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Tracked Down

 Toby was just one and a half millimeters tall, not exactly big for a boy of his age. Only his toes were sticking out of the hole in the bark where he was hiding.

Looking up through the enormous russet-colored leaves to the starry sky above, Toby felt there had never been a night as dark and shiny as this one. *When there's no moon, the stars dance more brightly. Even if there is a sky in Heaven, he told himself, it couldn't possibly be as deep or as magical as this.*

Toby began to calm down. Lying with his head resting on the moss, he could feel his hair wet with cold tears. He was tucked inside a hole in the black bark. His leg was injured, he had cuts on both shoulders, and his hair was matted with blood. His hands were stinging from being ripped by thorns, but the rest of his tiny body was numb with pain and exhaustion.

His life had ended a few hours earlier, so what was he still doing here? That's what people used to ask him, when he poked his nose in everywhere: "Still here, Toby?" Today, he kept whispering it to himself: "Still here?"

But he was definitely alive, and his misery was even vaster than the sky. He was staring at the sky in the same way he used to cling to his parents' hands in a crowd. *If I close my eyes*, he thought, *I'll die*. But his eyes stayed wide open, behind two lakes of muddy tears.

Then he heard them. And in a flash the fear was back. There were four of them: three adults and a teenager. The teenager was holding a torch to light their way.

"He can't be far. I'm sure he's not far."

"He must be caught. He has to pay too. Like his parents."

The eyes of the third man shone yellow in the night. He spat, then said, "We'll get him, you'll see, and we'll make him pay."

More than anything, Toby wanted to wake up from this nightmare; he wanted to run over to his parents' bed, and cry and cry. . . . He would have given anything to go through to their bright kitchen together, still in his pajamas, where they'd make him a hot honey drink with cookies and say, "It's over now, Toby sweetheart. It's all right."

Instead, Toby was trembling at the bottom of a hole, trying to tuck in his sticky-out toes. Toby was only thirteen, but he was being hunted by the whole Tree, by

his own people, and what he could hear was much worse than the cold, scary night.

What he could hear was a voice he loved, the voice of his oldest friend, Leo Blue.

Once, when he was four and a half, Leo had tried to steal Toby's lunch, and they'd ended up sharing everything ever since—good things and things that weren't so funny. Leo lived with his aunt. Both his parents had died. All he had left of his father, the famous explorer El Blue, was a wooden boomerang. But his misfortune had made Leo Blue very strong, deep down inside. This brought out the best in him, and the worst too. Toby preferred the best: Leo's intelligence and bravery. The boys became inseparable. There was a time when people even called them Tobyleo, as if it was just one name.

One day, when Toby and his parents were due to move house, down to the Low Branches, Tobyleo hid in a dry bud because they didn't want to be split up. It was two days and three nights before they were found. It was one of the rare occasions when Toby saw his father cry.

But tonight, Toby was curled up alone in his bark hole—was this really the same Leo Blue standing just a few paces away, brandishing his flare against the dark? Toby felt his heart exploding when his best friend shouted, "We'll get you! We'll get you, Toby!"

Leo's voice rang out from branch to branch. It brought back a vivid memory.

When he was tiny, Toby had had a tame greenfly called Lima. Toby used to climb on Lima's back, before

he could even walk. One day, out of nowhere, the green-fly stopped playing—it bit Toby hard and shook him like a scrap of rag. The creature had gone crazy, and Toby’s parents had to separate them. Toby could still remember that look in Lima’s eyes, his pupils grown fat as a pond in the rain.

His mother had said to Toby, “Today it was Lima, but anyone could turn crazy one day.”

“We’ll get you, Toby!”

When he heard that wild cry again, Toby knew that Leo’s eyes must be as terrifying as a crazy animal’s. Like ponds swollen by the rain.

The small troop was getting nearer, tapping the bark with wooden spears to feel for cracks and hollows. They were looking for Toby. It was like the White Ant Hunt, when fathers and sons set out every spring to drive the pests to the Far Branches.

“I’ll make him come out of his hole.”

The voice was so close, Toby could almost feel the speaker’s warm breath. He didn’t dare move or shut his eyes. The beating spears were coming toward him through the flame-swept darkness.

A spear crashed down, landing only a finger’s width away from his face. Toby was paralyzed with fear but kept his eyes glued to the patch of sky he could see in between the hunters’ shadows. This time they had him. It was over.

Suddenly, night fell all around again.

“Hey! Leo! Did you let the torch go out?” an angry voice shouted.

“It fell. Sorry, the torch fell. . . .”

“You idiot!”

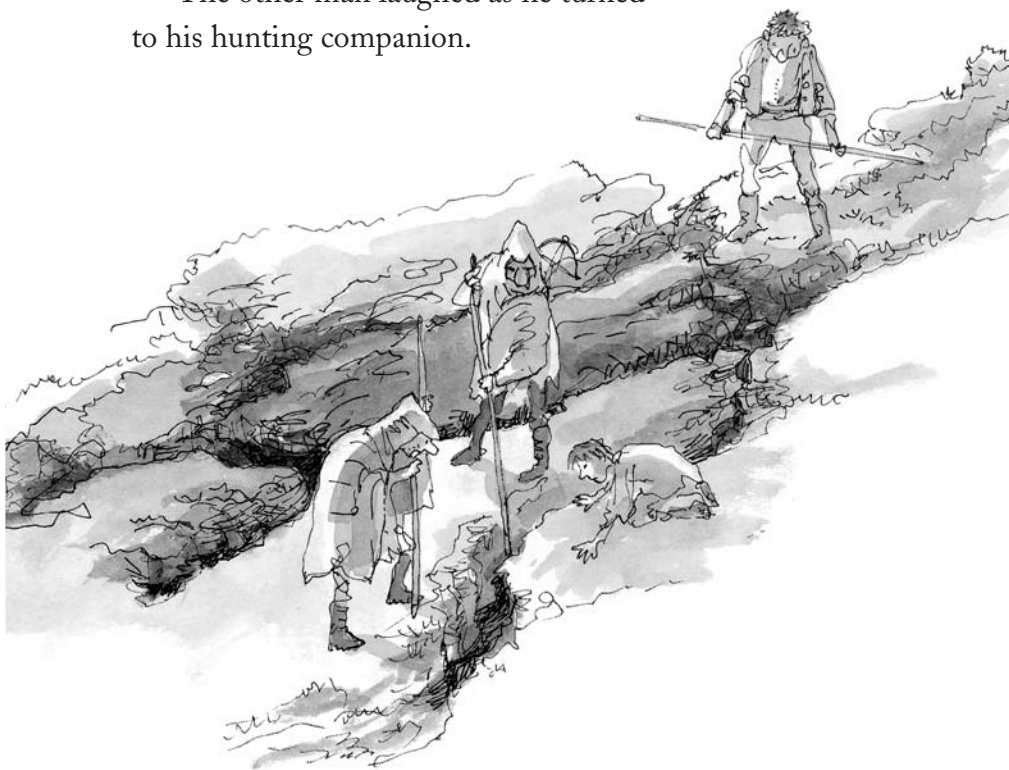
The group’s only torch had gone out; the search would have to continue in the pitch black.

“We’re not giving up now. We’ll get him.”

Another man had caught up with the first and was rummaging around the cracks in the bark. He was so near, Toby could feel the air moving. The second man must have been drinking, because he stank of alcohol and his movements were violent and clumsy.

“I’ll catch him myself. I’m going to chop him up into little pieces. And then we’ll tell the others we couldn’t find him.”

The other man laughed as he turned to his hunting companion.



“Doesn’t change, does he? He killed forty white ants last spring!”

Toby was worse than a white ant to them—they wouldn’t spare him the spear or the flames.

Both shadows were towering directly over him. Nothing could save him now. Toby almost stopped looking up at the sky, which was the only thing keeping him going. He saw the spear coming down toward him and quickly flattened himself against the sides, so all the hunter felt under his weapon was the hard wood of the Tree.

But the other man had already thrust his arm into the hole.

Toby’s eyes were smarting with tears. He watched the man put his big fat hand right up against him, stop, then move it a bit higher, next to his face.

Strangely, at that moment Toby stopped feeling frightened. A sense of calm rose up inside him. There was even a faint smile on his lips when he heard a terrifying voice whisper gleefully, “I’ve got him. He’s mine.”

Silence.

The others came over. Not even Leo Blue was talking now. Perhaps he was afraid of looking his former friend in the eye.

There were four of them surrounding an injured child. But Toby wasn’t afraid of anything anymore. He didn’t even shudder when the man put his arm into the hole, then roared with laughter as he tore something off and showed it to the others.

Silence, longer than a snowy winter.

Toby thought he'd just felt a shred of his clothing being ripped off. After a while, words rang out in the chilly silence.



“It’s bark, just a piece of bark.”

Sure enough, the man was holding out a piece of bark to the other hunters.

“Got you that time, didn’t I? Of course he’s not here. He must be running like crazy toward the Low Branches. We’ll catch him tomorrow.”

The group groaned in disappointment. They hurled a few insults at the man who had pretended to find Toby. Their shadows moved off quickly, like a sad cloud. Their echoing voices dispersed.

And silence settled around him again.

It was a long time before Toby could hear the sound of his own breathing again, before he could feel his body against the sides of the Tree.

What had happened? He pieced his thoughts together very slowly.

He relived every second of that mysterious episode over again. The man had put his hand on him, but he’d felt only wood. He’d torn off a piece of his jacket and mistaken it for bark. They’d all agreed it was bark. It was

as if Toby had become part of the wood. At least that was how it felt, as if the Tree had hidden him under its bark coat.

Suddenly, Toby froze.

What if this was a trap?

Of course! The man had felt him and was waiting in the dark, a few paces away. Toby was sure now. After all, hadn't the hunter said he wanted Toby all to himself? That he'd crush him like an ant? He was lurking in the shadows, waiting for Toby to come out, ready to pounce with his spear. The fear was back, curled up in a ball at the base of Toby's throat.

He didn't move. He was listening for the slightest sound. Nothing. Then, slowly, he became aware of the sky above again. His starry friend, watching over him with so many eyes.

Beneath him, the Tree was warm. Summer was drawing to a close, and the branches had stored up a gentle heat. Toby was still in the High Branches, where the sun shines from morning till dusk, filling the air with the smell of warm bread, like his mother's leaf-bread rolled in pollen grains. The reassuring smell relaxed Toby. He closed his eyes, forgetting about how frightened he was, about Leo being so crazy. He forgot that he was bait for the hunters and that there were thousands of them against one of him. A gentle wave washed over him, lulling him to sleep. He forgot everything. His trembling and loneliness, how unfair it all was, even the big WHY that had been pounding inside him for days now.

He forgot about it all. But he kept a small space free in his dreams, the only dream he would let into his sleep. And this dream had a face: Elisha's.

All day long, on the run from his enemies, he'd vowed not to think about her. He mustn't. It would be too upsetting.

He built a fortress around his heart, with watch-towers and moats. He released soldier ants into the surrounding paths. He wouldn't let himself think about her.

But at every moment, there she was, popping up in his memories, wearing her green dress. In the middle of his thoughts, she was even more real than the sky.

He'd gotten to know Elisha when he and his family had left the Treetop and moved to the Low Branches. How they met is an interesting story.

Here, with Toby asleep in his hole, let's rewind the story to six years ago, and the time of the great move.