

A twig snapped behind her. Renn stopped dead in her tracks. She didn't dare move, she didn't even dare think, out of fear one of her thoughts might be overheard. Holding her breath, she counted, listening as hard as she could.

Was it - the bear? Bears are strong, and they are silent. They melt into shadow more easily than darkness, and they are so strong they can uproot trees. But this bear, this bear was far more powerful. She knew that. Everyone knew.

Where was it now?

Her lungs nearly burst, and she let out her breath slowly, as silently as she could. Bears can hear anything. It would know she was there.

But bears are also silent, and clever. It was impossible for *her* to have made any noise, even if she had wanted to move fear kept her rooted to the spot. Yet there was definitely something rustling behind her, hopefully the same something that had snapped that twig.

No bear would be that noisy. Bears are silent hunters, and the most efficient. They are impossible to locate until it's too late, and this bear, especially this bear, would waste no chances. It hated the glowing light of life, it hated the shiny souls - and Renn knew her souls were dazzling. She hated it, but she knew it was true.

A flash of amber caught her attention, moving just beyond the corner of her right eye. Not daring to move, she deliberately swivelled her eyeballs - started, and nearly lost her balance. Blinking back at her was a pair of round, orange eyes.

No churning fire, no dreadful chaos of the Otherworld. It couldn't be the bear. Besides, the eyes were too curious, too innocent; almost naïve. They held her gaze for a heartbeat longer, then vanished into the bushes, accompanied by a soft swish of leaves and branches.

Renn slowly inhaled and blew out her breath again, absent-mindedly tracing a string of her dark red hair. She felt herself relax, and shuffled her feet, looking for a more comfortable stance. Almost automatically, her right hand reached for the quiver on her back, and she drew an arrow - a long, narrow shaft of wood tipped with flint sharper than a fang and fletched with the feathers of a Tawny Owl.

"Remember, owls are silent fliers," her uncle had told her when showing her how to fletch an arrow. "This way, you're arrows will be silent, too."

And silent they were, and lethal. Renn nocked the arrow and drew her bow, now she was ready to go and investigate.

Behind her, footsteps crunched through the undergrowth, and although she recognised a man's stride, she turned and aimed her arrow.

A giant figure shouldered his way out of the trees, powerful, with a rough face and friendly eyes and a scar on one side of his head. Oslak had had an unfortunate encounter with a wolverine once, but despite his savage look and missing ear, he was one of the kindest people Renn knew.

"Surely you aren't going to shoot me with that?" he greeted her, his face breaking into a smile. Renn only hesitantly lowered her bow.

"You know me, Oslak," she replied, trying to sound sharp rather than hollow. "It's just -"

"The bear," Oslak guessed. Renn nodded, averting her eyes. She didn't want Oslak to see how much it frightened her. But he just asked, "Any luck with your hunting?"

Renn shook her head in frustration. Despite being the best shot in her clan, and her sharp senses and good intuition, she hadn't had any luck out hunting recently. Nobody had, and prey was turning scarce. "But I heard something I want to have a look at." She quickly related what had happened while Oslak had been gone. The huge man listened in silence, running his thumb down the handle of his large basalt throwing-axe.

"You did the right thing, waiting," he told her. "And you're right, we should definitely have a look. But we'd better wait till Hord comes back. We might need him, and it isn't wise to be alone in the Forest right now."

Renn groaned inwardly. Hord was her brother, seven years older than she, and one of the most skilled hunters in the clan. But he was also unbelievably annoying, constantly mocking and criticising her; and above all, he was so vain, so desperate to prove himself.

Of course, Renn understood why. It wasn't easy being who they were, with everyone knowing. Whereas Hord has gained the clan's grudging acknowledgement of his talents, she had no-one. But still, he didn't have to make a fuss about everything. She could already picture his scathing dismissal of her worries, and then him deciding to brave the inquiry nonetheless, just for the sake of demonstrating his courage. *Please don't let him do that*, Renn thought.

Being Hord, that was exactly what he did when he arrived. With his high-bones features and dark red hair, his face was so like Renn's whenever she got mad at Saeunn, only her eyes had none of his scorn.

With a deliberate shrug, he drew his bow too, and motioned for Renn and Oslak to follow him. Now that he was here, Hord was making absolutely sure he took the lead. Renn rolled her eyes as she followed behind him and Oslak, venturing into the thicket.

They hadn't come far when Hord raised his hand and stopped. Renn and Oslak stepped out on either side of him, and Hord carefully, silently, bent a branch out of the way, blocking Renn's view instead. With a furious hiss, she shoved it to one side,

angrily digging her elbow into her brother's side. Hord threw her what could have passed as a with glance or a sly grin with equal validity. He motioned for silence, then indicated the clearing ahead.

A young boy, maybe a few moons older or younger than Renn herself, had just sat down on a tree stump. His hair was black, long and shaggy, his skin but brown and his eyes glimmered an usual shade of grey. Next to his feet, a small wolf cub slumped down, giving a low whine. The boy chuckled, reached out a long hand, and *scratched the cub between the ears*. Renn caught her breath. No-one had ever befriended a hunter, a wild, free-born wolf, not in many, many generations, not since the time of the Great Wave.

And it was a wolf. *Whispers to the one who runs as a shadow, speaks to the Hunter with amber eyes.*

The words of the prophecy echoed through her mind suddenly, coming as unbidden as they had been when Saeunn had first related them to her. Renn had never felt a stronger dislike for the old bat, and she often infuriated her, telling her about Magecraft when she of all people should understand why Renn hated it so. But Saeunn was cold. Adamant in her belief it was Renn's destiny to become a Mage, she taught Renn Magecraft whether she wanted or not.

Yet surely, *surely*, the Listener could not be this boy? He was so young, and there was a large graze on his arm. His step was uncertain, and his look hunted.

He looked as if he had difficulties just staying alive. How on earth was he supposed to save the Forest from a demon bear?

Next to her, Hord bristled.

"What's wrong?" Renn breathed.

"A stranger on our territory," hissed Hord, his eyes narrow with anger as he watched the boy extract a strip of meat, take a good bite, and feed the rest to the cub. "And eating *our* prey."

He was right of course. At the last clan meet, the leaders had decided to assign each clan a fixed patch of Forest where they were entitled to hunt - claiming all of the prey that happened to be found. It was necessary if they were to stay alive without members of the different clans constantly tearing each other apart.

This boy has broken clan law.

Renn felt anger boiling up inside her too. Fin-Kedinn always said anger wasn't helpful, it made you mad and stopped you from thinking straight, but she just couldn't help it. For days, she had scoured the Forest, tracking prey and setting snares without any luck, and here this boy was feasting on food that was rightfully her clan's.

"Renn," Hord said curtly, "go back the way we've come and see if you can find where he built his shelter last night." For once, Renn didn't argue. She knew his camp would be the ultimate proof of the strange boy's theft.

Wordlessly, she turned on her heel and made her way back out of the thicket. She kept to the left as that was where she'd first spotted the amber eyes. Only now did she realise she had probably seen the wolf cub, and despite her anger at its companion, she felt strangely honoured to have met its gaze.

However, try as she might, she couldn't find any tracks at all. Once or twice she thought she'd spotted the outline of a footprint in the mud, but even then she couldn't discern if it really had been the boy. Besides, even proving he *had* been there didn't provide any evidence he'd killed prey which was rightfully her clan's.

Fuming, Renn stomped back to they'd spotted the boy. Hord had gone, but Oslak was waiting for her, looking grim. Renn guessed at once Hord had gone on to track the boy, leaving Oslak behind. Of course, if he caught the boy all by himself, all the recognition would go to Hord, and Hord alone. Exactly what he always wanted.

"Come on," was all Renn managed to say. Her brother was infuriating her almost as much as that boy.

"Did you find anything?" Oslak asked. Renn shook her head.

"Nothing useful."

Oslak grunted, and led the way through the undergrowth, Renn following as silently as she could. Trying to calm down, she drew her bow.

They hadn't gone far when they spotted Hord, crouching behind a tree, nocking an arrow. At a glance from Oslak, Renn slipped behind another tree trunk, but turned her head to peep out. Ahead of them was a large, still rather leafy thicket. And, judging from a low mewling coming from it, the boy and the wolf were not far off.

Renn knew the procedure. Swift and silently, she and Hord moved forwards, taking up positions to either side of Oslak, the strongest man in the clan. They didn't even need to look at each other, and for once Renn felt glad about the mutual understanding between herself and her brother.

Three steps, two, one - Renn, Hord and Oslak entered the thicket, shouldered branches and leaves aside, the boy stopped, tensed - and suddenly they were upon him, Oslak grabbed him by the scruff and lifted him off his feet. Renn felt a hot flush of triumph. Caught the thief!

The boy swung up and round, his throat meeting Oslak's knife. Beneath his brown skin, Renn could see the blood draining from his face. So he was frightened. Good.

But he wasn't helpless. With a growl, he took a swing at Oslak, but he just twisted out of reach.

"Let me go!"

Oslak merely grunted. "So here's our thief!" he exclaimed jubilantly. Clearly he was relishing his first hunting success in a long time - he hoisted the boy higher. His cheeks adopted a grey tinge.

"I'm not - a thief!" he chocked.

"He's lying," Hord remarked coldly. For once, Renn agreed with her brother.

"You took our roe buck." He really was turning grey now. Somewhere, pity stirred in her heart. He was as old as her, and all alone, fighting to survive. "Oslak, I think you're choking him."

Oslak put him down, but kept his steely grip on the boy's neck. His knife's flint blade hadn't moved a bit. The boy gasped, wincing at his sore neck, and Renn put away her arrow. He was no threat to him now. Hord didn't, and a single glance at his face told Renn he was enjoying himself, way beyond the usual flash of triumph at a successful hunt. She quickly turned away, not wanting him to see the disgust on her face - or her pity for the boy. She stole another glance at him.

His long, brown hand reached for the heavy knife at his belt -

"I'll take that," growled Oslak. Never once loosening his grip on the boy, he took the small axe, bow and quiver, tossing them to Renn. She caught them in a flash, but it was the knife that caught her attention.

It was big, and heavy, too unwieldy for a boy to use. Even most hunters wielded lighter blades than that. Several small engravings at the bottom of the blade and on the hilt caught her eye. This wasn't a hunter's knife. It belonged to a Mage.

Which could only mean one thing - "Did you steal this too?"

"No!" the boy protested desperately, angrily. "It - it was my father's." Renn threw him a disbelieving glance. She knew of no Mage who had recently died, bequeathing his ceremonial knife to his son. He had to be lying.

The pleading look in his grey eyes told her otherwise. At least he believed he was telling the truth. Seeing that he had her attention, the boy said, "You said I took your buck. How could it be yours?"

Hord stepped forward, turning all the attention to himself. "This is our part of the Forest."

The boy looked astounded. "What do you mean? The Forest doesn't belong to anyone -"

"It does now," Hord snapped, with hostility. "It was agreed at the clan meet. Because of..." He suddenly stopped, and Renn could see the pain thinking about the bear always caused him in his eyes. He quickly hid it behind a scowl, and abruptly changed the subject. "What matters is that you took our prey. That means death."

Shock flooded the boy's face, and dread. He was a bit of a coward, Renn reflected, and definitely a liar. How could anyone not know what had been decided at the clan meet? But he still mumbled, "If - if it's the buck you're after, take it and let me go. It's in my pack. I haven't eaten much."

Renn cast a glance at Oslak. The offer was a fair one - provided he wasn't lying - but with Hord present it was a fat chance.

He snorted scornfully, making that awful, arrogant movement with his head Renn hated so much. "It isn't that simple. You're my captive. Oslak, tie his hands. We're taking him to Fin-Kedinn."

"Where's that?" the boy asked. Renn started. How could he not know that? It was downright ridiculous. Definitely a lair, or just incredibly thick. Maybe both. She wondered how he'd managed to survive on his own long enough to make a kill.

Oslak took the trouble to explain. "It's not a place, it's a man."

Renn shook her head. "Don't you know anything?" she sneered.

Hord drew back his shoulders. "Fin-Kedinn is my uncle."

*Ours*, Renn silently corrected him.

He went on, "He's the leader of our clan. I am Hord, his brother's son."

The boy didn't get it. "What clan? Where are you taking me?"

Renn saw no point in replying and, apparently, neither did Hord and Oslak. Instead, Oslak gave him a shove to get him going, and he promptly fell over. Picked himself up again - and started. His eyes widened, "uff!" he growled.

Now it was Oslak's turn to nearly fall over. Renn just stared. What had he just done?

"What did you just say?" Oslak demanded, but the boy didn't seem to hear him. "Uff!" he repeated again, and this time, Renn understood. The wolf cub had come back again, and he was warning it off. Rage momentarily blinded her. How could he?

But in that very moment, the cub streaked from its hiding place and straight towards them. Apparently it was still young, and not very smart.

"What's this?" Oslak asked.

He made a grab for the cub, swinging it high with his free hand. It snarled fiercely, desperately trying to wriggle free, but Oslak had a grip of stone.

"Let him go!" the boy shouted. "Let him go or I'll kill you!"

The threat was so ridiculous Renn had to hold on to a tree to stop herself from falling over with laughter.

"Let him *gd*!" yelled the boy again. "He's not doing you any harm!"

But keeping him clearly wound up the boy, and would make him come more quietly. Oslak looked at Hord.

"Just chase it away and let's go," he said, definitely irritated by the delay.

"No!" screamed the boy. "He's my gui - no!"

That settled it. "He's your what?" Renn asked suspiciously. She could hear Saeunn croaking in the back of her head, tried to push her voice away. It had never worked, and it still didn't.

"The Listener," Saeunn had said, "can find the way to the Mountain. But not because he knows where it is - no-one knows, the World Spirit makes sure of that."

Renn had been interested despite herself. "Then how can he give his heart's blood to the Mountain?" she'd asked, her mouth feeling horribly dry.

Saeunn had bent close, bringing her wrinkled, shrivelled head right next to Renn's ear. "The Listener has a guide," she'd whispered hoarsely. Renn had felt shivers passing up her spine like long, cold finger gently stroking her neck.

She pushed the memory aside for good and glared at the boy, silently demanding an answer.

"He's with me," he mumbled. But he wouldn't meet her eyes, and she knew that he was lying.

Hord, meanwhile, was getting impatient. "Come on, Renn," he growled savagely. "We're wasting time."

But Renn wasn't going to give in that easily. She carefully studied the boy again, who still glared at the nearest birch, stubbornly refusing to meet her eyes. She'd try another approach then.

Swiftly turning to Oslak, she said, "Give it to me." Aware the boy's incredulous stare, she drew a buckskin bag from her pack, grabbed the cub by the scruff, and shoved it in headfirst. Ignoring the cub's protesting wriggles and yowls, she swung it over her shoulder and fastened the boy with a glare. "You'd better come quietly, or I'll bash him against a tree."

His responding glare told her she'd successfully ensured his obedience, and she gave Oslak a curt nod, who shoved the boy forward. And off they went back to camp with their unusual catch.

The trek was a long one, but Renn didn't mind. Roaming the Forest, away from the prying eyes and poorly hidden whispers from her Clan, she truly felt alive. Unlike its human inhabitants, the Forest didn't judge her by anything but her own skill, her ability to survive. Next to its timeless strength and ancient wisdom, she was but a passing shadow, and she liked it that way. It felt good just to be Renn.

Behind her, the boy gave a low groan. He must be getting tired, but his temper was as fierce as ever. He snapped at Hord, who walked right in front, and then turned to Renn, begging her to open the bag a little.

"No need," she answered curtly. "I just felt it wriggle."

But it made her think all over again. He really seemed to care about his little fur ball, more than he cared about himself. And the cub had rushed to his side despite the obvious warning of danger the boy must have issued - the growled "uff" now made sense. For a fleeting moment, Renn was jealous of such deep a friendship between the boy and wolf. Despite the company of her Clanmates, she suddenly felt very lonely and not even the silent compassion of the Forest could comfort her.

All morning they headed west in silence, and it was well after midday that Hord finally slowed to a halt by a brook. He would have kept going all day, Renn knew that, but she desperately needed a drink, and although he would never admit it, he probably did too. Besides, the boy had been growing careless with fatigue, stumbling and slipping.

Even so, Hord was complaining. "We're much too slow. We've got a whole valley to cross before we reach the Windriver."

From the corner of her eye, Renn saw the boy raise his head. She didn't know whether to be exasperated or astounded. How could anyone have lived in the Forest and not heard about the Windriver?

She sighed. "The Windriver is to the west, in the next valley. It's where we camp in autumn. And a couple of daywalks to the north is the Widewater, where we camp in summer." She paused for a moment, then scathingly added, "For the salmon. They're fish. Maybe you've heard of them."

The boy blushed, and Renn felt a flush of triumph, but also a stinging unease. She knew her last bribe had been arrogant and unnecessary, usually so unlike her. *What is wrong with me?* she wondered. Maybe it was Hord, she was always terse in his presence and more easily nettled. He probably thought she was a soft fool, explaining anything to a captive like that. But then again, maybe she was more like - no. She wouldn't even allow that thought.

Nonetheless, she promised herself to make it up to the boy when next a chance presented itself.

Slowly, the light started to fade, and with the setting sun, Renn felt her uneasiness grow. She kept glancing over her shoulder, peering into the impenetrable thicket to her left and right. Behind her, she sensed Hord halt from time to time to listen.

There is no better time for a bear to hunt than twilight, when the shadows are long, and the light low. The air is still, and the Forest grows quiet. It can stalk undetected and make its kill. And this bear would never waste an opportunity to wipe out the bright life so very blinding to its demon eyes.

At last they reached the Wideriver. Their camp wasn't far off, although Renn knew people offered little protection against something as powerful. She felt better nonetheless.

Across the familiar wooden walkway, the Forest opened into the clearing where the Ravens had made camp. As always, they'd set up four big reindeer-hide shelters around a large fire. In the sandy space between, her Clanmates were hard at work. Someone must have made a kill because Thull and Kao were skinning a boar carcass which hadn't been there this morning. At one side, the trees opened up all the way to the shallows.

Renn scanned the camp for Fin-Kedinn; she found him sitting by the fire as usual, spitting hares. His face was hard and closed as always, although Renn could see the lines around his eyes that crinkled whenever he smiled. His only resemblance to her was his reddish-brown hair; he also had a short red beard. Working next to him in stony silence was Dyrati, the girl who wanted to be Hord's mate. Renn didn't know whether to pity her or her brother more.

A low cark! caught her attention and she inadvertently looked round to where Saeunn was crouched, heading arrows; but Renn knew they weren't for hunting. Saeunn used them to do Magecraft.

Oslak now shoved the boy into the firelight, distracting Renn from Saeunn although she felt the ancient woman's gaze on her. She resisted the urge to pull a face at her and In focused on her uncle.

Fin-Kedinn didn't even look up but continued spitting his hares, but by now the camp had grown silent. The Ravens formed a loose circle around Renn, Hord, Oslak, and the prisoner. Yet Fin-Kedinn only looked up once he'd finished and rubbed off his hands with dust. He waited in silence.

Dyrati looked at Hord and blushed. "We saved you some broth."

Renn rolled her eyes. "Dyrati saved you some broth," she mocked. Dyrati's obvious admiration for Hord both annoyed and pleased him, her constant teasing him definitely made him mad.

But he didn't respond for once, walking up to Fin-Kedinn.

"We brought a prisoner," he said, quietly enough for all the assembled Ravens to overhear. "He stole one of our roe bucks, and when I found out, I tied him up at once. He has to answer for his crime."

Renn glared at him. She had first spotted the boy, and it had been Oslak who had caught him.

One of the dogs came sniffing the bundle over her shoulder. "Back!" she snapped, uncomfortably aware of the boy staring at her. If he could speak to wolves did that mean he could understand dogs too?

To make sure the wolf stayed out of, she went into the nearest shelter. It was Oslak's and she knew he wouldn't mind her borrowing some wavenbark rope.

She tied one end around the pouch, tossing the other high over the branch of an oak, and hoisted it high, beyond the dogs' reach - and more importantly, beyond the boy's.

She caught his eye and gave him a wry grin, leaning against the tree. He scowled back.

Hord had finished his narrative and Fin-Kevin nodded for Oslak to push the boy towards him. His face was unreadable as ever and his sharp blue eyes slowly studied his prisoner from top to toe. It was the clear, steady gaze of a hunter who notices every detail. Renn knew that look all too well - he'd taught her to inspect her surroundings with a calm eye and form her judgment later. She did that whenever she was out hunting.

He'd also taught her to keep her face neutral no matter what she thought. She rarely did that.

"What is your name?" he asked softly. For so powerful a man he had a quiet voice, but it wielded authority with an underlying tone of strength clearly detectable. It was the voice of a good Leader, the best Leader in the Forest, Renn thought with a flash of pride.

The boy licked his lips - had his mouth really gone dry with fear? He must be an even bigger coward than Renn had originally assumed.

"Torak. - What's yours?"

Hord disdainfully replied, "He is Fin-Kedinn. Leader of the Raven Clan. And you, you miserable runt, should learn more respect -" Fin-Kedinn silenced him with a stony look, then turned back to the boy, Torak."

"What clan are you?"

Only now did Renn notice the two fine dotted lines tattooed on his cheekbones. The left one had a break in it, a small white scar making it hard to identify.

"Wolf," Torak replied, raising his head.

"Well, there's a surprise," Renn remarked. There were so few Wolf Clan hunters left and they lived in seclusion. Why they should cast out so young a boy was a mystery to her though.

Around her, some Ravens laughed, but Fin-Kedinn's face never changed. His gaze didn't once leave Torak's face. "What are you doing in this part of the Forest?"

"Heading north," answered Torak.

"I told him it belongs to us now," Hord put in quickly.

"How could I know that?" Torak protested. Renn raised her eyebrows contemptuously. "I wasn't at the Clan meet!"

"Why not?" Fin-Kedinn asked sharply. Renn was astounded. Everyone attended Clan meets, unless they were so sick they couldn't come, but even then the rest of their Clan would tell them what had been decided. Especially in such dire times as now.

When Torak didn't reply, Fin-Kedinn said, "Where are the rest of your clan?"

"I don't know. I've never lived with them. I live - I lived - with my father."

"Where is he?"

"Dead. He was - killed by a bear."

A hiss went through the Ravens. Renn's fingers touched her clan-creature skin, three black raven feathers sewn to the left shoulder of her jerkin. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Saeunn rise and come towards them.

For a brief moment Renn wondered if she had been right and this Torak was the Listener. But how could the one who would destroy the bear be a boy of twelve summers who stole prey and lied about it? How could it be such a coward?

Still, Renn felt a pang of pity. She knew what it was like to lose one's father. On a sudden impulse, she lowered the bag with the wolf and loosened the neck a little.

But Fin-Kedinn showed no emotion. "Who was your father?"

Torak squirmed uncomfortably. It is forbidden to name a dead person for the first five summers so as not to disturb his or her souls as they enter the Death Journey. So he named his father's parents.

His mother had been Seal Clan, Renn was surprised to hear. The Seals kept themselves to themselves, and were very distrustful of mixing the Sea with the Forest, but maybe they hadn't been as strict in those days. His father's father had been Wolf. The name meant nothing to Renn, but Fin-Kedinn looked surprised. He knew who Torak was talking about.

Very slowly, he ran his finger down his bottom lip. Renn felt herself tense. At last he gave his verdict.

"Share the boy's things between everyone," he ordered Oslak. "Then take him downstream and kill him."

Renn watched Torak's knees buckle as he stumbled away from Oslak, her own eyes wide. She couldn't believe what her uncle had said. This strange boy's father must have been a very dangerous man.

"Wh-at?" Torak gagged. "I didn't even know the roe buck was yours! How can I be guilty if I didn't know?"

It was a fair point, but he had no evidence to back it up.

"It's the law," Fin-Kedinn only replied. No-one could argue with him - it was impossible. And Renn knew from experience - she'd tried.

Torak didn't seem to accept that, though. "Why? *Why?* Because you say so?"

But Renn could see Torak's arguments were becoming feebler. Challenging Fin-Kedinn personally about the law was not a smart move.

"Because the Clans say so."

Oslak put his hand on Torak's shoulder and started dragging him away. Renn hardened her heart. He was nothing but a common, stinking thief.

"No!" yelled Torak, desperately fighting Oslak's grip. "Listen! You say it's the law, but - there's another law, isn't there?" He gulped. "Trial by combat. We - we fight for it." He faltered, but Renn was impressed despite herself. It was an ancient rule - in undecided cases the accused had the right to fight. Fin-Kedinn's eyes narrowed.

Torak appeared to grow more confident and calmed down as he did so. *Good*, Renn thought. Panic was not a good ally in difficult situations.

"I'm right, aren't I?" he insisted, his voice now level. He met Fin-Kedinn's eyes and stared right back. That took guts Renn had to admit. "You don't know for sure if I'm guilty because you don't know whether I actually *knew* the buck was yours. So we fight. You and me." He gulped again. "If I win, I'm innocent. I live. I mean, me and the wolf. If I lose - we die."

Renn stuffed her fist into her mouth to stop herself from laughing out loud. This Torak had to be mad if he thought there was any chance he could fight Fin-Kedinn and win. Around her, some of the men sniggered.

Fin-Kedinn wasn't one of them. His face remained motionless as he said, "I don't fight boys."

"But he's right isn't he?" Renn called out. She knew he was, and she wanted the boy to be given a fair trial. Slyness, working sideways, cutting corners, hiding in the mist - that wasn't her style. She shot her arrows straight. "It's the oldest law of all. He has the right to fight."

Hord shouldered his way forward. His time had come, Renn sensed his desperation to prove himself. "I'll fight him," he said, his voice full of contempt. "I'm closer to him in age. It'll be fairer."

"Not by much," remarked Renn drily. She raised her eyebrows at her brother, but he ignored her as usual.

With a suppressed sigh, she glanced at Saeunn - for support? She almost smiled at the thought, it was ridiculous. Never, ever would Saeunn be a source of support for Renn. But she was old, and she respected the law. Besides, the Ravens listened to her. They never paid much attention to Renn.

Saeunn did not look back at Renn and for a fleeting moment Renn wondered if she could sense her own thoughts.

"What do you say, Fin-Kedinn?" she croaked. "The boy's right." Renn blew out her breath. "Let them fight."

She didn't know why she felt so strongly the boy had to live, but when she saw Fin-Kedinn gazing at Saeunn she knew it was decided, and couldn't suppress a flash of triumph. She barely registered her uncle nod.

Almost absent-mindedly, she looked at the wolf cub next to her, remembering him talk to the boy. The words of the Prophecy came back to her.

Could he really be the Listener?

No-one else has payed the cub the slightest bit of interest. They were all too excited at the prospect of a fight. Renn saw Oslak walk towards Torak and help him with his gear. He didn't look like he'd ever seen an arm-guard before. Still, she

believed his odds were as good as they could be. Hord was a skilled fighter, but she of all people knew he had weaknesses. If he used his wits, Renn thought, Torak stood a chance. // She couldn't help feel it was a big if.

Her eyes moved over to where Hord was starting to get ready himself. He was taking off his jerkin and now accepted a drink from Dyrati, smiling at all the attention.

Renn turned away, scowling. She knew how refreshing elderberry juice was. They all hadn't had a lot to eat or drink all day. She glanced back to Torak, who was rubbing his hands in the dust. With a deep breath, Renn took a beaker, filled it with the refreshing juice, and walked over to him, lightly touching him on the shoulder to get his attention.

He jumped but gratefully accepted the beaker. He looked surprised and Renn shrugged. "Hord's has a drink. It's only fair." She pointed out a pail by the fire. "There's water when you need it."

Torak handed back the beaker, ever so slightly shaking his head. "I don't think I'll last that long."

Renn hesitated. "Who knows?"

She withdrew quickly, staying as far from Saeunn as she could. She didn't like the look in the Mage's eye. It was as if Saeunn knew what she was thinking. *Ignore her*; she told herself, trying to focus on the fight.

Hord and Torak circled each other. Renn saw the small smile on her brother's face - he was clearly enjoying this, confident of victory. And he moved with grace and suppleness. He knew how to fight.

The contrast to Torak couldn't have been starker who's face was ashen beneath its brown tan. He stumbled lightly, unused to the weight of the spear in his hand. His eyes, however, were grey and focused on Hord's face, then his hands, then took in his movements. He was studying his opponent closely.

*Good*, thought Renn. Hord's biggest weakness was his arrogance coupled with a deep fear of failure. He clearly didn't think Torak stood a chance and he hadn't properly sized up his opponent, either. This was a mistake, Renn knew. Hord was relying on raw strength to win the battle, as she had suspected. There was a chance for Torak to win if he used his wits.

Hord lunged with his spear, suddenly, and with deadly precision. But Torak dodged, and Hord's spear just missed. He wiped the sweat from his brow and tried the move. Renn rolled her eyes.

"Copying won't get you very far," she called. He blushed.

He and Hord were circling faster now, and Renn started as she saw him slip in a puddle of boar blood. He caught himself in the last moment, a new light now in his eyes.

This time, he didn't wait for Hord, but attacked himself, jabbing at Hord's throat. Hord blocked, and when Torak tried for an undercut to the belly, he parried easily. It hadn't worked.

"Come on, Hord!" Renn heard Thull shout. "Give him a red skin!"

"Give me time," Hord called back, his lip curling. The Ravens laughed.

Torak lunged again, wildly off target, and Renn momentarily closed her eyes. He really was anything but a seasoned fighter. As she'd expected, Hord thrust his own spear towards Torak's now completely unprotected chest, but Torak swung his arm across and caught the blow with his arm-guard. The impact made him stagger backwards, yet he somehow remained on his feet, twisting his arm upwards.

Incredulous, Renn watched Hord's spear snap clean in two, and he stumbled back without a spear.

Torak gaped. He didn't believe his own success. *You fool!* Renn shouted silently. Hord lunged forwards, digging his knife into Torak's hand. Torak cried out in pain and dropped his spear. Hord lunged again as Torak slipped, just managing to roll away.

He was panting heavily, and sweat streamed down his face. A trickle of blood ran down his hand. With a grunt of effort, he dodged Hord, putting the fire between them.

"Hurry up, Hord!" shouted Finna. "Finish him off!"

"Come on, Hord!" her husband called. "Is this what they taught you in the Deep Forest?"

Not everyone was shouting for Hord, though. A few Ravens were encouraging Torak, too, although Renn knew it wasn't as much support as surprise he'd lasted so long. She glanced at her uncle. His face was stony as always, revealing nothing. It was impossible to tell what outcome he was hoping for.

Hord had slowly followed Torak who's attention had been momentarily caught by a yowl from the wolf. He jumped aside just in time to avoid a knife-slash from Hord. Renn's legs shook despite herself, and a cold bead of sweat trickled down her back. That had been a killing blow. If Hord had been a second faster...

It seemed to have rattled Torak to his senses, though, and he lashed and feinted, putting the fire between him and Hord again.

"Hiding again?" jeered Hord. Torak jutted his head towards the bitch-bark water pail. "I want a drink. All right?"

Hord bared his teeth. "If you must. *Boy.*" He put all the scorn he could muster into the last word. Renn winced. She hated it when her brother behaved like that. Torak's has been a fair request, he was just a boy for goodness' sake!

Renn watched Torak squat down with deliberate slowness. He was up to something, she knew he was. Apparently, so did Hord, because he stepped closer, looming over Torak's hunched figure.

"You want a drink too?" Torak asked softly. Hord snorted.

Suddenly, Torak lashed out - at the cooking skin! Renn could have laughed as Hord flinched against the hissing steam. Several Ravens gasped, but this time Torak didn't waste any time. He jabbed at Hord's wrist and he howled, dropping his knife. Torak kicked it away and hurled himself at his opponent, bowling him over. They rolled, Torak coming out on top to pin down Hord's arms.

It all went very fast, half-hidden by steam. Torak bashed Hord's head against the ground - then Fin-Kedinn was there, seizing him in his iron grip and lifting him away.

"It's over."

Hord jumped to his feet, casting about for his knife. He found it, rounded on Torak and glared, his hostility not yet spent.

"I said it's *over*," snapped Fin-Kedinn.

The Ravens exploded, yelling and shouting - at them or Fin-Kedinn, Renn wasn't sure which. She had more important things to do.

The words of the Prophecy rang in her ears - *the Listener fights with air and speaks with silence*. He'd done just that - he'd fought with air. And he could understand wolves. *But what does it mean to speak with silence?*

Renn shouldered her way through the crowd as behind her, Fin-Kedinn announced, "The boy won."

Then Renn had pushed into a shelter and didn't hear any more. She rummaged about - where had Oslak put the boy's things? At last, she spotted his pack and wrenched it open.

Tools tumbled out, and neat bundles of dried meat. But nothing looked like - there! Tucked into a very large sleeping-sack was a small grouse-bone whistle.

*The Listener speaks with silence.*

Could it really be? Renn raised the whistle to her lips and blew - but it made no sound. She tried again, heat flooding her body like dread.

Fast as a flash, she was back outside. Hord had vanished into a shelter, and Oslak had freed the wolf. Torak was crouched in the middle of the clearing, caressing the cub in his arms. He didn't say a word though.

"The law's the law," Fin-Kedinn told him. "You're free to go."

It was now or never. "No!" Renn shouted desperately. "You can't let him go!" She ran forward, pushing the others out of her way.

Torak glared at her from the ground. "He just has. You heard him. I'm free."

Renn turned to her uncle. The gleam has left his eyes. "We can't let him go," she insisted quietly. "This is too important. He might be -"

Realising everyone was listening, she pulled Fin-Kedinn aside, finishing her sentence in a whisper. Saeunn, Oslak and a few others followed them, even Hord emerged from his shelter.

Fin-Kedinn sighed. "Are you sure about this?" He looked thoughtful.

"I don't *know*," Renn admitted, though she had a pretty good feeling. "Maybe he is. Maybe he isn't. We need time to find out."

Fin-Kedinn stroked his beard. "What makes you suspect -"

"The way he defeated Hord," she replied immediately. "And - I found this in his things." Hesitantly, she proffered the little whistle.

"What do you use it for?" she asked Torak.

"For calling the cub," he answered. Renn raised her eyebrows and blew on it. The wolf twisted to look at her - apparently he was telling the truth. She looked at her uncle meaningfully, and thought she saw him incline his head a little.

"It doesn't make any noise," she said accusingly. When Torak remained silent, she turned back to Fin-Kedinn. "We can't let him go till we know for sure."

Saeunn chose this moment to speak up as well. "She's right. You know what it says as well as I do. Everyone does."

"What *what* says?" whined Torak. "Fin-Kedinn, we had a pact! We agreed that if I won the fight, me and Wolf would go free!"

"No," Fin-Kedinn calmly retorted. "We agreed that you would live. And so you shall. At least, for now. Oslak, tie him up again."

"*No!*" screamed Torak.

Renn raised her chin and forced him to meet her eyes. "You said your father was killed by a bear. We know about that bear. Some of us have even seen it."

Hord shuddered and started gnawing his thumbnail. Renn knew it stung whenever the bear was mentioned, and although she really didn't want to hurt him she didn't believe she had any other choice right now. She'd explain later.

Now, she turned back to Torak. "About a moon ago it came. Like a shadow it darkened the Forest, killing wantonly; even killing other hunters. Wolves. A lynx. It was as if - as if it was searching for something." She paused. "Then thirteen days ago it disappeared. A runner from the Boar Clan tracked it south. We thought it had gone. We gave thanks to our clan guardian." She

swallowed and went on, if possible, even more quietly, "Now it's back. Yesterday our scouts returned from the west. They'd found many kills, right down to the Sea. The Whale Clan told us that three days ago, it took a child."

Torak licked his lips nervously. "What's that got to do with me?"

"There's a Prophecy in our clan. *A Shadow attacks the Forest. None can stand against it.*" She frowned, trying to remember how it went on.

Saeunn took up the chant. "*Then comes the Listener. He fights with air, and speaks with silence.*" She gazed at the whistle in Renn's hand.

Everyone had fallen silent, their eyes trained on Torak.

He shook his head. "I'm not your Listener."

"We think you might be," Saeunn answered.

Torak didn't respond for a few minutes. Then, softly, he asked, "What - what happens to him? What happens to the Listener in the Prophecy?" His mouth was a tight line in his face - he was afraid. Renn knew he knew.

Fin-Kedinn replied out of the shadows, "*The Listener gives his heart's blood to the Mountain. And the Shadow is crushed.*"

Torak's grey eyes lit up with a strange fire for a heartbeat - fear, but something else, too.

That was when Renn knew for sure.

He was the Listener. He had to be. And she knew something else, too. She was going to do anything to help him get to the Mountain.

Anything.