

# Chapter 1

## The Forsworn



he wail of a child lifted on the breeze. Redmond paused and crouched in the shadow of a rock outcrop. Waiting. Listening. The morning sun had not yet poked its head above the eastern horizon. Rocky, undulating hills bristled with pines and shrubs while the deep valleys still lay in gray shadow. A warm breeze rustled through clumps of grass and delicate white flowers of the woodland aster, carrying with it the rich scent of pine. There was no smell of wood smoke or anything else that would suggest people were about.

Redmond's ears must have deceived him. There could be no children here. No one lived on the contested borders of the Barony of Longmire and the Barony of Windemere. This region of the Hallstat Kingdom of Morcia had been swept clean of inhabitants by the raids and counter-raids that left it a no man's land. No child could be making that sound.

The wail came again, and Redmond slipped an arrow onto the string of his longbow. He fell to his belly and crawled forward until he could peer down on the old road that snaked its way among the hills beyond sight toward the north end of Long Lake.

"Shut up," a male voice growled. The slap of flesh on flesh split the air.

The voice came from directly below Redmond, concealed from view by a pile of boulders. Redmond stole over the lip of the hill to kneel behind a huge pine from where he could see them. A big man with a round belly the shape of a wine barrel, dressed in a pale green tunic and brown trousers, dragged a boy, who could be no more than ten or eleven years old, from inside a hollow log. They struggled not fifteen feet below him.

"You run away again and it'll be the lash," the man said. He heaved the boy from the ground. The boy kicked and squirmed.

"Release the child," Redmond called as he gripped the string of his bow and stepped from behind the tree.

The two froze for an instant before the man spun to gaze up the hill at Redmond.

"Let him go," Redmond said.

The man whipped a knife from his sheath and pressed it to the boy's throat. The boy stared up at Redmond with wide eyes. This was no father disciplining a wayward child. Redmond had seen his kind more often than he would have liked in the Kingdom of Morcia. This man was a slave catcher or slaver himself. But why would they be here, so far from any inhabited town or village?

"You work for Lord Otto of Windemere?" Redmond asked.

"Just walk away and forget what you saw," the man said, "or you'll regret it."

Redmond glanced around dramatically. "And who's going to make me regret it?" he asked. "I only see the two of us. Besides, I have trouble forgetting things like this."

"Don't be a fool," the man said.

"You hurt the boy, and you're a dead man," Redmond replied. Ever since the Salassani raid on his village many years ago, he could not abide men who preyed upon women and children. Much to his dislike, slavery was a fundamental part of Hallstat society here in the southlands and children were often the easiest targets.

The man edged his way up the road holding the child in front of him as a shield. He was moving south. Why south? What could there be along the southern shores of Long Lake that would attract slavers who traded in children? The southern villages were farther away than the northern ones.

"You're leaving me no choice," Redmond said.

The man stepped on a stone that rolled under his boot, causing him to stumble. The boy slammed his head back into the man's face in a desperate bid for freedom. The slaver dropped the boy with a curse. Then he lunged to grab him.

Redmond's arrow caught the slaver in the throat. He staggered backward, clutching at the shaft before he tripped and tumbled over the side of the road into the rocks and trees below.

The boy scrambled back to the hollow log and dove inside. Redmond let him go and bounded down the hill to check on the slaver. The shaft of the arrow had snapped in his fall, but the blood still leaked from the ghastly wound. His body lay at an awkward angle with one arm bent beneath him. A pine tree had arrested his fall. The man stared up at Redmond. There was no point questioning him. He wouldn't be able to speak with a wound like that. There was nothing Redmond could do to help him.

"You gave me no choice," Redmond said.

The man's fingers spasmed as they clutched at the broken arrow shaft. His eyes took on the cold, glassy look of death, and his body stopped quivering. Redmond checked the man's pockets but only found a bag filled with silver dust and a few small silver nuggets. He hefted the bag thoughtfully, climbed up to the road, and squatted beside a rotted tree.

"It's safe to come out," he said. "I won't hurt you."

A brown head poked out.

"He can't hurt you anymore either," Redmond said.

The boy crawled out. Dirt smeared his face where a red welt still burned. His clothes barely covered his thin body. He had a starved look about him.

Redmond backed up so the boy could come out on his own without fear that he would harm him.

"What's your name?"

The boy frowned. "Henry," he said in a tremulous voice.

"I'm Redmond. I work for the Baron of Longmire. You're on his lands, but I'm curious to know how you came to be here."

Redmond slipped his waterskin over his head, took a swallow, and handed it to the boy who drank greedily. When he finished, he handed it back to Redmond.

"I wanna go home," he said.

Redmond stepped over to sit on the log. "Tell me where that is, and I'll do what I can to get you there."

The distant blowing of horns echoed over the hills. Redmond snapped his head up. He had left his men not half an hour ago to scout the area. There had been no sign of soldiers from Windemere or anyone else until he came across the slaver and the boy. He lunged to his feet.

"Stay here, lad," he said. "I'll come back for you."

He tossed the boy the bag of silver and scrambled up the hill, racing toward the little bridge that controlled the pass which cut through the hill country around Long Lake. They had been ordered to prevent any of the Baron of Windemere's men from using the pass to prey on the villages clustered at the northern end of the lake.

The deep-throated bellow of the horns called him on over the rugged terrain. He ducked beneath gnarled trees and tore through the wild rose bushes. The horns ceased calling. An eerie quiet settled over the hill country. Redmond pounded over the broken ground and up the last rise.

He paused on the ridge in confusion. His men were gone. The valley was empty. The pass was unguarded. The distant crash of steel and the hoarse cries of battle reached his ears. Redmond leapt down the hill, sliding and lunging in a cascade of loose stone and soil. The sounds of battle could only be coming from farther up

the road where it passed out into the broad valley beyond. But why had his men left their post? There was no sign of battle here. What or who could have driven them from the gorge?

Redmond pelted down the rutted road, now overgrown with grass and weeds, before he broke through the gap to the long, narrow valley that split the hills. The creek spread out on the grassy plain where Redmond's archers struggled over a tiny bridge. There were only one hundred twenty of them, and a force more than twice their size encompassed them. It was an indefensible position, and Redmond could not understand why his men would defy his orders and advance to such a weak location.

A host of men-at-arms on horseback and on foot encircled them. Mail armor and steel helmets glinted in the early morning sun. Their ranks bristled with lances, maces, swords, and axes. The footmen closed with Redmond's men, while the knights on their big chargers waited behind a row of crossbowmen with their long, wooden shields planted at intervals wide enough to allow the knights to ride through.

Redmond recognized the big black horse with the white, speckled flank. It was Lord Dacrey's, one of the Baron of Longmire's commanders. Why would Dacrey be attacking Redmond's archers? Not pausing to catch his breath, Redmond raced down the sloping road. There had to be some mistake. He had to stop this.

"Lord Dacrey," he called when he came within earshot, but no one heard him over the tumult of battle.

"Stop," he called again.

His men were dying. Killed by their own comrades. His sword slapped against his side as his boots pounded the road.

"Hold!" he yelled again.

Lord Dacrey turned his head. He wore a distinctive helm with bronze flourishes that ran up the noseguard and over the top of the helmet. He whirled his horse around to face Redmond with a sharp, unintelligible command. Several knights reined their chargers around toward Redmond and lowered their lances.

What was happening? Redmond slowed and jogged up the rise to stop before the threatening points of the lances.

"Stop this madness," Redmond panted.

Dacrey studied him before nodding. A mounted man-at-arms raised a horn to his lips and blew two sharp blasts. The attackers hesitated and then withdrew, leaving more than a dozen men dead or dying amid the bayberry bushes and marsh grasses lining the creek. Redmond's archers hesitated, uncertain what the respite might mean.

"What are you doing?" Redmond demanded.

"Following orders," Dacrey said.

"Baron Longmire ordered you to kill his own men?"

Redmond gripped his bow in a tight fist. He wanted to shoot the insolent smirk off Dacrey's face.

"Did I say anything about Longmire?" Dacrey sneered. "Tell your men to lay down their weapons and no one else will get hurt."

Redmond glanced at his men. They huddled together, some still with their longbows in hand. A dozen appeared to be seriously injured and others were spattered in blood. Jannik, the big redheaded Rosythian, stood at their forefront with his huge battle hammer clutched in his hands.

Redmond's men were sturdy bowmen drawn from all over the mainland and the Frei-Ock Islands to serve as mercenaries for the feuding barons. But they had not been prepared for betrayal.

"You're surrounded," Lord Dacrey said. "Baron Dragos doesn't pay you enough to die to hold this little pass."

"And who is paying you now?" Redmond asked.

Dacre's horses pranced sideways. "That's none of your concern."

"It's my concern," Redmond replied, "when my men are betrayed by Baron Longmire's own knights."

"Either surrender, or we'll leave your bodies to the crows," Dacre said.

"What guarantee do you give us?" Redmond demanded.

He had grown weary of these squabbling barons and wished, yet again, that he had stayed in the Kingdom of Deira. At least there the nobles didn't prey on each other like they did in Morcia. He certainly didn't want to see his men die for no purpose. And he wondered how Dacre had lured them out of the pass where they held an easily defended position.

"You can choose to fight a battle you cannot win, or you can spend a few weeks in leisure while we convince your baron to withdraw his claim to lands that are not his own."

Redmond knew full well these lands had been granted to the Baron of Longmire after the King had confiscated them from the Baron of Windemere.

"Your baron?" Redmond repeated. "Then you admit that you are forsworn? How can we trust a man who so recently sang a different tune?"

"I will personally guarantee your safety," Dacre said, "and you may yet find more profitable employment."

Redmond scoffed. "You didn't answer my question."

"I'm giving you a way out of an impossible situation," Dacre said. "Take it or leave it."

Redmond glanced at his men where they clustered on the other side of the bridge. Their position was untenable with the enemy both before and behind. They were exposed. There was no escape or redoubt to which they could retreat. If he didn't surrender, he would be nothing more than a butcher.

"Give us your word of honor spoken here before all these men," Redmond said, "that you will spare the life of every man here and guarantee their freedom."

"Done," Sir Dacre said.

"I want an oath," Redmond insisted.

Sir Dacre removed his helmet. His dark hair spilled over his mail shirt. "I give you my word of honor, Captain Redmond, that you and your men will be spared and set free once this matter is settled."

Some of Redmond's men dropped their weapons and raised their hands. What more could he do?

Redmond set his bow on the grass and unbuckled his sword. He remembered the boy he had left back at the rotten log as he raised his hands over his head. What would happen to Henry now? Should he tell Dacre where Henry was hidden? If he did, Dacre might simply re-enslave him. If he didn't, the boy would likely starve out here on his own. Redmond glanced back up the road toward the pass. Henry crouched in the shadow of a boulder at the mouth of the canyon. The boy had followed him.