SEVEN

Three hunters. Three lethal flint weapons. All aimed at him.

2) Torak’s mind whirled. He couldn’t move. Couldn’t see Wolf.

The man gripping his jerkin was enormous. His russet beard was a bird’s nest tangle; one cheek was pulled downwards by an ugly scar, and whatever had bitten him had taken off one ear. In his free hand he held a flint-edged knife, its point jabbed under Torak’s jaw.

Beside him stood a tall young man, and a girl about Torak’s own age. Both had dark-red hair, smooth, pitiless faces, and flint arrows trained on his heart.

He tried to swallow. He hoped he didn’t look as scared as he felt. ‘Let me go,’ he gasped. He took a swing at the big man and missed.

The big man grunted. ‘So here’s our thief!’ He hoisted Torak higher – chokingly high.

3) ‘I’m not – a thief!’ coughed Torak, snatching at his throat.

‘He’s lying,’ the young man said coldly.

‘You took our roe buck,’ said the girl. To the big man she said, ‘Oslak, I think you’re choking him.’

Oslak set Torak on his feet. But he didn’t loosen his hold, and his knife stayed at Torak’s throat.

Carefully, the girl replaced her arrow in her quiver, and shouldered her bow. The young man did not. From the gleam in his eyes, it was clear that he was enjoying himself. He wouldn’t hesitate to shoot.

Torak coughed and rubbed his throat, surreptitiously reaching for his knife.

‘I’ll take that,’ said Oslak. Still gripping
Torak, he relieved him of his weapons and tossed them to the girl.

She studied Fa’s knife curiously. ‘Did you steal this too?’

‘No!’ said Torak. ‘It – it was my father’s.’

Clearly they didn’t believe him.

He looked at the girl. ‘You said I took your buck. How could it be yours?’

‘This is our part of the Forest,’ said the young man.

Torak was puzzled. ‘What do you mean? The Forest doesn’t belong to anyone –’

‘It does now,’ snapped the young man. ‘It was agreed at the clan meet. Because of ... ’ he broke off with a scowl. ‘What matters is that you took our prey. That means death.’

Torak broke out in a sweat. Death? How could taking a roe buck mean death?

His mouth was so dry that he could hardly speak. ‘If – if it’s the buck you’re after,’ he said, ‘take it and let me go. It’s in my pack. I haven’t eaten much.’

Oslak and the girl exchanged glances, but the young man tossed his head in scorn. ‘It isn’t that simple. You’re my captive. Oslak, tie his hands. We’re taking him to Fin-Kedinn.’

‘Where’s that?’ asked Torak.

‘It’s not a place,’ said Oslak, ‘it’s a man.’

‘Don’t you know anything?’ sneered the girl.

‘Fin-Kedinn is my uncle,’ said the young man, drawing himself up. ‘He’s the leader of our clan. I am Hord, his brother’s son.’

‘What clan? Where are you taking me?’

They did not reply.

Oslak gave him a shove that knocked him to his knees. As he struggled to his feet, he glanced over his shoulder – and saw to his horror that Wolf had trotted back to look for him. He stood uncertainly some twenty paces away, snuffing the strangers’ scent.

They hadn’t spotted him. What would they do if they did? Presumably even they respected the ancient law which forbade the killing of another hunter. But what if they chased Wolf away? Torak pictured him lost in the Forest. Hungry. Howling.

To warn Wolf to stay out of sight, he gave a low, urgent ‘uff’. Danger!

Oslak nearly fell over him in surprise.

‘What did you say?’

‘Uff!’ said Torak again. To his dismay, Wolf didn’t retreat. Instead, he put back his ears and raced straight for Torak.

‘What’s this?’ muttered Oslak. He reached down and grabbed Wolf by the hackles.

Wolf wriggled and snarled as he dangled from the huge red hand.

‘Let him go!’ shouted Torak, struggling. ‘Let him go or I’ll kill you!’

Oslak and the girl burst out laughing.

‘Let him go! He’s not doing you any harm!’

‘Just chase it away and let’s go,’ said Hord irritably.

‘No!’ yelled Torak. ‘He’s my gui – no!’

The girl threw him a suspicious look. ‘He’s your what?’

‘He’s with me,’ muttered Torak. He knew he mustn’t reveal his search for the Mountain, or
that he could talk to Wolf.

‘Come on, Renn,’ snarled Hord. ‘We’re wasting time.’

But Renn was still staring at Torak. She turned to Oslak. ‘Give it to me.’ From her pack she pulled a buckskin bag into which she shoved the cub, drawing the neck tightly shut. As she shouldered the wriggling, yowling bag, she told Torak, ‘You’d better come quietly, or I’ll bash him against a tree.’

Torak glared at her. She probably wouldn’t do it, but she’d just ensured his obedience far more effectively than either Oslak or Hord.

Oslak gave Torak another push, and they started along a deer-track, heading north-west.

The rawhide bindings were tight, and Torak’s wrists began to hurt. Well let them, he thought. He was furious with himself. Look behind you, his father had said. He hadn’t, and now he was paying for it – and so was Wolf. No more muffled yowls were coming from the bag. Was he suffocating? Already dead?

Torak begged Renn to open the bag and let in some air.

‘No need,’ she said without turning round. ‘I just felt it wriggle.’

Torak set his teeth and stumbled on. He had to find some way to escape.

Oslak was behind him, but Hord was right in front. He looked about nineteen, well-built and handsome. He also seemed both arrogant and uneasy: desperate to be first, but seared that he’d only ever come second. His clothes were finely made and colourful, his jerkin and

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leggings stitched in braided sinew dyed red, and edged in some kind of birdskin stained green. On his chest he wore a magnificent necklace of red deer teeth.

Torak was mystified. Why would a hunter want so much colour? And that necklace clinked, which was the last thing you needed.

Renn resembled Hord in feature, and Torak wondered if they were brother and sister, although Renn was younger by four or five summers. Her clan-tattoos – three fine blue-black bars on her cheekbones – showed clearly on her pale skin, giving her a sharp, mistrustful look. Torak didn’t think he’d be asking her for help.

Her buckskin jerkin and leggings were scruffy, but her bow and quiver were beautiful, the arrows deftly fletched with owl feathers for silent flight. On the first two fingers of her left hand, she wore leather finger-guards, and strapped to her right forearm was a wrist-guard of polished green slate. Torak guessed that such wrist-guards were worn by people who lived for their bows. That’s what matters to her, he thought. Not fine clothes, like Hord.

But what clan was she? Sewn to the left side of her jerkin – and those of Hord and Oslak – was their clan-creature skin: a strip of black feathers. Swan? Eagle? The feathers were too tattered, Torak couldn’t tell.

They walked all morning without stopping for food or water: crossing boggy valleys choked with chattering aspen; climbing hills darkened by ever-wakeful pines. As Torak passed beneath,
the trees sighed mournfully, as if already lamenting his death.

Clouds obscured the sun, and he lost his bearings. They came to a slope where the Forest floor was bumpy with the waist-high nests of wood-ants. As wood-ants only build by the south side of trees, Torak worked out that they were heading west.

At last they paused at a brook to drink.

‘We’re much too slow,’ growled Hord. ‘We’ve got a whole valley to cross before we reach the Windriver.’

Torak pricked up his ears. Maybe he’d overhear something useful...

Renn sensed he was listening. ‘The Windriver,’ she told him slowly, as if talking to a baby, ‘is to the west, in the next valley. It’s where we camp in autumn. And a couple of day walks to the north is the Widewater, where we camp in summer. For the salmon. They’re fish. Maybe you’ve heard of them.’

Torak felt himself reddening. But he knew now where they were heading; his captors’ autumn camp. It sounded bad. A camp would mean more people, and less chance of escape.

As they walked, the sun sank lower, and Torak’s captors became edgy, pausing often to listen and look about them. He guessed that they knew about the bear. Maybe that was why they’d adopted the unheard-of measure of ‘owning’ prey. Because it was getting scarce; the bear was frightening it away.

They descended into a big valley of oak, ash and pine, and soon reached a wide silver river.

This must be the Windriver.

Suddenly Torak smelt woodsmoke. They were nearing the camp.