

OZLAND

BOOK 3

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• G A I L •

My breath rises in ghostly wisps into the cold evening air as I hold my position. Motionless. Silent. My arrow securely nocked and trained on the shoreline of the icy lake. It's after dusk, and winter has settled in early this year. The woolen cloak and gloves offer some warmth, but the chill bites the tips of my ears and nose. Still, my eyes remain fixed. The nightly cries of the youngest children, the ones that are nothing but flesh over bones, just skeletons really, shriek in my thoughts. They cry for their lost families, for the blistering pain riddled throughout their bodies as the new cure slowly heals them, for insatiable hunger; I can only help with the latter.

I'm the best of the hunters in my village, bringing in the most food out of all of us who take our weapons to the wilderness. But even so, my father, Hunter, our leader, has insisted I travel no farther than the forest's edge.

Beyond the body of water, red lights glow in pairs. They are the eyes of those that are neither human nor beast in these parts. No one has ventured past the lake and returned alive. Terrible creatures lie in wait within the dense forest. Describing them as terrible is generous. They hide in the shadows of the trees, their bodies camouflaged like chameleons—only, they've been known to snap a person in half with one bite from their powerful jaws.

The crackle of dry leaves draws my attention, but I remain still. Heart racing, sweat beading my forehead, I can't allow my fear to shake my resolve. Survival lies in what game I can bring home.

Under the glow of the moon, a shadow emerges from the tree line as the dead foliage rustles beneath the newcomer's feet. The wild sow lifts her snout into the cool evening air, in search of the slightest hint of danger. Although I've been careful, rubbing my clothes and body with oak leaves to cover my scent, my stomach twists, worried that it isn't enough. That my anxious heartbeat will divulge my location.

The sow snorts, as if declaring the area safe, before making her way to the water, only five meters from where I've taken cover.

My fingers twitch, but I don't shoot. Instead, I take in a breath. If I fire now and miss, that will be my only shot before the pig bolts back into the forest. I wait until the animal is lapping at the shoreline. Steadying the bowstring close to my cheek, I take aim.

As I'm about to take the shot, high-pitched squeals break the silence. Four piglets burst through the shrubbery and race to their mother's side on the lake's edge.

My breath catches, hesitancy paralyzing me. I lower my weapon and watch the offspring romp by the lake's edge. They are too young to be alone. With what else lives in these woods, they won't make it through the night. Not without their mother looking after them. Growling, my stomach reminds me

that there are those depending on me. Yet, if I don't get back to the village soon, I also might not see the sun rise. It's either them or me.

Again, I take aim, my arrow fixed on the thick neck of the large sow, my hands steady as I pull the string taut.

It takes only a moment to recognize the familiar rumble of a menacing growl before one of the piglets is snatched up by a hideous claw. The poor animal hardly has time to squeal before it disappears into the shadows. My face grows cold as the crack of bones startles the rest of the pigs. Instinct takes over, and I keep my weapon aimed at the adult pig. But I don't have time to shoot. A Bandersnatch explodes from the trees, seizes the sow with its teeth and two of the remaining piglets with its claws. Only one escapes into the wild brush. The horrifying creature abandons the offspring and bulldozes into the trees, leaving behind splintered branches and uprooted shrubs. It takes seconds before the terrifying shrieks of the wild pigs cease, leaving the lakeside as quiet and desolate as it was when I arrived.

Cursing, I throw my bow over my head and quiver my arrow. Knowing the frightened squawks of the pigs have probably warned off any other nearby game, I pack up and take one last look at the shoreline. Everything is still. As I turn away, I hear a quiet whine.

Snatching my bow and an arrow, I target the bushes and find the young pig trembling beneath the lower branches. I drop my aim. Even if I kill it, there's not enough meat on the piglet to make a decent meal for one, much less an entire village. There's

no point shooting it, at least not for now. Perhaps I could bring it home and fatten it up. It's better than going home empty-handed or leaving it alone to be eaten by predators. I sit cross-legged on the damp soil and reach inside my rucksack. Taking out some wild berries and nuts, I shake them in my hand.

“You hungry?” I ask.

The piglet cautiously steps forward before it hesitates. I toss a handful of food its way. Squealing, it dodges back into the brush.

“Chicken,” I mutter.

The young pig watches as I pull out another fistful and snack on the meager morsels. It edges up to the closest berry with caution. With a guarded gaze set on me, the piglet devours the fruit and nuts. I coax the young pig toward me, holding out another palmful of food. When the warm snout nudges my hand, I pour the snack onto the forest floor. Hungrily, the piglet plunges its face into the pile. It flinches only once when I scratch behind its ear.

“What am I going to do with you?” I ask.

It peers up at me with chestnut eyes before returning to its meal. The piglet finishes off the food and begins chewing at the toe of my silver boot.

“Hey!” I say, pulling my foot away.

A roar rips through the trees. It's the same beastly howl that makes the ground tremor in the dead of night. The piglet sprints for my rucksack and cowers inside, rattling the unclipped metal buckle. My eyes dart upward, hoping the beast is too focused on

its dinner to notice me, but I know it's only a matter of time before it picks up my scent.

As the growl dies out, echoing far into the forest, my surroundings become eerily quiet except for the howl of a lonely wolf. I let out a silent sigh, grateful that the Bandersnatch has gone on its way. Standing, I cradle my rucksack in my arms, ready to turn back to the village when the ground shakes again, but this time it is much more violent. Earth-shattering screams erupt from behind me—the Bandersnatch is back, and it's brought company.

I don't have enough time to draw my weapon. Instead, I just run.

The canopy of branches blocks out what little moonlight there is in the sky. I can't see where I'm going as I race between the large trunks of pine trees, dodging low-hanging branches. Twice I nearly fall, tripping over debris scattered throughout the forest floor. The piglet trembles within the leather bag clutched in my arms. The crack of tree limbs chases me like a violent thunderstorm, but I don't dare turn back to see how close the beasts are. Panting, I push my burning muscles as fast as they can go, knowing if I slow down even a little, the piglet won't be the Bandersnatches' only snack.

The Bandersnatches draw closer, and my legs grow tired. Panic riddles my body. I know I can't keep running much longer. Hiding is my only option.

Ahead, a large tree, its trunk almost a meter wide, comes into view. I slip around and press my back against the bark.

Gulping, I hold my breath, afraid that my panting will give away my location.

Three Bandersnatches roar as they sprint past me, and the gust of wind following them ruffles the stray pieces of hair that have fallen from my braids. The younger trees snap like twigs as the beasts burst through the forest. When their long, spiked tails are no longer in my line of sight, I let out the breath I was holding in a cloud of mist. It won't be long before they return. I need somewhere to hunker down until they've given up their search for me.

The pale hue of a rocky hill catches my attention. If it wasn't for the small amount of moonlight casting through a break in the trees, I never would have seen it. Taking one last glance at the destruction the Bandersnatches have left behind, I head toward the stone wall. It doesn't take long for me to find a series of caves. With the chill in the air, more than likely this network of alcoves is a home to a bear or wildcat. But I'd rather deal with a dozen bears than even one Bandersnatch.

Scrambling over the uneven stones, I choose a smaller hollow, hoping that the carnivorous wildlife would opt for someplace a bit roomier.

On one hand and both knees, I clutch my rucksack and crawl through the entrance. The damp soil soaks through my pants as I creep to the back of the cave. Finally, I sit and lean up against the stone wall, thankful for the chill it brings. I inhale deeply, trying to slow my breath. It is the squirm within my satchel that pulls my attention from the anxiety boiling in me.

Reaching inside the bag, the piglet rubs its warm snout against my hand as I search for a candle and matches. Lighting the beeswax candlestick and tucking it into a crevice in the wall, the cavern brightens. Small bones, tufts of fur, and feathers litter the rock-and-dirt floor. Based on the size of the scat, whatever lives in here can't be any bigger than a fox. Relieved, I sigh and watch the shadows dance across the gray rock.

"It's your lucky day, Gail," I mutter aloud.

The piglet peeks out of the bag and tilts its head, as if listening intently.

"Seems today is lucky for both of us," I say, scratching its soft pink ear.

With a single snort, the piglet circles my lap and flops down, lying on its side.

"How can you possibly nap after all that?"

The animal doesn't seem to hear me, but instead breathes deep and slow, lost somewhere in its dreams.

Another roar echoes in the distance. The Bandersnatch may not be outside the cave entrance, but I'm not taking any risks. Not tonight, at least. Besides, I'm suddenly drowsy, my eyelids weighted down by the aftereffects of an adrenaline rush. As the candle flickers, fighting to stay lit, I close my eyes and surrender to the lull of sleep.