It is 1666, and the forces of darkness are spreading across Europe. Dreaming of wielding a blade in epic battles like the father he never knew, Jakob von Drachenfels falsifies a letter of introduction to join the Hexenjäger – an elite military order of witch hunters. He soon learns a lesson in the dangers of ambition when he finds himself selected for a team sent to recover a biblical relic from a witch-infested castle. But when the team is betrayed from within, what was already a difficult mission turns into a desperate struggle for survival.
In memory of my parents
Four riders, their collective scars a timeline of every major battle fought in the German states over the turbulent course of the past decade. All members of the Hexenjäger – an elite order of witch hunters – clad in their trademark crimson tabards and wide-brimmed hats, and decked out with enough rapiers and flintlock pistols to declare war on the world.

And then there’s me: Jakob von Drachenfels, riding in the middle of the four, the latest recruit in the Hexenjäger – a tenderfoot in comparison to my four companions.

Bethlen Liprait’s riding immediately behind me. His dishevelled hair, unkempt moustache and creased clothing stand in direct contrast to the other witch hunters, who wear the order’s uniform with pride. But whereas maintenance of personal hygiene and physical appearance may
not be high on Bethlen’s agenda, there’s one thing he makes an absolute priority: teasing me.

In the short period of only one week – the time that has passed since I was admitted into the order – Bethlen has made my life unbearable. His sole purpose in life seems to be to subject me to constant ridicule and hardship. My life has become an endless ordeal of being tripped over, having food knocked out of my hands, finding my sleeping quarters ransacked, and being the recipient of every practical joke imaginable. Two days ago, for instance, I found horse dung shoved inside my boots. There was no need to wonder who the culprit was: the malicious smile on Bethlen’s face when he saw me cleaning my boots later that day said it all.

As much as I resent Bethlen’s relentless taunting, I actually envy him for, despite all of his personal shortcomings, he is an established member of the Hexenjäger. Although I have been admitted to the order, I am but an initiate, yet to prove myself to them in combat. At only sixteen years of age, I am the youngest member in the history of this esteemed order. That should be a badge of honour to wear with pride. But as far as Bethlen is concerned, my youth and inexperience in fighting Satan’s legions make me unworthy even of the time of day.

‘Keep your eyes on the road ahead, whelp!’ he curses. ‘I didn’t know they considered kindergarten a military unit these days. I didn’t realise we’d lowered our standards that much.’
This is typical of my luck. We’ve been on our journey for over six hours, and the first time I let my focus stray – to furiously scratch at fleas, which I’m sure I’ve caught from Bethlen – he notices.

Reminding myself that civility is as alien to him as a comb, I take a deep breath and try to ignore his criticism. ‘I’m sorry.’

Being my first mission with the Hexenjäger, I’m eager to impress, and I have to discipline myself not to take the insults personally. But now Bethlen has brought me to the attention of Christian von Frankenthal, and that’s the last thing I wanted.

‘Whelp!’ von Frankenthal calls out, forcing me to look back to where he’s riding at the rear of our group. He stabs a finger the size of a notched lance at me. I’m lucky I’m not impaled.

I’ve never really been afraid of much in my life, but this man – if indeed he is a man – terrifies me. At thirty years old, he is rippling in muscle, taller than the walls of the Papal Palace at Avignon, and has a stare so deadly it can repel a cavalry charge. In short, he’s an instrument of death.

‘This is no game,’ he says. ‘The enemies of Christ could be watching us at this very moment, waiting for some wet-nosed novice to lower their guard. Do that again and you’ll taste the back of my hand!’

His voice is like rocks grinding. Or is that just my knees shaking against the saddle? I will most certainly keep my
guard up. I don’t relish the thought of being back-handed by one of von Frankenthal’s granite-like fists.

‘Give the boy some slack. We all had to start somewhere – even you, von Frankenthal.’

What? Kind words? I don’t believe it. I could run over and kiss Klaus Grimmelshausen’s feet. He’s riding a few yards ahead of me, his raven-black hair tied back in a ponytail. He carries one of the most elaborate rapiers I’ve seen, with a cross-guard in the shape of a wolf’s head.

‘I’d like to think this boy will last longer than the last initiate placed under your care, von Frankenthal,’ Klaus continues. ‘That’s not the sort of reputation you want to earn.’

Last initiate! I don’t like the sound of this. When I was first told that von Frankenthal had been assigned to look out for me during this mission I felt invulnerable. I thought it would be like having my own mobile fort. But what happened to the previous initiate? Visions of von Frankenthal torturing him to death over hot coals race through my mind.

‘What was that last recruit’s name?’ Bethlen asks, smiling maliciously at me, as if the names of initiates are not even worth recalling.

‘Don’t remember, don’t care.’ Von Frankenthal doesn’t sugar coat his words; he lays them thick, with a splat of mortar. ‘That boy couldn’t even protect a meal from a fly. Useless.’
Bethlen shoots me a look, which suggests that I won’t survive long in the Hexenjäger. ‘How long do you think this whelp will last?’

‘No talk!’

Two simple words delivered with the finality of an axe-man’s blow, spoken by Lieutenant Otto Blodklutt, the leader and oldest member of our small band. There is no finer swordsman within our order. To see him in combat is to witness a dance of death. A heavy leather-bound copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum* – the book of the witch hunter – jostles by his side in a protective calfskin case. He holds this in such reverence you’d think he had the Pope hidden in there.

Nobody tells von Frankenthal to be quiet! I’d rather be given the task of single-handedly defending the borders of the Holy Roman Empire than confront him like that. You have to pay the Lieutenant full credit. It just goes to show how much authority he has within our order.

As happy as I am to see Bethlen put in his place, I’m not foolish enough to gloat. Bethlen shoots me a disgusted look and withdraws into brooding silence. But it’s von Frankenthal I’m more worried about. He’s wearing a pained expression on his face. I hope he doesn’t hold me responsible for Lieutenant Blodklutt’s reprimand. It will be best if I keep a low profile for the remainder of the day.

Come to think of it, what is today? So much has happened in the past week I’m finding it hard to keep track of
everything. I think it’s Thursday. Wait. Yes, it is. Thursday the third of March, in the Year of Our Lord 1666.

This has been a year plagued by war, famine and pestilence. Europe is engulfed in a fire fuelled by winds of sectarian violence, with Catholics and Protestants engaged in constant warfare. This comes as a legacy from the Thirty Years’ War, which saw the Holy Roman Empire torn apart by a war waged by the Imperial forces of Catholic Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor battling against the armies of Sweden, France, and Protestant Germany. Rivers of blood have been shed. The Inquisition stalks the land, eradicating heresy with cruel efficiency. So many heretics have been burned at the stake that the air now carries with it a sickly stench of charred flesh. It has become common practice for many people to carry a small pouch of dried rose petals around their neck to combat the stench. Outbreaks of bubonic plague have destroyed entire kingdoms. London has been gutted by the Black Death. England and the Dutch Republic are in the second year of a brutal naval campaign for control of the world’s seas. It is rumoured that Louis XIV of France has set his eyes on the Spanish Netherlands. And from the east, the Muslim world encroaches on the borders of Christendom, preying on Christian vessels in the Mediterranean, and pushing deeper into the forests of Hungary on its western-most border.

Many believe that God has forsaken the world, abandoned it to the ruling vices of men: fear, cruelty,
lechery, avarice and lust. Many believe that evil has planted its sin-stained seed.

1666. Containing the numbers 666. As foretold in the Book of Revelation, the number of the Devil.

The year of the Antichrist!

Priests are spurring their congregations into frenzies, proclaiming that the events detailed in the apocalyptic Book of Revelation are coming to pass. The forces of evil are emerging from the shadows, laying a carpet of blood to welcome the arrival of their Dark Prince. Rumours of warlocks, witches and demons are discussed in hushed tones throughout every tavern and coaching-inn.

Believing that 1666 would herald the arrival of the Antichrist, the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, commissioned the creation of an elite order of witch hunters – the Hexenjäger – some four years ago. Their task was to hunt down Satan’s servants, weakening the forces of darkness before the arrival of their Dark Prince. Whilst Papal Inquisitors cleansed the world of innocent peasants whose only crime was being illiterate, and were hence unable to read and quote the scriptures, the Hexenjäger hunted evil in its pure form, slaying real witches and demons. Only veteran soldiers, tried and proven in combat, were permitted to join.

Over the years the order’s numbers have swelled, and what started as a clandestine unit of twelve has developed into a force of over a hundred witch hunters, recognised
by their crimson attire and revered throughout all of Europe.

And I have been selected to join their ranks. Well, to say that I was *selected* is stretching the truth. I would like to tell you that I have been recruited for my fighting prowess. But the truth of the matter is not that glamorous. I’m embarrassed to admit that I hardly know how to wield a sword. I am simply fortunate that my uncle is highly regarded by Emperor Leopold. It was my uncle’s signature that I forged on a fabricated letter of introduction to secure my posting into the Hexenjäger.

My father was a cavalry commander, who died in the Low Countries – comprising the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic – when I was only four years old. And my mother – God bless her soul – died of tuberculosis two years later. As my grandparents had passed away long before I was born, my sole remaining relatives were my uncle and aunt, who had adopted me, raising me as their own son.

Although I was young when my mother passed away, I still have fond memories of her. But I can’t even picture my father’s face. As a child, I used to ask my uncle and aunt about my father – where he was born, where and how he met my mother, and what motivated him to join a German mercenary army, fighting alongside Spain in the Low Countries. I also asked how my father had died and where he was buried. I had hoped that I could then slot these snippets of information together to form a picture...
of the man who helped bring me into the world. But my uncle and aunt were always reluctant to reveal too much – too afraid, possibly, that such information would trigger some calling within my blood, and send me off on some fool’s errand to the Low Countries in search of more clues. Knowing that I wasn’t getting anything from them, I stopped questioning my uncle and aunt some time ago. But the thirst to learn more about my father, and hence myself, has always remained. Until I find these answers, I fear I will always feel incomplete, as if some fundamental part of me is missing.

Whereas my father was a soldier, my uncle is a farrier – one of the finest in the Holy Roman Empire, in fact. He’s been master of the Farriers’ Guild of Dresden – the Brotherhood of Farriers – for the past ten years. Assisted by his four Wardens, he is responsible for monitoring the quality of stables and the condition of horses throughout the city. He is a pillar of the community, respected and in demand for his knowledge of treating horse ailments. Only last year he was summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor to bring back to health his favourite mare. My uncle’s greatest desire is for me to follow in his footsteps. Indeed, since the age of six I have done exactly that, working in his stables every day – washing, combing, feeding and watering the dozen or so horses he has owned throughout the years. He even organised for me to begin my apprenticeship as a Warden in the Brotherhood of Farriers next month. This
would have been a position of great importance; I would check the condition of stables throughout Dresden, as well as ensure that farriers and shoesmiths were adequately trained and registered with the Brotherhood of Farriers.

But my uncle’s dreams are not my dreams, and my heart was never truly in my work.

Much to my uncle’s dismay, my father’s blood courses through my veins and I inherited his unquenchable thirst for adventure. It has been my lifelong dream to join an army and lead the life of a professional soldier – to see the world and draw steel in epic battles. And in this darkest hour, with Christendom beset by the forces of evil, there is no greater cause than that followed by the Hexenjäger.

The order reminds me of the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller: military orders of monks created during the Crusades, who I used to read about in my uncle’s study – a quiet haven where I used to indulge in the history of medieval times. It’s quite ironic that while my uncle and aunt have tried to shelter me from the truth of my father, and hoped that I would not follow in his footsteps, it was the books contained in their study, which I must have read over a dozen times, their pages full of heroic and daring exploits that ignited my desire to be a great soldier.

It pains me to have left my uncle and aunt without a word of farewell. I left a note on their bedside table, thanking them for raising me and for loving me as if I were their own child. My note explained that I had forged a letter of introduction
and gone off to join the Hexenjäger. I know this would have worried them no end, but they at least deserved to know the truth. It would be inevitable that the Hexenjäger would contact my uncle to confirm my appointment into their order. The last thing I wanted was for my uncle to reply that he knew nothing of my appointment – or, even worse, to reveal that I had left against his wishes and forged the letter of introduction. To safeguard myself against the possibility of this ever happening, I had included a warning in the note I left for my uncle and aunt: should they ever attempt to get me expelled from the Hexenjäger by telling the order of my deception, I would run away and join some other military organisation. I had also assured them that, should things not work out with the Hexenjäger, I would return home of my own accord. Of course, I never truly believed I would do this, for I was determined to fulfil my destiny as a great warrior. But I at least wanted to give my uncle and aunt the peace of mind of knowing that I might one day return home.

I feel immense guilt for my actions, but I reconcile my sorrow and guilt by convincing myself that my uncle and aunt had always harboured suspicions that one day I would run away and follow the calling of my blood.

I might fail in this enterprise and fall flat on my posterior. But I’ll be damned if I give up before trying my hardest. And I won’t let someone like Bethlen be the reason for my failure.
What’s this? There’s movement up ahead. It’s Armand ‘why walk when you can saunter’ Breteuil, a twenty-three-year-old fop from the courts of Paris. He’s so vain he probably believes his portrait should be stuck up on town walls as part of a regional beautification program. But his foppish appearance is deceptive, for he’s a former captain of Louis XIV’s Royal Palace Cavalry and fights with dual heavy-bladed slashing cavalry sabres. That is, when he’s not waving the handkerchief that seems permanently attached to his hand.

Armand’s been scouting ahead for the past hour with a Scot named Robert Monro. Robert doesn’t say much. Getting the odd word out of him is more difficult than turning water into wine. He wears a crimson cassock, and a long-barrelled rifle is slung over his shoulder.

Armand and Robert have come back to report that we have arrived at our destination. On the top of a nearby hill lies Schloss Kriegsberg.