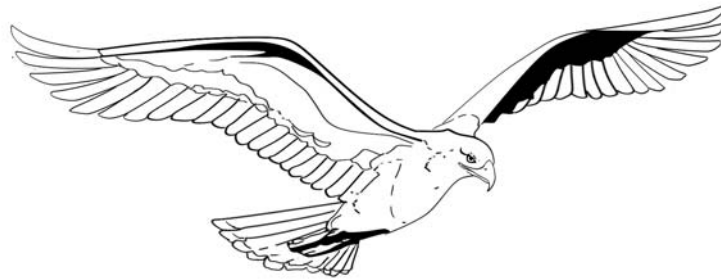


**ASULON**  
**The Sword of Fire**  
**Book One**  
**By William R. McGrath**  
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**PROLOGUE**  
**THE HAWK**

The hawk rocked back and forth on a thick limb of an old oak, impatient for the rising sun to climb the mountainside and create the morning thermals. Judging the time right, the hawk stretched out its wings, took hold of the air and pulled itself aloft. Riding the warm rising draft, the hawk began its hunt, flying high above the valley running between the tall mountain and its neighbors.

A man looking skyward from that valley would have seen just a speck in the sky, which he might have guessed to be a bird of prey. However the hawk, looking down from that height with its superior eyesight, would have known the man for a man and would even have known a rabbit from a badger, were either at the man's feet.

Now, far, far below, at the edge of a clearing, the hawk spotted a man moving in a way that caused the bird to begin a slow spiral downward to investigate...



## CHAPTER 1 **THE HUNTER**

Seek, and ye shall find...  
-**The Book of Luke 11:9**

The hunter stopped his slow, careful stalk through the shadows bordering the clearing and knelt behind the roots of a fallen pine. It had taken him nearly an hour in the faint light of dawn, moving no faster than a shadow across a sundial, to travel the short distance from the edge of the clearing to the downed tree. Now he waited patiently, eyes on the deer trail, ears attuned to any change in the forest's rhythm. On the border between the lowland hardwoods where the deer fed and the highland pines where they bedded down at midday, the clearing made a good place to hunt.

Gray wood ash, taken from his fire pit that morning, covered the hunter's skin, hair and beard. Over the ash, he had smeared streaks of black charcoal to break up his outline. By now, he knew how to blend in with the forest. If he did not move at the wrong time, he would appear no more dangerous to his prey than a broken tree stump.

He heard the deer just a moment before it emerged from the dark forest and entered the dawn-lit clearing. Just a twig snapping, but the sound had spoken to him of the size of the animal that made it. It was a large, mature buck, but with its antlers hidden in their velvet covering and only half the size they would reach later in the year. Not till early autumn would the antlers be full grown, unsheathed from their velvet and sharpened by the buck upon the trunks of trees to become the weapons they were meant to be. Near the end of each winter the antlers would be

shed, the breeding season over, the weapons needed for autumn's battles then just so much added weight. New antlers would begin to sprout again next spring, to start the cycle once more.

Provided the buck lived to see the spring, for death was also part of the forest's cycle.

The hunter studied the buck as it followed the feeding trail into the clearing, grazing as it walked. The buck would take a few steps, sniff the air, lower its head to graze briefly and then lift its head again to check its surroundings. The hunter watched unmoving, waiting for the buck to come within range of a sure bowshot. The buck took a few more cautious steps forward and lowered its head to inspect a mushroom.

And still the hunter waited. He had no intention of failing on so important a hunt.

To prepare for this hunt, the hunter had not eaten meat for seven days. He had built a small lodge as a steam bath, first heating rocks to a red glow, then rolling them into a pit lined with boughs of sweet balsam and quickly pouring water over the stones until the air in the lodge grew white with steam. By the morning of the hunt, he had sweated the odor of a meat eater from his body. Rising before dawn, he had washed himself in a clear mountain stream and then held his buckskin loincloth and knife sheath over a fire made smoky with green wood. He wore a flint knife newly made for this hunt, as the bone handle and sinew wrapping of his old knife would hold the scent of his last meat meal. Lastly, he had covered himself with the ash and charcoal from a fire pit made just for this purpose. He knew that if he smelled of anything at all now, it would be only of the faintest trace of wood smoke; as from a long dead fire.

And so the hunter waited behind the downed tree, his bow in hand and an arrow on the string, ready for the draw.

The buck's path took it down the trail to a point even with the fallen tree that concealed the hunter. It lowered its head again to graze upon some tender grass. The hunter drew back his bowstring, taking aim. Just as he was about to release, the buck jerked its head up and sniffed the wind, looking back down the trail.

The hunter froze, limbs straining against the heavy bow. He had missed a shot once when a deer, tense like this one, jumped aside at the release of the bowstring, quickly enough for the arrow to miss. This buck snorted, unhappy with what it had scented, and began to trot down the trail, quartering away from the hunter. Though he could have made such a shot if he had to, the hunter wanted a clean broadside through the heart that would ruin little edible meat. He parted his lips just enough to release his breath and made the bleating sound of a fawn in distress. The buck paused to turn and look back to see if whatever was attacking the fawn would pose a danger to itself.

The hunter willed the fingers of his right hand to relax and the bowstring leapt forward. The arrow flew across the clearing and struck the deer just behind the foreleg, low in the chest where the heart would be. Despite this, the buck ran, disappearing into the darkness of the forest. The hunter heard it crashing through the underbrush, then the sound of a large body falling to the forest floor. The hunter did not move; he waited as his father had taught him, making sure the deer was truly down before approaching.

A squirrel had been cracking into one of last year's acorns at the far end of the clearing when the hunter had first drawn his bow. Now it chattered noisily, alarmed by the crashing of the buck through the brush. A jay took up the cry and began to squawk.

The hunter leaned back against the fallen tree and waited for the alarm to die down. He thought how he must leave this wild country soon and that he would miss it. This was the great deep of the forest and it was very old. So thick were the ancient trees in the valleys that sunlight had not shone broadly upon the forest floor there for a thousand years. Mountains, so tall their summits were ever covered in snow, lorded, like silver-haired wise men, over the woodlands below. Among the foothills, the underlying granite bedrock lay exposed here and there, poking out of the skin of the earth, scattered like the broken bones of a giant fallen from heaven. Mountain-born streams ran cold and clear and fresh here even in midsummer. There were shy deer in the woodlands and great herds of elk in the higher meadows. Long-horned wild cattle that need flee from no bear lived here. Tawny lions prowled the mountainsides and black panthers hunted the deep valleys. Packs of wolves, so cunning and swift that even the great cats feared them, roamed at will here. The wild country was both dangerous and beautiful and the hunter loved it dearly.

After a time, the squirrel and the bird ended their alarm cries and the sounds of the surrounding forest subsided into whispered gossip. The hunter rose and made his way to the buck. It had crossed over the stream that ran just west of the clearing when it collapsed. It now lay upon the far bank, eyes staring and breath stopped, but somehow looking less dead than men did when they died. A dead animal was unmoving, but still whole. A man looked shrunken, deflated somehow—if ever so slightly—in death. His father said that more left a man's body when he died than left an animal's.

The hunter looked skyward. "Thank you, Lord God, Maker of All, for this gift of meat to sustain me, skins to clothe me, bones for my tools and sinews for my bowstring: that I might hunt again."

The hunter dragged the deer back into the clearing. He would keep an eye on the trail while he cleaned the deer in case whatever the buck had scented could prove a danger to him as well.

He drew his flint knife and got to work removing the deer's organs. He worked quickly so that the blood would drain and the meat would cool. Left in the animal too long, the organs would spoil and give the meat a rancid taste. Pinching a bit of skin by the pelvis with his left hand, he inserted the tip of his knife and made a long cut up the belly, cutting through the skin and abdominal muscles. He kept his forefinger along the back of the blade so that the point would not drag through the deer's organs, spilling their contents and tainting the meat. Next he cut across the throat, severing the windpipe and esophagus, and then reached inside the chest to cut the diaphragm loose. He tilted the carcass on its side to spill out the organs. A quick shake and they fell free of their thin connections to the inside of the body cavity.

He set the liver aside on the grass, for he would eat this tonight. His father called the liver "the hunter's portion" and, on their hunts, they traditionally made a meal of the liver before returning home. As he had been taught, the hunter threw the heart as far downwind as he could. If a lion, or worse, a wolf pack, were coming up

the trail, they would likely circle downwind to stalk him, stop to eat the bloody meat, and alert him to their presence. The hunter pulled up a handful of clean grass and began to wipe the blood from the inside of the carcass.

From the sky far above, a hawk cried. The hunter looked up at the bird for a moment as it circled the clearing and then returned to his work. But something about the hawk gnawed at the back of his mind. He paused. Sitting back on his heels, the hunter looked skyward, studying the bird. The hawk had tightened its path and now circled the downed deer.

“Master Hawk,” he said in a low voice, “you may eat carrion in the winter, but now there is too much game in these woods for a great hunter like yourself to wait on another hunter’s kill. You do not fly like you are wounded or ill. What are you about?”

As if in reply, the hawk flew down to land on a tree branch above the deer carcass. The bird looked down at the meat, then cast a glance at the hunter, shook out its wings and folded them back against its body.

Then the hawk turned its head and stared down the trail.

The hunter followed its gaze and sent his hearing out to search the forest in the way of his people. Layer upon layer of sound came to him, the calls of birds, the wind through the trees, the movements of small creatures.

And, off in the distance, there was ...silence.

Without hesitation the hunter stood, left his kill, and slipped into the shadows.

Like the prow of a ship parting the waters, something was pushing a wave of silence before it, rippling through the trees, moving up the deer trail, quieting the forest creatures in its wake.

Unconcerned, the hawk flew down from its perch and landed near the deer. It turned its head this way and that, inspecting the carcass, then hopped over to the pile of organs and began to tear pieces off the liver with its sharp beak.

The hunter made his way to the pines that grew along the north side of the clearing. The lower branches of the younger trees stretched nearly to the ground, making the space underneath each pine a low and shadowed chamber. The hunter had often hidden under these trees to learn the habits of the deer that came to feed here. He checked the angle of the sun and judged it would not shine fully on the area beneath the trees for another two hours. It would be enough. He crawled into the dark space under the nearest pine and waited.

Nearly half an hour passed before the hunter caught the first sign of movement down the trail. A darker shadow emerged from the dimness of the forest. As the shadow neared, it took shape and became a tall man dressed in black traveling clothes. The wide black brim of a black felt hat hid the tall man’s face. A long black cloak covered his lean frame. A long battle sword sheathed in black leather rested at his hip. The tall man lifted his head to sniff the air and hawk-like features emerged from shadow. A long aquiline nose, dark eyes and olive skin showed the man to be an Etruscan; his thick black hair, bearded chin and mustache all bore traces of silver.

He moved as a man accustomed to walking in dangerous places, with care and in silence, stopping frequently to listen to his surroundings. This was a warrior past

his youth, but still strong and swift, wise in the ways of war. But the wild things did not fall silent at his approach for those reasons.

This man was a predator.

They could see it in the way the man's eyes pierced into the shadows without fear and in the way his hands seemed quick and ready, even when at rest. The animals fell silent before him as they would before the coming of a panther, hoping that the dark stalker would pass them by if only they made no sound.

The tall man made his slow, careful way into the clearing. He stopped opposite the young pine that hid the hunter and knelt to examine something on the ground. He drew a dagger from under his cloak, pierced the thing before him and held up the deer heart the hunter had thrown down the trail. The tall man turned his head to study the trees surrounding the clearing. The hunter held his breath, fearing even that slight sound might betray his presence. After a long moment, the tall man let the heart slide off his dagger. He wiped the blade on the grass and then came to his feet sheathing the dagger. As he continued across the clearing, a thin half-smile came to his lips.

The hunter let the tall man get another twenty paces past his hiding place and then slipped out from under the tree and began his stalk. He moved carefully, matching his own step with the tall man's to hide the slight sound his deerskin-clad feet made as they pressed upon the grass. Coming up from behind, his view of the man's hands would be blocked by the tall man's cloak and this worried him.

The tall man came upon the hawk feeding on the deer liver and halted.

The hunter froze.

The tall man looked from the hawk to the piled organs and then to the split deer carcass.

The hunter hesitated. He was still too far away to spring upon the tall man.

Without warning the tall man spun around, his cloak falling behind him, a flash of steel flying from his hand.

Quick as a young lion, the hunter sprang aside as the knife hissed over his head to strike, vibrating, into a tree. In one fluid motion, the hunter leapt to his feet, drawing the steel knife from the wood with his right hand and his flint knife from its sheath with his left, and charged.

The tall man calmly took a step forward to meet the attack. The hunter fell upon him, aiming a ripping stab at the taller man's throat. Without a wasted motion, the tall man stepped aside and parried the hunter's arm. As their arms struck, the hunter felt hard links of ring mail beneath the tall man's sleeve. A slash with a dagger would do nothing against the tall man's limbs or body.

The hunter drew back, switching both his knives to reverse grip, points down, and waited, arms outstretched like a mantis. He would use the knives as hooks to trap the tall man's arms and open the body to attack. Such a grip lessened the hunter's reach but doubled the power behind a stab; he would need such power to penetrate his opponent's hidden armor.

The tall man drew a dagger with his right hand and aimed a low, lunging thrust at the hunter's abdomen. As the hunter moved to parry, the tall man thrust a second blade, concealed in his left hand, at the hunter's face. The hunter tried to trap the man's arm with his own blades, but the older man evaded him like smoke, then renewed his attack, alternating between slashing and thrusting with his two blades.

At the longer ranges, the older man's experience and greater reach gave him the advantage. In close, the hunter's young reflexes and strong limbs gave him the edge.

They clashed once more and the hunter's flint knife snapped in two, the thin, sharp stone too brittle to take the impact of a fight. The hunter dropped the broken blade just as the tall man lunged in.

The hunter parried the thrusting arm, caught his opponent's right hand in his left and twisted it outwards, locking the wrist. He stepped back to pull the tall man off balance and keep away from the man's other blade, while bringing the edge of his own dagger against the sleeve covering the tall man's pulse, ready to cut the wrist. Instead of resisting the lock, the tall man stepped in and threw a left thrust over the top of the locked arms. The hunter swept the thrust aside and circled his arm around his opponent's, pinning the tall man's left arm. The hunter brought his dagger up between them, pointing the tip at his opponent's throat. Now the tall man's longer reach in forward grip became a detriment, as his blade was pinned too far from the hunter's back to reach him. About to order the tall man to yield, the hunter felt three light taps on his spine. The hunter looked over his shoulder and found that the tall man had reversed his grip on his dagger and freed it to work.

The hunter smiled and released the older man.

The man took a step back, sheathed his dagger and bowed.

"Well, having a year's holiday in the woods has not slowed you down *too* much," said the tall man.

The hunter cocked his head to the side as if the man spoke in a foreign tongue.

"Yes, Daniel, I understand," said the tall man. "After all this time alone, another man's voice must come strange to your ears."

At the sound of his name, Daniel broke into a broad grin.

"My ears may be slow to catch your words, but my eyes are glad at the sight of you!"

He stepped forward to hand the throwing knife back to its owner, resting it on an open palm, handle first, as he had been taught. "It is good to see you again, Master-Instructor Moor."

Moor did not speak in reply, but gave the half-smile that Daniel remembered so well, a smile that never seemed to include the Etruscan's eyes. Moor sheathed his second dagger before taking the throwing knife and returning it to its place up his sleeve. He retrieved his cape from the ground and donned it. With its shoulders capped with hard leather, the cloak needed no clasp to keep it in place, save when riding at a gallop; yet it could be dropped with a shrug of the shoulders. That Moor did not need to unclasp his cloak before a fight was a small thing, but Moor had many small tricks like that: little things to give him even the slightest edge in a fight.

"It is good to see you also," Moor finally replied. He paused, and then added, "My prince."

"What did you call me?" asked Daniel in surprise.

"King Absalom died ten months ago," said Moor. "Absalom being without an heir, succession fell to his cousin, your father."

The Etruscan studied the young man's reaction to this news.

"Are my father and mother safe?" asked Daniel. "And the realm?"

“The realm goes better than it did,” Moor replied. “And the King and Queen sleep less with their new duties, but sleep well nonetheless.”

Daniel nodded his head towards the downed deer. “Tell me more of them while I finish with the buck.”

They walked to the downed deer, the prince deep in thought. The hawk flew from the gut pile to land on a tree stump nearby. Daniel trimmed off the piece of liver the bird had been eating from and tossed it to the hawk.

“I think Theol has left us enough for tonight’s dinner,” said Daniel offhandedly as he worked.

Moor made no comment. He had eaten worse things than the leavings of a hawk.

“Master Moor, unless I am off my mark, the summer equinox is seven days away. You have come for me a week early. How did you find me?”

“Your father ordered me to return you to him earlier than the allotted time. I knew the stream where you began your journey, and I knew how far you would travel in three days.” He nodded towards the hawk. “Theol led me closer, for he knows the look of a man hunting and hopes for a share of the meat, as he receives on my own hunts. After that, it was just a matter of cutting your trail and following it,” said Moor as if it were a small thing.

Daniel finished preparing the deer. He hoisted the carcass up onto his shoulders and led the way to his camp. Daniel thought back on the last time he had seen his teacher, nearly a year ago in the dining hall of his family’s home north of Eboracium. Moor had stood next to his father as his parents gave him their blessings for his journey. That had been the first day of summer of the year he turned twenty. The appointed time had come for him to spend a year alone in the wilderness, the traditional preparation for his travel east across the ocean to the Isle of Logres, where he would study the art of governing free men with his grandfather Anak.

Four young men had gone out into the wilderness that year. The ship sailed north, up the Great River, “The River of the Tears of the Clouds” as the old people called it. At sunset of the third day, they set anchor for the night at the outlet of a small stream. The next morning at dawn the four young men drew straws, choosing Daniel to leave the ship first. The others laughed and slapped him on the back and said he was lucky to go first and made a brave show, but all knew that Daniel went into danger, as they would soon. Then the ship would sail north for another day and, on the morrow, it would be the turn of another. When Daniel had made his last farewell, he stripped off his clothing, stepped up on the ship’s railing, dove into the cool river waters and swam ashore. For the next three days he walked, following the stream, its water his only nourishment. Each night he gathered dry tree leaves into a mound and crawled into them as both blanket and bed. The morning of the fourth day he broke his fast with fish he snatched from beneath the stream bank, cooked on a fire started by a fire bow made from a willow limb and the inner bark of a birch spun into cord. After his meal, he made a spear and a hatchet of stone and wood.

Early that same evening, at the time that animals come down to the stream to drink, he took the first of many deer that year. What meat he did not eat that night, he cut into thin strips and dried over his fire. He made the deer’s sinews into bowstrings and its bones into fine tools. He took the deerskin, removed the hair and, using a paste made from the deer’s brain, cured the skin over a smoky fire. From the

hide he cut a loincloth and a pair of short boots. From green willow limbs he made a pack to carry his food and bone tools.

When he had finished his preparations, he set out away from the stream to find a good place to make camp. A smaller stream fed into the one that had led him inland and he followed this north for a day and a half. He made his cabin under a small rock overhang partway up the side of a hill. Here he would be protected from the wind by the hill and high enough to stay dry. Animal trails passed further down the hillside, but not close enough that his camp disturbed them greatly. If he could, he would do his hunting far from his own camp. Any game living close to his cabin would be his emergency larder; he would not hunt these unless in dire need.

He built his cabin from the broken rock that winter's frost thrust up from beneath the forest floor each year. He chose a place under the ledge with just enough room to stand upright and scraped off the top layer of soil. He built up thick walls of rock with mud and dry grass for mortar. He made a fire pit inside, near the entrance, and built up a bed of logs and pine boughs along the rear wall. That fall he would also build a small stone sweat lodge to strengthen his body against the cold. He had water close by and meadows, hardwoods, fruit trees and good hunting grounds a morning's hike away. This place would be his home for the coming year.

For the last thousand years, it had been the practice of the young men of the House of Asher to go off into the wilderness for a year of solitude to strengthen their wills and test themselves.

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The morning after Moor's arrival, Daniel packed the few things he would take from his camp. For himself, he kept only a flint knife, a wooden cup and buckskin shirt, pants and boots. For his father, he would bring back the black bearskin coat that had kept Daniel warm all winter; for his mother he packed two pairs of doeskin slippers and a basket of (rather hurriedly) smoked venison for their table.

Daniel and Moor dismantled the cabin, prying the stones apart with sticks and kicking the walls down. By spring, a man could walk through what had been Daniel's home for nearly a year and not know that any other man had ever trodden there. Then the two men followed the stream Daniel first used on his journey, back to the Great River where a ship awaited them.