TWENTY

Clutching Torak’s quiver, Renn raced to the edge of the trail and tripped on a tree root, spilling arrows in the dirt. Panic bubbled in her throat. What to do? What to do?

Only moments before, she’d been pacing up and down, while a flock of greenfinches tore at the yew tree’s juicy pink berries, and Wolf tugged on the leash, uttering bark-growls which Torak would have understood, but she just found worrying.

Then the finches had fled in a twittering cloud, and she’d glanced down the hill. A gap in the fog had given her a clear view: she’d seen the stream rushing past a clump of spruce, and a big dark boulder hunched beside them. Then the boulder had moved.

Frozen in horror, she’d watched the bear rear up on its hind legs, towering over the spruce. The great head swung as it tasted the air. It caught her scent and dropped to all fours.

That was when she’d run to the cave and screamed a warning to Torak – and got nothing back but echoes.

Now, as the fog closed in again and she fumbled for the arrows, she pictured the bear climbing the hill towards her. She knew how fast bears can move: it would be here in moments.

The rockface was too steep for her to climb; besides, she couldn’t leave Wolf. That left the cave, but every part of her screamed not to go inside. They’d be caught like hares in a trap, they’d never get out.

Wolf’s desperate tugging on the leash broke her panic. He was pulling her towards the cave – and in a flash she knew he was right. Torak was inside. They would fight it together.
She plunged in, dragging packs and sleeping-sacks behind her. The darkness blinded her. She ran into solid rock, hitting her head.

After a breathless search she worked out that the cave narrowed sharply to a slit. Wolf was already through, tugging at her to follow. She turned and edged sideways – quickly, quickly – then dropped to her knees and reached through the gap to drag the gear in after her.

As she yanked in packs and bows and quiver, she felt a flicker of hope. Maybe the gap was too narrow for the bear? Maybe they could hold out...

Her waterskin was wrenched from her hand with a force that slammed her against the gap and sent pain shooting through her shoulder. In a daze she scrambled sideways into a hollow, yanking Wolf with her.

The bear couldn’t have moved that fast, she thought numbly.

A deep growl reverberated through the cave. Her skin crawled.

It can’t get through the gap, she told herself. Stay still. Stay very, very still.

From deep within the cave came a cry. ‘Renn!’

Was Torak calling for help, or was he coming to help her? She couldn’t tell. Couldn’t call out. Couldn’t do anything but cower with Wolf in the hollow, knowing she was too close to the gap – just two paces away – yet powerless to move. Some force was keeping her there. She couldn’t take her eyes from that narrow slit of daylight.

The daylight turned black.

Knowing it was the worst thing to do, Renn leaned forward and peered through the gap. The blood roared in her head. A nightmare glimpse of dark fur flickering in an unfelt wind; a flash of long cruel claws glistening with black blood.

A roar shook the cave. Moaning, Renn jammed her fists against her ears as the roar battered through her, on and on till she thought her skull would crack...

Silence: as shocking as the roar. Taking her fists from her ears, she heard a whisper of dust. Wolf panting. Nothing else.

Slowly, appalled at what she was doing, she crawled towards the slit, pulling the reluctant cub with her.

She saw daylight again. Grey rockface. The yew tree with a scattering of berries beneath. No bear.

A shuddering growl: so close that she heard the wet champ of jaws, smelt the reek of slaughter. Then the daylight was blotted out, and an eye held hers. Blacker than basalt, yet churning with fire, it drew her – it wanted her.

She tilted forwards.

Wolf wrenched her back, breaking the spell so that she shrank out of the way just as the deadly claws sliced the earth where she’d been kneeling.

Again the bear roared. Again she cowered in the hollow. Then she heard new sounds: the clatter of rocks, the groans of a dying tree. In its
fury, the bear was clawing at the mouth of the
cave, uprooting the yew and tearing it apart.

Whimpering, she pressed herself into the
hollow.

Against her shoulder, the rock moved. With
a cry she jumped back.

From the other side, she heard stones
shattering, and earth being flung aside with
lethal intent. She realised what was happening.
The rock that formed this side of the gap was
not, as she had thought, a part of the cave itself,
but merely a tongue of stone that jutted from
the earth floor. The bear was clawing at its
roots: digging them out like wood-ants from a
nest.

Sweat streamed off her. She stared at Wolf.
With a shock, she saw that he was cub no

your back, not from your arm . . .

‘Fourteen arrows,’ she said. ‘I should be
able to put in a few of them before it gets me.’

She stepped out from the hollow and took
up position.

Torak tore at the Watchers swarming over him.

Claws snagged his face and hair. Foul wings
stifled his mouth and nose. Somehow he
managed to pull on Renn’s mitten and reach for
the stone tooth. It was heavier than he’d
expected. He wrenched off the mitten with
the tooth inside, and shoved it into the neck of his
jerkin.

‘Renn!’ he yelled as he pushed himself off

the stone. His cry was deadened by leathery
wings.

He struck out through the stench – but with
the rushlight gone, he couldn’t even see his
hands in front of his face.

Faint and far above came Wolf’s frenzied
yowls: Where are you? Danger! Danger!

He waded towards the sound with the
Watchers swarming over him, pushing him
down into the stink.

Terrible images thronged his head. Wolf
and Renn lying dead – just like Fa. Why had he
made them stay up there where it was ‘safe’,
when all the time that was where the true
danger lay?

Raging inwardly, he drew his knife from its
sheath and slashed at the Watchers. They
seemed to lift to avoid the blade. ‘Oh, so you’re scared of it, are you?’ he shouted. ‘Well here’s some more!’ He slashed at them — and again they lifted, a dark cloud just out of reach. The hilt grew hot in his hand. Snarling, he ploughed on through the stink.

He barked his shins on solid rock. He’d reached the ledge. ‘I’m coming!’ he shouted, pulling himself out and starting up the slope.

A roar shook the cave, beating him to his knees. The Watchers rose in a cloud and vanished.

The silence after the last echo had died was worse. Torak became aware of rock beneath his knees; the stone tooth throbbing inside his jerkin. He struggled to his feet and ran up the ledge. It was steep — so steep. Why was there no sound from above? What was happening up there?

On and on he climbed till his knees ached and the breath seared his throat. Then he rounded the last bend and the daylight blinded him.

The cave mouth was five paces away, and wider than he remembered. The gap he’d squeezed through on his descent had been wrenched open, and before it stood Renn, a small, upright figure, incredibly brave, taking aim with her last arrow at the thing looming over her.

For a heartbeat, Torak was back with Fa on the night of the attack, transfixed by the malice of those demon-haunted eyes...

‘No!’ he shouted.

Renn loosed her arrow. The bear batted it away with one sweep of its claws. But just as it was about to move in for the kill, Wolf leapt from the shadows — leapt not at the bear, but at Renn. With a single snap of his powerful jaws, Wolf tore the ravenskin pouch from her belt — knocking her off her feet, out of reach of the bear — then sped out of the cave. The bear lashed out, gouging the earth a hand’s breadth from where the cub had been.

‘Wolf!’ shouted Torak, throwing himself forwards.

With the pouch in his jaws, Wolf disappeared into the fog. The bear swung round with terrifying agility and raced after him.

‘Wolf!’ Torak shouted again.

The fog engulfed them, leaving the empty hillside mocking him. The bear was gone. So was Wolf.