

The Deer Hunters

The Blood of Ten Chiefs, #6

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It was a summer day at Halfhill. Four elves sat in the afternoon sun in the treeless space between the wide, nearly vertical cliff that gave Freefoot's holt its name, and the broad, gurgling, gravel-bottomed stream.

Suretrail, his back to the clay cliff—more than twice as high as an elf—was carefully weaving a plait of fibers and feathers with which to decorate his spear. The two javelins beside him had already been painted with red ochre and blue berry-juice. Rainbow, on Suretrail's left, showed him some tricks with the white, green, and black feathers. Her own spear was stained and carved with elaborate patterns.

On Suretrail's right was Graywing. She took off the rawhide thongs that bound the flint point to her spear-shaft. It had become dull with use, and needed to be replaced. Fangslayer, across from Suretrail, was carving a new handle for his white quartz ax. From somewhere across the stream behind him came the occasional sounds of the four children laughing.

In the face of the cliff behind Suretrail were the dens of the elves, dug back into the hard clay among the supporting roots of the large, overhanging trees that grew above it and down its gently sloping back side. In the deep shadows at the top of the cliff sat five other elves in a line. Four of them were no longer children, but not yet adults in the eyes of their elders. Shadowflash, the fifth, as old as Suretrail, sat at one end.

Brightmist, beside him, was not thinking about Shadowflash at the moment, though for several seasons now they had been a little more than playmates, a little less than lovmates.

Rather, she was trying to figure out how to make Suretrail give in to their wishes.

Deerstorm, on Brightmist's other side, plucked a frond of fern and set it in her brown hair. Beyond her, Greentwig sat with crossed legs, staring down into his hands folded in his lap. At the far end of the line was Crystalmoss. She was quite a bit younger than the other three, but already showed tremendous promise.

Somewhere off to the north a wolf howled. Shadowflash left off his thoughts and turned toward the forest behind him. The cublings across the stream became silent. The four elders on the bank below him put down their work and looked up toward the sound. The howl came again.

"Freefoot's back," Shadowflash said. He started to rise but his companions did not move. After a moment's hesitation, he sat down again.

There were more wolf-howls. Fangslayer and Rainbow answered back. The hunting party had been gone for three days. A few moments later, Freefoot and Starflower, Fairheart and Moonblossom came through the trees from the upstream, western end of the cliff.

They and their wolves looked tired, and well they might be, for on the back of each of the wolves was an antelope, each nearly as big as an elf, caught out on the prairie to the north of the forest. The waiting elders greeted the hunters and helped take the carcasses down from the tired backs of the wolves. There would be feasting tonight.

"The antelope are doing well this year," Fairheart said. "Can you believe it, these are the weaklings."

Suretrail and Graywing began to butcher one of the antelopes while Fangslayer and Rainbow started on another. Then there was a crashing in the brush on the other side of the stream, and four very young elves came racing across the stones set in the water. Dreamsnake, who had been tending them, came a moment later.

The cublings—Dayshine, Warble, Starbright, and Feather—hurried up to where the elders were carefully skinning the antelopes, and begged for treats. Suretrail and Fangslayer handed out bits of rich liver. It was all they could do to keep the cublings from offering more "assistance" than was good for them, or for the antelopes.

Freefoot spread out one of the skins, on which Fangslayer and Rainbow placed the meat as they cut it from the bones. Fairheart hacked off the horns and hooves and put them aside. Graywing carefully split the leg bones, not only to remove the marrow but also to save the bones themselves for javelin points, awls, fine scrapers, and other tools.

Catcher was the first of the other elves to arrive. She greeted the hunters cheerfully and displayed a brace of ravnits, which she had taken from the traps that only she knew how to make.

A moment later Glade and Fernhare came from downstream. Glade glanced up to the top of the cliff, where his son Greentwig and his friends were still sitting with Shadow-flash. They should have come down to help with the butchery. Instead they just sat, rather sullen and grumpy about something. Not Shadowflash; he was his usual cheerful self.

Starflower and Moonblossom carefully separated the edible organs from the intestines. These Freefoot and Catcher took down to the stream to wash. Later they would be stretched and dried for cord, bowstrings, and thread.

Two-Wolves and Grazer joined the group. Two-Wolves took the job of prying the teeth from the antelopes' skulls. Grazer, who was a full head taller than any other elf, helped keep the children busy while the butchery was finished. Blue-sky came last.

At last Shadowflash and the four young elves came down from the top of the cliff. Antelope was not that common a meal, and just enough different from deer to make it special.

Graywing, Bluesky, and Catcher passed around chunks of meat, choice pieces of liver, kidney, lungs, and brain.

Four antelopes proved to be just barely enough. It was fortunate that so many of the other members of the tribe had gone off on hunting expeditions of their own. All those present were able to eat their fill, and by the time Fairheart found it necessary to bring out fire for lights, there was nothing left of the antelope but belches, smiles, and some greasy faces.

By then the children were getting sleepy. Fairheart and Moonblossom collected their daughter Starbright and went off to their den at the downstream end of the cliff. Warble's father was one of those out hunting, so Dreamsnake took her to her place. Dayshine's parents, too, were away, so she went to sleep with her grandmother Bluesky. That left only Feather.

Freefoot reached down to pick up his cubling son and hold him for a moment, then handed him to Starflower.

"Aren't you coming?" his mate asked.

"In a bit." He pointed to where Brightmist, Crystalmoos, Deerstorm, and Greentwig were sitting by the stream, dangling their feet into the water. "There's something wrong and I want to find out what it is."

"They've been awfully quiet this evening," Starflower said.

"And they've been avoiding Suretrail," he told her. He nuzzled his son again, and then Starflower took Feather away.

Freefoot waited until all the others had gone off for the night before he went over to join the four young elves. "Why don't we take a little walk," he suggested.

They seemed pleased to see him, almost as if they had been hoping he would come to their rescue. They got to their feet and walked with him downstream, away from the cliff.

It was almost full dark, and the sounds of night had begun.

Beside them the stream gurgled pleasantly. Somewhere an owl hooted, in preparation for its night's hunt. Chirpers and other insects were calling stridently.

They walked without talking until they could no longer see the lights left out at the holt, then found a nice place where a rock shelved over the edge of the stream, mossy and soft and big enough for them all to sit on. They rested for a while, silent in the deepening night.

At last Brightmist spoke up. "We want to go on a hunt," she said.

"By ourselves," Deerstorm added.

"Well," Freefoot said, "I don't see why you couldn't do that."

"Suretrail said we couldn't," Greentwig said. "Fangslayer said it would be all right, but when we asked Suretrail, he said no."

"I see. Well, he must have had a reason."

"But now that you're back," Brightmist said, "maybe you can tell him it's all right."

"It's about time," Greentwig said. "We're not children anymore."

"We can take care of ourselves," Deerstorm insisted. "We've been on lots of hunts with the elders."

"But we always have to hunt what they want to hunt," Crystalmooss said, "and let them attack first, and sometimes we don't even get in on the kill until it's all over."

"Except for ravvits," Greentwig said, "and chuckers."

"Will you let us go?" Crystalmooss asked.

"I can't if Suretrail told you you couldn't," Freefoot said, "but maybe we can work something out. We saw tapirs at the clearing when we came by this afternoon."

"They're no fun," Brightmist said. "You can walk right up to them."

"How about the otters at the pool?"

"Yeah," Greentwig said with innocent enthusiasm. "They put up a good fight."

"No," Deerstorm insisted, "two of the bitches died this spring."

"Besides," Crystalmooss said, "Suretrail told us we couldn't."

"Hunt otters?" Freefoot asked.

The four were silent. They hadn't asked to hunt otters.

It was an old story. Children had to be protected while they learned to live and survive in the forest. But sooner or later they wanted a real challenge. The transition between childhood and adulthood was never easy. "All right," Freefoot said. "I'll see what I can do."

Suretrail and Bluesky were sitting in front of Bluesky's den when Freefoot got back to the cliff. In spite of the late hour they were both making arrowheads. Suretrail, who was putting thong-notches on the delicate flint points, seemed to know what Freefoot had come for. He put down the piece he had been working on and looked up at his chief. "Are you going to let them go?" he asked.

Freefoot sat down facing them. He watched as Bluesky took a large piece of nearly black flint and skillfully struck off a flake with a fist-sized rock. She turned

the flake over and over, laid it down on her anvil stone and struck it again. It broke cleanly across. The two halves were somewhat overlarge but almost the right shape.

"I told them I'd talk with you about it," Freefoot said. "They want your permission."

"They're good cubs," Suretrail started to say as Fangslayer, then Catcher joined them.

"They're not cubs anymore," Fangslayer said.

"But did they tell you what kind of hunt they have in mind?" Suretrail went on. "They want to go to Tall-Trees for black-neck deer."

"Oh," Freefoot said. "I see."

"I think they ought to do it," Fangslayer said.

"They have to learn sometime," Catcher added.

"Of course they do," Suretrail said. "But you need at least four to hunt black-neck. If they wanted to go out with a couple of more experienced hunters, okay. I'm not worried about Brightmist or Deerstorm. It's Crystalmoss."

"She's the best thrower in the tribe," Fangslayer said.

"With stones and darts and javelins," Suretrail said. "That's not heavy enough for black-neck. And she's not even fully grown yet."

"It's Greentwig who's the real problem," Bluesky said. "He's just not ready."

"He's old enough," Fangslayer said.

"They don't have enough experience," Suretrail insisted. "None of them are ready for this kind of hunt yet. Black-necks are too tough, especially at this time of year."

"And Tall-Trees is too far away," Bluesky said. "It would take them half a day at least just to get there."

"And besides," Suretrail said, "I've already told them they couldn't."

"I still think they ought to have their chance," Fangslayer said.

"They'll never learn," Catcher said, "if they don't find out for themselves."

Glade, Grazer, and Dreamsnake came to join them. They already seemed to know what the discussion was about. Bluesky added wood to her fire so that they could be included in its light. The others made room for them.

"Talon and I," Glade said, "took Greentwig and Crystal-moss out hunting yesterday. Beaver, up by the marsh. Crystalmoss did all right. But Greentwig, I don't know. I don't predict a long life for him."

Bluesky brought out a pouch of dreamberries and passed it around.

"An elf his age should have an adult name," Fernhare said. "Crystalmoss has hers."

"I think Deerstorm has what it takes," Grazer said, "and not just because I'm her father. Brightmist, too."

"They want to do this for themselves," Fangslayer said.

"Of course they do," Glade said. "They want to prove themselves. But Greentwig is ... just ... the combination just won't work."

"He is something of a disappointment," Dreamsnake said gently. "But Glade, you and Fernhare can't take care of Greentwig all his life. He must learn—somehow—or die trying."

"I know," Glade said sadly.

"If Longreach were here," Bluesky said, "maybe they'd let him be a part of their hunt. He's not that much older than Greentwig. With five, that would be fine."

"If they could bring in a black-neck," Grazer said, "they would certainly prove themselves."

"They would indeed," Freefoot said. He chewed another dreamberry, then sat back to think.

"We can all remember," he said at last, "when we were first given the chance to hunt, not with our elders but on our own—not just for ravvits but for serious game." The others listened without comment. "We can all remember when we were first given full responsibility for our own hunt, whatever game and whatever place we chose. For some of us that's been a long time."

Suretrail looked away. His decision was being challenged. Fangslayer just stared into the fire.

"Suretrail," Freefoot said, "you did the right thing when you told them not to go."

Suretrail muttered an acknowledgment.

"But it's my responsibility now," Freefoot went on, "not yours. And Fangslayer," he turned to his older son, "you are right too. Those four are nearly of an age, and they must become adults. We cannot deny them their chance, as we all have had, even though they die. Even though."

For a moment, all were silent. "And it's not fair to Brightmist or Deerstorm," Freefoot went on, "who will be full adults soon enough. Now is the time. Let us hope they all come back alive."

The next morning Shadowflash went with Brightmist and the other young hunters when they left Halfhill. The weather was cool, and there was a slight mist in the forest. Shadowflash liked it when the forest was that way. Of course he liked the forest any way when he was with Brightmist. He wanted to go with her today, but he knew he would not be welcome this time. He was only going to see them off.

They went upstream a way and then the four young hunters paused to call their wolves. Answering howls came back from different parts of the forest.

The four youths were excited about the hunt, and now that they had finally gotten permission, a bit apprehensive as well. That was good.

After a moment Fog, Brightmist's gray bitch, came walking toward them. She was a big old wolf and seemed to know that something special was about to happen. Then Scarface and Mask appeared, bounding lightly through the brush. Scarface was Deerstorm's wolf, who bore the marks of a less than successful encounter with a forest pig. Mask was Greentwig's companion, black across the eyes and tawny brown elsewhere. Behind them came Dancer, long-legged and swift, bounding up to Crystalmooss's side. The elves greeted their animals, in the way of elves and wolves.

Then Brightmist turned to Shadowflash and put her hands on his chest. *We'll be all right*, she sent to him.

I know. Keep an eye on Greentwig. He did not look at the youth, tall for his age, handsome, sturdy, and somehow younger than Crystalmooss.

This could make a difference for him, Brightmist sent.

It will, if he survives.

"Let's go," Deerstorm said. "You two can cuddle when we get back."

The wolves were impatient too. They could sense their companions' excitement and wanted to get on with it. Shadowflash touched Brightmist's pale ruddy hair, then turned and went back to Halfhill.

The hunting party went upstream to the west. The mist dissipated before they got to the big south loop, which they cut across instead of following, and by the time they got to the marsh the day was warming. They had been too excited to have breakfast so they caught a few of the marshrats that lived there. The animals were so plentiful and slow that it was hardly hunting.

The stream went on beyond the marsh, but they crossed the water there and headed southwest. The ground rose. Bald Hill was directly to the south, though its rocky top was not visible from this far away. They passed its sloping shoulder, moving quickly, ignoring the plentiful small game. It was an easy walk, though the forest was dense with undergrowth.

Still, it was nearly noon by the time they got to the edge of Tall-Trees. Brightmist had not been there before. She couldn't help but pause as they left the denser forest and entered the parklike area.

The trees were huge deciduous junipers, each one twenty or thirty paces or more from its nearest neighbors. The ground was covered with a ruddy-gray carpet of fallen foliage, scalelike and ankle-deep. The branches overhead completely covered the sky, so high that they got dizzy looking up at them. The tree trunks were so big around that the four of them together holding hands could not encircle one. The bark was shaggy and loose, and gave no purchase when they tried to climb.

The forest floor was not completely bare. Here and there were a few small plants and shrubs that preferred deep shade, but they hardly obstructed the view. They could see for hundreds, maybe thousands of paces in every direction.

Some ways off was what, had it been in a clearing, they would have called a copse. It was a dense, rounded mass of brush and vines that grew where the trees were farther apart, and where the sun was able to come down from the canopy of branches overhead. It was maybe thirty paces across, its verge abrupt, and the taller trees within it were about four times as tall as an elf. Still, the lowest branches of Tall-Trees were many times higher than that. There were other similar copses farther off, some smaller, some larger.

They were all in awe of Tall-Trees. Even the wolves seemed to know that this was a special place, the last of an ancient forest left over from some previous age.

"Look," Greentwig said. He pointed. There, so far away they could not tell what kind it was, was a buck deer. It was walking alone, and they watched it as it went from one great tree to another and then disappeared into a copse.

"That's where we'll find the black-necks," Deerstorm said, "in the copses."

"Then let's go hunting," Brightmist suggested.

They went to the nearest place of brush, shrubs, and vines, several hundred paces from the edge of the forest. Except for the one deer, they had seen or heard no other life in the park. But there was plenty in the copse—birds, squirrels, insects, bats hanging asleep from the head-high branches. The copse was small, and there were no deer there, but they did startle a forest antelope, its head barely chest-high to an elf. They did not chase it as it went bounding off in search of a safer refuge.

They left the copse and went toward a larger one more likely to shelter their chosen prey. It felt strange, walking in an openness that was still roofed by branches. They could see so far in all directions that for the first time they realized they were truly alone, truly on their own here. They felt rather small and young. The great clear spaces between the trees was not like a clearing, or the meadow, or the prairie; it was different.

As they went deeper into Tall-Trees, the copses became larger and farther apart. They quickly learned that while they could see great distances here, so could the other animals. They had to move carefully from one copse to another, to avoid being heard or seen before they got to the shelter of the brush. More than once they heard some unseen animal bounding away from the far side of a copse as they approached uncautiously.

Sometimes they saw white-tail deer, occasionally red deer, in the copses or crossing the park between them. The wolves wanted to hunt, and it was not easy to explain that that was the wrong game. They took an occasional rævitt or pouch-rat, to fortify themselves, but avoided the prickly-spines and the badger they surprised out of its burrow. They found no traces of black-neck deer.

Black-neck were uncommon in the elves' hunting range. Most of the year they lived in the upland forests to the south and came here only during the month or so just before the mating season. They were far bigger than the white-tail or even smaller red deer, which lived here year round.

And at this time of year they were dangerous. The bucks, which would not eat much until the mating was over, were antsy with the upcoming rut, nervous, cautious, and prepared to fight with anything. The does, though not territorial, could also be deadly. Besides anticipating the mating, they would be protecting fawns and yearlings. White-tail or red deer would be far easier game.

But it was black-neck they wanted, and at last, in the seventh and largest copse they had visited, they came upon traces of their quarry. The smell of the black-neck droppings was distinctive, and now that the wolves had the scent they could follow it.

The deer were not in that copse, but the trail was fresh and led them past several smaller copses toward another large overgrown area, some distance away. They hurried toward it, but cautiously.

The hunt was serious now. They entered the copse as quietly as they could, one step at a time, penetrating the dense growth of vines, bushes, tall grasses, and leafy herbs with as little noise as possible. The scent of the deer was strong, and fresh. They paused frequently to listen. There were squirrel sounds, bird calls, a rævitt dashed off through the brambles. But there was also the sound of a branch moving, and there was no wind, not even a breeze. They moved closer and could hear the sound of bark tearing. That was the deer grazing.

They kept in touch by sending as they closed in. They were excited when they saw the deer—two big bucks, five does, as many yearlings, and maybe four fawns. The wolves were naturally cautious.

The bucks were huge, over twice as high at the shoulder as an elf, their black manes thick, their antlers at full growth, broader than an elf could reach, with spear-sharp points. One of them would provide more meat than the four antelopes

Freefoot and his hunting party had brought in. The more they watched, the more fascinated the elves became, and the more frightened.

Which one should we take? Greentwig asked. *There's a yearling.*

If we wanted that spindly thing, Deerstorm sent back, *we might as well have gone after red or white-tail.*

We don't dare try for a buck, Brightmist sent. Unless they dropped it on the first strike, they would be in danger of their lives. Later these two bucks would become deadly enemies; right now they would help defend each other and the rest of the herd.

How about that doe, Crystalmooss suggested, *the one on the far side.* It was the largest of the does, but also somewhat slower.

She won't have many more breeding seasons left, Deerstorm agreed. *The younger does could easily replace her.*

They circled into position, then Greentwig, who was farthest around, sent, *Wait!*

What is it? Brightmist asked, then she heard it too.

There was another animal nearby, in a thicker part of the copse, not that far from the doe. The wolves one by one caught the scent, and they, too, were distracted. The animal sounded large, and its scent was unfamiliar. Carefully, they moved to where they could see the creature.

At first they thought it was just a forest pig, but it was nearly half the height of the buck deer—taller at the shoulder than Crystalmooss—and fully as heavy. No forest pigs got that large. Its body was angular, its shoulders high and sharp, its face was knobbly and very long, its head huge, with a crest of dark reddish hair. And it had two tusks growing up from each side of its lower jaw instead of just one, each tusk longer than an elf's hand.

It rooted around the bases of certain bushes, digging up tubers and occasionally pulling plump fruits off the branches. And even as they watched they all got the same idea. What if they brought back this animal instead? The black-necks would be around for several eights-of-days yet, but this might be their only chance at a strange pig like this.

Pigs were, pound for pound, more dangerous than anything except badgers and wolverines. Even wolves and long-teeth were cautious about taking one. They would have to be especially careful, not only because it was a pig, and so large, but also because it was unfamiliar and they didn't know its ways.

Quickly they planned their attack, then struck. Deerstorm's arrow bounced off the pig's boney face, Greentwig's lodged high in the shoulder, Brightmist's struck a rib, and Crystal-mooss's javelin struck a flank.

The pig jerked up and squealed with surprise and pain as they readied for a second shot. The wolves closed in to keep the pig confused. The deer moved quickly away.

The three archers shot, but the pig's skin was tough. It squealed again and spun around. The wolves danced out of reach of its tusks. Crystalmooss threw her second javelin and hit the pig at the base of its neck, but the light weapon could not penetrate the bone and muscle. The pig crashed off, knocking Dancer aside.

They dashed through the brush in pursuit. The wolves raced ahead to try to turn it. Brightmist got her spear ready for a charge, but the pig zigged and zagged

out of her way. Deerstorm and Greentwig couldn't get a clear shot with their bows through the dense undergrowth.

Crystalmoss threw a dart, which did little more than scratch along the pig's back. Then the pig turned abruptly south and burst out of the copse. The elves and wolves raced in pursuit. Crystalmoss recovered one of her javelins as it fell from the pig's neck.

The pig was running away fast. It seemed so very strong and tough. But there was blood on the ground, and as the pig ran it shook itself as if to dislodge the arrows still sticking into it.

They had committed themselves now. The pig was wounded, and they could not just let it go and eventually bleed to death. They had to kill it if they could.

Elves and wolves ran, just keeping up with the pig. They hoped it would wear itself out or come to a place where they could attack it more effectively. It led them southwest, in almost a straight line, and stayed away from the copses.

Once in a while one of the wolves closed in and snapped at it. Once in a while one of the archers drew up and tried a running shot. The pig almost ignored them.

One time Deerstorm and Crystalmoss raced up, one on either side, and both threw javelins. They hit the pig under its shoulders, but it just kept on running. Greentwig came up once and tried to hamstring the pig with his ax, but his blow went wrong and only cut the skin.

At least the pig was bleeding a lot and would eventually lose its strength. But when they finally killed it, how would they ever get such a heavy animal back to the holt?

They came to a part of Tall-Trees where there were many copses closer together, some of them only a dozen paces apart, and the pig had to swerve and turn frequently to stay on the clear ground. At one point the pig suddenly found itself confronted by a newly fallen tree, too big to jump over and too low to run under, and it was almost trapped. For a moment the pig was at bay, the wolves closed in and snapped at it. The pig swung its huge heavy head to one side, Mask tried to bite at its throat, the pig swung back and caught the wolf and tossed him into the brush.

Mask yelped, the other wolves hesitated, the pig charged through the elves and around the stump end of the fallen tree, and all but Greentwig turned in pursuit. He went to help Mask get to his feet. The wolf's side was badly cut, his ribs bruised, but he wanted to go on, so they did.

After that the wolves didn't try to get too close. Instead they ranged ahead, as if looking for another place to corner the pig. The pig, though bleeding even more, was running harder now, and the elves and wolves had to work just to keep up.

They came to the far side of Tall-Trees by the middle of the afternoon. On their left was the verge of the river, which formed the southern border of the park. The pig headed toward it, then veered more to the west again, toward the denser forest. While they could they got off a few more arrows into the pig's flanks. The elves hoped that the thicker brush of the forest would slow it down.

But the pig charged into the brush unhindered, and the elves and wolves, lighter in weight, had to work to get through the tangles of vines and creepers. The pig ran along the bank of the river, where the brush was thicker, and began to pull ahead of them.

As the chase continued through the thickest growth they lost sight of the pig now and then. It continued to gain until they could no longer hear the noise of its passage, and had to follow the trail the wounded animal had left. It was not difficult. The brush was broken, there were hoofprints in the ground, bloodspots and smears on the foliage. The scent of the pig was strong: fear and blood and sweat.

It seemed as though the pig was never going to tire, though the elves had. Even the wolves, especially Mask, were beginning to show strain. Most game, when chased through the forest, were as encumbered by the brush as the hunters.

The chase went on, into a broad valley. There was a subtle change of vegetation here, the undergrowth was more luxuriant, the trees were broadleaf red-twigs more often than not. The pig's trail still led along the bank of the river, too wide even here to cross.

They wanted to rest, but they dared not. Only the splattering of blood here and there assured them that the pig, though now far ahead, was worse off than they. At last the ground began to rise, the river rushed more rapidly as it came down into the valley from the uplands.

Even the gentle slope slowed them now. Their only consolation was that it had to be slowing the pig, too. The land continued to rise, the river beside them ran more swiftly. The water was broken by occasional rocks, and the forest on either side became somewhat clearer. Then they could hear noisy splashing up ahead. They knew they must be getting to the top of the valley, and, indeed, they soon came to a long expanse of rapids, between rocky banks. And there was the pig, still a good way ahead, running and stumbling along the bank, as if looking for a place to cross.

The river splashed through a thousand paces of jumbled rocks, a treacherous ford across the river. The pig was choosing its path carefully, but jumping strongly from one rock to another. The hunters fanned out and started to cross, in hopes of meeting the pig on the other bank, where they could attack it again.

But Mask was tired and whimpering. Greentwig paused to talk with his wolf and told him to rest there a moment and then go back to the holt. Mask was sorry to miss out on the kill, but knew his own strength. The wolf sat, and Greentwig hurried after the others, who were now partway across the river.

What a hunt! Greentwig nearly fell into the water as he hurried to rejoin the others. The pig had almost reached the other side, angling upstream, and the hunters were gaining on it.

They all reached the other side at the same time, though spread out up and down the rapids. The pig, instead of following the river upstream, where Brightmist and Crystalmoss were waiting, charged up the bank, leaving the river altogether. The elves pulled together to follow it into the forest.

This was more like the classical hunt. The forest was more open this high up, but the uphill work was strenuous. The pig chose a straight path, avoided gullies and brush, and the elves and wolves ran along beside and behind.

At last the land began to level. They had come to the uplands, and the pig was now running southeast. It was tiring, and they were able to keep up with it easily. The forest was different here, an older forest.

The pig occasionally stumbled as it ran. It was going to have to turn at bay sooner or later. And then it came to a break in the forest, a broad, semiopen glade. There were occasional trees spotted through the mostly waist-high brush and grasses. The ground was both soft and rocky, mud and moss between broken stones.

The pig was tiring rapidly now in the late afternoon. It struggled across the glade, thousands of paces across. The pig looked as though it was trying to get to the other side, so the elves and wolves put on speed and circled around. If they were going to finish it, it had to be here.

Luck was with them. Before the pig could get more than three-quarters of the way across the glade they were able to turn it into a shallow, rocky draw. Steep rocks formed the sides, and three huge oak trees grew at the far end, their roots a tangle that the pig couldn't pass. It turned and charged back, saw the elves and wolves, backed a step, then stood at bay.

The pig snorted angrily, kicked rocks and mud, smashed its face from side to side against roots and brush. The wolves ranged along the sides of the draw and snapped at the pig when it tried to climb out. Once the pig nearly made it but Scarface bit its nose, just out of reach of the tusks, and the pig squealed and dropped back.

They used their few remaining arrows carefully, aiming for the throat between the neck muscles and the shoulder bone. The pig thrashed around heavily with each hit. Crystalmooss and Deerstorm used the last of their javelins and hit the pig in the belly in front of the flanks. The pig snorted in rage.

It was bleeding copiously now, its movements were erratic, and it occasionally stumbled. Now was the time to go in for the kill. But Deerstorm had no more weapons, and Crystalmooss had only a few darts and a small ax. It would be up to Brightmist with her spear, and Greentwig with his heavy ax, to finish the matter.

Deerstorm went behind the pig and halfway down the rocky side to hit it with a rock. The pig turned toward her with a snort. Now Brightmist and Greentwig could enter the draw. Crystalmooss then distracted the pig from the other side. Greentwig and Brightmist got into position.

Brightmist planted the butt of her spear against the ground while Greentwig threw rocks until the pig charged. But Brightmist slipped on the muddy rocks and the pig, instead of impaling itself in its mouth or under its chin, ran onto the spear at its shoulder, all the way through the muscle to the bone.

Brightmist lurched to the side, out of the stopped pig's way. Greentwig stepped up and swung his ax at the back of the pig's skull, but the animal half turned and his blow, though strong and deep, only struck it in the shoulder.

The pig screamed. The spear was lodged in its shoulder, and it was crippled, but now Brightmist had no weapon. She backed off. The pig screamed again. Greentwig trembled. Then, when the pig turned toward him, he struck again. He hit it across the forehead, barely avoiding its tusks. There was lots of blood, but it was not a killing blow. The pig screamed again.

From all sides they heard the sudden response: heavy, deep grunts and bellows, squeals and snorts and moaning calls. The pig staggered back, panting and crying.

The elves stood paralyzed. There was crashing in the brush not far away, heavy hooves clattered on rocks, sucked at the mud, getting closer. Brightmist, Crystalmoss, and Greentwig clambered half up out of the draw. Deerstorm was already out, crouching on the edge.

From all sides more pigs were coming, from the forest, from other parts of the glade where they must have been concealed by brush or wallows. They came at a full run, responding the way all pigs do to the distress of one of their fellows, to the rescue.

The four young elves had just a moment to realize that the pig they had been hunting, as big as it was, was only a juvenile. These four boars, and eight or ten sows, were fully grown. Each was as tall as a black-neck deer, each weighed maybe three or four times as much. Their faces, long and bristly, were covered with callused knobs, their tusks were longer than an elf's arm.

The wounded pig screamed. The rest of the herd, with a dozen or so juveniles as big as the wounded pig in the draw, and even a number of piglets, came on from all sides, at full charge. The forest was a long way off. There was no place to run.

It was dusk at Halfhill. A few lamps were lit. Over by her den Bluesky was making arrowheads. Beside her for company, Catcher was making a trap from a springy stick, a piece of bone, and some fine cord woven from hair. Nearby, Dreamsnake was telling the cublings the story of how Freefoot had gotten his name.

Closer to the stream, Fairheart, his shirt off, was making a bow, shaping the wood with sharp flint. Beside him, Rainbow was repairing his shirt and trimming it with fancy feathers. Suretrail, Glade, and Two-Wolves looked on.

Downstream from them, Freefoot, Grazer, and Fernhare were working on the antelope skins under Starflower's direction. Graywing, Shadowflash, Moonblossom, and Fangslayer sat between them and the others, talking, digesting, calming down for the night.

"The kids ought to be back by now," Suretrail said.

"If they pot a deer," Catcher said, "they'll have a hard time bringing it back."

"One of them could have come on ahead and asked for help," Rainbow muttered.

"No," Fangslayer said, "they've got to do that themselves too."

"After all," Moonblossom added, "Tall-Trees is a long way off; they might well have to stay the night."

"I don't think we should have let them go," Suretrail insisted.

Freefoot ignored the implied challenge. "It has to happen some time," he said softly. "They're of that age. If we hadn't given them our blessing, they'd have gone off anyway."

Suretrail knew that was true, but it didn't make him any happier. He tried to put his thoughts and worries out of his mind by watching Rainbow stitching on Fairheart's shirt.

One by one, as night fell, the elves finished their tasks and retired to their dens. At last only Suretrail, Rainbow, and Bluesky were left. The three just could not go to sleep. To keep busy they set about making arrows. Shafts, fletches, heads. They could always use more arrows.

Overhead the two moons were shining. They had been approaching each other during the last few nights. Would they kiss when they passed?

Just before dawn Freefoot, who was more concerned than he cared to admit, came out of his den with Starflower and little Feather. He saw Rainbow and Bluesky asleep, saw Suretrail coming back from the stream, and waited for him as Starflower, with a reassuring word, took Feather off for his morning bath.

"How much longer should we wait?" Suretrail asked him softly. Rainbow muttered in her sleep.

"Give them a chance," Freefoot said. "If they got a big buck, they'll have a hard job bringing it back."

Bluesky woke and looked up at them. "We made a lot of arrows last night," she said.

Now Rainbow roused too. "Are they back yet?" she asked.

"Not yet," Bluesky said, and went with her to wash up.

"And besides," Freefoot went on, "if it was a long hunt, they'll have to sleep. Other hunts have turned out that way before."

"I know that," Suretrail said, "but not hunts half of whose members were too young or incompetent." And then he saw Glade and Fernhare, just coming out of their den. "I'm sorry," he said, "but it's true."

"I know," Fernhare sighed.

Glade didn't say anything. On the one hand he agreed with Suretrail. On the other, he was the keeper of the Way, and knew better than anybody that Freefoot was right. He just went upstream, and after a moment Fernhare followed.

The conversation was rousing the other elves now, and one by one they came out of their dens. Freefoot went off to wash. Suretrail started to pick up all the arrows he and Bluesky had made. He was exhausted.

Shadowflash and Catcher came up from the stream. "Were you up all night?" Catcher asked.

"Made a lot of arrows," Suretrail said, showing them to her.

"They'll be all right," Shadowflash said as Bluesky and Rainbow came back with Fangslayer. "Deerstorm has been there before, she's got good sense."

"So has Brightmist," Fangslayer said. "We had to give them the chance. We wouldn't worry about any other party of four."

"That's just the problem," Rainbow said.

"I guess we can wait a while longer," Bluesky said.

The daily hunt was a minor affair, as the elves went after smaller game close to the holt. By noon, most had returned for a light meal. But Suretrail, Two-Wolves, and Rainbow couldn't stand it anymore. They went to sit with Freefoot, Starflower, Fangslayer, and Feather.

"I think we should go looking for them," Suretrail said.

"I have to agree," Starflower said.

"If they were all right," Two-Wolves said, "they'd not have kept Crystalmoos out this long."

"Then I guess somebody had better go after them," Freefoot said to Suretrail.

"I'm going too," Two-Wolves said.

"How about Shadowflash?" Starflower suggested.

"That's good," Freefoot said. "Grazer and Fernhare too. But it's getting on toward afternoon, you won't make it to Tall-Trees before dark."

"I know," Suretrail said, "but I think we should start out anyway. Tomorrow might be too late."

Mounted on their wolves, the five elders traveled as quickly as they could, following much the same route the four younger elves had taken two days before. It was indeed dusk by the time they came to Tall-Trees.

The area was too large to search, so they tracked first one way along the verge, then the other. At last Snaggletooth, Shadowflash's wolf, caught a trace where Brightmist had put her hand on a branch to move it aside.

They followed the faint trail from copse to copse, circling rather than going through. Always they found the trail on the other side. As they went they occasionally saw the distant shadowy forms of deer—white-tail, red, and even black-neck. But there was no smell of deer blood anywhere.

"I think it's time to shed some," Two-Wolves said. "It's late, I'm hungry, and Loper and Springer don't want to track elves with so much game nearby."

The others agreed, so when they saw a white-tail yearling they brought it down quickly and ate. By the time they finished it was full night. The dark did not slow them as they went on, but fatigue and full bellies did.

Some time later, in a large copse, they smelled pig blood. They entered the brush, smelled the spoor of black-neck, and saw the place where the pig had been struck.

"It wasn't a forest pig," Shadowflash said.

They followed the blood smell out of the copse and through the dark parkland. At one point the trail crossed bare ground, and they knelt to check for prints. It was a big pig, and had been running hard.

"If they just wanted supper," Grazer said, "why did they chose a pig that size?"

"Why a pig at all?" Suretrail wondered. "There were black-neck right there."

"More of a challenge?" Fernhare suggested.

"It looks like it must have led them quite a chase," Two-Wolves said.

"Foolish thing to do," Suretrail said.

"At least," Shadowflash said, "they decided to finish the job after wounding it."

Later they came to a place where they smelled wolf-blood and stopped, alarmed. Their wolves howled in distress. The elves howled too, and sent. There was no reply to their sending, but there was an answering howl.

They hurried toward the sound and found Mask. Greentwig's wolf was tired and sore and stiff, and the skin along one side was badly cut and it seemed that some ribs were cracked.

"He must have tangled with the wounded pig," Grazer said. The wolf was in no danger but needed rest and attention.

"He can't be the only survivor," Suretrail said.

Two-Wolves put his hands on Mask's head and stared into the wolf's eyes. But Mask was not his wolf, and the animal was tired, hungry, and thirsty, and not interested in wolf-talking. About the only thing Two-Wolves could learn was that Greentwig had sent Mask back from some place. After a bit Two-Wolves instructed Springer, the smaller of his two animals, to accompany Mask back to the holt where he could be tended.

The trail continued in almost a straight line through the park to the river, where they could see the trampled brush where the pig had gone. They followed, into the denser forest.

It was dawn by the time they came to the rapids high in the back of the valley. The sun, though still hidden by the forest across the river, was just coming up. The trail led to the rocks of the rapids, and was lost. Two-Wolves looked around. "Here's where Mask turned back," he said.

They were very tired and had to rest a bit while they decided what to do next. They slaked their thirst, and Shadowflash and Grazer went to catch a few fish for breakfast. They came back with several large salmon.

When they had eaten and caught their breath they searched along the river, then forded the rapids where it was easiest and cast up and down the other side. At last they found wolf-prints in the mud, and followed the trail away from the river, upslope into the forest, and eventually to the uplands.

They pushed on as hard as they could until, by midmorning, they came to the semiopen glade. Here they could finally see the pig tracks clearly, of the wounded animal and of many others. The smell of pig was strong.

"Look," Fernhare said, pointing to the tracks. "The pig our deer hunters were after was just a juvenile."

"Are you sure?" Two-Wolves asked.

"See for yourself," she said. She pointed out other, much larger hoofprints. "Mountain-swine. I've seen their tracks before, way to the south."

They scouted cautiously. There could be other swine nearby. The pig smell was everywhere, bushes had been rooted up and small saplings knocked down.

"At least twenty animals," Suretrail said, "maybe more."

"Look at the size of those tracks," Grazer said. "Bigger than a deer, and heavier than a bear."

They didn't see any swine at the moment, but the ground was uneven, there were hollows, rocks, bushes, and the occasional tree where they could be concealed. The rescue party moved deeper into the glade. Some of the pig marks had been made recently. One pile of droppings was still warm. The wolves were quiet, slinking along. They didn't like this place at all.

Then they heard sounds to one side, distant snorting and grunting. They approached cautiously, well spread out and ready to run. And there they were, dozens of swine, of all sizes, the biggest truly huge, loosely gathered and moving around a place where three tall oaks stood, still some way off.

Two-Wolves looked up at the trees. Maybe... *Crystal-moss!* he sent.

Father! came the answer they all could hear.

Then the four young hunters yelled, and the swine thrashed around in the rocky-bottomed draw.

"They're up in the trees," Shadowflash said with obvious relief.

Are you all right? Suretrail sent.

The four young elves all answered at once, a jumble of thoughts and images. They were fine, but they were tired, cramped, and hungry. The pigs had stayed under their trees since the middle of the afternoon the day before yesterday, even during the night. Their prey had died last night, and they had hoped that, with its death, the other swine would leave, but they hadn't. The nearest other trees were

too far away to jump to, and the forest was too far away to run to even if they could have gotten past the herd below them.

Even worse, Deerstorm's wolf had been killed shortly after they had gotten into the trees. Fog and Dancer had escaped, but Scarface had gotten cornered, tossed, gored, trampled, and later half eaten. Deerstorm was more distraught about that than her own predicament.

Hang on, Grazer sent. We'll get you down.

The elders tried to get closer, but the juvenile pigs and most of the piglets were out at the edge of the herd and could easily alert the adults. As they tried to decide what to do next, Dancer and Fog came slinking up from the forest. The other wolves whimpered softly, the elders hushed them up.

The forest, on the side of the draw from which the wolves had come, was not too far away, and the elders circled around to it.

"Let's see if we can make them chase us," Grazer suggested to Shadowflash. Shadowflash just grinned.

They left the others and walked toward the herd of swine. Then they started yelling and shouting and waving their spears. The piglets set up a commotion, some of the juveniles started to chase them, and they ran back to the forest. But most of the swine stayed at the draw, and those in chase gave up quickly.

The rest of the swine were now more upset than ever. Suretrail and Two-Wolves went around to the side and again taunted them by throwing stones at them. They, too, were chased back, by a sow and three juveniles.

But the other swine just got more upset. The elders could see the branches of the three oak trees shaking as the boars and sows shouldered against the trunks, as if they would knock the trees down.

"They're digging around the roots," Greentwig called to them.

"We've got to do something," Fernhare said.

Suretrail thought about it, then went toward one of the nearest juveniles and threw a javelin, which struck the pig square in the side. The pig screamed, the nearer adults turned and lunged, Suretrail ran.

Several swine gathered around the wounded pig, but Suretrail's shot had been too good. Even as other adults came to the rescue, the pig died. The swine jostled it, rolled it over, but didn't pay any attention to the elves. Instead they snorted and went back to the three trees.

"It was a good idea," Fernhare said.

"But not quite good enough," Shadowflash said. "Make some cord, as much as you can."

He took one of Suretrail's javelins, took off the bone head, whittled the end of the shaft to a point, then refastened the head backward, as a long barb. The others cut strips from their clothes and plaited a long and thin but strong cord which he tied to the butt of the javelin.

"I guess throwing it is my job," Grazer said. He was the strongest of the elves. He coiled the cord loosely over one arm and then went boldly out to pick a target.

The other elves followed at a short distance, to give him help if he needed it. Grazer moved carefully toward the herd of swine and picked out the piglet that was nearest the forest. Holding the end of the cord tightly with one hand, he took

careful aim and launched the javelin in a high arc. It struck the piglet through the thick of the thigh, at nearly the full stretch of the cord.

He didn't pause but turned and ran back as hard as he could. The barb on the javelin held and the weight of the now screaming piglet nearly jerked the cord from his hand. The boars and sows bellowed in rage at the piglet's screams as he dragged it along behind him, and before he was halfway back to the trees the whole herd came running after him.

Two-Wolves and Shadowflash were waiting by a tree, and as Grazer came up they gave him a boost into the branches. As soon as he had a good hold he pulled in the cord and dragged the screaming piglet up after him. He was barely in time. A boar crashed hard into the trunk of his none-too-large tree, and it was all he could do to hold the tree and the piglet at the same time.

The swine trampled the undergrowth, snorting and grunting and shouldering the trees. Fernhare, Suretrail, and Shadowflash fanned out through the branches, making as much noise as they could to distract them. Though most of the swine trampled around under Grazer, others dashed back and forth following the three elders who squealed in imitation of the hurt piglet as they moved slowly away. It was enough to keep the swine from knocking down Grazer's none-too-large tree. Meanwhile he was holding the piglet, wishing he could put it out of its misery.

But Two-Wolves moved quietly off through the branches, away from the swine, and went back to the ground. He called all the wolves and hurried with them to where the youths were even now coming down from their refuge.

The four young elves, tired and cramped, mounted the borrowed wolves and raced with him back to the forest. Some of the swine came to investigate and started in pursuit, but the elves went up into the trees as soon as they could and the wolves scattered.

As soon as they were all safe, Grazer slit the piglet's throat. Now the other elders became quiet and slowly, one by one, moved off through the high branches. Grazer kept the piglet as he left the place. No sense letting good meat go to waste.

When they were a safe distance away they came down to the forest floor. The wolves rejoined them as they went back toward the river. When they could no longer hear the swine they paused to rest.

Shadowflash held Brightmist as they sank down to the ground. The other three young elves all sat, very subdued. The elders, too, were quiet. Even the wolves seemed relieved. Suretrail butchered the piglet, and let the kids eat it all.

"I thought you were going after black-neck," he said.

"We could have had one, too," Greentwig answered.

"At least that was something you could have handled," Suretrail told him.

"Would we have done any better," Fernhare asked, "if we had hunted that pig?"

"I guess not," Suretrail said reluctantly.

"Under the circumstances," Fangslayer said, "I think our deer hunters are probably wise enough now to take care of themselves."

"Sure," Grazer said, "they didn't bring back a black-neck, but anybody can get in trouble."

"It's not the kind of trouble we're likely to have in the future," Brightmist said from Shadowflash's arms. "And besides, it was a good hunt before we got trapped."

"I guess it was at that," Suretrail said. "You did all the right things up until then."

"And then, too," Crystalmooss said. "We could have tried to run away."

Then Suretrail reached out and hugged her. "I'm so glad you're safe," he said.

Fernhare looked fondly at Greentwig, who still felt unappreciated. "Nobody can argue about your hunting alone now," she said. "You four seem to make a good team."

"And as long as we have to go back through Tall-Trees anyway," Greentwig said, "let's get us a black-neck."

"That's a good idea," Suretrail said.

It was lopsided; one edge was so much higher than the other that the whole thing looked like it would slide right off the boulder Brownberry had set it on. Still, the little pottery bowl, with its wolf-print decorations, had survived an eight-of-day's bath in the brook without collapsing back to the mud from which it had been made.

"I think you're on to something," Longreach assured the scowling craftswoman.

"It doesn't look like the one in my mind."

She snatched it up and made to throw it far across the brook when the storyteller's fingers closed over hers.

"No need to be angry with it. See it for itself. As a bowl— well, perhaps it has a flaw or two; but as a tallow-lamp—see, the high edge will protect the light from the wind. ..."

"It was supposed to be a bowl," Brownberry insisted, though she relaxed her grip and let her friend take the pottery into his own care. "They never come out the way my mind's eye sees them."

Longreach set the bowl, now a lamp, in the grass beside him. "At first they didn't come out at all. You'll get the knack of it yet. What's a few more tries?"

The chestnut-haired Wolfrider sat down with a sigh. "They laugh at me," she said without meeting his eyes. "Briar, Foxfur—even Skywise—they don't even try to hide it. Pike even asked if I was growing another finger."

There was no more potent insult in the Wolfrider's tongue than a five-fingered elf, yet the storyteller wasn't entirely surprised. Brownberry had pursued her notion of working with clay for many turns of the seasons now. The need to shape the red muds ate at her in ways she herself did not seem to understand. Perhaps it was some dormant aspect of her elfin heritage—a different shade of the magic that flowed through Rain and Goodtree—perhaps not. Either way, the need to shape something was not a need which erupted frequently in the Wolfriders.

His own thoughts found their ending, but Brownberry was still slump-shouldered. "What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him; I hit him one with my spear."

"That certainly got your point across—but there have been other ways, you know—"

