

Chapter One

Foundling

The Great Wood stretched as far as the eye could see. It had been there since time began, before men came to the land, some say even before the first animals. Within the Great Wood were many things, men lived under its tall trees, strange animals roamed its depths and beings, that were not man or animal, made it their home. Many of its inhabitants never saw the light of day outside its glades and valleys, some shunned the light as one would a curse, and others were content to live their lives within its broad acres and under its tall trees never seeking to venture outside its broad boundaries.

The child, however, did not have that kind of choice. It had been left in the small grove to live or die as fate dictated. Whoever had left it in the patch of sunlight, within the centre of the glade, had at least wrapped the frail body in old rags in some attempt to keep it warm, if not safe; in a place where wild animals hunted and strange beings roamed. The child slept, dreaming baby dreams, as the mid-morning sun filtered through the tree canopy, dappling its small face with leaf cast shadows.

A vole, seeing the bundle, sat and watched for movement either from the bundle or surrounding area. Satisfied at last that it might investigate, it crept forward, covering the distance from its hiding place in the blink of an eye, scurrying as fast as its tiny feet could go. As it got nearer it caught the unmistakable scent of a human, a small one which would make very tasty nibbling. The creature scrambled onto the pile of rags covering the child just as it kicked out lustily with its legs, as children are apt to do. The vole instead of getting a meal got a crack on the head as it was flung backwards to land two feet away on its back. At the same time the child woke to the light of day and immediately began to wriggle within its cocoon of rags. The vole righting itself, looked at the moving bundle and decided it wasn't hungry enough to chance another flying lesson, and took itself off to find easier pickings.

As the day wore on the child cried from time to time as its hunger increased. Most of the rags wrapped around it had been cast adrift by its kicking and arm waving, so that by the time the sun started to set it was barely wrapped at all. With the setting of the sun the heat of the day evaporated from the small clearing. The child was crying continuously now with hunger. As the night set in and the temperature continued to drop, the small body began to get cold and the arm and leg waving grew less and less. How the child survived the night no one can tell, but towards morning its cries had stopped and the pathetically small form laid still and quiet.

No other denizen of the Great Wood since the visit of the vole had bothered the child, perhaps it would have been a mercy if one had put the suffering child out of its misery, but fate had other things awaiting the child so it laid and suffered. The sun filtering through the leaves stirred the child awake and some inborn instinct for survival drove it to give voice, its weak cries barely reaching the edge of the clearing. It used the last of its strength to thrash once with its arms and leg, and bawl its pain aloud.

The old man had been up and about since dawn, as he was every day. It was the best time to pick herbs and see what had gone on in the wood that night from the tell-tale signs left by the creatures that lived under the moon rather than the sun. He had wandered further than was his habit and only by a sudden twist in the direction of the breeze had he picked up the last faint cry of the child. He knew from the sound just what kind of creature had made it, he also knew that he was the only other human in this part of the Great Wood and had been for the past twenty years. Cautiously he picked his way towards the sound, his soft leather shoes leaving no mark nor making a sound as he made his way to the edge of the glade. Just as the vole, he stopped and investigated the area. He had lived in the Great Wood too long to be other than cautious. From his place of concealment under a large elm tree, he could see the now naked child. Only when he was sure that he was the only one present did he cross the ground and stand looking down at it.

Perhaps some sixth sense told the child that it was no longer alone for it gave a weak whimper. The old man leaned on his staff to get a better look at the child. The staff was as tall as he and was of unusual design made of many differing types of wood, each a different colour and grain. Each strand no thicker than a man's thumb, was twisted around the others making it difficult to follow any individual piece from the base to the curved tip. His fine but bland cape fell forward as he bent over the child, casting a shadow over the tiny figure. The rest of his clothing was as his cape, well made and of good quality but lacking in colour or design. Other than the staff a small dagger at his side was the only weapon about his person. He cast his eyes around the perimeter of the glade once more before settling down on one knee to take a better look at his find.

After a second's thought he pulled the leather bag from his shoulder and emptied his herbs in a heap onto the ground, rapidly sorting through the assorted leaves and flowers until finding a certain small pink bloom. The stem of this bloom was far thicker than one would have expected for such a small flower. The old man took the stem between his thumb and finger and squeezed from it a small amount of clear liquid, which he carefully smeared onto the child's lips. Without the child needing to do anything the liquid seemed to disappear into its mouth. The effect was almost instantaneous; the pale face brightened to a ruddy glow and the skin took on a healthy hue. The clenched fists uncurled and movement returned to the child's arms and legs. Nodding to himself the old man gathered the child up into his leather bag, which he slung in front of his chest. With the aid of his staff he rose to his feet, but before moving he once again made certain he was alone with the exception of the child.

The journey back to his home took longer than normal, not due to the weight of the contents of the leather bag, but the care he took to ensure that he was seen by no other. He frequently stopped and listened for movement in the trees or on the ground. If he heard any sound he would keep silent until whatever it was passed by. The child, either from weakness or the effect of the sap of the small flower, kept silent within the leather bag on the old man's chest.

While still some way from his home the old man paused and took from under the neckline of his tunic a small silver whistle. He appeared to give three long blasts, one after the other, but no sound that man could hear issued forth. Seeming satisfied he replaced the whistle under his tunic and continued on his way. From around him now came the noise of many creatures, but he paid them no notice, indeed he marched at a faster pace with no regard now for stealth or concealment, for this was his domain and within it he was complete master over all things, even those of the night. The denser forest gave way to a much less crowded habitat and finally thinned to a few shrubs and small trees, opening into a broad clearing the size of which a man could walk around in one day. In the distance was a castle with many spires; herds of cattle and horses grazed before it, and people of all shapes and sizes worked the fields nearby. Not all the workers were anything human-like.

This was the old man's home; his place of power, his castle, self-contained and self-sufficient like many others within the bounds of the Great Wood. This, he decided, was where the child, a boy, would be raised and be taught whatever the old man could teach him in the ways of the secret arts; in the ways of a warrior. He would be the son the old man had lost during the King's War, the war that had split the kingdom into many small, often quarrelling fiefdoms, the politics of which were as tangled as the thorn thickets of the wild wood.

The child was given into the care of a wet nurse and moved into a room not three doors along from the master's own rooms. Within a few days the child had thrown off the last effects of its time in the glade and was soon smiling at the constant procession of callers who had just dropped in to see him. For the lowest stable boy to cooks and even advisors of Torrin himself, could not resist viewing the child to see for themselves what had so aroused their master's interest. That he had brought the child back with him to the castle and installed it in such lavish quarters caused much comment. After handing the child to the wet nurse Torrin spent an hour in deep thought, then calling his chief man-at-arms he gave instructions that a party of armed men were to go to the glade and search for anything that would cast some light on how the child got there. If he could find the parents he would adopt the child in the usual manner, by buying it. Children were rarely abandoned in the land, not when parents could get paid for adoption. There was a mystery in this and if he could, he would unravel it.

Trying to put the matter from his mind, at least till his men returned, he got on with the day-to-day running of the castle. He was still busy, some four hours later, with the piles of paperwork when his attention was drawn to loud shouting, which seemed to be coming from the area of the main gate. The next thing he knew, his chief man-at-arms was pounding on his study door and shouting for him to come immediately. The agitation of his man was so unusual that Torrin fairly ran to see its cause. Throwing the door open he nearly collected a blow to the face as his man was just about to hammer on the door again. Instead losing his balance, the man-at-arms stumbled into the arms of Torrin. Quickly righting himself the man blurted out his news,

"Master we have found Debna, they all but killed him, he's downstairs, come quick master I don't think he has much time left."

"Calm down Rol, now who is Debna and who all but killed him?"

"Debna is the child's father, and it was the Duke of Capra's men that left him to die in the glade."

Pushing past Rol, Torrin ran down the two flights of stairs to the main door, the crowd surrounding the bloody body of Debna parted to let him through. After taking one look, Torrin issued orders for him to be

taken to his own rooms and told the gathering crowd to go about their work. Turning to Rol he gave his orders,

“Turn your men out, I want guards posted, any sign of the Duke’s men and I want to know straight away. When that is done you come to my rooms and tell me the rest of the story.”

By the time Torrin had got back to his rooms the body of Debna had been placed on a couch and serving girls were cleaning his wounds. Under their ministrations he was slowly regaining his senses. When his eyes were open and focused, Torrin sent away the girls and knelt by the side of the couch to speak to Debna.

“Debna can you tell me what happened, why did the Duke have you beaten? I am Torrin, master of this castle. You need have no fear as long as you are here.”

Torrin had to strain to hear the reply.

“My son, you must find my son! Don’t let the Duke take him... in a glade in the wood, he’s in a glade, find him please!”

Torrin knew he was speaking of the child he had rescued and taking the man’s hand in his own he explained what he had done and that the boy was safe in the castle even as they spoke.

Debna began his story, bringing pity and fear to the older man. Debna was the son of High King Percend and the Princess Thesa, the same Thesa that Percend had taken by force of arms from her husband, the Duke Lector’s castle some thirty years ago. The princess had gone willingly for she and Percend were deeply in love. From their teenage years they had been so, but a marriage of politics had separated them, until her husband’s cruelty to her had resulted in Percend abducting her. The result of this action had been a civil war, known as the King’s War, and the banishment of the King and Princess when the war had gone against them and they were defeated on the battlefield. Percend was the last of his line so none would have him executed; banishment was his lot, to the depths of the Great Wood to live out the rest of his life in isolation with his stolen princess.

In the fullness of time a child was born whom they named Debna, after his grandfather. Debna grew up into a sturdy young man and took for himself a wife, from the wood people, by the name of Cless. She bore him a fine son, Lorn, the child Torrin had rescued. After the war, the land was torn apart by petty feuding, with Barons and Dukes setting up their own small fiefdoms. At the top of this heap was the Duke Capra, who held sway over a large part of the land. He wanted to rule all of it, but knew that if he tried by force of arms then the petty barons would join together. Even he with his large well-trained army could not defeat them if they took up arms against him, so he had come up with a scheme to unite the barons under one banner.

He had found out that the son of Percend had a child, the last in the line of the old kings. This child he would take and put on the throne, but he would be the power behind it. It would be the Duke Capra that really ruled the land. So he had sent his men to take the child. Cless’s people had warned Debna of their coming for nothing moved in the Great Wood without their knowing. Debna had told them to take his son Lorn to the glade, he would tell the duke’s men that the child was dead and when they had gone he would collect the child. They had beaten him unconscious trying to get him to tell them the whereabouts of the child, for no man of the Duke took anything to be the truth and they had enjoyed the beating anyway. It had been a long hard ride and they deserved some sport before returning to the duke empty handed. Cless had died from the beating, her body laid in a twisted heap where it had fallen from the last kick of a spurred boot. Leaving him for dead, the Duke’s men had left Debna where he had fallen by his wife’s side. How he did not know, but Debna had crawled to the glade to find his son gone. It was there that Rol and his men had found him. Debna had told them enough on the journey back to the castle to make Rol batter at his master’s door on returning.

As Torrin sat holding Debna’s hand, mulling over the story he had just been told, Debna gave one small movement of his fingers and died. Torrin looked down on the battered face of the son of the man he had served so many years ago and made a silent promise. Torrin folded Debna’s hands over his lifeless chest and closed his eyes then quietly left the room.

Chapter Two

Childhood

Rol was waiting outside in the corridor as Torrin pulled the door shut behind him, the cast of Torrin's features telling his man-at-arms that Debna was dead. Together they walked the few paces to Torrin's work chamber and seated themselves at the paper littered table.

"Rol you must try to remember everything he said to you. Was it only you he spoke to, or did any of the others talk with him?"

"No master, he only spoke to me, and then only in a whisper, he was near to death when we found him. He never let them know the child's whereabouts, telling them he was already dead. He refused to go with them and play the Duke's games. That's why they beat him as they did and killed his wife. One other thing he did keep saying was that the Duke's men had taken the ring. What ring I don't know, but he was terribly upset about it being taken, kept saying it was the boy's."

Torrin could guess which ring it was that had been stolen, the signet ring of the old King, which had been handed down through the generations of the royal line. Anyone could wear the ring, but only a member of the royal bloodline could make the band glow with a life of its own so that the ring seemed to be constantly changing colour like a captured rainbow; indeed it was known as "The Rainbow Ring", and now the Duke had it, presumably to lay claim to the vacant High Kingship.

The silence stretched between the two men seated at the table as Torrin thought over all that had happened and its implications.

"Rol this is a matter between you and me, no matter what, you will say nothing about it to another living soul. As far as anyone else is concerned the child is now my ward and has nothing to do with the happenings in the Great Wood this day. Understood?"

"On my oath master, it shall be as you say."

"Good, go now and quiet those below and see that the sentries are on their toes. I want no more surprises this day. From now on our lands will be guarded day and night. See to it that the men do not get lax in their duty as time passes. Go now."

Time did indeed pass, the child grew, the seasons changed and people got older, but Rol, as were his orders, never left the castle or the lands around it unguarded, nor ever said a word about the child, other than to say he was the master's ward. In the years that came and went, Rol grew to think of Lorn, not so much as his master's ward, but more his master's son. The boy would tease and play pranks on the gruff soldier, but if a scraped knee was the problem, or some such other thing, it was always the burly man-at-arms to whom the youngster ran.

When childish ailments laid the boy low it was always Rol who could be found pacing up and down outside the boy's rooms. At such times the men under his command kept well out of his way. Though usually fair and just with his men, he could display a temper that was normally well hidden. A saying sprung up to cover such circumstances, "If Lorn was pained, then Rol was a pain."

When Lorn was five years of age he was given his first horse and taught to ride under the watchful eyes of Rol and the horse master. He took to riding as if born in the saddle, seeming to have an almost uncanny understanding with the horse. For that matter the lad could do things with, and to, animals that even the most experienced of trainers would have problems with, like the time a full-grown boar had broken out of its pen and was rampaging across the courtyard, slashing its tusks at anything in the way. The raging jaws dripped with foam as it looked for something it could rend and tear. Lorn, then a three-year-old, had slipped from the shadows and before anyone could stop him marched straight up to the incensed animal, to stand squarely in front of it with his hands on his hips. The eyes of the boar were on the same level as the child as they stood no more than an arm's length apart, the bunched muscles of its shoulders ready to ram its tusks forward into the child and rip flesh and bone. Suddenly its shaking form began to quieten and the killing light in its eyes faded. All around the courtyard men stood ready to throw themselves at the boar, in an effort to protect the boy, for not only was he the master's ward but was genuinely liked for his own self. The boy's hand reached out and soothed the rough snout, as he himself had often been soothed after a scrape or knock. The tusks dropped as the boar's head lowered and it stepped forward into the child's embrace, then with his arm over the thick neck of the animal Lorn calmly

led it back to its pen and closed the gate behind it. The crowd around the courtyard stood in complete silence until someone cheered, then a hundred voices burst forth. Rol was the first by the boy's side, scooping him into his arms and hugging him tight to his chest. Thus it was with any animal; if you wanted a horse kept still while you examined it, you sent for the boy. Sick animals healed under his care and ferocious dogs would wag tails and leap like puppies to get his attention and a pat on the head.

At the same time as he got his horse to ride, Torrin began Lorn's education into the magic arts. For two hours every day the boy had to recite old laws and learn by heart, runes and charms. He was taught to read and write, to paint and draw, how to make potions that would heal ills, and how to set a broken bone. The afternoons were taken up with another kind of instruction, that of the sword, bow and lance, in which he was drilled by Rol, who, for once, would take no notice when the boy complained of tiredness. He was told on more than one occasion,

"You cannot lay down your sword in the middle of a fight because you are tired, not unless you want to be killed."

Rol pushed Lorn harder than any other on the practice grounds. Often the boy would stumble into bed after the day's lessons aching in every part of his body, only to have to face the same routine the next day. You may be forgiven for thinking Torrin had little to do with the boy's upbringing but you would be wrong. Every aspect of his ward's life was overseen by the master, from his training as a Knight to his diet. Indeed they spent many hours together, discussing his lessons, or just in idle talk, the bond between them as close as father and son.

By the time Lorn was sixteen he was a tall gangly youth, who enjoyed the hunt and roaming the Great Wood either on horseback or on foot. On many such forays he would, out of mischief, give the guards sent with him for protection the slip and go roaming on his own. It was on one such occasion that he was to meet one of the wood people. They belonged to the same tribe as his mother had, before marrying his father so long ago. Though many knew of the wood people few had seen them. They were human by descent, but had over the millennia parted from the main stream of humanity. They were vegetarian by nature, at one with the animals of the Great Wood and the Great Wood itself. One of their many talents was the ability to get animals to do their bidding, a kind of telepathy with the creatures of the wood. It was not surprising, therefore, that Lorn had inherited this same gift from his mother and it had on at least one occasion saved his life. His meeting with his mother's folk came about in a deeper part of the wood than he had ever roamed before. He was enjoying his solitude, he had no fears for he knew no animal would trouble him, nor was he afraid of other men for, though he was still a youth, he had his sword by his side and years of Rol's training behind him. His inbuilt sense of direction would see him home safely back to the castle from wherever he went.

He had been strolling aimlessly for about an hour when he heard a cry for help, from up ahead. Headstrong the boy might be but a fool he was not. His sword hissed from its scabbard as he went forward to investigate. Treading softly and keeping a watchful eye for anything amiss he approached the source of the noise. The cries were getting more urgent as he got nearer. Kneeling on the ground he cautiously parted some branches to see a young wood boy, of his own age, sinking fast in quicksand. A quick look at the scuff marks on the bank told Lorn that the boy must have lost his footing as he tried to reach some herbs at the edge of the mire and fallen in.

The lad had sunken in so that only his head, neck and right arm were still visible above the surface. It would only be a matter of a minute or so before he was completely engulfed by the quicksand. His cries had stopped and he seemed motionless. Lorn stepped into view, careful not to slip on the bank and land up in the same trouble himself. Laying sideways on the edge of the bank he reached out with his arm to the stricken boy. Try as he might he was still an arm's length from grasping the outstretched hand in view. The boy's mouth was now just clear of the sucking sand. Lorn knew he had to chance being dragged into the quicksand himself if he was to save the boy. With his left hand he took as firm a hold as he could on one of the branches and edged into the quicksand. He tried to spread his body as flat as possible over the surface. He was starting to sink when his flailing hand caught hold of the boy's, just as the boy's head disappeared under the sand. Lorn lifted his head, and gulped in air, fillings his lungs as much as he could, then he gave one huge convulsive jerk of his right arm and managed to get the boy's head back above the surface. Getting his own head up out of the mire, he took the strain with his left arm and pulled until his sinews cracked with the effort. Slowly the quicksand released its hold on them and they edged back towards the bank. Both were still in danger but Lorn had to stop, the muscles in his arms and shoulders were in spasm and he was in agony.

Although he rested only for a few seconds it was long enough for them to sink further into the sand. He dare not rest any more so, gathering his strength, Lorn dragged both his and the boy's arms inward towards

his chest, so that he pulled both of them to the bank at the same time. Releasing his hold, with his left hand on the branch, he quickly grabbed it again further up its length and pulled once more.

Another two minutes saw Lorn dragging the unconscious form to safety among the bushes around the edge of the mire and collapsing beside him. Deep wracking breaths were all that Lorn was capable of for some minutes as he lay there. It was only after he had regained his breath and managed to sit up that he could check on the state of the wood boy. A quick examination showed that the boy's left leg was broken below the knee, from when he fell down the banking. Being pulled through the quicksand would have been agony; it was a mercy he had passed out, though his limp form had made it more difficult for Lorn. Both were plastered from head to toe in filth, but Lorn knew his first task was to set the broken leg while the boy was out cold. Finding where he had thrown his sword he set about cutting lengths of wood to make splints. He used the razor sharp edge of his sword to slit the boy's hose. Within a short space of time he had the leg neatly splinted, a few bits of string from his pocket securing the splints in place.

His ministrations were only just finished when the head of the wood boy moved, and he started to emerge from his swoon. A pair of deep blue eyes fought for focus and low moans escaped from the mud caked lips. A slight movement brought a sharp cry of pain from the boy and his hands reached down instinctively to grasp his injured leg. Lorn knocked the boy's hands away from the injured limb and said,

"Rest, don't try to move, you have a broken leg. I haven't had time to look at the rest of you, does anywhere else hurt?"

The blue eyes squinted through pain, but after a moment the boy shook his head to signify that he had no other injuries. Lorn sat back and ran his fingers through his hair to remove the mud.

"Well now I'm Lorn, what do I call you, apart from clumsy for falling in that muck?"

The boy's pale features gave a wan smile and he held out a hand for Lorn to take.

"Terl, my name is Terl, and I thank you for saving my life."

"Nothing to it, do that sort of thing every day, but I don't usually get this messy. When you feel a bit stronger we'll see about getting you home, that is if you will tell me where you live. I'm told that the wood people don't like others to know much about their home in the Great Wood."

"No, we like to keep ourselves to ourselves, no offence, but we find the rest of the humans to be too aggressive for our taste."

"Talking of taste, you wood people are supposed to be vegetarian, is that true?"

"Yes it's true we have respect for the animals that share the wood and no taste for meat. Perhaps it is meat that makes your kind aggressive."

Lorn burst into laughter as he replied,

"Well it's a good job I had my fill of meat today, or I might not have had the strength to pull you out."

Still laughing, he climbed to his feet and held out his hand to help Terl up. Together they set off back towards the faint trail ahead, Terl leaning heavily on the taller Lorn's shoulder. On reaching the trail Terl indicated the way to take, and told Lorn that an hour's steady walk straight in that direction would see them at the wood people's village. After only a few yards Terl's good leg began to turn to rubber and he began to sweat heavily as shock was setting in. He stumbled into Lorn's side and collapsed in a heap at his feet before Lorn could catch him.

Lorn knew what the problem was and decided that the best thing he could do was to get Terl to the village as fast as possible. That meant he would have to carry him. On the second try he managed to sling the boy across his shoulders and set off in the direction indicated by Terl. Within a few minutes he was covered in perspiration, the rescue had taken more out of him than he had realised and the weight across his shoulders seemed to double with each step he took. Soon he was stumbling himself, but he gritted his teeth and kept plodding on, his whole attention focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Under normal circumstances he would have spotted the attack, but he was near to exhaustion and never saw it coming. He felt a split second of pain as the club hit the back of his head then the lights went out. Lorn regained consciousness to find a man standing over him and no sooner had he moaned than he was prodded in the ribs by a boot. His first reaction was to reach for his sword, but his reward was a hard kick in the ribs. His pain seemed to spark off laughter from the other men around him. He tried to get up but a well-placed boot pinned him to the ground.

"Don't move filth or I'll have to kick you again and you've made my boots dirty enough as it is. Now lad what is a beggar like you doing carrying a sword like this, stole it did you?"

"No the sword is mine; it was a present from my guardian, Torrin. Now let me get up."

Lorn tried to rise once more, but the boot forced him back down. From behind he heard a sharp cry of pain as one of the men nudged the broken leg of Terl, just for fun. This set off another bout of laughter. With his hand stroking his chin, the man pinning down Lorn spoke again.

“Now lad, let’s have the truth, how does a filthy beggar like you come to have this sword, answer me or I might have to get the information out of you another way. You won’t enjoy that but I will.”

A truly evil grin spread over his face as he talked.

“The reason I’m filthy is that I crawled into the quicksand to get the other boy out. He’d fallen in and was sinking, so I dragged him out, set his leg, and was carrying him home. Then you came along and ambushed me, a small matter that my guardian Torrin will, I’m sure, take up with your master in the very near future.”

The anger in Lorn’s voice was loud and clear, and seemed to have the desired effect for the boot holding him down was removed. The man still, however, stood over him, his face calculating. The other men standing around were looking at one another, trying to decide if they were in trouble or not and if so, who was to blame. Lorn got to his feet and stood facing his attacker, his eyes narrowed as he glared at the man in front of him.

“I know you; you’re wearing the Duke of Capra’s colours. You are his second-in-Command, Ligit, no Lithgo. You’re Lithgo, I’ve heard of you and what you do, how you like to beat people up for no reason.”

Lithgo help up his hand to silence Lorn.

“You are right I am the Duke’s man, but it was an honest mistake I made, a wood boy covered in filth and sporting such a fine sword, with another lad slung over your shoulders. I took you for a thief at least, how was I to know that you had rescued him? It could have been that you had murdered him and were getting rid of his body. Still no harm done! We’ll be on our way and leave you to take the lad home.”

“Not so fast. What were you doing in this part of the wood to start with? And if you think I believe you about it being an honest mistake, then you’re a fool and somehow I don’t think you are a fool...a bully and a thief, but not a fool.”

“Harsh words young master, but as I said an honest mistake and when explained to the Lord Torrin, one that’ll be settled with a handshake.”

Lithgo held out his hand to Lorn who looked down and ignored it.

“Well, what were you doing in this part of the wood, so far from your master’s land? I think you should explain.”

“Why hunting. We got a bit lost, but I think we can find our way back now so we’ll be going. I’ll tell my master of our meeting. I am sure he will be full of admiration for you for rescuing a wood boy, after all no one else would! Goodbye young sir, I am sure you and I will meet again.”

Turning, Lithgo signed for his men to follow and looking back once or twice at Lorn he disappeared into the depths of the wood.

Terl lay curled on the ground, his face a mask of pain from the kick to his broken leg. Once more Lorn slung him across his shoulders, neither of them spoke as he started back on his way again, the weight across his shoulders making his kicked ribs smart with pain. He had to stop many times before he finally rounded a bend to see the wood people’s village in front of him. The last few steps seemed to take forever as he staggered nearly dropping his burden once more. Suddenly he was dimly aware of someone taking the limp form from his shoulders and others running to help. The rescue of Terl combined with the attack by the Duke’s men and the long walk carrying the dead weight of Terl had sapped his strength past the point of exhaustion. Only iron will and sheer determination had kept him going, his subconscious told him he need go no further so, as soon as the weight was lifted from his shoulders, he collapsed into the dirt face first, unconscious as he hit the ground.

When dusk fell and Lorn had still not returned to the castle, Rol went out to the main gate and peered out into the gathering shadows. For over an hour he paced outside the castle entrance, until full darkness had fallen and he could see no more than a few feet before him, in the light of the torches set on the main gate. He was not the only one to be growing concerned about Lorn’s absence. Torrin, himself, stood by his window that overlooked the entrance, his features set and his hands clasped behind his back. When he could no longer see the gate, only the flickering torches, he sent for Rol.

The man-at-arms stood in front of his master, his concern for Lorn plain to see. Torrin kept looking out of the window, his back to Rol as he spoke.

“Did he say where he was going or if he expected to be late?”

Rol did not need to ask who he meant,

“No master, as far as I know he was just going for a stroll in the woods, he should have been back at least two hours since. He slipped away from the guards sent with him; they came back near three hours ago. They tried to find him, but you know the lad master, if he wants to be alone then you could look for

him all day and night and not find him. They tried as they always do but he had disappeared, as if spirited away.”

Torrin’s voice was low as he gave Rol his instructions, his fingers whitening as he gripped them fiercely together.

“Give him one more hour to return, then send out every man we have to search for him, I want him found!”

Rol nodded and left to make preparations. As he descended the main stairs he found Maga, his wife, waiting for him, her face streaked with tears for Lorn. Rol gathered her into his arms, holding her tight as her head nestled under his chin.

“Do not worry, everything will be alright you’ll see. He knows those woods like the back of his hand. He probably fell asleep under some tree and is on his way back as we speak.”

Secretly he did not believe this, but could not say so to his wife, who loved the boy as much as he. Lorn was the child they never had. Kissing the top of her head he told her he had to go. He did not tell her it was to organise a search party, or of his fears for Lorn. An hour later Maga watched as the men filed out of the main gate. Torches flared and cast long shadows as they set forth to find the missing boy. From the lowest to the highest no one slept in the castle that night. Dawn came and with it the return of the searchers, many stumbling from lack of sleep and the exertions of the night. Cooks busied themselves serving food to the hungry men who, when they had eaten fell asleep only to be woken again, to once more search for the boy many thought would be brought back dead on a litter.

As the men in the castle courtyard got ready to resume the search, Lorn himself was just awakening from his exhausted sleep. As he opened his eyes his first thought was for Terl and he was halfway out of bed before he realised he had even been in one. The mid-day sun shone through the entrance to his room, and the first thing that struck him was that the room was filled with flowers. They were in pots and tubs everywhere, their scent filling the room. A shadow suddenly blotted out some of the sunlight coming through the doorway. With the sun at the back of the person who stood framed in the doorway Lorn could not make out any features, until the person moved closer towards him. A soft feminine voice told him to lie back down upon the bed, and gentle but insistent hands pushed him back. Lorn lay back on the bed looking up at a girl of his own age. Her dark hair fell forward to brush against his face, as her hands on his chest made sure he would not try to rise again.

“I know your name is Lorn, so you need not introduce yourself. My name is Silla and I am Terl’s sister. He is fine thanks to you. His leg will be as good as new in a few weeks; you did a good job setting it. You, on the other hand, need to rest, you have lumps and bumps all over and were unconscious when we carried you in here and put you to bed.”

Lorn put up his hand to stop her talking and asked.

“How long have I been here?”

“Only a day and a half. We let you sleep, it was the best thing for you and you still need to rest.”

Her efforts to keep him lying down proved futile as he rose from the bed with a worried look on his face.

“I must get back to the castle. They will be out of their minds with worry by now. Can your people give me a guide back to where I found your brother; I can find my own way from there?”

“You should rest, you are still weak.”

With a wave of his arm in her direction he turned and headed for the door, but before he could go through it she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“If you must go, you must, but first please let my father speak to you and also Terl. He’s been asking after you every other minute since he came round.”

“Will you then find me a guide?”

She nodded and together they stepped outside, the sun making him squint after the semi-darkness of the room. Her slim figure took the lead as they walked towards one of the village houses. Gesturing for him to enter, they went through the door to the main room. Lorn noticed this room was also full of plants and flowers. Seated at a table in the middle of the room was Terl, his splinted leg stuck out in front of him. It was the first time Lorn had seen him without being covered in the mud and slime. Terl’s face split into a huge grin as he recognised his rescuer and he tried to rise to greet him. Only a sharp word from his sister stopped him. From another room came a much older man, with a resemblance to Terl so strong he could only be his father. From his side Lorn heard Silla introduce her father Rild, whose grin at seeing Lorn up and about was as big as his son’s. Silla glared at Lorn as she told her father of his plans.

“Father you must tell him to go back to bed. He wants to return to the castle at once, and he is not well enough yet.”

“I must get back as soon as I can. My guardian and others at the castle will be worried.”

Rild came over and took Lorn’s hands into his own strong hands.

“I will see that you get back safely, but first let me thank you for saving my son’s life.”

“He has told me and the other elders of the village, how you risked your own life for him, and he a complete stranger. And how you would not leave but struggled to carry him back to us on your shoulders, also of the encounter with the Duke’s men. Know that we, in this village, will always be indebted to you and will help you whenever you are in need. The other villages of the wood people also. Should you wish to come back, at another time, to our village leave a note under the split oak at the edge of the Great Wood, on your castle’s land, and we will send you a guide.”

Turning to Silla he sent her to fetch one of the villagers to guide Lorn home and while they waited for the man to arrive, they sat around the table. Three beautifully engraved drinking horns were filled and they drank the sweet pale wine of the forest. Both father and son lifted their drinks in a toast to Lorn who was beginning to feel embarrassed by the gratitude shown to him. He kept insisting that anyone would have done the same, but all he got in response was smiles and shakes of the head. He was glad when the guide arrived and they set off on the trail to the castle. What he did not expect was that Silla would accompany them. As they walked she asked him about his life in the castle and he in turn questioned her about the life of the wood people and her own life in particular. By the time they had reached the place where they were to part, he knew that he would have to see her again. His mind was searching for the right words when she stood on tiptoe and kissed him quickly on his lips. Then she turned and ran back along the trail to catch up with the already departed guide, vanishing from sight as he stood bereft of words.

As he stood still trying to gather his thoughts, he heard the sound of a hunting horn, being blown as hard as it could be from behind him. Within minutes, a crowd of laughing cheering people surrounded Lorn, all trying to touch him and welcome him back. The search party had found him. The procession that came through the gates of the castle with Lorn held high on willing shoulders was more like a carnival. It was some hours before he got any time to himself, as he had to tell the tale over and over again as those who were further afield returned to the castle.

After the excitement died down, Lorn sat with Torrin and Rol in private. For the first time in his life Lorn saw Torrin become angry as he recounted the ambush and run in with Duke’s men. Rol was for mounting a party of men and going straight to the Duke’s stronghold to call out in combat the man, Lithgo. Only a restraining hand laid on his arm by Torrin prevented him from doing so. The master’s voice was cold as he told his man-at-arms,

“Now is not the time, but that time will come I promise you.”

