

# SKIN TAKER

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# ONE



A Lynx Clan hunter saw it first. He was trudging along a ridge, checking his snares, when he spotted a brilliant spark of light moving fast across the night sky.

The hunter had seen such stars before. He knew they meant the World Spirit was shooting arrows at demons, so he was reassured as he went on his way.

Midwinter, the Dark Time, when the sun is asleep in its cave and doesn't show its face for two whole moons. No wind. Silent pines watching him pass. The only sounds the crunch of his snowshoes, the creak of his reindeer-hide parka and leggings. His breath.

As he approached the next snare he could see as clear as day, thanks to starlight and snowglow, and the rippling

green radiance in the sky which the clans call the First Tree.

Good. He'd snared a willow grouse.

The horsehair noose was frozen stiff, so was the bird.

As the hunter stooped to retrieve it, something made him glance up. He was startled to see that the star had grown much brighter, and doubled in size.



On the riverbank Renn poked her head out of the shelter. 'Come on, Torak!' she called crossly. 'We need to get going!'

'I'll catch you up!' he replied without turning his head.

'No, you won't, you'll invent an excuse and stay here!'

He blew out a cloud of frosty breath. *Perfect* conditions for ice fishing. He'd hacked four beautiful holes and laid a stick across each one, from which he'd hung his lines and hooks. To attract the fish he'd made torches of folded birch bark jammed in split sticks, and set them in a row. The First Tree was helping too, shining so brightly it was sending the trout crazy, he'd already caught three. Why couldn't he stay here peacefully with the wolves?

Wolf bounded up as if he'd heard Torak's thoughts and licked the frost off his eyebrows. With a grin Torak pushed Wolf's muzzle aside. His thick winter pelt was sprinkled with snow and his breath smelt of fish. It would take too long to tell him in wolf talk that his shadow was spooking

the trout, so Torak distracted him by backing away on all fours, uttering eager little grunt-whines: *Let's play!*

Lashing his tail, Wolf went down on his forelegs: *Yes, let's!* Then he pounced, soft-biting his pack-brother's arm with muffled growls and hauling him over the ice.

'You know I'm not leaving without you,' called Renn. In the glare of the torchlight she was a black figure by their shelter, but in his mind Torak saw her red hair tucked behind her ears, her pale, well-loved, infuriatingly stubborn face. 'Dark *wants* us at the Feast,' she insisted.

'Yes, but *why?*'

'I don't know, he said it's important. And he's our friend, and he never asks us for anything!'

Torak tossed a trout onto the far bank and watched Wolf race after it. He heaved a sigh.

The Moon of Long Dark was over and they were into the strange days before Sunwake, when the endless blue night was briefly lightened by a false dawn. The sky would grow pale, as if the sun was about to show itself above the Mountains – only for darkness to return as the sun retreated into its cave.

It was an edgy time when each clan did its best to ensure that in a few days the sun really would rise above the peaks. The Boar Clan burnt a whole spruce tree on a hilltop. Renn's clan, the Ravens, held the Feast of Sparks underground, while their Mage ventured even deeper to kindle the need-fire, and everyone sang and—

'Too many people,' grumbled Torak.

'Oh, Torak, it's not that bad, last winter you enjoyed it!'

He heard the smile in her voice and snorted a laugh. But the holes were freezing over, so he applied himself to clearing them with the butt of his ice scoop, flicking the shards for Wolf's mate, Darkfur: she loved chomping ice.

Wolf lay on the far bank, gripping the half-eaten trout in his forepaws. Behind him on the slope the cubs, Blackpaw and Tug, were pouncing on snowdrifts in futile attempts to catch lemmings. Their older brother Pebble was away guarding the pack's range. As a cub he'd been carried off by an eagle owl, and though he'd grown into a handsome young wolf, the ordeal had marked him, and he rarely relaxed.

Renn was shovelling snow onto the fire with an auroch's shoulder blade. Rip and Rek lit onto the shelter and gurgled a greeting. She gave the ravens a distracted nod. 'It's not as if we've far to go,' she told Torak. 'They're only camped a daywalk away.'

But Torak could be stubborn too. He *liked* the feel of this sleeping valley. The river dreaming under the ice, the alders asleep on its banks. Even the pines were dozing, only a single watch-tree remaining properly awake.

He'd chosen this spot because a family of beavers had dammed the river to make a pool which sheltered many fish. Not far from where he knelt, the beavers' lodge was a mound of blue snow, the air above it faintly quivering from the warmth of the furry bodies snuggled within.

Again he sighed. Renn was right. If Dark really wanted them to come...

'What's that over there?' she said in an altered voice.

He raised his head. 'Where?'

'There.'

She stood facing north, pointing at the sky.

Wolf and Darkfur had seen it too. They stood with ears pricked and tails stiff, bodies rigid with tension.

Slowly Torak rose to his feet.

It was low in the sky above the pines spiking the hilltop: a huge, brilliant, blue-white star.

'It's getting bigger,' said Renn.



In the Deep Forest the Lynx Clan hunter stood motionless, his frozen grouse forgotten at his feet. His hand crept to the fur amulet at his throat and under his breath he whispered a prayer to his clan-creature. The star had grown unbearably bright, as big as his fist.

Shielding his eyes with his arms, the hunter lurched against a pine. He heard a strange whistling noise, like a vast flock of geese rushing towards him.



The star was brighter than the sun, turning night to dazzling day. Its shadow passed across Torak, he heard a

whistling like the rush of enormous wings – then a growl of thunder. ‘Get under those rocks!’ he yelled to Renn.

Darkfur was streaking across the ice towards her cubs, Renn shouting something he couldn’t make out – then the sky was raining fire, a hot wind blowing him off his feet.

He fell with a crash. The ice was heaving, the river waking up. The thunder was louder – but how could there be thunder when there were no clouds?

A stink of singed fur, his parka was on fire. Beating out flames, he struggled to his feet.

He saw pines bending like blades of grass, others flying overhead like spears. On the far bank a blazing poplar had fallen, pinning Wolf to the ground. On the near bank the shelter had collapsed, Torak couldn’t see Renn. Next moment he realized that the white thing poking through the wreckage was her hand. Who to help first, Renn or Wolf? *Who?*

A boom like a thousand thunderclaps, swelling to a deafening solid roar...

Silence.

Torak could feel the ice buckling beneath him, see the hillside shaking, trees toppling, boulders crashing – but he couldn’t *bear* anything. The Forest was burning, engulfing him in fierce choking smoke.

He could no longer see Renn or Wolf.





The Lynx Clan hunter had fallen to his knees. Thunder roaring, trees thrashing, the whole sky on fire—

That was the last thing he ever saw.

The Thunderstar blasted entire valleys to cinders. It turned frozen rivers to raging torrents.

It obliterated the heart of the Forest.