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Xander Rowe

By: Randy McCarthy

Chapter 1

I licked my chapped lips. They tasted like dry blood, my lips that is.

You see, each time a hunting party leaves our hamlet by the bay, all the young men line up in this longhouse where the Council of Elders meets. All the elders take turns standing in the front and saying important things to show they're important people because they get to speak at this important ritual and all. It's really a big to-do. Then one of the elders walks down the line with a bucket of this concoction called sponami. It's a thick, purple, syrupy drink, just like the purple syrupy norwulf blood that it's made from. When the elder gets to you, you scoop up a ladle full of sponami and bring it to your lips and throw your head back and the elder puts his hands on your shoulder and says some more important things.

They say it's supposed to strengthen your soul for the hunt or something, but I hate it, sponami that is. It tastes so bitter that it makes me want to puke. And that bitter, bitter taste lingers in your mouth all day and the dried sponami sticks to your lips and you have to retaste it each time your tongue touches your lips.

But that's what hunters do. They drink sponami right before they hunt. So that's what I do because I'm a hunter.

Other hunters say they like it, the sponami that is, but I think they just want to look brave and vigorous in front of the Council of Elders. You know, being able to drink their sponami and not puking and all. Sheesh! Like going on a hunt for norwulves is not brave enough, they have to pretend to like sponami too. I mean, I don't go around telling

people that I dislike sponami or anything because it's a tradition and all, and I actually like traditions, but I don't go around telling people I like it because that seems dishonest. I mean, I may not like sponami, but at least I'm honest.

Sometimes I think the whole point of drinking sponami is that it tastes so bad. You see, there are so many young boys who want to become hunters. It's what all the little boys dream about doing when they become men, becoming hunters that is. You know, all the little boys of the kingdom grow up listening to the old men tell tales of great hunters and they run around in the woods pretending to be hunters when they play with their friends and stuff like that. Some of those boys actually get an apprenticeship to learn how to hunt, like me, and then only some of those apprentices will actually become hunters. So there has to be a way to decide which boys become apprentices and which apprentices become hunters. Perhaps finding those who spit out the sponami is an easy way to find those who aren't totally dedicated to hunting. You know, if you're not even willing to drink the sponami and not make a big deal over how bad it tastes, then you'd never handle the actual dangers of actual hunting.

Anyways, I licked my blood-flavored lips and was thinking about how bitter they taste.

I found this nice perch on the south face of the mountain just big enough for me to crouch on. Well, big enough for me and my gear like my bow and arrows, skis, and a bag filled with some rope and dry rations and stuff. It was really just a piece of flat rock sticking out from the mountainside, this perch that is, but it was nice. Sturdy too. I say this perch was nice because it protected me from the howling wintry wind. When I say

howling, I don't mean it was just blowing strong, I mean the wind actually made these ghostly howling sounds as it whipped through the steep and narrow passages of these mountains.

So I crouched deeply to hide from the howling wind and used my bow for balance. My legs were tired from walking all day. I left my hunting party this morning and walked all day deeper and deeper into the mountains, pushing myself to go farther and farther north, until I found this perch. It's a real slog, you know, walking all day through these mountains and the cold and all. My gear gets heavy and my ramskin boots are warm, but awfully uncomfortable. So it felt restful just to take the weight of my bag off my back for a while and be still and wait.

The air is dangerously cold this deep into the mountains too. And today, well today was especially cold. It's one of those days where the cold air whips through the mountain passages and bites your exposed skin, which, ironically, feels like a burning sensation, you know, like it does when your skin touches a hot iron. And up here, where there are few trees to act as a windbreak, the air swirls and twirls and there are few places to hide. No matter how good you bundle yourself, the cold air ceaselessly finds any bare skin or gaps in your clothing, no matter how slight, and then nips it. Your face and your fingers and your toes just feel like they're getting bit all the time by the frigid air. Nip, nip, nip. That little gap where your parka sleeve meets your mittens. Nip, nip, nip. Even your eyeballs get nipped when it gets this cold. Your eyeballs! But this perch was nice. It mostly blocked the wind so I wasn't getting nipped too bad.

My mind really gets racing sometimes. I just kept thinking about how I hate sponami and I hate the cold and that leads me to thinking that maybe I don't really want to be a hunter. I mean, I really like the *idea* of being a hunter, just like I did when I was a boy, but I don't like to do a lot of the things that hunters must do. You know, I just keep thinking "what kind of hunter doesn't like sponami and doesn't like the cold?" and stuff like that. So I try not to think about those things because it would be real sad if I was sitting on this perch deep in the mountains and I realized I didn't want to be a hunter.

My mitten-covered hands tugged the wool lining of my hood to cover a bit of my exposed cheek. I wiggled my toes inside of my ramskin boots to keep the blood flowing. God, the air was cold today. Each exhale hung in the air like a puff of smoke for a moment, which gave me something to look at while I waited for the norwulves to come.

"Focus, Xander. For Chrissakes, focus."

That's my name, Xander. Xander Rowe actually. My mind wanders sometimes when I am on a norwulf hunt, especially when I am hunting alone and there is nothing else to do but wait and watch and stay warm like I was right now, so I have to keep snapping it back into place, my mind that is. I usually yell at myself to focus just like my mentor, Thoren, yells at me when he sees my mind wander. I even use my own name when I yell at myself just like Thoren does. You know, I yell "Focus, Xander" and stuff like that. It's kinda funny, my yelling at myself and all, but it works and I guess that's all that matters.

The real reason I chose this perch to sit on is because of the view though. Not because it was scenic or anything, although it was, and not because it was a shelter

from the howling wind, although it was, but because it was strategic. That's a word hunters use to describe things that are helpful to having a successful hunt like a good view, *strategic* that is. So I left my hunting party this morning and headed north all alone when I came upon this field of bluegrass. This field was the perfect hunting spot, you know, exactly what I was looking for. So I looked around the walls of the mountains that surrounded the field for a strategic view. That's when I found this perch. From here I could look down on the lush valley below. The mountain descended quickly below my feet. I inched my feet all the way to the edge of my little perch so I could see everything. Well, almost to the edge. I always stay back a little bit when I am high up because I'm afraid of heights too.

Man, what a pathetic hunter I am. I hate sponami, cold air, and heights.

The rocks and boulders that covered the mountainside created this jagged slope like the edge of a serrated blade all the way down. I hated that metaphor, the mountainside looks like the edge of a serrated blade that is. I'd heard a master hunter say it once. I remember it well. He had these gnarly and scarred hands and a face tattoo. A real rough looking guy, which I guess bothered him, you know, that he looked so rough. So when he said that metaphor I thought it sounded like he was trying too much to sound both masculine and insightful, like he was so worried about his reputation and all. And now I hated myself for using the metaphor too. Not that I don't worry about my reputation, I do, worry about my reputation that is, but I hate that I'm the type of man who worries about his reputation. But sitting here on my perch and looking down the mountainside, the edge did actually look a bit like a knife's edge.

So the serrated knife's edge of the mountainside descended steeply below my feet, and then, at the base, the rocky mountain turned to soil and met a small field of bluegrass. The waving blades of grass actually looked like the blue sea when the wind blew. You know, the waves would actually move across the field from one end to the other. It was shiny and pretty. And on the edges of the far end of that field was a big patch of thatchleberry bushes. You know, green bushes with thorn-covered branches and berries that stayed bright orange all winter long.

This field of bluegrass with thatchleberry bushes deep in the mountains was right on the norwulves' migration path. And I could see the whole field from my perch. But it was much farther north than our typical hunting area, this field of bluegrass that is. It was deeper in the mountains and more dangerous to reach, especially during the frigid winter hunting season. But that's exactly why I chose this place, you know, because it's deeper in the mountains and more dangerous.

"God, they must be close?" I wasn't sure if I thought that or said that aloud. Sometimes when I am alone I talk to myself just to break the silence of nature. I like being alone and having time to think, but I don't like the silence if that makes any sense.

I looked to the west. The red sun was just above the highest peak. It would be dark soon.

God it was cold. I kept wiggling my fingers in my mittens and my toes in my boots, you know, to try and keep my blood flowing. And I kept watching each exhale hang in the air for a moment before it faded into the coldness.

My thoughts were broken by the unmistakable sound of the norwulf cackle bouncing through the rocky valleys of the mountains. It was a grating sound that reminded me of the sound a child makes when they are awoken in the middle of the night and cry for their mother. Some of the other hunters say they like the sound, but I don't. It's kinda scary, the norwulf cackle that is.

Usually I would berate myself for being afraid of the norwulf cackle too, you know, just another reason why I'm not a good hunter and all, but there was no time for that now. Maybe later, when I am watching the stars and trying to sleep I would berate myself real good for all the reasons I wasn't a good hunter.

"Focus, Xander. Focus!"

The cackles got closer and louder. The norwulves would be here any time now. The anticipation warmed my fingers and toes.

I kept track of how long it was from the time I heard the norwulve's cackle and when they came. Sound bounces around the mountains and has a way of playing tricks on your mind. Especially in the winter, you know, because sound travels so quickly through the frigid air and you're always wearing a hood that covers your ears and all. So, it's hard for an untrained ear to judge direction and distance out here in the cold mountains. But me, being an apprentice hunter, needed to hone my skills so someday I can teach these tricks to others when I become a master hunter. You know, when I was a master hunter I could teach my apprentices how to judge the direction and distance of norwulves just from the sound of their cackles. Well, at least I hoped that I would become a master hunter someday. But more about that later. I have to focus now.

Finally, a shadow smoothly drifted over me and quickly darted down the mountainside. Then another shadow. And another. These shadows were quickly followed by three norwulves that glided to the field of bluegrass below my perch. Their fat little pig bodies actually looked small from up here as they rooted around the field and made their ugly little grunting noises. And then the whole sky darkened with the shadows of the flock of norwulves that was migrating north for the winter. One after another, norwulf after norwulf, they drifted from the sky above down to the grassy blue field below. Their piercing cackles filled the air. My God, they were loud. There were so many too. This was truly a big flock. And their cackles were amplified by the rock walls of the mountains in every direction.

My heart raced as more and more norwulves glided downward from the sky and softly landed in the sea of bluegrass below. I felt like I could reach out and touch some of the low-flying norwulves as they glided over my head and hugged the mountainside on their way down. When they flew overhead, you could see their large three-toed feet tucked tightly to their portly wool-covered bodies. Their curved talons are large enough to tear the flesh of an unfortunate man. It was terrifying to be honest. But I guess that's the point. You know, hunters are seen as so brave because they kill these terrifying beasts.

I thought about firing an arrow into the flock. You know, just drawing my bow and shooting it into the air. The arrow would almost be certain to hit a norwulf because there was so many of them. I could bring my kill back to my hamlet by the bay and make up some story about how good of a hunter I was. People would think I was brave,

especially if my story was a good one. I was all alone. I could make up whatever story I wanted and make myself as brave as I wanted and nobody would know. But that would not be an honorable kill, to aimlessly kill a norwulf and then make up a story to make myself sound brave that is. I didn't want to live with that forever. I needed to find one, *the* one, norwulf and hunt it honorably and stick it with a skillful shot from my bow. Then I could feel proud of myself and I could tell my story honestly and others would think I was brave. One arrow just beneath the wing that would drive through its breast meat and through its rib cage and into its heart. An honorable kill would show the Council of Elders that I deserved to become a master hunter. One skillful shot and my life could be changed forever.

Finally, silence. Well, mostly silence. I could still hear the little ugly grunting noises the norwulves made as they rooted around in the bluegrass below searching for grub and little rodents to eat. There must have been a hundred of them in the flock. Rooting in the bluegrass. Rolling. Grunting. Eating. Eventually they would sleep for the night right there in that field of bluegrass.

I tried to follow all the steps that Thoren had taught me. "Make notes of where the flock is resting. What direction is the wind blowing? Where are the sows? Where are the boars?" Those are the names of the female norwulves and the male norwulves, sows and boars that is.

I drew an arrow from the quiver that hung from my belt and rested the broadhead on the rock shelf on which I crouched. I leaned the erect arrow against my palm and gave the fletching a firm blow and watched the shaft of the now-spinning arrow go round

and round. This was a technique that all hunters learn to check that their arrows are straight. Spinning the arrow that is. The shaft on this arrow was true. Straight as an arrow as they say. But this arrow was special, this was the arrow that I was going to use to harvest my norwulf. Of course I knew these arrows were true because I checked them all when I was packing. I was just fidgeting with the arrow while I waited and watched.

You see, earlier this morning, as my hunting party was preparing to leave our hamlet by the bay, my mentor, Thoren, told me this would be my last hunting season unless I did something truly brave and skillful to impress the Council of Elders. The Council had met last night, as they do before each harvest season begins, and talked about the apprentices in their guild, as they do before each harvest season begins. You know, which apprentice hunters are brave and skillful and which are not. The Council decided I have not shown the bravery and skill to become a hunter. You know, they said "I was not brave enough" and "I was not skillful enough" and things like that. They said it was time for me to leave the guild and make room for another young man to have his chance. As you can imagine, this news was devastating, the news that my apprenticeship would be over that is. But Thoren pleaded with the elders to give me one last chance. At least that's what Thoren told me this morning.

"Xander is a good boy," Thoren told me he told the elders. "He is steady. Give him one final hunt to prove his bravery."

Five years. That's how long I have been an apprentice hunter. I worked hard too. I was not the best hunter for sure. I was good at shooting my bow and I had become

fast at field dressing a norwulf. But others were better and faster. I could drag the slain bodies of the norwulves across the snow. But others were stronger. The thing I lacked, the thing the elders didn't see in me, was bravery. You know, the thing that quality that all hunters have. It's hard to explain what it is, you know, bravery, but I guess it's one of those things you know when you see it.

I knew what I needed to do. I had to harvest a big norwulf and be truly brave when doing it. And even that was no guarantee. Even if I was brave, the elders must know that I am brave. I just kept thinking about how I had to do something so brave and skillful that the elders could not ignore me.

So when Thoren and I and all his other apprentices left our hamlet by the bay to hunt the norwulves early this morning, I walked with the group far to the north where the river comes from the mountains and empties into the sea, to our usual hunting grounds, and I told Thoren that I needed to do my hunt alone. Killing a norwulf alone would be truly brave. He understood this was what I must do. He rested his old, wise hand on my head and wished me luck as I disappeared alone north into the mountains.

The red sun was just peering through a gap of mountain peaks on the horizon and was nearly gone now. It would be dark soon, which meant it would be even colder soon. I couldn't stay here on my perch much longer because I couldn't risk stumbling in the dark and falling down the mountain. I had to do it quietly too, walk down the mountain that is, so I didn't startle the norwulves that would be sleeping in the field below.

“Patience, Xander,” I kept telling myself as I carefully navigated down the mountainside thinking about the norwulves sleeping just below me. I must find a place to rest for the night and return for my big day tomorrow.

Chapter 2

The sun had fallen below the mountaintops and a few of the brighter stars faintly peppered the sky. It was quite dark by the time I made it to a good resting place. Not so dark that I couldn't see, but much darker than what I'd hoped. I should have left my perch on the mountain earlier so I had some daylight left. Instead, each footstep required seeing through the fading light to carefully place your foot and feeling the ground through the soles of your boots. It was a painfully slow descent down the mountain to be sure, which only made it darker by the time I'd got to the bottom.

I berated myself as I started my tasks. "God, why did I have to let it get so dark. Silly Xander. Stupid, stupid, Xander. These poor timing errors are exactly the type of thing the elders had in mind when they said you weren't a hunter." It was important to be silent tonight because sound travels far in the cold mountains and I couldn't spook the sleeping norwulf flock. So I berated myself quietly.

Nevertheless, I made it down the mountain and I found a nice patch of soil that was downwind of the sleeping norwulf flock so they couldn't smell me while I slept. I would need to approach them from the downwind direction tomorrow morning, the norwulf flock that is. But for now I needed to eat some food and get some rest and prepare my mind. Tomorrow morning I would harvest a norwulf and drag the body back to my hamlet by the bay before sundown. Thoren would be proud. The other apprentice hunters would be envious. And the elders would be impressed that I harvested the

norwulf all by myself and they would finally see that I could become a brave and skillful hunter. Or at least that was the plan I kept running through my head.

I didn't have the courage to imagine the alternative. You know, that I would not get a norwulf and that I would have to return to the hamlet by the bay empty-handed and that I would not get to become a hunter. God, that would be devastating. Even thinking about thinking about those thoughts made me disappointed.

"Focus, Xander. Enough dreaming." I needed to focus my mind because it really was getting dark and I needed to work quickly on my tasks.

The first thing I needed to do was build a fire. Fire was life when you are in the wilderness. The air was noticeably colder since the sun dropped below the mountains. I knelt on the cold soil and fumbled around a bit trying to open my leather pouch of matches. I removed my mittens and let the cold air bite my bare hands. My fingers were so cold and shaky that I ended up dumping a good twenty matches onto the dirt floor. I felt around the dark to grab a match, but my fingers were so numb that it was hard to feel anything.

God, Thoren would roll his eyes in disappointment if he could see my exposed hands feeling around the dirt looking for matches in the dark. Building a fire is the job they give to first-year apprentices, mere boys, and here I was, an apprentice of five years, and I was failing. It truly would be embarrassing if my legacy was that I died of cold because I couldn't build a fire because I stupidly let it get dark on me.

“God, I should have left earlier because it was getting darker and darker,” I kept repeating as I fumbled around this lightless patch of soil. Quietly yelling at myself was keeping me warm.

I eventually found a match. I eventually lit a fire. And I eventually had some light to work. I used cantaberry branches to build my fire that I gathered on my way down the mountain. These branches burned a nearly smokeless fire and the leaves made a delicious tea that I would enjoy in the morning.

The cantaberry branches crackled in the orange glow of the fire and the flickering flames lit up my resting spot and cast my shadow onto the thicket of evergreen trees that surrounded me. I just sat there warming my bare hands. It felt good to be able to move my fingers without the pain that causes your hands to hurt like an old man’s hands. I knew there was much more work to do before I could rest, but the warmth of the fire was so relieving and the flickering flames were mesmerizing to look at. So I just sat there staring at the rising flames and listening to the crackling branches and letting the warm flames brush against my face.

I don’t know how long I sat there staring at the fire. A long time I suppose because it was now pitch black. Probably too long. I always do this sort of thing. You know, there’s work to be done and I find myself just sitting by a fire and letting my mind wander. Not even on productive thoughts, just wandering from one unimportant thought to the next like a stray leaf getting blown around in the wind. Then I think about how much time I would have if I could have added up all these hours and minutes and seconds of me just sitting. It would surely add up to days of time. Maybe even weeks. It

makes me feel guilty too, you know, for all the time I'd wasted over the past few years. God, to have that time back. I would put it to better use the second time around, I swear.

I complained out of frustration for my disobedient mind. "Focus, Xander! For goodness sakes, focus!" I promised myself that if I focused and got my tasks done that my mind could wander as aimlessly as it wanted as I fell asleep. For now I had to work.

The first task was to stack the rocks around the fire just like Thoren had taught me. Large, flat rocks around the bottom and smaller rocks at the top. These rocks hid the flame. There are creatures and hermits in these mountains and you can see a flame for a long distance when it is dark and clear like it was tonight. It's best to hide the flame as much as possible. Building the rocks around the fire also protected the flames from the wind so that it burns a nice slow smoldering burn and the cantaberry wood lasts longer. A good fire should last all night, at least that's what Thoren taught me. Building the rocks around the fire warms the rocks too. That makes for a nice bed, the warm rocks that is, but more about that later. Right now I needed to eat.

I got a pot full of nice clean snow from under a bush and rested my pot on the rocks by the fire. The warmth of the fire melted the snow in my pot as I carefully unpacked my belongings.

These pots, you know, the ones that hunters carry, are specially made for hunters. Not too thick that they are heavy, because hunters must travel light, but not too thin that they would crush easy, because hunters do many brave things that can crush their gear. That would be devastating for a hunter's pot to be crushed. And these pots

have a curved handle so they can be hung from a belt or from a bag, which is nice because hunters must carry all their things. I always carry the pot from my belt because that's what all the young hunters do. The old hunters hang their pots on their bags. It's not better, hanging the pot from your belt and all, but young men are always looking for ways to do things just a bit differently than their elders. You know, we like traditions and all, but we also want to assert our independence too. When I become a master hunter I suppose my apprentices will do things their way. And so it goes, each generation straddles the line between respecting traditions and asserting their independence.

Anyways, looking at these pots always reminded me of the small hamlet deep into the east grove, far inland and away from the sea, where I grew up, Norwick. In Norwick there were many men who made these pots for hunters. Potters, that's what these men who made pots were called. And I watched these potters make many pots when I was a child: I can still hear the sounds of the potters' shops when I close my eyes too. You know, the sounds of the potters banging and rapping and tapping the metal with their hammers for hours and hours until a pot emerged. The hunters would come to Norwick in the summer and talk to the potters and inspect their pots and entertain the potters with stories of hunting the norwolves.

Anyways, my mind always wanders to those thoughts when I see a hunter's pot.

If I looked closely, I could see the little dents all over my pot from the potter's tools. Hours of work and thousands of dents from the thousands of taps of a hammer went into each pot. I wouldn't have the patience for that sort of work, at least that's what I thought when I looked at the little hammer dents in my pot. I'd probably start out good,

you know, with the real careful taps of a hammer, but then I'd just want to hit it hard.

You know, take a big swing and strike the metal with my hammer real good just to see what would happen. I really don't know, I've never made a pot in my life.

When I was a young boy, back when I still lived in Norwick, some of my friends' fathers were potters and now their fathers are old or dead and the sons are now grown men and are now potters. Their sons will watch them work and will learn how to make these special pots for hunters too. It's this nice little chain of fathers teaching their sons who will grow up to teach their sons who will grow up to teach their sons the skills of how to choose the best metals and how to hold the hammer right and stuff like that.

It's kinda sad when you think about it, the miners bring the metals to the potters and the potters make pots for the hunters, but only the hunters actually get to hunt. The miners and the potters never get the excitement of hunting the norwulf. In fact, many men in Norwick have never left the grove in their entire lives. They were born being a miner or a potter and they will die being a miner or a potter.

That's why I left Norwick you know, to become a hunter.

My father was not a miner or a potter. He was a fletcher, which is what the men who make arrows call themselves. He had this nice little shop with a thatched roof and this big wooden table in the middle of his room where he set all his tools and worked. When I got to be an older child, perhaps around my seventh summer, I helped my father and learned his craft. That's how I became an apprentice hunter actually, by making arrows with my father that is.

Thoren would visit Norwick during the summer to gather supplies for the next hunting season just like many hunters do. He would visit the farmers and the potters and the tanners. And, of course, he would visit the fletchers. Thoren would gather his supplies and entertain the craftsmen with his tales of hunting the norwulf and flatter them by saying it was only possible because of their skills. He would tell the farmer that his food sustained his hunting party for three days while they hunted the norwulf flock. He told the miner that his metal was the strongest metal for piercing the norwulf's hide. He told the tanner that his leather was the warmest leather. And he told my father that his arrows were the straightest at shooting the norwulf. Maybe he was just being nice or liked to entertain the craftsmen. Or maybe he was trying to get a good trade. I don't know why Thoren told these stories.

Anyways, I was very good at finding the straightest branches that would make the best arrows. I would go deep into the grove with my hatchet and bring back armfuls of arrowwood from the evergreens that surround Nowrick into my father's fletching shop and he would tell me which branches were good for making arrows and which were not. You know, my father was trying to teach me about being a fletcher and all. For three years I set aside the best arrowwood for Thoren. I had this little pile in the corner of my father's shop where I would neatly stack the best arrowwood and I'd say "These branches are for Thoren's arrows." My father was happy that I'd taken an interest in making arrows for the hunters so he let me do this. And each of those years Thoren harvested a norwulf with my arrows. And each year Thoren would return to my father and ask about Xander, the boy who made his arrows. Thoren was nice like that, you

know, saying that I made his arrows when I just picked out his arrowwood. My father made the arrows, but it flattered my father that a hunter knew his son's name, so he never corrected Thoren. If you wanted to flatter a craftsman, then compliment his son. The craftsmen love hearing good things about their sons more than hearing good things about their crafts.

Anyways, Thoren knew my name and knew that I was an eager young boy. Then, in my sixteenth summer, Thoren asked my father if I, Xander, would like to become an apprentice hunter. This was a rare offer, becoming an apprentice hunter that is. Very few boys from the grove are asked to become hunters. I begged and pleaded with my father. I would leave the grove and live by the bay and Thoren would become my mentor as I learned how to hunt. My father was sad that I, his only son, didn't want to be a fletcher like him, and I suppose he was worried about who would take care of him as he aged if I left the grove.

He's dead now, my father that is. Another man and his son are the only fletchers left in all of Norwick. Thoren and his apprentices, including me, get our arrows from him now.

The snow in the pot had finally melted into a warm water. I poured three spoonfuls of dried bracca beans into the pot and let them simmer. Bracca beans are what all hunters eat while they are hunting. They are dry and light and full of vitamins and they taste like dirt. The bean mongers soak them in flavored brine too before drying them because they know their beans taste like dirt and they are trying to get them to taste less like dirt when they are cooked. Even with the brine flavor though, I hate the

taste of bracca beans. They taste like spoonfuls of briny dirt balls. And they have this gritty feel to them, like you are grinding sand between your teeth when you eat. I hate them. But it's what hunters do when they are hunting, eat bracca beans that is. So I eat bracca beans when I am hunting too because I want to be a hunter and that's what hunters do. And, if all goes well tomorrow morning, I will become a great hunter and I will get apprentices of my own some day and make them eat bracca beans while they hunt.

Three spoonfuls of bracca beans tonight, three for a midday meal tomorrow after I harvest my norwulf, and then I would still have an emergency ration if my day ran long tomorrow as I dragged my harvest back to my hamlet by the bay. That's another thing Thoren taught me, you know, to always leave an emergency ration. You never know what sort of situation you'll find yourself in out here in the wild. Thoren always says it in a more spiritual way though, you know, like "keeping extra rations is respecting the power of the wilderness" or something like that.

These are the thoughts that ran through my head as I stared at my potful of beans resting on the rocks at the edge of the fire.

I neatly emptied the contents of my bag onto the two long skis that always have strapped to my back while my beans cooked. I carefully inspected each item to make sure they weren't damaged during my travels through the mountains. Metal blades must never rest on the forest floor and my knives must be easily reached in case there is danger in the night, so those get set on the skis next to where I slept. My bow rested

upright on a tree and my quiver hung on a branch that was out of arm's reach. A bow and arrow are no use at night in the dark.

I used my small shovel to dig a shallow trench where I planned on laying for the night. Then I took the top row of stones, you know, the real small stones, away from the fire and laid them in the trench and covered them with a thin layer of dirt and placed my blanket on top. The heat from the stones would glow with warmth and provide my body with heat all night long. I crawled into my now-empty bag. I loved that feeling of being warm while the air around you was cold.

I ate my potful of bracca beans. God they tasted awful. And the gritty, sandy feeling on your teeth was awful too. But I need the nutrition. The cold really does take the energy out of your body. I mustn't let myself become weak over a silly thing like bad taste.

One of my favorite things to do is look up at the stars at night. The legends say that each of the stars in the sky represent great hunters of the past. Back in Norwick, all the young boys sit attently as the elders point their fingers towards the stars and share the tales of the bravery and skill of these great hunters. These tales plant the idea in each young boy's mind that the greatest and bravest thing you can do is to grow up and become a hunter. And so the last thing they hear before they go to sleep is these tales of the stars and the hunters. And the next day the young boys jump out of their beds and are all energized by their dreams and they run around the grove and pretend to be great hunters. And these boys do this for years and years until they grow up and all they know is these dreams of hunting. I know these are tales now, myths the elders tell the

little boys so they can ensure there will be more hunters in the next generation, but I can't remember if I actually believed these stories were true or not when I was a child. You know, whether the stars were actually the spirits of great hunters and all. I know it's silly, but I, a young man now, still like to fall asleep looking at the stars and dream of becoming a great hunter just like I did when I was a little boy. Someday when I am no longer alive, it would be the greatest thing in the world to have my memory live in a star and little boys could look up in the sky and listen to the old men tell my tales.

Tomorrow would be my chance. I will wake before the sun rises over the mountaintops in the east. I will be unseen and unheard as I sneak to the edge of the sleeping norwulf flock and wait and watch. I will find the biggest norwulf in the entire flock and shoot him with my arrow. It will be truly brave and skillful. My eyes were closed now. My body was tired. And the thoughts of returning to the bay with my norwulf made me warm as I fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The stars still glistened against the darkness of the sky when I awoke. And the smoldering embers put off a soft glow that provided me enough light to make a pot of cantaberry tea. It's kinda pleasant, you know, having a warm blanket and a warm cup of tea when the air is so cold.

The pot warmed my hands. The first sip warmed my belly.

Unlike bracca beans, cantaberry tea actually tastes good. Well, to me anyways. It's got this minty flavor. Plus, the juices from cantaberries and their leaves makes you alert. You know, it really wakes your mind early in the morning.

Between the fresh, crisp air and the cantaberry tea I was ready to begin my hunt.

I quietly gathered my belongings. It's not just gathering my belongings, but gathering them properly. I could hear Thoren's voice in my head as I packed, "heavy items in the bottom of the bag, be sure the load is evenly distributed side-to-side, be sure your metals are secure so they don't rattle when you walk, keep your blades easy to reach, etc."

I gathered my bow and slung my quiver and heaved my bag across my back. The norwulves will be on the move once the sun rises. I emptied the last bit of cantaberry tea into my mouth, hooked my pot to the side of my bag, and swallowed my mouthful of tea in one big gulp.

It was time to hunt.

The hard part about hunting a norwulf is getting close enough to reach them with your arrows. Because I was alone, this meant I had to slowly crawl along the frozen ground and hide behind trees and be silent until I reached the edge of the field of bluegrass where the flock slept. And I had to do all of this without being seen or heard or smelled.

I hadn't stalked a norwulf like this before, you know, sneaking up to the sleeping flock and all. Usually we hunters hunt in groups. We have some hunters, almost always the young apprentices, walk in a line, spread out of course so we cover a wider swath, and drive the norwulves in one direction. You know, the norwulves see the line of hunters walking towards them and the flock moves away from the walking hunters. And then we have other hunters setting and waiting to harvest the norwulves. This works, having the drivers and setters that is, because norwulves will run when they are approached. They have wings, but their wings are more for gliding. They have fat little pig bodies and big featherless wings, the norwulves that is, and they tire quickly when flying. So the drivers drive, the setters set, and the norwulves run, at least at first. And once the arrows start flying, so do the norwulves.

It's a very brute force way of hunting, you know, the driving and the setting.

But today there would be no driving and no setting. At least for me anyways, because I was alone. Today, rather than push the norwulves towards the hunters, I, the lone hunter, would have to get nearer to the norwulves with patience and stealth. And, when the time is just right, I will skillfully fire an arrow to kill a norwulf and capture my prize.

The sun was rising over the peaks of the eastern mountains and the norwulf flock was stirring awake when I approached the edge of the field.

I wished my father could see this beautiful scene. The early morning sun peeking over the mountaintops glistened off the frosty bluegrass, the gigantic flock of waking norwulves was now stirring and hungry, the sound of calves bleating for their mothers broke the early morning silence, and the fog and norwulf breath hung in the air to make a hazy scene. My father was one of those men who'd never left the grove in his entire life. I am sure he'd never seen anything like this before.

"Not now, Xander. Do not get distracted by the beauty of the scene and thoughts of your family." I kept having to remind myself of my purpose: Harvest a norwulf and bring it back to the bay for the elders to see. My mind needs to be focused on hunting. That is all. Hunting. Nothing else. I promised myself that I would let my mind wander after the hunt when I am dragging my giant norwulf beast back to the hamlet by the bay.

My head raised just over the top of the grass and my eyes quickly scanned the flock. The longer I took, the more likely it would be that I would eventually be seen, so I scanned quickly.

A sow and calf were the closest norwulves to me, but neither of those were any good for proving your bravery as a hunter. The calf was really bleating too, like it desperately wanted its mother and the mother didn't seem to notice. There was a fine boar close enough to shoot, but there was nothing special about him. I mean, he would be a fine kill and all, the boar that was close enough to shoot that is, but it would not be

especially brave and skillful to kill him. Today I needed a norwulf that would truly impress the elders. I needed a large beast of a norwulf.

And then, in the middle of the flock, I saw him. The biggest boar I'd ever seen. At first I thought it was two norwulves sleeping near one another, you know, for warmth or something. But when he stood up I could see he was just one enormous beast. He was a full head above the others. The horn that came from his nose was as long as my arm. His shoulders were broad like an ox. This was truly a magnificent beast. If I was to kill this beast, the elders would truly think that I was a brave and skillful hunter.

I lowered myself to the ground and quietly laid my bag down beside me. A few deep breaths calmed my mind as my body hugged the ground. I removed my right mitten so I could grip my bow string. The frozen mountain air bit my now-bare hand. God it was cold. I nocked my arrow, the same arrow that I'd spun the day before when I was watching from my perch, and placed it upon the arrow rest. It's exciting to think that this arrow would soon be warm with the blood of a beastly norwulf.

I brought myself to my knees to take one more look at the beast. My head briefly popped over the top of the grass and glanced at the beast before lowering myself back to the ground. God, this beast was enormous.

My heart pounded.

I would have to make my move soon. I could not wait longer. If the flock moved on I might not get this close again.

I peeked my head above the grass one last time. The sow and calf moved directly between me and the giant norwulf. "Move. Move, damnit." I kept yelling with the

thoughts in my mind as if the sow could hear my thoughts. If she would just move, even slightly, then I would have a clear path to my prized beast and I could take my shot. Even then, at this distance you needed to fire directly under the wing or directly through the front of the norwulf's chest to have a clean kill. I was too far away to drive my arrow through the wing.

I don't know how long I laid on my stomach and hid from the flock. A long time I suppose, because the sun was now completely above the mountaintops. I'd lost the cover of darkness. One side of my mind was screaming "now, you must act now." The other side was screaming "patience, you mustn't act foolishly and ruin your hunt." These clashing thoughts ended up just freezing me in indecision. So I just laid there, in the bluegrass at the edge of the field, watching my breath and trying to calm my mind and trying to keep my bare hand from freezing so I could still feel my bow string.

I peered above the grass once again. The sow moved. The calf followed. I had a clear look at the beast of a norwulf now. God he was big. He turned towards me. Each inhale puffed out his muscular chest and each exhale created a cloud of breath that hung in the frigid air. His horn ran from the tip of his nose all the way back to the top of his head, right between his blood red eyes and his pointy ears. What a beast. This will surely be a glorious kill.

Now was my chance.

I rose to my knees and drew my bow. I brought my hand back to the corner of my mouth, just like I'd done a thousand times before. "Steady," I talked to myself as I tried

to keep my hands calm. I steadied my aim. I focused on the beast's rising and falling chest and pictured my arrow penetrating deep into his meat and into his heart.

The sound of a squealing norwulf filled the valley. The calf bleated in fear of losing his mother. I'd been spotted and the flock was now spooked. My fingers released. The bow let out a twang as the string pulled taut. The arrow flew across the air above the field with bluegrass. It was a poor shot. Not my best by any means. But I watched the arrow flying through the frozen air towards the beast. It's funny how time slows sometimes. It was like I could see the arrow getting closer and closer to the beast. And I could see the beast noticing the startle that had spread throughout the flock and turned his body ever so slightly. And even before the arrow finished its flight I knew that it was not a kill shot. All of these things happened so quickly, but I could see them so clearly.

The arrow struck the beast in the wing. The upper wing I think, you know, where there's a lot of meat, but nothing fatal. I'm not sure because there was quite a bit of commotion happening now and my mind started seeing events in real-speed again. The beast squealed and flailed at the pain that coursed through his body.

I stood. There was no point in hiding now. The norwulf flock was in a panic. A noisy, chaotic panic. If the beast hadn't turned it would have been a perfect shot. "Maybe it wasn't that bad of shot after all," I thought to myself.

"No! Focus, Xander." I snapped my mind back to attention. "No time for thinking about that shot now." I'd failed to kill the beast. And that's all that matters.

The flock was on the move now. Once one norwulf gets startled, so do the rest. I reached for my quiver to grab another arrow. The field of bluegrass was filled with

running bodies and squeals of panic and the sound of norwulf feet pounding the ground. It took a lot of focus to keep an eye on the great beast, but I could see him running, the arrow still stuck in his wing.

Perhaps I could fire another shot at the wounded beast. No, there was too much commotion in the field. I don't know what got into me, but I got up and I ran. I ran right into the norwulf flock believe it or not. I nocked a new arrow onto my bow string as I ran, fixed my gaze onto the beast of a norwulf, and ran across the field of bluegrass. This was a foolish and stupid thing to do. Not only has nobody told me to do this, run into a norwulf flock that is, but Thoren has explicitly told me not to do this because it is reckless. But perhaps later this would be seen as brave, me running into the norwulf flock to harvest my great beast that is. You know, part of the tale of Xander and how he killed his great beast or something. Children could recite this tale as they looked at the stars and drifted to sleep to the thoughts of me running across the field of bluegrass.

My ramskin boots pattered the ground as quickly as my legs would churn. I closed in on the beast, my bare hand pulled the bow string to the corner of my mouth again, my bow was fully drawn, and right as I released my grip. A running norwulf rammed my body. My body smashed into the ground. My arrow flung far over the flock and harmlessly hit into the side of the mountain. My bow was knocked from my grip. Even though the thick bluegrass cushioned my fall, the breath was taken from my body and a pain shot through my leg. My heart was racing so fast that I hardly noticed these pains at the time. It's funny how that happens, you know, that your heart pumps so quickly that your body doesn't feel getting knocked down.

The flock of norwulves was stampeding all around me and making these deafening squealing noises.

“Stupid, Xander. Foolish, Xander.” I tried to yell at myself because I was sure that my impatience had now led to my death, but my lungs had no breath. One careless step, from me or from one of these running creatures, could end me. I didn’t know whether I should run or stand still.

I stood. God, my leg hurt. I didn’t know what caused the pain, but I now had a bigger concern than a wounded leg. The norwulf sow that upended me had turned her attention towards me. The decision was made for me, I had to run. Luckily, female norwulves do not have a horn. Just the males do. But norwulves are the size of a man and they have three toes with talons that could easily rip through a man’s flesh.

I scampered towards the trees and bushes that lined the edges of the field. My one leg was hurt so I sort of galloped the best I could. Luckily, all the stampeding norwulves were somehow just running past me. Except for the sow that is. The spirits of the Gods seemed to be with me right now.

The ground shook from the panic in the flock.

I reached the edge of the field and dove. My body slid underneath the thatchleberry bushes. The sow grabbed my ramskin boot and powerfully pulled. My entire body was dragged back. She pulled again. I grabbed handfuls of thorn-covered thatchleberry branches to resist her tugs. She pulled my boot harder and just as she tried to bite me I released the handful of branches and stabbed her in the face with one of my short blades that hung from my belt.

She let out a squeal of pain and released my boot. I'd never heard a norwulf squeal so closely before. It frightened my soul. I never want to hear that yell again. I yelled back, you know, I yelled to try to make myself sound as imposing as the stab of my knife.

My heart was racing so fast that it felt like it was trying to escape from my chest.

Thankfully, the sow scampered away in pain and the stampeding flock took to flight and glided away into the valleys of the mountains. They must have really panicked because, like I said earlier, norwulves prefer to run, not fly, when they are startled.

The flock had left the field of bluegrass. I could hear the wind howling again. I hid under the thatchleberry bushes for a long time out of fear the flock might return and, you know, out of exhaustion.

My heart eventually calmed. But my mind raced. What happened to the beast? Was my leg OK? What should I do next?

Chapter 4

The grating racket of the startled norwulf flock had left the valley. No more squeals of panic and no more pounding of heavy feet striking the ground and stuff like that. It was silent now, you know, other than the sound of the wind still howling through the hollow mountains and my low groans from my achy body. I crawled out from under the thatchleberry bush and looked to the blue sky above. All appeared calm for now. But my eyes sure were attentive.

God my leg hurt. I laid on my stomach under that bush for so long that I hadn't put weight on it since my heart calmed. I stood. Or at least I tried to stand. A pain shot all the way from my hip to my toes and I collapsed to my knees and then all the way to the ground. A real sharp pain too. One of those pains that leaves your face all gnarled and ugly from when your mind knows your body is broken. And your body just falls to the ground.

I laid at the edge of the field of bluegrass and ran my hands over my body, you know, looking for which pains left my body broken. My whole hand could fit into the gash on my cowhide pants. My thigh was wounded, but appeared to not be bleeding. Now that my heart calmed I started feeling all sorts of small pains too. My ribs were sore, probably from getting knocked down by the sow. And my hands were sore from holding onto the thatchleberry bushes when the sow was tugging my body by the boot. It's amazing how you don't notice these little sorenesses when your heart is pounding.

“Stupid, Xander. Foolish, Xander. Why would you run into a norwulf flock?” I berated myself nice and good as I laid in that field and stared at the clouds in the sky and let my body ache. “Did you think you were going to be brave? How brave will you seem when you have to explain this to Thoren and the elders? Stupid, Xander. They surely will all laugh at your foolishness.” These were not just thoughts going through my head, I knew I was speaking aloud now. Yelling in fact. I was serious too, I acted stupidly by running into the norwulf flock. I could have been killed. I was lucky to be here and I musn’t let my mind forget that.

It eased the pain in my leg to yell at myself. So I sat there at the edge of the field and really lit into myself. You know, really try to hurt my pride for being so stupid and reckless. My curses and howls echoed off the mountains, my fist struck the ground over and over, and I really made a ruckus. The more I hurt my pride, the less my body hurt.

Turns out I was tossed right onto my quiver. At least that’s what I assumed from the location of the wound on my thigh and the hole that was torn into my pants. It all happened so fast. But that’s what must have happened. Three of my arrows were broken, one was shot into the beast’s wing, and one arrow was shot far away into the mountainside when I got bowled over. That leaves me with twenty good arrows.

I really am a fool sometimes. The beast was lost, my leg was wounded, and I am counting arrows, the least important thing in the world, like a child. God, maybe I don’t have the stuff of great hunters because I cannot even control my mind. It just wanders on its own and couldn’t care less about my commands.

Anyways, my leg hurt, and the yelling helped cope with the pain, so I lit into myself again about my foolishness and I yelled and cursed about how foolish it was that I was counting arrows right now.

So one of the arrows tore right through the quiver, my cowhide pants, and into the flesh of my left thigh. It was a real gash too, the wound in my thigh that is. But thankfully it was not bleeding.

My mind wandered again. "God, the beast. I should follow the flock and pursue the beast." And then I snapped my mind back. "No, first thing's first. I needed to tend to my wounds." I berated myself again for my indecisiveness.

The sow's grasp left three long gashes along the back of my ramskin boot that ran from the ankle to the heel. It really shows you how powerful these beasts are, you know, that their claws can tear through a leather boot and all. Anyways, my foot was not harmed, it was just cold now that my boot was torn and my heart had calmed.

I crawled across the field with bluegrass towards my bag that I'd left earlier, you know, before I foolishly ran into the norwulf flock trying to be brave or something. I had some medicine and cloth for bandages in the outside pouch of the bag. So here I am, crawling across the field because my leg is too wounded to walk and I am thinking about how soft the bluegrass is on my face. It's funny how my mind works sometimes.

Anyways, I got to my bag and I got to my medicine and I tended to the wound in my leg. The medicine is this powder that you sprinkle on the wound. I don't even know what it is to be honest, but it's white and it sort of smells salty, you know, just like the sea water when the ice thaws in the spring. It's just what hunters always carry with

them, the salty powdered medicine that is, so I carry it with me too. The medicine soaks up the blood and takes the pain away. There must be some sort of drug in it or something. I'm not sure. Right now I'm just thankful for the relief.

So I sprinkled the medicine onto my wound and wrapped my leg in a bandage. I could walk again without the stabbing pain.

It was a chaotic few moments when I startled the norwulf flock. My things had been strewn about the field during the panic. I walked into the field of bluegrass and gathered my arrows and quiver that I dropped when I scampered away. And I gathered my bow too. Well, the two halves of my bow. My bow broke you see. I must have fallen on it or a norwulf stepped on it or something. I really don't remember, but that must be what happened.

I sat at the edge of the field for what seemed like a long time. My back rested against my bag and my mind wandered about all that just happened. The sun was now directly overhead and it felt good and warm on my face. I closed my eyes. I don't know if I'd fallen asleep for a while or not. I think I did, but I really don't know. But I was awake now. And alert.

The norwulf flock is long gone now. And spooked. There would be no way that I could sneak up to them again like I did this morning.

"Dammit!" I yelled as I threw one half of my bow into the field of bluegrass.

"Dammit to hell!"

If the norwulf flock was not spooked before, all my yelling and cursing surely has them spooked now.

I walked over to where I'd seen the beast of a norwulf and kicked the dirt for a while at the lost opportunity. I called myself "stupid" and "foolish" and "impatient" and I swore that I would give the Gods anything to have one more chance to take my first shot just one more time.

I'd spent many hours practicing shooting my bow. All apprentice hunters did. It's one of the things we do most between hunting seasons. I'd shot so many practice arrows that the skin on my fingers that held my bow strings were calloused and hard. Thousands and thousands of arrows were shot into the bales of straw in preparation for today. And each shot I would pretend the bale of straw was a giant norwulf. Now I'd had my shot at a real norwulf. You know, it wasn't a bale of straw that I was pretending was a beast, I'd shot an arrow at an actual beast, a great beast, a beast that was gonna make me a hunter. And I failed. God, it was devastating to have missed my chance.

I looked around at the field with nothing in it but me and a sea of bluegrass and my broken bow and I knew the beast had escaped and so did my chances of proving my bravery and skill to the elders.

"Glory was in my grasp and I let it slip away because of my foolishness," I yelled into the sky. No norwulf and now no bow.

My mind raced some more.

I didn't know what I'd end up doing, not just what I'd be doing in the next few hours, but what I'd be doing for the rest of my life. Perhaps I'd go back to Norwick and try my hand at being a fletcher. You know, open up a small shop where I could make arrows and entertain the young boys with tales of the years I was an apprentice hunter.

Perhaps I would tell them about Thoren and the great beast of a norwulf that I'd shot in the wing. And the boys of Norwick would sit attently as I told my stories and made my arrows. They'd say that "Xander the fletcher has the best stories." And the boys would ask their father if they knew that Xander the fletcher was an apprentice hunter when he was a young man. And the boys would run around the trees in the grove playing out the adventures that I'd told them by shooting pretend arrows at imaginary norwulves and dream of being hunters themselves. Perhaps I'd find a wife and have a son that would become a fletcher too. And he'd gather arrowwood for me like I did for my father.

But this would be very hard now, you know, being a fletcher and all. When my father died I did not take over his shop like most sons do when their fathers die. My father's one-room shop with the thatched roof is gone now. His tools are all gone now. Plus, I really don't know how to be a fletcher. I only helped with the unskilled tasks of arrow making like gathering wood from the grove. You know, the jobs they give to little boys to keep them busy and make them think they are helping. I left before my father mentored me on the skillful parts of making arrows. You know, the skillful parts that take years for young men to learn. But I was with Thoren, chasing my dream of becoming a hunter while I could have been learning the skillful parts of being a fletcher from my father. I told myself that I was learning different skills. Besides, who would even buy my arrows? All my father's clients buy their arrows from other fletchers in Norwick now. Even Thoren, my father's best customer, would probably not buy arrows from me unless it was out of charity for poor Xander who was not brave enough to become a hunter.

And I wouldn't want charity. If I was a fletcher I would want to have honor. No, I could not go back to being a fletcher.

I also lost my chances of becoming a father. I mean, you never know, maybe I'd meet a woman in the grove who'd become my wife. But I had a woman, Ingrid, who was a girl I was going to marry. At least I thought I was going to marry her. You see, we were in love. You know, the type of love that young people fall into right after they are children and right before they become men and women. We'd run deep into the woods around the grove outside of Norwick and find a place to be alone and chatter about becoming adults. She would listen to me jabber for hours about the dreams of a wide-eyed boy who gathered arrows for Thoren and wanted to leave Norwick and be the bravest and most skillful hunter. And I'd jabber about how I believed the young boys would someday look up at the stars in the night sky and tell the tales of Xander the great hunter. And I'd come back to Norwick and the young boys would all point at me and watch me from a distance. I don't think she believed me, you know, that I wanted to leave Norwick and be a hunter, because she'd always say something like "oh, Xander you've got such dreams" and then she'd go on and talk about how she wanted to raise a family in Norwick and all.

But I left Ingrid when I left Norwick to go hunt with Thoren. I didn't even say goodbye. It was young and foolish of me to just leave her behind like I did. Anyways, she has a husband now, he's a potter, and Ingrid would never forgive me for my youthful foolishness, you know, that I left her without saying anything like I did. Now,

when I go to Norwick I avoid seeing Ingrid because deep down I am a coward when it comes to facing my past. If I was to ever have a wife, it would not be Ingrid.

So I was kicking the dirt on the spot where I'd shot the beast. I cursed my bad luck. And in my mind I was making plans on returning back the hamlet by the bay. You know, which route I'd take south, figuring out how many rations I needed for the journey, and how best to travel with my wounds and all. I even cried. I know because the wet tears froze to my face and hurt the corners of my eyes. But then I saw it in the dirt I was kicking. A smear of purple blood. By my feet. That's norwulf blood. Then a few drops more. It was a blood trail.

This hunt was not over yet.

It's possible the arrow wounded the giant beast's wing enough that it couldn't fly away with the rest of the flock. If so, that would mean that the wounded norwulf was separated from his flock. And that would mean that there was still a chance at killing this beast and returning to the hamlet by the bay and impressing the elders with my bravery.

I became silent and knelt down in the field of bluegrass. Perhaps the beast was near. It was foolish of me to have yelled at myself even if it did help ease the pain in my leg. "Foolish, stupid, impatient, Xander." I berated myself silently so as not to further startle the wounded beast of a norwulf.

I followed the trail of purple blood to the edge of the field. It led north into the mountains beyond the perch where I watched the flock from yesterday. I already was the most north that I'd ever been. Following the trail would mean venturing farther into the unfamiliar northern mountains. My mind was racing with all the information that went

into the decision I had to make: Follow the wounded norwulf to the north into the mountains or return home to the south?

I would easily have enough rations if I returned to the hamlet by the bay now. I would probably have to spend one more night in the mountains before I would be home and could warm myself in a bed and eat a meal that didn't taste like dirt. I would be hungry and tired, but it would be a fairly easy trip. However, this would mean that I'd return empty-handed. You know, I would have to accept that my hunt had failed. I would have to tell everybody about how I got my wounds and how I broke my bow and how I let the beast of a norwulf get away. Worst of all, this would surely mean the elders would not be impressed and I would not become a hunter.

If I went north and followed the norwulf, then there was much less certainty. I only had enough rations for one more day, maybe two if I was very frugal. My bow was broken, which meant that I would have to kill the norwulf with a blade that I held in my hand. It would be dangerous for sure, killing a norwulf with a blade that is. But it would be dangerous and brave. I don't know if that's been done before. And a norwulf that large, that would mean that my name would be known everywhere. Children would hear tales of Xander who killed the giant norwulf with his knife as they stared at my star in the sky. Grown men would be nervous to shake the hand that thrust a blade into the giant norwulf. And the elders would all be convinced that I was a brave man.

Sometimes your mind gets clouded by foolish aspirations. I feared that was happening to me now because I kept thinking about the story that would be told about Xander the hunter. I think that men tell the boys stories of the great hunters so in

moments like this the boys make the foolish choice that pushes them beyond their fears. I convinced myself that I could kill the norwulf and could become a great and brave hunter. I decided to follow the blood trail north.

Chapter 5

I gathered my belongings and followed the trail of purple norwulf blood--a few drops here, a smear there-- that left the north end of the field. It disappeared into the mountains, the trail of blood that is, and I followed. I tried not to think that each of my steps took me farther from the hamlet by the bay and farther from a warm bed and farther from food that doesn't taste like dirt. And I tried not to think about how each step meant I was deeper and deeper into these unknown mountains and my rations were getting less and less sufficient for a safe return. No, I tried not to think of those things.

On the other side of my mind I also knew that it was foolish not to think of those things, but I tried to quiet that side of my mind so I could focus on tracking the beast. I needed blind faith that if I single-mindedly pursued the beast that everything would somehow work out. It was a foolish thought, you know, ignoring how far you've traveled and how many rations you have left and all, but that is what it takes to be brave, blind faith that compels you to go beyond the point of rational behavior, or so I told myself.

So, despite more sober thoughts, I followed the trail of blood farther and farther north into the mountains and I kept telling myself how brave I was for doing so.

It was not an easy thing to do, follow the blood that is. I hadn't done it much because my hunting party usually killed the norwulves cleanly, which means there is not much tracking to do. The norwulves laid where they were struck down by the arrows and the apprentice hunters would field dress them right on the spot. You know, remove the innards and leave a pile of guts in the fields where the fallen norwulves would lay.

But the fact that I kept finding new drops of blood each ten paces or so meant that the beast was both wounded good and still moving at a decent clip through the mountains.

I took solace in thinking that Thoren would be proud at his apprentice tracking the norwulf blood so well, or at least that's what I told myself. Like it took skill to follow a trail of purple blood through the woods. It really just took patience.

I told myself that I needed to remember all these things, like the tracking of blood, because I will need to retell them to the elders when I return with the great norwulf beast. They will surely ask for my story and I want to be sure to impress them.

The sun steadily lowered in the sky and the shadows got longer as I walked farther and farther north. I would soon run out of daylight and the cold air would soon get colder. I would not find the beast of a norwulf tonight. But I would pick up the blood trail in the morning and continue my hunt tomorrow when I am rested.

I set up my resting spot much like I did the night before. I gathered cantaberry branches and made a fire and stacked the stones neatly around the flames. I neatly laid out my blades so they didn't rest on the soil. I ate a potful of bracca beans. And I complained to myself at how much the beans tasted like dirt. Even though my body was weakened, I cut back on my rations. I wasn't sure if that was a wise decision or not, you know, to cut back my rations because my wounded body needed nutrition with being tired and wounded and all. I really didn't know how much longer I could make these beans last. Perhaps two more meals. Three at most. And that would not be leaving me with any emergency rations.

The coldness of the air becomes even more intense when the sun goes down. God it was cold in these mountains. My mind had been busy all day tracking the blood trail and I forgot to complain much about the cold. Now that I was hunched by the fire and had food in my belly and the dark had filled the air I thought I would complain a bit to pass the time. So I rested my mittens by the fire and held my bared palms to the heat of the flames. It's such an odd feeling, you know, to have your palms be warmed by the fire and the backs of your hands be cold from the air. Anyways, I stared at the backs of my hands and cursed the cold air for being so damn nippy and unforgiving.

After a while I snapped my attention back to the important things. "No time for complaining about the cold, Xander. You are a hunter. And hunting is done in the cold. And great and brave hunters do not complain about the cold. Children complain about the cold. You are a man, not a child." I was right, there was work to be done. I needed to tend to the wound in my thigh, sew my pants where the arrow had pierced my leg, and I needed to rest my body.

So I tended and sewed and rested in the flickering lights of the fire.

It's an eerie feeling when you stare up at the night sky and there are no stars staring back. These clouds rolled in late in the day as the sun was setting, these thick and smokey clouds, but I hoped they were just passing overhead. But they kept coming and thickened as the day went on, the clouds in the sky that is. I feared they were storm clouds. But there was nothing I could do about it now, the weather that is. If a storm was coming, it would not matter whether I wanted it to come.

So the thick and smokey clouds rolled in from the north, the sun disappeared below the mountains, and now there were no stars of the great hunters in the sky.

The weather changes quickly in the mountains, perhaps it was just a few passing clouds. That last thought, the one about these clouds quietly passing through, comforted me enough for me to sleep. So I crawled inside of my bag and laid my head down and went to sleep for the night. I dreamed of the giant norwulf and prayed that tomorrow I would be given a chance to kill him.

My sleep was restless. My mind raced. The powdered medicine wore off and my leg hurt, but not so badly that I wanted to fumble around in the dark and the cold to apply more medicine. So I laid in my bag, half awake, and feeling the throbbing of my wounded leg. It was getting stronger as the night went on too, the throbbing in my leg that is. It was really bothersome, I tossed and turned trying to find a way that I could lay my body so my leg didn't hurt. But I couldn't find a comfortable position. And all the tossing and turning and throbbing in my leg made it impossible to sleep. And I worried about the clouds in the sky and whether they were storm clouds even though I'd sworn that I wouldn't worry about them. And I tried to calm my mind by telling myself stories of great hunters, but the stars were covered and my mind couldn't tell the stories without the stars. And I had brief thoughts about waking up and heading back south. "Perhaps I'd made a mistake in pursuing this beast north into the mountains," I wasn't sure if I thought that to myself or said it aloud. About that last thought, the one about whether it was a mistake to pursue this beast north into the mountains, I tried to silence that thought with even grander thoughts of killing the great beast and becoming a hunter.

When I was a child and Thoren would visit Norwick in the summer and entertain the craftsmen with his tales of hunting glory, he would visit my father's shop, just like he did for all the other craftsmen, and pick up the arrows and ask my father questions about the arrowheads and the fletchings. And my father would answer. He had this deep timbre in his voice when he spoke too, Thoren that is. It made him sound very strong and wise. So Thoren would hold the arrows in his strong hands and ask these questions and I think he was sizing up my father's character more than learning about the arrows. You know, like he wanted to know that the man who made his arrows was an honest man or something. He was honest too, my father that is. Anyways, I remember the first time that I'd seen Thoren in my father's shop. He was tall and muscular and when he'd pick up an arrow you could see him imagining the arrow flying through the sky towards a norwulf chest. I remember hiding from him, under a table or something, and watching from a distance like the shy child I was. And he would pretend to not see me hiding and watching. That was nice of him, to pretend not to see me and all. Anyways, it was like a God had walked into my father's shop, which was a really big deal for a little child. It really was, a big deal that is. I remember there were many solid black lines tattooed on his forearms too. I don't remember how I'd learned it, but a hunter gets a new black line tattooed across his forearm each time he kills a norwulf. Perhaps I asked my father about the tattoos and perhaps he told me what they meant. I really don't remember.

So there I was, half awake in my bag trying to stay warm. And I was thinking back at the first time I'd seen Thoren's tattooed forearm.

I only had one tattoo on my forearm. In the second year of my apprenticeship, which would be three years ago from now, I was a driver on the first norwulf hunt of the season. You know, we were trying to push the norwulf flock towards the setters. I was real inexperienced. I'd never even shot an arrow at a norwulf the entire first hunting season. So there we were, pushing this flock of norwulves towards Thoren and the other setters, when a juvenile boar got spooked by one of the other apprentices and ran around in circles in a panic. This boar must have got disoriented in all the confusion because he turned right towards me. My hands were shaky. So shaky that I nearly shook the arrow right off the rest. I drew my bow and my fingers released the arrow. And the bow let out this twang that it does when the string throws an arrow. The shot was true. And the arrow drove deep into the norwulf chest and through his heart. The norwulf fell to the ground. There was no blood trail to follow.

When we returned to the hamlet by the bay I got to retell that story dozens of times as the apprentices toasted our mugs of ale and swapped stories of the hunting season. So I smiled and laughed and toasted many times about how I killed a norwulf with my first shot ever. But there was no blood trail.

The air was still cold and the clouds still smothered the light from the stars in the sky. I rubbed the sole tattoo on my arm as I thought about my one and only norwulf kill.

My father died two days before we left for that hunt. So he never got to see my tattoo and he never got to tell his friends about his son, Xander, the little boy from Norwick who killed a norwulf on his very first shot.

Some of the other apprentice hunters have many tattoos. Everybody says that we're a hunting party, you know, that we should take pride in the success of the party and not the individual, but all the apprentices know how many tattoos each other has. I mean, that's why we tattoo our forearms when we kill a norwulf, you know, to keep track of how many kills we, as individuals, have. I mean, if it was really where we only cared about how many kills our hunting party has, then we would get tattoos when our party kills a norwulf or not get tattoos at all or something. One of my good friends, Sem, has seven tattoos. Seven! And Sem became an apprentice hunter a year after me. When I compare my forearm to Sem's, I get real jealous. Perhaps the elders were right, you know, about me not being a hunter and all.

Anyways, we being young men and there being many more apprentices than positions for hunters, it creates this situation where all the apprentices are competing with one another for how many tattoos you have on your arm.

So I spent the whole night thinking about how desperately I wanted to get another tattoo on my forearm. It was a nice thought, getting another tattoo that is. It kept me warm. But it's also frustrating when you are tired and you cannot sleep because your mind is racing and you know you will be tired the next day.

So the sun slowly rose over the eastern mountaintops. It was so cloudy so the sun just created this dull glow behind the thick clouds in the sky that created a hazy and smoky light. I felt tired and sore. And now that I was fumbling around my resting place gathering my belongings I was even more cold. I was tired and sore and cold.

The clouds above were all sorts of greys and blacks. Storm clouds. Dammit.

I found the trail of purple norwulf blood and continued following it through the valleys of the mountains as the storm clouds rumbled unsettlingly in the sky above. It really sounds ominous in the mountain valleys too, the rumbling of storm clouds that is. The sounds just bounce around the rock walls and scares your soul. The rumbling clouds also sound a bit like rolling rocks, so you always get this eerie feeling that you are going to get caught in an avalanche or something too. You know, you hear the thunder roll and your body jumps like there are rocks tumbling down onto you or something.

Anyways, if it snowed I may lose the trail of blood. God that would be such an unfortunate turn of events, you know, if the snow covered the blood trail.

I walked for a while, perhaps an hour, and came upon a matted thicket of grass and bushes that were covered in purple norwulf blood. This is where the beast had slept last night. Knowing that I was standing where the beast laid invigorated my mind. It made me forget about the soreness of my wounds and the tiredness of my mind and the coldness of my body and the rumbling of the storm clouds above. I forgot those things at least for a moment. Rather, I started having flashes of me returning to the bay with the great beast and everybody would chatter about my bravery.

I repeated over-and-over thoughts that made me less cold. You know, stuff like “the beast is close,” “the beast is wounded,” and “the beast is mine for the taking.” And these thoughts kept my mind busy as I pushed deeper and deeper into the mountains.

At midday I saw the first flake of snow swirl and twirl through the twisting wind of the mountain air. I don't know if that snowflake ever touched the ground, you know, it

just sort of blew through the air and got carried in whichever direction the wind blew it. Then more flakes fell from the grey sky and were swept up in the wind and all of those flakes were swirling and twirling through the air. Some of those flakes must have reached the ground because the snow was gathering now. The wind gained strength too. "I must keep following the purple blood before it's all covered in snow and is lost forever," I said to myself as I put my head down and pushed into the wind. This was my last chance to get this beast. If I ever wanted to become a hunter, I needed to find every last ounce of courage and resolve in my body and put it to use right now.

However, just as my mind was more determined than ever, the storm increased. Enough snow had fallen that I could see my footprints. The rocks of the mountains became slippery in the fresh snow. And the trail of purple norwulf blood was covered. Gusts of wind often knocked me to my knees. A real cold wind too, the kind that shoots frigid air into your hood and down your back and chills your body. The type of chill that really shivers your body and makes your bones rattle. "The gods were trying to hinder me," I complained to the empty mountains.

The snow deepened. It was over my feet now. I put on my snowshoes and trudged through the mountains.

My pursuit of the beast had slowed as my mind was thinking about seeking shelter from the storm.

One more peak. I promised myself that after I reached the top of this small ridge that I would find some shelter and rest my body and try to warm myself. I planned on

reaching the top of the ridge and assessing the landscape. You know, look for a path forward or for some shelter or something.

I was not prepared for what I saw. At the top of that ridge, the one that I'd promised myself would be the last one that I'd climb, I saw him there. The giant norwulf beast was plodding through the valley below. I instinctively dropped to my knees so my body did not make a silhouette on the mountaintop. Shelter from the storm would have to wait.

He was magnificent, the norwulf beast that is. He looked both small from being so distant and bigger than I remembered. You could tell how large he was from the size of his body and how he'd plod through the snowstorm. The snow gathered on his shaggy, woolly pig body and his wounded left wing was held tentatively in this sort of uneven cocked position on his back. He was hurt for sure. But he seemed determined to escape me. You know, his giant three-toed feet pounded through the fresh, white snow as I watched him slowly inch forward through the valley. He had no intention of stopping.

The heart in my chest pounded with excitement, which made me forget about how cold I was. "We meet again," I talked quietly to the beast.

I cursed the bad luck that caused me to break my bow. I cursed it to hell. If I had my bow I would be able to strike the beast with an arrow from a distance. Even with the swirling wind, my bow would be the best tool for this job. "Not now, Xander, there is no purpose in cursing your broken bow. That is a useless thought." My bow was broken and now I would have to kill the beast with one of the blades I carried around my belt.

From the top of the ridge where I stood, I also could see exactly where the norwulf was headed. The rock-covered mountains were ending and evolved into a rocky shore that met an ice-covered sea. Unlike the steep and deep mountains, the frozen sea created a flat terrain that went all the way to the horizon. The norwulf was headed towards the water.

I should have known the sea was near. I'd seen a sea bird earlier. The bird brought back flashes of my first hunt with Thoren. That first hunt was the first time I'd seen a sea bird in my life because they don't fly as far inland as Norwick. Later that day, you know, the day of my first hunt, was the first time I'd seen the sea and smelled the salty scent of the sea water. Instead of this memory, I should have known the sea was near. But that was right before the storm began so I forgot to think deeply about it, the sea bird and the idea that I was close to the sea that is. I really frustrate myself sometimes. I saw a bird earlier and I should have thought harder about what that meant. This sea would not have been unanticipated if I was paying attention. My mind wanders when I need to be more attentive. "When I become a great hunter, and I have apprentices of my own, I must be more attentive," I told myself. I mean, if I want to tell my apprentices they must be attentive, I would have to be attentive myself.

"Not now. Focus, Xander. Do not think about the things you must tell your apprentices." I snapped my mind back to the beast below. "The norwulf is headed for the sea."

You see, you wouldn't know it by looking, but norwulves are excellent swimmers, even in the icy waters that would kill a man from the cold. They can hold their breath for

a long time too. Much longer than even the strongest man. The fact that they are not only large and powerful beasts, but that they can fly and swim is what makes them such impressive prey, the norwulves that is. And escaping into the water is one way that norwulves evade hunters. They go deep into the water and wait. They wait for a long time. Then they surface far away. Thoren had told me that once, you know, about the norwulves escaping into the water, although I'd never actually seen it before. I had to quickly descend the mountain and cut off the beast before he reached the water.

Chapter 6

The beast of a norwulf pounded and plodded one heavy foot after the other through the fresh snow and towards the sea.

God it was cold. The biting wind blew the snowflakes into my frozen face and it felt like a thousand needles pelting my cheekbones at each moment. The snow that was blown directly into my face was caught in my beard, which made my blonde-colored beard appear white like an old man. And my eyes were a hue of red that only comes from hours of the frigid wind brushing over your face. You know it's cold when your eyeballs are so cold that it hurts to blink.

I knelt on the top of the snowy ridgetop. The thoughts in my mind aimlessly swirled just like the stormy wind with what to do next.

"I must not think, I must do." I actually said this to myself as if it was a plan rather than meaningless words. My mind rallied my body's energies. I didn't really know what I'd do once I started to act. But I guess I thought I could will myself to act wisely if I pretended to be more decisive than I really was. You know, pretend to be brave and you might actually act bravely or something.

So I tied the hooked blade that hung from my belt to the end of my roll of twine that hung from my belt and headed down the mountainside. If all went well, my instincts would take over and guide my actions. I'd heard a tale of a great hunter who snagged a norwulf with such a setup, you know, a hooked blade with twine tied to it. This hunter hooked the norwulf with their hooked blade and tied the norwulf to a tree. I forget the

rest of the story, but I remembered the part about snagging the beast. That incomplete memory was enough for me to act.

It didn't seem like a great idea, hooking the norwulf and all, and I had no idea how this would all play out, but it was the first idea that came to mind. By the time I'd realized this was not a well-thought plan my body was already moving down the mountain. As I ran, I convinced myself this was a brave idea even though I knew that was just me trying to calm my doubts.

This hooked blade, the one that hung from my belt and the one that I tied to the end of my twine, was given to me by my good friend, Sem. Sem was another one of Thoren's apprentice hunters. Well, sort of. You see, he joined our hunting party in my second hunting season, Sem that is. The thing is that Sem's father, Magnus, was Thoren's noble patron. That means that Magnus pays for Thoren to hunt the norwulves and pays for Thoren's gear and rations and apprentices and stuff. Magnus is a very powerful man, which means his son, Sem, also is an important young man and had been from the moment he was born.

I chuckle each time I think about being born an important young man. Imagine a helpless baby, not even able to hold his own head up, not knowing a single thing about the world, and grown men think of this baby as important just because his father is important. I mean, I suppose the men treat the baby as important merely so the father sees them treating them as important, but the whole situation seems silly to me, you know, grown men fawning over a baby. And here's the real silly part, the father is only important because his father was important who was only important because his father

was important and it goes on and on until there are so many generations of important fathers and their important sons that the name itself is the only thing that matters. I mean, all these important people are *being* important, but nobody is *doing* anything important. I suppose that somewhere in this chain of fathers and sons that somebody must have actually done something important, you know, other than be born important, but that information tends to get forgotten in the retelling of the story so many times.

I guess that's the way the world works though. You know, some men are important because they do brave things and some men are important because they are born that way.

I laugh at the absurdity of it all, you know, the important fathers with their important sons. But I also feel sort of sad for these important babies, like Sem. You know, they are born an important young man, but they don't know they are important because they're a baby. And they certainly haven't done anything brave, you know, on account of being a baby and all. But at some point these babies will grow to be children and somebody tells them they are important or they start to figure out how the world works and at some point they must start to think of themselves as important and all. I'm not really sure exactly how it happens, but at some point they must realize that other people think of you as important. That must be an odd feeling, that feeling of unearned importance that is. And I feel sad, you know, to be treated as important and then find out that it's not because of anything you'd done but just because you have the right father.

Anyways, my good friend Sem is an apprentice hunter just like me, but he will never become a hunter nor does he want to become a hunter. Some day, when Magnus dies, Sem is going to inherit his father's wealth and will become an important man who is a patron of hunters too. Magnus sent Sem to hunt with Thoren so he could learn about the hunting culture, you know, drink sponami and sing hunting songs and stuff. I guess this experience is supposed to make Sem a wise patron because he'd been on a few norwulf hunts and slept under the stars in the mountains and all. Really I think it just gives Sem the adventures that young men like to have. You know, adventures about hunting and stuff that he could use to impress other young men or a woman or something. I bet that Magnus' father made him be an apprentice hunter too when he was Sem's age. I don't know. I should ask Sem about it sometime. Anyways, hunting is sort of like a long vacation for Sem. Something to do while he waits for his father to die.

You see, there is a time when the children of noble patrons are old enough that they are not children, but are young enough that their fathers are still alive. The children are not children and are not yet the head of the family. It is during this time that they are young men with all the energy that young men have and they sit idly waiting to inherit their father's wealth. And so they use their fathers' wealth to occupy their time and seek some sort of outlet for their youthful energies. Some of them hire the wisest men as their tutors and read the wisest books in hopes that they too will become wise or at least sound wise or something. Some join a fishing boat and learn the ways of navigating by the stars and enjoy the adventures of seeing exotic ports and maybe even catch a few fish. And some, like Sem, hunt. I guess they want to prove that their lives of privilege

has not dulled their instincts that make them a man, you know, that they are still capable of being afraid and proud and brave and stuff. Without these little divergences they would never have a chance to feel these feelings. Maybe they want to prove that they are important all by themselves and not just because of who their fathers are. I don't know really. I probably shouldn't speculate too much either. I mean, Sem is a good guy and all, even if he treats hunting more like a hobby, so I don't want to say he isn't really important. It's just that he's important because of who his father is that's all.

No matter what, these children who are born important always end up just being wealthy and important. You know, they don't ever end up being a fisherman or a hunter or a wise man. They fool around for a few years while they are young fishing or hunting or learning how to sound wise. Then they grow up to be important, wealthy, and old. Their fathers die, they inherit their father's wealth, and then they wait to die so their sons can have their turns being wealthy.

So Sem joined our hunting party a few years back. It's not like Thoren had a chance to tell Magnus "no" or anything. Sem just wanted to feel fear and pride and to occupy his time until he was a few years closer to becoming a noble patron when his father passed. He wanted to kill a norwulf so he could brag to his other important friends that he killed a norwulf when he was a young man.

As you would expect from the son of a noble patron, Sem had the best equipment too, you know, the warmest boots, the strongest bow, and whatnot. So Sem had this nice curved blade of a knife. I remember telling him that it looked like the moon hanging from his belt because it had this crescent shape and it glistened a bit when the

light hit the smooth silver metal just right. It was new too, meaning it had never touched blood before, the knife that is, which is why it glistened. And one day we were on a hunt and Sem was looking the wrong way, which can happen in all the commotion of a norwulf hunt, and nearly got ran over by a charging norwulf. I mean, I don't know if he was frozen with fear or if he was watching a bird fly in the sky or what, but he would have got ran over by that norwulf if I hadn't grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him out of the way at the last moment. I mean, the very last moment. I saved Sem's life that day. I did too, save his life that is. I mean, I wasn't just going to watch another man get ran over. Anyways, that was the time Sem realized that hunting wasn't just a vacation or a hobby, but that being a hunter was dangerous work.

I think that's exactly the type of experience Magnus wanted Sem to have, you know, almost getting killed and all. The funny thing is that Sem seemed to like it, you know, almost being killed and all. Later at the camp he kept feeling his chest and how his heart had never beat that hard before in all his privileged life and he talked about how exciting the hunt was and how Xander had pulled him to safety at the last moment. And he always had this big toothy grin when he said it too like almost getting killed was the best thing that happened to him, like it was a thrill or something. And the norwulf got bigger and faster and closer each time that he told the story. I got the sense that Sem had never really felt the fear of death in his entire privileged life before. Maybe he was afraid of an unfamiliar sound in the dark or something, but those are petty and childish fears that everybody has. Sem had probably never got the rush of actually fearing for your life, you know, where you almost die and all. And so Sem felt the thrill of his heart

instinctually racing and the fire that fills your blood that can make a man feel strong enough to lift the heaviest rock. You aren't even aware that you are capable of these feelings until you are in those moments and then the primal parts of your mind and body take over. And I'm sure that Sem had never felt that way in his whole privileged life.

But the funny thing about Sem is that he also never really understood that he nearly died. I mean, almost dying was part of his story that he told and retold and all, but I don't think he really understood the dying part if that makes sense. It was like he thought that sons of important fathers don't die over things like a charging norwulf or something. So Sem got all the excitement and none of the fear of almost dying. What should have been a humbling experience became, in fact, an emboldening one. And so he would chase that thrilling feeling that you get when you almost die. This made him do foolish things sometimes.

So I saved Sem's life from the charging norwulf. Hunters have this tradition where you give somebody a knife if they save your life and all. So Sem, wanting to learn the ways of the hunters, gave me this new knife with the blade that was curved like the moon because I saved his life. It's supposed to be a big deal, you know, giving another hunter a knife and all, because knives are tools to be cherished. Knives are the products of hours and hours of labor that must be honored. And fathers hand them down to their sons, knives that is. But to Sem, these knives were not to be cherished. They were merely a possession to him. A thing. It's not like Sem disliked these knives, it's just that he lacked cherishing them if you know what I mean. So he went through the feelingless motions of handing me the knife and it was no big deal to him.

That knife has proudly hung on my belt on every hunt since I saved Sem's life.

I ran down the mountainside to try and cut off the beast before he reached the sea. I held the knife with the curved blade--the blade that Sem gave me--in my hand as I ran too. This was a dangerous thing to do, running with a blade that is, because the snow was slick and the wound on my leg was hurting and it would be very easy to fall on one of the rocks buried in the snow and hurt yourself. But running down the snowy and steep mountain with a knife was another one of those things that is only foolish and dangerous if I don't kill the norwulf. If I succeed, then foolishly running down the snowy and steep mountain will be a brave thing. The more foolish, the more brave.

God my leg hurt. The sharp pains shot down my leg as I ran. I wished I'd applied more of the powdered medicine to my wounds. But there was no time for that now. I must focus on staying upright as I make my way down the mountain so I can kill the beast.

So there I was, running down the mountain, the curved blade was clenched in my fist, my wounded leg was throbbing, I had some vague plan about hooking the beast that I'd vaguely remembered from some tale I'd heard once, and the norwulf heard me closing in on him. The beast's pace went from this steady plod to a slow gallop. His giant three-toed claws threw up the freshly-fallen snow to make this cloud of snowflakes that followed his body. That was the first time I knew the norwulf had seen me, when he picked up his pace and all. I wasn't sure what I was going to do when I reached the bottom of the mountain either. I just knew that I was running to get close to the beast and I hoped my instincts would guide my actions.

This whole endeavor seemed foolish, but the Gods were with me, or so I told myself. The norwulf would be running directly below a small ridge at the same time I would be above.

The pain in my leg shot from my left hip down to the toes of my left foot as I launched myself recklessly from the small ridge into the air. While in the air I had another one of those moments where time moves slowly because I remember thinking both about how brave and instinctual it was for me to leap down onto the back of the wounded norwulf and, at the same time, at how impatient and foolish this choice was. Even if I timed my jump perfectly, there was little assurance that landing on the norwulf would end well. I'd probably hit my body hard onto a flapping wing or something and seriously hurt myself. But I jumped and I was falling and it was foolish and reckless and there was no turning back.

My falling body landed right on top of the beast's back and I drove my curved knife as hard as I could between his shoulders. I felt like a hero in the stories that old men tell young boys because I'd actually landed on top of the beast and I actually drove the blade through the woolly fleece of the beast and into his back meat. I could feel the warm norwulf blood run into the beast's yarny hair and onto my cold hands. The norwulf squealed in pain and bucked wildly. He violently flapped his wings and bucked his head back to try and strike me or throw me off or something. But I gripped my free hand into the beast's long hair and hung on tightly as the beast convulsed in pain.

I pressed my weight into the back of the blade to drive it deeper and deeper into the beast's muscular back. There was nothing but meat as far as my blade could reach. This second thrust made the beast squeal even louder and flail even more violently.

I was thrown clear of the beast, my body slammed into the snow-covered ground, but my curved knife had stuck.

So there I was, laying on the ground. One end of the twine was tied to the curved knife stuck into the back of the norwulf and the other end was tied to my belt.

Thankfully the beast's instinct was to flee and not fight. The impact of my body being thrown into the rocky ground dazed my mind and knocked the wind from my lungs. It was an odd feeling, like the world spun around me for a moment as I laid on the rocky beach listening to the ringing in my ears. I don't think I was knocked out, you know, where I wasn't awake or anything, at least it didn't feel like it, but I'm not really sure. But I would have been defenseless had the norwulf turned his ire towards me.

In the tales of the great hunters, the elders do not tell the young boys how much these brave acts hurt. Probably because that would make them sound less brave. I don't know, it seems like the pain makes these acts sound more brave to me. Anyways, my body hurt from jumping and landing on the beast's back and my body hurt when I was thrown to the rocky beach. No, actually doing these acts hurts much more than they tell you in the stories.

God, being brave is rough, which is the point I suppose. If it was easy to be brave, then everybody would be brave and then the brave acts would not be brave.

The norwulf ran across the rocky beach and took up all the slack in my twine until the jolt of the twine being pulled taut and yanked my body. My arms and legs hung lifelessly from my body. Reaching the end of the twine simultaneously dug the knife deeper into the beast's back and jerked my body from its rest. This was accompanied by the norwulf letting out another one of his piercing squeals of pain, you know, the ones that make your bones rattle out of fear. I suppose it was a squeal of pain, but I'm not sure.

The strong beast easily pulled my body as he continued to run towards the sea. I was helplessly sliding and bouncing across the gravelly beach.

This was brutal, I'd never been drug across the ground like this before. But here I was bouncing across the rocky beach, my body rattling off each bump on the ground. I felt like a little fish that the little boys back in Norwick would catch and then keep on a string and then run across the banks of the streams to proudly show their father. They'd run and hold the string, the children that is, and the fish would be dragged behind the children's feet bouncing across the ground and desperately flailing and flopping to try and escape even though it was futile.

This jostling and rolling and bouncing from being drug across the beach woke up my mind. The ground was so frozen and rocky and hard that I was sure that I'd have a thousand small bruises when my heart stopped racing.

My arms and legs were flailing and being pulled under my body. My body rolled from stomach to back to stomach again. I tried desperately to grab rocks and dig in my feet to resist the beast's power. But it was useless. The beast was too strong. I ended

up with a thousand little nicks and cuts on my hands from trying to dig into the dirt or hold onto a rock or something but, despite my frenzied attempts at resisting, the beast easily pulled me at his will.

Perhaps my resistance was actually causing the beast to pull harder. I really didn't know. So I stopped trying to resist the beast's pulls and I tried to grab the rope or something just to make my body less hurtful as I was being dragged.

I ended up gripping the rope with both hands and being dragged on my side. The bouncing off the rocks still hurt, but this was the least bad position.

Finally my body stopped being dragged across the beach. Relief. I finally caught my breath and thanked the Gods for stopping the punishing experience of being dragged by the beast. I laid on my back and looked up at the snow still falling from the grey sky above and just slowly opened and closed my hands a few times. God that felt both painful and relieving to just open and close my hands.

I looked up to see the norwulf clawing at a small hole it had found in the icy sea.

God, I'd never felt so beat up in all my life. "No time for complaining, Xander, the beast is busy." I yelled at my mind to focus on my next steps. I was right too, to remind my mind to be focused that is, because I was tethered to this beast who was clawing at the ice to go under the water. If I did not act quickly, then I might get pulled under the water too and I would surely die.

I rolled my achy body onto its stomach and mustered the energy to get to my knees. I took off my mittens that were tattered from trying to resist the beast's will and I worked my sore fingers at untying the knot that held the twine to my belt. The beast had

pulled that knot too tightly to undo, at least too tightly to undo with my sore fingers. My hands were not working well, you know, being all sore and gnarled. But I clumsily removed one of my short blades from my belt and sawed through the twine to free myself.

I could have walked away right then and there. I was untethered from the beast. He could go under the water and escape my pursuit. I could start my trek home to the hamlet by the bay. But no, I could not stop. I had to banish those thoughts from my mind. I implored my mind to continue hunting the beast. I would have to remember this decision to tell the elders when I returned, you know, that I decided to continue hunting the beast after being dragged across the beach, because they would be impressed at my persistence and bravery.

I felt proud too. You know, to continue hunting and all. Perhaps there was something in my soul that only brave hunters have. That something that pushes you to pursue the hard option even though it may be a dangerous option.

Chapter 7

The frigid wind whipped across the rocky beach and out to the open sea. It cut right through my parka and through my flesh and sent a chill straight into my bones. The swirling wind continued to pepper my face with snowflakes even though my cheeks were so numb that I'd long ago stopped feeling the pain in my face. And for a moment my teeth chattered so hard I thought they might break right inside of my mouth and I would have to spit out a mouthful of teeth parts onto the ground.

Yep, there was no doubt about it. I was probably as cold as I'd ever been in my life.

Even over the howling wind and through the muffled hood of my parka I could hear the beast's claws grating against the ice as he was desperately trying to create a hole into the sea. What a spine-tingling sound, the beast's long and hard claws grating against the hard sea ice that is. It reminded me of the sound of a man trying to saw through bone with a dull blade. Just a slow scrape, scrape, scrape of two hard materials grinding against one another that made the hairs on my neck stand on end. I tried not to imagine what those long claws would do to a man's flesh. But I didn't have to imagine, I knew. I tried not to think those thoughts though because it would make me less likely to act.

The twinge in the beast's posture meant he was in pain from the hooked knife sticking into his back. You know, he had a slight lean to his posture, like one leg was longer than the other, and most of his work was being done by his right paw. The

hooked blade must have stuck into the muscles that work the left paw. I'm not really sure I guess, but that would make sense. But he steadily pawed at the hole in the ice and didn't seem to pay any attention to me staring at him from a distance.

Seeing my newly-cut twine laying next to me reminded me that the beast and I were no longer tethered together. If the beast slipped into the water he would be gone forever and this whole hunt would be a failure. There was slack in the twine, but nothing to tie it to. No trees out in the middle of the frozen sea and not even a large rock or something.

"I mustn't let my beast get away," I thought to myself, or perhaps I said that aloud, I'm not really sure. Anyways, I started referring to the norwulf as "my beast" because I needed my mind to stay focused.

My frozen and clumsy hands worked quickly tying the twine to my skis. These skis were as long as me. The plan was for these skis to form a cross that would catch the edge of the hole in the ice so the norwulf could not pull it through. It was makeshift and desperate, this contraption I was making out of skis that is, but I was desperate and it was the first idea that came to mind. I didn't have time to think of other alternatives.

My numb and sore hands struggled to form the skis into a cross and to bind the skis together with the loose twine. The unnerving scraping and grating of the norwulf claws on the ice filled my ears. The beast is working fast, I must work fast. The numbness in my hands caused me to fumble the twine. The pressure of working quickly also caused my hands to fumble the twine a bit. And my body shivered from the cold, which made my hands even more clumsy. "Focus, Xander," I instructed myself to slow

down and make the knot tight. I peered at the beast. He was still clawing at the ice. I still had time. Finally, I had made a hasty knot around my skis and tightened it with all the strength my arms could muster.

I dropped the bag off my back onto the snow next to my skis and reached for some weapons. You know, anything that could be used to stab, poke, or bludgeon the beast. "Dammit," I let out a yell that echoed through the valley. The belt loop holding my dagger was empty. It must have fallen out somewhere when I was being dragged. After my bow broke, I thought my dagger was the best choice of weapon to kill the beast. In my mind's eye, I imagined stabbing the beast through the ribs with my dagger. There was no time to go back and look for it, my dagger that is, it was gone now. Besides, it would be covered by snow now anyways and would be impossible to find. I grabbed a short blade in one hand, my hatchet in the other, and sprinted towards the norwulf.

I really don't know what had gotten into me over the past day. I am usually cautious, I really am, maybe even a little scared of norwulves, although I could never admit that to Thoren or any of the other apprentices. But my instincts seemed to take over my body as I ran towards the beast without much consideration of just how impatient and foolish my actions were. Perhaps, I thought, I may be brave after all.

My mind told my body to run faster than the icy surface of the sea would allow. My legs scampered quickly, but I clumsily slipped and slid my way across the frozen surface of the sea towards the beast. Both hands gripped weapons. And my blood warmed as it does right before you kill your prey. The beast methodically pawed at the ice, not paying any attention to me approaching him from behind. Right as I was within

striking distance the beast slumped into the hole he'd been clawing at. My swinging hatchet came down hard and struck his back with a dull thud as he disappeared into the darkness of the sea below.

The beast's body caused an overflow of water to spread outward from the hole and spill onto the frozen surface of the sea. The freshly-fallen snow absorbed the water and created a slush. The water bobbed up and down a few times within the hole until it calmed again.

The beast swam quickly. The twine quickly fed into the water. I rolled to the side to avoid the skis that flew across the frozen sea. There was a sudden jolt when the skis caught the edges of the hole. The wooden skis flexed, but held. I honestly couldn't believe that the skis had caught the hole like I'd planned. It was another one of those unbelievable events that seems like it was from the hunting tales the old men tell the young boys. Even then, I expected either the skis to break or the hooked blade to tear out of the flesh of the norwulf's back or something. But this make-shift contraption seemed to hold the beast.

I had hooked the beast.

To be honest, I am relieved the beast slipped into the water rather than fight because it is a fight I might not have won. Again, it seemed as if the Gods were protecting me from the worst outcomes of my impulses right now.

My skis flexed some more as my beast pulled harder from under the ice. The skis held again. And then another pull. The skis held once more. The beast would have to come back to this hole for air eventually. Norwulves can hold their breath longer than

the strongest man, but they do need air. This beast was frightened and wounded. I didn't know how much time I'd have before he resurfaced. But I had to ready myself for when he returned.

I knelt next to the hole in the ice. I laid out my weapons in preparation for when the norwulf re-emerged for air. The excited blood flowing through my veins made me forget about the cold and allowed me to work quickly. I had the remainder of my arrows, two short blades, a hatchet, and a skinning knife. I wished I had my dagger back and then I yelled at myself to focus on the tasks that needed to be done and to stop dwelling on my lost dagger.

My eyes stared down the hole in the ice and vigilantly watched for any signs of the beast.

God it was cold and lonesome out on that frozen sea. And, other than the swirling wind pressing against my body, it was silent. Not even the sea birds came out this far from shore. I sang hunting songs to distract myself and wiggled my toes to keep my blood flowing. All the while I stared into the hole in the ice. I laid on my stomach and hugged the ground closely. My head hung over the open hole in the ice and stared into the blackness of the sea. Perhaps I could somehow get below the punishing wind if I laid flat enough. But it was useless. I was completely exposed to the cold and stormy air swirling all around me.

Staring down that hole in the ice was terrifying. The twine quickly disappeared into a foggy blackness that seemed to have no end. It just disappeared into a vast nothingness. It actually made me fearful, looking down that hole that is, because it

seemed to go on and on forever. Hanging my head over that hole in the ice felt like I was staring into the mouth of a whale, like I might get swallowed and there would be no escape. So I looked up instead. The mountains off in the distance were barely visible through the swirling snowstorm. God I just wanted to trek across the ice and find a windbreak within those mountains and build a warm fire.

“No! Focus, Xander. Don’t let your mind wander.” I imagined myself as an old man looking back at me laying on this icy sea and how disappointed I would be if I missed my chance at the norwulf. “Do not do anything that you will regret later as an old man. You are cold, but a strong mind can overcome this coldness.”

I held my breath as I waited to compare how long I could hold my breath to the great beast. I held my breath and then exhaled when I couldn’t hold it any longer. I did this many times before I conceded that the beast was superior to me in holding one’s breath. He was underwater for so long that the water in the hole had a thin layer of ice again. I broke the fragile ice away with my hatchet to keep the hole open.

The twine went slack and hung in the dark water as far as I could see. The tension on the skis was released. And there was a dark blob moving in the foggy sea inside of the hole in the ice.

My heart startled. Energy shot through my veins. Alertness filled my mind. I brought myself to my knees and tightly gripped an arrow and my hatchet. I clenched the weapons tightly in my fists. And for a moment I didn’t feel the stinging cold in my body.

The water in the hole bubbled. The blob grew quickly. Then the beast appeared, swimming quickly towards the opening in the ice, it’s face staring directly at my face

waiting above. My muscles tightened. The norwulf peered its wooly head out of the hole and knocked the crossed skis to the side. Water poured out onto the surface of the ice and splashed my face. My arm struck the arrow down onto the beast's face, but it glanced off the horn that ran along its nose and disappeared into the darkness of the sea. My other arm swung the hatchet down with a thud onto the beast's back. My swinging hatchet threw up a splash of water onto my face as the beast disappeared back under water. It didn't feel like a solid blow, but each blow would bring me one step closer to killing the beast, or so I told myself.

The norwulf disappeared into the water again. The skis were tugged back over the hole again. The twine was pulled taut again. And I laid my stomach onto the ice again.

My sleeve wiped the sea water from my face. Ice had already formed on my beard.

"Focus, Xander. Don't let your mind wander." I vigilantly watched the water.

The rush of striking the beast had warmed my body and concentrated my mind. I reassured myself that I had struck the beast many times with my hatchet.

The encounter with the beast left a pool of purple blood floating in the water in the hole in the ice. The blood froze into a thousand little round and purple pebbles of norwulf blood.

No time to rest. The line slackened and the tension on the skis released just as it had before. I saw the dark blob moving in the water below. It moved quickly towards the hole.

The beast sprang his front claws onto the edge of the hole, the frigid water rushed out of the hole and splashed against my body, and I could smell the beast's salty breath as he let out a piercing squeal right into my face. I stuck him with an arrow in his side, but the arrow, having only a narrow shaft that was hard to grip, did not penetrate deeply. The beast's wool protected him.

I swung my hatchet with all my strength and struck the beast by his front shoulder. Purple blood splashed across my chest. The beast squealed in pain.

Another swing of my hatchet landed with a thud on the beast's shoulder. And then another. The beast squealed and writhed as I rained hatchet blows down onto his body as quickly as my arm could swing. The thrashing beast was throwing water all over as he struggled and squirmed to get out of the hole. I did not know how lethal the blows from my hatchet were, but I reasoned that each swing had to bring me closer to my goal of killing the beast. So I just kept swinging and swinging and swinging as if I was frantically trying to chop down a tree. And each swing landed with a dull thud that struck the beast's body in no particular place.

The beast now brought his entire body out of the hole and stood on the ice in front of me. He tried to intimidate me with a thundering roar, but I did not let my fear stop me. I charged at him with my hatchet and swung, but his lowered head rammed through me and knocked me to the ice. I clenched my ribs in pain as the beast's head struck my body and my body struck the hard surface of the frozen sea. My body slid a long way across the icy surface of the sea. My hatchet flew out of my hand. I really don't know which direction or how far it flew to be honest. It all just happened so fast.

I could hear the beast's paws thumping the ice as he scurried past my stunned body and towards the mountains. I crawled towards the leaving beast just in time to grab the twine that he was still dragging behind him. The twine slipped between the weak grip of my hands. I hastily wrapped the twine around my forearm. My body was jerked as the line pulled taut. And I was being dragged across the icy sea once again, this time inland. All of my weapons and my bag were left behind me as I commanded my hands to hold on tightly.

"Do not let go," I yelled at my hands. "Do not let go you weak, weak hands." But they were too weak. My hands were not responding to my mind's commands. The twine unwrapped itself from my forearm and slipped through my grip as I cursed my hands for not listening to my mind. I laid on the icy sea and watched the norwulf trudge farther and farther away. The crossed skis bouncing behind him from the twine that was still coming from his back. Eventually the beast disappeared into the swirling snowstorm and, presumably, into the mountains to the north.

I laid on the ice for a while and felt the aching of my ribs and my wounded leg. I really don't know how long I laid there. I think I cried too because the corners of my eyes hurt from the wet tears freezing to my face. I may have even fell asleep for a moment. I'm really not sure if I slept. But eventually I mustered the energy to stand up and limp back to the hole in the ice to gather my things. Without my things I would have no food and would not be able to build a fire. I could not feel my fingers and toes. Icicles hung from my bearded face. Even If I started a fire now, the cold might still take some of

my fingers and toes. This was a very dangerous cold, my body might not last. And I was as good as dead out here in the frigid wilderness without food and fire.

The beast had gotten away for now, but it was badly injured.

Chapter 8

I gathered all my belongings that had been strewn about the icy surface of the frozen sea. Well almost all my belongings. I'd lost a short blade somewhere. One of the blades that dangled from my belt. Perhaps it was covered in snow. Perhaps it got kicked down the hole in the ice during the scuffle with the beast and rested on the bed of the sea. I really don't know. And I really don't care. My primary concern was getting shelter and starting a fire.

My hands and feet felt like clubs hanging from my body and I was worried about what hues of blues and purples my skin was turning. And the few parts of my arms and legs that weren't numb started to feel achy again now that my heart calmed, you know, from getting dragged across rocks and getting rammed by the norwulf and all. This was a dangerous time. My body would start failing soon.

My wounded leg still hurt too much to put weight on it. The shooting pain still shot down from my left hip to my left toes, my face still grimaced, and I still cursed uncontrollably whenever I walked. It wasn't even a walk, it was a pathetic limp. So I fashioned a sled out of my skis that I used to drag my bag across the ice.

What a pitiful sight I must have been. Wounded. Hungry. Tired. Cold. My one good leg dragging my bad leg and all of my body, one pitiful step at a time, dragging my bag. Thoren and the elders would surely be disappointed if they could see me right now.

I cursed myself real good for being such a pathetic sight. It warmed my blood and eased the pain, cursing that is.

I limped my body and dragged my belongings towards the mountains to the north where the norwulf had escaped. Well, I tried heading north anyways. It was terribly hard to navigate. The swirling snow made everything look white and hazy and the wind whipped across my frozen cheeks. I mostly stared at my feet when I walked, you know, to protect my face from the wind. And, when I did look up, the dark storm clouds made it impossible to locate the sun in the sky. It was just a blanket of grey rumbling clouds from one horizon to the next and the sun let out this dull light that didn't come from any particular place. This whole place had this gloomy feel, like it wasn't dark and it wasn't light, it was just grey and cold. So I just put my head down and plodded through the snow and prayed to the Gods that I would stumble to someplace warm.

To be honest, the swirling snow made me feel a bit sick too. All I could see was a thousand little white dots whizzing past my face. And some of the snowflakes, which were more like tiny balls of ice, pelted off my eyeball, which hurt, like my eye was getting poked with a thousand little needles. The whole scene was disorienting, like I was falling off a cliff or something. It made me dizzy and lightheaded. I felt like my mind would start spinning and wouldn't know which way was up or down and I was going to keel over onto the ice. I could vaguely see the mountains through the storm of swirling and twirling snowflakes. You know, some rough mountain-shaped objects somewhere on the horizon. But it gave me something to walk towards, the hazy mountains that is. I wasn't really sure if those were the mountains the norwulf had escaped into or not, but I desperately needed to find a windbreak and start a fire soon. I would consider it an auspicious event if it was anywhere near the norwulf to be honest.

“Just head towards those mountains,” I kept saying to myself. As long as I could hear my voice, then it meant that I was alive, or at least that’s what I kept telling myself as I trudged across the deepening snow, so I kept speaking aloud. You know, “head towards the mountain, Xander,” and “one foot in front of the other, Xander,” and “you’re almost there, Xander,” and stuff like that. I’d just say anything to will my body to take one more step. In an odd way, hearing my own voice was a bit reassuring too, like I wasn’t terribly alone out here in the unrelenting wilderness, like I had a friend in this struggle to survive. I tried not to think about how far away I was from the hamlet by the bay. And I tried not to think about how few rations I had left. No, those thoughts would not do me any good right now. If I thought about those thoughts I would just be afraid and depressed.

The snow deepened. I plodded my heavy feet, one after another, steadily towards the mountains. My right knee came nearly to my chest with each step just to get over the deepening snow and then my wounded left leg would sort of drag behind in this pathetic limp. It made for some odd footprints in the snow, you know, with one foot walking and one foot dragging. Anyways, only having one good leg made me real unstable too. The wind knocked my weak and wounded body over several times. Each time the wind pressed my body real hard I dropped to my knees, I cursed the pain that shot through my wounded leg, and then fell to the ground out of exhaustion. And each time I wanted to just lay in the snow and rest and cry at how much of a failure I was.

Some great hunter I am, wanting to cry and all. But I willed myself to get up immediately each time. "No lying in the snow, Xander," I would yell out of fear that I would not get back up. Then I would curse the wind for blowing me down.

It was getting dark. I cursed myself for letting it get dark again. "Stupid, Xander. Foolish, Xander. How could you let it get dark again?" I thought about Thoren and the elders for a moment, about how they would be disappointed in the predicament I got myself into. Yep, I cursed myself real good as I limped slowly towards the mountains. It took my mind off my achy body and my exhaustion and the cold, the cursing that is.

So I reached the rocky beach and then I eventually reached the mountains. My body was exhausted from trudging through the snow. I desperately looked for something, anything, that would offer some relief from the wind. A nook or a cave or something. It was getting dangerously dark, my hands and feet hadn't been felt in quite some time, and I needed to build a fire fast before my body started to fail.

The temperature drops quickly when it gets dark. My body shook violently. It really did. I shook so hard that I nearly lost my balance a few times. You know, my body would shake and then I would shift my weight or something and my knees weakened and I felt like I was gonna shake myself until I fell off my feet. I actually did once, shake myself to the ground that is. I was standing and shivering and the wind was swirling and then the ground just came closer and closer to my face until my face smashed into the powdery snow. Luckily the fall woke me up and I kept limping along.

I fumbled around in the dark. The wind dictated my direction more than my mind. And I kept stumbling over rocks that were buried in the snow and running into trees

because I couldn't even see the reach of my arms it was so dark. I eventually felt my way to a small cavity on the side of a boulder that was wedged in the saddle between two mountains. It wasn't much, but it was better to try and make this work as a campsite rather than wander around in the dark looking for something better. If I crouched real low and hugged the boulder real tight, the wind blew overhead, which was the biggest relief of all.

I threw my bag down onto the ground, kicked away the snow until I reached the rocky ground, and hastily started scooping all the contents out of my bag into the dark. I know this was undisciplined and noisy and Thoren would be ashamed at his apprentice being so impatient and loud, but I needed to find my matches quickly.

I paused. My ears perked. The sound of the norwulf crying in the distance caught my attention. I thought I heard him earlier, the beast that is, but I wasn't sure if it was the wind howling through the trees. But I heard him good and clearly this time. The beast was near.

"Focus, Xander. Fire first. Then you can think about the beast." I was right, you know, to think about the fire first.

I knelt on the ground I'd just kicked clear and neatly laid a mittenful of cantaberry branches in a haphazard pile. I would have made a nice base of kindling, but my fingers were failing me and the wind was moving just enough, so the pile was haphazard. I clumsily dumped the matches from my leather satchel onto the ground in front of me. My mittens clawed at the ground trying to pick up a single match. My whole body violently shivered as I cursed the cold and my unresponsive fingers as my mittened

hands raked the ground and unsuccessfully tried to grab a match. I cursed my numb and useless fingers for not listening to my mind. I finally clamped a match between my two mittens. I carefully raised it towards my face and then dropped it into the dark in front of me.

“Dammit,” I yelled into the snowstorm out of frustration. “Dammit to hell.”

I brought my face right to the ground where I’d dumped the matches. There was just enough of the dull light in the air that I could see if I brought my face right to the ground. I actually think my nose touched the snow at one point, but I’m not sure because my nose was too numb to feel anything.

It’s a scary feeling. You know, having it be so dark that you can’t see past your nose and the wind and beasts howling around you and having to start a fire to stay alive and all. But I could not think about being scared. Right now I had to focus on building a fire.

My mittens clumsily clawed away again at the ground, frantically trying to grab the matches. And these matches looked like the sticks and dirt that covered the ground, so I had to look real closely. Finally, I clamped another match between my mittens. I pressed my palms together so I didn’t drop it. It was an odd feeling, you know, with my numb hands in my thick leather mittens. It felt like I was trying to pick up a match with two clubs attached to my arms rather than with my hands. You know, I could see my hands and I could see the match, but there was no sense of feeling of my hands holding a match, just two lifeless limbs that I could vaguely control.

“Focus, Xander,” I spoke in a slow and reassuring voice. I brought the unlit match to my mouth and grabbed it between my chattering teeth. I then grabbed the match stone from the ground and held it between my mittened hands. “Focus,” I thought. I tried to run the stone across the head of the match I held between my teeth.

God, my whole body was madly shivering, which made it clumsy to do anything. I couldn't see past my nose and I couldn't feel anything, my hands, my lips, my face. Nothing. I was totally numb and shivering uncontrollably.

I could not drop this match. “Focus,” I said in my mind with a calm and reassuring voice. I closed my eyes and visualized my arms moving near my mouth. My eyes were not helping anyways.

After a few misses I finally ran the stone across the match. I could hear it ignite. The glow of the match pierced the darkness and lit up my face. My lips quivered and it took all my self-control to not let my teeth chatter and drop the match. I lowered my body onto my stomach and gently set the lit match onto my hastily-built pile of kindling. I then protected the small and fragile match from the wind with my body and my mittens like I was cradling a tiny baby in my hands.

My ears perked at another norwulf howl that echoed through the mountains. The beast is still near.

“Focus, Xander, you fool.” I snapped my attention back to the fire. “I must coddle this flame. This flame is the only thing that will keep me alive tonight. This fire is life. Fire first. Then the beast.” My shivering hands formed a cup around the flame as I cursed the wind howling around me. If I failed to build this flame into a fire, I wasn't sure if I

would have the wherewithal to strike a new match. I slowly fed more small branches onto the flame--one at a time and gently--and prayed the flame grew stronger. As the flame grew stronger, my hopes of survival also gained strength. It was as if the flames and my hopes were one and the same right now--as one grew, so did the other.

The small flame grew into a fire. Feeling came back to my hands and feet. It really hurt to, you know, having your hands and feet thaw like this, but the pain felt good. I kicked around in the snow for more firewood and more rocks to build a windbreak around the life-giving hearth that I'd created. I didn't care about the size of the fire and how indiscrete it was. I didn't care if every living creature in the mountains knew where my fire was, I was just glad to know that I would survive the night. So I piled on the wood as fast as I could find it which made the flames grow high.

I squatted with my back against the boulder and listened to the wind and the norwulf howl around me. I prayed to the starless sky that the storm would end soon. I was hunched so far over the fire that the flames were nearly reaching the beard that hung from my face. My body shook from being weak and cold so hard that it nearly knocked me over.

The blood slowly came back to my fingers. I must have slowly opened and closed my hands a hundred times and inspected them in the light of the fire. God that hurt, the blood coming back to my fingers that is. My mind had nothing to do but to churn over and over how much all the nicks and scrapes on my hands hurt, which made them hurt more, which made me think about it more, which made them hurt more.

My mind was too concerned about the fire to sleep. You know, that the fire would slowly weaken and the swirling winds would shift ever so slightly and my body would be so tired that it would not wake easily. And then, with one unfortunate gust of wind, the life-giving fire would be gone, the light would turn to dark, and the puff of smoke where the fire used to be would be quickly carried off by the wind into the mountains. Both the fire and I would be extinguished forever. I feared this so much that I stayed awake for the second night in a row.

There was only one other time I remember being alone and feeding a fire all night. That was when I left Norwick to join Thoren. You see, my father did not want me to leave Norwick and become a hunter. I told my father that "Thoren invited Xander, the boy who makes his arrows, to join him." He, my dear and sweet father, told me that "Thoren is a hunter and that hunters say these things to the craftsmen. You know, hunters will flatter the craftsmen by complimenting their sons. Their words do not mean what they mean." I did not believe him, my father that is, you know, that Thoren was only trying to flatter my father. I cursed my father and said that he was only saying these things because I was his only son and he was worried about his fletching business and who would care for him as an old man if I, his only son, left Norwick. I said many mean things that I now regret.

So anyways, I cursed my father and he cursed me. We cursed each other for several days and nights. Then I left Norwick one night. I told nobody. Not my father, not Ingrid, not my childhood friends. I gathered what few things I could carry and I left the grove. For two days and two nights I trekked to the hamlet by the bay to join Thoren.

Both of those nights I could not sleep. I think I was regretful about the things I said to my father and how I'd left and I was nervous about joining Thoren and all. So I stayed awake for several nights in a row, feeding the fire little sticks and thinking thoughts.

I could hear the beast of a norwulf howling in the distance. He was probably calling out for his flock to find him. But each howl fed my resolve. If the beast was not sleeping, then I would not sleep either.

So I sat there, slowly churning my thoughts over and over in my mind, listening to the norwulf howl, and feeling the hundred small pains in my hands. It was a bit peaceful, you know, watching the glow of the flames and listening to the wood crackle while the storm violently swirled all around you. It was like I had a brief respite from the world--the hunt and Thoren and the elders--and I was given time to think.

I thought about impressing the elders with the great beast and winning patronage as a brave hunter and all. And I thought about the place on my forearm where I would proudly immortalize my kill with a new tattoo--a solid black stripe going across my left forearm just above my other tattoo. Young men would ask me to tell them the story behind the tattoo--"tell us about the norwulf you killed," they would say--and I would tell them about the field with bluegrass and the frozen sea and me hunched over this fire the night before I slayed the beast. These dreams were comforting. They took me away from the cold, the dreams that is. In fact, for a moment I drifted off to sleep while I was crouched over the fire and nearly fell into the flames. Imagine that, I fell asleep while I was crouching. Luckily, I was startled from falling and my body woke in time to catch myself.

Some time in the night I'd ventured into the trees near my fire and felt around the dark for a large stick. I found a nice one, a large stick that is, that was nearly as tall as me and was just the right size for my clenched hand to hold. I wanted to be prepared for the norwulf the moment it became light enough to see. So I brought this stick back to my fire and, by the dim light of the flickering flames, I tethered a small blade to this stick to fashion myself a spear. For now I would wait and ensure my spear was strong. I must have rechecked the knot that held my knife to the stick a hundred times while I waited for the morning light to come. Strong stick, strong knot, sharp blade. I was satisfied with the weapon I'd created.

My bag was heavy. Especially now that my leg was wounded and my body was weak. And I could not drag it through the mountains like I did across the frozen sea, the bag that is. No, dragging a heavy bag would not work while I climbed mountains and cut through dense trees in pursuit of the beast. So I planned to stash it here, my bag that is, in the cavity by my fire, so I could travel light tomorrow as I stalked the beast.

In a few hours, I would use the remainder of my powdered medicine to dull the pain in my wounded leg, I would eat the remainder of my beans for strength, I would leave my belongings in the small cavity by my fire, and I would sing hunting songs to myself as I went to kill the beast.

Chapter 9

The blanket of darkness that filled the night slowly softened. There would be no sunrise today, just a somber and colorless light that would eventually fill the air. Just like yesterday, today also would be grey.

The storm still whipped the snowflakes through the mountain air in no particular direction--just around and around in this violent swirling pattern--that resulted in everything being chilled and fragile. It hadn't ceased all night, the wind that is, because the distinct swirling sound never stopped.

I climbed out of my bag and was greeted with the unforgiving coldness that filled the air. I fed a few small branches into the still smoldering embers of my fire to warm my hands and face. God, it was cold out.

"It is time to be brave and win your future, Xander." It took all my effort for my mind to convince my body that it could withstand the cold that awaited me beyond the reach of my fire.

My ears perked. The norwulf howled in the distance just like it had been howling on and off throughout the night. And loudly too. As loudly as the gusts of wind howled, and they were loud, the norwulf howled louder.

Hearing that howl, that sad and gloomy howl of the wounded beast reaching out for his flock, was just the nudge I needed for motivation. It was time to hunt.

I gathered everything that was not essential into my bag and tethered it tightly to a tree by my fire. Then I tied a rope high into a tree so I could find my bag even if it got

covered in snow. You know, I would just have to find the tree with the rope and follow the rope down to my snow-covered bag. It was a trick that Thoren had taught me once, how to make sure you could find your bag in a snowstorm by tying it to a tree that is. All of the young men who were apprentice hunters scoffed at these “old man” tricks, but I am glad that I learned this one. Later, after I killed the beast, I would return for my things.

I travelled light and nimbly. All I would carry with me today was my snowshoes, the spear I'd created, and the hatchet that slung from my belt.

I closed my eyes and soaked in one last breath of warmth by the fire and headed into the swirling wind and towards the norwulf howls.

Fire really is life giving in these mountains. My body became cold to the core as soon as I left my resting place. The first few steps are the hardest, you know, your body is chilled and you keep looking back at the flickering flames of your fire and you tell yourself “just go back for one last moment of warmth.” But your mind must be strong, you know, to keep heading deeper into the cold and farther from your fire. The trick is to remind yourself that no amount of warmth would stick with your body once you leave the comforts of the fire. You could go back for one more moment of warmth, and then one more, and then one more. Eventually you must leave the warmth and face the coldness. It is best to leave quickly, accept the coldness of the air, and don't look back at your fire.

So I left. I carried only the essentials. And I did not look back at my fire.

The snow was deep. Walking was hard, even with my snowshoes. Some places were bare where the wind swept away the snow and some places gathered snow that formed drifts taller than my head. And sometimes the freshly-fallen snow was hard and crusted on top and soft and powdery underneath. This snow was dangerous, the snow that is hard on top and soft underneath that is. You must either walk gently on top of the hard and slippery surface and risk slipping or step hard to break through the crust and reach the soft bottom, which can cause the snow to give away quickly beneath your feet.

Anyways, the sad howling of the wounded beast continued. He howled and howled hoping that members of his flock would hear him and join him. I kept telling myself he was trying to find his flock and not his family. I tried not to think of the norwulf having a family and all. Because if he had a family, then he might have a son. If he had a son, then I would be killing a son's father. And I didn't want to think of myself as killing a son's father. Boy, that would really be tough, you know, if I knew this beast had a son. I couldn't allow those thoughts to enter my mind and spoil my hunt, I must think of him as a beast only. A beast who was merely trying to find his flock.

The storm increased in strength. It was now an angry and violent storm, like a man who drank too much ale and was cussing and fighting with his friends. I talked to the storm, pleaded with it, but just like the drunk man it would not listen. It was just angry and disagreeable, the storm that is.

Walking became harder. The gusts of wind easily blew my weakened body to the ground. Each strong gust collapsed me to my knees and I willed myself to return to my

feet and push deeper into the mountains with each fall. Walking at all required me to rest my weight on anything for balance--my spear, tree branches, the ground. And the wind was biting cold too. My body shivered uncontrollably. And progress was slow.

When I was a child back in Norwick I would go into the grove to gather firewood for my father during the winter. I would imagine myself as a hunter stalking norwulves just like the tales the old men would tell us children. I imagined that I was brave and resolved and that the cold did not bother me. I pretended to trudge through the snow as I hunted the beasts in my imagination. I'd stay outside as long as possible and then, when I couldn't stand another moment of cold, I'd go into our home and warm my body. It's kind of funny thinking about that now, you know, trying to make myself cold so I could pretend to be a hunter and all. It is a much different feeling when you are exposed to the cold for days and you do not have a warm home to escape to when your body needs warming. But I like to remember the things I used to play as a child because it distracts me from the cold.

Each time the norwulf's howl echoed through the mountains I was reminded of my purpose. I must kill this beast.

It was terribly hard to tell which direction the howls came from. The blizzard of white snowflakes whipped around me at such a speed that they disoriented my sight. And the sounds bounce around the mountains in a way that easily misleads the ears because the echoes come at you from all directions. But he sounded close, the beast that is.

Another howl filled the air. And then another. The beast was near.

A great gust of wind pounded my body, like God's hand reached down and gave poor Xander a nice shove. I dropped to my knees and cursed the wind. I remember this gust of wind specifically because that was right before I'd seen the beast--that magnificent, woolly, pig-bodied beast. He was on the mountainside above me. His three-toed paws pounding through the crusty top of the snow as he disappeared over the top of the ridge and out of sight.

Energy rushed to my body and alertness filled my mind at the sight of the beast. The thought of coldness was not at the fore of my mind for the first time all day. I was no longer fighting the storm and chasing ghostly howls through these mountains, but I was now chasing a beast I could see.

My hands tightened around my spear. I imagined plunging the blade deep into the body of the beast as I headed up the mountain. The wind pressed against my body. I nearly fell many times as I ascended the mountainside. But I leaned into the wind and put one foot in front of the other. I was resolved to continue.

"Just over this ridge, Xander," I talked to myself to keep me motivated.

I eventually reached the ridgetop. The howling wind filled my ears. My knees fell to the snow. My eyes scanned the other side of the mountain desperately trying to see the beast again. But nothing. Well, not nothing, there was mountains as far as I could see through the snowstorm and all, but there was no beast. My heart sank in my chest as I tried to understand how I'd lost track of the beast. It was as if he'd vanished. Those horrible thoughts of me being a failed hunter entered my mind as I stared at the barren mountainside.

The beast went over the ridge right where I stood. I was certain. I looked behind me to see if I'd veered off track somewhere, you know, drifted in one direction when I had my head down to fight into the wind. Even though the snowstorm had covered my tracks, I knew I was standing right where the beast was standing a short time ago.

I planted my spear in the snow out of frustration. And I knelt on the snowy ridge of the mountains. My head slowly scanned the landscape from left to right. Perhaps my first glance was hasty and inattentive so I really focused this time. My eyes focused on anything that was not white until I was confident it was not the beast. It was mostly rocks sticking up from the snow. But no beast. The beast eluded me once again.

"Stupid, Xander. Foolish, Xander." I wasn't exactly sure what I was yelling at myself for. Just the circumstances I suppose. You know, that I'd lost track of the beast.

The sound of the swirling snowstorm was broken by another norwulf howl. This one was so loud that it sounded like it'd come from inside of my parka hood. A shiver shook my spine. It was not a shiver of my body fighting the cold either, it was a shiver of fright, you know, from the closeness of the norwulf howl. My muscles tensed and my grip tightened even more. My mittened hands felt like they were crushing my spear. The direction of the howl was unmistakable. It came from right behind me.

Just below me was the opening to a cave. I raised from my knees and willed my body to face its fear and walk to the cave opening. It was a cleft in the mountainside just large enough for my body to enter, the cave opening that is. I could see nothing but darkness inside. It disappeared into nothingness just like the sea did in the hole in the

ice. I stuck my spear into the darkness and it didn't touch anything for as far as it reached.

Perhaps this wasn't where the beast was. I didn't want my mind to admit that the beast was hiding in the darkness. But I knew I would have to enter the cave to kill the beast.

I took my first tentative step inside the cave and reached my spear as far as my arms could reach. Again, the spear touched nothing but darkness. Another howl came from deep in the cave and filled the air. My heart pounded and my body jumped back out of fear. That last howl sounded as if the beast was just in front of me. I swear that I could smell the salty breath of the norwulf inside the cave, but it could also be my mind playing tricks. I really wasn't sure. I was so nervous and my mind was racing that it was hard to tell what was real and what was just a fear my mind spun together.

If there ever was a time to be brave, this was it. With my body in such a weakened condition, this might be my last chance at killing this beast. I retook my first step into the cave. And then another. And then another. I was now completely inside the lightless cave.

My body followed my spear tip, even though it was so dark that I couldn't see the knife I'd tethered to the end. My teeth chattered so hard out of cold and fear that I could hear them echoing off the cave walls.

My body instinctively froze. A low and rumbling growl was coming from the darkness. Not an angry growl, but the sort of growl a dog makes right before fighting,

you know, this calm and intimidating rumbling sound. I inched my feet forward to move slightly deeper into the dark cave. The growling continued.

The grip on my spear tightened.

My heart pounded.

I reached my spear into the darkness towards the growl. Not in a thrust, but just this gentle reach to try and touch something.

Nothing.

I inched my feet forward one more time. And I reached my spear into the darkness towards the growling one more time.

Nothing.

I moved the tip of my spear in a circle trying to feel something. Anything.

Nothing.

The growling stopped. God, silence is scarier than the growling. The sound of norwulf claws gripping the floor of the cave was unmistakable. It's amazing how, even in the pitch black, I knew what that sound was. You know, the norwulf's claws tightening like it was trying to gain traction on the cave floor right before he lunges his body forward. God that is a scary sound. Especially in the dark too.

My eyes were wide open, my mind was focused, but I could not see a thing.

Then silence. Deafening and terrifying silence. No more sounds of my chattering teeth echoing off the cave walls. No growling. No claws gripping the cave floor. Just the sound of the fear building in your mind of what dangers await.

It is a horribly lonely feeling being in a cave where you can't see and there is no sound. It's like you are willing your senses to work. Imploring them. Commanding them. And they won't. And then you realize how completely and utterly vulnerable you are. I slowly moved my spear tip in a circle in front of my body again. It touched nothing, my spear tip that is. No sight, no sound, and no sense of touch.

It felt like I stood there in silence for an hour. It was actually only a few breaths.

Then the complete silence exploded in a fury. The body of the norwulf rammed into the spear tip and pushed it back into my body. The handle punched my ribs and threw my body into the wall of the cave. A gnashing growl filled the air and bounced around the cave walls. My body was stunned and my spear fell somewhere into the dark.

I dropped to my knees and keeled over in pain. My lungs let out a gasping sound as they desperately tried to gather air. I frantically groped the cave floor looking for the spear. No success.

I gasped for air and groped the floor and feared the growling sounds that filled the cave.

A giant claw grabbed my wounded left leg and tossed my body like a toy. My hands desperately groped my belt and finally gathered my hatchet. I swung wildly wherever my arm could reach. The beast's claws dug into the meat of my thigh. I screamed in agony as the pain shot both up and down my leg. I hoped my screams would be unpleasant enough that the beast would leave me, but the claws dug in deeper.

I pounded the darkness with my fist and my hatchet, hoping that I would cause pain wherever they struck. I swung into the darkness below, by the claws digging into my leg, because the beast was down there somewhere. My blows rained onto the body of the beast, but I couldn't see exactly where on the body I was hitting. I continued yelling and swinging like a madman.

A claw simultaneously released from my thigh and pressed into my chest. I gripped the hatchet with both hands and swung down with all my power. My swing landed with a dull thud somewhere on the beast's body. I don't know where. I tried to swing again, but the claw tightened and tore into the flesh of my chest. My arms froze in mid-swing from the pain. The muscles that swung my hatchet were not responding to my mind's commands.

My body lowered to the cave floor and the beast's weight pressed all the breath out of my body.

I was trying to kill the beast, but not to become a great hunter, but merely to survive.

The beast clenched a powerful claw around my shoulder. Now there were claws on both my chest and my shoulder. My parka provided some protection, but my shoulder muscles were painfully crushed in the beast's grip. His wool brushed across my face. I could smell the salt on his warm breath. I pushed against his body with all my remaining energy, but my arms were too weak. My body lowered to the floor of the cave.

My instincts were to flail wildly. My mind didn't tell my body to flail, but it did. I guess the fear of death will do that to you, make you flail that is. It was my body's last ounces of energy and life.

My flailing slackened the beast's grip ever so slightly. I swung my hatchet one last time. It struck the beast somewhere in the face. At least I am guessing it was his face because I swung right in front of my face and the beast was laying on top of me. Anyways, the norwulf let out a squeal of pain and released his grip.

I inhaled deeply. Air returned to my lungs.

I clung to the norwulf's wool and it dragged me across the cave towards the opening. I could see light again. The beast was trying to leave.

"No. You mustn't leave yet," I yelled at the beast in my weakened voice. "I must kill you first."

I swung my hatchet at the beast's body. I continued to yell at the beast as I struck him with my hatchet once more. My body was weak and my blows were ineffective. The beast turned back into the cave, I jumped onto his back and held him at the base of his wing, and he flailed frantically.

He was still powerful, the beast that is, even though he was wounded. I could feel it in the way he threw my body around like it was an annoyance more than a threat to his life. My body was tossed aside the beast against the cave wall again. My body was stunned again. My vision blurred again.

I stood crookedly, favoring my non-wounded leg and hunched over from the pain in my chest muscles where the beast's claws dug into my breast. My pathetic body stood between the beast and the cave's opening.

The beast ran towards the opening of the cave. I think the beast was hoping that I would move out of fear, but I bravely did not. I clenched the hatchet as the beast neared me. My hatchet-wielding arm raised above my head. The beast was right in front of me. My arm swung downward. The beast's head lowered and he now led his charge with his horn.

My hatchet never struck the beast. The horn stuck right through my parka and into the soft body of my stomach. For a moment my vision went red. My body went limp. The hatchet harmlessly fell onto the ground. And a gurgling sound came from my mouth as blood oozed from my mouth and into my beard. The funny thing is that I had no pain. I always thought this would be the most painful thing in the world, getting gored in the stomach, but my body was very numb all over.

My motionless body was tossed and dragged as the beast unskewered me from his horn. I laid on the ground at the opening of the cave and watched the beast plod through the snowstorm away from the cave and out of sight.

My mind was yelling at my body, "Get up, the beast is getting away." It's an eerie feeling, having your mind command your body to move and having your body not respond that is. It did not matter how hard my mind yelled, my body just laid on the ground motionless.

My beast got away. My mind was clear, but my body was not responding. The white snow on the cave floor next to my body was dyed red with my blood and purple with the norwulf blood.

My mind commanded my body to stand. Nothing.

My mind commanded my body to crawl across the snow. Nothing.

My mind even commanded my wide-open eyes to close. And still nothing.

This is what it felt like to die.

Chapter 10

I woke to the sound of a crackling fire. You know, the really loud snapping and popping sounds that firewood makes when the flames are really hot. It reminds me of the violent sound of a butcher breaking down a carcass with a hatchet, you know, the blunt force of the swinging blade roughly breaking through bones and tendons and stuff. It's true. Sometimes I'll sit next to a fire and my spine shivers in discomfort at the snapping sounds of the hot flames because it reminds me of a body being broken. But right now it was a soothing sound, the sound of the wood snapping and popping in the heat of the fire that is. It was a pleasant way to be awoken.

A heavy blanket draped over my body and pressed it into the bed. God it was a heavy blanket. It felt real nice though, like it was giving you a hug or something, the heavy blanket that is.

So my body awoke to the warmth of the fire snapping and popping and the weight of the heavy blanket giving my body a hug.

My eyes followed the rough hewn wooden beams of the ceiling of the small cabin and then down the chimney to the fireplace. An old bearded man crouched by the fire and poked it with a stick. It didn't appear that he'd noticed that I'd awoken because he just crouched there, really focused on what he was doing, you know, staring at the fire and poking it with a stick and causing a hundred little embers to float up into the air and fizzle out and all. I mean, if he'd noticed that I'd awoken I would think he'd speak or look

at me or something. But he just crouched there like the only thing that mattered in the world was slowly poking that flickering fire with his stick.

It's funny, but it didn't really startle me or anything, you know, to wake in this unfamiliar small cabin and to see this old man poking the fire and all. Perhaps I was too tired to be startled. I don't know. Maybe I should have been scared, but I wasn't. It was just confusing. As if my mind was trying to make sense of a situation that didn't make sense. But nothing did, make sense that is. You know, where I was and who this old man was. It felt like a dream. It must be, a dream that is. So I told myself this was a dream, my eyes closed, and I went back to sleep hoping that I would wake up and I'd be back in a familiar place.

My eyes opened again. I'm not sure if I just blinked or if I fell asleep for a while. But I was awake now. At least I think I was awake. My eyes followed the rough hewn beams across the ceiling again and down the chimney to the fireplace again. The old bearded man was still crouched by the fire, but was now slowly stirring a wooden spoon in this large black pot and humming to himself like he was the only person in the world. He was humming a tune that vaguely sounded like the hunting songs that we sing to get all the young men excited before the norwulf migration begins. But he seemed awfully chipper, the old man that is, you know, like the sort of chipper humming you do when you think you're all alone, like when you're gathering berries out in the woods and you know there's nobody else around or something.

Perhaps I was dead. That might explain why the old man didn't acknowledge me or why he was humming like he was all alone. I must have rustled or groaned or

something, because the old man stopped his chipper humming and turned his wiry body towards me in this jerky fashion, like I'd startled him or something, like he forgot I was there until I made a sound. His eyes focused on mine. Then he moved his mouth as if he was speaking to me. The words were all muffled like he was talking under water or something. I don't know, my mind was kinda foggy. But at least I knew I wasn't dead.

My eyes were heavy too. I tried my hardest to keep them open, you know, to try and stay awake so I could make sense of this situation and to try and make out the words the old man was speaking and all, but my mind was weak. My eyes blinked a few slow and heavy blinks as my mind's eye alternated between the image of the old man moving his mouth as if he was speaking and the pitch darkness of my closed eyes.

My eyelids shut again despite my mind's efforts to keep them open. And I'm pretty sure I went back to sleep again. I really don't know I guess. You know, about whether I went back to sleep again.

My eyes opened a third time. It felt like I merely blinked, but I must have rested because my mind was clearer. I had no idea of how much time had passed since my eyes were open the last time. I really didn't. And I had no idea whether it was night or day. I really didn't. And I had no idea where I was other than in some small cabin. As far as I could tell, I was alone in that cabin, you know, other than the sound of the wood still snapping and popping in the fireplace.

I tried to lift my body out of the bed, but a pain shot through my stomach when I moved. It was this real sharp pain too, sort like I was getting stabbed with a knife right in the gut or something. It wasn't just my gut though. The pain shot from my stomach in a

thousand different directions and caused all the little muscles in my body to tense up, you know, my toes curled, my back tightened, and my face twisted into an ugly, painful grimace. I hate that feeling of being in such pain that you can't control your body and all, you know, where your whole body stiffens in a real distorted position. I actually tensed so hard that I gagged, like my stomach was twisted so hard that it wrung like a wet rag. But my stomach was empty, I just got that acidic taste in my mouth. Anyways, I slowly eased my achy body back into the bed and found a comfortable position lying on my back.

I breathed a sigh of relief of laying down again and, eventually, the pain in my stomach melted away. My hands felt under my shirt, you know, down where that pain was, but I wasn't wearing a shirt. I had no memory of removing my shirt. I touched my fingertips to the bandages that wrapped my stomach, which reminded me that the beast of a norwulf had gored me at some point. I had no memory of how those bandages got there.

I thought the thoughts that men do in these situations. You know "where am I?" and "how did I get here?" and "why are my bags in the corner?" and all. I just noticed that my bag was hanging from a hook near the door.

You know, I always thought it would be an eerie feeling to wake up in a place with no memory of how you got there. And now that it happened to me, it was, an eerie feeling that is. It was just as scary as facing the norwulf I suppose, but scary in a different way. It was more like your mind was imagining things that make you scared,

whereas the norwulf was scary because, well, because it was this beast that was stronger than you. God, I hate being scared of the fears your mind makes up.

“Focus, Xander.” This was no time to lay in bed and think about why I was scared. I needed to think about where I was and how I got here and all. So I laid there and thought for a good while, but my thoughts just went round and round because I was trying to make sense out of a senseless situation.

The crunching sound of approaching footsteps walking through the snow interrupted my thoughts. My eyes and ears focused on the door. My heart pounded. I sat up. Or at least I tried to sit up. You see, the pain shot through my stomach and all over my body again when I moved. You know, that real sharp pain that feels like getting stabbed and makes your face grimace in pain. My body tensed up into this odd distorted shape again. And I laid on my back to ease the pain again. I think I was going to go for my bag and search for a knife or something, you know, when I heard footsteps and tried to sit up, I’m not really sure. I guess I thought I needed to protect myself from whoever was approaching the cabin.

Anyways, the sound of footsteps crunching through the snow stopped. I took a nervous breath. The cabin door creaked open. A boot entered the opening of the door followed by the rest of a man. The old man with a beard, the one who I’d seen earlier poking the fire and stirring the pot, entered the cabin with an armful of firewood. The bundle of firewood he carried must have weighed more than him, which is not much. You see, he was rail thin, the old man with the beard that is. Even in his leather pants

his legs looked not much thicker than the stick I used to make my spear. But he seemed to not have any problems lugging the firewood.

He was a strong old wiry man.

The old man stared at me with his young blue eyes. This made sense, you know, if I had a stranger in my cabin I'd look at them when I walked in the door too, you know, just to check. I'd look them over real good.

It's amazing how everything about the man was old other than his eyes. He had a white beard that hung to his chest and deep wrinkles in the corners of his eyes like a dried sea bed. But his eyes, well, his eyes were blue and young like the clear sky on a sunny day.

Anyways, the old man looked me over real good with his young blue eyes.

"Ah, the hunter awakes." The old man had this jovial way about his voice, you know, like he was telling a joke to a friend. He gently set the firewood on the floor next to the chimney. It must have been obvious that I was a hunter. Perhaps he'd figured it out from the things in my bag or perhaps he'd seen the tattoo on my arm or something. I'm not really sure, you know, how he knew that I was a hunter and all. But I sort of liked that he called me "the hunter." Even in my condition, I was sort of proud of being thought of as a hunter. Anyways, the conversation moved on. He knew I was a hunter and I didn't know how he knew. And I never corrected him by explaining that I was only an apprentice hunter.

I tried to ask the old man questions about this situation. You know, "Where am I?" and "Who are you?" and stuff like that. But when I tried to talk my voice was

bone-weary. I think I might have even coughed too, I'm not sure. Anyways, I sounded real weak regardless of the exact questions I asked and whether I coughed or not. My voice kinda scared myself at how weak it sounded. You know, you expect your voice to sound a certain way, like, well your voice, and then it comes out real weak and sickly. Hearing your voice like that, it makes you wonder how badly your body is hurt. It also was kinda painful to talk. You don't realize that each utterance uses some little stomach muscles when you speak until you have a wound in your stomach. Then each of those little muscles has its own little pain whenever you try to speak,

Between not being able to sit up and hearing my sickly and frail voice, I figured the norwulf must have gored me real good.

Anyways, the old man looked back at me with his young blue eyes. He ran his fingers through the grey beard that hung from his face down to his chest. His fingers worked on removing a few small sticks from the armful of firewood he'd carried that had stuck into his beard. It was real uncomfortable too, you know, having the old man stare at me and me stare back at him and having his fingers fidgeting at the sticks in his beard and all.

Finally, the old man spoke again.

"I am Roki. And this is Roki's castle." I understood him this time. He, the old man, Roki I guess, outstretched his arms and lifted his palms towards the ceiling as if to say that this whole cabin was his. "And Roki is king of Roki's castle. King Roki welcomes you as a guest and a friend to his castle."

He had a banter about his speech, Roki that is. Like whatever he was saying was clever or something. Like when he called himself a king and his cabin a castle, he said it with this little chuckle and seemed a bit too pleased at the joke he thought he was making. But I didn't know Roki so I didn't chuckle back. It probably came off as rude, not chuckling back and all, but I was still sizing up the situation, and I didn't want to start chuckling with this stranger and have him thinking we were friends or anything. Besides, chuckling when I'm not supposed to chuckle can be worse than not chuckling. I had a hard time telling if he was just a go-lucky guy who enjoyed the idle conversation between strangers or if he was not right in his head, you know, a crazy man who lives in his own fantasy world and thinks the birds and trees talk to him and stuff like that. For all I know he actually did think he was King Roki and he actually did think this cabin was his castle. So between not knowing who Roki was and the pain in my stomach, I just laid in bed, listened, and didn't chuckle along.

"You are in Roki's castle, my friend. Deep into the mountains. Far to the north of the hamlets where the hunters live. You, you my friend, are very far from home, that is for sure. Roki saw your fire the night of the big storm. Oh yes, the hunter was not very discreet." I guess I was the hunter in this scenario. "Roki saw you pursue the norwulf into the cave. You are a very lucky boy to be alive my friend. Roki followed you and brought you back to my castle after the norwulf hurt you. And Roki cleaned your wounds."

I didn't really bother me that the old man talked about himself like another person would. You know, referring to himself as Roki and his cabin as Roki's castle and all. I

knew some apprentice hunters who did that once in a while, you know, use their own name when they talked about themselves. It always came off as arrogant and other guys wanted to punch them in their faces for being so arrogant. But Roki wasn't doing it to be arrogant, at least it didn't seem so. It was just sort of the way he talked and it took me a while to pick up on his cadence. But it did make me think that Roki was a bit crazy.

"Thanks and all, you know, for cleaning my wounds. I--". I guess my voice sounded weaker than before and my face must have showed pain because Roki raised his hand and silenced me.

"No more talk. You must rest my friend," and he turned his back to tend to the fire and to stir the pot with the wooden spoon.

What an odd man. Here I am, worrying about being rude, and he cuts me off and turns his back to me. "You are a hermit?" I said to Roki's back.

My mind pieced together the information. There are legends of hermits living in these mountains. You know, men who live a life of solitude, you know, without the company of others. I guess that's a gentle way of describing them, hermits that is. They hunt their own food and gather their own plants and just sort of avoid society altogether. At least that's what I've been told. I'd never met a hermit before. Come to think of it, I'd never seen one either. So I wasn't quite sure if hermits actually existed or if they were just part of the tales that hunters swap about the northern mountains. One of my friends, Iver, says he found a hermit's cabin once and went inside and meandered through the hermit's belongings and stuff. But you never know if Iver was telling the truth or just telling a tale. He fibbed sometimes, Iver that is, because then everybody would hang

onto his every word and all when he told his stories. Boy did he like the attention. He'd go on and on for a long time too. It was entertaining and all, you know, listening to his stories, but you could never take it too seriously because of the fibbing.

Anyways, apprentice hunters were always told to avoid hermits. You know, if you ever came across one in the woods you should never talk to them or try to get away as quickly as possible. I couldn't remember why. It must be because they are dangerous or something. You know, because they live alone they're not bound to the laws like everybody else or something. I'm not really sure.

Thankfully, Roki didn't seem offended by my direct questioning because my body wasn't in any shape to defend myself if we started arguing and all. "A hermit? No. Roki is no hermit. Roki is a king." He broke into this little jig where his rail thin legs kicked to the side one-at-a-time and his rail thin arms pumped down towards the ground and he did a little chuckle while he danced.

I blankly stared back. I was pretty sure this guy, this Roki, was a hermit. A crazy hermit. I mean, this cabin was small for one man. There was only one bed, one chair, and a handful of things hanging from the walls like an axe, a few cooking blades, a few pots, and a pair of skis. These were the belongings of one man, Roki was the only person living here.

"Who are you?" I asked again slowly and clearly so there was no misunderstanding. "Do you live here alone? Or do you have peoples?" God it hurt to talk. I don't know why my words got slower and louder. I mean, Roki seemed to understand what I was saying and all. But it just sort of came out that I spoke in this

slow and loud voice. Anyways, I wanted to know if he had peoples, you know, whether he lived here in this cabin all by himself.

Roki never did answer my questions, you know, about having peoples. But his non-answer was itself an answer.

I sat my body up. It was really painful, sitting up and all, but I propped myself up against the wall. After a few minutes the pain melted away.

The old man went over to his pot by the fireplace and poured a ladle of its contents into two bowls.

“Answer me this my friend: Why do hunters kill norwulves?”

Roki handed me a bowl.

“What do you mean, why? It is what hunters do.” That answer satisfied me, but didn't satisfy Roki.

“Do you get meat from the norwulves?”

“No.”

“Milk?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

I told Roki that I wasn't feeling well and I went back to sleep.

Chapter 11

From across the bay I watched the fishermen prepare their boats. You know, lines of young men hoisting cargo onto their backs and carrying it from the shore to the ends of the long wooden docks that jutted out into the shallow waters of the harbor. It looked like a parade of two-legged pack mules. At the end of each dock was a pair of narrow planks that bridged the gap between the dock and one of the boats. There, at the end of the docks, another line of young men, one-at-a-time, would hoist another load of the cargo onto their backs and carry it across one of these narrow planks from the dock to the boat and the young man would return on the other plank from the boat to the dock with their arms empty and ready for another armful of cargo. Back and forth and round and round they'd go, hoisting cargo, loading boats, balancing on planks, in a ceaseless dance of busyness. They carried the sorts of cargo one needs to live on the sea for a few weeks, you know, crates of food and spools of rope and barrels of ale and things like that. And walking across these narrow planks was dangerous too, because the docks were firm and the boats gently bobbed up and down with the ebb and flow of the waves crashing into the shore. And the planks would flex in the middle too, you know, from the weight of the young man and the cargo and all, which gave the appearance their steps were bouncy. I watched them for a long time, the young men that is, carefully carrying what seemed to be endless armfuls of cargo across the docks and across the bobbing and flexing planks.

Of course, wherever there's young men working there's old men telling them to work faster. Loading boats is no different I suppose. The old men stood on the docks and pointed with the unmistakable gestures of the old men commanding the young--pointing with their fingers, or whatever object they held in their hands, you know, sticks or canes or handfuls of rolled up important papers or anything really--jabbing the air and waving their arms and barking commands all trying to get the young men to work faster. The young men did too, work faster that is. I couldn't really hear them, you know, the old men barking orders because I was all the way across the bay, but it was obvious that's what was happening.

This was a familiar scene around the docks where the hamlet met the sea, you know, young men working and old men barking for the young to work harder. Much like how the apprentice hunters risk their lives pursuing a norwulf that could win them approval of the elders, the fishers go out to sea in pursuit of their prize too. The sea was full of prizes for the fisherman too, you know, bear sharks and thornfish and great barbed whales and all sorts of other sea creatures that I'd never heard of before.

I made a note to learn more about the types of sea creatures the fishermen catch.

Anyways, these young men were the apprentice fishers. When they were boys, they listened to tales of great fishermen and pretended to fish when they played and dreamed of fishing when they went to sleep. Now that they were young men, they welcomed the backbreaking labor of loading the cargo because it was their way to ensure a place on a boat, you know, they get to live out their dreams. What a hard

smack of reality that is, you know, dreaming of becoming a great fisherman and catching great fish and visiting exotic ports and all, just like in the stories, but you end up loading boats and eating salty foods and getting yelled at by old men instead. But each fishing expedition is a chance for these young men to become a great fisherman. One great catch would change their lives forever. You know, one day you're an apprentice fisherman and then you catch a big fish and then you're just a fisherman. If the catch is big enough you can end up a *great* fisherman. And that possibility of instant success has great appeal for eager young men. Society hums based off the naive eagerness of young men chasing success.

These old men, the ones standing on the docks barking orders, were the master fishermen. That's what they call fishermen that have been around a long time, master fishermen. They captained the ships, led their crews, mentored the young men in the ways of the sea, and, of course, they barked orders to keep the whole operation running smoothly. At least that's what they tell themselves, you know, that the operation couldn't run smoothly unless they barked orders. These old men were young once too, which is one of the things they barked. It's motivating I guess, to the young men that are in their command. You know, the young men want to grow up to be master fishermen when they grow old and they can think about how their mentor was just like them once. Just one catch of the right fish and a young man could never have to load another boat for the rest of his life.

You could always tell which old men were fishermen because they usually were missing a finger or an eye (which was probably from an accident and not an act of

bravery, or so I've been told, so the old men hardly ever told you how they lost a finger or an eye because they wanted strangers to go on believing that it might have been due to an act of bravery). But even from far away, like I was, you could tell if an old man was a fisherman by the way he stood. You know how people say labor is back breaking. I think that's actually true for fishermen because old fishermen always stood crookedly, like one leg was longer than the other and they have to lean their shoulders the other way to compensate for their uneven legs and tilt their head to compensate for their uneven shoulders and then sort of tip their hat to compensate for their tilted head. All of this leaning and compensating just to keep them from falling over. It gives them the posture of a heap of rocks stacked on top of one another, you know, wobbly, like the whole thing could collapse into a heap of rubble at any time. Perhaps it's from carrying the cargo as a young man or perhaps it's from trying to stand upright on a boat that is tossing and turning on the sea. I'm not really sure I guess, why the old fishermen have crooked backs that is.

Anyways, I watched the young men load the boats and the old men stand crookedly on the docks and bark orders at the young men to work faster. It's funny, I knew these fishermen loaded their boats each spring when the ice thawed, but I'd never really taken the time to watch them work. I was just sort of aware that it was happening down by the docks. But it might as well have been in a different world because I'd never sat and watched the fishermen work. Probably because I'd feel odd watching other men work. I guess it would make me feel lazy or something, you know, me sitting and staring while other young men are laboring and all. But I could watch them now because

nobody knew I was watching you see. Anyways, I actually liked watching it all happen. It was like it's own little world, you know, young people laboring and old people barking orders and everybody knew their place and their job. The whole scene reminded me of seeing the innards of a fine-tuned clock, you know, like I was watching the gears and springs and sprockets and whatnot all moving together in perfect harmony to make the machine work. Each piece wasn't too important unless all the other pieces are doing their jobs.

Anyways, the salty smell of thawed ice filled the bay air. I couldn't believe the icy waters of the bay had opened and it was fishing season again. It didn't seem like it, but I spent three months with Roki. Resting. Recovering. Talking. Thinking. I took walks each day too. You know, I would just leave Roki's cabin and head in a different direction and be mindful of the changes happening in the wilderness and smelled flowers and felt the sunshine on my face and stuff. And I'd just walk until my body was tired or until I ran out of daylight. His questions about why hunters hunt really stuck in my mind too. I meditated on them all day, Roki's questions that is.

So the sun hung in the sky longer, my walks got longer, my body got stronger each day, and I just thought and thought about his questions until I couldn't think any more for the day. And then I'd head back to the cabin. Roki pretty much left me alone too. He was a real quiet man, but he had this wisdom about him, like he could ask a question that cut to the heart of an issue.

It wasn't just healing my body though. The time with Roki was a time of reflection. You see, nobody knew I was alive. Thoren and Sem and all the other men in my hunting

party probably assumed I was dead, you know, because I'd left into the mountains and never returned and all. At least I assumed they assumed I was dead. And nobody in Norwick knew that I'd been gone. Sure, they might have known that it was the time of year hunters went into the mountains for the norwulf migration, and they probably assumed that I, Xander, an apprentice hunter, went on the hunt, but they'd never know that I didn't come back from the last hunt. And so I had a window of time where I was both alive and dead that allows you to think about things without the concerns of the people who are merely alive or dead. It was kinda nice, you know, to be both alive and dead because you could have as much time as you needed to think. It was a time to think real clearly.

Anyways, by the end of all these walks, my whole apprenticeship seemed the height of silliness, you know, hunting norwulves and all. So you got teams of young men venturing out into the mountains and stalking these beasts and trying to kill the ones with the biggest horns. And why? To be seen as brave? To impress elders? So that a wealthy patron could brag that his hunters killed the biggest beast? There was a whole system of busyness and rules and traditions that was just made up wholecloth, like how many tattoos you have, but there was nothing that really served a purpose other than to be busy or to follow rules or to carry on traditions. Nothing was being built. Progress wasn't being made. You just hunted because that's what hunters do.

Eventually fresh skin had grown across the wound in my stomach, and strength returned to my body. The frozen ground softened. Green shoots of life sprouted from the soil. Springs of water bled from each small cleave in the mountainside and gathered

into streams in the valleys below. Streams flowed from many directions and met to form rivers and those rivers eventually emptied into the sea. The same sea these boats would live in for the next few weeks.

So one day I was on a walk. One of those nice long walks too where nature really energizes your soul, and my strength had returned to my body and my mind felt clear and all. And I came up on this norwulf carcass that was peering out from a melting pile of ice that collected on the north side of a tree. The carcass was in this position like it was huddled into a ball and its claws were tucked into its ribs like it died trying to stay warm or something. The face had this gnarled look too, like it was in pain, and its teeth were showing. And there was this real long horn that ran from its nose all the way back to between its ears. And I sat and looked at this poor beast for the whole afternoon.

The thing that really hit me was that there was a curved blade stuck into the frozen back meat of this dead beast. And the short strand of twine that was tied to the curved blade was frayed off from being dragged so far. It was the blade that Sem had given me. This was my beast.

It was kinda interesting, you know, getting to inspect the beast up close and all. I got to measure his horn, it was as big as my arm. And the muscles were hulking. This truly was a great beast. But here it was, this great beast, and it was rotting into dirt. And there was a chunk of meat missing from his back from where a rodent had gnawed. And it was at this time I realized that I'd built up this norwulf in my mind to be some mythical and God-like beast that was gonna make all my dreams come true, but it was only flesh and bones.

I didn't know if I should feel proud that I killed it or sad that it was slowly rotting away. I wanted to feel proud, you know, that I didn't fail on my hunt, but I didn't. I just felt kinda sad. Sad for me and sad for the beast. I mean, the beast didn't know that it was my prize, it just wanted to live. I murdered an innocent norwulf. For what? For having the misfortune of being in the wrong field at the wrong time? For being too big and magnificent? I couldn't answer that anymore. I guess for pride, but that didn't seem like a good answer. Tradition? That answer seemed only superficially satisfying.

The funny thing is that I could have sawed the horn off the beast's carcass and taken it back to my hamlet by the bay. With the story of my adventure and everybody thinking I died and the giant horn I would surely impress the elders. But I just didn't care anymore. My future was right here for the taking and I just didn't care. It's not that I didn't care about anything, it was just that I didn't care about the horn or becoming a hunter anymore.

So I returned to Roki's cabin without the norwulf horn. I guess seeing the beast's carcass did something to my mind. I thanked Roki for his kindness and bid him farewell. I descended the mountain on which his cabin sat and followed the streams and rivers until I reached the sea. I then followed the shoreline south to my hamlet by the bay.

For four days and three nights I walked south all day and slept under the stars at night. Well, I almost walked all day each day. On the second morning I came across the field with bluegrass, the same field where I shot the beast of a norwulf three months ago. I kicked around the grass for a bit and let my mind wander. And then I set up a resting place for a midday meal and let my mind wander some more. The field of

bluegrass was just, well, a field of bluegrass. There were no remnants of my hunt other than my memories. The grass where the norwolves laid was not matted and the trail of purple blood had long been washed away. So I sat there, ate my midday meal, kicked the dirt as I meandered around the field, and let the thoughts of what-if roam through my mind. You know, “what if I killed the beast of a norwulf with my first arrow?” and “what if I never escaped the angered sow?” and “what if I never went on this hunt in the first place?” and thoughts like that.

I don't know why I do this, meditate on these what-ifs and all. I suppose it helps to understand why you did what you did. Perhaps you can learn a lesson or something that could be applied in the future. And people might think you're a wise old man after a lifetime of learning these lessons. You know, you could pull these lessons out of your mind like pulling a book off a library shelf and people would be impressed because you look old and say wise-sounding words. I suppose that's how it's supposed to work. But this sort of lesson-learning seems like just an excuse to let my mind wander. Time is passing, that's for sure. But I don't know how many lessons I actually learn and I don't know how wise I'm really getting. My mind just wanders from thought to thought. I have a hard time controlling my thoughts sometimes and then I come up with a story about learning lessons or something that makes me not feel so bad about wasting all this time.

So I slowly meandered around that field of bluegrass in circles. You know, I just shoved my hands in my pockets and I watched my feet kick the dirt and I just ran these what-ifs through my mind over and over the whole afternoon while I walked in a circle. Imagine that, just walking around and around for a few hours kicking dirt. Talk about a

waste of time. Anyways, the real interesting thing is that I wasn't even that mad at myself. A few months ago I would have cursed myself real good for not killing the beast of a norwulf on that first day, you know, really lit into myself for ruining my chance at becoming a hunter and all. And I suppose I did that a bit on my walks around Roki's cabin, especially my early walks before I found the beast's carcass because I did it less and less as I walked more and more. But now I felt at peace, like I knew that I tried my best and that I actually did kill the beast and I didn't feel like I needed to curse myself anymore. So I kicked the dirt for so long that the sun got low in the sky and I ended up sleeping in that field that night.

Anyways, I made my way down to the hamlet by the bay and perched atop the steep bluffs on the opposite side of the bay from my hamlet and watched the fishers work. The hamlet is this nice hamlet that is sandwiched between the sloping mountains and the sea. The trees are all cut back, you know, where all the houses are. And as the hamlet grows, the treeline recedes in this jagged uneven fashion like the swings of men's axes had slowly and unevenly gnawed away at the treeline.

So I sat there waiting and watching. It's funny, my mind and body were at a stalemate. I walked for four days to get here and now I was frozen with indecision, you know, about whether I wanted to walk the last hour to actually get to the hamlet. I think I enjoyed being both a dead man and alive. I felt free. And I didn't want it to end. But my mind knew that all good things must end even if my body didn't want it to end. My mind just had to command my body into motion and it would all be OK. Sort of like when you

leave a fire behind and enter the cold wilderness, you just gotta start walking and not really think about how cold your body is gonna be.

I didn't know how my life would unfold, you know, once I returned to the hamlet by the bay. Would I be received as brave? Or would I be seen as the foolish hunter who didn't bring back the norwulf horn? But I felt at peace for once in my life. More than drinking sponami and singing the songs of the hunters and shooting a norwulf, I found the true spirit of being a hunter. A man pouring his soul into his craft. A man exhausting all his energies into hunting a beast. Truly trying at something with all your abilities. The patrons support hunters not because it brings them meat or horns or stories, but because the hunters do things that inspire other men. There's something about watching a man push himself to the extreme that expands what we believe is possible. Once in awhile a man pushes himself and achieves something great and his story is told and retold. And that is worth celebrating and patronizing. But sometimes men try their hardest and their stories are forgotten. Trying your hardest, that, my friend, is true bravery.

So my mind commanded my body to walk to the hamlet by the bay where I would begin my life anew.