

## SUMMER FOREST

### Chapter 1

#### ALJA

The flames made wild shadows on the faces and bodies of the dancing people. Intricate patterns of dark mud curled around cheeks and backs. A rhythmic beating on drums of taut animal skins together with the shrill sound of flutes created an almost tangible tension in the circle of people who weren't dancing. Their eyes shone blackly in the flickering light as they watched.

Alja could hardly contain her excitement. The moment when she would be allowed to perform her own dance was not far off now. For a moment she held her outstretched hand up against the light, and studied the lines that the Eldest had just painted on her hands and arms. They wound around her fingers and along her arms to her shoulders. Her back was painted with figures too, even though she could not see those. She smiled proudly. She had been given the drawings of the hunter. A painted otter for her suppleness and intelligence to the left, a hawk for her sharp eyes to the right. She was a hunter! That is why the paintings were on her back, shoulders and arms. She needed the most strength in those parts of her body in order to fire arrows with her self-made bow.

*Alja*, she thought to herself, *my name is Alja. I am Alja!* The name felt strange, but it was hers now.

Never again would she be just one of the children of the tribe. She was now a hunter, someone who made sure that the tribe would never be short of anything, someone with strength and speed. Someone with a name. Only now, after being a child for so many summers, was she a person who could earn respect. One day she would teach the children of the tribe to hunt...

A sharp poke in her ribs made Alja jump and put a stop to her thoughts. Her angry glance flashed to the right, where the elbow had come from, and to the laughing face of Talbo, a short blonde boy with a pointy nose that looked like the beak of a bird. He had a few paintings on his hands, but they were mainly on his face. One of them was a hawk, like Alja's. Talbo was a finder. He would look after the tribe by collecting roots, fruits, seeds and insects. Alja knew that he was very good at this, his eyesight was as sharp as hers. But he had never managed to make his own bow or spear, and he had never hit a target. He was no hunter. He would be one of the tribe's best finders though. She smiled briefly back at him, and was glad that he had woken her out of her daydream.

She turned her attention to the dancers and the circle of people again. There were more children who now had a name. Some had been named hunters and finders, like herself and Talbo, but there were makers too, who's drawings were mainly upon their fingers and hands. The makers could take wood, stone, leather or bones and make anything that was needed in and around the camp. Axes for the cutting of branches, or needles for sewing leather. Arrow-heads and spears. And also figurines and images to honour the forest. She saw that even now, during this special gathering, her friend Emka was

holding a flat grey stone in her hand, carefully watching the dancers with squinting eyes, and then scratching fine lines into it with a sharper stone. Alja was sure that, before the evening was over, a tiny figure would be on there, frozen in dance forever.

When she looked to her right, Alja saw the Eldest of the tribe, his sharp old face looking strange in the flickering light, with deep wrinkles that looked like shadowy snakes. His long grey hair was tied back with a leather band and he was completely wrapped in wolf fur, which made him look almost like an old wolf himself. As if he could feel her glance, his pale eyes found hers and he gave her a small smile and nod before returning his attention to the fire and the dancers. Alja knew that he was sad. Out of all the children who had been given a name this day, not a single healer had come forward. Not for many summers. There was no one he could pass his knowledge on to, no one to follow in his footsteps. But if the Challenges did not come up with any healers, then that was the forest's will. Alja looked at the old man again and sighed. He had always been good to her and she worried with him.

But this night was a wild night, a night of dancing and fire. A final rumble from the drums put a sudden stop to the music. Alja straightened her back and could feel her heart thumping. This was the moment the children with new names would perform their own dance. The older dancers moved away and disappeared into the dark circle of people.

The Eldest stood up, supported by a young woman, and walked to the painted children in the circle, holding a wooden bowl in his hands. Alja knew what was in it. This was the moment that she had waited for for so long. Emka was first in the line. The Eldest called her by her new name and put something from the bowl into her mouth. Emka chewed it thoroughly before she swallowed. Then she moved towards the fire. The others followed quickly. Each child was called by their name and fed a piece from the bowl. By the time it was Alja's turn, the first children had already closed their eyes. Some of them were trembling.

'Alja,' the Eldest said in a loud voice, and he held the small dried toadstool out towards her. The bitter taste spread into her mouth and made her eyes water. Even so, she chewed the fungus into tiny pieces and swallowed it down. She walked towards the flickering flames as if she was floating on air. When the last new hunter had stepped into the circle of light, the drum-beat began again and the rhythm was even more inciting than before. This time Alja didn't just hear the drums, she felt them, through her entire body. She didn't see the fire any more, just a bright white and orange glow, and her friends weren't her friends any more, but creatures from another world, without faces, who left coloured stripes behind them in the dark air as they moved wildly. She had to dance, she had to move, she couldn't do anything else. The sharp scent of smoke and fire filled her nostrils. When she closed her eyes she could see stars flying past like birds. She turned round and round, her arms stretched out to the trees above her, her fingers touched the moon. She danced for herself, for the otter and the hawk that swooped around her. She danced with the strange creatures without faces, and they were just like her. She danced for the world that was coming, the world that was going to sleep, the world that was now. She was Alja,

the hunter.

There was no end to this night.