Chapter 1

Rain mixed with sweat as it trickled down Conrad's arms to his hands and then down his hickory bow. His sharp eyes searched the ruins as he ran, the blackrock plain stinging his bare feet with every step. Warm water splashed from the endless puddles gathering on the sun-heated expanse.

Damn my luck.

He had spooked his quarry and followed it to this wide clearing littered with rubble and rusted junk. He lost the trail soon after, for no prints could be made in the unyielding ground. Scrub fought its way through the myriad cracks in the hard surface. Decrepit iron boxes poked out of the greenery.

His prey might have already slipped back into the forest. Should he search the twisting mass of trees at the edge of the clearing or wait in case it was still here? Vale would have known. His brother always kept the family fed when their father was away with a raiding party.

"Shoulda gone fishing," he sighed. At least then he'd have something to bring back to the neighbor lady and her grandchildren.

But his old man didn't like fish, so hunting it was. Conrad didn't mind not having meat for supper, but his father's mockery would be intolerable if he failed yet again.

He slowed his gait and kept alert. These wildlands were far from the safety of Fort Scrap Iron. Bears and pythons hunted here. He had heard stories of even fiercer beasts in the depths of the vast Mississippi Rainforest, the descendants of zoo animals kept in ancient times. Conrad dreamed of seeing them, of exploring the abandoned realms of man, an impenetrable wilderness interrupted only by deep ruins with their crumbling, vine-covered towers. More than anything, he wished to see the far northern lands where it still snowed.

He combed the sweat-soaked black hair away from his face with grimy fingers, long strands of it immediately falling back in front of his eyes. His nose caught something in the wind, a heavy musk. He turned and spotted his prey. A wild pig poked about a collection of ancient stones, the last remnants of a ruined building.

Conrad felt a pang of guilt as he watched it go about its business. He didn't want to hurt the pig. But his father taught him that a real man was a hunter, so that's what he would be whether he liked it or not.

He debated whether to attempt a shot from this vantage or work his way around to a better angle. He was downwind at present. The more he moved, the greater the chance he would spook it again. But if he shot from here, the ruins would be in the way. Conrad bit his lip in frustration. He fiddled with the string of gator teeth around his neck, his lucky talisman. Not that it ever worked.

Trembling, he nocked an arrow. He took a deep breath before drawing back the bowstring. The hard muscles of his arms continued to shake. He relaxed his draw and closed his eyes. He felt his heart in his throat as he begged his limbs to obey.

Conrad was not naturally left-handed, yet drew the string with his left as the crooked fingers of his right could not. It had taken much practice to overcome the awkwardness of aiming with the wrong hand and eye. Vale once said no one ever worked so hard to become a mediocre archer.

"The hell with it," he whispered to himself.

Heart racing, he pulled back on the string. He took a deep breath before releasing his grip. Hitting an animal through a gap in the ruins was a difficult shot, but the arrow looked true

to his aim. His jaw dropped as it skipped off the very edge of the stone pillar, missing its target by a hair. The pig let out a terrified squeal and bolted across the blackrock.

“Damn it!” he said.

Out of pure reflex, he nocked another arrow and loosed it at the fleeing animal. This shot was more certain, done without thought and with no regard for the outcome. Conrad’s arrow struck the swine behind the shoulder blade. It let out a pathetic whine and kept on its way.

“Holy shit! I did it!” he said, momentarily pleased with himself before realizing the weight of his action.

Normally, Conrad would have tracked his quarry from a discreet distance and waited for it to die in peace. Rushing after it too soon would keep it panicked and on the move. The problem was the rain, for it could wash away the trail of blood.

He gave chase but soon lost sight of it. Conrad knew a wounded animal went to water, and there was a creek not far from here. It was his best bet. He stalked the forest trails until he found fresh prints in the mud. He checked the direction of the wind so his scent wouldn’t give him away. There wasn’t much blood on the ground. The shot might not have been lethal.

Conrad followed the trail until he heard the beast whimpering between labored breaths. He poked his head above a rise in the path. The animal was there, taking water from the creek a dozen paces downstream. He debated for a while whether to risk a another shot. Putting it out of its misery would be kind in a way. However, a missed or poorly placed shot would just make things worse.

Something caught the swine’s attention. It splashed across the creek and then vanished from sight. Conrad moved to follow when he heard hoofbeats in the distance. He cursed under his breath and followed it toward an ancient road, watching it bolt away from the noise. A loud

cry echoed through the woodlands, a sound soon joined by whoops and laughter. Horses thundered past, and Conrad followed the commotion down the road.

Ahead of him, a trio of boys his age were chasing the wounded pig on horseback. Two of them had muskets on their saddles. Instead of drawing them, they leapt from their horses, slashing wildly with their swords. Blood mixed with rain in the steamy air. It splattered across their fine linen shirts, leather vests, and riding boots.

“Hey! Stop that! That’s my pig!” Conrad said as he struggled to catch up.

“I’ll take its head off with one swing!” shouted a voice Conrad recognized as Kal, the local elder's son.

Kal’s blade missed and struck deep into the mossy blackrock, potentially nicking the precious steel. The bloodied swine circled and changed directions frantically, but it was surrounded, and every way it turned it was met with a fresh assault.

Enough of this.

He drew in close and dropped the pig with an arrow to the head. The trio of boys nearly jumped out of their skins. They turned to face him, fear turning to embarrassment and then to anger. Scowls twisted onto their faces. Along with Kal was a landlord’s son, Duncan, a chubby kid whose face was always snarling. The third lad was a tall, muscular boy Conrad didn’t recognize. Their blood-stained shirts were unbuttoned and trinkets of gold and silver hung from their necks.

“That was my kill!” Kal said, pointing his curved blade in Conrad’s direction.

“No, it’s mine,” Conrad said, his voice quivering. “You can see my other arrow in it.”

The larger boy stepped forward, holding a cowhide sheild. He towered over the other two, so tall even Conrad had to look up at him.

Conrad nocked an arrow but did not pull the draw.

“Hey! Don’t do anything dumb!” Conrad said.

The boy took another step.

“Stay back!” Conrad said.

Duncan said, “I’ve got a musket on my saddle.”

“You think you can get to that saddle before I get to you?” Conrad asked.

Kal said, “Look who thinks he’s tough now,” as he twirled his sword around in slow arcs.

“I’m not looking for a fight. I just want my pig,” Conrad said backing up.

“You have no right to interfere with our hunt, peon. Are you prepared to pay the price?” the tall boy asked.

Conrad took a deep breath and with a faltering voice said, “That isn’t hunting. You’ve tainted the meat. When an animal dies hard like that…”

Kal cut him off, sneering. “Who cares about the meat? We have plenty of meat on our tables because we’re not a family of cripples.”

That remark caught the big one’s attention. He looked Conrad up and down, his gaze finally settling on Conrad’s right hand, still grasping his hickory bow.

“You expect us to feel sorry for you?”

“No!” Conrad said, his teeth grinding as he spat the word. “I never asked anyone to feel sorry for me, and I dare you to call my father a cripple to his face.”

“I’ve beaten men stronger than him,” Duncan said with the bluster of adolescence.

“There are no men stronger than him,” Conrad said.

Kal said, “He wouldn’t lay a hand on us. My father will be high warden soon, and I’ll take his place one day.”

Conrad stifled a chuckle so as not to provoke the boy further. These boys came from families that could afford the blood price for killing a commoner in a brawl.

“Good luck with that,” Conrad said.

“Smirk all you want,” Kal said. “When I dominate the manhood rites and prove I’m the alpha male, you’ll see how quickly they make me leader.”

Conrad shrugged and said, “Like I said, good luck.”

The tall boy growled and stepped even closer. Conrad drew in a sharp breath. He raised his bow and pulled back on the drawstring. His pulse quickened and his throat went dry. If he ran, he’d likely wind up with a blade in his back.

“You’ve had your fun. Can I please have the pig now? You said you didn’t care about the meat.” Conrad said.

Kal snorted. He said, “You think this is a game?”

Duncan said, “We’re training for the rites, unlike someone.”

“We’re getting ready for blood,” Kal said, indicating the pig’s blood on his sword.

“Not that we’ll see you there, coward.” the tall boy said.

“Of course I’ll be there,” Conrad said, not knowing if it was a lie.

“Good. There are no rules inside the Gauntlet,” Kal said.

Duncan said, “Do you even have a girl to escort? Going alone is almost as bad as not becoming a man at at.”

“That’s none of your business,” Conrad said.

Kal said, “Better to go alone. In case you don’t make it through.”

“Another failed initiate, just like your brother,” said the big one with a grim smile.

Conrad fought back tears. The tall boy chuckled seeing how much his words had stung.

“Fuck you,” Conrad said, fighting the urge to let the arrow slip.

The other lad poised his blade to strike. “I should kill you where you stand, bitch.”

“No!” Kal said. “Save it for the rites. The elders will take pity on the crippled boy with his poor hand.”

Snarling with rage and repressing a sob at the same time, Conrad stood stiff as a board. He looked the tall one in the eyes. Some people fight when they feel they have no choice. Some fight when they are angry. Some look for every opportunity to inflict pain without consequence. Those ice-blue orbs glinted with joy at the thought of violence. Conrad breathed slowly, willing his body to stay frozen, to give the aggressor no excuse.

The other boy lowered his sword. He retrieved a length of rope from his saddle and began securing a harness around the pig to haul it away.

“That’s mine,” Conrad said softly, relaxing his draw. “You said you didn’t care about the meat.”

Kal asked, “Are you ready to fight over this?”

“Of course no. It’s just a pig,” Conrad said. “But right is right.”

“If you won’t fight to protect it, then you don’t own it,” the tall boy said. “Like a woman, if you can’t protect her, she’s not yours.”

He took a deep breath to calm himself before speaking. “Could you at least let me take my arrows back?”

The blue-eyed boy paused from his work and looked back at Conrad, smiling. He grasped an arrow in each hand and snapped them, tossing the broken shafts on the overgrown road bed. The other two burst out in laughter as they mounted up and rode away, Conrad’s pig tied to the tall boy’s saddle.

His body trembled and shook violently. He felt the flush of blood in his face. Embarrassment and anger came in waves. Mixed in it all was a sad sense of relief. There would be no pig for supper, but at least there wasn't a fight.

Conrad turned and walked the other way down the forgotten road, so thickly overgrown that the blackrock was completely hidden and trees burst through the gaps. His eyes locked on a lone figure standing atop a hill overlooking the road. The last crumbling remnants of an ancient bridge jutted from the hillside. He hadn't realized they were being watched. It was a girl, someone he had seen in the wildlands before. She was holding a musket and dressed in a man's tunic and trousers. Fine leather boots were laced up to her knees, and a light cloak kept her dry despite the drizzle.

Conrad always felt like he recognized her from somewhere but couldn't remember where. He wondered who she was and what she was doing out here. He prayed she would not speak to him, for he couldn't decide if her pity would be worse than her mockery. Thankfully, the huntress said nothing and turned back into the forest after a few moments.

As he walked, Conrad thought about the upcoming rites. At sixteen, he was too old to wait five years for the next Initiation Day. If he decided to go at all. He wasn't scared of ending up like Vale; the whole thing just seemed so pointless.

He reached the Outskirts just as the sun began to set. The slum sat on a dozen hills far from the fort, shabbily made longhouses of timber and scrap illuminated by lanterns on their porches. Conrad could smell the savory delights being prepared in the kitchens and his stomach grumbled mightily.

He worked his way up the trail to his home, cutting across courtyards and small garden patches. Children danced in the yards to the sound of distant drums and delicate fingers on the strings of a guitar. How that guitar triggered joy and terror in him at the same time.

“Hey Connie! Looks like you’re coming home ‘empty-handed’ again,” said Felix, a neighbor boy a few years younger than Conrad. Laughing, he pointed to his right hand in case someone didn’t get the joke.

“You scared of the rites or scared to ask a girl to marry you?” slurred a very drunk elderly man named Sable as he watched his grandsons butcher a wild goat in the yard. “I ran the Gauntlet at fourteen!”

One of the boys looked up from his bloody work. It was Maurice, someone Conrad trained with back in the old days.

“We used to look up to you. You know that?” the boy said angrily. “Whenever things were hard in training, we’d say look at Conrad. Guy only has one good hand but he never complains, tries harder than anyone else.”

Conrad shrugged. “Things are different now.”

“The guys were so proud because you never quit at anything. Then you up and quit on us.”

By this time, half the neighborhood had gathered to watch. Opinions were shared with whispers and sideways glances, stale jokes told for the hundredth time.

“I never asked to be your inspiration,” Conrad said as he walked away.

He quickly forgot about the confrontation as gentle strumming filled the night with thrilling dread. His standoff with the highborns was less frightening than the sound of those strings.

“Hello, Conrad Walsh,” came a dulcet voice, one flavored by a heavy Rambler accent.

“Hello, Mendi Starchild,” he said, his heart jumping as he faced his neighbor’s granddaughter, a girl about his age.

Mendi gave him a sweet, crooked-toothed smile. She leaned against a split rail fence as her nieces and nephews wrestled in the yard behind her. Mendi picked at her guitar and smoked her grandmother’s tobacco as the old lady slept in her porch hammock. The lines and lids of her hazel eyes were painted black. Her short, dark curls were plastered to the sides of her face beneath a red shall. The old dress she wore no longer fit quite right. Her thick and shapely legs swayed to the beat of unseen drummers, her bare feet coated in dirt.

“You haven’t asked anyone to run the Gauntlet with you,” Mendi said in a way that was both a statement and an accusation.

“Hurry up and decide who you want to spend your whole life with,” he said with a forced laugh.

“That joke was funny when you were a boy. You’re almost a man now. You aren’t thinking of asking anyone?”

A little girl of about eight or nine ran up to the fence, her twin braids trailing after her.

“Do you have any fish today?” she asked.

“Naw. Sorry little bit. Went hunting today,” he said.

“Aw! Why?” the little girl said. “You never get anything that way.”