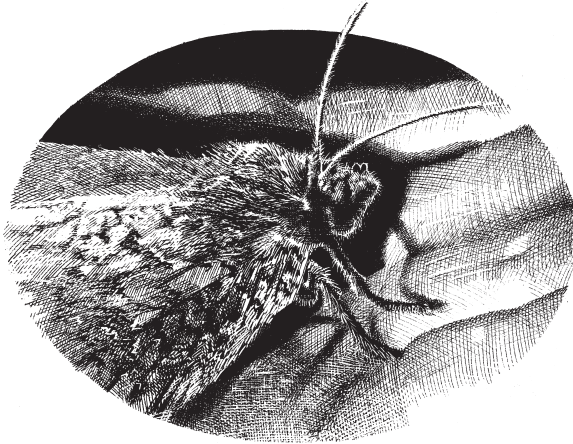




ONE



Torak doesn't want to enter the silent camp. The fire is dead. Fin-Kedinn's axe lies in the ashes. Renn's bow has been trodden into the mud. The only trace of Wolf is a scatter of paw-prints.

Axe, bow and prints are dusted with what looks like dirty snow. As Torak draws closer, grey moths rise in a swarm. Grimacing, he flicks them away. But as he moves off, they settle again to feed.

At the shelter, he halts. The doorpost feels sticky. He catches that sweet, cloying smell. He dare not go in.

It's dark in there, but he glimpses a heaving mass of grey moths – and beneath it, three still forms. His mind rejects what he sees, but his heart already knows.

He backs away. He falls. Darkness closes over him . . .
With a gasp, Torak sat up.

He was in the shelter, huddled in his sleeping-sack. His heart hammered against his ribs. His jaws ached from grinding his teeth. He had not been asleep. His muscles were taut with the strain of constant vigilance. But he had seen those bodies. It was as if Eostra had reached into his mind and twisted his thoughts.

It's what she wants you to see, he told himself. It isn't true. Here is Fin-Kedinn, asleep in the shelter. And Wolf and Darkfur and the cubs are safe at the resting place. And Renn is safe with the Boar Clan. *It isn't true.*

Something crawled along his collarbone. He crushed it with his fist. The grey moth left a powdery smear and a taint of rotteness.

At the back of the shelter, another moth settled on Fin-Kedinn's parted lips.

Torak kicked off his sleeping-sack and crawled to his foster father. The moth rose, circled, and flitted out into the night.

Fin-Kedinn moaned in his sleep. Already, nightmares were seeping into his dreams. But Torak knew not to wake him. If he did, the evil images would haunt the Raven Leader for days.

Torak's own vision clung to him like the moths' unclean dust. Pulling on leggings, jerkin and boots, he left the shelter.

The Blackthorn Moon cast long blue shadows across the clearing. Around it, the breath of the Forest floated among the pines.

A few dogs raised their heads as Torak passed, but the camp was quiet. You had to know the Raven Clan as well as he did to perceive how wrong things were. The shelters clustered like frightened aurochs about the long-fire which burned through the night. Saeunn had ringed the clearing

with smoking juniper brands mounted on stakes, in an attempt to ward off the moths.

In the fork of a birch tree, Rip and Rek roosted with their heads tucked under their wings. They slept peacefully. So far, the grey moths had only blighted people.

Ignoring the ravens' gurgling protests, Torak gathered them up and went to sit by the long-fire, his arms full of drowsy, feathered warmth.

In the Forest, a stag roared.

When he was little, Torak loved hearing the red deer bellow on misty autumn nights. Snuggled in his sleeping-sack, he would gaze into the embers and imagine he saw tiny, fiery stags clashing antlers in fiery valleys. He'd felt safe, knowing that Fa would keep the dark and the demons away.

He knew better now. Three autumns ago, on a night such as this, he had crouched in the wreck of a shelter, and watched his father bleed his life away.

The stag fell silent. Trees creaked and groaned in their sleep. Torak wished someone would wake up.

He longed for Wolf; but howling for him would disturb the whole camp. And he couldn't face the long walk to find the pack.

How has it come to this? he wondered. I'm afraid to go into the Forest alone.

'This is how it starts,' Renn had told him half a moon before. 'She sends something small, which comes in the night. Something you can't keep out. And the grey moths are only the beginning. The fear will grow. That's what she feeds on. That's what makes her strong.'

Far away, an eagle owl called: oo-hu, oo-hu.

Torak grabbed a stick and jabbed savagely at the fire. He couldn't take much more of this. He was ready: he had

a quiverful of arrows, and his fingertips ached from sewing his winter clothes. He'd ground the edges of his axe and knife so sharp they could split hairs.

If only he knew where to find her. But Eostra had hidden herself in her Mountain lair. Like a spider, she had cast her web across the Forest. Like a spider, she sensed the least tremor in its furthest strand. She knew he would hunt her. She wanted him to try. But not yet.

Scowling, Torak tried to lose himself in the glowing embers.

He woke to a voice calling his name.

The logs had collapsed. The ravens were back in their tree.

He hadn't dreamt that voice. He had heard it. It was familiar – unbearably so. It was also impossible.

Rising to his feet, Torak drew his knife. When he reached the ring of juniper brands that protected the camp, he paused. Then he squared his shoulders and walked past them into the Forest.

The moon was bright. The pines floated in a white sea of mist.

Above him on the slope, something edged out of sight.

Torak's breath came fast and shallow. He dared not follow. But he had to. He climbed, scratching his hands as he pushed through the undergrowth.

Halfway up, he stopped to listen. Nothing but the stealthy drip, drip of mist.

Something tickled his knife-hand.

At the base of his thumb, a grey moth fed on a bead of blood.

'Torak ...' A pleading whisper from the trees.

Dread reached into Torak's chest and squeezed his heart. This wasn't possible.

He climbed higher.

Through the swirling mist, he glimpsed a tall figure standing by a boulder.

'Help me . . .' it breathed.

He blundered towards it.

It melted into the shadows.

It had left no tracks; only a branch, faintly swaying. But behind the boulder, Torak found the remains of a fire. The logs were cold, covered in ash. He stared at them. They'd been laid in a star pattern. This couldn't be. Only he and one other person built their fires that way.

Look behind you, Torak.

He spun round.

Two paces away, an arrow had been thrust into the earth.

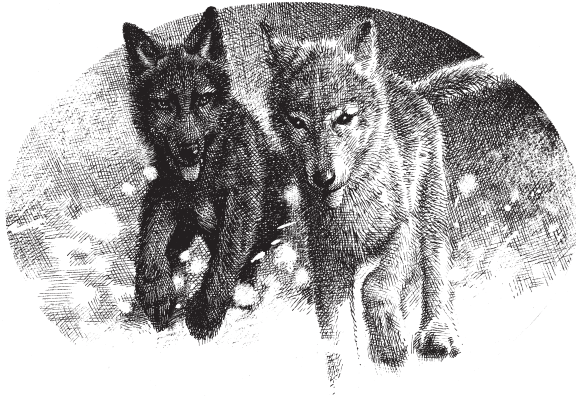
Torak recognized the fletching at once. He knew the one who had made this arrow. He wanted desperately to touch it.

He tried to lick his lips, but his mouth was dry.

'Is it you?' he called, his voice rough with fear and longing.

'Is it you? . . . Fa?'

TWO



'It may not have been him,' said Fin-Kedinn.
'It was Fa,' said Torak, rolling up his sleeping-sack.
'His arrow, his fire, his voice. His spirit.'

Fin-Kedinn prodded the earth in front of the shelter with his staff. 'Voices can be mimicked. Those who knew him remember how he woke his fires. As for that arrow—'

'I know,' Torak cut in, 'anyone could have found it. Because I left him in the Forest. No rowan branches, no chants. Just a botched attempt at Death Marks. No wonder he's not at peace.'

Grabbing strips of dried meat from the cross-beams, he crammed them in his food pouch. *The dried deer meat*, his father had gasped as he lay dying. *Take it all*. But in his haste, Torak had left it behind.

'You were twelve summers old,' Fin-Kedinn said quietly.
'You did your best.'

'It wasn't enough. Now he's begging me for help.'

'Or Eostra wants you to think so.'

Torak stiffened. These days, few dared say that name out loud.

'This is what she does,' said the Raven Leader. 'She steals into thoughts and dreams. She breeds fear.'

'I know.'

'Do you? Do you have any idea how powerful she is? She has tokoroths at her command. She has the fire-opal. All the other Soul-Eaters were afraid of her. And you want to seek her alone.'

Torak paused. The mist had thickened to fog, and in the wakening camp, people loomed and vanished like ghosts. He saw pinched, terrified faces. He wondered if the fog had been sent by Eostra.

Opening his medicine pouch, he found the chunk of black root which he'd begged from Saeunn, in case he needed to spirit walk. But what use was that against the Eagle Owl Mage?

'Maybe you're right,' he said. 'Maybe what I saw last night was her doing. Fa was a Soul-Eater for a time. Maybe she's got some hold over his spirit. But I have to do something.'

'Not yet. It's been only days since the moths came. Not even Saeunn has seen anything like them. I've had word from Durrain of the Red Deer, she agrees with me. We must gather the clans. If we don't – if we give in to fear – we fall into Eostra's hands.'

'I can't wait any longer!' Torak burst out. 'Again and again I've wanted to set off, and you've always said no! The Mountains are vast, you said, you could search your

whole life and never find her. But now we're under attack. Who knows what she'll send next? It's my destiny to face her, Fin-Kedinn. Must I wait till she has the whole Forest in her grip?

'So what would you do, head off for the Mountains and trust to luck?'

'I won't need to! She wants my power. When she's ready, she'll tell me where she is.'

'When she's ready, Torak! When she's got you alone. When it's too late. No. I won't let you go.'

'You can't stop me.'

They faced each other. Fin-Kedinn was broader and stronger, but Torak no longer had to look up to him.

Taking up his medicine pouch, Torak yanked the drawstring tight. 'When Renn gets back, tell her I'm sorry. It's too dangerous for her to come with me. At least that's one decision you'll approve of,' he added with some bitterness. Since he'd turned fifteen – the age at which clan law permits a boy to seek a mate – it had seemed as if Fin-Kedinn were trying to keep them apart.

Casting away his staff, Fin-Kedinn took a few paces, then returned. 'I understand the urge to contact the dead. Believe me I do; when your mother died . . . But Torak. It must be *resisted*. The living and the dead can't be together. It casts a blight on the living, it drags them down into madness!'

He spoke with startling vehemence, and for a moment, Torak was shaken. Then he shouldered his quiver and bow and took up his axe. 'He's my father,' he said.

'*Your* father. *Your* destiny. But this is not only *your* battle! This threatens us all!'

'That's why I have to leave. I can't do nothing any longer.'



Torak left the Raven camp soon afterwards. The fog oppressed his spirits, but he saw no grey moths, and felt no immediate menace as he headed east.

Around midday, the fog lifted and the sun came out. Beads of moisture sparkled on amber bracken and silver-green beard-moss. The last of the willowherb gleamed purple beneath golden birch and blazing rowan: the Forest's final burst of brilliance before going to sleep for the winter. It had been a good autumn for nuts and berries, and the undergrowth rustled with small creatures enjoying the feast. Jays squabbled over acorns. Squirrels buried hazelnuts in the leafmould.

Rip and Rek flew past, making woodpecker noises and pretending to ignore Torak. They were in a sulk at having to leave the Raven camp, where they'd grown fat on offerings, especially Rip. He'd lost a wing-feather fighting the Oak Mage in the spring, and it had grown back white. This meant he was revered by the clans.

Torak barely noticed the ravens. He hated leaving Renn behind. She would never forgive him. And yet, he knew this had to be. His vision of the slaughtered camp could have been real. When he faced the Eagle Owl Mage, it had to be without Renn.

And without Wolf.

This was why he'd decided on an indirect route towards the Mountains. The quickest way would have been to cross the Ashwater and head south-east, following the Fastwater upstream, then onto the fells. Instead, he headed north-east up the Horseleap, towards the ridge above the

river, where Wolf and Darkfur had recently moved the cubs.

To say goodbye.



The resting place was a patch of level ground on top of the cliff, bordered on one side by a fallen ash, and by a bramble patch on the other. It was late afternoon when Torak reached it, and Darkfur and the cubs gave him an ecstatic welcome; but Wolf was away hunting.

Torak was relieved. Now he would have to make a shelter and wait for his pack-brother. He could put off leaving until tomorrow.

As dusk came on, he woke a fire and built a spruce bough lean-to against the ash tree, hanging his gear out of reach of inquisitive muzzles. There were only two cubs to get under his feet. The one with the foxy ears, whom Renn had named Click, had died of a sickness the moon before.

When the shelter was finished, Torak went to pick blackberries, and the cubs came too: Shadow, the black cub with a passion for gnawing boots, and Pebble, who'd been the first to emerge from the Den and greet Torak in the summer.

The blackberries were so ripe that they fell to pieces in his hands, and the cubs snuffled them up from his palm. Shadow placed her forepaws on his knee and rose on her hind legs to give him a sticky wolf kiss, while Pebble, his muzzle stained purple, bounded off to attack the shelter. Seizing a branch in his jaws, he gave a tug that made the whole thing shudder and sent him hurtling back to his mother.

As Torak watched Darkfur licking her cubs, he knew he was doing the right thing. They were only three moons old: too small to make the trek to the Mountains. And Wolf would never leave them behind.

Thinking of this, Torak crawled into his sleeping-sack.

It was a frosty night, and he was glad of his winter clothes: a duckskin jerkin and under-leggings, with a parka and over-leggings of warm reindeer hide, and beaver-hide boots. He hadn't been asleep for long when he was woken by excited whimpering.

Wolf had returned. Darkfur and the cubs were lashing their tails as they gulped the meat he'd sicked up for them, while Rip and Rek sidled about looking for scraps. Darkfur was too clever for them, and the cubs had learnt the hard way about raven thievery, and warded them off with growls and body-slams.

In the moonlight, the resting place was spangled with frost, and the eyes of the pack shone silver. Wolf bounded over to Torak and they rolled together, nose-nudging and licking each other's muzzles. *The hunt is good, the cubs are strong!* said Wolf.

Glancing up, Torak saw that the black sky was spotted with downy white flakes.

It was the cubs' first snow, and they loved it. They chased and snapped and stalked this strange, silent prey, batting it with their paws and licking it off each other's fur. Torak knelt and they clambered over him, butting him with small, cold noses. Wolf and Darkfur joined in, and everyone chased each other up the ridge and round the resting place, skittering so near the edge that they sent pebbles splashing into the Horseleap far below.

At last, Torak squatted by the fire, and the wolves lifted their muzzles and howled to the moon. Torak listened to the cubs' wavering yowls and their parents' strong, sure voices. It didn't seem possible that he could bring himself to leave. And the worst of it was that he couldn't tell Wolf, as that would only force him to make an agonizing choice: either to follow Torak and desert his family, or to stay with them and abandon his pack-brother.

Sensing Torak's unhappiness, Wolf stopped howling and trotted towards him. His thick winter pelt sparkled with snow, but his tongue was warm as he licked Torak's cheek.

You're sad, he said.

No, lied Torak.

Wolf didn't ask again, but leant against him, comforting by his presence.

Safe with the pack, Torak slept without fear of Eostra's grey moths, and woke at dawn. The cubs lay in a snow-sprinkled huddle, with Darkfur and Wolf curled nearby.

Quietly, Torak put the fire to sleep and shouldered his gear.

Wolf's paws twitched in his dreams, but as Torak knelt beside him, he opened his eyes and stirred his tail. *You go to hunt?* he said with a tilt of his ear.

Yes, Torak replied in wolf talk. Burying his face in his pack-brother's scruff, he inhaled deep breaths of the beloved scent. Then he tore himself away.

It was a bitterly cold morning, and the snow-crust crackled under his boots. On the higher ground, the wind had exposed patches of flat bearberry scrub: the startling scarlet of spilt blood. On one patch, Torak

found a dead grey moth. He touched it with his boot, and it crumbled to dust.

As he went on, he found more dead moths littering the undergrowth. The frost had put an end to them.

Or maybe, he thought uneasily, Eostra no longer needs them. Maybe they've already done their work.