TWENTY-EIGHT

Why are you doing this?’ cried Renn. ‘He’s trying to help us! You can’t treat him like an
outcast!’

‘Watch me,’ said Hord, dragging Torak through the snow.

Torak fought to stay on his feet, but it wasn’t easy with his hands tied behind his back. There was no hope of escape: he was surrounded by Oslak and four sturdy Raven men.

‘Faster!’ urged Hord. ‘We’ve got to reach camp before dark!’ ‘But he’s the Listener!’ said Renn. ‘I can prove it!’ She pointed at the ravenskin pouch at Torak’s waist. ‘He found all three pieces of the Nanuak!’

‘Did he,’ muttered Hord. Without breaking stride, he drew his knife and cut the pouch from Torak’s belt. ‘Well now it’s mine.’

‘What are you doing?’ cried Renn. ‘Give it back!’

‘Hold your tongue!’ snapped Hord.

‘Why should I? Who says you can –’

Hord slapped her. It was a hard blow across the face, and she went flying, landing in a heap.

Oslak growled a protest but Hord warned him back. He was breathing hard as he watched Renn sitting up. ‘You’re no longer my sister,’ he spat. ‘We thought you were dead when we found your quiver in the stream. Fin-Kedinn didn’t speak for three days, but I didn’t grieve. I was glad. You betrayed your clan, and you shamed me. I wish you were dead.’

Renn put a trembling hand to her lip. It was bleeding. A red weal was coming up on her cheek.

‘You shouldn’t have hit her,’ said Torak.
5) that. Camp’s not far.’
Renn ignored him, and got unaided to her feet.
Glancing up the trail, Torak caught an orange flicker in the deepening dusk. Nearer, in the shadows beneath a young spruce, a pair of amber eyes.
His heart turned over. If Hord saw Wolf, there was no knowing what he might do . . .
Luckily, Renn had everyone’s attention. ‘Is my brother Clan Leader now?’ she demanded. ‘Do you follow him instead of Fin-Kedinn?’
The men hung their heads.
‘It’s not that simple,’ said Oslak. ‘The bear attacked three days ago. It killed –’ his voice cracked. ‘It killed two of us.’
The blood drained from Renn’s face. She knew that.’
Oslak started to speak, but Hord cut in. ‘Your part in this is finished,’ he told Torak. ‘I will take the Nanuak to the Mountain! I will offer the blood of the Listener to save my people!’

8) drew closer to Oslak, whose brow and cheekbones were marked with grey river clay.
Torak didn’t know what the marks meant, but when Renn saw them she gasped. ‘No,’’ she whispered, touching Oslak’s hand.
The big man nodded and turned away.
‘What about Fin-Kedinn?’ Renn said shrilly. ‘Is he –’
‘Badly wounded,’ said Hord. ‘If he dies, I will be Leader. I’ll make sure of it.’
Renn clapped her hands to her mouth and raced off towards the camp.
‘Renn!’ shouted Oslak. ‘Come back!’
‘Let her go,’’ said Hord.
When she’d gone, Torak felt utterly alone. He didn’t even know the names of the other Raven men. ‘Oslak,’’ he begged, ‘make Hord give
pounce away. He fought against the Pull that was now so strong that he felt it all the time, and the fear of the demon he scented on the wind. He turned his ears from the distant howls of the stranger pack: the pack that didn’t sound like strangers any more, but faraway kin . . .
He had to ignore it all. His pack-brother was in danger. Wolf sensed his pain and fear. He sensed, too, the anger of the full-growns, and their fear. They were scared of Tall Tailless.
The wind changed, and Wolf caught a wave of scents from the great Den of the tailless. Sounds and smells overwhelmed him. Bad, bad, bad! His courage failed. Whimpering, he shot under a fallen tree.
The Den meant terrible danger. It was huge and complicated, with angry dogs who didn’t
listen, and many of the Bright Beasts-that-Bite-Hot. Worst of all were the tailless themselves. They couldn’t hear or smell much, but they made up for it by doing clever things with their forepaws, and sending the Long-Claw-that-Flies-Far to bite the prey.

Wolf didn’t know whether to run or stay.

To help himself think, he chewed a branch, then a chunk of the Bright Soft Cold. He ran in circles. Nothing worked. He longed for the strange sureness that sometimes came to him and told him what to do. It didn’t come. It had flown like a raven into the Up.

What must he do?

Torak blamed himself. Because of his carelessness he’d lost the Nannuak. It was all his fault. Around him the snow-laden trees cast blue moon-shadows across the trail. ‘Your fault,’ they seemed to be telling him.

‘Faster,’ said Hord, jabbing him in the back.

The Ravens had camped in a clearing by a mountain stream. At the heart of the clearing, a long-fire of three pine logs glowed orange. Clustered around it were the clan’s sloping shelters, then a ring of smaller fires and spiked pits, guarded by men with spears. It looked as if the entire clan had come north.

Hord ran ahead while Torak waited with Oslak by one of the shelters. He saw Renn, and his spirits rose. She was kneeling at the mouth of a shelter on the other side of the clearing.

talking urgently. She didn’t see him.

People were huddled around the long-fire. The air was thick with fear. According to Oslak, scouts had found signs of the bear only two valleys away. ‘It’s getting stronger,’ he said. ‘Tearing up the Forest as if – as if it’s seeking something.’

Torak started to shiver. Hord’s forced march had kept him warm, but now, in his summer buckskin, he was freezing. He hoped they wouldn’t think he was scared.

Oslak untied his wrists and put his hand on his shoulder to guide him into the clearing. Torak forgot about the cold as he stumbled into the glare of the long-fire, and a buzz of voices like a hive of angry bees.

He saw Sæunn, cross-legged on a pile of reindeer hides with the ravenskin pouch in her lap; Hord beside her, gnawing his thumb; Dyrati watching Hord, her face strained.

Silence fell. People made way for four men bearing Fin-Kedinn on an auroch-hide litter. The Raven Leader’s face was drawn, and his left leg was bandaged in soft bindings blotted with blood. His face contracted slightly as the men set him down by the long-fire. It was the only sign he gave of being in pain.

Renn appeared, rolling a chunk of pine log. She put it behind Fin-Kedinn for him to lean against, then curled up beside him on a reindeer skin. She didn’t look at Torak, but kept her eyes on the fire.

Oslak nudged him in the back, and he took a few halting steps closer to the litter.
The Raven Leader caught his gaze and held it, and Torak felt a rush of relief. The blue eyes were as intense and unreadable as ever. Hord would have to wait a while longer to be Clan Leader.

‘When we first found this boy,’ said Fin-Kedinn, his voice ringing clear, ‘we didn’t know who, or what, he was. Since then, he has found the three pieces of the Nanuak. He has saved the life of one of our own.’ He paused. ‘I have no more doubts. He is the Listener. The question is, do we let him take the Nanuak to the Mountain? A boy, on his own? Or do we send our strongest hunter: a full-grown man with a far greater chance against the bear?’

Hord stopped gnawing his thumb and squared his shoulders. Torak’s heart sank.

‘Time is short,’ said Fin-Kedinn, glancing at the night sky where the Great Auroch blazed. ‘In a few days, the bear will be too strong to overcome. We can’t call a clan meet, there’s no time. I must decide this now, for all the clans.’ The only sound was the hiss and crackle of the fire. The Ravens were hanging on every word.

‘There are many among us,’ Fin-Kedinn went on, ‘who say it would be madness to trust our fate to a boy.’

Hord leapt to his feet. ‘It would be madness! I’m the strongest! Let me go to the Mountain and save my people!’

‘You’re not the Listener,’ said Torak.

‘What about the rest of the Prophecy?’ said Saeunn in her raven’s croak. “The Listener gives his heart’s blood to the Mountain.” Could you do that?’

Torak took a breath. ‘If that’s what it takes.’

‘But there’s another way!’ cried Hord. ‘We kill him now, and I take his blood to the Mountain! At least then we stand a chance!’

A murmur of approval from the Ravens.

Fin-Kedinn raised a hand for silence, then spoke to Torak. ‘You used to deny that you were the Listener. Why so keen now?’

Torak raised his chin. ‘The bear killed my father. That’s what it was made to do.’

‘This is greater than vengeance!’ sneered Hord.

‘It’s greater than vanity, too,’ Torak retorted. He spoke to Fin-Kedinn. ‘I don’t care about being “the saviour of my people”. What people? I’ve never even met my own clan. But I swore to my father that I’d find the Mountain. I swore an oath.’

‘We’re wasting time!’ said Hord. ‘Give me the Nanuak and I will do it!’

‘How?’ said a quiet voice.

It was Renn.

‘How will you find the Mountain?’ she asked.

Hord hesitated.

Renn stood up. ‘It’s said to be the furthest peak at the northernmost end of the High Mountains. Well, here we are, at the northernmost end of the High Mountains. So where is it?’ She spread her hands. ‘I don’t know.’ She turned to Hord. ‘Do you?’

He ground his teeth.

She spoke to Saeunn. ‘Do you? No. And
you’re the Mage.’ She faced Fin-Kedinn. ‘Do you?’

‘No,’ he answered.

Renn pointed at Torak. ‘Not even he knows where it is, and he’s the Listener.’ She paused.
‘But somebody knows.’ She looked directly at Torak, her eyes drilling into his.

He caught her meaning. Clever Renn, he thought. Just so long as it works . . .
He put his hands to his lips and howled.

The Ravens gasped. The camp dogs leapt into uproar.

Again Torak howled.

Suddenly, a streak of grey sped across the clearing and crashed into him.

People muttered and pointed; the dogs went wild until men shoed them away. A small

child laughed.

Torak knelt and buried his face in Wolf’s fur. Then he gave the cub’s muzzle a grateful lick. It had taken enormous courage for Wolf to answer his call.

As the uproar subsided, Torak raised his head. ‘Only Wolf can find the Mountain,’ he told Fin-Kedinn. ‘He got us this far. It’s only because of him that we found the Nanuak.

The Raven Leader ran a hand over his dark-red beard.

‘Give me back the Nanuak,’ pleaded Torak.

‘Let me take it to the World Spirit. It’s our only chance.’

The fire crackled and spat. Snow thudded off a nearby spruce. The Ravens waited for their Leader’s decision.

At last Fin-Kedinn spoke. ‘We’ll give you food and clothing for the journey. When do you leave?’

Torak breathed out.

Renn gave him a curt nod.

Hord shouted a protest, but Fin-Kedinn silenced him with a glance. Again he spoke to Torak. ‘When do you leave?’

Torak swallowed. ‘Um. Tomorrow?’