

## CHAPTER 14 - WOLF BROTHER

### FOURTEEN



'What is it?' whispered Renn, staring at the terrified cub.

'I don't know,' murmured Torak. His skin began to prickle. He couldn't hear any birds.

Renn took his knife from her belt and tossed it over to him.

He caught it with a nod.

'We should turn back,' she said.

'We can't. This is the way to the Mountain.'

Wolf's amber eyes were dark with fear. He padded slowly forwards: head down, hackles raised.

Torak and Renn followed as quietly as they could. Junipers snagged their boots. Beard-moss trailed thin fingers against their faces. The trees were utterly still: waiting to see what would happen.

'Maybe it isn't . . . ' said Renn. 'I mean, it could be a lynx. Or a wolverine.'

Torak didn't believe that any more than she did. They rounded a bend and came to a fallen birch that was bleeding from deep claw-marks gouged in its bark.

Neither spoke. Both knew that bears sometimes claw at trees to mark their range, or frighten off other hunters.

Wolf approached the birch for a better sniff. Torak followed - then gave a sigh of relief. 'Badger.'

'Are you sure?' said Renn.

'The scratches are smaller than a bear's, and there's mud on the bark.' He circled the tree. 'It got its front claws clogged with earth, digging for worms. Stopped here to scrape them clean. Went back to its sett. That way . . . ' he waved a hand east.

'How do you know all that?' said Renn. 'Did Wolf tell you?'

'No. The Forest did.' He caught her puzzled glance. 'A while back I saw a robin with some badger hairs in its beak. It came from the east.' He shrugged.

'You're good at tracking, aren't you?'

'Fa was better.'

'Well you're better than me,' said Renn. She didn't sound envious; she was merely acknowledging a fact. 'But why would a badger have frightened Wolf?'

'I don't think it did,' said Torak. 'I think it was something else.'

She took his axe, bow and quiver, and held them out. 'Here. You'd better take these.'

They crept up the trail. Wolf went first, Torak next, scanning for signs, and Renn last, straining to see through the trees.

They'd gone another fifty paces when Torak stopped so abruptly that she walked into him.

The young beech tree was still moaning, but it hadn't

long to live. The bear had reared on its hind legs to vent its fury: snapping off the entire top of the tree, ripping away the bark in long bleeding tatters, and slashing deep gouges high on the trunk. Terrifyingly high. If Renn had stood on Torak's shoulders, she wouldn't have been able to reach the lowest claw-mark.

'No bear could be that enormous,' she whispered.

Torak did not reply. He was back in the blue autumn dusk, helping Fa to pitch camp. Torak had made a joke, and Fa was laughing. Then the Forest exploded. Ravens screamed. Pines cracked. And out of the dark beneath the trees surged a deeper darkness...

'It's old,' said Renn.

'What?' said Torak.

She gestured at the trunk. The tree-blood has hardened. Look, it's almost black.'

He studied the tree. She was right. The bear had clawed the bark at least two days before.

But he couldn't share Renn's relief. She didn't know the worst of it.

*With each kill, Fa had said, its power will grow... When the red eye is highest... the bear will be invincible.*

Here was the proof. On the night when the bear had attacked, it had been huge. But not this huge.

'It's getting bigger,' he said.



'What?' said Renn.

Torak told her what Fa had said.

'But - that's not even a moon away.'

'I know.'

A few paces off the trail, he found three long black hairs

snagged on a twig at about head height. He stepped back sharply. It went that way.' He pointed down into the valley. 'See how the branches have sprung back in a slightly different pattern.'

But that didn't reassure him. The bear could have returned by another trail.

Then, from deep in the undergrowth, came the sharp 'tak tak' of a wren.

Torak breathed out. 'I don't think it's anywhere close. Otherwise that wren wouldn't be calling.'

As night fell, they made a shelter of bent hazel saplings and leafmould by a muddy stream. Holly trees gave a pretence of cover, and they lit a small fire and ate a few slips of dried meat. They didn't dare risk the salmon cakes; the bear would have smelt them from many daywalks away.

It was a cold night, and Torak sat hunched in his sleeping-sack, listening to the faint, faraway roar that Renn said was the Thunder Falls.

Why had Fa never told him about the Prophecy? Why was he the Listener? What did it mean?

Beside him, Wolf slept with ears twitching. Renn sat watching a beetle clamber down from the firewood.

Torak now knew that he could trust her. She'd risked a lot to help him, and he couldn't have escaped without her. It was a new feeling, having someone on his side. He said, 'I need to tell you something.'

Renn reached for a twig, and helped the beetle off a branch.

'Before he died,' said Torak, 'my father made me swear an oath. To find the Mountain, or die trying.' He paused. 'I don't know why he made me swear. But I did. And I'll do my best.'

She nodded, and he saw that for the first time she truly



believed him. 'There's something I've got to tell you, too,' she said. 'It's about the Prophecy.' Frowning, she turned the twig in her fingers. 'When – if – you find the Mountain, you can't just ask the Spirit for help. You've got to prove that you're worthy. Saeunn told me last night. She said that when the crippled wanderer made the bear, he broke the pact, because he made a creature that kills without purpose. He angered the World Spirit. It'll take a great deal to get it to help.'

Torak tried to swallow. 'What will it take?'

She met his eyes. 'You've got to bring it the three strongest pieces of the Nanuak.'

Torak looked at her blankly.

'Saeunn says that the Nanuak is like a great river that never ends. Every living thing has a part of it inside them. Hunters, prey, rocks, trees. Sometimes a special part of it forms, like foam on the river. When it does, it's incredibly powerful.' She hesitated. 'That's what you've got to find. If you don't, the World Spirit won't help you. And then you'll never destroy the bear.'

Torak caught his breath. 'Three pieces of the Nanuak,' he said hoarsely. 'What are they? How do I find them?'

'Nobody knows. All we have is a riddle.' She shut her eyes, and recited,

*'Deepest of all, the drowned sight.*

*Oldest of all, the stone bite.*

*Coldest of all, the darkest light.'*

A breeze sprang up. The holly trees gave a prickly murmur.

'What does it mean?' said Torak.

Renn opened her eyes. 'Nobody knows.'

He bowed his head to his knees. 'So I've got to find a

mountain that nobody's ever seen. And work out the answer to a riddle that nobody's ever solved. And kill a bear that nobody can fight.'

Renn sucked in her breath. 'You've got to try.'

Torak was silent. Then he said, 'Why did Saeunn tell you all this? Why you?'

'I never wanted her to, she just did. She thinks I should be a Mage when I'm grown.'

'Don't you want to be?'

'No! But I suppose – maybe there's a purpose in these things. If she hadn't told me, I wouldn't have been able to tell you.'

Another silence. Then Renn wriggled out of her sleeping-sack. 'I'll take our packs outside. We don't want the food smell to draw the bear.'

When she'd gone, Torak curled up on his side and lost himself in the fiery heart of the embers. Around him, the Forest creaked in its sleep, dreaming its deep green dreams. He thought of the thousands and thousands of tree-souls thronging the darkness: waiting for him, and him alone, to deliver them from the bear.

He thought of the golden birch and the scarlet rowan, and the brilliant green oaks. He thought of the teeming prey, of the lakes and rivers full of fish, of all the different kinds of wood and bark and stone that were there for the taking if you knew where to look. The Forest had everything you could ever want. Until now he'd never realised how much he loved it.

If the bear could not be destroyed, all this would be lost.

Wolf leapt up and went off on one of his nightly hunts. Renn returned, got into her sleeping-sack without a word, and fell asleep. Torak went on staring into the fire.

'There's a purpose in these things,' Renn had said. In a

strange way, that gave him strength. He was the Listener. He had sworn to find the Mountain. The Forest needed him. He would do his best.

He slept fitfully. He dreamed that Fa was alive again, but instead of a face, he had a blank white stone. *I am not Fa. I am the Wolf Mage...*

Torak woke with a start.

He felt Wolf's breath on his face, then the downy brush of the cub's whiskers on his eyelids, and the needle-fine grooming-nibbles on his cheeks and throat.

He licked the cub's muzzle, and Wolf nuzzled his chin, then settled against him with a 'humph'.



'We should have crossed lower down,' said Renn as they craned their necks at the Thunder Falls.

Torak wiped the spray from his face, and wondered how anything in the Forest could be this angry.

All day they'd been following the calm green Widewater upstream. But now, as it thundered over a sheer wall of rock, it was appalling in its fury. Before it, the whole Forest seemed to stand and stare.

'We should have crossed lower down,' Renn said again.

'We would've been seen,' said Torak. 'Those meadows were too exposed. Besides, Wolf wanted to stay on this side.'

Renn pursed her lips. 'If he's the guide, then where is he?'

'He hates fast water. His pack was drowned in a flood. But he'll be back when we've found a way to get above the falls.'

'Mm,' said Renn, unconvinced. Like Torak, she'd slept badly, and she'd been moody all morning. Neither of them

had mentioned the riddle.

Eventually, they found a deer track that wound up the side of the falls. It was steep and muddy, and by the time they reached the top they were exhausted and soaked in spray. Wolf was waiting for them: sitting beneath a birch tree a safe distance from the Widewater, shaking with fear.

'Where to now?' panted Renn.

Torak was watching Wolf. 'We follow the river till he tells us to cross.'

'Can you swim?' asked Renn.

He nodded. 'Can you?'

'Yes. Can Wolf?'

'I don't think so.'

They started upstream, pushing through brambles and tangled rowan and birch. It was a cold, overcast day, and the wind scattered birch leaves onto the river like small amber arrowheads. Wolf trotted with his ears flat back. The river ran fast and smooth on its way to the falls.

They hadn't gone far when Wolf began to run up and down the bank, mewing. Torak could feel his fear. He turned to Renn. 'He wants to cross, but he's frightened.'

'The brambles are too thick here,' said Renn. 'What about further up by those rocks?'

The rocks were smooth and splashed with treacherous-looking moss, but they reared a good half-forearm out of the water. They might provide a way across.

Torak nodded.

'I'll go first,' said Renn, pulling off her boots and tying them to her pack, then rolling up her leggings. She found a stick for balance, and slung her pack over one shoulder, so that it wouldn't drag her down if she fell in. Her quiver and bow she carried in the other hand, high above her head.

She looked scared as she approached the water. But she



made it across without faltering – until the final rock, when she had to leap for the bank, and ended up grabbing a willow branch to haul herself up.

Torak left his pack and weapons on the bank, and pulled off his boots. He would carry Wolf across, then return for his things. 'Come on, Wolf,' he said encouragingly. Then he said it in wolf talk, hunkering down on his haunches and making low, reassuring mewing noises.

Wolf shot under a juniper bush and refused to come out.

'Put him in your pack!' shouted Renn from the other side. 'It's the only way you'll get him across!'

'If I did that,' yelled Torak, 'he'd never trust me again!'

He sat down in the moss on the edge of the bank. Then he yawned and stretched, to show Wolf how relaxed he was.

After a while, Wolf emerged from the juniper and came to sit beside him.

Again Torak yawned.

Wolf glanced at him, then gave a huge yawn that ended in a whine.

Slowly, Torak got to his feet and picked Wolf up in his arms, murmuring softly in wolf talk.

The rocks felt ice-cold and slippery under Torak's bare feet. In his arms, Wolf started shivering with terror.

On the far bank, Renn held onto a birch sapling with one hand, and leaned towards them. 'That's it,' she shouted above the thunder of the falls, 'you're nearly there!'

Wolf's claws dug into Torak's jerkin.

'Last rock!' shouted Renn. 'I'll grab him . . .'

A wave slapped into the rock, splashing them with freezing water. Wolf's courage broke. Twisting frantically out of Torak's grip, he leapt for the bank, landing with his hind legs in the water and his forepaws clawing at the bank.

Renn leaned down and caught him by the scruff. 'I've got him!' she yelled.  
Torak overbalanced and crashed into the river.



