

BONES AND KEEPS

DENA BAIN TAYLOR



ILLUSTRATIONS MARTIN SPRINGETT

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Dedication

to Charles, Rivka and Dave
with love always



CHAPTER 20

If he'd been a more perceptive man, Hring would have noticed. Or if Wulfgar were still alive, the leader of his warband would have leaned over to comment out of one side of his mouth in his gnomic way: "The Eikwood wants us to be here today." But Wulfgar was dead, killed by one of Siggeir's men on the day Hring was spurned by Bright Jarl's eagle and then humiliated by Beowulf. So Hring noticed nothing. He was thinking about his prey.

Late summer had enriched the woods. Since Midsumar the living world had basked in sunshine and gentle rains, unheard of since the summer of no sun. The forest floor was green and dark and cool in ways that drenched the skin with life. Here and there a leaf was turning colour. It had become a mast year for acorns and the creatures of the forest were stuffing themselves at an unending feast. A constant parade of woodchucks, chipmunks and bears, squirrels and raccoons, woodpeckers, nuthatches, starlings and crows went about their business while they kept a wary eye on the

men and hounds. A couple of fawns wandered onto the path ahead of them and froze at the sight, then bounded into flight when a snort from a hidden parent penetrated their indecision. A thrush raised its head from the yellowing foliage of a spicebush to flute melodiously, then dipped back to peck at a clump of the scarlet berries.

Beowulf had still not returned and Hring was bored and irritated with the endless speculation about what had happened to the king and his foreign woman. After the excitement of a Midsumar that featured amazingly good sex, the weeks had slogged along and Hring had grown ever more impatient. Having tried once to play the hero and been so scarred for his troubles, he wanted no part of weird. He wanted to look after himself. And if the old man *was* dead — and his little brown bitch, a bonus there — it just put him on the High Seat of Wedermark.

His mother. He shook his head. The most unpredictable woman in a living world that was too full of them. Lately she'd summoned him to Grafenheim several times and been admiring and chatty. Telling tales about the Old Man, how the bear had been a mankiller since the beginning of time. How he can't, of course, always have been the same physical bear. Which means that eventually, some hero kills him and his spirit passes to the next Old Man. How only the hunters the Old Man thinks worthy ever see him. How Beowulf sees him every year at the Dysablot. How she thought he might be the better man to finally kill the beast.

A buck rabbit bolted in front of them, hotly chased by a fisher fox. The fox's queer bounding gait quickly ate up the gap but the rabbit got lucky and the last tip of a shivering paw disappeared

down a hole just as the fox snapped at it. Hring turned to his hunting partner, Karl:

“Where did he say his track was sighted?”

He was referring to an old woodcutter who’d come by the little hunting hut they used the night before. Karl was the best tracker among Hring’s thanes, a man with dark red hair and beard, a startling orange moustache and a face as creased as a walnut’s. Hring and Wulfgar had often taken Karl with them hunting deer or elk in the deep woods. Now it was just the two of them and a pack of dogs following quietly.

Three nights ago, at table in Keephold’s great hall, an idea had lit up Hring’s boredom. “Hai!” he’d said to Karl. “Why don’t you and me go after the bear?”

“You mean the Old Man?” Karl asked blurrily, being several drinking horns past making easy connections.

“Yes, the Old Man! Why not? Why not us? You’re the best tracker in the living world, aren’t you?”

It was hard to argue with that logic. Karl mulled it around through two more ales — conveniently forgetting that the bear had never vouchsafed him even a glimpse of its massive bulk — and then agreed.

Now they walked through the long shadows of late afternoon and Karl no longer gave much for their chances of success. They had left their horses at the hunting hut. They carried bows and arrows, and also had small packs slung across their backs that holstered a longsax in easy reach. Karl turned to answer Hring’s question:

“Remember the stag with the missing rack Wulfgar brought down last summer? Near the stream with the two forks and the coney dam? Near there.”

“That’s pretty far out toward the edge for the Old Man,” Hring pointed out eagerly. After two days in the woods with everything so simple and basic, so welcoming and beautiful, he was relishing this hunt. “That’s good for us. Give us a better chance if he’s where he doesn’t know so well. See, that’s the problem with hunting him at the Dysablot. He’s always deep in his own territory. Of course no one can get him.”

Karl grunted skeptically. “His den may be in the deep woods but it’s all his territory.”

They walked on in silence. The sun-flecked canopy rustled high above them. A goshawk darted with pinpoint accuracy through the branches of a tall pine. It flushed out a warbler and swooped down. Long talons sank into the screaming warbler’s back and the birds plummeted together to the ground where the larger one instantly began plucking and feeding. Through the trees the men could see two small black bears play-fighting in a quiet stream. They nipped and bit and their open mouths flashed bright pink. The water churned and diamond veils of water trailed from their arms and claws as they boxed.

“I know a thing or two about tracking, Hring,” Karl boasted modestly. “The track of that bear began where he was born and it ends when he dies. In between, I could read every move he makes, every hunt, every meal and nap, whether he’s deep in his own territory or at the door of the keep. But none of it would make any

difference. That bear dies when he's ready to and he'll choose his own hunter to honour."

Hring scoffed, in too good a mood to let history intrude. But Karl was more than half as good a hunter as his reputation made him and he knew this was an unwise hunt.

They walked on through increasing gloom. They were coming to the home of the giant oaks now, the old forest, the original Eikwood. The trees had shaded out the undergrowth and a ribbon of fog twisted through the low-lying spots. A single black walnut tree had lost its leaves very early, as they sometimes do, and loomed like a disgruntled watchman set to keep guard while his companions still drank and gambled.

Karl stood for some moments between two oaks and then gestured to Hring. "It's him," Karl said, speaking quietly. He was quiet in deference to the forest, not to hide from the Old Man's keen hearing. The Old Man already knew they were in the Eikwood. Karl believed he'd have smelled them when they entered the forest. No doubt he could smell what they'd had for breakfast, and supper the night before. "Look at the size of these claw marks. Look how high up they go." The marks, dozens of them, went up twice Hring's height and dug deep gouges into the tree. Karl pointed to a fresh set. "He was here yesterday in the evening and he found himself a little pig to eat." He pointed to a bloodied hollow in the ground with nothing left in it but a couple of gnawed rib-bones and a lonely-looking foot.

They walked on, with Karl checking the trees and the muddy spots that would hold a print, sometimes having to cast back when he lost the signs. The sun was almost down and Hring called an end to the day's hunt. He was pleasantly tired and thoughts of the two

fat pheasants Karl had flushed and killed earlier brought the juices flooding into his mouth.

While Karl made one final cast so they'd know where to start in the morning, Hring sat down on a log near a little pool of muddy water that had collected in a low spot. His eyes rested tranquilly on the ground until his brain suddenly registered what he was seeing — a giant bear print in the wet ground, so fresh that it was only now filling with water and starting to dissolve round the edges.

"Karl!" he called, excited, and the tracker appeared at his side.

"He's playing with us," Karl announced grimly, examining the print. "Having some fun."

"Well, so am I," Hring shot back with a "so don't spoil it" hanging in the air. Karl took the hint and grinned lopsidedly.

"Let's go get him, then!" he said. Hring clapped him on the shoulder and they set off at an easy trot. The dogs followed, keenly snuffing up the scent. Karl kept his eyes to the ground, following the fresh prints. They ran past a dense thicket of chokecherries where Karl could see the Old Man had paused for a snack and up along a high, bare ridge. Karl lost the track on the rocks but thought he picked it up again on lower ground at another marked tree, an ironwood that no other bear could have had the strength to gouge.

"No! Over here!" Hring gestured excitedly and pointed to a fresh track in a bit of moist soil. The track pointed westward, out of the heart of the woods. Karl shook his head.

"No, that's not him. He's been leading us into the woods, not out," and he pointed east to the marked ironwood.

"Of course that's him," Hring argued. "There's no other bear that size."

Karl was annoyed. "That print isn't anywhere near his size." The hounds were also confused, running back and forth between the two traces, not knowing which to trust. "Look, we'd better stop," Karl went on, trying for diplomacy. "It's too late to see anything."

Hring chewed his lip. "You make camp," he ordered impulsively. "I can see that print clear as day. Hai!" he called to the dogs and whistled. Then he set off at a stiff-shouldered jog to the west, leaving an open-jawed Karl to shut his mouth in an angry line and set about savagely gathering firewood.

Hring had no difficulty following the Old Man's track at all. Ahead of him, the last glow of sunset lay low on the forest floor, illuminating the ground and making black holes of the bear's distinctive prints. It was easy to move quietly over the damp litter, and the wind and the forest life masked the sounds he and the pack made. He was sure he must be gaining. His blood ran hotter with every stride.

Then the ground dropped out from beneath his feet and he went tumbling down a brush-choked chimney. A protruding root snagged his bow and wrenched it from his hand as he fell past. At the bottom, he scuttled to his feet through a cloud of dust and flung pebbles, and found himself in a long, narrow gully, face to face with the bear.

It was the Old Man — there could be no mistaking him — standing not six feet away, comfortably at ease in the heart of his kingdom. Hring could feel the hot breath from the Old Man's snout. Even on all fours he was Hring's height and he weighed as much as four thanes in full battle gear. His long neck stretched forward from his shaggy humped shoulders. He peered with shocking intelligence into Hring's stunned face and the man knew in the pit of his belly

that Karl was right — he'd found the Old Man only because the bear wanted him to.

Common sense penetrated Hring's frozen fascination with the Old Man and got his arm swinging round like a stone-shot to whip his sax from its sheath. Though he didn't realize it, Hring actually had a choice at this point. He could have remained as he was and called off his dogs, then bowed in deference to the majesty of the bear and left as he'd come.

Or he could do what he did and set many other things in motion.

The dogs found their way down the gully, baying furiously, haunches digging into the scree. The bear turned and stood to meet them, rising high above them. Hring sprinted forward and drove his sax up through the small, moving gap between the bear's breastbone and ribs, then jumped back. But he felt the tip hit the breastbone at an angle and deflect so the whole blade slid in along the surface of the bone and lodged there. The bear roared and two of the dogs leaped snarling onto his back, trying to lock their jaws into his throat. The Old Man shook them off easily and turned back to Hring.

Still standing on his hind legs, the Old Man opened his mouth. His little eyes disappeared behind the expanse of jaw and dripping fangs, and he made a hideous noise, half grunt, half roar, that made Hring's bowels sink with fear and the hair on his body stand straight up. He vaulted back, reaching for his useless hunting dagger, and waited for the fall of long, chisel-like claws to gore his life out.

To Hring's astonishment, the Old Man dropped to all fours and shook himself, then ran away down the gully. He paused only to cuff the dogs away — they could never hold him in an open space

like this. Hring was still terrified, but jubilant. It must be that he'd dealt a mortal blow after all and the bear was going off to die. At any step, he expected the Old Man to stumble forward and collapse.

He didn't, though. He picked up speed and by the time he'd climbed agilely out of the gully, he was off at a ground-chewing run. With his heart thumping, Hring snatched his crossbow, which had fallen to the ground, and went after the Old Man. He grabbed at scrag to pull himself up the near-vertical incline, while the dogs whimpered and yipped and slid back down to the bottom. The smart ones figured things out soon enough and led what was left of the pack back to climb out the opposite, shallower end. Hring and the bear were gone by this time and the sound of the dogs soon faded in the distance.

The sunlight was completely gone but the Old Woman had already risen and it was easy to follow the thick, glistening blood on the ground. With all that blood loss, Hring kept expecting to hear the crash of the bear's body. Yet though he could hear the bear running through the woods ahead and sometimes catch a glimpse, the Old Man never stopped. The moon was all but full and cast such a dapple of light through the wind-rustling leaves that it was like running through an underwater world. Hring didn't guide his steps with his eyes — he'd quickly have stumbled and fallen over some unseen hazard of root or brush. Instead, he ran by giving himself over to the night and the woods. He ran by the senses that lie buried in the spirit, the ones that connect us like a cord to the living world. He ran like he was part of the forest and the forest let him pass. He jumped over logs fallen lengthwise in his path, easily clearing the clusters of dry roots that sprunged out the end. He ran

through little brooklets and never caught his foot between the slippery stones. He slid down the slopes of ravines and pounded across the ridge-tops and though he never seemed to come closer to the Old Man, he never lost him either.

He burst into a circular clearing with a single oak in the centre and nearly stumbled to his knees in confusion. All trace of the bear was gone — no noisy shadow gliding far ahead, no blood-markings. Hring's head whipped from side to side and his ears strained, standing out from his head like a horse's. His nostrils gaped with the effort to catch the scent of bear and blood. Nothing. It was all gone. The Old Man was gone, as though he'd come to this clearing and taken to the air like a vast hairy bird.

Hring cast about wild-eyed around the perimeter, seeking traces, sifting through the useless sounds and scents that assaulted him. He swore and made whuffing noises of frustration and kicked at the ground. Finally, he subsided into the realization that he had somehow, inexplicably, lost the Old Man. He paced on and on round the ring of foxtail grass and burdock, too furious to stop walking.

Eventually he crumpled to the ground, utterly defeated. He sat with his knees pulled to his chin and his arms around them, facing the oak tree but not seeing it through a veil of tears.

Here in the clearing, the Old Woman shone like a beacon. Hring sighed and blinked his eyes clear, and suddenly noticed that he wasn't alone. In fact, he'd been staring blindly right at her, a woman standing in front of the tree. Watching him. *A charl, sent for a strayed beast and got lost herself*, he figured.

In an instant he'd scrambled to his feet and covered half the distance to the tree.

“Hai! Which way did the bear go?” he demanded.

Then he got a good look at her and stopped in his tracks. This was no charl. She was a tall woman, self-assured and queenly in her stance. Hring kept walking toward her but more cautiously. Her face was white and calm in the light cast by the Old Woman though her eyes were in deep shadow. Her hair was the colour of silvered barley and it was tied back in a single braid. Her robes were also white and as he got closer he could see the curves of her body against the summer-light cloth.

His immediate thought was that she was of the otherworld and he knew that he must be the first to speak or risk enchantment. Or else, with those white robes, she was a seithr — it abruptly occurred to him that this clearing was a nearly perfect ring — and he’d interrupted some magical working of hers, also a potentially dangerous situation that he was ill-prepared for. In either case, she needed to know right from the start that she’d have no power over him.

He stopped again and called roughly: “Hai, lady! Name yourself!”

“You’ll have my name when I have yours, charl!” she called back and a very insulted Hring heard an unwitchlike note of fear in her voice that emboldened him.

“Charl?” he repeated indignantly and strode right up to her, his always-quick temper flaring up. “I’m no charl, can’t you see? I’m a hunter and a jarl. I’m the sister-son of a king and I’ll have your name!”

Now he could see that she was young and he could see her eyes. Doubtless they were blue by day but the moon had turned them clear so they seemed colourless depths shining with some

inner light. Their otherworldliness cooled his anger and revived his caution.

“Are you the *living* son of a king?” she retorted suspiciously.

He felt reassured again. She was as wary of him as he was of her. She was a living mortal like him. The strange eyes had resolved themselves to deep silver-blue with very clear whites and long lashes. Her skin was smooth and perfect. And if she was a seithr, she was giving no signs of displeasure. He held his hands open before him. “Hring Haraldson, Beowulf’s sister-son and heir.”

Her body relaxed and her hands, which she’d been holding tightly clasped, fell to her sides. “My name is Caerlinh.”

Questions bubbled to his lips: “Which way did you come? Did you see the bear? Did you hear it? How long have you been here?”

She looked confused. “Bear?” She was looking at his face but her eyes weren’t focused on him.

“You’re blind,” he blurted out, then tried to cover his awkwardness even more awkwardly: “So then you didn’t see the bear. Well, no, you didn’t. Didn’t you hear him?” he finished desperately.

“I’m not blind,” she answered coolly and he felt even more of an oaf. “I just don’t see well. Or far — just to the edge of the trees. No, I heard nothing I’d know to be a bear. You were hunting it?”

“Who *are* you?” he demanded. “What are you doing here in the middle of the night? Are you a seithr?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Not a seithr.”

“You’re dressed in white. I thought you might be a seithr.”

She shook her head again. She folded her arms across her chest as if cold. “I’m in mourning for my mother. She died last month. That’s why my father wants to marry me away so he can

marry again and not have me around to fight him over it.” Her brow creased, forming two vertical lines above her nose, which was just slightly too large and long. Which only added to her beauty.

“You’re with your father? Where is he?” He whirled around, expecting more people to surprise him by suddenly being there. But there was no one.

“I *was* with him. Living with him. He sent me away with a hired pactmaker and my bride money in two bags. To parley for a husband in Wedermark. You can probably guess the end of the tale,” she finished bitterly.

“The pactmaker left you here and took the bride money.”

She nodded and bit her bottom lip and hugged her elbows tighter to her sides. He couldn’t help noticing how that pushed her generous breasts a little higher. “He was a kind-hearted fellow from a stedding in just the next valley,” she continued woefully. “That’s why we trusted him. I don’t understand why he’d do this. And then go back home? Or just leave everything he’s always known and start a new life?”

Hring snorted at the trustful folly of women. “Well, maybe your father isn’t too picky about how he solves his problems. Maybe his new bride has a daughter of her own she’s talked him into favouring. Maybe your kind-hearted friend only keeps half the money and returns the rest when he gets back home.”

There was a certain unreality about the whole conversation that troubled Hring but somehow captivated him. The moon, that oldest of women, was like a third character in this tale, a presence so strong it weighed on him. The questions he should have been asking right now eluded him.

Instead, Hring started feeling protective.

He became aware of her scent drifting across the little space between them. Bitter and rich like old oak but with a sweet undercurrent. She had everything he liked in a woman's body. Large breasts to fill his hands and broad, full hips to welcome his thrust and give him back stroke for stroke. Her voice was more beautiful to his ears than the most resonant harp he'd ever heard in his over-skalded life. Hring started feeling more than protective.

"I could tell you were a son of a king right away, you know," she said quietly, lowering her eyes a little. Hring drifted closer. "From your voice. I'm sorry I called you a charl." She glanced back up and this time met his eyes straight on. His chest swelled. He'd never yet mistaken *that* particular look, blind or no. She was close enough for him to touch her arm and he did, running his fingers up to her shoulder. For answer, she dipped her cheek to graze him with her lips. He moved in and grasped her upper arms, feeling her round muscles through the soft weave of her robe. He pulled the cloth away from her shoulder and bent his head to kiss it. He ran his tongue toward her neck. The sweet-bitter taste and smell of her were intoxicating; he felt the sensation rush to his head and down to his groin, and his mouth closed down hard on her strong, throbbing throat.

Then he caressed the spot while he ran his mouth upward to join hers. She lifted her hands to his shoulders and one slid to finger his ear while the other moved down his back. He kneaded her breast and he felt the hard point leap up against his circling fingers. His prick hung hot and heavy in his breeches and then pushed against

the tight leather, and again, and he groaned a little when her hand cupped him.

The layers of clothing between them chafed and he reached down to hike her robe over her head. He swung the cloth round so it billowed through the air and spread out into a blanket on the ground. He turned back to her and quickly closed the distance between them and then she was helping him tear away his own clothes.

They were both naked on the makeshift blanket and he was hanging suspended over her, her legs spread wide as an apple blossom. The tip of his shaft brushed her, straining to bury itself. She reached down and circled him at the base. He shuddered and thrust down. Suddenly, she was out from under him and had flipped him onto his back and was stretched above him. He stared up, astonished by her strength and speed.

“Wait,” she chided him, baring strong white teeth and she pinned his wrists to the ground. And though he knew she shouldn’t have been able to do that, he was powerless to do anything but wait for her next touch. No woman had ever had this effect on him. Women were supposed to lie where they belonged until he finished with them and that’s pretty much what they’d always done. He closed his eyes and his breath came in tight gasps when she ran her tongue down the hard muscles of his chest and stomach and then into the soft crease of his thighs. She opened his legs with fingers that spread fire where they passed and started to pleasure him with her lips and teeth and tongue. He dug his fingers into the ground to keep himself from yanking her head up and flinging her over so he could bury himself in her, fought that nearly overwhelming urge because it would mean an end to this unbelievable sensation. It

poured through his body in waves. And just when he could stand it no longer, when he could go no higher without coming, she shifted her mouth and her hands and started again in another spot, adding a whole new dimension of pleasure. In the far distance someone was moaning and he didn't realize it was him until she shifted again and he came back to himself for a second. His eyes popped open and he saw the Old Woman above him, blotting out the stars and gazing coolly down on his passion. Then he sank back until he absolutely could not bear it any longer.

"No *more*, woman!" he roared and flung her off of him and onto her back. Her legs spun open with the force and then he was inside them, inside her. She rode with him in perfect rhythm with his strokes, slamming him in more deeply to her and then nearly tearing herself away, pulling him right out to the edge before closing him in again. Somehow always controlling their speed and depth so that he couldn't stay long enough at the peak to explode from it. "Oh-h-h-h, come *on*, bitch!" he groaned into her ear. For answer, she licked wickedly at his ear and sent shudders down his spine to add to the electric spasms of need already torturing him.

Then she was on top of him again, riding him fully. His fingers dug into her hard buttocks, trying to control her so he could orgasm into her. But she kept moving and kept him moving, her muscles tightening and loosening around him with maddening perfection.

At last he forced her still and ground his hips into hers, and felt the light and heat of release gather at the root of his spine. He held his breath to relish the endless second when the rush outward begins.

Only something happened to the tight bands of muscle sheathing him. They softened abruptly, losing pressure as though turned to mushrooms. His hands on her buttocks sank in deeply and he reflexively jerked them back. His eyes sprang open and he saw her vanishing, now turning to something like mallow, sticky and cloying around him, touching his skin, encasing him. He screamed and jerked himself away from her. He scabbled back on the grass, dragging the disintegrating robe back with him so that his scuttling legs got snagged in the mess and he collapsed back with a terrified yip. He stared in frozen disbelief as the extraordinary young woman who'd just been banging his brains out turned to thick white mist and dissolved backwards in the direction of the tree.

Leaving him in agony. He realized with shock and disgust that this nightmare exit hadn't served to kill his passion. If anything, it had made him harder. He threw his head back and bayed to the moon as long and hard as any wolf. He sank to his knees and tried desperately to relieve himself but all he could achieve was a pathetic little release that left him flaccid, clammy and unfulfilled.

Tears and snot streamed down his face as he gathered up his things and put his clothes back on. Every trace of her was gone. Not even a fugitive whiff of her peculiar, wonderful scent on the breeze. She'd disappeared as completely as the bear.

"I've been witched!" he raged. "Who's done this to me? Why did you do this to me?"

Skuld Dysakona stepped out from behind the oak tree.

"You!" He bore down on her with his dagger drawn. "I'll kill you for this!"

Her face remained calm and composed but the nine hands girdling her waist set up such a racket that he dropped the knife and clasped his hands over his ears to shut it out.

“Yes, you’ve been witched, you idiot, and you don’t even know how far. From this moment on, you’ll know no peace from a woman. Or from yourself either,” she added contemptuously and he coloured as he realized she’d been watching from the shadows. “Every day your thoughts will be full of Caerlinh.” He gasped as just the mention of that name sent a rush upward through his groin. “You see?” She smiled at his discomfort. “At night, if you’ve been a good lad and done my work well, she’ll come to you in your dreams and ride you until you’re satisfied. You’ll beg her to stop and she’ll leave you to your sweet sleep. And if you *don’t* do my work well, she won’t come to you, and then” She shrugged.

“There are other women,” he said defiantly.

“Yes, but not for you, not any more. They won’t satisfy you and you certainly won’t satisfy them. I guarantee it.”

“Where is she?” he shouted. “Bring her back here! Do you understand me? Bring her back here!” His hot spittle sprayed her face and she twisted away in disgust.

Desperately, he tried pleading. “Why are you doing this to me? What kind of a mother are you?”

“The Old Man wanted to test you. See what the heir to the keep is made of. I think he’s got his answer. Convenient, because I wanted to test you too to see whether I can use you in the times to come.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of shite is this? She told me she wasn’t of the otherworld. She told me she wasn’t a seithr. And she was both! Look what she’s done to me!”

“She told you the truth,” Skuld said flatly. “You can trust me on that.”

Hring laughed hysterically at the offer.

“Pull yourself together,” she snapped. “You’re still twitching.”

“You forced me out here! You made all this happen! You *bitch!*” He spat.

She wasn’t impressed. “I tried to get you out here, yes, and snared you like a pigeon for pie. But you decided to do it and you chose the time. It was stupid of you, now you come to think of it, hunting at the full moon when all seith is at its strongest. I just made use of it. Like the Old Man did.”

“And Caerlinh?” he asked with a catch in his throat. He couldn’t bear to think that she’d been testing him too, that she’d been as coldly detached in her lovemaking as his monster of a mother was in thralling him.

Skuld understood exactly what he was asking. “Ah, well, that’s going to have to be part of your fascination with her, my son. Wondering how she feels about having your proud young cock inside her.” He groaned at the image and his hand twitched. She sighed. “Can’t you figure even simple things out? Just like your father. You’d better get going now,” she ordered in a voice that brought his attention back. “This isn’t the best place for a man in your condition. Go back and find your friend.” She pointed with her chin. “It’s not as far as you think.”

He turned away with stiff legs and shoulders bowed, like a beast-man whipped from his food.

He couldn't care less if he found Karl or wandered 'till he died in the Eikwood. So he wandered until he collapsed and slept dreamlessly. In the morning, he and Karl blew their hunting horns until they found each other. Karl looked sharply at him, at his hollowed eyes and hunched back, but Hring would answer no questions. He walked, and later rode, in sullen silence all the way back to Keephold.

Karl felt complacent and completely vindicated. Obviously Hring had spent a useless night chasing some old black bear sow and didn't want to admit it.

No problem — Karl was feeling generous now that he'd been proved right. He knew a pair of sisters, newly arrived to the keep's kitchens. They'd set his prince's mood straight.



