

Blood of the Hunter
By Thomas James
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The newly fallen snow helped to make the tracking easier. Makula's breathe frosted in the cool midday air, his ice blue eyes peering intently into the hidden depths of the forest. Hunter's blood ran through his veins and the heart of a warrior beat in his breast. The thought of Lillus being taken by surprise and losing her life was reason enough for Makula's intense readiness.

Makula paused in his tracking, his sharp eyes detecting a flicker of movement. Muscles tensed on his 175-pound frame ready to spring. Makula locked his gaze onto a section of scant foliage, as a female deer pushed through and froze in place. Innocent, soft, brown eyes met the cold hard eyes of the hunter. After a heartbeat, the doe bounded away kicking up tufts of snow. The deer would have provided much needed food for Makula's tribe, but he did not pursue. This hunt was not for the tribe.

The hunter returned to tracking his prey, the trail leading him to an ice-choked river. The turbulent waters paralleled the inner turmoil Makula suffered. An area of packed snow and bones of small game indicated where his quarry had rested. Makula scoured the area, but could not find any tracks leading away from the site. The prey seemed to have vanished.

Makula's sharp eyesight picked out a fluttering motion across the river. He picked his way across the ice, determined to find his prey. A sharp crack was the only warning the hunter received before the ice gave way. Makula plunged into the freezing water. He could feel the river flow tugging at him, pushing him downriver. Desperate the hunter clawed at the ice. The already weakened ice continued to give way beneath his frantic struggle. Chunks of broken, craggy, ice slammed into Makula, hampering his attempts to save himself. With a final surge of strength, born of desperation, the hunter hurled his body onto solid ice. Makula lay panting heavily for a moment before he rose up on his unsteady legs, shook his sodden fur coat and continued to the river's edge.

The need for rest was strong, but could not compete with the need for vengeance. Makula headed back upriver. The hunter returned to the location of his unexpected plunge into the icy river. On a broken branch, Makula found a piece of his prey's pelt, beneath which the hunter located the tracks of his prey.

An easterly wind began, bringing with it a new snow fall. The hunter picked his way through the forest undergrowth, the memory of Lillus driving him forward. Occasionally, clumps of snow would shower down on Makula, as snow-laden boughs released their burdens. Makula followed the tracks to a stand of birch trees, the white bark a shade darker than the falling snow. At the base of one tree, the hunter spied a discoloration. Moving closer, his strong sense of smell picked out the sharp tangy odor of urine. A low growl sounded in the hunter's throat. This was where his prey had marked its territory. Snarling, Makula marked the territory as his own and set off once again.

Makula noted the sky-both's advance across the heavens and the lengthening shadows. Soon it would be time for the sky-sister to rise from her slumber and cast her silvery radiance upon her realm. That would be his time for vengeance.

A roar interrupted the hunter's musings; like that made by the sky-father when angered. It was the roar of his prey. The roar Makula had heard before the slaying of his life-mate, Lillus. Makula knew to be cautious of the thunder-stick, but quickened his steps to a loping stride, eager for confrontation.

Makula loped through the mounting snow. His keen senses, honed from years of hunting, picked out movement ahead and to his left. Three strides took him to the area just as a winter-hare burst from beneath the scrub brush. The hare took no more than two hops, when powerful jaws exploded from beneath the snow, catching the hare within its sharp teeth, shattering the hare's delicate bones.

Cautiously the hunter approached the still twitching form, alert and ready to strike out at any potential threat. Makula studied the carcass entrapped within the unmoving jaws, its warm blood cooling quickly in the snow. The hunter felt that no danger lingered and offered up a silent prayer to the earth-mother for her obvious gift and blessing.

The snows ceased to fall shortly after the shining sky-brother set down to rest. Overhead, the sky-sister appeared. Her silvery glow creating sparkling stars on the virgin snows. Off in the distant hills, Makula could hear his kindred offer praise up to the sky-sister. The hunter suppressed his urge to howl not wanting to alert his prey.

Makula resumed his tracking. Silently he padded through the snowdrifts, his yellow-gray fur blending easily among the night shadows. Above the hunter, a snow-owl glided in a silent dance, searching for prey of its own. Makula respected the nocturnal hunter and a kindred spirit.

The sky-sister marched across the heavens, illuminating the forest below. Makula's olfactory sense detected the odor of burning wood long before he witnessed the flames. Rounding a hillock, Makula spotted the glowing flames within a copse of stunted fir trees. Finally, the hunter neared the end of his quest.

Once again, Makula resisted the urge to howl at the moon. With his ears laid back flat against his skull, Makula slinked forward, his body stretched full out in the snow. Makula could feel his hunter's blood rising to the fore and his warrior's heart swelling with determination.

Silently, the hunter crept between the trees, blending in with the night. There before Makula sat his prey; the slayer of his life-mate, Lillus. The hunter waited, studying his prey. Sensing no other life in the area, Makula prepared for his attack.

Rising up, Makula ran towards his quarry. As he began a well-timed leap, the snow beneath the hunter's front paws gave way, tumbling Makula into a pit. The hunter could not stifle a yelp of surprise and pain as he struck the pits bottom.

As Makula shook away the shock, he heard his prey moving closer. Makula could feel his prey's glare upon him. Looking up, the hunter stared into the eyes of his prey, and knew he faced a superior hunter. Makula knew that hunter's blood flowed through the veins of his quarry, knew also the warrior's heart that beat within its breast. He knew also that he could not match the cruelty he saw in his quarry's eyes.

Makula let out a howl of despair and looked into the mouth of the thunder-stick. His quest failed, his vengeance lost, his pride shattered.

End.