

THE FIRST HUNT

Crouched in the shadow of a silver birch cluster, I lifted my head and sniffed the breeze. The earthy musk of damp moss and soil filled my nostrils, but there was a hint of something else; something warm and wild.

I remained still, listening for the rustle of movement.

There.

Something ahead, hidden in the dappled green of the forest.

Without taking my eyes off the trees, I reached down and snatched a pinch of last autumn's leaves. Brown and dusty, they blew towards me when I sprinkled them in the air, and I knew that whatever was out there would not be able to smell me. I was under the wind.

My grip tightened on the bow in my left hand, and with my right, I reached back to slip an arrow from the quiver. Its point was sharp and clean.

Nocking the arrow to the bowstring, I stepped forward without making a sound. I paused, then took another step, moving slowly. Ahead, the forest floor was littered with dry leaves and twigs. But I was a hunter. The best in our village. I would pass over them like a ghost.

Stepping on to the coppery, mottled carpet of leaves, I kept my foot flat. Time stood still. My heartbeat slowed. My muscles were relaxed and my mind was calm.

And then I saw it. Not far ahead. A shape through the branches.

It was the biggest animal I had ever seen, standing proud and straight, its head turned in my direction. Its antlers were enormous, spanning at least as wide as I could hold out my arms.

Straightening my back and taking a deep breath, I raised the bow and drew the string to my cheek. I closed one eye and aimed, allowing my breath to leave my lungs in a steady stream.

Now.

When I released the string, the arrow hummed across the forest. It cut through the air, covering the short distance in an instant: a deadly missile of wood and feather, fired straight and true.

But the arrow clipped a swaying branch and deflected to the right. It twisted and spun, clattering against the trunk of a silver birch and falling into the leaves like a harmless twig.

'Damn.'

Right away I reached for another arrow, put it to the string, drew and fired.

This time the arrow made it through the branches, but its power was gone by the time it reached the deer. When it struck the animal's hindquarters, it bounced off and was swallowed by the undergrowth.

'No way!'

I moved closer and fired again, this time almost hitting the place where the buck's heart would be, but once again the arrow failed to pierce its skin.

'I'm dead,' I said, lowering the bow. 'I'm never going to pass the Trial.'

Reality came crashing back around me. I wasn't the best hunter in my village. I wasn't even the best hunter my age. I was hopeless. My bow was weaker than the other boys' because I wasn't strong enough to draw anything bigger, and my aim was worse.

I sighed as I trudged across to the shape behind the trees and pushed through the branches to stand beside it. From a distance it looked just right, but close up it was nothing more than a pile of sticks and moss with an old coffee-coloured blanket thrown over the top. Dad and I had built it last month for me to practise on, right here in the trees behind our house.

I cursed and put another arrow to my bow, and shot the dummy at point-blank range. The tip of the arrow thumped through the blanket and straight into the fake animal's heart.

I shook my head. Maybe I'd be all right if I could get

close to something. Or maybe I'd get lucky, or—
Footsteps behind me.

I turned and waited, knowing it was Dad because I recognized the timing and weight of his steps. He was a big man, with a long stride, but was light on his feet.

'Oskari,' he said, holding the branches aside and looking through. 'Getting in some last-minute practice?'

I brushed the hair from my eyes and shrugged, trying to ignore the creeping sense of dread at what was to come. Tomorrow was my thirteenth birthday, but before I could become a man, I had to face the Trial.

'Well . . .' He hesitated, as if he didn't quite know what to say. 'Everyone'll be waiting. Are you ready to go?'

'I guess.' But I stayed where I was.

Dad watched me for a moment, then came over and put a hand under my chin, lifting my face so I had to look at him. 'It's okay,' he said. 'You'll be fine.'

I nodded, and tried to smile. But it didn't feel like I was going to be fine.