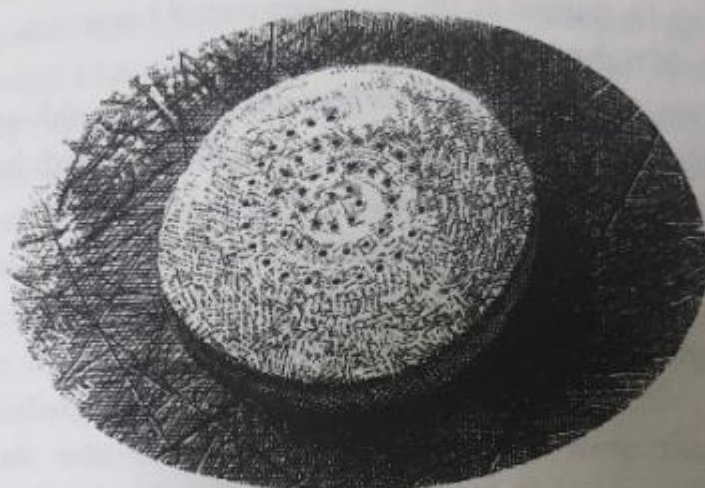


## ELEVEN



'How much do you know?' said Fin-Kedinn.  
'Nothing,' said Torak, eyeing the jagged bone knife at the Raven Leader's belt. 'Are you going to sacrifice me?'

Fin-Kedinn did not reply. He and Saeunn crouched at either side of the doorway, watching him. He felt like prey.

Behind his back, he scabbled around for something – anything – that he could use to cut the rawhide. His fingers found only a willow-branch mat: smooth and useless.

'How much do you know?' Fin-Kedinn said again.

Torak took a deep breath. 'I am not your Listener,' he said as steadily as he could. 'I can't be. I've never even heard of the Prophecy.' And yet, he wondered, why was Renn so certain? What does speaking wolf talk have to do with it?

Fin-Kedinn turned away. His face was as unreadable as ever, but Torak saw his hand tighten on his knife.

Saeunn leaned forwards and peered into Torak's eyes. In

the firelight, he saw her closely. He'd never encountered anyone so old. Through her scant white hair, her scalp gleamed like polished bone. Her face was sharp as a bird's. Age had scorched away all kindly feelings to leave only the fierce raven essence.

'According to Renn,' she said harshly, 'you can talk to the wolf. That's part of the Prophecy. The part we didn't tell you.'

Torak stared at her. 'Renn's wrong,' he said. 'I can't -'

'Don't lie to us,' said Fin-Kedinn without turning his head.

Torak swallowed.

Again he groped behind him. This time - yes! A tiny flake of flint, no bigger than his thumbnail: probably dropped by someone sharpening a knife. His fingers closed over it. If only Fin-Kedinn and Saeunn would return to the clan meet, he might be able to cut himself free. Then he could find wherever Renn had taken Wolf, and dodge between the guards and . . .

His spirits sank. He'd need a lot of luck to manage all that.

'Shall I tell you,' said Saeunn, 'why you can talk to the wolf?'

'Saeunn, what's the use?' said Fin-Kedinn. 'We're wasting time -'

'He must be told,' said the old woman. She fell silent. Then, with one yellow, claw-like finger, she touched the amulet at her breast, and began tracing the spiral.

Torak watched her talon going round and round. He started to feel dizzy.

'Many summers ago,' said the Raven Mage, 'your father and mother left their clan. They went to hide from their enemies. Far, far away in the Deep Forest, among the green

souls of the talking trees.' Still her talon traced the spiral, drawing Torak down into the past.

'Three moons after you were born,' Saeunn went on, 'your mother died.'

Fin-Kedinn got up, crossed his arms over his chest, and stood staring out into the darkness.

Torak blinked, as if waking from a dream.

Saeunn didn't even glance at Fin-Kedinn. Her attention was fixed on Torak. 'You were only an infant,' she said. 'Your father couldn't feed you. Usually when that happens, the father smothers his child, to spare it a slow death from starvation. But your father found another way. A she-wolf with a litter. He put you in her den.'

Torak struggled to take it in.

'Three moons you were with her in the den. Three moons to learn the wolf talk.'

Torak gripped the flint flake so hard that it dug into his palm. He could feel that Saeunn was telling the truth. This was why he could talk to Wolf. This was why he'd had that vision when he'd found the den. The squirming cubs. The rich, fatty milk . . .

How could Saeunn possibly know?

'No,' he said. 'This is a trap. You couldn't know this. You weren't there.'

'Your father told me,' said Saeunn.

'He can't have done. We never went near people -'

'Oh, but you did once. Five summers ago. Don't you remember? The clan meet by the Sea.'

Torak's pulse began to race.

'Your father went there to find me. To tell me about you.' Her talon came to rest at the heart of the spiral. 'You are not like others,' she said in her raven's croak. 'You *are* the Listener.'



Again Torak's grip on the flint tightened. 'I – I can't be. I don't understand.'

'Of course he doesn't,' said Fin-Kedinn over his shoulder. He turned to Torak. 'Your father told you nothing about who you are. That's right, isn't it?'

Torak nodded.

The Raven Leader was silent for a moment. His face was still, but Torak sensed a battle raging beneath his mask-like features. 'There is only one thing you need to know,' said Fin-Kedinn. 'It's this. It is not by chance that the bear attacked your father. It's *because* of him that it came into being.'

Torak's heart missed a beat. 'Because of my father?'

'Fin-Kedinn –' warned Saeunn.

The Raven Leader shot her a sharp glance. 'You said he should know. Now I'm telling him.'

'But,' said Torak, 'it was the crippled wanderer who –'

'The crippled wanderer,' cut in Fin-Kedinn, 'was your father's sworn enemy.'

Torak shrank back against the roofpost. 'My father didn't have enemies.'

The Raven Leader's eyes glinted dangerously. 'Your father wasn't just some hunter from the Wolf Clan. He was the Wolf Clan Mage.'

Torak forgot to breathe.

'He didn't tell you that either, did he?' said Fin-Kedinn. 'Oh yes, he was the Wolf Mage. And it's because of him that this – *creature* – is rampaging through the Forest –'

'No,' whispered Torak. 'That isn't true.'

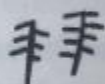
'He kept you ignorant of everything, didn't he?'

'Fin-Kedinn,' said Saeunn, 'he was trying to protect –'

'Yes, and look at the result!' Fin-Kedinn rounded on her. 'A half-grown boy who knows nothing! Yet you ask me to

believe that he is the only one who can – ' He stopped short, shaking his head.

There was a taut silence. Fin-Kedinn took a deep breath. 'The man who created the bear,' he told Torak quietly, 'did it for a single purpose. He created the bear to kill your father.'



The sky was lightening in the east when Torak finally cut the rope round his wrists with the flake of flint. There was no time to lose. Fin-Kedinn had just gone back to the clan meet with Saeunn, where they were locked in heated argument with the others. At any moment they might reach a decision and come to get him.

It was an effort to saw through the binding at his ankles. His head was reeling. 'Your father put you in the den of a she-wolf . . . He was the Wolf Mage . . . He was murdered . . .'

The flake of flint was slippery with sweat. He dropped it. Fumbled for it again. At last the binding was cut. He flexed his ankles – and nearly cried out in pain. His legs burned from being cramped for so long.

Worse than that was the pain in his heart. Fa had been murdered. Murdered by the crippled wanderer, who had created the demon bear with the sole aim of hunting him down . . .

It wasn't possible. There had to be some mistake.

And yet, deep down, Torak knew it was true. He remembered the grimness in Fa's face as he lay dying. *It will come for me soon*, he had said. He had known what his enemy had done. He had known why the bear had been created.

It was too much to take in. Torak felt as if everything

he'd ever known had been swept away: as if he stood on day-old ice, watching the cracks spreading like lightning beneath his feet.

The pain in his legs wrenched him back to the present. He tried to rub some feeling into them. His bare feet were cold, but there was nothing he could do. He hadn't been able to see where Oslak had taken his boots.

Somehow, without being spotted, he had to get out of the shelter, across to the hazel bushes at the edge of the clearing. Somehow, he had to evade the guards.

He couldn't do it. He'd be seen. If only he could find some way to distract them . . .

At the far end of the camp, a lonely yowl rose into the misty morning air. *Where are you?* cried Wolf. *Why did you leave me this time?*

Torak froze. He heard the camp dogs taking up the howl. He saw people leaping up from the clan meet and running to investigate. He knew that Wolf had given him his chance.

He had to act fast. Quickly, he edged out of the shelter and dived into the shadows behind the hazel bushes. He knew what he had to do – and he hated it.

He had to leave Wolf behind.