Prologue

Robin Loxley placed more wood on the fire. He breathed into the heart of the flames and they crackled fully to life. He used his knife to scrape away embers for cooking.

A twig cracked. He looked up. His father was coming back across the clearing, carrying more strips of flesh. He came to Robin's side and laid the meat across the cooking stones.

'Just wait till Hal sees,' Robin said. 'And Thane. They've never made a kill this big, have they?'

His father looked for a moment into the trees before turning back to the fire. 'It was a fine hunt,' he said. 'A superb kill. Here, eat some more, you earned it.'

Using the flat of his knife he lifted a strip of cooked meat. Robin took it carefully and sat back and ate.

His father went back to the carcass, a hulking shape at the edge of the glade. He began working at it again with his knife, and Robin felt a fresh swelling of pride. It *was* a superb kill: a large male with eight tines to its antlers – perhaps not a fully mature hart but certainly an older buck. It would provide meat for months – for the whole village – as well as the farm tools they would make from its antlers, the strong rope from its sinews, and all the other useful pieces.

He put more wood on the fire. He listened to the forest,

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loud on all sides: the skittering of clawed feet, sudden wing beats and distant killing shrieks. He realized he had no idea what hour it was. All day the sun had sulked behind dense cloud, the light little more than a grey wash. And now, as the mist began to thicken, it was growing so dark it could almost be dusk. But it couldn't possibly be that late. Nobody would stay in Winter Forest after nightfall. Not even Robin's father.

He looked to the edge of the clearing. Through the mist, in his bosky hunting cloak, his father could almost be a piece of the forest, man-shaped. Like Robin his clothing was stuffed with grasses and his skin was rubbed with mud and moss to mask his scent.

Now his father was cleaning his knife on the grass. And when he stood, and turned, he was holding the buck's bloody, steaming heart, still impaled with Robin's arrow. He carried it back to the fire.

'Are we going to eat it now?' Robin said. 'The heart is the hunter's part, you always said. Or is it an offering? Are we going to bury it beneath the Trystel Tree?'

His father didn't answer. He was sawing away the shaft of the arrow and then stuffing the heart into a hemp sack. He put the sack to one side, blood beginning to patch through the weave.

Movement nearby. Something darting through the undergrowth. Robin's eyes went after it. He thought it was a stoat, or a pine marten, but it was difficult to tell – all shapes were beginning to merge. Something else flicked past on dark wings.

Dusk *was* drawing in, wasn't it?

'Robin, don't be nervous,' his father said. 'There's nothing here for you to fear. That's what my father used to say, when he taught me my wildwood skills. He said I would never have to be afraid of the cold, or hunger, or rely on another man to

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offer me shelter. I could move freely in the world and survive anywhere, even here. That's why I've been teaching you the same skills. And you're a better apprentice than I ever was. You're in your element. Don't fear it.'

As he spoke he lifted his prized hunting bow. And now, to Robin's disbelief, he was pushing the bow into Robin's hands.

'I want you to have it,' his father said. 'Take it, it's yours.'

'How can I? You need it.'

'I'll cut another. This one is too good for me. It always was.'

Robin had been trying his best to resist, but his father's arms were thick as tree trunks, his hands tough as roots, and he kept gently but firmly insisting and finally Robin had no choice but to take the gift.

He turned the shortbow in his hands. It had been polished over and over with hazelnut oil to such a fine finish he could see his reflection in the heartwood. The grip was antler bone wrapped in soft worn leather.

'This gift means something, Robin. It means I'm proud of you. Proud to call you my son.' Something caught in his father's voice and made Robin look up. He was staring at Robin intently and his eyes, dark as oakwood, were glistening in the firelight.

'What is it?' Robin said. 'What's wrong?'

His father looked away. He cleared his throat. 'It's nothing,' he said. 'I'm fine. Smoke in my eyes, that's all. And I'm tired – even if you're not. That was a long hunt. We'll rest before heading home.'

He stood and moved Robin's hunting pack so it could serve as a pillow. Robin hesitated at first, but then he lay out flat and rested his head. They must be closer to the forest edge than he imagined. There must be plenty of daylight left. No harm in a short rest.

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His father sat at his side and started to stroke Robin's hair. At the same time he began to murmur some words, his voice enfolding Robin like a blanket.

'. . . Don't be afraid . . . in your element . . . fought them all, but fear of the unknown . . . what more could we have done . . . so sorry . . . winter-born . . .'

It was hard to hear what the words were, and anyway they were muddled and strange – like one of the nonsense rhymes his mother sometimes sang at his bedside. But whatever he was saying, the sound of his father's voice was reassuring.

'. . . everything in our power . . . so sorry . . . find you I promise . . .'

And as he spoke he continued to stroke Robin's hair, in a way that never failed to lull him to sleep. And it was warm here near the fire and the aspen leaves were making a hushing sound and Robin was tired and fully fed.

And his father was still murmuring those words.

He was still stroking Robin's hair . . .

And Robin's eyes were closing . . .

They opened again a heartbeat later.

Robin blinked. He kept blinking, trying to clear the blackness from his eyes.

The world had disappeared. There was no edge to the clearing; no branches or leaves above. There was only this: a single speck of light, hanging in the void.

He realized it was the remnants of their fire, burned down to embers.

They must have fallen asleep. Both of them.

'Wake up!' Robin hissed. 'Please, quickly, wake up!'

Nobody stirred. A silence at his side. An emptiness.

He sat up slowly, a sickly feeling spreading from his groin. The wind blew and he shivered.

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He whispered: 'Where are you?'

In reply came the distant hooting of an owl. A branch cracked and fell, somewhere close.

Robin crawled, on hands and knees, around the firepit, searching with his fingers for his father's things. His hunting pack, his knife, even the sack containing the animal's heart. All of it gone.

'Where are you?' he shouted. 'I'm here! Come back, please!'

He stood and shouted again and he listened to his voice dying in the mist. He sat and hugged his knees, gripping his father's bow to his chest. *He'll come for me. I was asleep and he heard a noise and he went to investigate, but he'll be back. He'll be back.*

A sound like a distant scream – Robin forced himself to think of an owl, hunting. Another noise like something being dragged through the wet leaves – Robin's heart hammering, harder and faster.

He stared again into the blackness. He began to pick out shapes. Something nodded its head and he told himself it was a sapling. He watched a yew tree, its outline rippling in the wind. To Robin the movement looked like rising and falling. Like breath. The needles looked like fur.

It's here, it's watching me, I know it is.

A gust of wind and the mist swirled and moonlight found the forest floor. From the corner of his eye he saw something else. More movement.

There was somebody there. Kneeling at the body of the buck.

His father.

Of course. He's caching the meat. To return for later. He's been here all along, of course he has!

Robin got shakily to his feet. He groped his way in the dark, edging towards his father.

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'Why didn't you answer?'

No reply. A twig snapping loudly underfoot. The boughs groaning high above.

'Why are you doing that alone?'

Robin moved closer, almost close enough to touch. The wind making the leaves skitter.

'Why didn't we get help? Why are we still here?'

Still his father hadn't turned or said a word. He was just crouching there, working at the carcass with his knife.

Except, was he using his knife? It looked like—

The mist swirled once more and moonlight spilled through the trees. Robin saw the kneeling figure more clearly.

He saw this was not his father.

This was an even bigger, broader man, with hulking shoulders. A man wrapped in some kind of animal pelt.

And when he half turns, still crouching over the carcass, the man's eyes are amber and his mouth and teeth are glistening with blood . . .

Robin running. Lurching away from those amber eyes and running, blindly into the darkness and the mist, gripping the shortbow in both hands and holding it out before him, stumbling over roots, falling, picking himself up and running again, breathless with the fear of it.

Running harder. The branches bare bones, snapping; the forest screeching, clawing at him with thorns.

From somewhere shockingly close comes a human noise – a woman's laugh. Followed by words, whispered on the wind: *Not yet. Too soon.*

And then a face looming from the darkness – a small child, grinning, her eyes flashing golden, like a hawk, or a vixen.

Robin doesn't dare look back, but he knows the Wargwolf is there too, its lower jaw hanging slack, its breath mixing with the mist, its lantern eyes burning.

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Robin running and falling and running, trying to shout for his father but fear blocking his throat.

Around him the wind swirls and seems to form those words: *Not yet. Too soon. He must suffer the wounds.*

Another cackle of laughter.

Stumbling and falling and getting to his feet and staggering on. Running now so long and so far that the night is beginning to lift and sunlight starting to sift through the trees . . .

Still Robin runs and he keeps running until the last of his strength leaves his body and he falls to the wet earth, senseless with fear and exhaustion, blackness closing its fingers around him and blocking at last the laughter snaking through the mist.

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