The red eye was rising. Torak had only a few days to find the Mountain.

3) Torak was astonished. Why was he howling to a strange pack? Lone wolves don’t do that. They try to avoid strange wolves.

With a whine, he asked Wolf to come to him – but Wolf stayed where he was: eyes slit, black lips curled over his teeth as he poured out his song. Torak noticed that he was looking much less puppyish. His legs were longer, and he was growing a mantle of thick black fur around his shoulders. Even his howl was losing its cub-like wobble.

‘What’s he telling them?’ asked Renn.

‘Torak swallowed. ‘He’s telling them where he is.’

‘And what are they saying?’

Torak listened, never taking his eyes off Wolf. They’re talking to two of their pack: scouts who’ve gone down onto the fells to seek reindeer. It sounds—,’ he paused. ‘Yes, they’ve found a small herd. The scouts are telling the others where it is, and that they should howl with their muzzles in the snow.’

‘Why? What for?’

‘It’s a trick wolves do sometimes, so the reindeer think they’re further away than they really are.’

Renn looked uneasy. ‘You can tell all that?’

He shrugged.

She dug at the snow with her heel. ‘I don’t like it when you talk wolf. It feels strange.’

‘I don’t like it when Wolf talks to other wolves,’ said Torak. ‘That feels strange, too.’

Renn asked him what he meant, but he didn’t reply. It was too painful to put into words.

4) Even if he found it, what then? What did he actually have to do with the Nanuaq? How would he ever destroy the bear?

Renn crunched through the snow to stand beside him. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘We’ve got to get off the ice river, back to the Forest.’

At that moment, Wolf gave a start, and ran to the top of a snow ridge, turning his ears towards the foothills.

‘What is it?’ whispered Renn. ‘What’s he heard?’

Then Torak heard it too: voices far away in the Mountains, weaving together in the wild, ever-changing song of the wolf pack.

Wolf flung back his head, pointed his muzzle to the sky, and howled. *I’m here! I’m here!*
5) He was beginning to realise that although he knew wolf talk, he was not, and never would be, truly wolf. In some ways, he would always be apart from the cub.

Wolf stopped howling, and trotted down from the ridge. Torak knelt and put his arm around him. He felt the fine light bones beneath the dense winter fur; the fierce beat of a loyal heart. As he bent to take in the cub’s sweet-grass scent, Wolf licked his cheek, then gently pressed his forehead against Torak’s own.

Torak shut his eyes tight. Never leave me, he wanted to tell Wolf. But he didn’t know how to say it.

6) They started north.

It was an exhausting trudge. The storm had packed the snow into frozen ridges, with thigh-deep troughs in between. Mindful of ice holes, they prodded the snow in front of them with arrows, which slowed them down even more. Always they felt the Mountains watching them, waiting to see if they would fail.

By noon they’d made little progress, and were still within sight of the snow cave. Then they encountered a new obstacle: a wall of ice. It was too steep to climb, and too hard to cut through. Another of the ice river’s savage jokes.

Renn said she’d investigate while Torak waited with the cub. He was glad of the rest: the ravenskin pouch was weighing him down. ‘Watch out for ice holes,’ he warned, watching

7) anxiously as she peered into a crack between two of the tallest fangs of ice.

‘It looks as if there might be a way through,’ she called. Unslinging her pack, she squeezed in, then disappeared.

Torak was about to go after her when she stuck out her head. ‘Oh Torak, come and see! We’ve done it! We’ve done it!’

Wolf leapt after her. Torak took off his pack and followed them in. He hated edging through the crack – it reminded him of the cave – but when he got to the other side, he gasped.

He was looking down at a torrent of jumbled ice like a frozen waterfall. Below it stretched a long slope of snowy boulders, and beyond that, scarcely a pebble’s throw away, and shimmering in its white winter mantle, lay the

8) Forest.

‘I never thought I’d see it again,’ said Renn fervently.

Wolf raised his muzzle to catch the smells, then glanced back at Torak and wagged his tail.

Torak couldn’t speak. He hadn’t known how much it had hurt – actually hurt – to be out of the Forest. They’d only spent three nights away, but it felt like moons.

By mid-afternoon, they’d clambered off the last ice ridge and started zigzagging down the slope. The shadows were turning violet. Pine trees beckoned with snow-heavy boughs. It was a huge relief to get in among them, out of sight of the Mountains. But the stillness was unnerving.

‘It can’t be the bear,’ whispered Renn.
There was no sign of it on the ice river. And if it had gone round by the valleys, it would’ve taken days.’

Torak glanced at Wolf. His ears were back, but his hackles were down. ‘I don’t think it’s close,’ he said. ‘But it isn’t far, either.’

‘Look at this,’ said Renn, pointing at the snow beneath a juniper tree. ‘Bird tracks.’

Torak stooped to examine them. ‘A raven. Walking, not hopping. That means it wasn’t frightened. And there was a squirrel here, too.’ He pointed to a scattering of cones at the base of a pine tree, each one gnawed to the core like an apple. ‘And hare tracks. Quite fresh. I can still see some fur marks.’

‘If they’re fresh, that’s a good sign,’ said Renn.

‘Mm.’ Torak peered into the gloom. ‘But that isn’t.’

The auroch lay on his side like a great brown boulder. In life he’d stood taller than the tallest man, and the span of his gleaming black horns had been almost as wide. But the bear had slashed open his belly, leaving him in a churned-up mess of crimson snow.

Torak gazed down at the great ruined beast, and felt a surge of anger. Despite their size, aurochs are gentle creatures who only use their horns to fight for mates, or defend their young. This blunt-nosed bull had not deserved such a brutal death.

His carcass hadn’t even fed the other creatures of the Forest. No foxes or pine martens had gone near it; no ravens had feasted here. Nothing would touch the prey of the bear.

‘Uff,’ said Wolf, running about in circles with his hackles up.

*Stay back*, warned Torak. The light was fading, but he could still make out the bear tracks, and he didn’t want Wolf touching them.

‘It doesn’t look like a fresh kill,’ said Renn. ‘That’s something, isn’t it?’

Torak studied the carcass, careful to avoid touching the tracks. He prodded it with a stick, then nodded. ‘Frozen solid. A day or so at least.’

Behind him, Wolf growled.

Torak wondered why he was so agitated, when the kill wasn’t fresh.

‘Somehow,’ said Renn, ‘I thought we’d be safer now that we’re back in the Forest. I thought —’

But Torak never found out what she thought. Suddenly the snow beneath the trees erupted, and several tall, white-clad figures surrounded them.

Too late, Torak realised that Wolf had not been growling at the auroch – but at these silent assailants. *Look behind you, Torak.* He’d forgotten. Again.

Drawing his knife in one hand and his axe in the other, he edged towards Renn, who’d already nocked an arrow to her bow. Wolf sped into the shadows. Back to back, Torak and Renn faced a bristling circle of arrows.

The tallest of the white-clad figures stepped forward and threw back his hood. In the dusk, his dark-red hair looked almost black. ‘Got you at last,’ said Hord.