I had cultivated was perhaps the only reason my war hounds held their ground with such ease. We all shared glances with one another, sharing a solemn nod of encouragement. It wasn’t much, but the overwhelming sincerity was calming.

The night erupted with howls that reverberated around us. Sharp and shrill, the creature’s call could be felt in my bones.

“Valon, save us!” I swore through gritted teeth.

The howling continued, reaching the line of trees less than a dozen paces from where we stood. In the darkness above, the branches began to creak, a cascade of leaves whirling to join the forest mulch.

“Get ready, they’re—”

Before I could finish my sentence, a shape dropped from the trees above and landed in a cluster of ferns. Leaping into the light like a jackrabbit, the Night Howler emerged into the light of the meadow. The three solid black eyes glistened, looking empty and evil as it stared me down. A sickly green film surrounding the edges of its eyes, and dark liquid oozed from its

smashed nose. Teeth sharp as needles, the creature's mouth opened to display row upon row of jagged white.

A split second passed as I took in the sight. Taking a deliberate step forward, I watched ten more bound out of the shadows and into the meadow. Each Night Howler paused to open its mouth as soon as it could be seen. Glancing behind them, I saw more movement as trees stirred in the darkness.

"Caden?" Jash cried, his voice cracking with fear. The sound was all the creatures needed. The first to emerge rushed the boy with alarming speed, a piercing voice calling out as it moved. My reaction was too slow, and the beast tackled Jash to the ground. It moved faster than the first we had encountered, its abilities unencumbered by an engorged belly. Blood spurted into the air as teeth sank into flesh.

I stepped forward and, with a swipe of my sword, cut the creature across the back. Falling to the ground, the creature's head twitched before it died. An empty-eyed Jash looked up at the stars, the left side of his neck butchered and torn.

Turning from the corpse, I cut down another Howler as it leaped towards me. The cold, gray steel of my sword slashed the body in half, its guts spilling out onto my boots. Stomping upon its head out of spite, I moved forward, cutting two more down with twirling strokes. My blood was hot, and an overwhelming fury filled my chest.

The fire felt brighter and, like a moth to the flame, its glow enticed me. Pain, sharp and hot, drove from my leg upwards and into my hip. Pulled away from the fire that had distracted me, I swiped my blade in a deliberate arch which cut the clawed hands from the Howler that had tried latching onto me.

The creature stumbled away, landing on its back, blood spurting from twin stumps. I stabbed the creature through the head, killing it. With a firm kick, I dislodged the hands which had clung to me like thistles. More Night

Howlers continued leaping at me, always one at a time. Each met the same end, tumbling to the earth in pieces.

I reached the cluster of boulders at the edge of the meadow where we had emerged before I ever thought to look back. All three of my war hounds were still fighting among the tents and fires, entirely consumed by the fight.

Evand charged a cluster of Howlers, sword tilted upward at an angle, and yelled as he swiped downward. The thick sound of heavy steel cutting through air ended with a sickening *thunk*. The entire group was struck down in one blow. He swung again, connecting the edge of his blade with the thick skull of another, cutting it like a melon. It screamed with pain as the top half of its head tumbled back. I could see part of the sliced brain before it fell to the ground.

Ten more Night Howlers turned from the corpses they had been feasting upon and rushed Evand. I opened my mouth to call out a warning just as one of the nasty creatures leapt onto his back and bit into his shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound as the creature tore free a chunk of muscle, devouring the flesh like a gull eating a fish. Evand fell, dropping his sword as the Night Howlers' claws began to rake across his body. Leather, cloth, and flesh were torn to bloody ribbons.

They devoured him like hungry rats, covering themselves with blood, tossing chunks of skin and entrails to the ground around them. They were after the meat and bone, which was eaten whole. A sudden realization dawned upon me about these beasts: hundreds of teeth meant to rip and tear, not to chew. I forced myself to hold back my vomit.

I had watched my friend be eaten alive faster than I could shout a warning. Enraged, I rushed back, blood-stained sword thirsting for more. The sharp steel of my blade cut through the flesh of a Night Howler, causing its gut to split open. Bile, blood, and organs spilled out, creating a stinking mess. The creature collapsed upon its gore, and it was trampled beneath the feet of three more monstrosities.

The beast to my left lunged towards me, reaching out to grasp my leg. I kicked the Howler between the legs, sending it tumbling backward. It shrieked as it rolled into a fire.

Looking at Merek and Kori, who were fighting back-to-back, I shouted for their attention. "You swiving fools! We need to go now."

They looked at me immediately, their frightened eyes desperate as the swarm around them continued to grow. Without hesitation, they dashed forward, cutting a way through the hoard. I retreated, cutting down the stragglers who were only now emerging from the woods and into the butcher's yard.

"We can't get through them!" Merek screamed as he slammed his axe into the chest of a Night Howler. Without a second's hesitation, I rushed into the swarm and fought towards my friends.

One after another, the beasts fell to my blade. But for every Night Howler that I cut down, two more appeared to take its place. Overwhelming anxiety urged me forward. Blood pumped through my body with such force that I could feel its rhythm. Reaching Merek, I cut a Howler free from his back and placed my hand on his shoulder to keep him from falling. Kori looked at me with total desperation, just as a creature slashed her across the back, its claws slicing through her armor like it was made of paper.

Kori cried out in agony, and a part of my heart broke. The sound caused Merek to whip around, his blood-covered face contorting with protective rage. He tackled the beast standing above Kori and tore out the creature's throat with his bare hands.

Cursing to myself, I stepped forward and took in a gulp of air. The wiser part of my mind, the part that knew the danger of what I was about to do, caused my body to tense. Time was out, and no one else would die because of my failures as a leader.

I fixated upon the closest fire pit five paces ahead. Standing between me and that mighty blaze were five Night Howlers. With arms spread wide, I rushed forward, tackling them all into the fire.

Together, we began to burn, the flames growing with alarming speed. The creatures burst aflame, and each became ash in my arms. Closing my eyes, I took in a deep breath of smoke and felt the burning within me. Relaxing, I let waves of pleasure wash over me.

Embracing the heat of the coals, I drew forth the energy from the fire. Standing up, I stood among the flames and, with renewed vigor, scanned my surroundings. I cast a ball of flame directly into a group of seven Night Howlers. They exploded in chunks of charred meat.

With a deep, controlled breath, I drew upon the energy of the fire into my body. The coals exploded into a cloud of ash and charcoal. The ground around me burst alight, and the forest was illuminated, revealing the hundred remaining creatures. Their glossy, three-eyed stares were wide, and if an animal like that could show fear, at that moment, I saw it.

The creatures froze, black eyes reflecting my burning silhouette. I felt the cloth beneath my armor burn away, and my cloak became a blanket of fire that enveloped me. The fire raged within me, coursing through every fiber, renewing my strength. I stepped out of the fire and began to decimate Night Howlers.

Moving forward, I reached out with both arms and threw fistful after fistful of fire at the creatures. I hit one square in the jaw and watched as its mouth exploded, white needle-like teeth blasted back.

Hurling balls of flame bright as bonfires, I incinerated dozens of the creatures. Within moments, we were surrounded by charred bodies of melted flesh hanging from bone. Merek looked up at me in disbelief as he cradled Kori in his arms.

“Don’t move!” My command sounded foreign and unnatural, an even blend of crackling flame and grinding stone.

I turned towards the remaining Howlers, watched their greasy bodies shy away from the light of the blaze that spiraled around me. I thrust out my hands, and a wave of flame rolled forward. Fire ate the grass, consumed canvas tents, and left smoldering husks of burnt flesh on blackened earth. The creatures all screeched with such ferocity as the flames hit them that my teeth ached.

Less than a dozen Howlers remained when the flames settled. I didn't bother chasing them as they fled back into the trees. I let the fire rage around me one last time as I looked upon the dismembered piles of corpses that surrounded me.

Sitting upon the ground, surrounded by smoldering corpses and covered in charred gore, I closed my eyes and concentrated. With a deep breath, I smothered the fire within me, using all my willpower to let go of the flame. The world became dull, and my blood grew cold. A chill rushed through my bones, and I shivered. The cold spread into my chest, causing the shivers to grow violent. I fell onto my hands and knees, vomiting onto the ashen ground. Forcing myself to take in deep breaths, I counted to ten over and over until it passed.

Opening my eyes, I focused my attention directly on the only thing still moving. Merek, who held Kori in his arms, hummed to her softly. He rocked back and forth, hot tears spilling down his face, as he held a bloodied hand to her side. Her chest still rose and fell, but it was in staggered breaths. She was alive, at least for the moment.

As I gazed upon my two remaining friends, the weight of knowing I could have saved everyone crushed my soul. I thought back on the promise that had compelled me to hide my abilities. An ache appeared, deep within, worse than any sorrow I'd ever felt. So many allies, friends, had died by my side over the years and, just like tonight, I had let them die. All for a promise: a now broken oath.

"Valon forgive me." My voice was little more than a rasp. I let out a groan of remorse that sounded worse than the bleating of a dying lamb. The ache settled in my heart, but a small part of my resolve remained.

Getting to my feet, I walked to the only two living friends I had in the world and squatted beside them. "Let's get Kori back to the guild. She will survive, I promise."

We both knew it was a lie. But it was a lie that we needed to hear.

He looked at me and nodded. "She will."

Wiping snot and tears from his face, his eyes returned to fixate upon Kori. I helped him to his feet, steadying him as he lifted Kori delicately in his arms. Merek walked with speed and determination I did not expect. It took everything for me to keep pace. The chill still clung to my bones, leaving me weak and exhausted.

Stopping for a moment at the edge of the meadow, I looked back at the now ashen camp. "What have I done?"