

## CHAPTER 13 – WOLF BROTHER

### THIRTEEN



'Don't move,' breathed a voice in Torak's ear, 'don't make a sound, and *don't touch the bones!*'

Torak couldn't even see the bones; he couldn't see anything. He was huddled in rotten-smelling blackness with a knife pressed to his throat.

He gritted his teeth to stop them chattering. Around him, he sensed the chill weight of earth, and the massed and mouldering bones of the Raven Dead. He prayed that all the souls would be far away on the Death Journey. But what if some had been left behind?

He had to get out of here. In the first shock of being caught, he'd heard a scraping of stone, as if his captor were sealing the mound. Now, as his eyes adjusted to the dark, he made out a faint edge of light. Whatever had been dragged across the entrance didn't seem to be a perfect fit.

He was thinking about making a run for it when he heard voices outside. Faint, but coming closer.

Torak tensed. So did his captor. The crunch and rustle drew nearer, then halted about three paces away. 'He'd never dare come here,' said a man's hushed, frightened voice.

'He might,' whispered a woman. 'He's different. You saw the way he won against Hord. Who knows what he'd do?' Torak heard the squelch of moss. His foot twitched – and in the darkness, something clinked. He winced.

'Sh!' said the woman. 'I heard something!'

Torak held his breath. His captor's knife pressed harder.

'Cark!' A raven's cry echoed through the trees.

'The guardian doesn't want us here,' muttered the woman. 'We should go. You're right. The boy wouldn't dare.'

Sick with relief, Torak listened to them move away.

After a while he tried to shift position, but the knife-point stopped him. 'Stay still!' hissed his captor.

He recognised that voice. It was Renn. *Renn?*

'You stink,' she whispered.

He tried to turn his head, but again the knife stopped him. 'It's to keep the dogs away,' he whispered back.

'They'd never come here anyway, they're not allowed.'

Torak thought for a moment. 'How did you know I'd be coming this way? And why –'

'I didn't. Now be quiet. They might come back.'

After a cold, cramped wait that seemed to last for ever, Renn gave him a kick and told him to move. He thought about trying to overpower her, but decided against it. If there was a struggle, they would disturb the bones. Instead, he heaved aside the slate slab which blocked the entrance, and crawled into the daylight. The mounds were deserted. Even the ravens had gone.

Renn came after him, backing out on hands and knees and dragging two hazelwood packs – one of them his own.

Perplexed, he crouched in the willowherb and watched her go back inside, emerging with two rolled up sleeping-sacks, two quivers and bows – both wrapped in salmon-skin against the damp – and a buckskin bag that was wriggling furiously.

'Wolf' cried Torak.

'Quiet!' Renn darted a wary glance in the direction of the camp.

Torak wrenched open the bag and Wolf shot out, sweaty and bedraggled. He took one sniff and would have fled if Torak hadn't grabbed him and assured him in low half-barks that it really was him, and not some murderous wolverine. Wolf broke into a big wolf smile, wagging his hindquarters and nibble-greeting Torak rapturously under the chin.

'Hurry up,' said Renn behind him.

'Coming,' snapped Torak. Grabbing handfuls of dew-soaked moss, he wiped off the worst of the dung, then yanked on his boots. Renn had had the foresight to bring them too.

As he turned to reach for his pack, he saw to his astonishment that she had fitted an arrow to her bow and was training it on him. She'd also slung his own bow and quiver over her shoulder, and stuck his axe and knife in her belt.

'What are you doing?' he said. 'I thought you were helping me.'

She looked at him in disgust. 'Why would I help you? The only thing I'm helping is my clan.'

'Then why didn't you give me away just now?'

'Because I intend to make sure that you get to the Mountain of the World Spirit. If I didn't make you, you wouldn't even try. You'd just turn tail and run. Because you're a coward.'

Torak gasped. 'A coward?'

'A coward, a liar and a thief. You stole our roe buck, you tricked Hord into losing the fight, and you lied about not being the Listener. Then you ran away. Now for the last time, move!'

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With Renn's arrow at his back and her accusation burning in his ears, Torak headed west downriver, keeping to the willows for cover, and carrying Wolf in his arms to prevent his pads leaving a scent trail for the dogs.

Amazingly, there were no sounds of pursuit. Torak found that even more disturbing than the birch-bark horns.

Renn set a fast pace, and he stumbled often. He was tired and hungry, while she was rested and fed; that would make getting away from her more difficult. But she was smaller than him, and he thought he could probably overpower her before she did too much damage with that bow.

The question was, when? For the moment, she seemed genuinely keen to evade the Ravens, guiding him along little twisting deer-paths that clung to the best cover. He decided to wait till they were further from the camp. But her insult rankled.

'I'm not a coward,' he said over his shoulder as they followed the river into a shady oak wood, and the threat of pursuit seemed to lessen.

'Then why did you run away from our camp?'

'They were going to sacrifice me!'

'They hadn't decided that yet. That's why they were arguing.'

'So what should I have done? Waited to find out?'

'The Prophecy,' Renn said coldly, 'could mean two different things. If you hadn't run away, you would have learnt that.'

'And I suppose you're going to tell me,' said Torak, 'because you know everything.'

She heaved a sigh. The Prophecy could mean that we sacrifice you and give your blood to the Mountain – and by doing so, destroy the bear. That's what Hord thinks it means. He wants to kill you, so that *he* can take your blood to the Mountain.' She paused. 'Saeunn thinks it means something else: that only you can find the Mountain, and destroy the bear.'

Torak turned and stared at her. 'Me. Destroy the bear.'

She looked him up and down. 'I know, it doesn't seem possible. But Saeunn's sure of it. So am I. The Listener must find the Mountain of the World Spirit – and then, with the Spirit's help, he must destroy the bear.'

Torak blinked. It couldn't be. They'd got it wrong.

'Why must you go on denying it?' Renn said angrily. 'You *are* the Listener. You know you are. You fought with air, just as the Prophecy says. You spoke with silence: that whistle. And the very first words of the Prophecy say that the Listener can talk to the other hunters in the Forest – and you *can* talk to them, because your father put you in a wolf den when you were small.'

Torak narrowed his eyes. 'How do you know about that?'

'Because I listened,' she said.

They followed the river west. As he walked, Torak heard the soft piping of bullfinches eating the brambles, a nuthatch tapping a branch for grubs. With all these birds around, the bear couldn't be anywhere close . . .

Suddenly, Wolf pricked his ears and twitched his whiskers.

Down' hissed Torak, pulling Renn with him. Moments later, two dugout canoes slid past. Torak had a good view of the one closest to him. The man who paddled it had short brown hair cut in a fringe on the brow. He wore a stiff hide mantle across his broad shoulders, and a boar's tusk on a thong at his breast. A black slate throwing-axe lay on his knees. Like his companion in the other canoe, he was scanning the banks as he sliced the water with powerful strokes. It was only too clear what he was seeking.

'Boar Clan,' whispered Renn in Torak's ear. 'Fin-Kedinn must have got them to help search for us.'

Torak was instantly suspicious. 'How did they know we'd come this way? Did you leave them some kind of trail?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Why would I do that?'

'For all I know, you're leading me to some other clan, to be sacrificed.'

'Or maybe,' she said wearily, 'those Boar Clan were passing this way because their autumn camp is downstream, and –' She stopped. 'How did you know they were coming?'

'I didn't. Wolf told me.'

She looked startled – then alarmed. 'You really can talk to him, can't you?'

He did not reply.

She stood up, struggling to overcome her unease. 'They've gone. It's time we headed north.' She replaced her arrow in her quiver and slung her bow over her shoulder, and for a moment Torak thought she was having a change of heart. Then she drew her knife and jabbed at him to get moving.

They reached a streamlet that tumbled out of a rocky gorge, and started to climb. Torak began to feel dizzy with tiredness. He hadn't slept the night before, and hadn't

eaten for over a day.

At last he couldn't go another step, and sank to his knees. Wolf jumped out of his arms, falling over his paws in his eagerness to reach the water.

'What are you doing?' cried Renn. 'We can't stop here!'

'We just did,' snarled Torak. He grabbed a handful of soapwort leaves, mashed them in water, and washed off the last of the wolverine dung. Then he bent and drank his fill.

Feeling a lot better, he rummaged in his pack for one of the rolls of dried roe buck that he'd prepared – what seemed like moons ago. After biting off a piece and tossing it to Wolf, he began to eat. It tasted wonderful. Already he could feel the deer's strength coursing through him.

Renn hesitated, then unslung her pack and knelt, but still with her knife trained on Torak. Plunging one hand into her pack, she brought out three thin, reddish-brown cakes. She held one out to him.

He took it and bit off a small fragment. It tasted rich and salty, with an aromatic tang.

'Dried salmon,' said Renn with her mouth full. 'We pound it with deer fat and juniper berries. It stays good all winter.'

To his surprise, she held out a salmon cake to Wolf.

He pointedly ignored it.

Renn hesitated, then gave the cake to Torak. He rubbed it between his palms to mask her scent with his, then offered it to Wolf, who gulped it down.

Renn tried not to show her hurt. 'So?' she said with a shrug. 'I know he doesn't like me.'

'That's because you keep shoving him in bags,' said Torak.

'Only for his own good.'

'He doesn't know that.'

'Can't you tell him?'  
There's no way of saying it in wolf talk.' He took another bite of salmon cake. Then he asked something that had been bothering him. 'Why did you bring him?'

'What?'

Wolf. You got him out of the camp. It can't have been easy. Why?'

She paused. 'You seem to need him. I don't know why. But I thought it might be important.'

He was tempted to tell her that Wolf was his guide, but checked himself. He didn't trust her. She'd been useful for helping him evade the Ravens, but that didn't change the fact that she'd taken his weapons and called him a coward. And she still had her knife pointed straight at him.



The gorge got steeper. Torak judged it safe to let Wolf walk, and the cub plodded before him with drooping tail. Wolf didn't like the climb any more than Torak.

Around mid-afternoon, they reached a ridge overlooking a broad, wooded valley. Through the trees, Torak caught the faraway glitter of a river.

'That's the Widewater,' said Renn. 'It's the biggest river in this part of the Forest. It flows down from the ice rivers in the High Mountains and makes Lake Axehead, then goes over the Thunder Falls and on to the Sea. We camp down there in early summer for the salmon. Sometimes, if the wind's in the east, you can hear the Falls . . . ' her voice trailed off.

Torak guessed that she was wondering how her clan would punish her for helping their captive escape. If she hadn't called him a coward, he might have felt sorry for her.

'We'll cut across the valley,' she said more briskly. 'It should be easy to ford the river where those meadows are. Then we can head north -'

'No,' said Torak suddenly. He pointed at Wolf. The cub had found an elk trail that wound into a wood of tall spruce dripping with beard-moss. He was waiting for them to follow.

'That way,' said Torak. 'Up the valley. Not across it.'

'But that's east. If we head east, we'll reach the High Mountains too soon. That'll make going north much harder.'

'Which way will Fin-Kedinn go?' said Torak.

'West for a while along the trails, then north.'

'Well, then. Heading east sounds like a good idea.'

She frowned. 'Is this some kind of trick?'

'Look,' he said. 'We're heading east because Wolf says we should. He knows the way.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'I mean,' he said quietly, 'that he knows the way to the Mountain.'

She stared at him. Then she snorted. 'That little cub?'

Torak nodded.

'I don't believe you.'

'I don't care,' said Torak.



Wolf *bated* the female tailless.

He'd hated her from the first moment he'd smelt her, as she pointed the Long-Claw-that-Flies at his pack-brother. What a thing to do. As if Tall Tailless was some kind of prey!

After that, the female tailless had done terrible things. She'd wrenched Wolf away from Tall Tailless, and pushed

him into a strange, airless Den, where he was bumped around so much that he'd been sick.

Even worse was the way she behaved towards Tall Tailless. Didn't she know that he was the lead wolf? She was so sharp and disrespectful when she yipped at him in tailless talk. Why didn't Tall Tailless just snarl and chase her away?

Now, as Wolf trotted along the trail, he was relieved to hear that she was several strides behind. Good. She should stay away.

He paused to munch some lingonberries at the side of the trail, spat out a bad one, and moved on, feeling the dry earth beneath his pads, and the warmth of the Hot Bright Eye on his back. He raised his muzzle to catch the scents wafting from the valley: some jays and a few stale elk droppings, several storm-broken spruce, lots of willowherb and withered blueberries. All were good, interesting smells; but beneath them was the cold, terrifying scent of the Fast Wet.

Fear snapped at Wolf afresh. Somehow, he and Tall Tailless had to get across the Fast Wet. The crossing place was still many lopes ahead, but already Wolf could hear it roaring. It was so loud that soon even his poor, half-deaf pack-brother would hear it.

There was danger ahead, and Wolf longed to turn back, but he knew that he couldn't. The Pull was getting stronger: the Pull that was like the Den-pull, but not.

Suddenly, Wolf caught another scent. He flared his nostrils to take it in. His ears went back.

This was bad. *Bad bad bad.*

Wolf spun round and raced back towards Tall Tailless.

