‘Wh – at?’ he gasped. ‘I didn’t even know the buck was yours! How can I be guilty if I didn’t know?’

‘It’s the law,’ said Fin-Kedinn.

‘Why? Why? Because you say so?’

‘Because the clans say so.’

Oslak put a heavy hand on Torak’s shoulder.

‘No!’ cried Torak. ‘Listen! You say it’s the law, but – there’s another law, isn’t there?’ He caught his breath. ‘Trial by combat. We – we fight for it.’ He wasn’t sure if he’d got that right – Fa had only mentioned it once, when he was teaching him the law of the clans – but Fin-Kedinn’s eyes narrowed.

‘I’m right, aren’t I?’ Torak insisted, forcing himself to give the Raven Leader stare for stare.

3)

‘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 swallowed. ‘If I win, I’m innocent. I live. I mean, me and the wolf. If I lose – we die.’

Some of the men were chuckling. A woman tapped her brow, shaking her head.

‘I don’t fight boys,’ said Fin-Kedinn.

‘But he’s right, isn’t he?’ said Renn. ‘It’s the oldest law of all. He has the right to fight.’

Hord stepped forward. ‘I’ll fight him. I’m closer to him in age. It’ll be fairer.’

‘Not by much,’ Renn said drily.

She was leaning against the tree from which Wolf was suspended. Torak saw that she’d loosened the neck of the bag a little, so that Wolf’s head was poking out. He looked

bedraggled, but was gazing curiously down at the two dogs slaverering beneath him.

‘What do you say, Fin-Kedinn?’ said the Mage. ‘The boy’s right. Let them fight.’

Fin-Kedinn met the old woman’s eyes, and for a moment there seemed to be a battle of wills between them. Slowly, he nodded.

Relief washed over Torak.

Everyone seemed to be excited by the prospect of a fight. They talked in huddles, stamping their feet, their breath steaming in the chill evening air.

Oslak tossed Torak his father’s knife. ‘You’ll need that. And a spear and an arm-guard.’

‘A what?’ asked Torak.

The big man scratched the scar where his ear had been. ‘You know how to fight, don’t
you?’

‘No,’ said Torak.

Oslak rolled his eyes. He went off to the nearest shelter, and returned with an ashwood spear tipped with a vicious basalt point, and what seemed to be a length of triple-thickness reindeer hide.

Torak took the spear uncertainly, and watched in puzzlement as Oslak strapped the toughened hide round his right forearm for him. It felt as heavy and unwieldy as a haunch of deer meat. He wondered what he was supposed to do with it.

Oslak nodded at the bandage on Torak’s other arm, and grimaced. ‘ Seems like the odds are against you.’

Just a bit, thought Torak.

strapped on. He had taken off his jerkin. He looked enormous, and frighteningly strong. Torak decided against taking off his own jerkin. No need to emphasise the contrast.

He untied everything from his belt and laid it in a pile on the ground. Then he wound a length of wovengrass twine round his forehead to keep his hair out of his eyes. His hands were slippery with sweat. He stooped and rubbed them in the dust.

Someone touched his shoulder, making him jump.

It was Renn. She was holding out a birch-bark beaker.

He took it gratefully and drank. To his surprise, it was elderberry juice: tart and strengthening.

When he’d suggested a fight, he’d had in mind a wrestling-bout, with maybe some knife-play thrown in: the sort of thing he and Fa used to practise quite often, but just for fun. Clearly, to the Ravens, a fight meant something else. Torak wondered if there were special rules, and whether it would look weak to ask.

Fin-Kedinn prodded the fire, making sparks fly. Torak watched him through a shimmer of heat haze.

‘There’s only one rule,’ said Fin-Kedinn, as if he’d guessed Torak’s thoughts. ‘You can’t use fire. Do you understand?’ His eyes caught and held Torak’s.

Torak nodded distractedly. Not using fire was the least of his worries. Behind Fin-Kedinn, he could see Hord having his arm-guard

Renn saw his surprise and shrugged. ‘Hord’s had a drink. It’s only fair.’ She pointed to a pail by the fire. ‘There’s water when you need it.’

Torak handed back the beaker. ‘I don’t think it’ll last that long.’

She hesitated. ‘Who knows?’

A hush fell. The watchers formed a ring round the edge of the clearing, with Torak and Hord in the middle, near the fire. There were no formalities. The fight was on.

Warily, they circled each other.

For all his size, Hord moved with the grace of a lynx, flexing his knees and repositioning his fingers on knife and spear. His face was taut, but a small smile played about his lips. He loved being the centre of attention.
9) Torak didn’t. His heart was hammering against his ribs. Dimly, he could hear the watchers shouting encouragement to Hord, but their voices were muffled, as if he were underwater.

Hord’s spear lunged for his chest, and he dodged just in time. He felt the sweat start out on his forehead.

Torak tried the same move, hoping it didn’t look like copying.

‘Copying won’t get you very far,’ called Renn.

Torak’s face burned.

He and Hord were moving faster now. In places, the ground was slimy with boar’s blood. Torak slipped and nearly went down.

He knew he couldn’t hope to win by force.

10) He’d have to use his wits. The trouble was, he only knew two fighting tricks, and he hadn’t practised them more than a few times.

Here goes, he thought recklessly. He jabbed his spear at Hord’s throat. As expected, Hord’s hide-arm rose to block it. Torak tried a quick undercut to the belly, but Hord parried it with alarming ease, and Torak’s spear slid harmlessly off his arm-guard.

He knew that one, thought Torak. With every move, it was becoming obvious that Hord was a seasoned fighter.

‘Come on, Hord,’ yelled a man. ‘Give him a red skin!’

‘Give me time,’ Hord called back with a curl of his lip.

A ripple of laughter.

11) Torak tried his second trick. Feigning total incompetence, which wasn’t hard, he hit out wildly, tempting Hord with a glimpse of his unprotected chest. Hord took the bait, but as his spear came in to strike, Torak’s guard-arm swung across to meet it. Hord’s spearpoint sank into the thick hide guard, nearly knocking Torak off his feet, but Torak managed to keep to his plan by twisting his guard-arm sharply upwards. Hord’s spear-shaft snapped in two. The watchers groaned. Hord staggered back without a spear.

Torak was astonished. He hadn’t expected it to work.

Hord recovered swiftly. Lunging forwards, he jabbed his knife into Torak’s spear-hand. Torak cried out as the flint bit between finger and thumb. He lost his footing and dropped his spear. Hord lunged again. Torak only just managed to roll away in time and scramble to his feet.

Now they were both spearless. Both down to knives.

To gain some breathing space, Torak dodged behind the fire. His chest was heaving, and his wounded hand throbbed. Sweat was pouring down his sides. He bitterly regretted not copying Hord and taking off his jerkin.

‘Hurry up, Hord,’ yelled a woman. ‘Finish him off!’

‘Come on, Hord!’ shouted a man. ‘Is this what they taught you in the Deep Forest?’

By now, though, not all shouts were for Hord. There was a smattering of encouragement
for Torak, although he guessed it was less
genuine support than pleased surprise that he
was lasting longer than expected.

He knew it wouldn’t be much longer. He
was tiring rapidly, and he’d run out of tricks.
Hord was taking control.

Sorry, Wolf, he told the cub silently. I don’t
think we’re going to get out of this.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed
Wolf high in the tree. He was wriggling and
yowling in a haze of steamy breath. *What’s
happening?* he was asking. *Why won’t you
come and free me?*

Torak leapt aside to avoid a knife-slash
across his throat. Concentrate, he told himself
grimly. Forget about Wolf.

And yet – something was nagging him:

It worked. Hord stepped closer to the fire,
looming over it to intimidate Torak.

‘You want a drink too?’ said Torak, still
squatting.

Hord snorted his contempt.

Suddenly, Torak lashed out – but at the
cooking-skin. Jabbing his knife into the tough
hide, he upended it, and sent boiling broth
pouring onto the white-hot embers. Hissing
clouds of steam billowed into Hord’s face.

The watchers gasped. Torak seized his
chance and jabbed at his opponent’s wrist.
Blinded, Hord howled in pain and dropped his
knife. Torak kicked it away, then threw himself
on Hord, knocking him to the ground.

As Hord lay winded, Torak straddled his
chest and knelt on his arms to pin them down.

something about Wolf. What was it?

He glanced at Wolf yowling in the tree, his
breath steaming . . .

‘You can’t use fire,’ Fin-Kedinn had said . . .
Suddenly Torak’s mind flooded clear and he
knew what to do. Jabbing and feinting, he edged
sideways, putting the fire between them once
more.

‘Hiding again?’ taunted Hord.

Torak jerked his head at the birch-bark
water pail. ‘I want a drink. All right?’

‘If you must. Boy.’

Keeping his eyes on Hord, Torak squatted,
and cupped water to drink. He did it slowly, to
make Hord think he was up to something with
the water pail, and to distract attention from the
cooking-skin bubbling by the fire.

For one roaring heartbeat his sight misted red,
and he knew the urge to kill. He grabbed a
handful of dark-red hair and bashed Hord’s
head once against the earth.

Then he felt strong hands on his shoulders,
pulling him off. ‘It’s over,’ said Fin-Kedinn
behind him.

Torak struggled in his grip. Hord sprang up
and scrambled for his knife. Panting and
glaring, they faced each other.

‘I said it’s over,’ snapped Fin-Kedinn.

Chaos erupted among the watchers. They
didn’t think it was over at all. ‘He cheated! He
used fire!’

‘No, he won fairly enough!’

‘Who’s to say? They’ll have to fight it out
again!’
Both Torak and Hord looked appalled at that.

"The boy won," said Fin-Kedinn, releasing his grip on Torak.

Torak shook himself and wiped the sweat from his face as he watched Hord re-sheathing his knife. Hord was furious, though whether with himself or with Torak it was impossible to tell. Dyrati put her hand on his arm but he shook it off angrily, and pushed his way through the others, disappearing into one of the shelters.

Now that the blood-lust had left him, Torak felt shaky and sick. He sheathed his knife and looked round for his things. Then he saw Fin-Kedinn watching him.

"You broke the rule," the Raven Leader said calmly. "You used fire."

now.

"The law's the law," Fin-Kedinn said briskly. "You won. You're free to go."

"No!" A girl's voice rang out, and all heads turned. It was Renn. "You can't let him go!" she cried, running forward.

"He just has," retorted Torak. "You heard him. I'm free."

Renn spoke to her uncle. "We can't let him go. This is too important. He might be..." she drew Fin-Kedinn aside, whispering urgently.

Torak couldn't make out what she was saying, but to his dismay, others drew closer to listen. The Mage scowled and nodded. Even Hord emerged from the shelter, and when he heard what they were saying he gave Torak a strange, wary stare.

18)

"No I didn't," said Torak. He sounded a lot more confident than he felt. "I didn't use fire. I used steam."

"I would have preferred it," said Fin-Kedinn, "if you'd used water instead of broth. That was a waste of good food."

Torak did not reply.

Fin-Kedinn studied him, and for a moment there was a gleam of humour in his blue eyes.

Oslak pushed through to them, with the bag containing Wolf in his arms. "Here's that cub of yours!" he boomed, tossing the bag at Torak with a force that made him stagger.

Wolf squirmed and licked Torak's chin and told him how awful it had been, all at once. Torak wanted to say something comforting, but stopped himself. It would be stupid to slip up

19)

Fin-Kedinn studied Renn thoughtfully. "Are you sure about this?"

"I don't know," she said. "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. And I found this in his things." She held out her palm, and Torak saw his little grouse-bone whistle. "What do you use it for?" she asked him.

"For calling the cub," he replied.

She blew on it, and Wolf twisted in his arms. A shiver of unease ran through the crowd. Renn and Fin-Kedinn exchanged glances. "It doesn't make any noise," she said accusingly.

Torak did not reply. He realised with a jolt
that her eyes were not light-blue like her brother's, but black: black as a peat pool. He wondered if she was a Mage, too.

She turned to Fin-Kedinn. ‘We can’t let him go till we know for sure.’

‘She’s right,’ said the Mage. ‘You know what it says as well as I do. Everyone does.’

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

‘No,’ said Fin-Kedinn, ‘we agreed that you would live. And so you shall. At least, for now. Oslak, tie him up again.’

‘No!’ shouted Torak.

Renn raised her chin. ‘You said your father was killed by a bear. We know about that bear. Some of us have even seen it.’

Beside her, Hord shuddered and began to gnaw his thumbnail.

‘About a moon ago it came,’ Renn went on quietly. ‘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. ‘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 them that three days ago, it took a child.’

Torak licked his lips. ‘What’s this got to do with me?’

There’s a Prophecy in our clan,’ said Renn as if he hadn’t spoken. ‘A Shadow attacks the Forest. None can stand against it.’ She broke off, frowning.

The Mage took up her words. ‘Then comes the Listener: He fights with air, and speaks with silence.’ Her gaze fell on the whistle in Renn’s hand.

Everyone was silent, watching Torak.

‘I’m not your Listener,’ he said.

‘We think you might be,’ replied the Mage.

Torak thought about the Prophecy. The Listener fights with air . . . He had done just that: he had used steam. ‘What – happens to him?’ he asked in a low voice. ‘What happens to the Listener in the Prophecy?’ But he had a terrible feeling that he already knew.

The silence in the clearing grew more intense. Torak looked from the frightened faces around him to the flint knife at Oslak’s belt. He looked at the glistening carcass of the boar hanging from the tree; at its dark blood trickling into the pail beneath. He felt Fin-Kedinn’s eyes on him, and turned to face the burning blue gaze.

‘The Listener,’ quoted Fin-Kedinn, ‘Gives his heart’s blood to the Mountain. And the Shadow is crushed.’

His heart’s blood.

Under the tree, the blood dripped softly into the basin.

Drip, drip, drip.