

Chapter 1

Fox approached slowly, his rifle at the ready, choosing his path through the snow carefully. Something was wrong.

He crept along the shore of a lake somewhere in Walker County. He did not know the name of the lake, nor did he care. Minnesota had too many lakes, and most lakes were too common to hold his attention. This one would have passed into memory and been forgotten if not for the dwelling he had almost missed.

It was not a proper house, standing upright, but a dugout, sunk into the ground, the top of the roof maybe five feet above the snow. It was not uncommon for individuals to build such things, tiny holes where one might scratch out a living while avoiding the tax collectors. But this was a good sized building, large enough for a family.

That alone had piqued Fox's curiosity. Fox moved in closer and his stomach tightened. It was a cold March, and the sun was not high enough to warm the dwelling, yet there was no smoke coming from the poorly disguised chimney. There was a small pen, for goats or pigs, but it was empty, and a sack of feed lay scattered about. And all around the muddy ground were the tracks of horses, many horses.

County yeomen, Fox thought.

The tracks were not fresh. At least one day old, given that they had frozen again in the night. Fox scanned the woods anyway, and saw nothing. He approached the entrance to the dugout. The door was splintered and broken, hanging off one hinge. Fox checked the surrounding once more, then slung his rifle over his shoulder, drew his pistol, and ducked inside.

He understood right away why this dugout looked so peculiar. The walls were concrete, not some poorly built wooden wall or assembly of stones and mortar, but actual concrete. There were cracks and some discoloration from water, but the occupants had worked hard to clean it up and make it presentable. This work was

centuries old; only the nobility of the Royal Cities, or the King himself, could afford something like this now.

This had once been a basement to a cabin or house, built more than four hundred years ago. The house had rotted or burned but the basement had remained. Someone had found it, built a small roof over it, and moved into it. It must have been the luckiest find of the man's life. If it was, his luck had run out. Three bodies lay on the floor. An older man, his hands bound behind him, executed by a bullet to the back of his head, sat crumpled against the wall. A woman, either his younger wife or possibly his daughter, lay on a bed, her throat cut, her dress ripped and exposing her body. And a child, a boy of eight or nine years, sprawled across the floor, his body shredded by a shotgun blast. The rest of the single room was ransacked. Anything that could be was broken, ripped or shattered, and lay strewn about the floor.

Bastards, he said to himself. Count Walker used yeomen to intimidate his subjects. They were brutal men, who in a civilized nation, would have been executed for their crimes. But Count Walker and his king wanted cowed subjects, and permitted such excesses.

Fox felt the pit of his stomach drop further when he noticed four beds. Four beds and three bodies. He could search the wreckage for some indication of who was missing, hoping to see one hidden in the wreckage, but he felt that he already knew what had happened. Yeomen had a taste for women, especially young and pretty girls, to do their cooking and laundry and warm their beds at night. Few went willingly. Now they had one more.

Fox left the dugout with a heavy cloak of guilt on his shoulders. He made his way back through the forest.

It's not your fault, he said to himself. He said it over and over as he marched through the snow. *It's not your fault. You didn't make the yeomen attack these people. The guilt is theirs and theirs alone.*

The yeomen attacked these people because they're scared and angry, the voice in his head

said, *and you helped with that, didn't you?*

Fox forced himself to continue through the woods. The guilt still followed him.

Fox was more than six feet tall. He was slender – built of straw, some people said – but he was not weak. His black hair hung past his shoulders, and he had trimmed his beard down to a thin line along his chin and lips. His eyes had the glare of someone who spent most of his life out in the wild. He wore traveling clothes, not uncommon in these parts. Indeed, he would have looked like a common, traveling peasant, looking for work, if it were not for his weapons.

The long knife he might have been able to explain away. The pistol was an automatic death sentence, unless he could prove he was a county yeoman or an officer in the Royal Army, neither of which were a possibility for him. And the rifle was not the rifled-musket of a peasant hunter, used for shooting wolves. It was a long, ornate, precision weapon of a Verendrye woodsman.

Verendrye Woodsmen were considered ignorant savages by the peasants; barbarians who could not build houses and ate raw meat and killed with hand-crafted rifles they loved more than women. And if any peasants saw him, they would run for their lives and claim whatever horrors struck their fancy.

Fox was far from ignorant. He had attended school. And not some school of letters for sons of wealthy men. He had attended the Hilltop Archive in Duluth, one of the institutions of ancient knowledge that survived into this Dark Age, guarding itself for the future. One had to prove their intelligence to be accepted to an Archive. Fox was that intelligent, so he knew why the county yeomen were getting aggressive.

Count Walker was scared. He had started the year with fifty-three yeomen. He was down by twenty now. Fox and his friends had killed or wounded them, but only in the eastern half of Walker County. Count Walker was now worried that he would lose the western half, which included the highway and most of the population. He was scared of losing the revenue from the tolls and the taxes of the population, so he was tightening

his grip.

Count Walker's yeomen were brutes, bullies in flashy uniforms. They had no skills in a forest, and normally stuck to the roads. That was why so many small families could live in the woods unmolested under normal circumstances. But the yeomen were forced to range further from the highway, looking for observation posts, or signs that someone was looking to haunt the highway. And a family could only get so far away from the roads.

The yeomen had come and found a family hiding in the woods. One that had not shown on their tax census. A family with a small herd of goats and an attractive daughter. Found by yeomen who had lost friends and taken fire. Yeomen were not supposed to die; they were supposed to do the killing. And if they could not find the men killing them, they would avenge themselves upon a poor family in the woods.

Fox forced himself to stop and glanced at the sun. It was getting close to noon. He looked around and realized he had lost track of where he was. He was supposed to be heading south. 'Idiot,' he said out loud. 'Pay attention!'

He looked around and saw a tall tree on a low hill, tall enough for him to see a fair distance. He had a precision scope for his rifle, and a pair of field glasses, so he climbed the tree, pulled out the glasses and looked around.

He had strayed too far west. He could see the highway, a largely mud track through the woods. It was not more than three miles to the west, much closer than he had wanted to be. He spied a town, slightly to his south on the highway. Three or four houses, only one with two stories, surrounded by a score of small dugouts. Smoke drifted from chimneys, and there was some sort of wooden post in the center of town.

Fox frowned to himself. He had walked along the highway between Bemidji and Park Rapids once or twice. One town had a wooden statue, withered into a formless post. He could not remember the name of the town, only that the statue was supposed to have been the woman who founded the town, and that no one had cared for the statue in

some time.

He heard something: A cracking of a branch. Fox felt throat suddenly dry. *Please tell me I didn't screw up again!* The last thing he needed was to be captured by Count Walker's yeomen. He doubted any of them would recognize him, but they were too excited right now to be expected to show any leniency to a man marching through their county with a long rifle and a pistol.

Fox slid down into the tree's branches. If they were yeomen, they might not be looking up, and he could hide until they passed, then make his way east away from the highway. He shoved his field glasses into their case and held his rifle in his hands.

He heard the snap again.

Fox saw a figure duck from behind a tree. It was not a man in Walker County's green tunic. It was a boy, eight or nine years old, wearing black clothes. He was rushing his way across the forest, stopping behind trees and looking around. He looked like prey trying to escape a hunter.

Another snap. The boy started, turning around to search the forest.

He saw something and started running flat out. There were more figures in the woods, three of them, chasing the boy through the woods. The boy was running towards his tree. *Bullies*, Fox thought.

The boy tripped over a downed branch. The bullies circled the boy, taunting him.

'Come on, Alice! Stand up!' one of the boys jeered.

Alice?

Fox understood the black clothes now. The boy was an Alvanist, a sect of Christians who lived in small communities across most of the Great Lakes. They believed in hard work, little comfort, and were committed pacifists. Some called male Alvanists 'Alice', a boy being called a girl's name, as an insult. And some targeted them for bullying, for Alvanists would not fight back.

The boy reached the trunk of a tree nearby and turned, his back to the wood. The three

boys circled him. They were not ten yards away from Fox's tree. None of them knew he was there.

'Oh, Alice,' the leader boy said, 'why did you run? That makes you tired! You don't squeal as much when you're tired. And we want you to squeal.'

'You can't!' the boy cried.

'I can!' the lead bully said, slapping the young child.

'God doesn't want us to fight,' the child sobbed. 'He wants peace.'

The bullies laughed. 'No he don't!' the lead bully slapped the boy again. 'God don't want peace. He wants strength. That's why we have nobles...they's stronger. They answer to the king, because he's stronger. And the king answers to the emperor, because he's strongest of all!'

'So, Alice, if I'm strong, I get to do whatever I want. And I want to hear you cry!' he slapped the boy a third time. Fox noticed the bully simply slapped the boy. He did not punch, did not try to draw blood. He wanted the boy crying and afraid, not hurt.

Fox hated watching. He hated bullies, but the boy had obviously been through this before, and if Fox intervened, the bullies would simply come back later and they might punish the boy for being saved. Not to mention an intervention would alert the locals to his presence. He had to stay silent.

Fox kept his body still and he slowly moved his head and his eyes around to survey the forest. Villages often had extra fields planted within several miles of its location where they might be missed by the assessor, and if a nearby field had adults who heard the children, he might be discovered. He could also avoid watching the bullies attack the boy, and ignore the growing desire to intervene.

'Gah!' the head bully cried out. Fox snapped his head around. Someone else had intervened, but it was not an adult. It was another Alvanist.

Fox saw the largest bully go down as a large branch struck his head. It was an old branch, dead and rotten, and it shattered in an explosion of wood and moss. The bully

dropped the boy and fell to the ground. The head bully fell backwards.

The third bully charged the new arrival. Fox knew there was not enough time to swing the branch again, but so did the newcomer. He spun the remnant of the branch and thrust forward like a spear, catching the next bully in the gut.

The newcomer stood over the crying boy the remains of the branch still presented as a sword. 'Leave him alone, Samuel Cartier!'

Fox's eyes widened. *It's a woman!*

A girl would be more appropriate. Sixteen years, maybe more, but not by many. She was a few inches short of six feet, and her hair was long and unbound, most likely unwedded, which was odd for a girl of her age in the countryside. And she was wearing the heavy black dress of an Alvanist. She did not look much like a pacifist, though, standing with a weapon in hand.

'Go home, Samuel,' she said. 'This is wrong.'

'Wrong?' Samuel laughed. The other bullies were standing up now, surrounding the young woman. 'The only thing wrong here, Sasha, is you! Women don't fight, especially not Alvanist women!'

'As long as you try to hurt my brother, I'll fight you,' Sasha said. She glanced to the two bullies at her sides, but she could not move from her position if her brother would not move, and he was curled into a ball, crying. She whispered something to the boy, but he remained where he was. She said something again, still he would not move.

She's going to lose because he won't move. And she won't leave him.

The three bullies charged.

Sasha attacked.

She rushed the bully to her left, the smallest of the three. She swung the small remnant of her branch at his head, knocking him down again but destroying what was left of the branch.

The large bully grabbed her, pinning her arms to her body. She kicked out with her

legs, but he held her up so she could not find a target. Samuel rushed up and punched her hard in the stomach; she groaned and ceased struggling. The other bully, standing up again and bleeding from his lip, grabbed the young boy and stood him up as well.

Sasha said something, and Samuel laughed.

'No. Why would I let him go? You two need to learn a lesson. You're weak. You're women and pacifists. The world belongs to the strong! I am stronger than you, so I can do what I want!' Samuel punctuated his point by slapping Sasha. Blood dripped off her lip.

'You can't,' she said.

'Yes,' he slapped her.

'I,' he slapped her again.

'CAN!' he punched her hard, rocking her head back. The bully holding her laughed.

Samuel took a step back to look at his two captives. The boy was crying, staring at the ground, whispering prayers under his breath. Sasha was bleeding, but her breathing was deep, and she glared at Samuel.

'You will not get away with this,' she said.

Samuel turned to Sasha, and strutted over to her again.

'Sasha, you ain't listening. I can get away with this. My father is the Mayor! And he's stronger than your father. The yeomen like him. And who will they listen to?' He laughed. 'You know, I thought it was a shame when you left to be married last year. I had hoped I might get to show you your proper place. But God favors the strong, and he brought you back here, rejected by those Alvanists as too violent. I get to tame you, Sasha Small.'

Samuel stood close, still speaking, his voice lower now. Fox could not hear him anymore. He glanced about, and did not see anyone else coming.

When Fox looked back, one of the bullies had a wicked grin on his face; the other looked very nervous. Sasha was struggling and Samuel was reaching for the strings on

Sasha's dress.

Four beds, three bodies.

Fox was already out the tree before he realized he jumped.

Everyone flinched as Fox landed. He strode over the roots and mud, raising his rifle to his shoulder, muzzle only inches from Samuel's head.

Everyone was still, frozen by his sudden appearance.

'The world belongs to the strong,' Fox said, 'and I claim the girl. Leave!'

No one moved. The other two bullies looked at Samuel, who was staring straight down the barrel of Fox's rifle, his eyes wide in fear.

'NOW!' Fox yelled. The bullies dropped their captives and ran off into the woods. The boy was again curled into a ball in the mud. The girl stayed on her feet, turning to watch the bullies run off, then back to face Fox. Her eyes ran over his weapons and his clothing; then she took a deep breath, clenched her fists and scowled at him.

'You can claim me, but I'll fight you anyway!'

'NO!' the boy screamed. 'No fighting!'

'Thomas,' Sasha started, but the boy had found his voice.

'Fighting goes against God! Father says so! He says that if you fight, you'll go to hell! You shouldn't fight!' the boy turned and looked at Fox as well. 'NO FIGHTING!' he said, then ran off himself, leaving Sasha and Fox alone.

Sasha glared defiantly at Fox, drawing herself up to her full height and clenching her fists. Her wild hair and bloody lip accentuated her scowl, and her deep breathing was almost a growl.

She was not an intimidating girl, though by no means small. She had common brown hair, and common brown eyes that burned with a righteous fury.

'There's no cause for alarm, Sasha,' Fox said as he slung his rifle over his shoulder. 'I have no intention of harming you.'

'How do you know my name?' she asked.

'I watched for some time before I intervened. You were having a good fight,' he smiled at her.

'There's no such thing as a good fight,' Sasha said quietly, looking at the ground.

'Bullshit,' Fox snapped at her. Her eyes darted to his. 'Your words lack conviction, Sasha. You know it was a good fight! Standing up, outnumbered, defending your family against attackers. That is a good fight.'

Sasha looked at him. He saw confusion in her eyes, and a realization dawned in his head.

'Of course,' he said, 'you're an Alvanist. Fighting is against your religion.' He chuckled. 'No one has ever complimented you on a fight before.'

Sasha shook her head. 'No. They have always been angry at me. My father believes fighting is a mortal sin. And the bullies don't think I should be fighting them....'

'Not surprising,' Fox said. 'If you fight them, you make their oppression harder, and bullies by definition do not like working for what they believed they deserve. And your father - and please do not take offense - but he is a fool, and a small man.'

Sasha smiled chuckled. 'Our family name is Small, woodsman. He is by his name a small man.'

'But you, Sasha Small, are not a small woman. Not if you stand up and fight whenever necessary.' He stopped for a moment and looked at the young woman - he could not consider her a girl - and thought for a moment.

He had a mission, true, and one that would take him far from here. But he could not simply leave this woman. He was supposed to keep an eye out for capable people, who might be useful to the cause.

Sasha Small had courage, enough to face three bullies at once, which was no small feat for a woman raised by pacifists in a world where her likelihood of making it to her wedding night with her virtue intact was slight. And she has moral fortitude; she did the right thing knowing she would be punished. Maybe....

'Tell me, Sasha Small, when you fight, what goes through your head?' He saw Sasha hesitate. 'I won't judge. I am just curious.'

Sasha took a deep breath. 'I think that I am better than a dog.'

Fox blinked in surprise. 'I don't understand.'

'When I was younger, a dog bit me. My father said that an animal will bite to protect itself when it feels threatened. But when I first fought off Samuel and his friends, my father said I should not protect myself. A dog can protect itself; I cannot.'

She shook her head. 'My father believed that our superior reasoning means we should not act like animals. I agree. But I don't think I am acting like an animal for defending myself or my brother; I think they are acting like animals for attacking. And when I fight them, I cannot help but feel that I am in the right, despite what my father says.'

Fox smiled at her. He had not expected such an answer. He thought she would say she was angry, or scared, or that she did not know what she was thinking. Peasants were not known for thinking much beyond their farms and their Bibles, but Sasha's response showed she was capable of considering what she was being told. It was the response Fox had dared to hope for.

'Sasha Small,' he said, 'I know several women who think along similar lines. Many of them would have fought the bullies just as you did.'

'And the rest?' Sasha asked.

'The rest would have killed them,' Fox said. Sasha's face paled. 'Oh, I don't believe you would kill those bullies, Sasha Small, but when the yeomen take a notice to you, they won't be scared off by a dead branch and a mean scowl. It'll take blood to remove them, and if you're not ready to spill it in defense of yourself, the yeomen will take you, and your worst dreams will come true.'

Sasha swallowed and nodded. 'I....' She paused. 'I understand what you're saying. And I believe you.'

'That is wise,' Fox said, and smiled again. Sasha managed a meager chuckle, and

watched as Fox dug into his satchel and pulled out a scroll case. It was a small thing, four inches long, dark brown leather with silver embroidery. He held it out to Sasha.

‘For you, Sasha Small.’

‘What is it?’ she took the scroll from his hands.

‘It is called the Declaration of Independence. Have you ever heard of it?’ She shook her head. ‘I am not surprised. The wealth of knowledge lost when the Old World died is staggering. This document is almost seven hundred years old. It was once revered. Now, it is all but forgotten. I give it to you, Sasha Small, because I believe you will find it a profound document, and I think you will find your situation changing very soon.’

She began to ask a question, but he cut her off.

‘Sasha, by now your friends have reached their parents, and they will worry that you are being held in the woods by a savage woodsman. I should be on my way.’

‘I don’t even know your name,’ she said.

‘Good,’ he smiled. ‘I will tell my friends about you, Sasha Small. All I ask in return is you read that, consider its words, and, when asked, tell everyone I headed north.’

Sasha nodded, and Fox smiled. His doubts eased, he turned south, continuing on his way.