Torak crashed through alder thickets and sank to his knees in bogs. Birch trees whispered of his passing. Silently he begged them not to tell the bear.

The wound in his arm burned, and with each breath his bruised ribs ached savagely, but he didn’t dare stop. The Forest was full of eyes. He pictured the bear coming after him. He ran on.

He startled a young boar grubbing up pignuts, and grunted a quick apology to ward off an attack. The boar gave an ill-tempered snort and let him pass.

A wolverine snarled at him to stay away, and he snarled back as fiercely as he could, because wolverines only listen to threats. The wolverine decided he meant it, and shot up a tree.

To the east, the sky was wolf grey. Thunder growled. In the stormy light, the trees were a brilliant green. Rain in the mountains, thought Torak numbly. Watch out for flash floods.

He forced himself to think of that – to push away the horror. It didn’t work. He ran on.

At last, he had to stop for breath. He collapsed against an oak tree. As he raised his head to stare at the shifting green leaves, the tree murmured secrets to itself, shutting him out.

For the first time in his life he was truly alone. He didn’t feel part of the Forest any more. He felt as if his world-soul had snapped its link to all other living things: tree and bird, hunter and prey, river and rock. Nothing in the whole world knew how he felt. Nothing wanted to know.
each carcass. It hadn’t killed from hunger. It had killed for fun.

At Torak’s feet lay a dead foal, its small hooves still crusted with river clay from its final drink. His gorge rose. What kind of creature slaughters an entire herd? What kind of creature kills for pleasure?

He remembered the bear’s eyes, glimpsed for one appalling heartbeat. He’d never seen such eyes. Behind them lay nothing but endless rage and a hatred of all living things. The hot, churning chaos of the Otherworld.

Of course his father was right. This wasn’t a bear. It was a demon. It would kill and kill until the Forest was dead.

No-one can fight this bear, his father had said. Did that mean the Forest was doomed? the Forest was that so few people came here.

As he ran, he picked up signs of prey. Elk tracks. Auroch droppings. The sound of a forest horse moving through the bracken. The bear hadn’t frightened them away. At least, not yet.

So had his father been wrong? Had his wits been wandering at the end?

‘Your fa’s mad!’ the children had taunted Torak five summers before, when he and Fa had journeyed to the sea-shore for the clan meet. It was Torak’s first ever clan meet, and it had been a disaster. Fa had never taken him again.

‘They say he swallowed the breath of a ghost,’ the children had sneered. ‘That’s why he left his clan and lives on his own.’

Torak had been furious. He would’ve fought them all if his father hadn’t come along and hauled him off. ‘Torak, ignore them,’ Fa had laughed. ‘They don’t know what they’re saying.’

He’d been right, of course.

But was he right about the bear?

Up ahead, the trees opened into a clearing. Torak stumbled into the sun – and into a stench of rottenness.

He lurched to a halt.

The forest horses lay where the bear had tossed them like broken playthings. No scavenger had dared feed on them. Not even the flies would touch them.

They looked like no bear kill Torak had ever seen. When a normal bear feeds, it peels back the hide of its prey and takes the innards and hind parts, then caches the rest for later. Like any other hunter, it wastes nothing. But this bear had ripped no more than a single bite from
shelter.

Torak, you fool! Messing things up on your first day alone! Alone.

It wasn’t possible. How could Fa be gone? Gone for ever?

Gradually he became aware of a faint mewing sound coming from the other side of the hill.

There it was again. Some young animal crying for its mother.

His heart leapt. Oh, thank the Spirit! An easy kill. His belly tightened at the thought of fresh meat. He didn’t care what it was. He was so hungry he could eat a bat.

Torak dropped to the ground and crept through the birch trees to the top of the hill.

He looked down into a narrow gully through which ran a small, swift river. He recognised it: the Fastwater. Further west, he and Fa often camped in summer to gather lime bark for rope-making; but this part looked unfamiliar. Then he realised why.

Some time before, a flash flood had come roaring down from the mountains. The waters had since subsided, leaving a mess of wet undergrowth and grass-strewn saplings. They’d also destroyed a wolf den on the other side of the gully. There, below a big red boulder shaped like a sleeping auroch, lay two drowned wolves like sodden fur cloaks. Three dead cubs floated in a puddle.

The fourth sat beside them, shivering.

The wolf cub looked about three moons old. It was thin and wet, and was complaining softly to itself in a low, continuous whimper.


The vision was as vivid as a lightning flash. What did it mean?

His hand tightened on his father’s knife. It doesn’t matter what it means, he told himself. Visions won’t keep you alive. If you don’t eat that cub, you’ll be too weak to hunt. And you’re allowed to kill your clan-creature to keep from starving. You know that.

The cub raised its head and gave a bewildered yowl.

Torak listened to it – and understood.

In some strange way that he couldn’t begin to fathom, he recognised the high, wavering sounds. His mind knew their shapes. He remembered them.

This isn’t possible, he thought.

He listened to the cub’s yowls. He felt them drop into his mind.

Why won’t you play with me? the cub was asking its dead pack. What have I done now?

On and on it went. As Torak listened, something awakened in him. His neck muscles tensed. Deep in his throat he felt a response beginning. He fought the urge to put back his head and howl.

What was happening? He didn’t feel like
Torak any more. Not boy, not son, not member of the Wolf Clan – or not only those things. Some part of him was wolf.

A breeze sprang up, chilling his skin.

At the same moment, the wolf cub stopped yowling and jerked round to face him. Its eyes were unfocused, but its large ears were pricked, and it was snuffing the air. It had smelt him.

Torak looked down at the small anxious cub, and hardened his heart.

He drew the knife from his belt and started down the slope.