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Opening extract from

Big Game

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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.

THE PLACE OF SKULLS

My stomach was turning somersaults as I propped my bow in the corner of my bedroom and left the house.

Dad was waiting in the SUV, with the engine already running. He was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. 'Come on!' he called through the open window. 'We have to go.'

I pulled the front door of the house shut behind me and jogged over to the vehicle, but when I went around to open the passenger-side door, Dad shook his head at me.

'On the way to the Trial, you sit in the back,' he said. 'When it's over, you can sit in the front like a man. It's the way things are done.'

Without replying, I climbed into the back. It was a long time since I'd sat there, and it made me feel small.

Dad crunched the SUV into gear and drove away. He glanced at me in the rear-view mirror and ran his fingers across his beard as if he was thinking hard about something. 'I know you don't really want to do it, but tradition is tradition.'

'I *do* want to do it,' I said.

He opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it and closed the window instead. Right away, the cool breeze stopped and it felt very hot in the back. The air was stale and smelled of old boots.

Through the village, the pot-holed road was lined with waiting vehicles, and as we passed them, they beeped their horns and fell into convoy behind us. I tried to forget they were all following *me*. They were coming to *my* Trial.

'Do the elk,' Dad said.

I took a deep breath, cupped my hands around my mouth, and tried to make the sound he had taught me.

'Myygh! Myygh!'

Dad frowned. 'Well, it's close, but sounds a bit more like an old man snoring. Maybe your deer is better?'

When I tried to make that sound, though, it was more like a drowned cat. Dad shook his head and turned his attention back to the road.

I closed my eyes and wished I were somewhere else. 'Sorry.'

'You'll be fine, Oskari,' he said for about the fifth time. But it sounded more like he was trying to persuade

himself that I wasn't going to let him down. 'Everything you need is on the ATV. But if you remember what I showed you, you won't need any of it. In my day, there *were* no ATVs to get around, only our feet, and we managed just fine. Now, tell me what are the two most important things.'

'Umm . . .'

'Come on, Oskari. The two most important things.'

'My knife.'

'Yes.'

'And my fire kit.'

'You have them with you?'

'Right here.' I patted the knife hanging from my belt, then touched the pocket of my jacket where there was a waterproof tub containing my fire kit.

'Good boy. As long as you have those two things, you can survive anywhere and anything. Carry them on you at all times. Never put them in your pack, and don't lose them. Out there, they can be the difference between life and death.'

'It's just one night,' I said, trying to make myself sound brave.

'Doesn't matter. One night in the wilderness is enough. Anything can go wrong; you know that. The knife and the fire kit will keep you safe and warm and well fed for as long as you need. And you will have the bow, of course.'

The bow. Just the thought of it made my stomach go cold.

I sighed and turned to look through the dirty back

window, swaying and jostling with the movement of the vehicle. The village was long gone now, lost in the trees as we climbed through the foothills of the tallest mountain in this part of the wilderness – Mount Akka.

Behind us, the trailer rattled on the bumpy road, with Dad's all-terrain vehicle secured to the top of it. The ATV strained against the chains as if it were alive and desperate to break free. With its chipped green paint, that big old muddy quad bike had been around for as long as I could remember, and Dad was always fixing it or trying to trade for parts because he couldn't afford a new one.

Behind that was the line of vehicles following us: an assorted convoy of old rusted pickups and four-wheel-drive SUVs. Some of them were loaded with equipment and covered with tarps that flapped in the wind; others pulled rickety old caravans. I watched them for a moment, and it made me feel sick just thinking about all the men inside them: men who were coming up the mountain to watch me take the Trial, men who were expecting me to fail because I was neither the strongest nor the best at anything.

Mum always said I was a slow grower. When I came back from school with bruises, she would make me hot chocolate and say it was only a matter of time before I was bigger and stronger than boys like Risto and Broki, but that they would never be as clever as I was. Dad would smile and agree.

'Bigger, stronger and smarter,' he used to say. 'You'll be more than just a hunter one day.'

He didn't smile much now that Mum was gone, though.