

Ice Forest



It was late when Torak came to the ice forest. Tall trees loomed over him, jagged with icicles that hung down like strange, sharp teeth. The last thin rays of winter sunlight slipped through the bare branches, casting a maze of ebony shadows on the forest pathway.

The boy sat down under a tree and waited. A bitter wind shivered through the forest, gripping his body in an icy fist. Torak sensed something moving in the dark; something watching him. He gripped a thin flake of flint and waited. A squirrel ran down a tree trunk, its beady eyes picking him out. Then it scurried back up and was lost into the treetops.

Far away, Wolf ran between the trees following the scent. In the distance, he could hear his brother's lonely call. A sharp, plaintive cry that drew him closer. Darkness settled onto the forest but Wolf relished the dark: everything stilled and the scent track seemed cleaner and easier to follow. Stars glittered above and the moon hung like a bear's claw. He ran on.

Torak stared into the night so hard that his eyes ached. Something moved between the trees, pacing in his direction. Shivering, he tried to keep as still as rock, to become one with the tree. To *be* tree. A scuffle of leaves. The flicker of a branch. Torak longed for Wolf, whose night sight would soon seek out whatever was stalking him. The yellow eye had long gone. Now it was a world of shadows and shapes.

Suddenly, a snow-covered boulder seemed to rise out of the darkness. The ice bear stood on its hind legs. Its great face turned slowly, sensing the bitter stillness. Torak flicked the flint to one side and as the bear moved towards the sound, he ran in the opposite direction.

Images whirled in Torak's mind: the ice bear's swollen eyes; the ice storm. Then he paused. Silence. Nothing. It was as if the forest had swallowed the bear. Then something warm brushed by his leg. Wolf licked his hand, waiting to see what Torak would do next.