FIVE

It was nearly dark when Torak woke up. He’d slept all day.

3) instead he pulled on his boots and went to check the traps.

The fish-hooks were empty except for one, which held the bones of a small fish, neatly nipped clean. He was luckier with the snares. One held a wood grouse, struggling feebly. Meat.

Muttering a quick thank you to the bird’s spirit, Torak snapped its neck, slit its belly and gulped the warm liver down raw. It tasted bitter and slimy, but he was too famished to care.

Feeling slightly steadier, he tied the bird to his belt, and went to check the deadfall.

To his relief, it contained no dead cub. The cub was sitting by its mother, prodding her stinking carcass with one paw. At Torak’s approach, it started towards him, then looked back at the she-wolf, yipping indignantly. It

onto its back, baring its pale fluffy belly, and gave him a silent grin of apology. Then it scampered off to a safe distance, head politely lowered.

Torak nodded, satisfied. The cub had to learn that he was the lead wolf, or there’d be endless trouble in the future.

What future? he thought with a scowl. His future didn’t include the cub.

The smell of roast meat drove all other thoughts away. Fat sizzled on the fire. His mouth watered. Quickly, he twisted one leg off the wood grouse and tucked it into the fork of a birch tree as an offering for his clan guardian; then he settled down to eat.

It was the best thing he’d ever tasted. He sucked every shred of meat and fat off the

bones, and crunched up every morsel of crisp, salty skin. He forced himself to ignore the great amber eyes that watched every bite.

When he’d finished, he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. The cub followed every move.

Torak blew out a long breath. ‘Oh, all right,’ he muttered. He tore the remaining foot off the carcass and tossed it over.

The cub crunched it up in moments. Then it looked at Torak hopefully.

‘I haven’t got any more,’ he told it.

The cub yipped impatiently and glanced at the carcass in his hands.

He’d picked the bones clean, but they’d still make needles, fish-hooks and broth; although without a cooking-skin, he couldn’t make any

He felt weak and ragingly thirsty, but his wound was cooler and much less sore. The fever was gone.

So was the cub.

Torak was surprised to find himself wondering if it was all right. Why should he care? The cub was nothing to him.

He stumbled to the river and drank, then woke the slumbering fire with more wood. The effort left him trembling. He rested, and ate the last pignut and some sorrel leaves he’d found by the riverbank. They were tough and very sour, but strengthening.

Still the cub didn’t come.

He thought about trying to summon it with a howl. But if it came, it would only ask for food. Besides, howling might attract the bear. So

wanted Torak to sort things out.

Torak sighed. How could he explain about death when he didn’t understand it himself?

‘Come on,’ he said, not bothering to speak wolf.

The cub’s large ears swivelled to catch the sound.

‘There’s nothing here,’ Torak said impatiently. ‘Let’s go.’

Back at the shelter, he plucked and spit the wood grouse, and set it to roast over the fire. The cub lunged for it.

Torak grabbed the cub’s muzzle and slammed it to the ground. No! he growled. It’s mine!

The cub lay obediently still, thumping its tail. When Torak released its muzzle, it rolled

4)
broth.

Sensing that he might be storing up trouble for himself, he tossed half the carcass to the cub.

The cub demolished it in its powerful jaws, then curled up and went instantly to sleep: a gently heaving ball of hot grey fur.

Torak wanted to sleep too, but he knew that he couldn’t. As night fell and the cold came on, he sat staring into the fire. Now that he’d shaken off the fever and eaten some meat, he could think clearly at last.

He thought of the glade of dead horses, and the bear’s demon-haunted eyes. *It is possessed*, Fa had said. *Some demon has entered it and made it evil.*

But what actually is a demon? Torak wondered. He didn’t know. He only knew that and snow and prey - about that, Torak knew least of all. Until now he’d never even thought about it. It was too remote: an unimaginably powerful spirit who lived far away on its Mountain; a spirit whom no-one had ever seen, but who was said to walk by summer as a man with the antlers of a deer, and by winter as a woman with bare red willow branches for hair.

Torak bowed his head to his knees. The weight of his oath to Fa pressed down on him like a rock.

Suddenly, the cub sprang up with a tense grunt.

Torak leapt to his feet.

The cub’s eyes were fixed on the darkness: ears rigid, hackles raised. Then it hurled out of the fireplace and disappeared.

demons hate all living things, and sometimes escape from the Otherworld, rising out of the ground to cause sickness and havoc.

As he thought about this, he realised that although he knew quite a lot about hunters and prey: about lynxes and wolverines, aurochs and horses and deer, he knew very little about the other creatures of the Forest.

He only knew that clan guardians watch over campsites, and that ghosts moan in leafless trees on stormy nights, forever seeking the clans they have lost. He knew that the Hidden People live inside rocks and rivers, just as the clans live in shelters, and that they seem beautiful until they turn their backs, which are hollow as rotten trees.

As for the World Spirit who sends the rain

Torak stood very still with his hand on Fa’s knife. He felt the trees watching him. He heard them whispering to each other.

Somewhere not far off, a robin began to sing its plaintive night song. The cub reappeared: hackles down, muzzle soft and smiling slightly.

Torak relaxed his grip on the knife. Whatever was out there had either gone, or wasn’t a threat. If the bear had been close, that robin wouldn’t be singing. He knew that much.

He sat down again.

You’ve got to find the Mountain of the World Spirit within the next moon, he told himself. That’s what Fa said. *When the red eye is highest . . . that’s when demons are strongest. You know this.*
Yes I do know it, thought Torak. I know about the red eye. I've seen it.

Every autumn, the great bull Auroch - the most powerful demon in the Otherworld - escapes into the night sky. At first he has his head down, pawing the earth, so that only the starry gleam of his shoulder can be seen. But as winter comes on, he rises and grows stronger. That's when you see his glittering horns and his bloodshot red eye. The red star of winter.

And in the Moon of Red Willow he rides highest, and evil is strongest. That's when the demons walk. That's when the bear will be invincible.

Glancing up through the branches, Torak saw the cold glint of stars. On the eastern horizon, just above the distant blackness of the High Mountains, he found it: the starry shoulder of the Great Auroch.

It was now the end of the Moon of Roaring Stags. In the next moon, the Blackthorn Moon, the red eye would appear, and the power of the bear would grow stronger. By the Moon of Red Willow, it would be invincible.

Head north, Fa had said. Many day walks.

Torak didn't want to go further north. That would take him out of the small patch of the Forest that he knew, and into the unknown. And yet - Fa must have believed that he stood a chance, or he wouldn't have made him swear.

He reached for a stick and poked the embers.

He knew that the High Mountains were far in the east, beyond the Deep Forest, and that they curved from north to south, arching out of the Forest like the spine of an enormous whale. And he knew that the World Spirit was said to live in the northernmost mountain. But no-one had ever got close to it, for the Spirit always beat them back with howling blizzards and treacherous rockfalls.

All day, Torak had been fleeing north, but he was still only level with the southernmost roots of the High Mountains. He had no idea how he was going to get so far on his own. He was still weak from the fever, and in no state to start a journey.

So don't, he thought. Don't make the same mistake twice: don't panic and nearly kill yourself out of sheer stupidity. Stay here for another day or so. Get stronger. Then start.

Making a decision made him feel a little better.

He put more sticks on the fire, and saw to his surprise that the cub was watching him. Its eyes were steady and quite un-cub-like: the eyes of a wolf.

Once again, Fa's voice echoed in his memory. *The eyes of a wolf aren't like those of any other creature — except those of a man. Wolves are our closest brothers, Torak, and it shows in their eyes. The only difference is the colour. Theirs are golden, while ours are grey. But the wolf doesn't see that, because his world doesn't have colours. Only silvers and greys.*

Torak had asked how he knew that, but Fa had smiled and shaken his head, saying he'd explain when Torak was older. There were lots
of things he’d been going to explain when Torak was older.

Torak scowled and rubbed his face.

The cub was still watching him.

Already it had something of the beauty of a full-grown wolf: the slender pale-grey muzzle; large silver ears with their edging of black; elegant, dark-rimmed eyes.

Those eyes. As clear as sunlight in spring-water . . . Suddenly, Torak had the strangest sense that the cub knew what he was thinking.

More than any other hunters in the Forest, Fa whispered in his mind, wolves are like us. They hunt in packs. They enjoy talking and playing. They have a fierce love for their mates and cubs. And each wolf works hard for the good of the pack.

Torak sat upright. Was that what Fa was trying to tell him?

Your guide will find you.

Could it be that the cub was his guide?

He decided to put it to the test. Clearing his throat, he got down on his hands and knees. He didn’t know how to say ‘mountain’ in wolf talk, so he guessed: gesturing with his head and asking – in the low, intense yip-and-yowl which forms part of wolf talk – if the cub knew the way.

The cub swivelled its ears and looked at him, then glanced politely away, because in wolf talk, to stare too hard is a threat. Then it stood up, stretched, and lazily swung its tail.

Nothing in its movements told Torak that it had understood his question. It was simply a

cub again.

Or was it?

Could he really have imagined that look?