



Chapter 1 - The Hollow

Aerinas ran through the fading streams of moonlight, barely clinging to the last bit of consciousness. He strode on, dashing left and right, feet light as they danced over rocks and fallen moss-covered trees. He could feel the cold rush of the night air bite at his lungs as he breathed, and the warmth of his own blood on his face. Every now and again, he would pause and look behind him for the pursuers, three wolves that caught him sneaking around the forbidden grounds of El-Caras. One of them had slashed his right arm, tearing through the cloak that covered his tunic. He had managed to strike that one down with his sword, but two more were hot on his trail. His goal was to reach his horse in time before he blacked out or the wolves overcame him. The blood saturated his sleeve and the pain was almost unbearable as his pulse throbbed in the wound.

Branches cracked and leaves crunched as he sped over them. He leapt over creek beds, and climbed up the sides of steep embankments, only to lose his footing and roll down the other side. His bruised body ached with every step he took. He pressed on, for he knew that his hunters were not as battered. Despite the blinding, stinging sweat in his eyes, he could make out the looming shapes like crooked teeth pasted against the dark horizon. They were the Dragon Mountains, refuge of the fortress of El-Caras and border to the cursed land of Dunandor.

He paused to catch his breath and heard the sounds of pursuit close behind him. It was painful to notch an arrow and draw back on the bowstring of his reliable recurve. It was a homemade longbow that his father gave him when he drew of age. Despite its worn appearance, his father was renowned for his impeccable skill at making the Elvish weapons of the ancient days. The bow was well-crafted, and the arrow's quality was an equal match. The silvery tips glistened in the few remaining rays of moonlight that searched in vain to find their way through the canopy above. In the

encroaching darkness, and through his blurred vision, it was a welcome beacon to him.

Suddenly, all fell silent. Aerinas held his breath in fear that it would startle the stillness from the air. He anticipated a howl or a bark to tell him which direction to release the arrow, hoping to scare off his foe at the very least. Alas, nothing came. Blood and sweat poured down his brow. He sighed heavily, weakening with every passing moment. He relaxed the string, turned, and scurried off into the night.

Before long, the world started to fade and whirl around him. The beaded sweat on his forehead felt ice cold and on fire at the same time. Pain took residence in his arm, creeping throughout his entire body. He shuddered and stumbled forward, landing on his hands and knees. He knew that he was in trouble if he could not get to his horse. He looked to the night sky, but all he could see was a swirling mass of blackness streaked with fragments of light moving swiftly overhead.

It cannot be too much further, he thought to himself as he pressed onward.

Crawling through the thickets, he heard the sudden sound of hustling footsteps beating against the soft earth. Aerinas stood as fast as he could, turned with bow drawn, and in a heartbeat let the arrow fly. The loud thud in the dark signaled that it struck a tree with fury. A low growl rumbled through the blackness; its resonating tone made the hair stand up on the back of his neck. In the dark, his vision was trustworthy, but this blackness was thick, almost as if ill will veiled the night with a broad blanket. He strained to see the stealthy assassin, but was already sure that at least one of the wolves was upon him.

He could smell them.

Aerinas strained his eyes as he scanned the surrounding area frantically. He finally caught a glimpse ahead of the broken stone edifice at the edge of the forest where he had tied the horse that carried him deep into the forsaken hollow. He hoped that the fiends had not taken its life.

Direwolves pursued him. They grew three times the size of normal grey wolves and many times fiercer. Not known to roam the forestlands, they preferred the wide-open spaces of the plains near the foot of the Dragon

Mountains to the south. Their stealth and speed felled many great warriors. Few dared to venture too far without proper weaponry and company. Recent reports from abroad marked these beasts straying from their homelands, as if being called by an old master.

Aerinas darted to a nearby arm of the moonlit structure and again drew back his bowstring with arrow stretched. He heard rustling to his right, then his left. His breath was heavy and his heart beat like drums. Looking over his shoulder, he spotted the stallion, Jjanasi. Even in the low radiance, his presence was white and commanding. Bound to the inside of one of the large walls, he tugged and pulled at the rope, seemingly distraught at what lurked in the night. Aerinas whispered a few words to calm the horse, but it worked only temporarily.

“Show yourself,” he shouted into the foreboding mist with as much ferocity as he could muster.

Just then, a faint light unmasked the menacing shape. About forty yards in front of him stood the large wolf, illuminated by light from a small source floating in the air. The wolf’s eyes glowed a soft yellow in the darkness. From where Aerinas stood, he could see the large, white fangs set in its gaping mouth as it growled and pawed at the air. It was distracted by a hovering light above. The light quickly disappeared into the darkness and the beast melted back into the night once again, as if it were toying with him. The foul stench of the wolf clung to the air, which, fortunately, was putrid enough to keep Aerinas from passing out.

Another growl pierced the choked air. Either the light from the moon was shaded by cloud or Aerinas’ vision was betraying him. He saw movement everywhere. The forest seemed to come alive. His senses were deceiving him, no doubt from the loss of blood. He shook his head to keep himself awake and alert. Suddenly, a bright light shone once again directly in front of him. As he turned, the beast leapt toward him with mouth wide open and muscles rippling beneath the gray fur. Aerinas could almost smell its breath as he let the arrow fly into the chest of the predator. Death seized it immediately, and the wolf crumpled mid-flight. It crashed through some hanging vines and brambles, then landed with a *thud* at the foot of the outcropping upon which

he stood. Aerinas wisely drew his sword, and leapt from the rock down to the soft forest floor. With great caution, sword shaking in his hand, he slowly crept toward the still beast, which no longer drew breath, its eyes void of the golden luster they once had.

Aerinas stood and wiped the streaming blood and sweat from his face. Now that his foe was dispatched, he looked up at what shed light on his shape in the dim wood. Above him, shining like a star, flew a sprite, one of the small, winged creatures of the wood. It was no more than the size of his hand with its wings outstretched, which flapped so rapidly that he could not tell how many it had. Its face was fair, complete with pointy ears similar to his. Sprites seldom remained still in the air, and rather enjoyed bouncing to and fro on the small pockets of current that swirled about them. They were peaceful creatures, not like the savages that crawled in the night seeking out weaker prey. All the battered elf could do was bow his thumping head before he crashed to the ground in a bloody heap.

There was a hustle amongst the sprites as some of them buzzed frantically around Aerinas' ghostly form. In a chorus of voices, they spoke together. Turning westward, they shot through the trees on a twisted course. They carried little hope, aware that too much time was needed to take them to their destination. Most of them remained behind to watch over Aerinas like hawks. Their glowing vivacity gave his body the lifesaving warmth it would need until help arrived, if at all.

It seemed like hours before the others returned. The leader of the group, Sindari, brought good tidings to the rest, who conveyed their difficulty in concealing the elf from the remaining direwolf still stalking him.

“We have flown far thus to fetch the man from beyond the Misty Falls. He comes ever swiftly upon his steed with water and dressings, being led here by Adana. We will care for Tristandor's kin until his coming,” ordered Sindari.

The cluster of teeming lights danced with acceptance at the news and resumed huddling around the still body of Aerinas. The sound of howls echoed closer.

Time was running out.