

Chapter 1 — The Hunters

September 1751

DANIEL THOUGHT HE SPOTTED WINGS in the trees, but he couldn't be sure. He'd been hunting on the rugged mountain since morning. Now it was nearly dusk. He was tired and more than a little hungry. To make matters worse, the fog rising above the little creek he'd been following was getting thicker, swirling around the oaks and pines on the hillside. But Daniel never let fog or waning sunlight keep him from bagging game back home in Pennsylvania on Neversink Mountain. He wouldn't leave this mountain empty-handed, either.

He knew his mother Sarah would already be at the campfire, boiling beans and preparing spits for roasting whatever he brought back. They had some venison left from previous hunts, so no one would go to bed hungry. But quail, partridge, or even pigeon would be a welcome respite from chewing on stringy venison.

Truly, though, it was now a matter of pride: Daniel, the best hunter in the family, rarely returned without a prize. He usually returned with several.

Sure, hunting was easier in familiar surroundings. Back home, he'd known intimately the hills, valleys, and forests that lay between their farm in Oley and the bustling city of Philadelphia. Now these familiar places were far behind them. Over many months, Daniel and his family had traveled hundreds of miles, following the path of other settlers through Virginia into the backcountry of North Carolina. Some days earlier, his father had spotted rocky cliffs thrust improbably high against the otherwise flat horizon. The family had headed for them. Now their camp lay in the shade of the tallest mountain. Daniel had traipsed up and over it, following the sound of rushing water to a striking waterfall and the little creek beyond.

The place was unfamiliar, yes — but hunting was hunting. Even at sixteen, Daniel was a master. Everybody said so. Back in Pennsylvania, he'd earned more selling furs and hides in Philadelphia than he had working his father's fields and forge. He knew from experience that where there was fresh water, there was bound to be game.

He wasn't about to be defeated this night, on this mountainside, by a few wisps of fog.

What was that?

Daniel saw movement in the thicket. He stopped short, placing one moccasin silently next to the other in the soft leaves as he hefted his well-worn hunting rifle and peered into the tangle of low trees and vines. He stayed frozen in place for what seemed like an eternity. Although confident in his ability as a marksman, Daniel didn't want to risk his game taking flight. With a rifle, it was a whole lot easier to hit a treed bird than one on the wing. Folks usually needed a fowling gun for the latter.

Daniel listened intently. Presently, his keen ears picked up some rustling in the thicket, along with the sound of tree branches scraping together behind him and what seemed like

footfalls in the fallen leaves much farther down the creek. Were there three birds in earshot? Or something else? Slowly, carefully, he cocked his rifle.

Then several things happened at once. The thicket suddenly exploded into a mass of shaggy fur, bared teeth, and beastly rage. Behind him, he heard a rustle of branches. And he heard a faint, eerie scream — like nothing he'd ever heard in years of hunting and tracking.

Perhaps that's why he jerked. Perhaps that's why his finger yanked the trigger prematurely rather than squeezing it. Perhaps that's why Daniel Boone missed.

THE HUGE BLACK BEAR — for, of course, that's what was charging the young hunter at ferocious speed — wasn't at all startled by the report of the rifle. Daniel swore, drew his hunting knife, and turned to run. He'd tangled with bears before. There was no chance for him to reload. There was little chance of playing dead and placating the bear. And there was little chance of outrunning it, particularly since Daniel had been following the creek downhill and would now have to run up a slope. There was, in fact, little chance of surviving the encounter at all. But Daniel Boone was no coward. He'd run as fast as he could and then put up a determined, probably doomed, fight.

As he turned on a heel to begin his flight, he saw wings. He'd have paid them little heed had the wings been attached to what he expected to see: the back of a gamebird. But what Daniel Boone beheld was just about the furthest thing he'd ever expected to see along that creek, in those woods, or anywhere on God's green earth.

He saw a small, lithe, human-like body flying through the air.

Daniel saw the wings beat and then straighten as the little creature banked toward the rampaging bear. He saw one slender arm holding a bow and another slender arm pulling an arrow back to a faintly whiskered chin. He heard the minuscule bowstring twang.

Fast as lightning, Daniel whirled to see the bear stiffen, an arrow sticking out from its neck. He saw the bowman reloading his weapon and lifting his left wing to bank around the head of the bear, whose jaws were thrown open in pain and rage. And Daniel saw, even before the archer did, a furry paw swinging up with blinding speed. It struck the winged creature with tremendous force, knocking the little man against a pine trunk. From there, the bowman fell to the ground, hard.

Even as he witnessed the savage swipe, Daniel was hurtling toward the wounded bear, holding his knife in the reverse grip of his right hand and wielding his rifle as a club in his left. He'd never heard of a man beating a bear in a hand-to-paw fight, but he didn't hesitate. The wonder he felt upon seeing a real-life fairy — for that was, surely, what lay senseless or worse before him — did not keep Daniel Boone from acting. The deepest instinct of self-preservation, to kill or be killed, combined with the highest instinct of honor, gave speed and strength to his limbs. With his left arm, Daniel dealt the bear a terrific blow with the butt of his gun. Then, with his right, he plunged his knife deep into the breast of the bear, through the shaggy hide into the savage heart.



How he got close enough to deliver these attacks, Daniel didn't know. He'd killed bears before, but with a bullet from his rifle. He knew the look of death. The bear fell forward on its face, wrenching Daniel's blade from his grasp, and moved no more.

A moment later, Daniel was crouching below the pine tree, gazing in astonishment at the crumpled form of the fairy. The little creature was lying on his stomach, his apparently undamaged wings of yellow-tinged feathers, glistening in the twilight as if dusted in gold, retracted onto his back. He wore a cloak of forest green over what appeared to be a leather jerkin and woolen stockings. From a rough belt hung a couple of leather pouches and a blade that bore no small resemblance to Daniel's own hunting knife, except in its tiny size. Another strap, bearing a quiver of arrows, crossed the fairy's torso from right shoulder to left hip. The bow lay a few inches away. The fairy was about the height of a large raccoon, Daniel judged.

Unsure what to do, he reached out a hand and carefully turned the fairy onto his back. The creature's face was youthful and handsome, but his delicate features were contorted in an expression of anguish. Fearful the fairy had sustained a mortal blow, Daniel was both surprised and delighted when the little eyelids fluttered open, revealing light-brown eyes. Daniel was even more surprised, if not exactly delighted, to see the fairy's lips move and to hear a soft voice uttering words he understood.

"You...you blundering human," the fairy said haltingly, between winces. "Your recklessness almost got us both killed by that fearsome beast."

Daniel's concern gave way to annoyance. "I just killed that beast and saved your life, sir," he pointed out. "You should be more grateful."

"Grateful?" The fairy coughed and tried to sit up, grimacing. "You did not save me. And because of you, my quarry may have escaped. Thanks to you, my first solo ranging may end in failure. I may not get another chance to become a journeyman for a long time."

Daniel would have responded in anger, with little of the Christian charity his parents Squire and Sarah Boone had tried to teach him. But his feelings of sympathy and wonder took over. This was a fairy lying before him — a real, flying, talking fairy! It was one of Mother's bedtime stories come to life. It was impossible and ridiculous, but it was happening.

Daniel stroked his chin, smiling quizzically.

“Maybe I ought to be the one upset, friend,” he said. “I wasn’t hunting bear. I was hunting fowl for supper. Even so, I reckon I would have hit the beast square on the nose and finished him if you hadn’t distracted me with that weird little shout.”

“What shout?” the fairy demanded, his eyes showing sudden enthusiasm. “What did you hear? I was too busy rescuing you to notice. Perhaps your gigantic ears can hear far-off sounds that my normal ears cannot.”

Bemused, Daniel looked at the little man. Normal ears? The fairy’s small ears were elongated and ended in points.

“I heard what sounded like wings fluttering behind me, and then a strange cry,” Daniel said. “I figured you did it. I’ve heard Indian friends do battle cries before. Wasn’t you?”

“No, of course not,” the fairy responded, shakily getting to his feet.

“Now that I figure it,” Daniel continued, “seems like the sound came from downhill a ways. I thought I heard something down there. At the time I thought it was a bird.”

The fairy shook his head. Whether it was to indicate disagreement or to regain his senses, Daniel couldn’t tell.

“What you heard was the cry of the beast I have been tracking for a while — for days in your time,” the fairy explained. “I was so close. I almost had it. But then I chose to help you. I may have saved one life at the cost of many more.”

Daniel watched as the fairy moved his hands down to one of the leather pouches hanging from his belt. He rummaged inside it, let out a cry of alarm, and withdrew two small cylinders. Daniel drew closer to examine them.

“It is destroyed!” the fairy wailed. “Now I will never be able to find the beast again.”

Daniel saw that the object was a silver-colored musical instrument broken cleanly in two.

“How can that little pipe help you track game?” Daniel asked.

The fairy glared at him for a moment, then his expression softened. “I suppose there is no harm in telling you,” he said, still rubbing his forehead where his hard fall had raised a welt. “I will not need it to produce simple spellsong, which is all I will need for you. And, now that I have lost my quarry, I might as well tell my troubles to someone. I have been alone on the trail so long that even a conversation with the likes of you would be welcome.”

“Well, that’s mighty generous of you,” Daniel said, a playful smile curling his lips. “I’ve only been hunting since breakfast but I wouldn’t mind a little company, either, even from the likes of *you*.”

For an instant, irritation mingled with frustration on the fairy’s face. Then he caught Daniel’s twinkling eye and let out a snort of merry laughter. “Well said, sir, well said! And well met — my name is Goran. Whom have I the pleasure to meet?”

“I’m Daniel Boone,” said the young hunter, shaking the fairy’s proffered hand. “My family’s camped a little ways from here. We’ve only just arrived in these parts, looking for a good piece of land to settle on. We’re originally from Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania, you say,” said Goran. “I know it well. My Folk stayed there for many of your years, within the shade of a low mountain in a place the humans call Bucks County.”

“Why, that’s not far from where I grew up, in Berks County!” Daniel replied eagerly. “You’re a long way from home, just like I am.”

Goran looked searchingly at Daniel for a moment, then smiled. “You have no idea. Yet, in a way, the histories of your people and mine are intertwined. Where humans live, we live. Where you go, we are unlikely to be far behind.”

Now it was Daniel’s turn to gaze meaningfully at the fairy, who still seemed dazed as he rose fully to his feet and returned the broken flute to his pouch. “What do you mean by that? And why do you keep saying ‘my years’ instead of just years? Do you reckon the days differently?”

Goran sighed and looked longingly into the fog. “It is a long story, and more trouble than it is worth for me to tell you. You will never remember it, anyway.”

Daniel pursed his lips. “I may not be as skilled at reading and doing figures as some, but nobody’s ever doubted my memory. That’s one reason I’m pretty good at hunting. It doesn’t take me long to draw a map in my head of where I’ve been. I can recall just about every bird call I’ve ever heard. I can tell one footprint from another. Trust me, friend, my mind’s like a bear trap.”

“Trust me, *friend*,” Goran repeated the phrase with a chuckle. “After you and I part, that memory trap of yours is going to be empty, at least when it comes to me. I am not such a novice that I need my flute for that.”

The fairy held up a hand as Daniel began to reply. “Hold on, listen to me,” Goran objected. “I said I would explain about the flute. I will tell you what you need to know. If you are such a skilled tracker, perhaps I can still catch up to the beast. Perhaps my ranging will not be in vain.”

Daniel Boone had countless questions. He didn’t like to be told no, but the idea of tracking unfamiliar prey intrigued him, while Goran’s implied test of Daniel’s abilities excited him. Holding his tongue, he nodded to the little man.

“Back in my village, I am an apprentice in the Rangers Guild,” the fairy began. “We train for many tasks. We scout. We track game to fill our larders and dining tables. We convey messages across long distances. And, when it becomes necessary to deal with humans, we are trained for that, too. That is why I know your language.”

“I was wondering about that,” Daniel said. “Does that mean you also know...”

“Please do not interrupt,” Goran interjected. “If there is still a chance to find the beast, it will not last long. Let us proceed while I talk.”

Daniel stooped over the bear, withdrew his knife, and cleaned the blade on the tail of his buckskin shirt. Returning the knife to its sheath, he picked up his rifle and began walking briskly along the creek. Goran fluttered his wings, gingerly at first, then with deliberate strokes.

“Another job of the ranger, perhaps the most important of all, is to find and track the monsters that prowl beyond our borders — beyond our walls of magecraft and spellsong that protect us from the Blur.”

“The what?” Daniel asked.

“The Blur. It is a word we use to describe your human world,” Goran said. “You see, we Folk are not from this realm, not originally. We experience time differently from the way you do. In our villages, behind our Shimmer walls, time passes at a rate that is normal for us but would

seem extremely slow to you. A day in our time is like a score of days in yours. If we stand at the very edge of our domains and look through the magical barriers that protect us, the grass, trees, waters, and creatures of your world look like they are in constant motion. To us, it is a blur.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Daniel said, his brows knitted into a questioning frown.

“To be honest, Daniel, I do not understand it very well myself,” the fairy admitted. “The details are really a topic for mages, not rangers. I do not know how magecraft works, or even how the spellsong used by rangers works. I just know that it does. We spend years — that is *our* years — learning how to wield the magic of music. We sing spells to cloud the senses and conceal ourselves. We use it to find other magical creatures and exchange messages over short distances. And we use it to alter emotions. With the right verse or melody, I can make you feel proud or fearful, joyful or wistful, even bring you to laughter or tears.”

Daniel chuckled softly. “That doesn’t sound so different from what I’ve seen a good fiddle-player or hymn singer do back home. Were they fairy bards, too?”

“That is an interesting question,” Goran replied with a knowing smile. “Perhaps they were. As I said, we can use spellsong to influence the moods and perceptions of humans and other weak-minded creatures. You may well have met some of my kind before, but you do not recall them, at least not the way you are seeing me now. Our spellsong alters memory, too.”

Daniel found this explanation hard to grasp. He wasn’t sure he wanted to grasp it.

“But back to what you need to know,” the fairy said. “For more complicated feats of song magic — for those involving highly resistant targets, for example — our unaided voices can prove inadequate. We use instruments enchanted by our craftsmen to focus and amplify spellsong.”

“Like your broken flute,” Daniel cut in. “Now I’m beginning to see your trouble. Without it, you can’t use your power to track that magical beast from far off because it doesn’t want to be tracked. It’ll resist you.”

Goran swooped in front of Daniel’s face and hovered. “I can see fortune has been most generous. You are not just brave but rather perceptive — for a human. So, you will help me complete my mission?”

Daniel stooped and set down his rifle by the creek, plunging both hands into the cool mountain water and cupping them to bring drink to his lips. He stood up, ran a damp hand through his dark, unruly hair, and turned back to the fairy still suspended in midair, his wings beating a graceful, steady rhythm.

“From what you’ve been telling me, I’m not sure how a mere human could be of much service,” Daniel said drily. “I can’t conjure up spells. All I can do is hunt fowl and rabbit and deer and, occasionally, bear. I even killed a cougar once, though I wasn’t rightly hunting it at the time.”

“Fortune truly favors us!” exclaimed the fairy. “That is exactly what I am after — a giant cat!”

“Well, cougars *are* way bigger than ordinary cats and mighty powerful,” Daniel replied, picking up his gun and resuming his rapid pace. “I wouldn’t want to tangle with one if I didn’t have to. But I’d hardly call them giants.”

“What I have been tracking is no ordinary wildcat, Daniel,” Goran said, his expression suddenly grave as he flew alongside Daniel. “It is something far more dangerous. You could not pronounce the name in our tongue, I suspect, but humans sometimes call it a Wampus Cat. It is a bit longer than you are tall, powerfully muscled, incredibly fast, with long, sharp teeth. As you may have guessed, it draws on magical forces to enhance its strength and speed. And — this is a bit gruesome — the Wampus Cat does not feed on its kills in a normal way. It bites the neck and...well...it drains the lifeblood from its victims while their hearts still beat.”

Daniel cast a revolted look the fairy’s way but didn’t interrupt his stride. “I’ve heard campfire stories about big cats, but never anything like that.”

“You heard only shadows of the truth,” Goran said. “Back in what you call the British Isles, where my Folk resided before we journeyed to America, local humans also told stories of monstrous cats with magical abilities. The Scots called them the Cait Sith. In Cornwall, where I was born, I often heard human bards sing of a legendary beast, Cath Paluc, that slew one hundred eighty people before a hero named King Arthur managed to overcome him. It did not really happen like that, of course.”

“I’m beginning to think that lots of things I thought I knew, or perhaps lots of things that lots of us thought we knew, have not been quite so,” Daniel said with another chuckle. “But if the giant cat we’re talking about is really that fearsome, how do you expect to defeat it? I mean no offense, Goran, but if we’re talking about some kind of giant cougar, it would dwarf the likes of you. Even my trusty rifle and I may be no match for it.”

The fairy shrugged his shoulders in what struck Daniel as a very human expression. “I never had any intention of facing it on my own. Capturing or, if necessary, killing a monster of this size is a job for hunters or even warriors, not of rangers. Our task is to establish a clear location of the quarry and then use spellsong to send the location back. Teams of Folk stand ready to respond to such calls. They arrive and take care of the beast.”

“What do you need me to do, then?” asked Daniel.

“We Folk have many talents and skills but, as you pointed out, we are comparatively small in your Brobdingnagian world,” the fairy said.

“Hey, I know that word — you’ve read *Gulliver’s Travels*? That’s one of my favorite books!”

“Please stop interrupting — of course I am familiar with the adventures of Gulliver, more personally familiar than you would ever guess,” Goran said, clearly relishing Daniel’s astonishment. “But we were talking about the realm of men. You are fitted to it. Your senses are attuned to it. I never heard the footfalls. That piercing cry? I did not hear that, either. I am hoping that, with my spellsong and your sharp ears, working together, we can corner the prey.”

Trying desperately to suppress his curiosity, Daniel stopped short and reached for his powder horn. “All right, Goran,” he said as he began loading his gun. “Let’s try whatever you had

in mind. While the beast may well be ahead of us, it's also possible it's changed direction. Better be sure we're headed the right way."

The fairy grunted his assent. He banked, turned, and landed lightly on Daniel's left shoulder. The young hunter was taken aback for a second, then relaxed. He had made friends with Goran and agreed to help him, after all. Time to follow his lead.

Clearing his throat and turning his face upward, Goran sang. To Daniel, whose ear was very close to the fairy's mouth, it seemed as if the song wasn't coming from just that one place but from every direction at once. It sang of misty mornings, of cool evenings, of damp hiding places, of hunger, of longing. It was a song Daniel had never heard before, yet it felt like a familiar dream of countless nights. He recognized not a single word of the language Goran sang. But by searching his feelings, Daniel found he could understand its meaning a little. Perhaps a great deal more than that.

And then the young human heard himself answering the fairy's song with a plaintive cry of his own.

No, wait, that's not my voice at all, Daniel realized.

It was a shrill, high-pitched sound. It was like the cry he'd heard just before the bear came crashing out of the thicket — only this time, Daniel could sense some of its meaning, a hint of loneliness, an eagerness to find comfort, but also the suggestion of wariness, of barely restrained ferocity.

Feeling a thrill of excitement, Daniel gave a nod. "I can hear it, Goran. Keep singing and follow me."

FOR THE BETTER PART of an hour, the two searchers followed the cries. Sometimes Goran flew high, extending the range of his spellsong. Other times he alighted on the human's shoulder and let Daniel propel the two, as the effort required to amplify his spellsong without his enchanted flute fatigued the fairy ranger. Slowly but surely, they gained on their quarry.

Daniel longed to ask Goran why the cat wasn't running toward them since the fairy's song sounded more enticing than menacing. That was only one of many questions Daniel had. How would the other fairies find them? How could the fairies be so close that they'd arrive in time? And, given the tiny size of their bodies and weapons, how could even a squadron of fairies manage to subdue the monster Goran described?

But there was no time for questions. The fairy needed to sing. Daniel needed to listen, track, climb, and run. And he also needed to think about what he would do when they caught up with the beast.

The moment came without warning. It had been a few minutes since Daniel last heard the cat's responsive cry. As the young hunter weaved his way through a line of trees, he heard it again — so loud it was almost deafening. Then the searchers broke into a small clearing, formed by a handful of downed trees and rotten logs, and Daniel glimpsed for the first time what they'd been chasing through the cool Carolina evening.



The monster was a cat, yes, and more. Its face was feline but elongated, its jaws jutting forward with an almost lupine suggestion. It was improbably massive, frightfully imposing, and covered with stripes. Its legs, short and stubby, were out of proportion to its long body. Its paws were out of proportion, too, wider and with claws that made Daniel's hunting knife look like a dainty piece of silverware fit only for a Philadelphia dinner table.

Most terrifying of all were the cat's huge tawny eyes. They weren't just filled with enormous yellow-orange pupils. The eyes *glowed* yellow-orange. To Daniel, they looked like a blazing fire — no, on second thought, like yellow-orange thunderclouds about to erupt with yellow-orange bolts of lightning. And those eyes, those fiery eyes of that fiery cat, were looking directly into Daniel's eyes of cold blue.

Without hesitation, in a move honed to perfection from years on the frontier, with a calm assurance that had failed him earlier in his confrontation with the bear, Daniel Boone lifted his rifle to a solid shoulder, trained a steady eye down its barrel, took careful aim at a target of yellow-orange, and smoothly squeezed the trigger.

The rifle shot rang out and, from high above Daniel's head, something else rang out — a new song from Goran, a very different one, short, focused, commanding.

Daniel couldn't tell if he'd scored a hit. Then what happened next captured his attention. The air around him began to shimmer with light and crackle with sparks. He felt a great force against his body, like a wind first pushing relentlessly against him and then, as if this were possible, passing rapidly *through* him.

An instant later, Daniel found that he, the fairy, and the Wampus Cat were no longer alone. The clearing was filled with many other figures. They were Goran's size but dressed and outfitted differently. Some of the fairies, aloft, held bows with arrows fitted. Others had their bows strapped across their backs and instead held thin spears, their points directed squarely at the cat, their ends connected to ropes coiled in the fairies' other hands. Still others stood stoutly on the ground in what looked like a military formation, holding thicker spears and round shields. Both the bronze bosses on their shields and the scale armor worn by these grounded fairies glowed metallic red.

Strangest looking of all, in the opinion of their human beholder, were the fairies who stood along the perimeter of what Daniel could now see was a bubble of shimmering light encompassing the entire hunting party and its prey. These new arrivals wore not short cloaks like Goran's but instead flowing robes extending to their feet. The robes were variously colored and decorated with a bewildering array of signs, runes, and other figures Daniels didn't recognize, as were the pointed hats on their heads. They were the only ones not looking at the Wampus Cat. Instead, their gazes were fixed on the shimmering walls of the encircling bubble, and on their own hands — from which glistening beams of moonlight, or something like it, kept emerging.

As Daniel took it all in, this weird and wondrous tableau, the stuff of bedtime stories and childhood daydreams, its elements moved swiftly. Daniel saw the flying archers release their arrows and reload. He saw the flying javelinmen hurl their darts and grab onto their ropes with both hands. He saw the armored spearmen march forward and around their quarry. And he saw the cat, that lightning-eyed cat not out of a dream but of a nightmare, its mouth snarling and biting the air, lose its footing, stumble, and sink to the ground. Twice it struggled to rise and fend off its attackers, knocking some roughly to the ground with powerful swipes of its paws. Twice it failed. Then the Wampus Cat rose no more.

“YOU HIT IT, DANIEL, you hit it right in the head!” exclaimed Goran some time later, after Daniel had sunk to the forest floor himself in a state of shock. “You did not deal it a mortal wound, thankfully, but you definitely stunned the beast and made it easier to capture without loss of life.”

The fairy ranger swooped down to sit on a fallen log. “You were very brave, my friend, and I couldn't have tracked it without you. My first solo ranging has ended in success. I am sure to get my Guild invitation.”

Daniel nodded, rubbing his eyes in fatigue, just to make sure he hadn't been seeing things all along.

“Those arrows of yours — they aren't just pointed sticks, are they?” he asked the fairy.

“No, Daniel, they are not. Our craftsmen forge the arrowheads with enchanted metal. The ones we used tonight are designed to bring on sleep. So are the tips of the spears we used. As I told you, we prefer to subdue the monsters, to confine them. We only kill as a last resort.”

“I hunt for food, or to make pelts to sell,” Daniel said. “I guess that's not what your people have in mind.”

Goran's disgusted expression was all the answer Daniel needed.

“That means, then, that even that bear back there, the one I thought I saved you from, was already going to keel over before I ever charged it,” Daniel said. “You really saved me from him, like you said.”

“Not necessarily,” Goran assured him. “That was an enormous animal. A single piercing by my sleep arrow may not have brought it down for some time, if at all. As you can see, it took numerous shots to bring down the Wampus Cat, and your bear was actually a bit larger.”

“Larger? Yep. But a bear is just a bear. This thing is something more. It’s magical, just like you and your friends. Spellson? Magecraft? Shimmer spells? I can’t begin to take it all in.”

Goran stood up and leveled a gaze at Daniel. “You will not need to, Daniel,” he said, reassuringly but also with a tinge of sadness. “You have had quite an adventure this day. Please know that I will always appreciate the service you rendered to me, my profession, my Folk, and indeed your own people — because monsters are as great a threat to you as they are to us.”

The fairy looked the young hunter up and down. “Are you injured? I can call one of the mages over. You will find that magecraft is superior to any healing arts your people possess.”

“I’m fine, Goran, just fine and dandy,” Daniel said. He sighed and got to his feet. “You were talking about our adventure tonight. I think you were about to tell me that I won’t remember any of it tomorrow.”

“That is right, Daniel — you are most perceptive. When our work brings us in contact with humankind, our Ranger Code requires us to sing songs of forgetfulness afterward.”

Daniel picked up his rifle and began to reload it. Goran looked startled.

“You never know — I might still be able to get a pheasant on the way home,” Daniel explained. “Don’t like the idea of showing up without what I went hunting for.”

“Oh, I see,” the fairy said, visibly relieved. “I thought for a moment that you had some wild idea about trying to resist. Believe me, I wish there were some other way. I have made a new friend today.”

Daniel looked back at Goran, a new light in his eyes. “A while ago, you said something about how where humans live, you live, and where humans go, you are unlikely to be far behind. What did you mean? If I’m to lose my memory, what’s the harm in satisfying my curiosity for the moment?”

The fairy laughed. “Why not, indeed? You speak plainly. You cut right to the heart of the matter. So I will speak plainly, too.”

He waved his hand at the fairies finishing their work, trussing the Wampus Cat in strands of what looked like ordinary rope — but probably wasn’t.

“We are not from your world, Daniel, but we must live alongside it,” Goran said. “We only want to survive, as you do. We act to protect our homes and families. But we also act to protect you humans. When we find that we must intervene in your affairs, sometimes it is to save ourselves. Other times, it is to save you from yourselves, from your human follies. It is nothing you need to worry about, though. We only do it for your own good.”

Daniel didn’t much like the sound of that. But he chose to keep his own counsel on the matter.

Instead, he asked, “If your spells are so good at scouring memories, Goran, then how come I knew what you were when I saw you? How come we humans know about fairies and magic and monsters at all?”

The fairy shook his head in amazement. “Again, Daniel, very astute of you. Our spellsong is far from perfect. Nothing in your realm, or any other, can be perfect. As a rule, our songs eliminate any memory of us from a human mind. There are, however, exceptions to every rule. Some human memories survive spellsong. But they are hazy, jumbled, incomplete. Such memories pose little danger — half-recalled daydreams suffused with fantasy and longing that fuel your imaginations and inspire your storytellers.”

Goran turned and nodded at the other fairies who circled the bound, unconscious monster. Daniel gaped as the robed ones made signs with their arms and appeared to *draw in* the shimmering light previously emanating from their fingertips. Daniel again felt a mysterious wind and saw a flicker like the flame of a candle. In an instant, the fairies vanished.

All except Goran. He fluttered his wings and lifted off the fallen log. “I know you will not understand this either, Daniel, but I am an exception myself. You see, for most of my Folk, existing in your world beyond our protective Shimmer is possible for only brief passages of time before we go mad or perish. A few of us are born different, though. We possess certain qualities that allow us to live long stretches of time in your world. We become rangers.”

Goran looked into the distance with a melancholy expression, as if seeing not what the fairy’s eyes beheld in Daniel’s world but instead what lay in the fairy’s own memories.

“We do not have all the answers ourselves, make no mistake,” Goran continued. “No one knows for sure how long even highly resistant, well-trained rangers can survive in the Blur. But tasks must be performed there. We need resources, supplies, protection. And the monster peril must be contained.”

The fairy was right — Daniel hadn’t understood what Goran said, not fully. But he could read the signs that were as plain as the nose on his new friend’s face. He knew their conversation was nearing its end.

“One final time, Daniel, I offer you my deepest appreciation for all you have done. And I extend to you my heartfelt goodbye.”

“Farewell, friend,” the human hunter responded. “Best of luck until we meet again.”

“Alas,” the fairy said, “we will never meet again.” And then he began to sing.

IT WAS A TIRED Daniel Boone who trudged along the banks of the mountain creek. On top of that, he was mighty hungry. He was looking forward to beans and venison when he got back to camp.

Should I try one more time to shoot up some game?

Daniel had great confidence in his skill with his rifle, but even the greatest marksmen who ever lived would struggle to hit a bird, treed or otherwise, in the pitch black of night. Besides, he’d already fired his rifle twice that day. Shot and powder weren’t easy to come by, not back home in Pennsylvania and certainly not in the more remote Carolina backcountry.

Daniel supposed this would just have to be one of those rare times he went on a hunt and came back with nothing but a tall tale. Actually, in this case he’d have to come back with even

less — and besides, there wouldn't be anyone awake to hear a tale. The Boones would all have been asleep for hours when he got back to camp. Or would it be daybreak by then?

Daniel got to thinking again about the cold beans and dried venison. "I wonder what fairies eat for supper," he asked out loud, to no one in particular. "I never got a chance to ask, and Goran never volunteered anything about it."

Oh, well, the fairy was free to keep whatever secrets he wished.

Daniel was good at keeping secrets, too.

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