Wolves of the Beyond 1: Lone Wolf
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PART ONE

THE BEYOND
Before she felt even the first twinge in her belly, the she Wolf set out to find a remote birthing den. She knew somehow that this birth would not be the same as the others. She had been traveling for days now, and she could sense her time was near. So far she had seen nothing that would serve as a den. There were several shallow pits, but those wouldn’t do. Pits offered no shelter and though it was almost spring, the weather could turn treacherous in a flash. If this happened, the pups would freeze. The sound of their fresh hearts beating so fiercely would grow dim under a thin glaze of ice until the hearts stopped, and there was only silence. This had happened before to the she wolf. She had licked those three pups until her tongue was dry and bleeding from the cold shards, but she had not been able to keep up with the ice. This was her third litter. And this time, she knew she had to get far away from the pack, away from the clan, away from her mate, and most of all, away from the Obea.

Finally, on the night of the fifth rising moon that now hung like an ice blade low on the horizon, she found a crevice under a rock ledge. She smelled it before she saw it. The scent of fox was distinct. She hoped it wasn’t a whelping. *Just the fox, dear Lupus.* She sent up a silent prayer. She did not want to contend with fox kits.

And it had been just a fox—a fox waiting to give birth. The she wolf routed her and took the den, settling in for her time. The fox smell lingered. *Fine,* she thought. It would provide another layer of concealing
scent. She rolled in the scat that she found nearby and then snorted to herself as she imagined what her pups would think of their mum. No matter, they would live—and if need be, live away from the clan.

Then they came. Three pups, two tawny like their father, the other silvery gray. They were perfect in her eyes. Indeed, it took her a while to discover the one little flaw on the silver pup—a slight splay to his front paw. When the she wolf examined it more closely, she saw that this paw had a dim tracery of a spiral, like a swirled star, on its footpad. It was odd, but certainly not a deformity. And she told herself the splay of that paw was minor. He was not *malcadh*, the ancient wolf word for cursed. It was such a slight flaw, and she had hope that the splay might lessen in the days that followed. The toes that pointed out might rotate back, and the tracery was so dim it wouldn’t leave a print even in soft mud. The silver pup was strong. She could tell by the way he sucked on her teat. Still, she was glad she had taken the precaution of finding a birthing den far away.

She dragged the pups one by one into the deeper recesses of the crevice, which thankfully had two or three tunnels that extended into a nesting chamber. Here she planned to stay wrapped around her cubs for several days, nursing them in the quiet darkness as long as she could. She knew that soon enough they would become restless, and when their eyes finally opened, they would seek that pale thread of light that gleamed feebly at the den’s opening, drawn to it as strongly as they were drawn to the milk from her teats, as strongly as they would later be by the scent of meat. But if they could remain concealed, they would survive and the silver pup would grow stronger and stronger so that the threat of the Obea would begin to fade, like an old scent mark scoured away by wind and rain and snow.
The she wolf would have only a few hours for such fanciful thinking.

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In a world that to any other wolf might appear trackless, Shibaan, the Obea of the MacDuncan clan had found the she wolf’s trail. The laws of the wolf clans were harsh. The Obea, was the female wolf in each clan who was designated to carry deformed pups out of the whelping den to a place of abandonment. Only barren she wolves were eligible, since such wolves were assumed not to have developed maternal instincts. With no blood offspring, Obeas were devoted entirely to the well being of the clan, and a clan could not be healthy and strong if defective wolves were born into it. The rules were precise. The deformed or sick pup was to be removed by the Obea and carried to a remote spot where it would be left to die of starvation or eaten as prey by another animal. If the cub somehow managed to survive, it was permitted back into the clan as a gnaw wolf and became the lowest ranking wolf in the clan. A malcadh’s mother was never welcomed back. The clan must be rid of her and her mate who had contaminated the bloodlines. If they were to survive, they must separate and seek new lives in different clans, for they were deemed to have destinies marked by blight that might be set right only by finding new bloodlines.

Shibaan had learned to become suspicious when a pregnant female about to give birth went by-lang, which meant deeply away. She was an experienced Obea and was not fooled long by the tricks of the she wolf Morag. Shibaan had to admit that Morag was more thorough than most in covering her tracks. Morag had never urinated except in streams or the
ice-free parts of the river. She had left no scent marks to declare her territory. To the average wolf, the clues to the desperate mother’s flight might have seemed non-existent. But Shibaan was no ordinary wolf, nor was she an ordinary Obea. She found the subtlest of traces. A tuft of silver fur caught on some thistle. Scratch marks on a rock that had served as a foothold when Morag crossed a stream. A slight whiff—a scent message perhaps, not from Morag, but another. To Shibaan, it flared up like a signpost. The message was clear: My territory, first lieutenant of the MacDermott clan, a response to an outsider veering too close to MacDermott territory. So, thought Shibaan, Morag has crossed the MacDermott border. Daring!

Then there was the scent of fox, but not pure fox. Shibaan shook her head wearily. I always find them, no matter what tricks they play. And she did. The fox scat outside the den even had a thread of fur, like a silvery pennant quivering in the breeze to announce that inside a she wolf concealed herself, sticky with fox scat, but still redolent in the sweet fragrances of new pups and warm milk.

No fuss, no muss. The mothers of malcadh never did put up a fight. They knew the consequences of resistance—immediate death to all the pups.

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Morag watched the Obea carrying the splay-pawed pup in her jaws until she was a dark speck on the horizon. How perfectly suited Shibaan was for this job! It was as if the years of performing her duty with unquestioning obedience had scoured away any kind of feeling or
imagination. For when Morag looked into the green eyes of the Obea, they were completely devoid of light, or depth, or anything thing that might reflect emotion. They were like dry stones, bleached of nearly all color.

The silver pup had allowed itself to be picked up by its neck scruff and instinctively had curled its body into carrying position. Did he not sense the Obea’s scent was different from his mother’s? Did the pup not mind the milkless, dry, sterile wind of her being? The pup had nursed constantly—but constant had been just a sliver in the short day since it had been born. The pup’s eyes and ears were still sealed shut. It would be days before they opened. The pup’s only way to know his mother, the Milk Giver, was through her scent and perhaps the feel of her fur and the throbbing rhythms of her heart. Would he remember? But what did it matter.

A tween season storm was brewing and these were the worst. Coming on the edge of spring or the cusp of summer such storms were full of rage, tumultuous winds and slashing ice. Morag had felt it coming and seen the leaden skies sinking lower and lower, clamping down on the land like a trap for all earth’s creatures. Her pup would be abandoned in the midst of this storm. And she herself would have to remain with the two other pups to await the Obea, who after abandoning the silver one, would lead Morag back to the clan. The Obea would carry one pup and Morag the other as they traveled that trail of shame. The news of the \textit{malcadh} pup would be announced, and Morag would have to leave the clan immediately, an outlaw. The surviving pups would be nursed by another female.

The Obea, though lacking imagination, did have thoughts. Practical thoughts. Where should she take this pup, so that there was no chance it
could survive? She had seen something on the pad of the splayed paw that disturbed her. She wasn’t sure why, all she knew was that she had not liked those markings.

What Shibaan did know was her job: to take care of the bad business of the clan. She did not mind her duty now. Long ago her failure to have pups was like a sharp pebble under foot, a constant reminder that she would never be a mother but instead an unranked wolf charged with an unpleasant task. However, she performed her task well, and gradually over the years she had gained some respect from the chieftain. The sharp pebble, once an irritation, became smooth and settled in her being like a polished river stone—there, not as a reminder of failure, but simply as part of her character, her charge, her duty as an Obea.

As she carried the pup, she glimpsed again the odd spiraling mark on its footpad. She felt a tremor in her heart. She could have killed the pup, but the Obea was very superstitious. It was against the law to take short cuts, and she wanted to climb the spirit trail to the Great Wolf, Lupus, and the Cave of Souls.

Ahead, Shibaan saw the gleam of the river under the gray skies that pressed down. It was there she intended to leave the pup. The river was just beginning to break up in the spring thaw. And when that happened the level would rise suddenly, torrentially, and the pup would drown. She would leave it on the edge, where surely it would be caught by the surging waters.

She arrived at a spot where the banks had been undercut by the course of the river. The thaw had already shown signs of beginning, so she placed the pup on an ice ledge. It was a spot certain to be swamped, especially when the storm rumbled in.
The Obea was careful as she put the pup on the ice—heedful, precise. The pup was an it, neither a he nor a she, nor even a wolf. Just an it that squirmed, mewing and whining weakly. But all that would be over soon. If the storm didn’t take the pup, an owl would. The river was on a major flight path of the collier owls who flew into the Beyond for coals spewed from the volcanoes. They were always hungry when they got to this point. This malseadh would not be the first seized by an owl from the kingdom of Ga’Hoole. There were smiths owls too that set up temporarily near the volcanoes. Forging was hard work. Those owls ate a lot. Despite the close relationship between owls and wolves a malseadh was fair game.

There was a tick tick sound as the pup attempted to grip the cold smooth surface with its tiny paws. The mewing and whining escalated to weeping, but the Obea didn’t hear it. Her ears were sealed as effectively as the pup’s. There were no vague stirrings deep within her. If anything, she felt only the cold smooth weight of that stone that had become synonymous with her duty, her charge, her identity. I am the Obea. That is all I need to know. All I need to be. I am the Obea.
Chapter 1: The River Roars

He could not see, he could not hear, and vainly he poked out his tongue to lick, but the smell of milk was gone and with it the warm teat. He could feel only cold, nothing else. Cold filled him until his small body was racked with violent shivers. How had everything changed so fast? Where was the stream of warm milk, the soft fur, the squirming presence of the other pups? In his brief life, he had known little, but now he knew less. Smell, taste, and feeling, the only senses he had, were deprived, starved. The pup felt himself drifting off into a void that was neither life nor death, only a terrible nothingness. And with this great void came a numbness.

Something stirred—a vibration—and with it a new element entered his barely pulsing life. The terrible cracking and booming as the river ice buckled was so loud that it penetrated the pup’s sealed ears. Then suddenly a roar surged through his head. There was a great lurch, and he began to skid off the ice shelf, but digging in his sharp little claws, he gripped hard.

It would seem a cruel trick that the lone pup gained two vital senses, sight and sound, as the winter-locked river ruptured and broke free. It was perhaps the shock that caused his eyes to unseal and his ears to open.

The final thaw of the river unleashed immense cataracts of water that tore at the banks, uprooting trees, dislodging boulders and outcroppings of rock. The shelf on which the Obea had placed the pup creaked, then tilted and at last there was a sharp crack that splintered in
his ears. Light flashed brutally in the pup’s eyes as the moon scorched
the ice floes sweeping down the river.

Dim in the pup’s memory was a previous violence. Birth. He had
been launched from the warmth of his mother’s womb into the grip of the
forces greater than himself. His small body was nothing against the
intense contractions that expelled him, cast him out. And now it was
happening again. But instead of going from the inviolable warmth of his
mother’s womb he was sliding into the frigid waters of the raging river. He
dug harder with that splayed paw, which seemed to have a better grip
than the others. He clung, clung dumbly to the shelf that had joined the
other flotsam of the river.

It would have been easier, less painful, to release his grip, to slip off
and drown. But there was only instinct, and the instinct was to grip. He
opened his eyes wider and saw the gleam of the full moon on the river.
The brightness made him squint.

His first lesson: He could adjust his eyes to the light. His first
thought: What else might he adjust or be able to change? Might he bring
back the warmth he once knew? The smell of milk, the taste? The soft
crush of those wiggling furry creatures that had tumbled about him as
they all scrambled for the milk? The comforting rhythmic vibrations he
felt as he pressed close to suck? There was something beneath the fur,
deep in the Milk Giver, that beat.

Icy water dashed over him, but still he clung. Occasionally, he felt
the ice shelf spin round and round in one place. The light swirled and he
experienced a dizzying nausea. To steady himself and keep his grip he had
to shut his eyes tight. Then there would be a jolt and his raft would break
loose and join the tumult of the stream. He felt the ice diminishing
beneath him. His hind legs hung off the raft now and were growing numb in the water. The numbness crept through him. It was not an unpleasant feeling, but with it something else seemed to grow dimmer, seep from the deepest part of him. His claws began to lose their grip.

The last thing he felt was a tremendous jolt; the last thing he heard was the sound of his claws skidding across the last fragment of his ice raft.
Chapter 2: The Spark from The River

On this stormy night, there was a sound that rose louder than the roar of the river and the howling of the wind. The anguished cries of the mother grizzly shook the banks on which she sat. Her great gulping grief seemed to suck the air from the earth. The long guard hairs on her back were sheathed in ice and trembled, creating a bristling litter of small sounds beneath the rage of her grief.

When the river had threatened to flood her den, she had turned her back for a few seconds to scan for higher ground. In those seconds, cougars had erupted out of nowhere and made off with her cub. Her single cub. She had only grown one this time. All summer and fall she had eaten, fattened herself up and for what? To have what would most likely be her last-born killed.

Now, with her teats still dripping with the milk meant for her cub, she was ready to die. She welcomed the river that she had hoped to escape. Not since the mating time five summers before, when a male grizzly had killed one of her cubs to get near her, had she grieved like this. She would not move from this den where she had birthed and suckled the cub. She tipped her massive head toward the moon that watched her like a dead eye and she pleaded with Great Ursus, *take me, take me!*

The grizzly had lost all sense of time, but the night became darker as the moon slipped down in the western sky. Near dawn, the storm had blown out, leaving dark clouds on the horizon like smoldering ashes. The flood of the river had reached its peak but still had not taken the grizzly.
A dark sodden clot snagged on her half-submerged hind leg. She shook her foot at the annoying scratching sensation. But when she shook, the clot clung tighter. It made her irritable, and she dragged her foot up onto the bank.

She would often wonder what it was that stopped her from reaching forward and simply scraping off the clot. It betrayed no sign of life. The scratching was most likely the prickly thorns of a bramble that had become entangled with the flotsam of the racing currents. River trash. That was all. And yet she felt something.

She would think of it as a spark. She had seen sparks come from the sky, and sparks struck from rocks when tumbling boulders collided, but she had never imagined a spark coming from a river. A spark from a river unquenched, undamaged, undiminished, flying upward from the watery turbulence and containing in its miniscule sphere of light, the promise of life. So she reached forward and carefully picked up the sodden clump with both her front paws. It didn’t squirm. She couldn’t see signs of breathing. But it was a cub of some sort, and when it opened its eyes with what seemed great pain, she saw the spark.

As the sun lifted over the horizon, she saw its light reflected in the cub’s two eyes. And then she saw an image that shocked her. It was her own reflection in the eyes of an animal that was not born of her, nor her kind. It’s a wolf, she thought. I seek death and it seeks life.

And then she looked up at the sky, searching for the great bear constellation. She could not see it, for dawn was breaking, but deep down she knew that this wolf was a message from Ursus, a scolding. She must not think of death. Her time had not come yet. It wasn’t an accident that the pathetic pup had fetched up on her leg. It was a gift from the river.
“Faolan,” she whispered. “I shall call you Faolan.” Foa meant both river and wolf. And lan was the word for gift.

“You are my gift from the river.” And she gathered him to her chest.

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The Milk Giver? The pup smelled the milky traces in the thick fur and nuzzled toward the source. But the closer he got, the more confused he became. It did not seem the same. The smell was different and the taste as well. And there was a new frightening sound. The thunderous roar of the river was replaced by a great rhythmic booming, and threaded through the mighty reverberations were gusty bubbling sounds. As the grizzly gently pressed Faolan closer to her teat, the sounds actually shook him. Yet he felt safe.

It was a different Milk Giver. A huge one, many times bigger than first, and he was hearing the pumping of her heart and the turbulences of her stomach. Gradually he became used to the sounds. They blended into the rushing of the river, folded into the quieter noises of his own sucking.

He sucked. His world became one of milk. Thick rich milk. He shut his eyes and slept, still sucking.

The grizzly looked down on Faolan and huge tears rolled from the corners of her eyes. The river spirit brought you to me. There must be a reason. I shall nurse you through this morning into the day and through the night. A spark can become a flame, a flame a fire.

She blew her warm gentle breath on to him. The pup’s eyes fluttered, and he sank deeper into dreamless sleep.
Chapter 3: Milk and Light

The pup might have been sent from Ursus, and the grizzly might have had the best of intentions, but she was at a loss to imagine how she might take care of this pup beyond nursing him. He was a greedy little creature, that was for sure, and he was so different from a bear cub. He smelled differently. He sucked differently. And although he was a bit larger than a newborn bear cub, when she had found him he was not fattening up as fast. A bear cub would have doubled its weight by now. The wolf pup had grown some, but not enough. And yet he nursed incessantly. The grizzly worried that her milk was not right, or perhaps she wasn’t holding him properly. What did she know about raising a wolf pup? If he had been a sign from Ursus, there should have been more signs. Signs that told her what exactly to do.

The grizzly told herself every day that the pup was a gift. But she wanted him to be more than just a gift. Did he feel she was strange, too? But what do cubs know? She was startled and nearly chuckled. I called him a cub! And then she realized that even though the pup was a wolf, perhaps they were all alike. Cubs, pups. They think about nothing but milk. Faolan is no different.

He had paused in his nursing for a moment, and she took the opportunity to pick him up in her huge paws and hold him close to her face. They peered into each other’s eyes. His were becoming a lovely green, like the wolves’ eyes in the Beyond, and hers were a rich, gleaming brown, so shiny that the tiny wolf could see his reflection in them.

“You’re a funny little creature!” And she stuck out her tongue and dabbed his wet little nose. He gave a happy yip yip.
“Oh you like that!” She did it again, and he squealed now with delight.

She set him down. He immediately rolled onto his back, holding his tiny paws in the air expectantly. The grizzly thought this was a signal that he wanted some more tickling. She began to speak with a mixture of words, snorts and huffs. She wasn’t sure if he understood her or not. It didn’t matter.

“Oh Great Ursus, you want me to do this again, you funny little fellow.” The words of the wolves and the bears and the owls did not differ much, but the tone and the expressions in the subtler movements of their heads or their eyes, created a hidden language strange to another animal’s, and sometimes incomprehensible.

Faolan lay on his back, waiting for the huge tongue to tickle his belly. So she did. And the pup leapt up gleefully. This was repeated several times. And then the pup ran a distance and turned his head to look slyly back at her. He suddenly hurled himself toward the grizzly, leaping into her arms. She was so stunned, she fell backward. He climbed up her chest and began licking her chin, then her nose.

The bear’s chest rumbled with chuffs of delight. The more she chuffed the more Faolan licked her nose. The bear felt her eyes fill with tears. For days this wolf pup had nursed but had seemed to hardly look at her. But now, now when he had finally stopped nursing for just a moment and she had played with him, he played back. He understood. She picked him up again gently and held him away from her face.

They peered once again into each other’s eyes. He wiggled a bit and made the milk! milk! bark. She cradled him, and he clamped on to her teat. But this time there was a difference. He opened his eyes as he nursed and
looked right at her. It was as if there was a current flowing between them. Faolan consumed the milk and the grizzly drank in the luminous green light of his eyes. She felt a deep surge of love.
Chapter 4: Thunderheart

They made a curious twosome—the great lumbering grizzly with the sun reflecting off the silvery tips of her brown fur and the small pup, his coat a brighter silver, scampering sometimes ahead of her, sometimes at her side, sometimes behind as they foraged for the spring bulbs that were just pushing their sprouts through the ground. One would grunt and the other would yip or hurl out snappish barks. Yet somehow they had found a way to begin communicating. He had begun to swing his head exactly like a bear cub would when saying “no”.

More and more the grizzly realized that rearing a pup was not all that different from rearing a cub. She marveled at the similarities between the two. Yet it frightened her how small Faolan was in comparison to a bear cub. Small and defenseless. However, the pup was very fast, much faster than a bear cub, and could cover ground with great bursts of speed. The grizzly thought Faolan’s speed might compensate for what he lacked in size. But there was the problem of his front paw, which was splayed and he favored. A wolf, just like a bear, needed full use of all its paws.

Faolan now had begun to lag behind and was making small whimpering I’m tired sounds. The grizzly turned around and glared at him. Faolan whimpered and squatted in a hummock of soft grass, wagging his head and growling. “No, no, no!” he said, then blew a great spray of air through his nostrils as if to proclaim too hot!

He walked slowly forward as if he could hardly drag himself to the grizzly’s side, and nudged against her try to clamber onto her back. There was a huge muscle over the grizzly’s shoulders that powered her
forelimbs, and Faolan loved to climb aboard and ride high on it. Bear cubs were too large to ride at this stage, but not the wolf pup. Even in the den, Faolan liked curling up on that furry mountain when he wasn’t nursing.

Having mothered three sets of cubs, the grizzly had heard all the complaints before. And it really didn’t matter if they were bears or wolves, the young got tired, they got cranky, they wanted to go back to the den and nurse—easy food. But one day the grizzly’s milk would dry up, and the pup would have to learn about other sources of food. It was particularly important for Faolan because he was so small. *Is he small for his age? Perhaps this is the size of all wolf pups?* the grizzly wondered. Nonetheless, it made her nervous.

It surprised the grizzly that she had grown so attached to the little one. But that spark she had detected when he had first fetched up on her foot and opened his eyes seemed to kindle throughout his tiny body. He was quick, smart, very strong willed and now the fires from the spark sometimes had to be tamed. How could such a tiny little thing contain such fierceness?

The grizzly lumbered up to Faolan and butted him with her boxy nose. He tumbled backward, squealing in mock pain.

“Get up,” she grunted.

“No! No!”

“No” was most definitely Faolan’s favorite word. “No” and “More milk.” It sounded slightly different when he said it than from when bear cubs uttered these same words. His voice was higher, not as deep as a cub’s. The grizzly wondered if this was because his chest was so much smaller than a bear’s. It was so narrow, so fragile. His growls were not only higher, but also they were more shallow than a cub’s. However, the
accompanying gestures were very similar to those of a cub. Did the pups of the wolves’ packs toss their heads about this way? From what little she had seen of full grown wolves, their gestures were nothing like these. Once she had watched a pack from behind a huge boulder as they tore at the carcass of a moose. There was an elaborate formality to their every move. Certain wolves ate first and then others crept up as if requesting permission to partake of the meat. She wasn’t sure how they would deal with a whining obstreperous pup like Faolan, who had just flopped himself on his back and was flailing his splayed paw dramatically.

He wanted to go back to the den, to the cool welcoming shadows, to its earthy coziness, to the smell of the river, the soft moss pads that grew at the opening where he loved to take his morning nap. But most of all, he wanted to curl up against the grizzly and nurse. Even the thought of that sweet milk made his stomach growl. Bulbs had a horrible taste. There was no juice in roots. He had even complained that they were too hard for his teeth.

He began whining loudly now.

“Urskadamus!” the grizzly grumbled the ancient bear oath, which meant curse of a rabid bear. Then she blasted him with a series of short huffs of intolerance.

This was the first level of scolding. But Faolan continued to whine and roll on his back, wagging the splayed paw.

*Enough of this!* she thought. *He must learn not to give in to his weaknesses.* He must, she realized suddenly, learn to make them his strengths. It would be a cruel lesson but there was an even crueler world awaiting him.

She growled for the first time ever at the pup and then with her own mighty paw whacked his good paw. Now Faolan howled in real pain.
His green eyes flooded with astonishment. *How could you? How could you?* he wondered.

The grizzly did not have words for every occasion that a young pup or a wolf would understand. Sometimes teaching or communicating by example was the best way, and then later the words would come. So she lumbered past Faolan and began digging in a patch of onion grass with her own paw, the one she rarely dug with. The message was clear. *‘Use the splayed paw! Make it your digging paw.’*

Meekly, Faolan began to scratch the dirt where the onions grew. It took a long time, but finally he dug one up.

The grizzly was proud. She came up beside him, making low purring sounds, then nuzzled him gently and licked Faolan under his jaw with her enormous tongue. She turned and began digging in another nearby patch of onions. Faolan stared at her in dismay. *More?* he thought. But he began scratching with the splayed paw. He did not want to risk her wrath again. What would hurt more than a whack was if she said he could not nurse.

*No milk only onions!* Unthinkable! He dug harder.

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The pup had done well. The grizzly had watched him out of the corner of her eye. In a very short time, he had turned the splayed paw in a special way so that he could get nearly the force he had with the other paw.

Faolan was a quick learner, and not just quick, but inventive. Still, the grizzly constantly regretted that she knew so little about wolves. But bears and wolves tended to avoid one another. This was quite different
from the owls and the wolves, who had formed a close alliance over a
great span of time that reached back to when the wolves had first arrived
in the Beyond. The grizzly often thought that if she had been an owl she
would have been a better mother to this pup. But it was stupid to waste
time over regretting that she was not an owl. Instead, she thought
and thought, searching for every scrap of memory she had of wolves. She
vividly remembered once watching from a high promontory two packs
that had come together to hunt. She had been quick to see that the way
wolves hunted was very different from that of bears. Bears were much
larger and more powerful, but wolves made up for their lack of power with
their clever ways. Bears never formed packs. And perhaps because of that
they had a different manner of thinking. The wolves’ ways seemed
complicated and mysterious.

And owls, the grizzly continued her musing, owls were so clever!
They knew how to make tools, weapons. They stuck things in the fires of
their forges and made claws that fit over their talons. Perhaps, she
thought suddenly, bears weren’t so smart because in fact they were so
much bigger, bigger than wolves and so much bigger than owls. Then a
really dreadful thought occurred to her. Perhaps I am not smart enough to
rear a wolf pup!

She looked back at the poor little thing as they made their way
back to the den. He was completely exhausted, wobbly to the point of
staggering off the narrow path. He was most likely too tired to even cling
to her hump while riding. Well, she thought, smart or dumb, I’m all he’s
got. She turned around and picked the little pup up with its head in her
mouth and the rest of his body dangling, the way she would have carried
a one-moon-old cub. At least two moons had passed since Faolan had
fetched up, and he was still small enough to be carried carefully in her mouth.

    Tomorrow they would make their way an even longer distance to forage for the squirrel caches of white bark pine. The white bark that squirrels used to line their nest was one of the most nutritious of the foods available in spring. And with luck perhaps they would find a squirrel. The spring diet was mostly grasses, roots, nuts. Meat would come later but they could always hope for carrion of an old animal who had not made it through the winter. Even as the grizzly led the pup back to the den, she swung her head constantly to sniff, scanning for the distinctive smell of rotting flesh.

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    Thunderheart had found a new den for spring and summer, one of the loveliest ever. It was in a thicket of alders on the river near a back eddy that would soon be busy with trout. Just outside the den’s entrance, glacier lilies nodded their pale yellow heads. The steep bank down to the river was stippled with wild blue iris.

    By the time they entered the den, Faolan was asleep. But he never slept so soundly that he couldn’t nurse. The grizzly sat upright with her legs stuck straight out in front of her. While Faolan nursed, she watched the lavender twilight fall softly on the land. The river reflected the clouds on it glassy surface. It was different from the stormy night Faolan had arrived. She looked down at him, who was drunk with milk now.

    She wondered about him more and more. The splayed paw was not that odd, but the faint tracery on the pad of swirling lines intrigued her. The swirls were so dim but there was something almost hypnotic about the pattern of lines. What did it mean? Where had Faolan come from?
Why had the river given him up to her? Was he lonely? Wolves were pack animals. Bears solitary. How could she be not just a mother but an entire pack to this wolf? “Urskadamus!” she muttered silently.

The grizzly wondered all sorts of things. Wolves she knew could not sit up like bears. So they must nurse their young in a very different way, perhaps lying down. But she was always worried about rolling over and crushing Faolan accidentally. He was so small and she so huge. And wolves could not stand up, let alone sit up. This seemed especially unfortunate. She saw so much standing up on her hind legs. She learned so much. It troubled her that Faolan could not do this. Would it, she wondered, be possible to teach a wolf to stand up and walk just a bit on his hind legs? She might try it. She looked down at him again and gave him a cuddle and a nuzzle. She loved him so. It was very odd she knew. Other bears would look at her suspiciously. But she didn’t care. She simply didn’t care.

Faolan squirmed a bit and settled deeper down into his milk laced sleep. He had grown accustom to the percussive sounds of the Grizzly’s innards—the windy drafts of her gut as she digested, the bellowing inhalations and exhalations of her breathing, but most of all, the epic thumpings of her heart, that huge majestic heart. The sound wove through Faolan while he slept like a song for his milk dreams. The grizzly was no longer simply Milk Giver in his mind, but Thunderheart.
Chapter 5: Den Lessons

It was during the first sliver of dawn that Thunderheart unceremoniously dumped Faolan from her lap and gave him a gentle butt with her nose on his muzzle. “Watch me!”

She left the den and he followed her down the banks of the river to the rock slab that slid into the water. It was his first fishing lesson. The trout at this time of the moon’s cycle would begin schooling in the back eddy by the rock. Fishing took patience and Thunderheart knew that wolf pups, like bear cubs, were short on patience—especially Faolan. But he was a quick learner. She hoped he was ready for the very practical lesson of fishing. He just had to fatten up. She worried incessantly about what she perceived as his smallness.

Fishing of course would be easier in the fall when the salmon began their run up the river. Then all one had to do was wade on the upstream side of a small waterfall and catch the salmon as they flipped themselves toward their spawning grounds. Dumb with their urge to mate they were easy prey. But trout were different. Free of any compulsion to spawn at this time of year and certainly with no obsessions about swimming, trout were a challenge. No matter, Faolan must learn. He had to grow fatter, bigger.

The grizzly waited and peered into the amber water, scanning for the first flicker of a trout. She felt Faolan growing restless, and she knew he could not remain still much longer. But the fish didn’t come. The pup whined a bit and wagged his head in the direction of a nearby cluster of
sedges. She grunted her permission. Now she would have to keep one eye on the pup and one for the fish.

He was happy though. The sedges provided an endless opportunity for nosing about for grubs and beetles and ladybugs, a favorite of bears and now a favorite of Faolan. He found a nest and was soon yipping with delight.

Faolan raised his muzzle, which was speckled with red dots. At the same moment Thunderheart glimpsed the flash of a trout. There was a loud *plash* as she smacked her forepaw into the river, grabbed the trout and slapped it on the rock. Blood spurt into the air, the droplets caught in dazzling shards of light from the sun on the horizon.

Faolan froze. He smelled... blood. His eyes fixed on the spinning drops glittering madly in the morning light. His heart raced, a quickness in his mouth. His tongue suddenly wet. He was stunned by a new hunger aroused deep within him, and with an overwhelming admiration for Thunderheart. He shook his head fiercely to rid himself of the annoying ladybugs and meekly walked over to her.

Faolan lowered his head and then his entire body, flattening his ears as he flashed the whites of his eyes. Thunderheart softly woofed at him. “What are you doing?” she asked. Faolan had never appeared more wolfish, and yet she instinctively knew that he was showing her respect. But where had he learned this?

She knew the answer. Blood. With the claw-ripped body of the fish, she had awakened Faolan’s blood passion. It was the same with cubs, but never had any of her cubs behaved in quite this way. They scrambled and tussled, trying to get in for the first nip of fresh meat, shoving and
pushing rudely in their clamor to try this new taste. Faolan, however, was approaching her on his belly.

She thought, *As if I am Ursus and no mere mother bear!* She ripped the trout in two and dropped it in front of Faolan. But he hesitated and looked up at her with almost pleading eyes. She could see the saliva dripping from his mouth, but still he hesitated. She pushed the fish even closer to him. But Faolan only flattened himself further and began to make small squeaking sounds. Thunderheart studied him carefully. She noticed that he stole a quick glance at the fish and then at her. Suddenly it burst upon her. *I should eat first!*

*But how,* she wondered, *will he survive if he allows others to eat first?* Was this something wolves did? Pack behavior? *But he has to eat!* *He cannot give way to others, he will be eaten!* Her mind roiled with confusion.

She was rearing a wolf, but knew only the way of bears.

Faolan remained flattened on his belly, stealing a glance at her sometimes but mostly rolling his eyes back as if he dared not even look at her. Finally, she gave up and bit off the tail of the fish, making sure to leave the meatiest part for the pup.

Immediately, he pounced on what remained.

From that moment on, she never had a more ardent student of fishing. By mid-morning, Faolan was following Thunderheart into the river to swim behind her as they examined every cranny for schooling trout. The splayed paw served him well, and this, for Thunderheart, was perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the whole endeavor. Faolan became skillful at slapping and scooping with that odd front paw.
By mid-morning both Faolan and Thunderheart were stuffed with fish. They lay on a sunny bank and traced the path of clouds across the sky. Thunderheart grunted and raised one paw to point out a cloud that looked just like the trout they had been catching. Faolan yipped with glee and immediately began scanning the cloudscape for another picture. Suddenly, he jumped up in great excitement and began to beat his tail against the ground. Two towering clouds had silently collided, a hump bulging from one cloud near the top. Around that hump shoulders rose. Faolan yipped and Thunderheart sat up, too. Above the hump another smaller dark cloud was settling. Faolan could not contain his joy. “It’s us! It’s us! I ride you in the sky!”

And with that announcement Faolan flung himself onto Thunderheart’s back. The huge bear roared with delight, and the ground shook as they bounded off together, with Faolan perched on top of her.
They had not gone far when Thunderheart felt Faolan grow suddenly tense. She saw immediately what caught his attention. In a clearing, a mother grizzly and two cubs were making their way to the river to fish. The grizzly mother and cubs spotted them and froze in their tracks. Faolan tumbled from Thunderheart’s back and scurried behind her, trying to hide. He nudged up against her hind leg, pressing into her fur. The mother and cubs approached cautiously. Faolan peered out and the cubs both made chuffing sounds. They were laughing at him and he knew it! Their mother simply stared dumbfounded. Thunderheart could feel Faolan shivering.

*He knows he’s different!* It was bound to happen. Her first instinct was to shield him, prevent the bears from staring. But the more the mother stared and the more the little cubs chuffed—one was chuffing so hard it was rolling on the ground with glee at this odd sight—the more determined Thunderheart was not to shield Faolan. She moved her legs so that Faolan was exposed, shuddering when she realized how tiny he was in comparison to the cubs.

Faolan made a mournful cry and looked up at Thunderheart. If she could have, she would have willed him to be twice his size. But she stood still as a rock. Not a sign, not a sound passed between them. All she could think of was that night she had dragged him from the river, that spark of life, nearly quenched yet still flickering. That fierceness!

Faolan caught something in her eyes. Slowly he turned his head to the cubs, who were now convulsed with chuffing in the tall grass. In a split second, the pup’s body transformed. His shivering stopped. He lifted his
head high and began to walk forward with a regal bearing, his tail raised and his ears alert. The cubs’ mother bristled with fear. She reached out and swatted the cub nearest to her. He yelped, and then his sister gave a gasp as she looked up from her tumbling and spotted Faolan.

The bear family regarded the pup with confusion now. How could something so small do this to them? Thunderheart herself was baffled. Faolan had not grown a speck bigger and yet somehow he appeared dominant. For one moment she had observed the pup caught between two worlds—one of which he had never seen. It was as if Faolan had joined something very important and very old, as if he were surrounded by the spirit of an invisible pack.

Then his tail began to waver just slightly and droop, and Thunderheart trotted over to him, grunted the command to follow, while reinforcing it with a light tap to his shoulder.

The mother grizzly blinked. Who was this strange creature who looked like a wolf, but now was behaving like a bear cub?

In truth, the animals were all confused, including Faolan. As he trotted behind Thunderheart one thought ran through his head. *I am different. I am different. I am different.*

On their way back to the den they passed a small inlet from the river where they had fished. The water was still, undisturbed by current. Faolan paused and peered down at the gleaming surface. Thunderheart came up beside him, wondering if he had found more fish. Both their reflections quivered on the surface of the dark water. *I look nothing like her, nothing like any animal I have seen. Why are my eyes so green? Why is my face so narrow? Thunderheart’s face is huge, wider than my chest. Her fur is so thick and dark. My fur is too bright.*
They returned to the den. Out of habit, Faolan clamped onto Thunderheart’s teat. All while he nursed he looked gravely into her eyes, and she saw a question in the deep green pools of light. *Why am I not like you?* She growled softly and licked his nose in answer.

*Love,* she thought, *love is all that matters.* But she did not say these words aloud. Bears, being solitary creatures, had great reserve and did not often give voice to their most powerful feelings. It was as if to utter such thoughts aloud was to diminish them. But she looked into Faolan’s eyes, and he, who had learned the ways of the bears, met her gaze. Engulfed in the deep amber light of Thunderheart’s eyes the wolf understood that he was different. He knew he was loved, as if he were her own cub.

He would not be able to nurse much longer for Thunderheart sensed that her milk was drying up. She was happy that they had been successful with the fish, but knew that she must now teach him to go after the real meat, the red meat. This might be easier than she had thought for it was Faolan who had first sensed the mother grizzly and her cubs. He must have picked up their scent. And if so he had done it quicker than she had. A good thing for hunting red meat.

They both slept through the rising heat of the day and into the late afternoon.

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*Thunderheart thought she smelled the bear coming. But she could not move. Her limbs felt heavy. It was as if she had sunk into winter sleep.*
This is not winter *she told herself*. I must move. My cubs...my cubs. Yet if it is winter-sleep it is not mating time. So why should I have scent marked? Why am I so confused? Was there time to scent mark? *She could hardly lift her head, let alone rise to her full height and mark the trees near the den.* A torrent of blood slashed the perfect blue of the sky as the great male grizzly ripped open the back of her cub to its bone. *Thunderheart rose up, roared and charged the male. She tore at his arm. A deep gash. He screeched in pain and ran off. But was it a mortal injury? She feared not. He would be back. . . he would be back. . . .*

Thunderheart woke up from the horrific dream with a violent shake that spilled the wolf pup from the lap.

“Urskadamus!” she muttered. Faolan blinked at her in alarm. He pulled back his lips in a grimace of fear, the hackles on the back of his neck rising as he tucked his tail between his hind legs. The grizzly huffed nervously. The time was coming when she knew the males would be feeling the urge for her company. If she could scent mark before she was fertile and before such a male came into her territory it would be good.

She knew that wolves scent marked as well. This might truly confuse other bears. She had no inclination to mate. Faolan was her last cub, and she was determined to do the best possible for him. No male was going to harm him or run him off.

But could he learn to stand up and walk, even run like a bear? He could jump quite high when he wanted a ride on her hump. He could almost reach her shoulder and she knew he could scent mark. He had certainly urinated in the area around the den, but more scent marking was needed; the other special kind that she had sometimes caught wind of when she passed wolf territory.
This was a practical lesson. Unlike the notion of love which could not be expressed in words, this one could be spoken. . . very clear actions to accompany the words. Faolan’s language skills had grown. Thunderheart had heard wolves and owls speak on occasion and at the time thought the words were so different, but the weren’t at all. It was merely the tones, the register in which they were uttered that seemed strange. She sometimes thought of it as water. The sound of water differs in a fast running brook from the clamor of a falls or the trickle of a stream in the dry season. But it was all water. One just had to listen.

Faolan’s voice was shallower, not as deep as her own. Owls’ tones varied widely. Some were almost hollow, others more sonorous and a few screechy. None of the owls’ voices when they spoke were remotely like a that of a bear and yet the words were almost identical. Nevertheless, Faolan was beginning to sound slightly bear-ish when he spoke. He was acquiring some of the rough, back-of-the-throat sounds that were common to the grizzlies.

And as soon as they were out of the den Faolan scampered toward the riverbank. Thunderheart gave him a low snarl and a firm head butt to his flanks that spun Faolan around in the direction that she wanted him to follow. “This way!”

She swung her head toward a large white pine, then rose up half way on her hind legs and began rubbing her back against the tree. There was a harsh scratching sound. She was leaving a scent, but it was not the odor of a female fertile and receptive to mating. Faolan must leave a scent as well, his own scent.

Thunderheart stared a him hard. She sensed that Faolan must do this scenting with his hindquarters. She lowered herself now and sprawled
on the ground and woofed softly for him to come over as she often did when they would tussle. He immediately clambered onto her back. A strong odor rose through the thick fur from the stimulated scent glands beneath her skin.

“What’s that?”

“My scent.”

Faolan had smelled that scent before when he had ridden on her, but now it was stronger, almost overpowering and very different from the thick sweet smell of the milk. It was a strong signal. A defensive message that this den and everything around it from the white spruce to the river bank and up to the grove of alders belonged to Thunderheart, and to him, her pup. It triggered something in Faolan, “I can do that!”

He sank into the thick odiferous fur and nuzzled her neck, licking the inside of her ear and then tumbling off to run to the nearest tree. Thunderheart watched him as he backed his hindquarters against it and lowered his tail. *He is quick!* Thunderheart thought to herself. She hadn’t had to explain anything really. He had immediately understood the urgency of this scent message. *What a remarkable young pup!*

A muscle at the top of Faolan’s tail contracted as he began to rub against the trunk. He felt something release. Immediately he began running about marking every tree, rock stump he could find. *Mine! Mine! Mine!* The thought coursed through his being. But this was only the beginning. As he marked there were stirrings in other parts of his body. He began to scratch furiously at the ground. Another scent from between his toes was emitted and the cry in his head *Mine! Mine! Mine!* changed to ours *Ours! Ours! Ours!* Something had unlocked deep in his wolf history.
But Thunderheart was the only other creature that he knew. He paused and looked at her once more. She stood by a tree that she was rubbing, not half crouched as before, but tall and majestic. She eyed him with the deep tawny light he loved so much, and yet now there was challenge a in her eyes. She huff and barked. “Come on, come on!”

Faolan cocked his head. He began to jump up for a ride on her hump, but each time she moved to another tree, before he could catch her, waving her arms and batting the branches above her.

Some bright green leaves caught the last of the setting sun’s light as they fluttered down. He leapt up to catch the leaf before it hit the ground. Thunderheart made a low amiable grunt and then shook the tree again. Faolan leapt again. They played this game for a while. Each time Faolan jumped a bit. . . Then Thunderheart turned from the tree and continued walking, still on her hind legs. She looked back to see Faolan following, but on all fours. She stopped abruptly, faced him and lowered herself down briefly. Next she rose up waving her arms as she had when she had encouraged him to jump at the tree. “Two legs!” she commanded.

Faolan stood very still. It was almost as if she could see his mind turning over what she had just proposed. He rose up on his hind legs. Thunderheart watched, hardly daring to breathe. Tentatively, Faolan took a step toward her.

Thunderheart grunted happily and lowered herself to lick Faolan under his chin making, soft chuffing sounds. She spotted a low shrub with some plump berries and broke off a branch. Then raising herself up again on her hind legs, she waved the branch in front of Faolan. She knew he
loved these berries. Instantly, he was on his hind legs walking. This time he took four steps! Thunderheart was thrilled.

He was learning and she was delighted with herself for teaching him. Cubs knew how to do this from almost the start. It was natural for them. But it wasn’t natural for Faolan. She was beginning to realize that Faolan was not just an exceptional pup, but an extraordinary creature.

By the time darkness fell, Faolan was walking almost as well as a cub on his hind legs. And, on that brink of time between the last drop of daylight and the first purple darkness, Faolan learned the best lesson of walking on his hind legs. He caught a flash of white as an ermine scuttled into a burrow on the far side of a tall shrub, something he would have never seen had he not been upright. He sprang in one arcing leap across the shrub and landing on all fours, madly digging. The splayed front paw had grown stronger since he had been forced to use it. He never thought twice about it now.

Thunderheart trotted up behind him as a storm of dirt spun through the air. Suddenly a furry dart shot from the nest. Faolan staggered backward and tumbled heels over tail as something lunged onto his back. Digging sharp claws. He leapt up into the air and twisted himself trying to get rid of the horrid attacker. It was much smaller than himself, not much bigger than a squirrel, but it was strong. Faolan yelped as the sharp claws and teeth dug deeper. Thunderheart roared. She could not risk swatting the ermine from his back with out injuring Faolan. They fought fiercely: The pup had just torn apart her nest and her young kits quivered in fear. If the ermine got near Faolan’s neck and the vital life pumping artery, he would be finished.
Thunderheart was frantic. There was no way she could use her strength to kill the ermine without hurting Faolan as well. She could see that Faolan was weakening already, losing energy. This was his first real blood battle. Thunderheart tried to false charge, but the ermine paid no attention. Faolan sank to his knees, rose up again and this time streaked toward the riverbank. In one flying leap, he plunged into the water. Thunderheart plunged in after him. She watched his head break through the surface. Red streaks coursed down the back of his neck, but on the opposite side of the river she saw the ermine slink up the steep muddy bank.

In the den that night as leaves outside rustled with warm summer breezes, Thunderheart licked the Faolan’s wounds. They were not as deep as she had feared. They would heal, but she sensed a new restlessness in the pup. He did not nurse. He was done with milk. He wanted blood.
Chapter 7: The Golden Eyes of Thunderheart

The lessons continued through the summer. Faolan loved learning. He became more and more proficient at rearing up, and he could walk for extended distances upright. His hind legs were becoming very powerful and because they were more flexible than a bear’s, he could jump very high. He took a puppyish delight in showing off his leaping skills.

There was an immense spruce tree near the den, the lowest limbs of which were almost as high as Thunderheart’s shoulders when she stood. Nearly every afternoon they went to this tree. Faolan was determined to reach that limb by springing up on his hind legs.

“What me! Watch me!” he yapped. Each day he got closer. “Watch me, Thunderheart! You’re not paying attention!” he’d scold. “I’m almost there!”

And then one day he made it. He found himself draped over the limb above the one he had aimed for. He was stunned. “Urskadamus!” he yelped. The curse startled Thunderheart.

“Where did you learn that?” she roared.

“From you!”

She chuffed heartily.

“Don’t laugh at me! I’m stuck!”

“You jumped too high. You weren’t paying attention!” she added slyly.

“How do I get down?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been stuck that high in a tree,” she replied.

Faolan gave off a plangent little yelp.
“No whining!” She turned her back and walked away as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

Faolan stared at her broad back in dismay. “You’re leaving me like this?”

“You’ll figure it out,” she said without turning around. “You’re the smartest youngster I know.”

A few seconds later she heard a soft thud as Faolan dropped to the ground.

He was soon at her side wagging his tail. “I did it!”

“I knew you would!” she turned her head and gave him a soft bump with her muzzle.

All summer long the the pup grew, although to Thunderheart he still seemed small compared to a bear cub. For a wolf pup, however, Faolan was large and very strong. He had abilities that ordinary wolves simply did not possess. He was a wolf without a pack, which made him fiercely independent. And since he had acquired the taste for meat, he had become proficient at hunting down the four-footed animals, the occasional ptarmigan and other ground nesting birds. Swifter on his feet than Thunderheart and with a keenness for strategy he had managed to chase an injured reindeer into a narrow defile and trap him. When Thunderheart arrived she brought the animal down with a single blow. This strategy worked so well that the two had done it several times since that first occasion.

“I love caribou,” Faolan said one day after they’d brought down another one. “Where do they come from?”
“Different places at different times. In the spring they come down from the Outermost.”

“The Outermost?”

“North of here. The taste of the caribou from the Outermost in the spring is the best.”

“How do you get there?”

Thunderheart pointed to the North Star. “In the early spring, when the Great Bear constellation rises you follow the last claw in the foot that points to the North Star. The Outermost is in between that claw and the North Star. I once had a den there. Someday . . . ”

“Someday what?” Faolan asked. Thunderheart looked troubled and didn’t answer. “Someday we’ll go back?”

“Perhaps but I am not sure if it is good for your kind.”

“My kind?” Faolan felt his heart race. “But the Outermost, it is good for your kind? If it’s good for your kind, it’s good for my kind.”

“Never mind, never mind. Eat up.” she was about to say more, but Faolan interrupted.

“I know, I know,” Faolan said wearily. “I must grow fat for winter.”

“Yes, eat that liver.” She yanked out the bloody organ and tossed it to him.

He obediently began eating, but his mind turned over what Thunderheart had said. *I am not sure it is good for your kind.* He didn’t like the way it sounded, and didn’t want to hear it again, out loud or in his mind. He would simply seal up his ears.
Together the grizzly and the wolf pup would often hunt late into the summer evenings until the stars broke out. Faolan liked to sleep near the opening of the den where he could see the stars and hear the star stories that Thunderheart told him. By now the words and the hidden language of bears beneath the words had become completely transparent to Faolan.

Thunderheart would point her paw toward the sky and trace the star picture of the great bear constellation with her longest claw. “He leads the way to Ursulana,” she whispered. It was in Ursulana, the bear heaven, where Thunderheart was sure her cubs’ spirits had traveled.

Every star seemed to have a story, and every animal a constellation. Faolan was impressed that Thunderheart knew so many. She pointed to the west of the Star Bear to the wolf constellation. “It’s disappearing now in the middle of summer. It shines the brightest and rises the highest in spring, but look, there are the Great Claws.”

Faolan blinked as a claw like figure began to creep up over the purple horizon. “It’s late, but it stays the longest, arriving in early winter and staying through summer. If you go the banks of Hoolemere, you can see the young owls of the Great Ga’Hoole tree practicing their navigation exercises by tracing it. The owls call the Great Claws the Golden Talons.”


Thunderheart made a snuffling sound, which was the way she laughed sometimes. “You’re young and you haven’t seen much! Hoolemere is a vast sea and there is a group of owls who live on an island in a huge tree in the middle of the sea. These owls are called the Guardians of Ga’Hoole. They are very intelligent owls”
“You mean smart?” Faolan asked.

“Yes, very smart.”

“As smart as you?”

“Oh, much smarter! They can find their way to many places just by looking at the stars and how they move. That is what navigation is—finding one’s way by the stars.”

“But you told me about the star to the north. You find your way by it.”

“That’s easy. That star never moves. It only sits high in the sky. It’s my only guide. But the owls use the whole sky and all the stars.”

“That’s probably because they fly and know it better.”

Thunderheart gave the pup a little squeeze. What a smart little wolf he was!

Faolan yawned and said sleepily, “Some day maybe I’ll go to the banks of Hoolemere and maybe even swim to the island. Such a funny word Hoole. What does it mean?”

“Well,” Thunderheart sighed, “some say that it is actually a wolf word and that it is their word for owl.” But by this time Faolan was fast asleep in her arms.

* * *

With the waning days of summer Thunderheart had but one thought. Eat! Eat all one could for the winter! The cold sleep was coming and the two of them must have enough fat. But beyond her overwhelming obsession about Faolan’s size and the question of fat there was another more elusive fear—that of the cold sleep itself. Soon she would have to
find a winter den farther away from the river. She was not sure if wolves went to into their dens and slept for endless days. How would she know? She had slumbered through every winter of her life. She knew nothing of the winter world and what other animals did. How would she explain this to Faolan? She knew that she changed during this sleep. She grew thinner and if she did rouse herself, her mind was foggy. If she slept and he didn’t, how would she protect him? Perhaps she should warn him. But not right now.

Right now the salmon were swimming up the river to their spawning ground. Thunderheart and Faolan had waded out to the shallows on the upstream side of a small rapid where scores of salmon were heaving themselves over. Thunderheart scooped them from the water or caught them on the fly.

It was the easiest fishing Faolan had ever done. He paused for a moment and looked at Thunderheart. Facing west, the setting sun turned her eyes gold. He felt a sudden surge of affection sweep through him as he realized how different they were. He had put out of his mind that day months before when they had seen the grizzly mother with the two cubs. He had since then refused to allow such thoughts to enter his mind. Except he now remembered a few days before when they had brought down a caribou, and Thunderheart had first mentioned the Outermost and how it was not a good place for his “kind.”

Thunderheart had mentioned wolves a few times, but Faolan had never seen any, except for the star wolf in the sky. So the notion of a real wolf was remote, abstract. The thought of wolves did not trouble him for
when he looked into the golden eyes of Thunderheart he felt his world was complete. Those eyes offered a universe. He needed nothing else.

That evening was their last night in the river den. The next morning well before dawn, they began their trek to find a winter den in the higher elevations of the Beyond. Thunderheart was particular about her winter den. Most grizzlys dug out dens under large tree roots. But the trees were few in this part of the Beyond and what trees there were grew at lower elevations. If a bear went above the sparse tree line, there were good natural rock caves to be found, even tunnels in the lava beds. But most important, the snow came earlier in the high country, insulating the den for a longer period of time.

By mid-morning, they were across the broad flat meadow and Thunderheart was pushing her bulk through the low-growing bracken and nettles at the base of a long slope. They were almost above the tree line. The air was thinner and the going harder. Thunderheart’s breath came in labored bellowing huffs, but she marveled at Faolan, who never seemed to tire. His chest had broadened, she noticed, and she suspected it might have been because of his jumping, which he loved to practice. It was hard to imagine that a brief four months before he had been a whiney little pup dramatically flinging himself onto the dirt and waving his splayed paw in the air. Now he scampered ahead. He had already pounced on a marmot and made quick work of him. His muzzle was still covered in blood.

Thunderheart had insisted that Faolan consume the liver entirely himself, for she knew that it was rich and would give him fat. She would never cease worrying about his size. And she was not ready yet to warn
him about how she changed during the cold sleep. *Not yet...not yet,* she told herself.

The days had shortened considerably and by late afternoon, as the long shafts of the setting sun angled across the short grass of the slope, Thunderheart found what she considered might be a suitable winter den. It was near a rock where they had commenced digging. Thunderheart’s paws were four times larger than Faolan’s, but Faolan anchored himself firmly by the four toes of his back paws, and dug furiously with his five-toed front paws. The fifth toe was somewhat smaller, and Thunderheart had wondered once what such a small claw could accomplish. It turned out to be perfect for digging.

The bear and the wolf had not been working long before both of them struck something hard. Faolan looked up in surprise and paused, but Thunderheart grew excited. She had heard that sound before! It was a hollow *kah kah* noise. In another minute, she grunted in delight. They had uncovered a lava bed with a natural tunnel that had been made from the flow of an inactive volcano to the north and west. Off the first tunnel, there was an elevated section that would trap heat and provide good drainage if there were any leaks from above.

“This is perfect,” she said looking around. “Just perfect.”

“Perfect for winter?” Faolan asked, for he had the feeling there was something else Thunderheart was referring to.

The grizzly looked at him now. Her gaze was very serious. “I must explain something to you, pup.”

Faolan felt a dread stir deep within him. *Please don’t talk about wolves again. Not wolves!*
“I am not sure what wolves do, but bears sleep through the winter. Our hearts grow slower and beat but a few times within the same span of time that there were many beats before.”

“Mine, too! Mine, too!” Faolan said. Although he could feel his heart racing.

“No Faolan, yours doesn’t.”

“I’m just like you Thunderheart.”

“No, you’re different.”

“I sense you are not going to sleep as deeply as I do.”

“I’ll try. I promise!”

“You can try all you want. But that doesn’t matter. You will most likely grow bored here.” She glanced around at the tunnel.

“Oh, no! No, I won’t! I love to watch you sleep.”

Thunderheart lifted a paw to silence him.

“Don’t interrupt. You’re big now. You will get hungry. All I am saying is that if you grow hungry and bored, you have my permission to go out. Snow rabbits are plentiful here. They don’t sleep. I am sure of that.”

Faolan was suddenly alarmed. “Are you saying I am like a snow rabbit? Are you telling me to go play with a snow rabbit?” His voice seethed with indignation.

“Faolan!” Thunderheart roared and the lava rock walls of the tunnel shivered. “Don’t act stupid. I’m telling you to go out and kill the rabbit, eat it. Not play with it!”

“Oh!” said Faolan meekly.
Chapter 8: The Winter Den

It was not long after the wolf and the grizzly moved into the winter den that Thunderheart began the cold sleep. In the beginning, it was just short snoozes and she often told Faolan go out and scour the slope for rabbits and marmot. She wanted to get him used to going out alone. He would always bring some meat back for Thunderheart in his gut. He had learned through some primal instinct that the large chunks meat lodged in his first stomach could be regurgitated in steaming piles on the floor of the den for Thunderheart. The first time he did this, she roused herself from the thick blanket of sleep in which she was folded, but it became more and more difficult to wake her after the first heavy snowfall. Thunderheart slept so deeply that, just as she had explained to Faolan, her immense heart began to beat slower and more quietly. It was as if a deep hush had fallen upon her and she sank deeper and deeper into an insensate sleep.

Faolan did not like the quiet. It unsettled him. The sound of that great heart was his first memory. So it was not simply boredom that drove him from the den, but the silence. Despite Thunderheart’s immense size, she seemed, in her stillness, a shadow of her summer self. Faolan could not understand how she slept so much. And the rhythms of Thunderheart’s body slowed, it seemed that those of Faolan’s accelerated.

*   *   *   *

The deeper the snow outside the better for Faolan. He loved bounding through the drifts and making huge powdery explosions. Down on the flats of the meadow the wind had pounded the snow into a great
hard surface, and he enjoyed skidding and coasting games. He had become expert at tracking the big snow hares and found their meat delectable.

He loved everything about winter—the strange green sky as twilight descended, then the deep purple dark of the night and the glittering jewel star that hung in the north and never moved, but guided him back to the den. The ice-spangled bracken poking through the drifts were as luminous as the constellations that floated in the dome of the night. One night soon after the first snowfall, he had spied in the distance a spectacular sight. It was the waterfall they had passed on their way to the winter den. But now the cascades were frozen in the air, suspended like silver flames caught in a wintry eternity.

Each day was shorter as the earth tipped further away from the sun. But the nights were longer. Once he thought he heard something new in the night—a long melodious howl that inscribed itself in the blackness like an unfurling banner of song. It stirred him profoundly. It was new to him yet oddly familiar. He felt compelled to howl in return. It was amazing to him that he understood perfectly the message embedded in the howl. *I am here, here with my mate. Our sister and brothers have returned. In one more moon, when the mating times come, we shall move.*

Faolan understood the message but nonetheless there were strange pieces of it that made no sense. What was a sister? A brother?

Each night for the next cycle of the moon, he went out to hear the wolves. He understood more and more, but despite his growing curiosity, he did not dare travel closer. For there was a warning woven into the message. *This is our territory. Do not trespass.* The warning was as clear
as any scent mark. By the end of the moon’s cycle, the howling had finished. The wolves had left as they promised.

For the first time, Faolan felt a bit lonely. He returned to the den after the first songless night and looked at Thunderheart. *How long will she sleep?* he wondered. She no longer slept sitting up, but instead laid on her side. He curled up next to her and listened to the slow beating of her heart. *So slow, so slow* he thought. And yet still he found profound comfort in its languid rhythm.

There came a day when the earth began to tilt toward the sun. The darkness near the entrance of the den seemed thinner, and Faolan even detected a slight quickening in the beating of the grizzly’s heart. *Perhaps this lonely time is coming to an end,* he thought.

Faolan still made his forays out to hunt for the tasty snow hares and marmots. One day as the morning lengthened, he went further from the den than he had in along time. The day had turned very warm and great slabs of ice began to slide down the inclines, peeling back the slope until dun colored grasses began to poke through. It was a great day for hunting and he ignored the storm clouds gathering in the west on the horizon.

Meanwhile back in the den Thunderheart began to stir. It was much too early for her to leave the cold sleep but she felt an absence, a void in the den that pushed her from her slumber.

It was a dangerous time for a bear to be out. Winter had not made its last mark. Bears were weak. Their reflexes slow despite their hunger, which was always overwhelming at the end of the cold sleep. If a bear ventured out, the first danger, aside from sudden changes in the weather,
was encountering another bear who was just as hungry. Territorial markings had not been made. Tempers raged and bear fights were inevitable. Thunderheart knew this, even in her sleep-drugged state. And although she was not extremely hungry, she was terrified when she discovered that Faolan had gone. In her confusion, she forgot that she had expressly given Faolan permission to leave the den and go out to hunt.

Thunderheart was determined to find him. But when she crawled out of the den, she gasped. A sudden blizzard had torn in from the west, turning the world white. Tracks were covered instantly, and when she looked up, she could not even see a dim smear of the north star’s light. But she had too go out. She had to find the pup. She knew Faolan’s scent. The blizzard could not cover it completely. If he had found prey he might have marked a small hunting ground. She was desperate to find him. Desperate and confused.

*    *   *

With the blizzard blowing so ferociously it was difficult to discern what time of day or night it was. The entire world had dissolved into an impenetrable whiteness. But Faolan made his way back to the den. He was shocked to find it empty. Had she gone deeper into the tunnels when the blizzard started? He explored briefly but he knew her scent and there was no sign of her. He began to pace. He tried to imagine what might have happened to her or where she could have gone. He had picked up no scent on his own journey back to the den. It seemed as if she had simply vanished. She wouldn’t have left me… No, never. She would never just leave me. The very thought sent a tremor through Faolan until the
hackles on his neck and every guard hair on his back stood straight up. It reminded him of something, something that had happened long, long ago that he couldn’t quite remember. She would come back, he reasoned. She had to!

He waited all that night and into the next day. He paid no heed to the grumbles of his empty stomach. Food meant nothing to him. There was only one thing he wanted. Thunderheart. The den was too quiet. The beat of her enormous heart, even in its slow winter rhythms, was gone. He could not live without the sound. It was all he knew, all he had ever known. He stepped out of the den into the rage of the blizzard and began howling. Howling for the great grizzly. Howling for all he had ever known and loved.

Then as he howled, an odd tremor rose through the depths of the snow, from the frozen land beneath it, from the very center of the earth. The tremblings were like faint quivers, but Faolan pressed his splayed front paw deep and these tremulous shakings became quite distinct. And then more incredibly powerful. For a moment, it felt as if the entire snowfield had shifted under his paws and in the distance, he saw the frozen waterfall crack and suddenly gush to life.

But in that second he thought of death. And he knew with an overpowering certainty that something terrible was happening to his beloved Thunderheart.
Chapter 9: A Dim Memory

One the far edge of the Beyond, the she wolf Morag had been absorbed in a new pack. She had found a new mate and born a healthy litter of pups. No one knew her history, and in fact, she herself had all but forgotten it. The minute the Obea had walked away with that pup in her mouth to deliver it to a tummfraw, the place for abandonment for malformed pups, Morag began to build up barriers deep within her. These barriers functioned like a kind of invisible scar tissue to toughen her so that she could go on, survive. Such was the way with wolf mothers who had endured the special anguish of losing a malcadh pup to an Obea. They quickly forgot. In the wake of forgetting there was perhaps for a time a darkness deep within them where that pup had grown inside their bodies. But in a brief time, it too soon faded until it became merely a gray shadow of which they were hardly aware. They had to be this way if they were going to go on, find another mate, and bear more pups.

Morag was now consumed with a rambunctious trio of red-furred pups. At nearly a moon cycle old, they were busy exploring the whelping den with their milk teeth. They were becoming bolder as well, and began to scramble closer to the white light of the den opening. It was beyond this light that the pups sensed something more interesting. Morag’s mate helped keep them back. Soon, when the pups were just a bit bigger, Morag and her mate would let them out regularly to explore under careful supervision. At that point, the pups would begin to eat meat. Then they would be weaned, and finally a den must be found near the rest of the packs that made up the MacDonegal clan.
Morag had decided that today she would leave her mate in charge and set out toward the heart of the MacDonegal territory to begin the search for an appropriate den. The weather was still blustery from the remnants of the storm that had blown in from the north, bringing heavy snows to the border between the Beyond and the Outermost. But here it was merely sloppy with rain and sleet. To the west, the sky was clearing and there was the promise of better weather.

Morag ambled along a creek bed. Since the earthquake, it was as if the territory had been entirely rearranged. Boulders that she had never seen before had tumbled from mountains and blocked up several parts of the creek, causing small pools to form. It was no longer a simple task to follow the creek to the middle of the MacDonegal territory. After several hours of travel, Morag found that she had swung far out of MacDonegal territory and skirted closer to the river that ran into the Outermost.

It was not, however, a tumbled boulder that caught her attention, but a small creek stone polished to a gleaming black finish by the water. She had just set her front paws in a shallow pool when she spotted it. It sparkled like a dark moon in the water and when she looked closely, she saw a pattern of swirling lines. Like eddies in the creek, the lines spiraled around and around. There was something vaguely hypnotic about the spinning design. But more than hypnotic, it kindled a dim memory in Morag. It was disturbing. She turned stiff-legged in the stream with her tail pointing straight out and howled her alarm.

But instead of a response from other wolves, a jagged sound cut the air. *Kra! Kra!* It was the call of a raven announcing the discovery of a carcass. This was not just an announcement, but also a summons for help. Without the ripping teeth of wolves, it was impossible for ravens to
penetrate the thick hide of a large animal. Usually this sound would have excited Morag. But not on this day. If she had been in the company of her pups, the raven’s call would have offered a lesson. But now she only shrank from the sound.

As she stood in the creek her eyes were drawn back to the swirl of lines on the polished rock. *What is this? What is it that so haunts me?*

The raven’s *kra kra* laced the air. The spinning pattern and the kras mingled in the deep recesses of her memory. Haltingly, she took a few steps toward the other bank.

Almost as soon as Morag left the creek, she spotted two ravens circling a short distance ahead. In a clearing she saw the immense carcass of a grizzly. Her first thought was one of slight disbelief. Why would a grizzly come this far south at this time of year? They should still be winter denning.

She swung her head toward the north and west, the far reaches of the Beyond in the low mountains, where the grizzlies frequently lived and denned. She knew from when she had traveled with the MacDuncan clan, that it was always bad when a grizzly came out of its winter den too early.

Morag approached the carcass. If it had been in a fight, there were few wounds, at least not enough to help the ravens. She walked slowly around the body until she spotted a terrible head wound near the grizzly’s ear, where the ravens had already torn away what flesh they could. The bear was on its side, and she could see bone protruding from its back. She stopped and peered at it. The grizzly’s back had been broken by an enormous force. Morag looked up. A short distance away was an enormous boulder, smeared with blood. The earthquake, of course! The
boulder had tumbled down from the ridge above. The bear must have been in its path. It wasn’t a living animal that had ended this bear’s life, but the spasms of the earth itself.

The two ravens perched on the bear’s hip, clearly indicating that this was the site they expected Morag to rip open for their feast. The ravens were already intoxicated by the scent of blood. But Morag caught the thread of another scent. The scar tissue that had so subtly built up within her began to dissolve. The first shadows of darkness to steal back in from that empty place she had so completely sealed off.

She became agitated and began nervously raced around the carcass, burrowing her nose into the bear’s thick fur, first beneath its huge arm, then beneath its haunches. The ravens became raucous; soon they were confused. What was the wolf doing?

Morag circled back toward the grizzly’s shoulders, where an immense hump rose like a mountain. But even without poking it with her muzzle, a familiar scent drifted from the dense fur. Morag’s hackles raised and her eyes rolled. She knew this scent. The pup from the year before! From the time she had traveled to the far edge of the Beyond to find a birthing den away from her old pack. The pup the Obea had taken, the one with the splayed paw marked with the spiral print.

Every bit of that sad time rushed back to her, how she was forced to return with the Obea and the remaining pups, and then was cast out of the clan. For an entire moon cycle afterwards, she would find the highest point of land each night and tip her head toward the sky, searching for the track of stars called the spirit trail that led to the Great Wolf Lupus, and the Cave of Souls. She was waiting for lochinmorrin, when her
unnamed pup with its splayed paw would begin to climb the spirit trail. Then she would know that his abandonment had ended in death, and he had found peace in the Cave of Souls. But _lochinmorrin_ had never come. She had never seen the soft mist of _hus lochin_, the soul of a departed wolf.

He had not died, she had wiped him from her memory until this moment. She sat down on her haunches close to the carcass of the bear. She pressed her head into its flanks. This bear had cared for her pup. She would not rip into the grizzly’s body. She would keep watch over it through the night. She would let no predator near. This would be like _lochinvyrr_, the ritual that wolves followed when they brought down an animal and it was dying. It was a demonstration of respect in which the killer acknowledges that the life he is taking is a worthy one. Although Morag had not brought down this bear, she felt it was her duty to acknowledge her as worthy, for she had reared a wolf pup as if it were her own cub. The _lochin_ of this magnificent bear would follow that spirit trail of stars to its own Cave of Souls. It was all she could do for the bear who had become the milk giver for her own pup, and allowed it to survive.