Torak’s fingers were shaking so much that he couldn’t get the stopper off his medicine horn.

Why had he left this to the last moment? Now Wolf was padding restlessly up and down outside the shelter, and the Ravens were waiting to see him off, and he still couldn’t get the stopper off the-

‘Want some help?’ said Renn from the doorway. Her face was pale, her eyes shadowed.

Torak passed her the medicine horn, and she yanked out the black oak stopper with her teeth. ‘What’s this for?’ she asked, handing it back.

‘Death Marks,’ he said, not looking at her.
She gasped. ‘Like the man on the ice river?’

He nodded.

‘But he knew he was going to die. You might survive –’

‘You don’t know that. I don’t want to risk my souls getting separated. I don’t want to risk becoming a demon.’

She stooped to stroke Wolf’s ears. ‘You’re right.’

Torak glanced past her into the clearing, where the dark-blue dawn was breaking. During the night, clouds had rolled down from the Mountains, covering the Forest in thick snow. He wondered if that would help or hinder him.

He tipped some red ochre onto his palm, and spat on it. But his mouth was too dry, and he couldn’t make a paste.

Renn leaned over and spat into his palm. Then she scooped up some snow, warmed it in her hands, and added that.

‘Thanks,’ he muttered. Shakily, he daubed circles on his heels, breastbone and forehead. As
he finished the one on his forehead, he shut his eyes. The last time he’d done this had been for Fa.

Wolf pressed against him, rubbing his scent into the new leggings. He put his paw on Torak’s forearm. I’m with you.

Torak bent and nosed his muzzle. I know.

‘Here,’ said Renn, holding out the ravenskin pouch. ‘I added more wormwood, and checked with Saeunn. The masking charm should work. The bear won’t sense the Nanuak.’

Torak tied the pouch to his belt. Already, he could feel the Death Marks stiffening on his skin.

‘You’d better take this, too.’ Renn was holding out a little bundle wrapped in birch bast.

‘What is it?’

She looked startled. ‘What you asked for. What I sat up most of the night making.’

He was appalled. He’d almost forgotten. If he’d left without it, what would have become of his plan?

‘I’ve put in some purifying herbs as well,’ said Renn.

‘Why?’

‘Well. If – if you kill the bear, you’ll be unclean. I mean, it’s still a bear, still another hunter, even if there is a demon inside. You’ll need to purify yourself.’

How like Renn to think ahead. How reassuring that she thought he had a chance.

Wolf gave an impatient whine, and Torak took a deep breath. Time to go.

As they started across the clearing, Torak remembered the medicine horn left behind in the shelter, and ran back for it. As he came out, opening his medicine pouch with trembling fingers, the horn slipped from his grasp.

It was Fin-Kedinn who picked it up.

The Raven Leader was on crutches. As he studied the medicine horn in his hand, the blood drained from his face. ‘This was your mother’s,’ he said.

Torak blinked. ‘How did you know?’

Fin-Kedinn was silent. He handed it back. ‘Don’t ever lose it.’

Torak stowed the horn in his pouch. That seemed an odd thing to say, given where he was headed. As he was turning to go, Fin-Kedinn called him back. ‘Torak –’

‘Yes?’

‘If you survive, there’s a place for you here with us. If you want it.’

Torak was too surprised to speak. By the time he’d recovered, the Raven Leader was moving away, his face as unyielding as ever.

The High Mountains were rimmed with gold as Torak crunched through the snow towards the Ravens. Oslak handed him his sleeping-sack and waterskin, Renn his axe, quiver and bow. Surprisingly, Hord helped him on with his pack. He looked haggard, but seemed to have accepted that he wasn’t the one who would be seeking the Mountain.

Saeunn made the sign of the hand over Torak, and then over Wolf. ‘May the guardian fly with you both.’
'And run with you, too,' said Renn, trying to smile. Torak gave her a brief nod. He just wanted to be gone. The Ravens watched in silence as he started through the snow, with Wolf trotting in his tracks. He did not look back.

The Forest was hushed, but as Wolf took the lead, he seemed eager and unafraid. Torak plodded behind him, his breath steaming. It was very cold, but thanks to Vedna, he didn’t feel it. While he was sleeping, she’d left the new things in his shelter. An under-jerkin of duckskin with the breast feathers soft against the skin; a hooded parka and leggings of warm winter reindeer hide; hare fur mittens on a thong threaded through the sleeves; and his old boots, deftly patched with tough reindeer shin-hide, lined with pine marten fur, and with bands of dogfish skin sewn to the outer soles to improve the grip. Vedna had even unpicked his clan skin from his old jerkin, and sewn it to the parka. The band of wolf fur was tattered and filthy, but very precious. It had been prepared by Fá.

Wolf swerved to investigate something, and Torak was instantly alert. A squirrel’s tracks: tiny and hand-like. Torak followed the trail as it hopped along between snow-covered juniper bushes, then broke into long, startled leaps and disappeared up a pine tree.

Torak threw back his hood and stared about him.

The Forest was utterly still. Whatever had frightened the squirrel had gone. But Torak was angry with himself. He should have spotted those tracks, too. Stay alert.

A jay followed them from tree to tree as they pushed on. The sun rose in a cloudless sky. Soon Torak was panting as he laboured knee-deep in dazzling new snow. He’d decided against snowshoes: they’d make walking easier, but slow him down if he had to move fast.

Wolf fared better, as his narrow chest cut the snow like a canoe slicing water. By mid-morning, though, even he was tiring. The land was climbing steadily, as Krukoslik had said it would. ‘My grandfather once got close to the Mountain,’ he’d explained when Torak had woken him in the night. ‘So close that he could feel it. From here, you follow the stream north, and the land climbs till you’re in the shadow of the High Mountains. Around midday, you reach a lightning-struck spruce at the mouth of a ravine. The ravine is steep: too steep to climb. But there’s a trail that clings to its western side—’

‘What kind of trail?’ Torak had asked. ‘Who made it?’

‘Nobody knows. Just take it. That lightning tree – it has power to protect. It guards the trail from evil. Maybe it will protect you, too.’

‘What then? Where do I go then?’
Krukoslik had spread his hands. ‘You follow the trail. Somewhere, at the end of the ravine, lies the Mountain.’

‘How far?’

‘Nobody knows. My grandfather didn’t get far before the Spirit stopped him. The Spirit always stops them. Maybe – maybe you will be different.’

Maybe, thought Torak, trudging through the snow.

If his plan worked – if the World Spirit answered his plea – the bear would be destroyed and the Forest would survive. If not, there would be no second chances. For him or the Forest.

In front of him, Wolf raised his head and sniffed. His hackles were up. What had he sensed?

A few paces on, Torak noticed that the snow had been brushed off the tips of the branches at about shoulder height. Then he found a juniper sapling with several twigs raggedly bitten off. ‘Red deer,’ he murmured.

A jumble of tracks confirmed it. By the look of them it was a single deer, probably a buck: they don’t pick up their feet as high as hinds do, and Torak saw drag marks in the snow.

But if it was only a deer, why were Wolf’s hackles up?

Torak looked round. He could feel the Forest holding its breath.

The bear tracks leapt out at him from the snow.

He hadn’t seen them before because they were so widely spaced, but now he made out the signs of the buck’s panicky leap down the slope below, with the bear tracks racing after it. The length of stride was horrifying.

Struggling for calm, Torak forced himself to study the trail. The bear had been going at a gallop, as the pattern of prints was reversed, with the man-shaped hind tracks in front of the broader front tracks. Each one was three times the size of his own head.

They’re fresh, he thought, but the edges are slightly rounding over. Although in this sun that wouldn’t take long . . .

Wolf jumped over the tracks, keen to press on.

Torak followed more slowly. Every bush and boulder took on bear form.

As they toiled up the slope, Wolf became more and more excited: bounding ahead, then doubling back for Torak and urging him on with little grunt-whines. Perhaps at last they were nearing the Mountain. Perhaps that was why Wolf was eager rather than frightened. Torak wished he could share that eagerness, but all he could feel was the weight of the Nanuak at his belt, and the menace of the bear.

A distant roar split the Forest.

The jay gave a squawk and flew away.

Torak gripped the hilt of his knife so hard that it hurt. How close? Where was it? He couldn’t tell.

Wolf was waiting for him to catch up: hackles raised, but tail held high. His meaning was clear. Not yet.
As Torak waded through the snow, he wondered what had happened to the bear's own souls. After all, as Renn had said, it was still a bear; once it must have hunted salmon and browsed on berries, and slumbered through the winter. Were its souls still inside its body, with the demon? Trapped, terrified?

He rounded a boulder – and there was the lightning-struck spruce.

His spirits quailed.

Above him, the High Mountains swept skywards, blindingly white. The ravine cut through them like a knife-slash. On and on it wound into the Mountains, its end lost in impenetrable cloud. A narrow trail clung to its western side, snaking up from where Torak stood. Who had made the trail? For what purpose? Who would dare set foot on it, and venture into that haunted place?

Suddenly, the clouds at the end of the ravine parted, and Torak saw what lay beyond. Storm clouds writhed about its flanks; a deep, windless cold flowed from its summit; unimaginably high, it pierced the sky: the Mountain of the World Spirit.

Torak shut his eyes, but he could still feel the power of the Spirit forcing him to his knees. He could feel its anger. The Soul-Eaters had conjured a demon from the Otherworld; they had loosed a monster on the Forest. They had broken the pact. Why should the Spirit help the clans, when some among them had been so wicked?

Torak bowed his head. He couldn't go on.

He didn't belong here. This was the haunt of spirits, not of men.

When he opened his eyes, the Mountain was gone, once more shrouded in clouds.

Torak sat back on his heels. I can't do it, he thought. I can't go up there.

Wolf sat in front of him, his tear-shaped eyes as pure as water. Yes you can. I'm with you.

Torak shook his head.

Wolf gazed steadily back at him.

Torak thought of Renn and Finn-Kedinn and the Ravens, and of all the other clans that he didn't even know about. He thought of the countless lives in the Forest. He thought of Fa: not Fa as he lay dying in the wreck of their shelter, but Fa as he'd been just before the bear attacked: laughing at the joke Torak had made.

Grief rose in his chest. He drew his knife from its sheath, and slipped off his mitten to lay his hand on the cold blue slate. 'You can't stop now,' he said out loud. 'You swore an oath. To Fa.'

He unslung his quiver and bow and laid them against the tree. Then he did the same with his pack, his sleeping-sack, waterskin and axe. He wouldn't need them; just his knife, the Nanuak in the ravenskin pouch, and Renn's little birch-bast bundle in his medicine pouch.

With a last glance at the Forest, he followed Wolf up the trail.