

# Forest Tracks

Onni and his family led a simple Sami life in the northern-most region of Finland: Finnish Lapland. During each of his twelve winters, the sun never rose above the horizon and deep snow – sometimes up to four feet – covered the earth with the ice on the frozen lakes thick enough to walk on. Onni always had to wrap up warmly as temperatures frequently dropped well below freezing. He had always loved nature: especially the ancient pine trees (that he'd read covered around 75% of the land) and the numerous small clearings occupied by communities that had been built within them.

Like most traditional Sami families, Onni's family worked as reindeer herders. They farmed the reindeer for their skins and meat, and trained them to pull sleighs. They wore their Sami colours proudly and lived modestly off the land, building their home as they wandered across the frozen forests of northern Finland.

One fateful night, as they were passing through a town, Onni spotted a leaflet on the ground:

**“Calling all Musers!**

**300 km competition Saturday. Prize money 500 Markka!”**

Onni's jaw fell open. His family could really use the money. They got by, but he knew his parents were desperate for some new tools.

Although mushing was not usually a part of their culture, Onni had persuaded his parents to let him keep huskies and train them to pull a sledge. It had been a life-long dream of his to become a musher of a six dog sledge. He could win this; he was sure of it.

On the Saturday of the race, Onni turned up at the start line. His sledge was lined with reindeer skins and was packed with provisions he would need for the three-day competition. The hounds had been fed and attached to their harness lines. They were raring to go: jumping, barking and straining forwards.

As he approached, the older mushers were sneering and jibing at Onni.

“You're too young, boy. Go back!”

“You think you've got what it takes, little one?”

But Onni held his head high. They could criticise him all they liked. He wouldn't listen. He was confident of his skills. Why wouldn't he be? He'd trained hard in his spare time. He also knew that he had several advantages. Being younger, he was lighter. Being lighter meant less weight for the dogs to pull. Therefore, he should be faster. Due to his Sami way of life, he also had an amazing knowledge of the forest. Its pitfalls, its hidden gems and how to live off it. He was not the amateur they all presumed him to be.

**BANG.** The sound of the starting pistol jumped Onni into action. He released his foot off the break and the huskies lurched into action. All the mushers guided their sledges towards the forest. Some of the mushers played dirty ramming their sledges into others, causing them to veer off course; trying to distract other racers' huskies with dried reindeer meat. All cheating tactics. All against the rules. But that didn't matter to them. After all, who would catch them now they were in the middle of the forest?

Pine trees, hundreds of years old, towered over them blocking the majority of what little light they had. Birch trees, bent over in arches from the lack of light, made the track difficult to navigate. Onni was lucky: being younger, he was shorter than the grown men. He could duck under the archways. The man behind Onni wasn't so lucky. Onni turned in time to see him try and swerve; but too late. The birch tree went straight into his stomach and he was knocked backwards off his sledge.

After a couple of hours, the sledges had spread out, taking slightly different routes through the forest. They had to check in at specific places to make sure nobody took any short cuts. They didn't take into account the other types of cheating that took place at the start of the race. The light was fading as the dogs ploughed on, making fresh tracks through the forest. It would soon be dark.

Several hours later, Onni decided it was time to stop for the night. The dogs pleased themselves and dug pits in the ground in which to sleep. Meanwhile, Onni built a shelter using his tools and lit a fire to keep warm. While he worked, colours danced and swirled across the sky. This was the *aroura borealis*, commonly known as the northern lights.

The rest of the night, and the next day, followed much without incident. The final day had arrived. The mushers were expected to have completed the course and made it back to the centre of the town. Onni was tired now. The dogs were tired now. It was the longest race they had done and it was taking its toll. Onni emerged from the trees. He could see the finish line. No one was ahead of him. Onni's heart jumped into his mouth. He could do this. He could *win*.

**CRASH.** Another musher erupted from the edge of the forest. Despite his dogs looking exhausted, he was gaining fast. The musher steered his sledge towards Onni's and the dogs collided. A deafening yelp filled the air. The front husky had caught his paw under Onni's sledge. The pack crumpled into a tangled mess and the other musher's sledge tipped over.

Onni was faced with a difficult decision. Should he stop, help and almost certainly lose his winning position? He knew he could help. He often helped his parents when the reindeer were injured. But, there was the prize money....

### Vocabulary

1. Look at the paragraph beginning, '*Like most traditional Sami families...*' Give the meaning of the word 'modestly' in this paragraph.
2. Look at the last sentence on page 2. What does 'amateur' mean?
3. What does the phrase 'lurched into action' suggest about how the dogs moved?
4. What does the word 'erupted' suggest about the other musher?

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### Summarise

1. Write a sentence summarising the Sami culture's way of life.
2. Summarise how Onni prepared for the race.
3. Read page 3. What is the attitude of the other mushers towards the race?
4. Summarise the whole race in four sentences.

### Retrieve

1. How much of the land is covered in forest?
2. How long does racing 300km take?
3. Why are the birch trees bent?
4. Give two names for the lights that appeared in the sky.

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### Infer

1. How does Onni feel when he sees the leaflet? How do you know?
2. How do the men feel about Onni participating in the race? How do you know?
3. Explain how the description of the other mushers makes the reader feel.
4. What does 'Onni's heart jumped into his mouth' tell you about how Onni is feeling?

### Predict

1. Based on what you have read, will Onni take part in the race? Explain your answer fully, using evidence from the text.
2. Do you think Onni will do well in the race? Explain your opinion using evidence from the text.
3. Based on what you have read on page 3, what might happen next? Use evidence from page three to support your prediction.
4. Based on what you have read, what do you think Onni would do at the end of the race? Explain your choice fully, using evidence from the text.

### Effect of language

1. '*One fateful night...*' What does the word 'fateful' suggest about the events of that night?
2. '*Onni had persuaded his parents to let him keep huskies ...*'. What does this suggest about how Onni and his parents felt?
3. Look at the first paragraph on page 3. What does the rhetorical question suggest will happen?
4. What does 'without incident' suggest about day two of the race?

### Link ideas

1. What is the purpose of the first paragraph?
2. Look at the paragraphs beginning, '*Like most...*' from page 1 and '*But Onni...*' from page 2. Explain what feelings they have in common.
3. Look at the paragraph beginning, '*After a couple of hours...*' Find and copy the group of words that link to the title of the story.
4. What might the moral of this story be? Explain why using details from the text.

### Compare

1. During the summer in Finnish Lapland the sun is always shining and it is much warmer. How does this compare to winter?
2. Compare the expectations that the other mushers have of Onni and Onni's expectations of himself.
3. Compare Onni's behaviour at the beginning of the race to the behaviour of the other mushers.
4. How does the mood change during the events in the paragraph beginning '*The rest of the night...*'?

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1. 'What does the phrase 'his family led a simple Sami life' tell us about how Onni's family lived?

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1 mark

2. Give two jobs Onni might have to do on a daily basis.

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2 marks

3. Based on the text, write three things you might see in Finnish Lapland.

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1 mark

4. What impression do you get of life in Finnish Lapland? Give two impressions using evidence from the text to support your answer.

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3 mark

