

Wolf Hour

Chapter One

'You shall dance the hunter's dance'

'The Hunter's Lullaby' – Black Ballads, Dan Andersson

The paw print was as large as her hand. Deep gouges in the mud for the blunt toes, a triangular shape for the pad of the foot. A heavy animal, judging by how firmly the print pressed into the earth.

Nella Khron looked forward, noting the broken twigs and bracken on either side of the animal path. A second print revealed itself ahead. Rising, she measured out the distance between the two. Roughly a metre and a half – the step length of a full-grown male.

Nella tightened her grip on the rifle strap, so the slender arm of the Browning X Bolt Hunter pressed against her shoulder blade. She had not thought the wolf hybrids would be this big. The reports from the sightings suggested they were young: six to eight months, born in the spring.

If that was true, these animals would be a wolf and a half in size when fully grown.

Nella fumbled for her hunting radio. 'Rasmus, do you copy? First sighting, two paw prints, one animal.' She checked her GPS. '361 metres east of starting point.'

Nothing but white noise answered her. No sign of Rasmus' bear-like figure through the trees. Twice more she tried, with the same result.

She bit her lip in frustration. Perhaps he'd entered a dense part of the woods where the signal was bad. Though he shouldn't be pressing this far ahead of her. Hunting partners were supposed to stick together.

Not that Rasmus Eriksson cared about that. At least not when he was paired up with Nella. Her, he'd always shunned.

Stepping over the paw print, she continued through the undergrowth. Energy spent on Rasmus was energy wasted. She kept close to the ground, stomach brushing her thighs; running a hand through the undergrowth to check for scats or trampled twigs.

Minutes passed, yielding nothing. It seemed her first find had been nothing but luck, a temporary blessing brought on by the morning rain. The weather was clearing now, causing the mud to dry where the undergrowth was sparse, once again proving that tracking any animal in conditions other than snow was difficult at best.

She considered checking in with her uncle. Roland couldn't be more than 100 metres away. He may well have spotted more tracks. His voice would be a comforting break from the silence pressing in on her.

Yet she shook the thought away. Roland had enough on his mind without her fretting, and the last thing she wanted was for Rasmus and his father Rolf, the hunt leader, to think she was struggling. Her status in the hunting club was too fragile for that.

She had to trust her instincts.

Keeping her breath steady, she advanced up a gentle incline, coated by mossy stones and spindly birches, with chanterelles poking their heads out of crevasses. This ground was a lot harder to read. She expanded her search, scanning the trees for fur tufts stuck in the bark.

If not for the golden reflection of the sunlight she would have missed it. The patch of grey and sable hairs was almost at head level, as if the wolfdog had stood on its hindlegs to rub itself.

Nella ran her fingers through it. It was bristly like steel wool, with a musky, almost spicy, scent. She could just about detect the same scent on the bark.

The animal was marking territory.

Her stomach clenched. Beckbo, her village, lay at the edge of this wood. The larger town of Kolsund a few miles south of that.

Wolves never settled this close to humans. They might pass through in search of new territory or when visiting another wolfpack, or scuffle around the garbage bins if hungry enough. Almost always, though, they were gone within a day.

Only a hybrid would linger for ten days straight. They were less shy than their wild counterparts; unpredictable due to the mixed genetic makeup, which could vary greatly from individual to individual, even within litters. An attention-seeking, people-loving puppy could grow into a quiet and cautious adult, unwilling to interact with humans or other dogs. The slightest overstepping was enough to awaken the predator within.

These hybrids had already killed a dog. Golden Retriever, thirteen months, out on its morning walk at 7.30 am. Off the leash, it had scampered ahead of its owner, out of sight as the forest trail curved. A series of barks had sounded; the retriever's high-pitched voice mingled with, according to the owner, a deep, primordial growl. The sounds built up into a high-pitched yelp and were then cut short. The owner found her dog splayed out on the trail, bleeding from a bite wound in its neck. It died on the way to the vet.

The Beckbo and Kolsund citizens referred to the tragedy as the return of the Gysinge wolf: the man-eating beast who in a three-month period 1820-21, had killed nine and injured fifteen people – most of them children. It was the last known case in Sweden of man being killed by wolf, putting an end to the raising of wolves as domestic pets and the illicit breeding of hybrids. Other attacks had been claimed since then, and the number of livestock killed by wolves each year had climbed steadily the past two decades. Though these figures paled in

comparison, they kept the fear alive. A fear that exploded when the retriever was attacked. The Gysinge story was on everyone's lips, as vivid and detailed as if the townspeople had witnessed it themselves, uniting everyone in hatred against the wolf and its spawn. If action wasn't taken soon, they would have a true repetition of the Gysinge tragedy on their hands.

The orders from the city council and Swedish Association for Hunters were clear: shoot every hybrid that could be found.

If only they knew exactly how many hybrids there were.

Nella closed her hand into a fist, the coarse fur rubbing against her skin. Wolf and dog litters alike averaged a size of five pups, though the number could vary from one to fourteen, depending on environmental conditions and, in the case of wolves, the abundance of prey.

But there was only ever one alpha male.

Trying to ignore the curdling in her stomach, Nella brought the fur tuft closer to her eyes. Was it the alpha of the pack she was tracking? Was he the one who had killed the retriever?

Once again, she wished she had more information. The dog breed involved, proper footage of the sightings. Anything to help prepare her for a face-to-face encounter. This was her first wolf hunt, after all.

Yet all she had was speculation. A pack of hybrids was totally unheard of in Swedish history. The Kolsund hunting team had no past experience or knowledge to draw upon. The Gysinge story served as nothing but sensational fearmongering. As her uncle said, speculations were wind.

They might as well be hunting ghosts.

A jarring sound from behind, followed by a high-pitched, frantic cry, made her flinch and twist around. Her left hand went to her rifle, ready to put the weapon to action.

Military rows of black pines stared back. The soft shadows of sifting green between them revealed no movement.

She forced herself to breathe out. Just a woodpecker.

Dropping the tuft, she resumed the hunt.

After a few minutes, it became clear the hybrid was heading south, towards the edge of the village. The sun, breaking through the clouds just above the canopies, lay roughly straight ahead. The trees began to thin; the pines and spruces most common in the deepest parts of the forest were replaced with rowan, aspen and ash; the moss and mushrooms gave way to mud and bracken. The animal paths grew broader and more defined – a sign they were also used by humans. No sign of any new prints, yet she consistently spotted broken twigs and sprigs.

Her mind went to the fladry. The hunters had set it up around the borders of the forest the previous morning, an area spanning 800 metres. It was a rope with red flags that would flap in a breeze, used as a traditional method for wolf hunting in Eastern Europe. The bright colour and the human scent lingering on the rope would hopefully stop the wolves from crossing the road into the village, keeping them within the fladry's boundaries. Tracking them down then would be easier. It would also be kinder on the Beckbo citizens than aerial hunting with helicopters, which would have been the default option had the hybrids been sighted in a more remote location.

There was no guarantee though, that the fladry would work. The red flags were most effective in snow, where they would stand out against the landscape. The current breeze was barely strong enough to tickle the ends of the flags. Human scent would repel wolves because they were shy animals at heart.

These hybrids were far from shy. The retriever's death was harsh proof of that. The fladry could just as likely attract the hybrids as repel them, drawing them back towards the village.

What if that was where this individual was headed? Nella gripped the radio, hovering between decisions.

Patterns in the mud caught her eye. The same paw print as before, almost perfectly tattooed into the squidgy earth. Beside it, two smaller ones coming from the left, with a fainter imprint of the pad, suggesting the animal was lighter and hadn't stood still for long.

Had a smaller hybrid crossed paths with the big one? There were broken twigs to their right, and looking down that way, Nella saw that mud had been flicked to the sides.

It must have passed through there. Moving away from its pack, by the looks of it. Had it spotted the hunters further on, got frightened and turned away? But why would it leave the rest of its pack behind? If this was a runt of the litter, it would stay with its siblings for protection.

A twig snapped. She felt a prickly feeling in her neck, like a needle through the skin. She was being watched.

Holding her breath, she turned around.

Two luminous eyes stared at her. They peered out from behind the sprawling arms of a spruce; two discs of molten amber; the pupils fat ink drops.

The wolf hybrid was twenty, thirty meters away. Nella could make out the dark shape of its body behind the branches, poised in a crouch, its ears flat against its head.

How long had it been watching her?

With painfully slow and delicate movements, she unhitched the rifle from her shoulder and brought it before her, never taking her gaze off the hybrid. The click when she

uncocked the safety mechanism caused the animal to twitch its ears and its eyes to widen even more.

A wolf would not linger like this. It would have shied away at the first whiff of man. A wolf would only turn aggressive or defensive if it saw no other way out of the situation.

This hybrid had chosen to wait for Nella.

As if sensing her thoughts, the wolfdog stepped out of the spruce's embrace. Nella caught her breath, almost letting the rifle dip to the ground.

The hybrid was magnificent. It had the regal physique of a wolf, with a long, tapered muzzle and pointed ears, a pronounced ruffle of fur framing its shoulders, and a long, bushy tail. Its coat, though, was more that of a German Shepherd's: black flecked with sable, and a grey line down its nose. It leaned forward, sniffing the air, as if tasting Nella's scent, inspecting her. Her finger, curled and ready around the trigger, ached with the tension of being frozen in the same position, but she dared not squeeze it. Those eyes, nuggets of burning gold, froze her from the spine down, paralyzing her.

At the sudden snapping of twigs from the left, the moment died. Nella twitched, almost firing by mistake. Another hybrid, or her hunting partner, finally arrived?

The wolfdog's eyes narrowed into yellow slits. A strange sound, half growl half howl, emanated from its throat.

Nella had never heard a dog vocalize that way before.

Now, a voice whispered within, shoot it now.

The wolfdog's lip curled up in a snarl, baring bone white incisors. It took two stalking steps forward, eyes locked on Nella.

Her world narrowed down to the bird's-eye view of the hybrid through her sniper scope, to the distance between them steadily growing smaller.

Then the animal jumped. A jerky movement, like that of a marionette being pulled upwards. As the full impact of the gunshot flooded the air, the hybrid uttered a small yelp of surprise, stumbled forward on shaky legs, staring up at Nella as if asking for help.

The second gun shot put an end to its struggles. The wolfdog slumped to the ground, one final whimper escaping its throat before it surrendered to inevitable death. A flurry of wings exploded amongst the trees as the birds which had silently been watching fled to the sky.

The echoes of the second shot reverberated through Nella's body. She stared unbelievably at the furry form which had been so alive, poised between caution and aggression, only heartbeats ago. Then she looked down to her finger, still poised, unmoved, on the trigger.

You did not shoot. Her inner voice, blunt and accusing, was a blend of her uncle's and the other hunters'.

The acrid whiff of gunpowder drifted to her on the wind, coming from her left. There was the metallic sound of a bolt ejecting, followed by the clinking sound of the spent casing spilling to the ground and another click as a new one was loaded. Nella stepped forward, looking for the source of the sound, although she already had a gut feeling of who she would find.

On cue came the crunching sound of footfalls on bracken. A human figure, tall and burly with a red beard, revealed itself amongst the trees. The hunting rifle, held tightly over the chest, gleamed copper in the sunlight slanting through the trees.

Rasmus Eriksson.

'What the hell were you playing at?'

His husky voice was a whispered hiss, an odd pairing that did not sit well with Nella.

'A kid could have taken that shot.'

The words stung her as if they'd been shouted. 'I didn't think the hybrid was going to attack... It was just watching me.' She remembered the first set of snapping twigs which had caused the wolfdog to snarl. 'Everything was fine until you drew near.' Would have been fine, if he'd answered her radio call.

Rasmus bristled at her words. He went up to the carcass, prodding it with the barrel of his Sauer 404 to make sure it was dead. A dark spot like a squished cherry marked where the first bullet had hit home; in the neck, just behind the jawbone. A second mark squatted on the left flank.

'It must have been waiting. Seen the smaller hybrid cross its own tracks, perhaps even met up with it.' Rasmus stepped across the undergrowth, searching the ground for tracks or signs of movement, his rifle caressing the tips of the bracken.

Had this been a regular moose hunt, Nella would have waited for his gaze to flick up at her. For him to acknowledge what he must have figured out already: that she had beaten him to the task and found the tracks first. When he didn't, she would have slid her hand into her pocket and curled it to a fist, suffocating the bitterness until every cubic millimetre of oxygen was gone, and all that remained was the sweaty friction of skin grazing skin.

Now, the wolfdog's carcass held her full attention. Death had already rendered it small and fragile. Nella marvelled that Rasmus seemed so unshaken by it.

The big man was already contacting Rolf on his hunting radio, explaining what had happened and giving their exact location in an even, matter-of-fact voice. When mentioning the smaller set of tracks that led off down the hill, though, his resolve hardened.

'This animal could be heading straight for the village. We need to stop it before it's too late.'

Images that Nella preferred not to linger on flashed through her mind. She tapped her fingers nervously against her rifle.

Rolf gave his son the go-ahead. He and Roland would locate the dead hybrid. They would set up watch on the hill, in case the other hybrids appeared, attracted by their pack brother's smell.

Rasmus strapped his rifle back over his shoulder. 'Next time, don't hesitate, yeah?' He motioned at Nella with his hand. 'Come on.'

Her ears still ringing with the echo of the gunshot, Nella stood up. She felt the eyes of the dead wolf on her as she followed Rasmus down the slope.