Tomorrow, Torak and Wolf would set out into the bear-haunted Forest – and Torak had no idea what he was going to do.

Even if they reached the Mountain, what next? Should he simply leave the Nanuak on the ground? Ask the World Spirit to destroy the bear? Try to fight it on his own?

‘Do you want new boots, or do we mend yours?’ snapped Oslak’s mate, who was measuring him for winter clothes.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Boots,’ repeated the woman. She had tired eyes, and river clay markings on her cheeks – and she was furious with him. He didn’t know why.

He said, ‘I’m used to my boots. Could you maybe –’

‘Mend them?’ She snorted. ‘I think I can manage that!’

‘Thank you,’ Torak said humbly. He glanced at Wolf, who was cowering in the corner with his ears back.

Oslak’s mate snatched a length of sinew and spun Torak round to measure his shoulders. ‘Oh, it’ll fit all right,’ she muttered. ‘Well sit down, sit down!’

Torak sat, and watched her tying knots to mark the measurements. Her eyes were moist, and she was blinking rapidly. She caught him looking, ‘What are you staring at?’

‘Nothing,’ he replied. ‘Should I take off my clothes?’

‘Not unless you want to freeze. You’ll have the new things by dawn. Now give me the boots.’

He did, and she eyed them as if they were a pair of rotting salmon. ‘More holes than a
fishing net,’ she said. It was a relief when she bustled out of the shelter.

She hadn’t been gone long when Renn came in. Wolf padded over and licked her fingers. She scratched him behind the ears.

Torak wanted to thank her for standing up for him, but he wasn’t sure how to start. The silence lengthened.

‘How’d you get on with Vedna?’ Renn said abruptly.

‘Vedna? Oh. Oslak’s mate? I don’t think she likes me.’

‘It’s not that. It’s your new clothes. She was making them for her son. Now she’s got to finish them for you.’

‘Her son?’

‘Killed by the bear.’

and Wolf.

She glared at him. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. I just do.’

‘That’s stupid.’

‘Maybe. But that’s how it is.’

‘You sound like Fin-Kedinn.’

‘That’s another reason. He’d never allow it.’

‘Since when did I let that stop me?’

He grinned.

She didn’t grin back. Looking thunderous, she moved to the fire at the entrance to the shelter. ‘You’re to eat nightmeal with him,’ she said. ‘It’s an honour. In case you didn’t know.’

Torak swallowed. He was scared of Fin-Kedinn, but in a strange way, he also wanted his approval. Eating nightmeal with him sounded unnerving. ‘Will you be there too?’ he asked.

‘Oh.’ Poor Vedna, he thought. Poor Oslak. And that explained the river clay. It must be the Raven way of mourning.

The bruise on Renn’s cheek had turned purple; he asked if it hurt. She shook her head. He guessed that she was ashamed of what her brother had done.

‘What about Fin-Kedinn?’ he said. ‘How bad is his leg?’

‘Bad. Bone-deep. But no sign of the blackening sickness.’

‘That’s good.’ He hesitated. ‘Was he – very angry with you?’

‘Yes. But that’s not why I’m here.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘Tomorrow. I’m coming with you.’

Torak bit his lip. ‘I think it has to be just me

Some time later, Torak made his way to Fin-Kedinn’s shelter, stumbling in his borrowed boots, which were much too big.

He found the Raven Leader in heated talk with Saeunn, but they stopped when he came in. Saeunn looked fierce. Fin-Kedinn’s face gave
nothing away.

Torak sat cross-legged on a reindeer skin. He couldn’t see any food, but people were busy at cooking-skins by the long-fire. He wondered how soon they would eat. And what he was doing here.

‘I’ve told you what I think,’ said Saeunn.
‘So you have,’ Fin-Kedinn said evenly.

They made no attempt to include Torak, which left him free to study Fin-Kedinn’s shelter. It was no grander than the others, and from the rooftop hung the usual hunter’s gear; but the string of the great yew bow was broken, and the white reindeer-hide parka was spattered with dried blood: stark reminders that the Raven Leader had faced the bear, and survived.

Suddenly, Torak noticed a man watching him from the shadows. He had short brown hair and dark, wizened features.

‘This is Krukoslik,’ said Fin-Kedinn, ‘of the Mountain Hare Clan.’

The man put both fists over his heart and bowed his head.

Torak did the same.

‘Krukoslik knows these parts better than anyone,’ said Fin-Kedinn. ‘Talk to him before you set out. If nothing else, he’ll give you a few hints on surviving the Mountains. I wasn’t impressed by the state you were in when we caught you. No winter clothes, one waterskin and no food. Your father taught you better than that.’

Torak caught his breath. ‘So you did know him?’

Saeunn bristled, but Fin-Kedinn quelled her with a glance. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I knew him. There was a time when he was my best friend.’

Angrily, Saeunn turned away.

Torak felt himself getting angry, too. ‘If you were his best friend, why did you sentence me to death? Why did you let me fight Hord? Why did you keep me tied up while the clan meet decided whether to sacrifice me?’

‘To see what you were made of,’ Fin-Kedinn said calmly. ‘You’re no good to anyone if you can’t use your wits.’ He paused. ‘If you remember, I didn’t keep you under close guard. I even let you have the wolf cub with you.’

Torak thought about that. ‘You mean – you were testing me?’

Fin-Kedinn did not reply.

Two men came over from the main fire, carrying four steaming birchwood bowls.

‘Eat,’ said Krukoslik, handing one to Torak.

Fin-Kedinn tossed over a horn spoon, and for a while Torak forgot about everything as he dug in hungrily. It was a thin broth made from boiled elk hooves and a few slivers of dried deer heart, bulked up with rowanberries and the tough, tasteless tree-mushroom that the clans call auroch’s ears. With it, they had a single flatcake of roasted acorn meal: very bitter, but not too bad once it was broken up and mashed into the broth.

‘I’m sorry we can’t do better,’ said Fin-Kedinn, ‘but prey is scarce.’ It was the only reference he made to the bear.

Torak was too hungry to care. Only when
he’d licked his bowl did he notice that Fin-Kedinn and Saeunn had hardly touched theirs. Saeunn took them back to the cooking-skin, then returned to her place. Krukoslik hung his spoon on his belt, and went to kneel by the small fire at the entrance to the shelter, where he murmured a brief prayer of thanks.

Torak had never seen anyone like him. He wore a bulky robe of brown reindeer hide that hung all the way to his calves, and a broad belt of red buckskin. His clan skin was a mantle of hare fur over the shoulders, dyed a fiery red, and his clan-tattoo was a red zigzag band across the forehead. On his breast hung a finger-long shard of smoky rock crystal.

He saw Torak looking at it, and smiled. ‘Smoke is the breath of the Fire Spirit. Mountain

clans worship fire above all else.’

Torak remembered the comfort the fire had given him and Renn in the snow cave. ‘I can understand that,’ he said.

Krukoslik’s smile broadened.

With nightmeal over, Fin-Kedinn asked the others to leave so that he could speak to Torak alone. Krukoslik stood up and bowed. Saeunn gave an angry hiss and swept from the shelter.

Torak wondered what was coming next.

Saeunn,’ said Fin-Kedinn, ‘doesn’t think you should be told any more. She thinks it would distract you tomorrow.’

‘Any more about what?’ asked Torak.

‘About what you want to know.’

Torak considered that. ‘I want to know everything.’

‘Not possible. Try again.’

Torak picked at a tear in the knee of his leggings. ‘Why me? Why am I the Listener?’

Fin-Kedinn stroked his beard. ‘That is a long story.’

‘Is it because of my father? Because he was the Wolf Mage? The enemy of the crippled wanderer, who made the bear?’

‘That is – part of it.’

‘But who was he? Why were they enemies? Fa never even mentioned him.’

With a stick, the Raven Leader stirred the fire, and Torak saw the lines of pain deepen on either side of his mouth. Without turning his

head, Fin-Kedinn said, ‘Did your father ever mention the Soul-Eaters?’

Torak was puzzled. ‘No. I’ve never heard of them.’

‘Then you must be the only one in the Forest who hasn’t.’ Fin-Kedinn fell silent, the firelight etching his face with shadow. The Soul-Eaters, he went on, ‘were seven Mages, each from a different clan. In the beginning, they were not evil. They helped their clans. Each had his own particular skill. One was subtle as a snake, always delving into the lore of herbs and potions. One was strong as an oak; he wished to know the minds of trees. Another had thoughts that flew swifter than a bat. She loved to enchant small creatures to do her bidding. One was proud and far-seeking, fascinated by
demons, always trying to control them. They say that another could summon the Dead.’ Again he stirred the fire.

When he did not continue, Torak mustered his courage. ’That’s only five. You said – there were seven.’

Fin-Kedinn ignored him. ’Many winters ago, they banded together in secret. At first they called themselves the Healers. Deceived themselves into believing that they wished only to do good; to cure sickness, guard against demons.’ His mouth twisted contemptuously. ’Soon they drifted into evil, warped by their hunger for power.’

Torak’s fingers tightened on his knee. ’Why were they called Soul-Eaters?’ he asked, scarcely moving his lips. ’Did they really eat souls?’

‘Who knows? People were frightened, and when people are frightened, rumour becomes truth.’ His face became distant as he remembered. ’Above all things, the Soul-Eaters wanted power. That’s what they lived for. To rule the Forest. To force everyone in it to do their bidding. Then, thirteen winters ago, something happened that shattered their power.’

’What?’ whispered Torak. ’What happened?’

Fin-Kedinn sighed. ’All you need to know is that there was a great fire, and the Soul-Eaters were scattered. Some were badly wounded. All went into hiding. We thought the threat had gone for ever. We were wrong.’ He snapped the stick in two and threw it on the fire. ’The man

you call the crippled wanderer – the man who created the bear – he was one of them.’

’A Soul-Eater?’

’I knew as soon as Hord told me about him. Only a Soul-Eater could have trapped so great a demon.’ He met Torak’s eyes. ’Your father was his enemy. He was the sworn enemy of all the Soul-Eaters.’

Torak couldn’t look away from the intense blue gaze. ’He never told me anything.’

’He had reasons. Your father did,’ he said. ’Your father did many wrong things in his life. But he did all he could to stop the Soul-Eaters. That’s why they killed him. It’s also why he brought you up apart. So that they’d never know you even existed.’

Torak stared at him. ’Me? Why?’

Fin-Kedinn wasn’t listening. Once again, he was watching the flames. ’It doesn’t seem possible,’ he murmured. ’Nobody ever suspected there was a son. Not even me.’

’But – Saeunn knew. Fa told her, five summers ago at the clan meet by the Sea. Didn’t she –’

’No,’ said Fin-Kedinn. ’She never told me.’

’I don’t understand,’ said Torak. ’Why couldn’t the Soul-Eaters know about me? What’s wrong with me?’

Fin-Kedinn studied his face. ’Nothing. They mustn’t know about you because . . .’ He shook his head, as if there was too much to tell. ’Because one day you might be able to stop them.’

Torak was aghast. ’Me? How?’
‘I don’t know. I only know that if they find out about you, they’ll come after you.’ Once more his eyes held Torak’s. ‘This is what Saeunn didn’t want you to know. And it’s what I believe you must know. If you live – if you succeed in destroying the bear – it won’t be the end. The Soul-Eaters will find out who did it. They’ll know you exist. Sooner or later, they’ll come after you.’

An ember cracked.

Torak jumped. ‘You mean – even if I survive tomorrow, I’ll be running all my life.’

‘I didn’t say that. You can run or you can fight. There’s always a choice.’

Torak looked up at the blood-spattered parka. Hord was right: this was a fight for men, not for boys. ‘Why did Fa never tell me anything?’ he said.

‘Your father knew what he was doing,’ said Fin-Kedinn. ‘He did some bad things. Some things for which I’ll never forgive him. But with you, I think he did the right thing.’

Torak couldn’t speak.

‘Ask yourself this, Torak. Why does the Prophecy speak of “the Listener”? Why not “the Talker” or the “Seer”?’

Torak shook his head.

‘Because the most important quality in a hunter is to be a listener. To listen to what the wind and the trees are telling you. To listen to what other hunters and prey are saying about the Forest. That’s the gift your father gave you. He didn’t teach you Magecraft, or the story of the clans. He taught you to hunt. To use your wits.’ He paused. ‘If you are to succeed tomorrow, that’s how you’ll do it. By using your wits.’

It was after middle-night, but still Torak sat by the long-fire in the clearing, staring at the looming blackness of the High Mountains.

He was alone. Wolf had gone off on his nightly wanderings, and the only signs of life in the camp were the silent Ravens guarding the defences, and the rumble of snores from Oslak’s shelter.

Torak longed to waken Renn and tell her everything. But he didn’t know where she was sleeping. Besides, he wasn’t sure that he could bring himself to tell her about Fa – about the bad things Fin-Kedinn said he had done.

‘If you survive it won’t be the end . . . the Soul-Eaters will come after you . . . You can run or you can fight. There’s always a choice . . .’

Terrible images whirled in his head like a snowstorm. The bear’s murderous eyes. The Soul-Eaters, like half-glimpsed shadows in a bad dream. Fa’s face as he lay dying.

To chase them away, he stood up and began to pace. He forced himself to think.

He had no idea what he was going to do tomorrow, but he knew that Fin-Kedinn was right. If he was to stand a chance against the bear, it would be by using his wits. The World Spirit would only help him if he tried to help
himself.

Once again, he ran through the lines of the Prophecy. ‘The Listener fights with air and speaks with silence . . . The Listener fights with air . . .’

The glimmerings of an idea began to nag at him.