



Prologue

His running footsteps broke the silence of the sleeping woods, and his heavy breathing was loud enough to sound like a thousand windmills had taken flight, at least in his ears. The runner couldn't pause to admire the beauty of nature as he passed it in haste, yet, even though he was physically fit enough to run for hours, he was feeling the strain of the chase.

The light coming from the heavens was dim, yet it was enough to disperse and cast shadows from the trees in the way of the running man. He didn't falter to check his direction; he knew those woods like the back of his hand, and he was taking every advantage he can in this race to the dawn.

He stopped for a moment, trying to hear the sounds of pursuit, and even though he heard nothing, he knew they still followed him doggedly. He knew they were as silent as most of the forest predators, and he also knew if he lost a step or stopped for long, they would be quick to pounce on him.

His hood and cloak should have flown behind him as he ran, but they were laying still, implying the heaviness of the material they were made of, thus allowing them to stream behind his speeding form without hinderance or much of a sound.

He adjusted the bundle he carried on his shoulder and resumed his running. As his footsteps sped on the forest floor, so did his breathing and heartbeats, but he had no time for a respite, he had to complete what he came here to do.

A single owl flew overhead, sounding its hoots for the world to hear, oblivious to the running man and his quest, or the peril he was trying to avoid. A thousand little creatures noted his passing for a moment, then forgot all about him the next, his race was personal, and it didn't mean much for all those small inhabitants of the quiet forest.

He sped feverishly under the dim light, shinning from a thousand small diamonds lining the roof of the world. Minutes slipped through to hours, and he was starting to feel more than just the strain of the chase, he was getting tired, but again, he had to meet his quest, it had to be fulfilled, a lot rested literally on his shoulder.

He stopped to look ahead, produced a small object from his pocket, which looked like an incomplete sphere, cut from the lower third. He pointed it to the heavens above him, and it flashed for a single moment, then a ray shot from its lower cut part to his north.

He inhaled a deep breath and continued his race. A few minutes later, maybe half an hour, he arrived at a dense fence of ferns, which he pushed aside and entered into a clearing which was secluded by an almost complete wall of green.

The night lights shone on the floor of the clearing, and a breeze wafted softly, carrying the scents of the woods to the running man. He approached and rustled some leaves of the underbrush, then the man stepped slowly to the center of the clearing, lowered his burden, and kneeled to breathe. He had accomplished his mission thus far, now was the time to prepare for the next part of his quest.

All he had to do now was wait, as the others would soon join him to decide on the next step of the endeavor awaiting them.

He sat on the lush green grass which permeated the clearing, and started to meditate to regulate his body functions, as the minutes passed, he had regained a lot of the energy lost to the race, and his heart beats ebbed to an inaudible level.

The ferns parted to show another man entering the clearing in a run, also carrying a bundle on his shoulder. The man sitting on the grass waited for the newcomer to manage his breathing before starting to debrief him.

The newcomer lowered his bundle and accidentally dropped it off the last ten inches to the ground, a soft moan could be heard from within the folds of the cloth, wrapping the bundle.

He sat facing the first man and started his own meditation to regulate his breathing, and as he did this, the first man brought out another object which appeared to be some kind of dull metal tiny teapot, and he approached it to the bundle and its occupant who was starting to move. In another moment, the bundle occupant was as silent as before the second man dropped it to the ground.

The second man finally turned to the first. "I see that you have acquired your target."

The first man nodded and said, "As you did yours."

The first and second man sat silently and patiently, without any further discussions running forth between them, the night was still young, and they still had to wait.

Some minutes later, yet another man stumbled through the clearing, and promptly he fell to his knees, as he fell, the two men jumped to his aid. He spat blood and coughed violently as the two held him in place for the cough fit to pass. Eventually, he calmed down and started to breathe in a labored yet firm manner.

The second man looked from their injured colleague to the first man, who followed his eyes, which fell on the shoulders of the last man to join them, and even in this dim light, it was evident he lacked the bundle the other two had raced to this spot with.

After the last comer regained some of his composure, the first asked him, "Did you fail to bring the target along?"

The last comer took a long breath and said, "I didn't. I procured the target at the precise time and location."

The second man rushed to question him. "Then where is he?"

Before the last comer could utter a single word, he looked in surprise at his chest as a spot of fresh blood bloomed on it, then his head jerked up as an arrow penetrated his neck, yet even before his head settled back on his chest, the two other men bolted up, grabbed the bundles and started to run.

They were found out of this much they were certain, even though they didn't know how the pursuers could see past the shrouding ferns of the clearing, as they were supposed to block the vision of any who didn't know of its existence. Right after the assault on the third man, the pursuers abandoned their silent approach, as their ululations filled the night air with shrill cries of blood-thirst.

The race was on, and the pursuers had two advantages on the fleeing hooded men, the first being their numbers, which allowed some of them to stay behind and shoot their arrows at the fleeing figures, the other is that they didn't seem to care about their breathing or heart rate as they bounded through the night, screaming and cheering like a pack of hyenas.

The pursuers were gaining on the fleeing men, but the hooded men had a mission, and it had to be accomplished, and their determination was their main driving force in the race.

Suddenly, the second man fell behind with a loud cry. The first man could only afford his colleague a passing glance. In it, he saw the arrow protruding from the second man's thigh. He turned his back to his colleague and continued running, all sacrifices were given to this mission, even a sacrifice of life.

His feet pushed the ground in a fury, trampling the serene carpet of the forest as he bound towards the edge of the woods. In the distance, loomed a mountain, and he was aiming straight for it.

To his luck, the pursuers fell back, probably to finish off his colleague, and to steal his precious burden. He took advantage of this as he finally surpassed their race to his direction, and reached a crack in the wall of the mountain.

He thought as he ran, this might not be enough for the original aim of the plan, but he will deliver his target. Nevertheless, maybe this was how the fates mandated for it to happen.

He finally reached the opening in the side of the mountain and slowed down, he eased down his burden and removed the cloth wraps from it, inside, was a sleeping boy of no more than six years, completely peaceful as he breathed slowly, never for a second did the passenger of the hooded guy feel the race —another one of those objects which lined the hooded man's pockets did the trick.

Now, he had to do one last trick with the last of his hidden objects, and maybe, just maybe, his sacrifice will not go wasted.

He pulled a small chalice and then drew the sword hanging by his side from its scabbard and passed its sharp edge over his palm. As the blood started to flow freely, he brought the lip of the chalice to his wounded hand and collected some drops of blood in it, enough to coat the inner walls of the cup. He then brought the filled cup to the head of the child and poured its contents on his sleeping form. For a moment, nothing happened, then some kind of smoke started to pour from the cup, slowly it covered the entire body of the child, and in another moment, it was gone, and so was the child.

The draw of power was enough to knock the hooded man to the ground, forcing him to his knees. His breathing came in short labored bursts, and his heart beats came erratically as he tried in vain to enter the meditative state taught to his kind, as a means to control their bodies.

He knew he will never be ready when his pursuers arrived, and he was certain they would arrive any moment now, but at least he resolved, he did his part of the mission, and he was ready to face death with a welcoming embrace.

As his heart rate started to steady, so did his wait for his pursuers, as they bounded the mouth of the cave with all the vigor of hungered hyenas.

He drew his sword from its scabbard, kissed the blade for the last time, and took on a defensive stance.

It was not long now, as his blade clashed with the first of the assailants blades, turning it around with a flick of his wrist, sending the sword of his assailant flying to the side, he then took a side turn, slicing through the mid-torso of the man in front of him, drawing his first blood of the night.

More came, and he used every trick and maneuver in his repertoire to harvest as many of his enemies as he could.

Blood covered his entire form, and it seeped from his wounds and the wounds he inflicted on his enemies, through the heavy metal plates under his hood. Still, he fought.

The fight dragged along the night, but the outcome was decided before it even started. Around twenty bodies draped in red suits and cloaks, with an insignia of a burning tree on their chests, laid around the falling man.

When he was finally dragged by the remaining assailants from the mouth of the cave, bleeding from a hundred cuts all over his body, he was smiling. He knew that soon enough, he would die, and the leader of the assailants would never acquire the location of the boy from his dead corpse.

The men dragging his body drew him to a clearing in the land at the foot of the mountain, then they started meticulously to bind him with hard leather straps. When they were done, one of their numbers approached the defeated man with a framed drawing, no more than a hand in size, and touched it to the dying man.

In a moment, a warm light poured from the framed painting, and the wounds around the body of the defeated man started to bind, and the blood stopped flowing from them.

He moaned his protests, but the man with the framed painting continued working its magic on the bound man till he was satisfied he will not die of his afflicted wounds.

A woman came slowly across the plane, headed to the defeated man with an annoyed expression drawn on her face, accentuated by her green suit and the dragon breathing fire insignia on its chest.

She approached the man and inspected his wounds critically until she found a spot on his side, which was not healed by the magic of the framed painting, and she kicked it viciously.

As the man's moan of pain quieted, she kneeled beside his head, pulled it up, and said in a strained voice, "Where is he?"