

Synopsis of Summer Forest

Summer, 7000 years ago. Alja, a young girl, is part of a clan of hunter-gatherers that has set up camp along the river bank. She has only just been named a hunter in a night time ceremony of fire and dance. The next morning she wakes from a terrible vision of blood, arrows and dark men.

Just as Alja is about to step into the river for to bathe, she is startled by a strange boy splashing around in the water nearby. He is dark-haired and his eyes are black. Although Alja is scared at first, when he notices her she is too curious to run away. They each speak a different language, but decide to stay and share a meal.

The boy's name is Erkin. He is not a hunter-gatherer, but lives in a farming village on the high grounds on the other side of the river. Erkin is eager to tell the others about his encounter, but no one will listen, until one day strange people are seen hiding among the trees at the forest's edge. After much debate, the village council decides Erkin must make contact with the river girl again, to find out what she and her people want.

Alja has told the clan about Erkin already. The Elder, the clan's leader and healer, forbids an attack and proposes one of the clan must go and live with these strange people. Alja thinks of Erkin and volunteers. The two groups meet on the river bank. But to both Alja's and Erkin's dismay, the village chief sends Erkin to the other side as well, to make it a fair exchange.

Erkin feels clumsy and self-conscious in the presence of the clanspeople, and only the Elder seems to take trouble to put him at ease. He is surprised to find these forest people do not live in houses and do not have cattle or fields.

Alja is awed by the monumental houses and the open space in the village. She cannot understand why people need such big huts when you can perfectly sleep in the open air or in a tent made of hides. And why do the animals stay so near to the people? Don't they know that they are food?

They both have their difficulties. Alja is stubborn and wants to hold on to her way of life. It takes patient teachers, tentative friendships, a hungry old wolf and an arrow in the shoulder to make her let go of her prejudices. Erkin struggles with his identity. Should he take Alja's place as a hunter like the clan expects him to? He has no talent for it. But a gift from a clansman steers him onto a different path.

When the villagers are startled by a night time visit of a group of six proud young hunters, things get complicated fast. Both Erkin and Alja fly back and forth to keep the fragile peace, but they are torn between their loyalty to their families, the people they have come to understand and themselves. They are forced to watch their people fight, get injured, die... But when his son is killed by his own people in the heat of battle, the heartbroken village chief makes the fighting stop.

Both sides count their losses and nurse their wounded. Alja discovers the true reason the villagers attacked the forest camp. When she tells the Elder, he wastes no time in punishing the young hunters who have so ruthlessly endangered their clan. They are marked and banished, forced to wander the land alone.

Erkin is silently taken on as an apprentice by the Elder. Although Erkin feels this is his place, he realizes he is not of the clan and his insecurity grows. But when the Elder tries to push him away for his own good, he resolves to stay where he knows he belongs.

Alja decides to live in the village for the remaining days of summer. As autumn approaches, she knows she should return to the clan and hunt for them. But she feels restless, longing for knowledge of strange lands and new people instead. When a stranger from the north asks her to go with him to his homeland, she is in terrible doubt. The Elder explains to her that explorers are needed now, not to find good campsites and hunting grounds like before, but to learn about the new people and help other clans understand them. It is only then that Alja accepts her feelings.

Before the clan travels to the winter grounds, they say their goodbyes to the villagers. Erkin will go with the clan, and become their next Elder. Alja leaves with the northman. As she walks away from the village, she looks back one last time. And then she lets the grey shadows of the trees absorb her.