

## The Hunter

The forest was silent save for the low gurgle of running water. Assir stood on the right of the stream; a cliff with a downward sloping rock outcropping was before him. The stream filtered into a much wider and shallower pool that flowed slowly towards the edge, rolling off the end and splashing into a much deeper stream far below. A sheer cliff was to the right of the outcropping but to the left was a stair of large boulders that curved down and around the cliff's ridge. From where Assir stood, under the line of pine trees that fenced the pool, the swirling shallows looked as if they were two hands cupping the edge of the cliff.

Assir took a step forward, pulling the layer of dark blue cloth from his mouth and removing the hood from his head to gaze at the summit of Mount Talion. In the distance he saw the great mountain's peak, snowcapped and blisteringly white even against the cloudy backdrop. A length of forest stretched through the valley before him, ringed on either side by two short mountain ranges. He listened to the babbling of the stream, the dull roaring of the slim waterfall, and the austere silence of the mountains, breathing in the clean mountain air and the smell of pine trees.

He shifted his attention from the distant mountain to the surrounding trees. There was nothing behind him except forest and nothing in front of him but the valley created by the cliff. Four days, he thought, breathing heavily and turning back to the cliff. Four days and no sign of any tracks. The bow in his left hand was heavy and his fingers felt tight and twisted from clenching it for so long. He flexed his right hand, trying to warm it. Bending down to the water at his side, he cupped his hands and brought the freezing liquid to his mouth. It burned his throat.

A twig snapped behind him.

He whirled around as the immense white wolf lunged through the air towards him. Raising his left arm they collided and he felt the wood of the bow slam into the back of the animal's mouth. They fell to the ground. The wolf pinned Assir, its jaws snapping down and jamming against the wood of the bow. The animal was as long as he was tall. Its mouth was closed around Assir's hand though it was unable to become fully shut as the bow was wedged against its gums. His right arm was pinned by one of the creature's immense paws. The wolf snarled, globs of snot splashing against Assir's eyes, then twisted and spun its head around, struggling to bite through the wood and to the man's flesh.

Assir worked to free his right hand and simultaneously hold the teeth back when the wolf raised its free paw. Noticing it out of the corner of his eye, Assir slammed his right knee into the animal's chest, stunning it long enough for Assir to pull his legs back and push them upwards.

The wolf flew head over tail and splashed into the shallow pool.

Assir twisted on the ground. Jumping up, he reached to the quiver on his back and pulled an arrow out of the pack. The bow was slippery in his hands as he brought it up to his eye. He drew the arrow back against the string while the wolf spun in the water and got back to its feet. For a brief moment it was motionless, two eyes like pools of blood fixed upon him. His left hand slipped and the twang of the string reverberated in his ear. The arrow sailed to the right of its target.

The wolf snarled again and charged. Assir drew another arrow back. This time the arrow shot into the trees when the wolf slammed into his side. Knocked off balance he swiveled on his feet just in time to dodge away from its ravaging claws. He turned and ducked under another strike then rolled away from the beast. Splashing through the stream, his boots kicked up a spray of water and he hopped right back to his feet, backing away from the creature while it stalked towards him.

Assir slowed his movements and walked in a circle, the wolf mirroring him. They looked each other over, he watching the sleek, graceful movements of the albino animal and the wolf snarling at the resistant prey. With great care, Assir stretched his hand back to the quiver. His fingers tapped against the fletching of an arrow.

In the next instant the wolf had covered the distance between them and swung its massive head towards Assir. Unable to react to its speed, the wolf's head slammed into his chest and he fell flat on his back, the sound of wood snapping came from his back and his bow flew through the air and over the edge of the cliff. Assir twisted and turned in the shallows, unable to find his breath or to raise himself from the freezing water while the light pattering of footsteps circled around him.

No sooner had he gotten to his feet than the wolf charged again. This time, Assir was ready. He reached his right hand around to his lower back and gripped a black leather handle. The wolf lunged, its maw opening wide and its claws slashing the air.

Assir spun to his right drawing the dagger from his back in the same motion. As the wolf passed by his left side he reached up his right hand and brought it down. The blade tore through

the thick pelt and into the wolf's neck; he felt it cut through muscle and skin. Howling, the wolf threw its left paw out, the claws tearing into Assir's skin. He let out a scream from the depths of his lungs and fell to his knees while the wolf landed upon the rock outcropping, skidded along the water as it tried to gain purchase with its left claw, and disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Assir gasped out in pain. He grimaced, gnashed his teeth, and shook his legs while the pain in his shoulder took over all of his senses. The grey sky turned red and despite the freezing temperature of the water he felt hot all over his body. Adjusting himself with the smallest and most careful movements, Assir managed to get his entire right side under the current. The cold water seeped into the gashes in his shoulder. Gradually, while the excruciating pain made his body shake, the cold numbed his skin and heat was replaced by the sensation of nothingness.

Pulling himself up, Assir stumbled from the rocky shallows onto the grass beneath the trees. He took the quiver and pack off his back and laid them down on the ground. Emptying the quiver he found that all but four arrows had snapped in half. He unwrapped the cloth about his neck and started binding his shoulder with it when he heard something over the hum of the waterfall. Cupping a hand to his ear, he walked to the edge of the outcropping and looked down.

Hundreds of feet below, on the left shore of the deep, wide pool, a white wolf with a large, dark red spot on its neck hobbled toward the tree line as if its left side were disabled.

Assir watched the wolf until it vanished beneath the screen of pines. He clenched his fists and the soreness in his shoulder intensified.

The path down the stair of boulders was treacherous, and Assir's impaired shoulder made the going even more difficult. He brought only a thin skinning knife and the four unbroken arrows stored inside the quiver he had strapped to his back.

The wolf had almost an hour lead by the time he made the final jump onto the shore of the pool and found the remnants of his bow shattered against a rock jutting up from the grass. The hunting knife was nowhere to be found. Turning away from his destroyed weapon, Assir discovered the massive paw prints and a thick trail of blood leading into the forest. He adjusted the quiver on his back, drew out a single arrow and the skinning knife, and followed the tracks into the dense pines.

A thin mist was upon this lower part of the mountain. Assir was unable to see more than several yards ahead and he moved with caution, not following on the trail but rather off to the

side just in sight of the marks. The blood was getting thicker and the paw prints were turning into tiny red puddles.

He heard the wolf before he saw it. A heavy, labored breathing that reverberated off the trees. It was not far ahead. His hands tightened around the arrow and the knife and he crept along even quieter until the sound was just ahead of him.

The endless rows of trees stopped, forming a circle around a bed of green grass. There, on its side and in the center of the small clearing, with an ever widening area of red grass beneath its head, lay the wolf. Its mouth was drooped open, its eyes staring in the direction of its tracks.

In his mind, Assir saw a cabin in the woods torn and splintered. An old man's face was drowning beneath a flood of blood while a boy cowered in the corner. A massive white wolf, with streaks of red about its lips, stalked out of the ruined house. Its eyes were red and they burned in his vision. His blood was hot and his muscles tensed. Assir inhaled the wet air, sharp and cold, and stepped out from the line of trees.

Then he heard the whine. As if drifting upon the mist a soft whimper came to his ears and he stopped, hand at his sides. A low moan started from the wolf's mouth and it tilted its head inward toward its stomach. The red spot had almost engulfed its neck.

From over the wolf's side rose the small, white head of a young cub. It rested itself upon the great mound of fur, its eyes, blue as sapphires, fixed on the wolf's head. The mother raised her head and extended her tongue, the great pink muscle enveloping the smaller wolf's head. Uninterrupted, the young animal continued to whimper, even as its mother withdrew her tongue and left it with a glistening coat. Assir felt a new pain in the left part of his chest that chilled his body.

Red eyes met Assir's and he was struck by how the deep pools of blood now sparkled like rubies. The wolf blinked at him before her eyelids drooped. As they closed she took in one last breath, as if she meant to take in all the air in the clearing, and opened her mouth wide. A great, piercing howl reverberated off the mountains and throughout the trees, continuing to sound even in the distance. The small animal raised its head and added a quieter, though no less penetrating, cry. The two calls blended together, producing a melody that filled the valley with both love and lament. It took hold of Assir, struck him in the heart, and faded away.

The wolf bowed its head, the cub cried out to the world, nuzzling at its mother's still body, and Assir stood by the edge of the clearing, watching. The forest was silent.