

From the author of the #1 nationally bestselling Warriors series

RETURN TO THE WILD

SEEKERS

THE BURNING
HORIZON



ERIN HUNTER

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The Bears' Journey: Bear View



The Bears' Journey: Human View



Dedication

Special thanks to Cherith Baldry

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CHAPTER ONE

Toklo

Toklo padded through the trees at the edge of the forest, with Lusa, Kallik, and Yakone a little way behind him. On one side of them the trees crowded closely together, while on the other the sheer wall of the Sky Ridge stretched up to the cloudless blue sky. The trees were in full leaf, but the shade gave only a little relief from the scorching sun. Toklo let out a grunt of discomfort, longing for the cool of evening and the chance to rest.

Each pawstep he took was more difficult than the one before, not only because of the heat and exhaustion, but also because each one took him farther from his own territory. Toklo could still feel the aches and cuts from his punishing battle with his father, Chogan, the old bear who had once driven him away with his mother Oka and his brother Tobi. In his mind he could still hear Chogan's threatening roars, smell the hot reek of blood, and feel fierce satisfaction as his claws slashed through his father's pelt. It was from Chogan that he had won his territory.

Chogan had better enjoy the rest of his time there, Toklo thought grimly. Because it won't last long. He knows he only gets to stay for now because I promised to go with Lusa to Great Bear Lake. Toklo felt strength and power flow through his body at the memory of his victory, but at the same time there were doubts in his mind. Am I really old enough to have my own territory? Am I ready to do it on my own?

Toklo worried, too, that while he was away another strong brown bear might come and drive Chogan from the territory he had just claimed.

But it's mine. He let out a soft growl. Every pawstep of that ground holds memories for me, and I'll fight for it again if I have to.

For a few moments Toklo concentrated on finding a clear path among the rocks strewn over the ground, and listened to the chatter of his friends behind him. Kallik and Lusa were discussing the journey to Great Bear Lake and telling Yakone how so many bears traveled there for the Longest Day Gathering.

"Thousands of bears!" Lusa exclaimed. "More bears than there are stars in the sky!"

Toklo let out a snort of amusement at the little black bear's excitement, but his thoughts soon drifted back to his territory. It felt strange to be leaving his brother Tobi's grave site behind, when he had only just found it. He pictured the small mound of earth beneath the overhanging rock with the berry bushes clustering around it, and his pawsteps grew heavier still. Suddenly it felt like he was tearing himself away from his brother. But he trusted the brown she-bear, Aiyanna, to look after the burial mound until he returned.

And I will return—to her. . . .

Feeling a curious pang pierce his chest, Toklo stopped and turned his head toward the Sky Ridge. *Is all this hesitation because of Aiyanna?*

He shook his head impatiently. *No, that can't be it. It's just my grief for Tobi and worry about my territory, that's all.*

"Toklo, are you okay?" Lusa scrambled over the rocky ground, her pelt brushing by arching fronds of fern, until she caught up with him. "Are you *sure* you want to keep traveling? The whole point of our journey now is to find homes for ourselves," she continued when Toklo didn't reply at once.

know how hard it must be for you to leave the home you've just found." She butted his shoulder gently with her muzzle. "I'll understand if you think your part is over."

Toklo turned to look at Kallik and Yakone making their way toward him. They had left the Melting Sea to help him and Lusa find their homes, when they could have stayed with Kallik's brother Taqqiq and the other white bears.

I'm not the only one to leave something important behind, he thought, his resolve strengthening. *Because this matters more. All four of us should be together when we reach the end of our journey.* Grief prickled deep in his belly as he recalled how Ujurak had died on Star Island, protecting them from an avalanche. *We should be five. . . .*

From the corner of his eye Toklo spotted a frosty glint of light, as if a star had awoken beyond the branches of the forest trees. When he turned his head it was gone, but comfort flowed over him like a warm tide.

We are still five. Ujurak is watching over us.

"Thanks, Lusa, but I'm fine," Toklo said, touching her head with his muzzle. "We all need to reach the end of our journey before it's over, and that hasn't happened yet. I made you all a promise, and I'm keeping it."

"Great spirits, it's hot!" Kallik gasped, when she and Yakone had struggled up to join Toklo and Lusa. "I can't wait for burn-sky to end."

"By then we'll be back on the Endless Ice," Yakone reminded her as he gave her ear a friendly nuzzle. "We'll have our own home there. No more earth beneath our paws!"

The white male's words reminded Toklo once again of the sacrifice Yakone and Kallik were making by staying so long among forests and mountains. He noticed that Yakone was limping again, a few trickles of blood oozing from his injured paw.

It starts to heal, and then he stubs his toes on a rock, or trips over a branch, and it opens up again. Toklo thought. *He needs time to rest, but it's time we don't have. Not if we're going to reach the lake by the Longest Day.*

"Great Bear Lake, here we come!" he announced.

Lusa gave an excited little bounce. "I hope I meet Miki and the other black bears at the lake," she said to Toklo. "They taught me so much about living as a wild bear. I know they'll let me stay with them."

"Let's hope they're at the gathering again," Toklo responded to Lusa as they padded through the trees. "We rescued Miki from those spirit-cursed white bears, so his family owes you something. And I'll stay with you until we find them, or some other black bears you can live with."

Lusa blinked up at him affectionately. "Thanks, Toklo." She turned and stared up in dismay at a rocky shelf that blocked their path a few bearlengths ahead. A steep, tumbled slope stretched way above her head, with trailing plants and spindly bushes growing from the cracks. A fallen tree was wedged diagonally across the shelf, and the bears would have to push their way through its branches before they could even start the difficult climb up the rock.

"Great spirits, how are we going to get up there?" Kallik asked tiredly.

Toklo stopped for a moment, considering. The forest around them was silent except for the piping of a single distant bird. The sun shone warm on his fur; the air was still and stifling, without even the whisper of a breeze.

Kallik and Yakone must find the heat even harder to cope with than I do, Toklo thought.

Lusa had trekked along the bottom of the shelf, looking for a path. "Come over here!" she called. "It's easier once we get past that tree."

Following her, Toklo saw that she was right. Farther into the forest the rock wall was lower, the stones broken up with more vegetation in the gaps.

“Get on my back,” he said to Lusa. “I’ll boost you up the side of the cliff.”

He could feel Lusa’s claws digging into his fur as she scrambled up, then took a leap from his back and clung to the rock face. Earth and small stones showered down on Toklo as she climbed; a moment later he could see her bright face gazing down at him from the middle of a clump of ferns.

“There are plenty of pawholds,” she told the others. “The climb isn’t too bad.”

Toklo wasn’t sure about that. Kallik and Yakone weren’t such agile climbers, especially now when they were tired. “What do you think?” he asked the two white bears as they plodded up to him.

“We don’t seem to have much choice,” Kallik replied. “We have to go this way. If we head farther into the forest, we’ll be traveling in the wrong direction, and we don’t know how far these rock stretches.” She gave Yakone a doubtful look. “Will you be okay?”

Yakone set his mouth determinedly. Toklo could see that he wasn’t going to let his wounded paw hold him back.

“Don’t fuss. I’ll be fine,” he growled.

Kallik opened her jaws as if she was about to protest, then closed them again without speaking, though she still looked uneasy.

To prove his words, Yakone dug his forepaws into cracks in the rock and scabbled with his hindpaws to push himself upward. Kallik gave him a shove from behind to help him on his way, then followed. Once Toklo was sure they could manage, he began hauling himself up the cliff, tearing the vegetation as he struggled to find pawholds. His claws were clogged with mashed-up leaves and his fur felt full of grit by the time he stood beside his friends at the top.

“Made it!” he grunted with satisfaction.

From the top of the cliff the ground fell away in a much shallower slope, covered with grass. At the bottom Toklo could see a lush growth of ferns, and he caught glimpses of a narrow stream winding its way among the clumps.

“Water!” he exclaimed, realizing for the first time how thirsty he was. “Come on!”

Lusa outran him as he galloped toward the stream, but the small black bear was so eager to reach the water that she tripped and went rolling head over paws down the slope. At the bottom she bounced up, pieces of leaf and twig clinging to her fur, and plunged her snout into the stream.

Toklo joined her, followed a few moments later by Kallik and Yakone. Kallik was matching her pace to Yakone’s, whose limp seemed worse after the scramble up the rocks. Toklo knew that the white male’s injured paw must be painful. The wound looked red and swollen, and blood was still trickling out, but neither of the white bears complained, just bent over the stream and drank thirstily.

“Yakone, are you okay?” Toklo asked. “Do you need to rest your paw?”

Yakone looked up, droplets of water spinning away from his muzzle. “My paw is fine,” he said.

Toklo knew he was just being brave. *I know he worries about holding us back.* But Yakone clearly didn’t want sympathy, so he said no more.

Lusa finished drinking and glanced around at her three friends. “You know, there aren’t any other bears like us,” she said.

Toklo gave her an affectionate nudge. “So you’ve met all the other bears in the world?” he teased her. “When did that happen?”

Lusa batted at him with one paw. “No, listen. Toklo, I know that what you really want is to stay here in the mountains on your own territory, and yet you drag yourself away from it for your friends. Kallik and Yakone left the Melting Sea for us. We’ve had help from flat-faces, like when Ujura

swallowed that fishhook, and we've traveled on a firesnake. How many other bears could say that?"

Toklo nodded reluctantly. He understood Lusa's point, but he wasn't sure that their choices had been the right ones. The two white bears looked grubby and exhausted, and Lusa was thinner and smaller than the other black bears they had met on their way. *Is it because she's been traveling for so long?*

As he was wondering whether they could afford a short rest, Toklo picked up a new scent on the air. His neck fur rose in apprehension as he lifted his snout for a good long sniff.

It smells like wolves . . . but not quite the same. Are we in danger?

"Keep still," he ordered in a low voice.

He sank down into the vegetation with the others beside him, all of them sniffing now. Toklo could make out only one scent, and after a few moments he spotted an animal slinking along the line of trees.

Not a wolf—a coyote!

Lusa let out a gasp of alarm, while Kallik and Yakone stiffened, their fur bristling. The creature seemed unaware of them. It was prowling along at a deliberate pace, its nose down and its gaze fixed on the ground, making Toklo think it was on its own hunt. Memories of how they had been tracked by the pack of fierce coyotes flashed back into his mind, but he squashed his fears down.

This coyote is alone, and it doesn't look like it's after us. It's hunting something else.

Thinking about hunting made Toklo realize how hungry he was. *I'd love to know what the coyote found,* he thought. *I haven't caught a sniff of prey all day.* "It might lead us to some food," he whispered to Kallik, who was closest to him. "Just one coyote and four of us—it should be easy!"

"Maybe." A gleam of humor woke in Kallik's eyes.

"So what's the plan?" Lusa asked.

"I think we should follow it," Yakone suggested. "Let it make the catch, and then we snatch the prey."

Kallik nodded. "Good idea."

"Okay, so we spread out," Toklo said. "That way if it runs off with its prey, one of us will be there to grab it."

The four bears rose to their paws and padded through the trees as quietly as they could, forming a wide ring around the coyote.

The stupid thing doesn't even know we're here, Toklo thought. *It's totally focused on its hunt.*

Watching Yakone limp through the undergrowth, a dark memory assailed Toklo of how the coyote pack had followed the trail of blood from his injured paw, relentlessly tracking them down. *The coyote could do just the same, given half a chance. But he's alone,* he reminded himself. *We'll be okay.*

By now Toklo had spotted the coyote's prey: a pika, a furry creature a little smaller than a rabbit. He signaled to the others to keep well back so as not to spook the little animal, and concentrate on tracking the coyote. He was enjoying the practice of putting his paws down silently, making sure that he didn't brush against the undergrowth.

He spotted Kallik maneuvering so that she stayed upwind of the coyote and crouching down to slide underneath a low branch. He could see from the glimmer in her eyes that she was enjoying this too.

Wry amusement bubbled up inside Toklo as he watched the coyote snuffling along the pika's scent trail. All its attention was still focused on its prey. As it drew closer to the pika, Toklo signaled to his friends again, jerking his head for them to move inward, tightening the circle.

We don't want to lose it now.

The pika stopped to nibble something on the ground underneath a juniper bush, and that was when the coyote sprang, snapping its jaws shut on the pika's neck.

Before the coyote could take a mouthful of its prey, the bears leaped forward. Toklo let out a roar hoping to scare it off. The coyote looked up, wide-eyed with alarm, then snatched up the pika and tried to dart away.

Kallik plunged forward and raked her claws along the coyote's side. "Drop it, mangefur!" she snarled.

The coyote let out a yelp of terror. For a moment it froze, expecting Kallik to deal it a killing blow. But she stepped aside and the coyote fled, leaving the pika behind.

Toklo padded up and gave the pika a sniff. "It's not much for four hungry bears."

"Three," Lusa said, beginning to grub happily in the ground among the ferns. "There are plenty of roots here for me."

Even divided among three, the pika did no more than take the edge off their hunger.

"Should we hunt some more?" Kallik suggested.

Toklo shook his head. "Look through the trees," he said. "There's another cliff ahead. And there'll be fallen trees, ravines, rocks. . . . We need to keep walking while it's still daylight."

Kallik gave Yakone a glance. "Are you worried Yakone will have trouble with the terrain?" she asked Toklo. "He'll be fine."

Yakone nodded. "You don't need to worry about me."

"I'm not," Toklo told him, not sure he was being entirely truthful. "But we'll walk at your pace, not faster. Let's go."

Another hard scramble brought the bears to the top of the next cliff and into a stretch of land where the trees were interspersed with wide-open spaces covered in long grass. With little shade, it was harder than ever to keep going. Toklo could see that the white bears were beginning to stagger, their chests heaving with each breath.

But we have to keep moving, or we'll never get to Great Bear Lake in time.

His belly still rumbling after his share of the pika, Toklo kept sniffing the air as he padded along. He had just picked up a warm prey-scent when he heard a startled yelp from Kallik. A hare had jumped up from the grass right under her paws. Instinctively Kallik lashed out, and the hare dropped limply to the ground.

"Great catch!" Yakone praised her.

"I didn't do anything," Kallik said, looking dazed. "It was right there. How could I have missed it?"

"Maybe Ujurak sent it," Lusa suggested.

"Maybe," Toklo agreed. "Thank you, spirits, whoever you are."

Kallik picked up her prey and headed for the next clump of trees, which cast a welcome patch of shade. Gathering around, they all shared the hare.

When he had filled his belly, Toklo felt sleepy. The shadows were lengthening as the sun slid down the sky, and he was tempted to stay where they were for the night. He knew that none of the others would argue if he suggested it.

No, he thought, stifling a yawn. We can manage another skylength before nightfall.

They kept walking even after the sun had gone down, though light still lingered in the sky, until Toklo realized that none of them could go another pawstep. He halted at the edge of a hollow among the roots of a pine tree, with bushes overhanging it.

“Let’s rest,” he said. “This will make a good den.”

Lusa puffed out a breath. “Thank Arcturus! My paws are falling off.”

She slid down into the hollow. Kallik and Yakone followed, careful not to squash her. Toklo hesitated for a moment, wondering if he ought to keep watch.

But I’m so exhausted, if anything crept up on us, I wouldn’t have the strength to fight.

He clambered down into the den to join the others, wriggling to make space for himself. In the dim light he could see Lusa with her paws wrapped over her nose, and Kallik and Yakone lying close together, already snoring. With a sigh of relief, Toklo let himself slide into sleep.

Toklo woke and stirred in the temporary den, then stretched his jaws in a vast yawn. Poking his head out from under the bushes, he saw that the sky was paling toward dawn. Dew glimmered on the grass and shreds of mist drifted among the trees. The air smelled clear and fresh.

His three companions were still sleeping, their bellies still comfortably rounded from Kallik’s hare. This would be the third sunrise since the bears had set out from the Sky Ridge, and there had been more prey after that.

Leaving the others undisturbed, Toklo heaved himself out of the den and padded toward the edge of the trees to look out across the open grassland. All around him mountains rolled endlessly away, wooded slopes giving way to bare rock. Some of the summits shone white where snow still lay unmelted.

It’s like we’re the only living things in the whole world!

The thought had barely crossed Toklo’s mind when a flock of birds flapped noisily out of the trees above his head, and immediately after a long screech ripped through the air, followed by a harsh rumble that throbbed in Toklo’s ears.

Toklo’s shoulder fur began to rise, though he knew the sound was only a firesnake racing through the trees along an unseen SilverPath. “I know it can’t reach us up here,” he grumbled aloud, “but it doesn’t belong here, and I don’t like it!” He shuddered at the memory of their journey on the firesnake, the speed and noise and the reek of flat-face stuff.

He turned his focus back to the mountains. Somewhere far ahead, beyond the rolling hills, was Great Bear Lake, where all the other bears would be traveling for the Longest Day. Toklo had made the journey before, but everything was different now.

I was so young then, so lost and angry and frightened. I didn’t even know where I was going; I just knew that I had to leave the place where Oka lived because of her grief and her rage. Meeting Lusa and Ujurak was the best thing that could have happened to me. I wasn’t lonely anymore, and they gave me something to live for.

A pang of grief pierced Toklo as he thought about Ujurak. *Is he watching me right now?* Looking up, he could see one or two stars still glimmering in the dawn sky, but he couldn’t make out his friend’s star-shape.

Toklo asked himself whether Ujurak would have told him to stay in his newly won territory. Lusa probably would have been fine traveling to the Longest Day Gathering with Kallik and Yakone, and they could have helped her to find a new home before heading off to find their own. And Kallik and Yakone would always have each other, so no bear would be left alone.

There’ll come a time when I have to make the long journey back here by myself.

Toklo’s belly churned as he realized that by choosing to travel once again with his companions, he was putting off the inevitable separation.

A familiar voice echoed in his mind. “Perhaps it’s fitting that the final part of your journey, t

claim your own territory, should be alone, like a true brown bear?"

Toklo caught his breath. Turning, he saw a small, dark-furred bear standing beside him. "Ujurak," he exclaimed.

"After all," Ujurak continued, as if they were in the middle of a conversation, "won't you get more respect at the Sky Ridge if the other bears know you as 'the wanderer'? The bear of all territories, the bear who has seen more of the world than any of them will be able to imagine?"

"Maybe . . ." Toklo murmured.

"Other brown bears will look upon you as fierce *and* wise," Ujurak said, "but only if you make it to Great Bear Lake, to the gathering. Nothing is more important than that right now. For Lusa, and for you."

Toklo put his head on one side. "What do you mean? Is something going to happen to me at the lake?"

"I can't say," Ujurak replied. "It's something you must discover for yourself. But trust me, it's vital for you to get there."

A rustling sound behind Toklo made him turn his head, and when he looked back, Ujurak was gone. Lusa appeared through the trees, blinking and stretching as she stumbled up to Toklo.

"Why are you out here by yourself?" she asked through a massive yawn.

"I wasn't by myself," Toklo replied. "Ujurak was here."

Lusa's eyes sparkled with excitement, the last of her drowsiness vanishing. "Oh, I wish I'd seen him!" she exclaimed. "What did he say to you?"

Toklo decided not to tell her that Ujurak had said the gathering would be of huge importance to him. *It's all too mysterious*, he decided, wanting to think about it more by himself.

"Not much," he replied. "Or not much that I understood."

"Does he think it's right for you to go to the lake?" Lusa asked anxiously.

Toklo nodded. "Yes, he does."

"I'm so glad." Lusa let out a sigh. "It feels good having you with us."

The glittering edge of the sun was just appearing between two mountain peaks. Toklo glanced down at Lusa, seeing a deep sadness in her eyes as she watched. He moved closer to her so that their pelts were brushing.

"The four of us won't have many more times like this, will we?" Lusa murmured, leaning against his shoulder. "I know our journey together has been full of danger, but even so—I'll miss it."

"Me too," Toklo agreed. "It'll seem really strange, settling down in one place instead of moving on all the time."

"And no more adventures," Lusa said wistfully.

"I know," Toklo responded. "But it's time, Lusa—time to find a territory that truly belongs to us." He tried to sound cheerful.

"But we've made a territory for ourselves with every step of our journey, haven't we?" Lusa asked, turning her head to look at him with berry-bright eyes. "That territory will stay in our hearts through the memories we have."

Toklo had never thought of it like that. "You're right, Lusa," he said. "A territory in our hearts."



CHAPTER TWO

Lusa

Lusa swallowed her last mouthful of elk and swiped her tongue around her jaws. "That was great," she sighed. "We must be the best hunters in the whole wild."

"I'm stuffed," Toklo said, shuffling back from the carcass. "I feel as if I could sleep for a whole suncircle."

The four bears were sharing the prey near their temporary den, the hole underneath the pine tree. Sunlight glanced through the branches, and the air was full of warm scents. Lusa was struggling with drowsiness, too.

"It was a good idea to stay here an extra day and hunt, Toklo," she said. "We needed to build up our strength."

Toklo shrugged. "It just seemed sensible."

Lusa butted Toklo's shoulder gently with her head, knowing that he didn't want to act like he was in charge. "We all appreciated it."

But looking at her friends, Lusa was still worried. They all looked so tired, and their pelts seemed to be hanging from their bones, even though they had eaten well since they left the Sky Ridge. *How far have we traveled too far?*

Still, it was good to see Kallik and Yakone contentedly sprawled out side by side, and the extra day's rest had helped Yakone's paw start to heal again.

"I know why you love the mountains so much," Kallik said to Toklo. "You hunt best among rocks and trees."

Toklo gave a pleased grunt. "True. But it's time to move on now."

He took the lead as they set out across the open grassland and then down a steep slope that led into a denser forest. But as they plunged back into the shade of the trees, Lusa heard high-pitched yelping sounds, and the thump of heavy pawsteps, drifting up from somewhere below.

"Flat-faces!" Toklo exclaimed, halting.

He jerked his head, signaling to the others to scramble back to higher ground. Kallik and Yakone dove into the cover of a rocky outcrop, while Lusa joined Toklo behind a huge boulder a couple of bearlengths away.

The sounds of flat-face voices and the clump of their clumsy paws grew louder. Peering cautiously from behind the boulder, Lusa saw a ragged line of flat-faces heading diagonally across the slope. They all had huge black eyes that seemed to poke out of their faces, and brightly colored pelts. They moved slowly, looking around them, but Lusa didn't think they were hunting. They weren't concentrating enough for that.

"What are they doing?" Lusa whispered to Toklo. "They didn't touch the berries on that bush, and they stomped right over those deer tracks. What do they want?"

The brown bear shrugged. "Who knows? We'll just wait here until they've gone, and then move on again."

But the flat-faces didn't pass by. Instead, they stopped, removed bundles tightly wrapped in pelts from their backs, and sat down. Yapping cheerfully to one another, they began pulling packages from their bundles. Even though she had eaten well, Lusa's belly began to rumble as she picked up the scene.

of food, and her jaws watered as the flat-faces opened the packages and began to pass the food around.

~~“Oh, spirits!” Toklo groaned. “If they’re stopping to eat, they could be here for a while.”~~

Looking around, Lusa spotted another path that curved upward, away from the slope where the flat-faces were sitting. She nudged Toklo to point it out to him. “There might be a way around the flat-faces,” she murmured. “But we’ll have to climb a little higher.”

“It’s taking us in the wrong direction,” Toklo grumbled, then shrugged and grunted agreement, signaling to Kallik and Yakone. Lusa took the lead as they headed up the new path. It was wide enough for all of them to pass, but narrower than the paths they had used so far, and it wound around the hillside with a sheer drop on one side. Lusa began to worry that if it shrank any further, one of them might fall.

Yakone, just behind Lusa, slipped and dislodged a stone from the edge of the path. “Seal rot!” he muttered, but he managed to keep his balance. The stone bounced down the side of the mountain with a rattle.

The flat-faces had heard the noise. All of them looked up and pointed their paws, making chuffing noises. Lusa didn’t think they were afraid; they seemed delighted to see the bears, their voices growing shrill with excitement as they raised small black boxes.

Lusa flinched, afraid the things might somehow hurt them. But she soon realized they were harmless. Still, her fur prickled at being exposed to the flat-faces’ gaze.

It’s like being back in the Bear Bowl.

A powerful vision of her first home flashed into Lusa’s mind. The expanse of earth in the Bear Bowl seemed so small to her now, with a single tree and flat-face walls all around her. She remembered how the flat-faces had crowded around the edge of the Bear Bowl, gazing down at her and chattering. The first time she had ventured out from her BirthDen, she had been terrified.

Be brave and keep playing, her mother, Ashia, had said. They won’t hurt you, little one.

For a moment the soothing sound of her mother’s voice filled Lusa’s head, blocking out everything else. Ashia had rolled over with her paws in the air and let Lusa scramble all over her; then she’d given her a piece of fruit to eat, and soon Lusa had almost forgotten the flat-faces. She felt safe and cared for, and so tired that she could sleep forever. . . .

Yakone stumbled against Lusa, jolting her back to the sun-scorched mountain and the stones sliding beneath her paws.

“Lusa!” Toklo hissed from behind her. “What’s wrong with you? We have to get moving *now!*”

Lusa realized that they might have only moments before the flat-faces started to pursue them. *That was then; this is now,* she told herself, shaking off the memories like a troublesome fly. *I’m a wild bear now.*

She set off again, trying to quicken her pace, but there were more loose stones on the path, and she had to put her paws down carefully. Then she spotted a dense patch of scrub a few bearlengths farther up the path and headed for it, hoping it was big enough for all of them to hide in. Glancing over her shoulder, she tried to see if the flat-faces were following.

As they left the path and plunged into the scrub, Lusa relaxed slightly. *Nothing bad has happened,* she thought. *And not all flat-faces are hostile.* Even so, she kept going, thorns and brambles raking her pelt as she pushed through. Once they had gained some height she checked and looked back, peering through the foliage to see if she could spot the brightly colored pelts. To her relief there was no sign of the flat-faces, and their voices had grown fainter in the distance.

Toklo lumbered to her side, glaring at a chipmunk that was chattering at him from a branch just above his head. “Don’t stop,” he muttered to Lusa. “Even if we don’t see them now, who knows who

they might do?"

He took the lead as they continued, on and on until they had left the flat-faces far behind. The scrub gave way to dense undergrowth beneath close-growing pine trees. At least it was cool under the deep shade, but their progress was slow. Lusa noticed that Yakone was struggling to clear a path for himself without putting his injured paw to the ground. *It must be hurting him again.*

Lusa ducked and wriggled among the clinging vegetation, then turned back to tug aside vines and brambles so the larger bears could get through. "Over here," she said to Yakone, as the white male halted in front of a particularly dense bramble thicket. She pointed him toward a narrow gully with stones at the bottom, where he could slide down and stoop underneath the bramble tendrils.

Yakone blinked his gratitude and managed to thrust his way through, his body almost filling the gully.

All around them were the sounds and scents of small prey.

"I can't believe we're passing up the chance to catch something!" Lusa muttered to Kallik.

The white bear unhooked herself from a clinging bramble. "Right now I'm more worried about scratching my eyes out," she responded.

"That elk will keep us going for a while," Toklo grunted, ducking beneath a vine. "We need to put some distance between us and those flat-faces before we stop."

"But they're a long way behind us now," Lusa pointed out.

Toklo let out a snort. "You can never be too careful."

The bears kept going, pawstep by weary pawstep, though now they could see no more than a bearlength in any direction and had no idea where they were going. Though they knew they had their head along the side of the ridge, Lusa felt confused, trapped beneath the tree canopy, unable to check their direction.

"I'm going to climb a tree," she declared, frustrated by their slow progress. "That might help us find a clearer path."

She scrambled up a blue spruce tree that looked like it might be taller than the others. Breaking out of the forest canopy, she caught sight of a stretch of ground farther up the slope where young trees grew more sparsely. But before she could examine it further or look for flat-faces, she heard a harsh screech. Looking up, she saw a large bird diving toward her. It swooped down and battered her head with its wings, while its talons clawed at her face.

Lusa raised one paw to swat the bird away and lost her grip on the branch. With a yelp of alarm, she plummeted to the ground, feeling twigs break beneath her. She landed with a thump on something soft and furry. When she could catch her breath and look around her, she realized that Yakone had caught her on his mighty shoulders.

"Thanks!" she gasped, sliding to the ground. "A bird flew right at me. I must have gotten too close to its nest."

"You're welcome," Yakone grunted, flexing his shoulders with a hiss of pain. "Anytime."

"I've had enough of this," Toklo barked. "Birds attacking us . . . chipmunks chirping at us . . ." He swiped a paw at another of the little creatures chittering at them from a nearby branch, but it was too far away for the blow to connect. "Stuck here, wedged in the undergrowth . . ."

"There's a clearer patch farther up the slope," Lusa said, nodding in the direction she had seen. "Let's go that way."

She urged the others on through undergrowth that seemed even denser than before, their paws tangling in brambles and vines as they pushed their way through clumps of dogwood. Panting hard, they struggled upward, only to freeze at the sound of more flat-face voices coming from close by.

“Here! Hide!” Lusa pushed Toklo into a thicket of barberry bushes and followed him into shelter, wincing as the thorns tore into her fur. Kallik and Yakone thrust their way in as well and crouched at Lusa’s side.

“Couldn’t you have found us a nice clump of ferns to hide in?” Kallik asked irritably, licking her paw where one of the thorns had scratched it.

“*Shh!*” said Lusa.

All four bears watched warily as the flat-faces came into view, stumbling through the undergrowth on huge, clumsy paws. They were different from the ones who had stopped to eat, though they wore the same kind of brightly colored pelts.

Lusa’s heart pounded, and she concentrated on staying still and silent. Kallik was trying to balance on three legs to keep her scratched paw off the ground, while Toklo had ended up in a shallow stream that flowed through the thicket. Lusa choked back a snort as she spotted him sinking slowly into the peaty ground. But her amusement faded a moment later as a spider dropped down on a thread of gossamer and landed on her nose.

It tickles! I’m going to sneeze!

Suddenly the flat-faces broke out into excited yelping. Lusa gasped, afraid she and her friends had been spotted, but just then a bird erupted from a nearby juniper bush, and all the flat-faces cried out in delight. Some of them raised the little black boxes Lusa had seen before.

I wish I knew what they were, she thought curiously.

She concentrated on keeping still, feeling the spider crawling up her muzzle and through her hearth fur. Kallik had settled down and was licking her scratched paw, while Yakone peered between two branches to watch the flat-faces. Toklo had a disgusted expression on his face as he sank even farther into the soft ground.

To Lusa’s relief, the bird flew off and the flat-faces moved on, following a narrow trail through the trees. The bears waited until the sound of their voices and their clumsy pawsteps had died away in the distance; then they scrambled out of the barberry thicket.

Lusa could feel the spider crawling through her fur, and it felt like her whole body was one huge itch. All the bears’ pelts were covered with scraps of debris. Toklo was soaked to halfway up his legs and he squished as he walked.

“What’s wrong with this place?” he demanded. “Why is it crawling with flat-faces?”

“At least they don’t have firesticks,” Lusa pointed out.

“And they’re not very observant!” Yakone snorted. “How could they miss four bears? Kallik and I are hardly blending in.”

Lusa thought that Kallik and Yakone were probably grubby enough to hide among the brown tree trunks, but she said nothing.

The four bears pressed on up the slope, toward the clearer area that Lusa had seen from the trees. Before long they came upon a trail, stony and covered with the prints of flat-face paws. Flat-face scent hung about it.

“Should we follow it?” Lusa asked.

Toklo hesitated, then shook his head. “We never used paths like these the first time we went to the lake. I wish we could, but there’s too big a chance of coming across more flat-faces. I know the ones we’ve seen so far haven’t threatened us, but we can’t take the risk.”

Lusa sighed. “Okay.”

Pushing through the undergrowth again, they passed some berry bushes, and Lusa spotted a few bunches of berries that were already ripe. She stripped them off the branches and gulped them down.

relishing the sweet taste.

At last they emerged in the clearer area where the undergrowth thinned out between the spindly young trees. They were able to walk more easily without thorns snagging their fur or digging into the pads. Lusa and Toklo enjoyed the warmth of the sunshine on their fur, but Kallik and Yakone kept to the shade as much as they could, panting beneath the spreading branches of a pine tree.

Lusa realized that now that they were clear of the dense forest, they could see for long distances again. Heading to look out from a bare outcrop, she let out a bark when she spotted a huge flat-fac denning place spread out in the valley below.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “I thought we were in the wilderness!”

Toklo came to stand beside her. “Well, now we know where all the flat-faces are coming from,” he grunted.

Lusa stared down at the expanse of flat-face dens that seemed to huddle together in the midst of the forest and mountains that encircled them. Light glinted from the surface of a river that looped around the dens. “I hope we don’t have to go any closer,” she said.

Kallik left Yakone, who had flopped down under the tree to rest, his eyes closed, and padded over to join Lusa and Toklo. “It might not be so bad,” she said, scanning the valley more closely. “Look, there are a few small BlackPaths, but only one main one leading into the denning place. We just need to cross that and the river, and then we can head toward the sunrise.”

“Now I remember,” Toklo huffed excitedly. “Ujurak and I came this way before, when the Pathway Star guided us to Great Bear Lake the first time. I think it should be okay.”

“Thank the spirits,” Lusa murmured, grateful that she could trust Toklo’s memory. *I don’t recognize this place at all*, she thought as she looked around. *Toklo and Ujurak must have traveled this way before I met them.*

Her optimism rose again as she gazed out across the wide landscape. Their way stretched out in front of them. Even the denning area couldn’t daunt her, now that she could see there was a way around it.

I think Toklo’s right, she told herself. *We will make it to Great Bear Lake in time.*



CHAPTER THREE

Kallik

Kallik stood beside Lusa and Toklo on the outcrop as they examined the terrain ahead and began plan their route.

“We can’t go near those flat-face dens,” Toklo growled. “And we’ll have to stay alert to avoid the flat-faces wandering through the trees. I don’t know why they can’t just stay on the BlackPaths.”

Kallik knew she should concentrate on what the others were planning, but she couldn’t stop worrying about Yakone. She kept casting glances back at him where he was resting under the pine tree. His wounded paw had never really healed since the battle with the wolves.

“Are you okay to keep going?” she murmured, padding over to him. “That paw doesn’t look too good.”

“It’s okay,” Yakone replied.

Kallik grunted and bent her head to sniff at the wound. Her worries increased as she picked up the sweetish scent of infection.

“Toklo! Lusa!” she exclaimed. “Yakone’s paw is infected again. We have to find herbs to treat it.”

“Honestly, it’s fine,” Yakone protested, but none of the bears paid any attention to him.

“I’ll go find some,” Lusa promised, and darted off into the bushes.

Toklo shifted his paws impatiently. Kallik guessed he didn’t want to stay in one place for too long, but they all knew Yakone’s health was more important.

A few moments later Lusa reappeared with a mouthful of leaves. Kallik chomped them up, enjoying the clean, bitter taste, and trickled the juices into Yakone’s wound.

“Thanks,” Yakone said. “I’m sorry for slowing you down.”

Kallik nuzzled his shoulder briefly. “You’re not,” she responded. “The undergrowth is doing the work all on its own.”

As soon as the bears set out again, they had to head back into denser forest where once again the undergrowth hampered their pawsteps. Toklo fell in beside Kallik, an anxious expression in his eyes. “Is Yakone really okay to travel?” he asked in a low voice.

“I think so. As long as we don’t overdo it,” Kallik replied.

“No chance!” Toklo snorted, halting to tear away a trailing vine from around his neck.

They had gone only a few bearlengths when once again they heard the sound of flat-face voices along with a clattering noise they hadn’t heard before. Peering around a juniper bush, Kallik saw another stony trail stretching across their path. The clattering sound was made by hooves: a long string of horses, with flat-faces on their backs.

“Flat-faces are so lazy,” Kallik muttered.

There was a large group of riders, and some of the horses had another animal tied to them with a long tendril. The second kind was smaller than the horses, but looked similar, though those animals had much longer ears and a long face.

“Are those horses, too?” Kallik asked.

No bear replied, though Kallik noticed that Toklo seemed to be thinking hard, with a distant look in his eyes.

“I saw animals like them once when Oka and I raided a flat-face den for corn,” he murmured.

“What did she call them?” He relapsed into deep thought for a moment; then his face lit up and he exclaimed, “Mules! They’re mules!”

All four bears peered through the bushes as the horses and their flat-faces filed past. The mules had lumpy packages fastened to their backs, wrapped in pelts bare of fur. The creatures had small eyes, their expressions cross and stubborn.

“I don’t think I’d like to get mixed up with one of *them*,” Lusa declared.

As she spoke, one of the mules started to skitter sideways, dragging on the tendril that tied it to the horse ahead of it.

“Uh-oh! I think it’s picked up our scent,” Toklo muttered.

The flat-face on the horse leading the mule turned around to bark at it, and the mule fell into line once more. As the flat-face turned, Kallik spotted a long firestick slung over his shoulder, and her fur prickled.

“What do you think they’re doing?” Yakone whispered.

“Who knows what flat-faces do?” Toklo responded irritably. “Who cares? All we have to do is stay away from them.”

“Then they should stay away from us,” Kallik said. “The woods are for us, not them!”

When the line of horses had disappeared into the trees, the bears hurried across the stony trail. Kallik bristled again at the strange scents that filled the air, but Toklo and Yakone both started sniffing appreciatively.

“I wonder what horse tastes like,” Toklo said.

“Or mule,” Yakone added. “There’s a lot of meat on one of those.”

“The flat-faces wouldn’t like it if you started hunting their animals,” Lusa warned them.

Toklo and Yakone glanced at each other, then shrugged. “They’re only flat-faces,” Toklo said.

“They have firesticks!” Kallik exclaimed, stepping forward to block the two males’ path. “Have you two got cloudfluff between your ears, or what?”

Yakone sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

Kallik headed off with determined pawsteps, glad to hear that the others were following her. The ground in front of them fell away into a steep slope, and farther down she spotted the walls of a flat-face den. As she veered away, dogs started barking, sounding uncomfortably close. All the bears picked up the pace; Kallik’s heart started to thump harder as she waited for the crack of a firestick.

But no flat-faces appeared, and as Kallik and her friends plunged into deeper undergrowth once again, the sound of barking faded into the distance.

By this time, they were getting used to traveling through the dense forest. Yakone and Toklo would hold vines and brambles out of the way so that Lusa could wriggle through and begin making a path. Then Kallik would stamp down the surrounding branches.

“We’ve come a long way like this,” Kallik commented at last, “but any creature passing this way would be able to see our trail.”

“But nothing is tracking us,” Toklo pointed out. “And there are so many flat-faces around here, I doubt there are any hunting packs of wolves or coyotes.”

Kallik realized that Toklo was right. She looked at the other bears, noticing that their fur lay flat on their necks and they seemed relaxed, almost cheerful, in spite of the difficult ground. Though they didn’t talk much because they wanted to travel quietly, they made their way with good humor.

“You expect me to get through there?” Kallik murmured as Lusa squeezed underneath some low-growing thorn branches. “Do you think I’m a mouse?”

“Yeah, a really big mouse!” Lusa responded, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Wriggle on your belly,” Toklo suggested, managing to hold the branches a little higher to make room for Kallik. “And Yakone, watch out for that root. You don’t want to bang your injured paw.”

Yakone took the lead after they had negotiated the thornbushes. The slope was flattening out, and from somewhere ahead Kallik could hear the sound of running water.

Suddenly Yakone stopped. While Kallik glanced around for any signs of danger, he stalked forward again, then plunged into the lush vegetation that edged the stream. A moment later he stood up, holding a grouse in his jaws.

“Good catch!” Lusa exclaimed.

“Yeah, nicely done,” Toklo added. “Let’s rest for a bit and eat.”

Before they settled down to share the grouse, all the bears took a drink from the stream. Standing beside Yakone, Kallik nudged his shoulder with her muzzle. “That was great,” she said. “I’d never have known there was a grouse there.”

“I got lucky,” Yakone responded, though Kallik could hear the satisfaction in his voice. She was glad that he’d had a chance to provide food for them. *Now maybe he’ll stop worrying that he’s holding us back.*

Yakone tore the grouse apart, dividing it between himself, Kallik, and Toklo. Lusa was already digging up ferns and crunching the roots.

“Tell me more about the Longest Day Gathering,” Yakone said through a mouthful of prey. “What happens there?”

“Like I said, lots and lots of bears meet together by a lake,” Lusa explained. “Black bears, and brown and white. I’ve never seen so many bears in one place!”

“They exchange news and tell stories,” Toklo said.

“Yes, and there’s a ceremony,” Kallik added. “At least, the white bears hold one. The oldest and wisest bear calls on the sun to leave so that the dark and cold can return. It’s wonderful. . . . But it seems like such a long time ago that we were there,” she finished with a sigh. “We’ve seen so much since then.”

“And Ujurak was with us.” Toklo looked sad for a few moments, then swallowed his last bite of grouse and sprang to his paws. “Let’s get going!”

They crossed the stream and carried on over ground where the trees grew farther apart and they could make better progress. After a while Kallik heard the sound of running water again, this time a deep, slow surge. Flashes of astonishing blue appeared through the leaves, and a few pawsteps later they broke out into the open to see a river in front of them, lined on one side by a small BlackPath. “This must be the river we saw from the edge of the forest,” Lusa said.

A shallow slope led down to the BlackPath and water, and on the other side of the river, a steep slope climbed up to another ridge.

Toklo looked up to check the angle of the sun and the direction of the mountain slopes. “Yes, this is where we have to cross,” he said with a confident nod.

Beyond the BlackPath the mighty current of the river rolled onward, the water reflecting the blue of the sky. Flecks of foam dotted the surface, and small waves broke against the rocks on the shore.

Kallik’s paws tingled with excitement. She and the others waited at the edge of the BlackPath, crouched behind a bush for cover, while a firebeast crammed with flat-faces roared past. Then they raced across the BlackPath, scrambled over the rocks, and plunged into the water, heading for the far bank.

The cold shock of the water felt wonderful as Kallik struck out into the current. But it had been so long since they’d encountered deep water that she struggled a little until she found her rhythm. She

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