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Opening extract from

Wilds of the Wolf

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THE FALCON CHRONICLES: BOOK THREE

WILDS OF THE WOLF

STEVE BACKSHALL



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A boy and girl walked in single file along a barely perceptible trail. Despite being in their early teens, they somehow seemed at home alone in the Arctic forest. The boy was in the lead, stopping every few minutes to crouch in the snow. He removed one thick woollen mitten, and pressed his pink fingertips into a footprint, tracing the shape of the toes, the claws, the heel pad. It was as if he was feeling for some warmth left behind by the animal they were following.

He looked up at the sky. Watery blue, with weak sunlight filtering through the suspended ice crystals of high cirrus clouds. The wispy mare's tails were the first signs of an approaching high-pressure system. "The weather's going to change," Saker said. "We need to make a good camp tonight."

Sinter didn't ask how he knew. He would tell her in good time, but while he was concentrating on tracking,

she didn't want to distract him. Saker was volatile at the best of times, but when he was intent on following a trail it was as if he was in a trance. Their target animal had taken a path through the spindly trees of the taiga forest, thin Siberian spruce and larch trees drooping under their white load, like starving vagrants waiting in a soup-kitchen queue. It's no accident the trees are so slender. They have no time to grow. The Arctic summer lasts no more than a month or two, and even then night-time temperatures are freezing. Besides, broad boughs would collect too much snow, and collapse under the weight.

The local Nenet people called this remote Russian peninsula the Yamal. It means "The End of the World". Looking around, it was easy to see why.

Saker stopped so suddenly Sinter practically walked into him. He was silent, still staring at the prints in front of him. Sinter was about to ask him if he was all right, when he broke into delighted laughter.

"How about that!" he said. "I've been following this for hours, and never noticed till now!"

Sinter crept forward to see what he was looking at. In front of them the single deep track suddenly diverged, and an identical but much shallower trail of paw-prints branched out then came back to the main trail.

"What's happened? Has he stopped and doubled back or something?" Sinter asked.

"Well, that's just it," Saker replied. "There is no he. Or there might be, but not just one. We've been watching this

trail like hawks, and I've only just noticed there's more than one animal. There could be five or six of them."

"Really?" she asked, surprised. "How does that work?"

"Look back at the marks we've made," Saker said. She looked behind her. There was only one set of footprints not two. They'd been walking single file, and she'd been putting her feet deliberately into his footsteps. It was easier that way; his feet had compressed the snow so she didn't sink so much.

"The wolves have been doing exactly what we do," Saker said. "It saves energy, and makes it much more difficult for other animals to assess how big the pack is. They're so canny!"

Sinter stared at the wolf tracks. It was all she could do to tell them apart from lynx, or Arctic fox, but Saker saw a whole complex story, as if he was reading a book.

"They're moving easily," Saker went on. "They certainly don't know they're being tracked. Look at this stride pattern, it's relaxed, they're in no hurry."

"If only they knew," Sinter said, looking down at the other set of prints alongside those of the animal track. Prints made by large leather boots.

Saker and Sinter had been following the animal tracks for two days before they'd seen the human prints, and realised they were not alone. The right kind of snow is the best medium for picking up and holding a track. If it gets too icy then the animal just skids about on top leaving no

trace. Too soft, and the prints will be a mess and impossible to read. They had perfectly consolidated snow, exactly firm enough to take an imprint, as if it had been pressed into plaster of Paris.

It had been too cold to snow these last few days, which also worked in their favour, as otherwise the tracks would have been covered. The footprints stretched off into the woodland in an enticing manner, beckoning them, like a trail of breadcrumbs left behind by a child in a fairy-tale.

Sinter recalled how Saker had reacted when he'd discovered them. He'd turned into an over-excited bloodhound, and she'd felt she needed a leash to prevent him bolting down the path after them.

"Here, here!" he yelped. "The toes on his left foot are a little deeper than his right. Maybe he's injured." Sinter realised he was talking about the human prints now. And then, "No! He's carrying something over his left shoulder, so he's heavier on that side. And here, this is why!" He pointed to a line through waist-deep snow. "It's a rifle, being carried muzzle down, it's trailed through the snow."

He sprinted another hundred metres through the silent frozen wood, then stopped.

"And here he's gone down on one knee to look at the tracks. He stayed here for at least a minute." Saker brushed a few crumbs from the ground. "And he ate a cookie!" Now he was seeing the tracks so clearly that it was as if the man was walking right in front of them. Saker watched the ghost, seeing what he would do next.

"He sped up," Saker said. "He wants to be home before his wife puts dinner on the table!"

Sinter was bemused. All she could see for sure was that they were following a big man. He had big feet, and his prints were much deeper than her own, so he was certainly much heavier.



It had been nearly an hour, and still Saker trotted alongside the prints as quickly as he could push through the snow pack. However, Sinter noticed that his enthusiasm had faded. Instead his mood had become dark, brooding. Something in the tracks was troubling him. Eventually she couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"What is it Saker? Something's different isn't it?"

He stopped and frowned. For a second she thought he might snap at her, but instead he replied without looking at her. "I thought the wolves were too smart for him. I thought the hunter was just aimlessly following the tracks, and would never catch them. Now I'm not so sure."

"Why not?" Sinter asked.

"He's biding his time, never speeding up or wasting his energy. And he's taking shortcuts . . . it's as if he knows where the wolves will go. This isn't the first time he's been on their trail."

"But surely that won't work," she said, trying to soothe him. "The wolves here know to be cautious."

"They do," Saker responded. "And most of the year they range over big distances. You could never predict what they'll do or where they'll go. But it's different now. The winter's been hard, they're hungry, and they need to hunt. All their prey, the elk and deer are in the valleys where it's a bit warmer, and they can dig down to the grass under the snow. While the food is here, the wolves will be too, and they're keeping to fairly obvious trails."

Sinter nodded. That made perfect sense – well, as much as anything here made sense to her. She had spent her whole life in the constant embrace of tropical heat. This was the first time she had walked in snow. The bitter blast of a Siberian winter was a tough way to learn.

Saker continued. "If I can figure that out, then the hunter certainly can. He's planning an ambush."

Sinter's heart sank. It was less than a month ago that the two of them had been sitting in the rainforest, their laptop connected to the outside world by satellite link, and first learned of the horrors facing the Yamal peninsula. Their friend Minh had sent a series of emails and photos, detailing how black gold; natural gas and oil, had been found. All of a sudden billionaire businessmen were plundering the frozen frontier, and the native people and animals simply had nowhere to hide. As the outsiders came, the first animal they sought to destroy was the one they feared most; the wolf. Within a few years, they could be destroyed.

Saker and Sinter had made a pact to become a tight Clan, dedicated to making a difference. They hadn't yet settled on much of a plan. So far all they had was a vague idea to travel to Yamal, to get a sense of what was going on. When they figured out who was most guilty, they would deliver a carved wooden bullet as a warning. If the warning wasn't heeded, then they'd think about doing something more extreme.

It turned out the whole situation was more complicated than they'd anticipated. Wolves were being killed in huge numbers by hunters and local people, but also by rich businessmen, who would take time out while visiting the gas and oil fields, to head off on a snowmobile and shoot a few wolves for fun. Finding one person who could be held responsible was going to be half the battle. They'd decided to head to the main oil and gas refinery, and scope it out, but had picked up the trail of a good-sized wolf pack, and then the hunter's tracks.

Saker stiffened. Something was wrong. The wolves had suddenly spread out, they were no longer walking in each other's footprints and their steps were cautious. Perhaps they were about to start hunting.

"The alpha male has picked up a scent," Saker said. "Look here, his nose has made a little furrow as he sniffed the ground."

"But there's no sign of prey," Sinter said. She was right; there were no elk or caribou tracks, no places where deer had been nibbling bark or saplings.

"But there is blood," Saker stated, his voice thick with misery.

"So they made a kill?" Sinter asked hopefully.

"No." He breathed out and knelt in the snow again. "A wolf kill is unmistakable. The pack all feed together, they brace back with their forepaws – like this." He held his arms straight and down, mimicking the pose of a wolf feeding. "They tear their heads from side to side to rip out chunks of meat. What remains of the carcass looks as if someone's put a grenade into it and blown it up. There would be blood, fur, bits of bone everywhere, like a butcher's shop floor."

His voice shook. "This was much more clinical." He picked up a discarded shell casing. The snow around it had melted from the warmth of the bullet spat from the hunter's rifle. The simple piece of brass had grim significance. A wolf had died here.

"At least it was quick," Sinter said. The two of them had already seen the agony caused by leghold traps, and heard tales of wolves chewing their own legs off to escape the vice-like grip of those barbaric devices.

"The death was quick," Saker replied. "But the alpha male has been killed. The pack has no leader. They're starving, the last thing they need is to waste energy battling over who takes control . . ."

His last few words were drowned by the roar of a raging dragon in the treetops above their heads. Sinter dropped to the ground clasping her hands over her ears, as a blizzard

whipped around them caused by the fierce downdraft of the behemoth flying overhead. Flurries bit into her cheeks and blinded her. From behind her fingers she could just make out Saker stumbling to his feet and sprinting as fast as the deep snow would allow him, towards the dragon as it flew off above the treetops. Saker broke out of the trees, finding himself at the top of a ridge-line. Below lay the broad expanse of a valley, surrounded by ominous-looking mountains. The huge Chinook helicopter that had just blasted its way over their heads bore off towards the horizon, the whop-whop-whop of its rotors slowly fading.

There at the meeting of land and sky was its destination. For days now, the only sign they'd seen of human beings was the one set of hunter's footprints. But far away on the plain was a tangled morass of concrete cooling towers, pylons spewing flame and smoke, vast grey buildings with helicopters and snowmobiles whining around them like mechanical gnats. It was as if someone had taken Batman's Gotham city, dumped it in the Siberian wastelands, then set it on fire.

Sinter came up alongside Saker, gasping at the chill of the wind-blown ice in her throat. She saw familiar steel forming in his dark eyes. She saw he had one pink hand free from its woollen mitten and was fingering something as if it was a sacred charm. Without looking, she knew it was a carved wooden bullet.