

READING SAMPLE

RISE OF THE WASTELANDS
The Kelvor Chronicles

CHAPTER I

The Hunt

A delicate grey veiled the sky above Kelvor, as though each struggling beam of sunlight, piercing the weight of cloud, etched faint silver veins upon the world below. This subdued radiance spread over the Greenwald — an unbroken expanse of moss and fern and age — worn trees, their towering crowns steeped in quiet antiquity. Damp air hung heavy, and the deep fragrances of soil and decay laden it, mingled with the faint sweetness of fragile blossoms that yet endured and flowered in the chill of the waning year.

With deliberate care, Logan advanced through the tangled growth. He kept his breathing slow and even, his passage scarcely stirring the underbrush. Every snapped twig, every yielding bed of moss beneath his boots held the risk of revealing him. The green leather of his cuirass absorbed the forest's dim light, dull and muted, as though fashioned to vanish amid bark and shadow.

He paused.

His attention settled upon his bow — the bowyer masterfully wrought this piece of craft, its darkened wood smooth and supple within his grasp. Delicate engravings of a silver griffin and a silver dragon wound about the haft, entwined emblems of strength and wisdom. Romm had shaped this shortbow with his own hands and bestowed upon it the name *Windslicer* — it earned this title not solely by its unrivaled accuracy in flight, but by the near-silent grace with which a well-released arrow claimed its mark. This was no common instrument of the hunt. It stood as a symbol. A pledge. Through it, Logan had learned not merely to track and strike, but to move as part of the living wild — to read its hidden chronicles, slumbering beneath leaf — mould and root.

The old tales spoke of an age when the Principality of Kelvor still youthfully existed, when its people were forced to hold fast against the ever-present threats of the Wastelands. In those days, the griffins reigned as dread sovereigns of the high mountains, their talons and vast wings rendering them untouchable lords of the open sky. People say that they forged a bond with the princes of Kelvor — one that surpassed simple fealty, a true joining of strength and purpose. The oldest lore says these creatures did not merely stand beside humankind in battle, but also watched over the borders of the realm with a devotion unmatched in song or story. They held their eyries, hidden among the most forbidding cliffs of the Hima Mountains, as sacred places. People believed the rulers of Kelvor drew courage, resolve, and wisdom from them.

Logan knew these histories well. In his childhood, he had listened in silence as Prince Kantus spoke of them, his voice weighted with reverence for the ages past. Logan never saw the griffins as mere heraldic devices — they embodied an ideal,

a standard toward which one might strive. With every breath he drew in this forest, the living heart of his homeland, he felt the pull of those elder days. It seemed as though the spirit of the griffins yet endured: a murmur passing through the high boughs, a fleeting shadow gliding across a distant clearing — present, elusive, and watchful still.

The Greenwald was more than a mere woodland. It lived — an abiding, breathing presence that held the chronicles of centuries within its deepened shade. Each tree bore a character of its own: some rose tall and unbending, their crowns lifting far above their kin, while others stood twisted and gnarled; they drove their roots deep into the waiting earth. The creatures that dwelt there moved according to a cadence that felt familiar and comforting to Logan. Birds called from the high reaches, squirrels darted along the branches, and somewhere in the distance, a bear stirred within its den, and its low rumble sounded.

Yet on this day, something felt askew. The air pressed more heavily upon the senses; the whisper of leaves sounded subdued. Logan felt it in his bones — a faint prickle at the nape of his neck urged him to temper each step with greater care. The trial that awaited him did not merely measure his skill as a hunter but a defining stride upon the path toward his place within the Principality. Romm, the Togar who had served as his mentor, had spoken the warning often enough: “The wild gives, but it also takes. Show it reverence, Logan, and you will move within its rhythm.”

For a fleeting moment, the sun broke through the clouded sky, casting a shifting lattice of light and shadow across the forest floor. Logan felt his heart quicken, if only for a breath. He lowered himself to one knee, his fingers brushing the yielding moss. A sense of communion lay in that touch of something vast and enduring, far beyond the measure of his own being. He closed; He listened to the soft stir of foliage, to the faint hum of unseen insects. The woodland spoke, and Logan stood ready to heed its voice.

Once more, the tales of the griffins stirred within his thoughts. How often, as a child, had he imagined himself astride one of those majestic beings, the wind upon his face, the wide world unfurled beneath him? But this hour did not welcome reverie. Today belonged to the trial alone. Drawing a steady breath, Logan rose and resumed. The Greenwald had called; he would answer.

Logan, not yet seventeen summers old, lived as a true child of the wild. From his earliest years, the discipline of the hunt had shaped him, and the forest of Kelvor had served him not merely as a place of play but as his sternest tutor. The ancient oaks and firs seemed to know his passing, as though they were silent sentinels

that had long marked his course. The roots whispered of forgotten ages beneath his boots, telling of wars and alliances, of times even the eldest among humankind could no longer recall. The thick canopy arched above him like a living vault, sheltering him from the wider world beyond its bounds.

He knew that every patch of moss, every strip of bark, every concealed trail carried a story of its own — yet today the Greenwald felt altered. An intangible tension hung in the air, like the lingering echo of a storm gathering far beyond the horizon. The familiar voices of the wild — the hushed whisper of leaves, the distant tapping of a woodpecker, the soft drone of insects — had fallen silent, as though the forest itself were holding its breath.

Logan advanced with a deliberation that would have been uncommon for one of his youth. He passed soundlessly; he keenly honed his awareness. He had learned to attune himself to the woodland's pulse, to become part of its stillness. But now that quiet offered no comfort, no shelter as it once had. It felt taut, expectant — as though the land itself had paused, sensing an unseen presence lurking amid its shadows.

A single white strand marked his brown hair, a silvery thread set starkly against the darker locks, and he moved through the undergrowth without a sound. Green boots found firm purchase upon the yielding ground, while his brown cloth trousers blended seamlessly with earth and moss alike. The green leather of his tunic caught the filtered light that slipped through the dense canopy, allowing him to pass almost unseen. He drew a hood low over his head, obscuring his features, yet eyes of striking blue gleamed from within its shadow— clear, alert, and keen. Bright and sharp as a winter sky at dawn, they were Logan's greatest secret, revealing thought, emotion, and resolve alike. They could draw unwanted attention; he concealed them whenever prudence demanded it.

His path carried him onward, deeper into the woodland, where the light waned, and the forest's voice slowly returned. The wind stirred the leaves, their rustling mingling with the distant call of a solitary bird. Logan scarcely registered these sounds; his focus rested wholly upon a point ahead. His keen sight had caught a movement — too distant to discern its nature, yet near enough to demand his attention. A beast? A foe? Or something altogether different?

Slowly, almost as if time itself had slackened, Logan reached with his left hand for the quiver at his belt. He moved so smoothly, so quietly, that it seemed he and the settling forest moved in quiet accord. With the practiced precision of a seasoned hunter, he drew an arrow free and set it upon the bowstring. Careful artisans had chosen and bound its fletching with care, and it caught the fading

light with a muted sheen. The bow rested in his grasp like an extension of his own arm — a trusted companion through countless hunts.

He drew the string back in a measured motion, muscle tightening as tension gathered. The world stood still for a heartbeat. He heard the steady cadence of his own pulse, mingling with the faint, almost imperceptible breath of the wind. The woodland paused once more, and Logan mirrored its restraint. The movement he had glimpsed at the edge of his vision now resolved into clearer form. Something — or someone — moved there among the trees. He could not yet name the creature, or perhaps an orc or goblin from the Wastelands, those restless intruders known to stray into the green reaches of Kelvor.

A flicker within the shadows — barely perceptible — caught his eye and held it fast. His awareness sharpened, his muscles tightened still further. He heard a snap. He heard a faint crackle. A lesser hunter might have passed these sounds as little more than chance disturbance; to Logan, they spoke yet another language of the wild — they reminded him that the woodland was ever—living, never truly at rest. Then the birds fell silent, and the sighing of the high boughs faded as though it had never been — no more than a breath lost to memory. Logan's pulse slowed, his gaze fixed upon the distant point from which the movement had first emerged.

He heard a soft rustle behind him.

Every sense, honed through years of the hunt and a life spent beneath leaf and branch, caught the intrusion at once. He shifted aside on instinct, wheeling about in a single, fluid motion as his bow came up, the string already drawn to the proper tension without conscious thought. Yet where he had expected a lurking threat, he found the familiar face of his closest companion. Asmodai stepped from the dense brush with a broad grin, utterly at ease.

“Is my old friend attempting to bring down leaves now?” Asmodai asked; his smile disarmed the moment's gravity. With a sharp flick of his head, he brushed the dark hair from his brow and moved closer, as though intent on easing the strain that still clung to the air. Sunlight filtering through the canopy softened his features, rendering them open and familiar. Even so, Logan could not entirely conceal his irritation.

He lowered the bow; he kept his eyes keen and unyielding as they measured Asmodai. “You may count yourself fortunate to have escaped unscathed,” Logan replied. He put a keen edge to his voice, his hand trembling for a brief instant.

His friend's sudden appearance had indeed caught him off guard, and the heightened tension of the hunt had yet to release its hold fully.

Asmodai laughed, the sound ringing through the woodland as though even the trees themselves shared in his mirth. "You know well enough that I admire how swiftly you still react, Logan. But be grateful I was not quarry — else your day would have begun with a lesson in missed aim." He clapped Logan's shoulder in easy camaraderie, and Logan smiled despite it all. He considered Asmodai, strong yet warm of spirit, as a brother. Since childhood, they had shared nearly everything: their earliest forays beneath the trees and later the weightier duties that came with life in the Principality of Kelvor.

Asmodai was the Prince of Kelvor's son, ruler of the principality that lay in the southwestern reaches of the great Kingdom of Argenon. Their homeland was a realm of rolling green hills and fertile meadows, set between the majestic lower ranges of the Hima Mountains to the west and the dark, perilous Wastelands beyond. Kelvor was cherished and carefully tended by its people — a domain that, from gentle highlands to its deep woods, seemed to breathe a quiet peace. Yet that calm was deceptive. Along its borders, most of all toward the Wastelands, the land was beset by constant threats from orcs and goblins. Unceasing struggle had long shaped the history of the principality and the defense of its fertile heart against the savage creatures of the wastes.

Not only the soil of their homeland, but fate has bound Logan and Asmodai. Asmodai stood as the heir apparent, destined one day to guide Kelvor into the years to come; Logan, by contrast, was an orphan, and the prince took him into his household. Yet their bond had ever risen above the divide of birth and station. They were brothers in all but blood, joined by shared trials and a trust forged through years of companionship.

"I nearly felled the prince's son just now," Logan said at last, a roguish smile touching his lips as he set the bow aside and returned the arrow to his quiver. "Perhaps next time I should find you a special corner of the woodland — one where you can be certain not to stray into the path of a hunting shaft."

Asmodai grinned and rested a hand upon his own bow, slung across his back. "I thought you might appreciate it, Logan—an heir to the throne who moves through Kelvor's wilds as swiftly as a stag. Perhaps I ought to offer you a little more competition," he added, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Competition?" Logan raised a brow. "Had my reflexes been any slower, the noble — born son of Kelvor would now be sporting an arrow in his chest," he

replied with mock severity — though the faint tremor in his hand betrayed that the shock had not yet wholly faded.

Asmodai chuckled softly, his voice deep and musical, briefly lifting the gloom of the surrounding trees. “That would make for a most entertaining tale for my father. Just imagine it: *‘The orphan fells Kelvor’s heir with a hunter’s arrow.’*”

Logan could not suppress a grin. “I am certain I would explain to the Prince just how clumsily his son blundered into my line of fire in a heroic attempt to save a boar.”

Before Asmodai could reply, a third voice entered the moment — gentle, yet carrying with it a quiet authority. “Have the two of you lost your appetite for the hunt? You chatter like court ladies. At this pace, we shall bring down nothing at all.”

Imdaros, Asmodai’s younger brother, stepped from the sheltering shadows of the trees. Barely sixteen summers of age, he had a slighter build than Asmodai, yet there was a calm gravity in his gaze that lent him an air beyond his years. Muted light caught his light-brown hair, and his posture spoke of discipline that his early childhood had instilled.

Logan straightened and regarded his closest friend’s younger brother. Imdaros was an unwavering part of their trio, and though younger than both of them, he possessed a rare gift for clear and measured thought. Where Asmodai acted on impulse, often guided by humor, Imdaros brought balance and restraint to their ventures. “Now that you have joined us, Imdaros,” Logan said with a faint smile, “perhaps you might demonstrate how to conduct a proper hunt. Or have you merely come to remind us of the court ladies?”

Imdaros folded his arms across his chest and met the gaze of his elder companion — who was, to him as well, a brother — with the barest hint of a smile. “Perhaps I should, Logan. At present, I see little sign of true hunting fervor in you.”

Together they pressed on through the woodland as the sun slipped further behind the clouds and the light dimmed to a muted glow. Softly murmuring leaves accompanied their steps, and the air grew cooler the deeper they ventured beneath the canopy. Their conversation gradually fell away, replaced by focused silence. The familiar tension coiled within Logan once more. Every footfall, every stir of undergrowth might serve as a sign of quarry, or of danger.

Abruptly, Imdaros halted and dropped to one knee. His fingers brushed the yielding earth as his keen eyes traced a barely discernible mark. “Boar,” he murmured, indicating the faint imprint of a hoof in the damp moss. Logan and Asmodai moved closer, their attention fixed upon the sign.

“Fresh,” Logan breathed, his voice little more than a whisper. “They cannot be far.”

Asmodai drew his bow almost without thought. “Then we waste no time. I will take the left flank. Imdaros, the right. Logan, you hold the center.” Without waiting for a reply, he slipped soundlessly into the shadows between the trees.

Logan inclined his head and took position, his senses sharpened to the living world around him. His eyes, glinting within the forest’s gloom, swept the ground ahead. The woodland was a breathing entity — a green labyrinth of ancient, gnarled trunks whose branches clawed skyward like the fingers of some primeval hand. Beneath them, the earth lay soft and thick with moss, a carpet of emerald mounds that swallowed sound and step alike. Ferns and tangled shrubs crowded every line of sight, and the light filtering through the dense canopy shimmered dimly, as though the forest itself bore a quiet sorrow within its aged limbs.

The three young hunters pressed deeper into the woodland — step by measured step — following a trail that wound ahead of them like an unseen thread drawn through the tangled growth. With each advance, the living sounds of the wild seemed to swell. The distant cry of a raptor tore at the hush, the wind murmured through the leaves, and branches snapped beneath their boots — each note blending into a shifting symphony of life and death that bound the forest together.

This pursuit was no ordinary contest of survival. It was a rite — a proving of skill and of inner resolve. Logan understood that it reached far beyond the mere tracking of beasts that roamed beneath the trees. They were not chasing flesh alone, but a purpose that seemed to drink in the darkness itself: elusive as the shimmer of morning mist, yet rooted deep within the heart of the wild.

Twilight tightened its hold, drawing the shadows closer, and with it came a strange urgency that Logan felt in his bones. They followed a trail as fragile as a wavering shade, forever slipping from firm grasp. Time and again, they had to pause, scanning the ground, reclaiming the faint signs that faded like whispered words among the trunks.

“We will never complete our training like this,” Imdaros muttered and leaned against a tree with a quiet sigh. A note of frustration crept into his voice,

spreading like a thin fog through the gathering gloom. “This cursed trail is all but lost. We are wasting precious time.”

The familiar stir of doubt gathered within Logan, dark as a looming cloud. Yet he knew that such moments of uncertainty revealed a true hunter. Without a word, he knelt and placed his hands upon the earth, which pulsed beneath him like the living heart of the woodland. He closed his eyes, and for a fleeting span, the sounds around him merged with the steady rise and fall of his breath.

The wind sighed through the boughs and softened into distant murmurs, entwined with the imagined cadence of flowing water. His fingers sank into the moss, and the chill of the soil seeped through him, as though he were being drawn into union with the land itself. Gradually, he deepened his breathing, his chest rising and falling in quiet accord with his surroundings. His frantic heartbeat slowed, settling into a calm, even rhythm. With each measured breath, he perceived the word more sharply, as if the woodland’s haze were lifting from his inner sight.

Within the darkness behind his closed eyes, something began to stir. At first, it was no more than a faint ember — a glimmer spreading like the last glow within a dying fire. Yet the deeper Logan surrendered to the rhythm of the world around him, the brighter that light became. It was as though the land itself had awakened and unveiled its hidden truths. The hoofprints of the boar they sought now flared within his mind like sparks cast against the night. Each mark, each impression, told a fragment of a larger tale, tracing a path that only he could perceive.

Tension gathered within his body, his muscles held in absolute focus. The fine hairs at his neck lifted, brushed by an unseen presence. The woodland’s energy flowed through him — a current that bound him ever more tightly with each heartbeat. The glowing traces sharpened, burning themselves into his thoughts, like a trail drawn solely for his steps to follow.

A sudden inner shimmer drew Logan’s eyes open. Before him, upon the forest floor, the boar’s tracks gleamed faintly, as though brushed by a whisper of unseen power. “I have them,” he said softly, his voice scarcely more than a breath, yet carried by unshakable certainty. He rose, and renewed purpose shaped his movements. “The trail continues. Follow me.”

Imdaros regarded him with measured skepticism as he straightened, and his hand drifted instinctively toward his bow. “Are you certain you see it?” he asked, a trace of doubt coloring his tone.

“I am,” Logan replied calmly, his gaze never leaving the direction in which the path unfolded. “We need only keep to it. The woodland will guide us.”

Asmodai, who had remained silent until then, studied Logan with thoughtful eyes. He knew his friend too well to mistake conviction for empty words. “Then let us waste no time,” he said at last, his voice bearing both resolve and urgency. Together they pressed on, the faintly glowing marks before them — signs that only Logan could perceive.

Logan lifted his hand as a clear signal to halt.

Shadows swallowed the clearing ahead, while the restless wind carried the hunters’ quiet breathing like a barely audible echo. The others froze; they fixed their attention upon him. In moments such as these, when the tension of the hunt reached its sharpest edge, Logan knew that composure was paramount. Within this stillness — drawn tight between them like an unseen cord — the land itself could speak, offering its truths to those willing to listen.

A boar grazed ahead upon the small clearing. Fully grown, it lowered its head to the rich earth, tearing at roots and shoots with unhurried ease. It seemed wholly absorbed in its world, unaware of the danger that circled it. Yet Logan understood that they stood here not merely as hunters, but as keepers of balance. Though such prey was commonplace, an unease stirred within him. The air lay strangely altered, heavy and compressed, as though the woodland itself had drawn inward — as though the animal before them were but a fragment of something far greater.

At his side, Asmodai and Imdaros had taken their positions, bows in hand, strings drawn taut, their focus locked upon the quarry. They kept their arrows well and keen in their quivers— edged, their weapons proven and dependable. Asmodai, the elder of the brothers, was a master of the craft, his movements as precise as the measured workings of a clock. His eyes — dark, sharp as tempered steel — had long since marked the boar. Unlike Logan, however, whose instincts remained attuned to subtler warnings, Asmodai had already resolved to loose the first shot.

“It is an easy mark,” he murmured, more to himself than to the others. “A fine boar. The prize is ours.”

Yet Logan remained unconvinced. The instincts that had so often served him now stood at their highest alert. He kept his hand raised as he felt a peculiar, almost ominous stillness settle over the clearing. The animal continued to feed, undisturbed, but Logan sensed that the moment held more than it revealed.

Something felt out of harmony. The trail they had followed spoke of more than a single beast, and the woodland, in its ancient wisdom, never failed to recognize when something unseen waited within its depths.

Without warning, a sharp crack, the violent splintering of wood, shattered the stillness like breaking glass. Logan spun aside, his eyes flaring as the sound reached him. A colossal shape burst forth from the tangled undergrowth behind them.

A boar — no, not a common beast, but a creature of near — mythic stature.

It rose almost to the height of a man, thick, blackened bristles sheathing its frame, which lay like interlocked armor across bulging muscle. It tore through brush and branch with unstoppable force, a living tempest unleashed. Each thunderous step made the ground shudder, as though the earth itself strained beneath its mass. Broad shoulders gleamed in the dimming light, every movement a declaration of raw, brutal power.

It had immense tusks, curved like the blades of a warlord, their edges catching the light as though honed through a thousand battles. A molten glare burned in the beast's eyes, seething with fury and an insatiable hunger to destroy all that stood before it. A guttural roar tore through the woodland — a sound that froze the hunters' blood where it flowed. The wind carried the stench of churned soil and savage flesh, tainted by a metallic tang reminiscent of blood spilled in ancient wars.

"Imdaros!" Logan shouted, his voice edged with command sharp enough to still the wind itself. "Move!"

Imdaros, the younger of the two brothers, stared in horror at the charging monstrosity. Unlike Asmodai — who met the hunt with near—unshakable composure — Imdaros was driven by impulse, his fierce energy both a strength and a flaw. Now, faced with the onrushing horror, that fire betrayed him. He stood rooted to the ground, terror locked his limbs, and he could not tear his gaze from the beast as it closed the distance with relentless speed.

"That... that cannot be," he stammered, the words catching in his throat. "A creature like this —"

Logan knew there was no time.

The boar barreled toward Imdaros with terrifying swiftness, moments from tearing the young prince apart. Logan drew and loosed in a single motion, the bowstring snapping forward so swiftly it was scarcely seen. The arrow struck one of the massive tusks and shattered with a dry crack, as though hurled against solid stone.

The creature did not so much as falter.

It thundered onward, inexorable, and in that heartbeat it seemed as though fate itself had risen to pass judgment on whether the prince's son would live — or fall beneath its charge.

Asmodai, still holding his aim, could wait no longer for the moment of truth. The spark of a warrior burned in his eyes — one who saw in the hunt not merely the craft of survival, but the honor of House Kelvor itself. From his earliest years, he had devoted countless hours to mastering the bow, refining hand and instinct alike. He knew, with chilling clarity, that this shot must find its mark — and that he would be granted no second chance.

"I will end this," Asmodai whispered through clenched teeth as the boar surged forward with furious force. The arrow in his grasp felt like a warrior's vow, cast against fate itself.

With a single, fluid motion, he drew the string. The bow, an extension of his own body, answered with a deep, almost spectral note as the tension was released. The shaft tore through the air, carving an unseen path through the dimming woodland. He struck swiftly and truly — one that should have driven the beast into the dust.

Yet the boar — an unstoppable colossus of the wild — scarcely heeded the oncoming missile. The arrow struck its flank near the shoulder and lodged there, buried deep. The creature gave no sign of faltering. Though Asmodai's shot had bitten into thick, leathery hide with all his strength and precision, it did nothing to slow the relentless charge.

"Impossible!" Asmodai cried, anguish cutting through his voice as he beheld the outcome. The arrow stood fast in the massive shoulder, as though embedded in unyielding stone. The beast answered only with a thunderous roar, hurling itself onward with such overwhelming force that the ground itself seemed to shudder beneath its advance. No shot — no bow, however mighty — could halt its fury.

"Imdaros, run!" Logan shouted, his voice crashing through the trees with a force that made the woodland tremble.

But it was already too late.

The boar was too close, and Imdaros had no time to even reach for his weapon. In that instant — when the monster surged forward with all its brutal mass, loosing a final, guttural bellow — *it happened*.

Romm had saved the youth.

He emerged from the forest's shadow like a presence as ancient as the trees themselves, as formidable as the legends spoken across the hills and valleys of Kelvor. Romm was a Togar — one of the feline folk whose forms embodied both the savage and the sublime. He was no common warrior, but a being who moved as though woven into the wild itself, a living shadow bound to claw and silence.

He stood well over two meters tall, his build immense; the breadth of his shoulders and the power of his arms would have inspired awe even among the strongest of men. Lustrous black fur cloaked his body that caught the last light of dusk, gleaming as though shaped from the forest's own darkness. He bound a mane touched with grey at the nape of his neck, and with each measured motion it stirred, as if the wind itself found purchase there.

His head bore the unmistakable aspect of a lion: a broad brow and piercing green eyes that seemed to look through flesh and bone alike. He had deep, ancient eyes, and pale striations marked his face—white tracings that cut starkly through the dark fur, lending his features an air of primal authority. Within that gaze lay the memory of countless seasons, of endless struggles, and of lives long scattered among the trees. He was a being of an older world, born of an archaic people who lived in accord with land, wildness, and the unbroken cycle of life.

Romm was more than a warrior or mentor. He was also a member of Prince Kantus' court. The prince — a ruler both just and wise — had taken the Togar into his service, naming him Warden of the Forest and his personal guardian. Ancient people from the remote woodlands of the Wastelands of Khylias once held the Togar in great esteem, until a dark chapter of history cast them into disgrace. Romm, among the last of his kind, now stood as a living bond between humanity and the wild — a hunter and protector whose understanding of the forest was matched only by his measured wisdom among men.

Romm's opening strike stunned the boar only briefly, and it hauled itself upright once more, fury contorting its features. It bunched its muscles, breath billowing in harsh clouds within the cold air. It lowered its head and charged again with brute force, unrestrained toward its assailant.

Romm was faster.

The Togar moved like a living shadow —a lifetime spent within the wild had honed his reflexes. He slipped aside with the fluid grace of a born hunter from the beast's charge, his powerful frame coiling for the next strike. His claws flashed in the fading light as he struck with relentless precision.

"Have the great hunters lost all sense and reason?" his voice thundered across the forest floor as the boar reeled once more. He fixed his gaze, hard as tempered steel, upon the young men. "You believe you may bend the woodland to your own rules? The forest answers to laws far older than you."

The boar, driven by unrestrained fury, struggled again to rise. Before it could renew its assault, a tremendous leonine roar tore through the air, echoing between the trees and striking bone and marrow alike. Birds burst skyward in panicked flight, and even the ancient trunks seemed to pause in silent witness. Romm stood with his jaws wide, his voice rolling through the woodland like thunder. His deep, rumbling snarl set the ground trembling; wrath blazed in his green eyes. That primeval sound froze the boar for a single heartbeat, and it had no chance to flee as Romm launched himself forward.

"You dare challenge a Togar?" he roared, his claws lashing out in a blur of motion. "Then your fate is sealed."

With the force of an ancient warrior, he sprang upon the creature, seized it with an iron grip, and drove his talons deep into its throat. The boar convulsed, lashed out once more, but Romm held firm. Blood spilled into the forest soil as the massive body finally slackened.

It drew one final breath — and the life fled from the beast.

Romm released his grasp, wiped the blood from his claws, and straightened to his full height. He passed his gaze over the young men, whose faces still bore the imprint of what they had witnessed. With a blend of sternness and restrained relief, he inclined his head.

"It is finished," Romm said in his deep, rough voice, which moved through the trees like a passing wind. "But do not linger. Your trial is not yet done." His eyes returned to the hunters, their breaths still heavy as the echoes of battle rang in their minds. "The woodland expects more of you. Claim your quarry — or return with empty hands."

Logan, Asmodai, and Imdaros shook themselves free of their stunned silence. Their hearts still hammered with the aftershock of the clash, yet Romm's words allowed no delay. They had come to prove themselves — not to stand in awe of a Togar's might.

And yet a question pressed upon them all: where had the game gone? Surely every creature nearby must have felt the violence of that struggle. Romm sensed their hesitation and let out a low, guttural rumble.

“Do you truly believe the forest belongs to you alone?” he said. “Beasts flee when danger rises — but some also learn to scent the weakness of others.”

Logan narrowed his eyes, and he swept his gaze across the dense undergrowth. Then — barely discernible — he saw them: impressions in the damp earth, fresh and fleeting. Boar. A sounder could not be far. They may have taken Romm's roar for a warning, yet they would also have sensed that one of their own had fallen.

“Here,” Logan whispered, indicating the marks. “They are close.”

Asmodai inclined his head, slid his bow from his back, and reached for an arrow. “Then we claim our quarry. I will take the floor. You remain concealed, and Imdaros circles from the flank.”

Without further exchange, the three slipped soundlessly into the thicket. Wet soil scented the air, every sound — the snap of a twig, the distant calls above — set tension coiling through their bodies. They had trained often, hunted many times — but today carried true weight.

Moments stretched on, the air taut with strain. Then — a muted grunt. A dull scraping through fallen leaves. Imdaros saw it first. A full — grown boar rooted near a moss — covered root, disturbed yet not far fled. Perhaps it had sensed danger, but not enough to abandon the place entirely.

A mistake.

Logan raised his bow with deliberate calm, feeling the familiar balance of *Windslicer* settle into his grasp. He slowed his breathing, his focus narrowed. The woodland fell silent. He rested the arrow against the string—a heartbeat. An exhale. Then he released.

The shaft hissed through the air with scarcely a sound. The boar grunted and reared — yet a heartbeat later, Asmodai's arrow struck true, and a third from Imdaros ended the struggle. The animal shuddered, then collapsed; it exhaled in a final, faint sound.

Silence.

Logan lowered his bow and let out a steady breath. It was done. The trial was complete.

“Well enough,” came a low voice.

Romm had approached without notice. He moved his gaze from the young men to the fallen animal. “You have shown that you understand the woodland. But the hunt alone does not make you wardens of the wild.”

Imdaros wiped the sweat from his brow. “What remains?”

Romm dragged his claws across the moss, drawing a single line through the green. “Any warrior can kill. A warden protects. This place is not merely ground for the chase — it is life, refuge, and home. You must learn to read it, to honor it, to understand it.”

He gestured toward the boar. “What will you do now?”

“We will bring it back to the village,” Logan answered. “As tradition demands.”

Romm nodded. “Good. But remember — take only what is needed. And never forget to whom your thanks are owed.”

With those words, he turned and dragged the fallen boar after him, leaving the three young hunters to their task. They bound the carcass, prepared it for the journey, and lifted it together. It weighed considerably, but it was not a burden alone. It carried the knowledge of a life taken and the quiet understanding that every living thing within the woodland bore meaning.

As they set out on the path home, the sky began to clear. Dusk slipped gently across the treetops, casting Kelvor in hues of gold and shadow. This day had been more than a hunt — it had been a lesson and a step toward growth.

Kelvor, the land that had raised Logan, Asmodai, and Imdaros, was a realm of rare beauty and deep—rooted heritage. It promised its people peace and sustenance, yet that peace was fragile, and they earned prosperity only through tireless effort. The folk of Kelvor knew no idleness. They lived with the certainty that unity and devotion were the true pillars of their home.

As a part of the great kingdom of Argenon, Kelvor lay within a world of stark contrasts. To the south, gentle hills and fertile fields stretched, sustaining the realm, while to the north, harsh mountain chains rose, their summits often crowned with eternal snow. Vast, ancient forests threaded the land, within whose depths the voices of bygone ages seemed to whisper. Yet the gravest peril did not dwell in mountain or woodland. It waited beyond the western border, in the dark expanse of the Wastelands.

That untamed region was a merciless world of barren plains, venomous marshes, and wind — scoured deserts. The forests that grew there were grim and impenetrable, laced with ancient, hostile sorcery. No order ruled those lands, no sovereign held dominion — only the law of strength prevailed. Orcs and goblins had carved out their own brutal domains within the chaos, savage societies whose blood and force bound their customs. To the people of Argenon, the Wastelands were little more than a cursed realm, a wellspring of evil from which few travelers ever returned.

Kelvor, standing at the edge of these hostile reaches, had ever been the first bulwark against the dark hordes. People feared orcs for their cruelty and their insatiable hunger for plunder and ruin. Goblins — smaller, yet scarcely less dangerous — often followed in their wake. Such raids most often struck the more remote regions of the principality, claiming countless innocent lives among Kelvor's farmers and hunters. They carried them out beneath the cover of night; they left behind scorched villages, ravaged fields, and cries that echoed long across the land.

The forests of Kelvor were the living soul of the principality — a green sea of ancient trees offered shelter with their dense canopies from the pitiless winds of the Wastelands. Yet even these steadfast woods could not fully shield the people from constant peril. Though orcs generally shunned the deepest forest, a wounded warrior or lone scout often strayed into the green depths, leaving greater devastation in his wake than an entire pack of wolves. Still, it was not solely their presence that seeded unease within the hearts of Kelvor's folk. They knew unspokenly that the shadows of the Wastelands were creeping ever closer — on certain nights, that sensation caused even the most seasoned hunters to shiver.

Prince Kantus, Lord of Kelvor and father to Asmodai and Imdaros, had ruled through an age in which the incursions from the Wastelands were no longer mere opportunistic raids. In recent years, the attacks had grown more frequent and disturbingly deliberate. The marauding bands seemed to gather and move with purpose, as though guided by a commanding will. It was as if a new power had risen — some dark force that bound orcs and goblins into something resembling a disciplined host.

The frontier bordering the Wastelands was the most perilous region of Kelvor. The sentries stationed there were no common soldiers, but warriors who had devoted their lives to the realm's defense. The knights of Kelvor — men and women of unyielding courage — rode night after night between watchtowers and lookout posts, ever vigilant for the first sign of invasion. However tireless their efforts, it was not enough. Time and again, orc warbands slipped between patrols, put villages to the torch, and sowed fear deep within the people's hearts.

The duties of rulership had shaped Asmodai from childhood, and tutors had carefully schooled him in the web of noble alliances both within Kelvor and beyond its borders. As heir to the throne, he had grown up amid the intrigues and burdens of governing a principality. Yet military danger was not his sole concern. The increasing influence of the eastern principalities carried equal weight upon the crown realms that, in times of hardship, leaned heavily upon royal favor. Though loyal to the throne, these lands now faced growing peril as orc forces pressed ever deeper into the kingdom.

Recent reports from Cisterul troubled them most, a realm of the far north. There, they had confirmed incursions—an unprecedented development that deeply unsettled the assembled princes. Orcs had never before ventured so far toward the frozen reaches of the realm. Cisterul was a land of ice and desolation, shaped by snowbound plains and forests locked in frost. It had long, merciless winters; only the hardiest of people could endure its cold. That orcs — creatures long accustomed to milder climates — now pushed into such a forbidding region was more than anomalous. It was ominous.

A threat that was not only unexpected but profoundly unsettling faced the lords of Cisterul. Had the orcs altered their nature? Or was some unseen will driving them northward?

The authority of the Prince of Kelvor, like that of the other nobles, had strengthened under the current regent's ascent. Yet this consolidation of power had also stirred unease, giving rise to new tensions among the great houses — fault lines that, if left unchecked, threatened to fracture the realm's fragile unity.

The capital of the realm — Kelvor — rose as an imposing fortress amid a broad plain; it was a living emblem of the principality's resilience. Its towering walls, hewn from pale stone, offered steadfast protection while granting commanding views over the surrounding woodlands and the distant, majestic peaks of the Hima Mountains. From its watchtowers, hostile movement could be discerned at great distance, affording the stronghold a tactical advantage beyond measure.

The citadel of Kelvor was more than a military bastion of Argenon; it was the heart of the principality itself — a vibrant center where trade, governance, and culture converged. Within its halls, people made decisions that shaped the land's fate, and from its high chambers the Prince guided his domain with measured wisdom. The city's closeness to the forests also made it a vital crossroads for hunters, merchants, and travelers alike, who sought the shelter of its walls to exchange news or replenish supplies. For all its martial strength, the fortress possessed a quiet dignity — a bulwark that offered the people of Kelvor both safety and constancy.

The folk of Kelvor remained vigilant, though even they could not know whether the shadowed threat would one day reach their gates. Their resolve, their courage, and the unyielding strength of the citadel — standing like an eternal sentinel over the land — gave them hope.

Asmodai, Imdaros, and Logan bore their quarry upon their shoulders and made their way back toward the fortress. Behind them, the forest lay hushed, as though it had reclaimed its balance after the violence of the struggle. Romm walked at their side, his green—lit eyes studying the young hunters with quiet appraisal.

“Well done, my rangers,” Romm began in his deep voice, which carried between the trees, a faint grin touching his lips. “But do not imagine yourselves masters of the hunt just yet. Had I not intervened, you might well have served as a boar’s feast by nightfall.”

Asmodai snorted softly, leaning upon his bow. “I had matters well in hand. My arrow would have ended the beast, had its hide not been so unnaturally tough.”

Romm inclined his head slightly. He rested his luminous gaze on the prince’s son, amusement flickering there. “Indeed. Yet a true hunter does not rely upon hope that an arrow will pierce any target — but upon knowing precisely where to place it.”

Imdaros smiled. “A single shaft decides no battle.”

Asmodai grimaced faintly but offered no reply. “At least I struck true. Logan merely grazed a tusk.”

Logan lifted a brow, his smile crooked. “Entirely intentional. The brow was my mark — the tusk merely stood in the way.”

Romm let out a low snort, though it carried no hint of disdain — only patient amusement. “Each of you played your part. Yet the hunt is not measured by courage or skill alone. It is the balance of reason, instinct, and reverence for the natural world.”

He passed his gaze over the three in turn, weighing them in thoughtful silence. “But enough of words. A long night awaits you — and it will demand more than simple bravery.”

Imdaros lifted his head, curiosity plain in his expression. “What do you mean, Romm?”

The Togar paused, then a faint smile touched his lips. “Have you truly forgotten that the great banquet is held this evening? You will be expected at court — and you, Asmodai, will at last be presented to your future bride.”

The words brought Asmodai up short. He straightened, his expression sobering. “Tonight?” His tone suggested the hours had slipped past him unnoticed.

“Indeed,” Romm replied calmly, his certainty unshaken. “Did you imagine you might continue roaming the woods while the noble houses of Argenon are already gathering in the great hall? This evening, you will meet the woman you are to wed. It would be fitting if you did not appear as though you had wandered in from the wilds.”

Logan, who had followed the exchange with growing interest, could not suppress a grin. “Asmodai — and a lady? I was under the impression his heart belonged solely to his bow.”

Imdaros chuckled softly. “Or his blade. He does spend more time with his weapons than with people.”

Asmodai shot them a sharp look, though amusement flickered at the corner of his mouth. “Laugh while you can. Perhaps I shall find her agreeable. Perhaps I shall

wed her and invite you both to the celebration — if only to see that the cups remain filled.”

Romm rumbled quietly and laid a heavy paw upon Asmodai’s shoulder. “Beware excessive confidence, boy. Women have a way of unsettling even those who believe themselves masters of every situation.”

Logan shook his head. “I cannot see why such fuss is made over marriage. Binding oneself seems to invite obligation, politics, and endless discourse on family ties. Life beneath the trees is far simpler.”

Romm turned toward him, mischief glinting in his eyes. “You speak as though nothing could ever trouble your calm. One day, a woman will cross your path — and your tune will change.”

Imdaros smirked. “Perhaps she will be a huntress who shoots straighter than he does.”

Soft laughter passed among them as Romm continued beside the others, the boar dragged in his wake. At last, his voice cut through the mirth. “Enough foolishness. I have no time to concern myself with your future marriages. But tonight, you will conduct yourselves as true gentlemen. Wash, dress properly — and Asmodai, ensure you do not look as though you have spent the past weeks burrowed in the undergrowth. Your future wife should not think she is marrying a savage.”

Asmodai snorted softly. “She should consider herself fortunate to be permitted to marry me at all.”

Romm came to a halt. He grew grave, though a trace of indulgence lingered in his features. “Perhaps, boy. Yet remember this: a marriage is not merely a pact between houses, but a trial of the heart. Grant her the same respect you show your weapons.”

For a moment, silence settled as his words took root. At last, Logan grinned and broke it. “Almost poetic, Romm. Were you not our master of the hunt, you might well compose verses.”

The Togar cast him an amused glance. “I would sooner craft ballads of your first botched hunt — and that, my boy, would fill entire volumes.”

Without another word, he turned and resumed his stride toward the fortress. “Move along — before I decide to turn you into kindling.”

The young men followed, laughing, and though they knew the evening ahead would be heavy with expectation and trial, they felt secure beneath the guidance of the mighty Togar. The sun sank slowly beyond the horizon, and in the distance, the stronghold of Kelvor rose into view — a sentinel of vigilance and refuge.

The fortress loomed before them, a monumental bastion of stone, its walls stretched endlessly across the plain. As the young men emerged from the dense woodland, the full splendor of the stronghold revealed itself. Its design married formidable martial strength with restrained elegance. Vast and impregnable ramparts stood, built of massive, weather—worn blocks that bore the weight of centuries. They were broad enough for several men to patrol abreast, and every tower that rose from the walls commanded sweeping views of the open plains, the surrounding forests, and the distant peaks of the Hima Mountains.

Smith had wrought the main gate as a masterwork—builders had reinforced a towering oak structure with heavy iron bands. Intricate carvings upon its surface told of ancient deeds, long wars, and hard — won victories. The sigil of Kelvor gleamed at its center: a silver griffin with wings outstretched, emblem of courage, vigilance, and unyielding resolve. Massive towers flanked the gate; they trained their narrow arrow slits upon the world beyond like watchful eyes. Here, the warriors of Kelvor kept silent guard, alert to every soul that sought passage.

As the young men drew nearer, they felt the presence of ages embedded within those stones. Every block, every battlement, every wrought hinge echoed with memory — a testament to countless battles fought and alliances sworn. Kelvor was more than a fortress; it was the living heart of the principality, a symbol of a people’s will to withstand whatever darkness might come.

Activity pulsed within the walls of the stronghold. They had preparations for the evening’s banquet well underway, and the bustle of servants and artisans lent the citadel a vibrant air. Stablehands hurried between the yards and the inner keep, leading horses, hauling hay, and drawing water. In the vast kitchens, cooks labored over smoking hearths, preparing lavish fare: fragrant roasts, rich pies, freshly baked loaves, and rare spices brought from distant lands—motion teemed in the great courtyards. Squires moved swiftly through the throng with cloths and oil, polishing armor to a gleaming sheen. Smiths worked tirelessly at their forges, repairing mail and shaping tools; the steady rhythm of hammer upon anvil rang through the air. In one corner of the yard, musicians rehearsed upon curious

instruments, weaving a festive melody that would soon set the tone for the night to come.

Builders had designed the castle complex itself to serve both purpose and pageantry. The great hall in which the banquet would be held lay within the central keep and ranked among the most awe—inspiring chambers of the fortress. Massive timber beams supported its vaulted ceiling, and artisans adorned each with intricate carvings. Vast tapestries hung along the walls recounting the storied past of Kelvor — from the wars fought against the dark hordes of the Wastelands to the ancient alliances forged with the Togar. Hundreds of candles glowed and filled the chamber, setting silver goblets and golden platters agleam upon the long tables.

In one corner, counselors conferred in low voices over the seating arrangements. Such matters were delicate, for at a gathering of this importance, they had to place every guest with care, lest some political slight be taken. The Prince of Kelvor had issued precise instructions, and the servants endeavored to carry them out with equal diligence and caution. Elsewhere, attendants arranged floral displays of rare blossoms grown only within the castle gardens, ensuring that each table was laid to flawless perfection.

Yet it was not only pages and artisans who were in motion. The nobles and knights residing within the fortress also prepared for the evening ahead. In the upper levels, where the chambers of the highborn lay, the same restless activity prevailed. Squires delivered freshly pressed garments, maids filled bathing chambers with scented oils, and the ladies of the court selected their jewelry with careful deliberation, intent on shining during the feast.

In the western wing, within a chamber warmed by a broad hearth and lined with an impressive collection of ancient weapons, Prince Kantus himself made ready. The Lord of Kelvor was a man of commanding presence, his grey hair and deep — set lines bearing witness to the burdens of a long reign. His adviser stood at his side, an older man with a keen gaze, quietly reviewing the final details of the evening. Kantus nodded from time to time, though his thoughts had already turned toward the political deliberations that would accompany the banquet.

Meanwhile, Logan, Asmodai, and Imdaros passed through Kelvor's main gate, with Romm close behind. They made their way through the streets toward the inner keep, their shoulders bowed beneath the weight of their quarry. The last light lingered upon the upper windows, while below, lanterns were being lit beneath the eaves.

Warmth and the scent of woodsmoke drifted from the open doorway of a tavern. Above the clatter of cups and conversation, a clear, resonant voice rose to the measured notes of a lute.

*No crown alone, no lonely sword,
No voice unheard, no broken word.
By hearth and hall, by seed and stone,
No Kelvor heart shall stand alone.*

“Darothan the Honorable,” Imdaros said, turning toward the sound.

Logan followed his gaze. He had heard the name before—a bard from the country near Lake Tira, in southern Kelvor. Through the doorway, he glimpsed a man standing beside the hearth, his fingers moving over the strings of a worn lute. Around him, the company had begun to set aside their conversations.

The three hunters slowed. Logan shifted the burden upon his shoulder, listening.

Darothan lifted his voice into the refrain, and before he had finished the first line, the room joined him.

*Raise the banner, lift it high,
Silver griffin, claim the sky.
When the dark draws near the light,
We stand as one, we rise and fight.*

A man in a soot-stained apron beat time against the table. Beside him, a grey-haired woman sang every word. Even a guard passing the doorway caught the final line and carried it a few paces farther down the street.

Asmodai was singing beneath his breath. Logan glanced at him, then at Imdaros, whose lips were moving to the same familiar words. A smile touched his mouth. He joined them quietly, his voice scarcely carrying beyond the three of them.

“You may sing on the way,” Romm rumbled. “We still have a boar to deliver.”

Asmodai gave a soft laugh and adjusted his grip. Together, they resumed their pace. The song followed them along the street, its mingled voices fading only as they turned toward the inner keep.

Their boots rang against the cobbled stones of the inner courtyard, and the surge of activity immediately drew them in. Logan—who felt far more at ease beneath open sky and bough than within stone walls—took in the preparations with a mingling of wonder and unease.

“It feels as though half the realm has gathered here,” he murmured, watching a stablehand struggle to calm a particularly obstinate horse.

Imdaros grinned. “Just wait until you see the great hall. If you think this is lively, you will scarcely believe what awaits inside.”

Asmodai, walking at the fore of the small company, appeared less impressed. A blend of focus and faint apprehension marked his expression. “Stop gawking,” he said, casting them a stern look. “We already resemble country lads as it is.”

Logan raised an eyebrow. “I am no farmer. And unlike you, I have no lady to impress this evening.”

Romm, who had followed them into the courtyard, let out a chuckle. “You speak truly, Logan. Yet should you one day wish to court more than trees and boar, you might begin by carrying yourself with a touch more refinement.”

Imdaros laughed aloud. “Perhaps the banquet will offer him a few inspirations.”

After delivering their quarry to the princely butcher — whose practiced hands set to the task with calm precision — they continued toward the great hall. Within, activity still thrummed in the air. Servants hurried back and forth, spreading fine linens across the tables and attending to the final details. Anticipation crackled in the air, holding back tension. They had already laid the long boards, and fresh bread and roasted meats lingered warmly in the air. Attendants moved swiftly through the chamber, while a herald rehearsed the names he would soon proclaim.

Romm halted at the threshold of the hall and regarded the three young men with thoughtful gravity. “Remember this,” he said, his tone turning solemn. “This evening is more than a celebration. It is an opportunity to reveal who you are. Especially you, Asmodai. Your future begins here.”

Asmodai inclined his head in silent acknowledgment. Though he offered no reply, Logan saw the conflict stirring behind his eyes. This moment marked the opening of a new chapter for the three companions — one shaped by choice, trial,

and the weight of responsibility that life within and beyond the walls of Kelvor would demand.