WOLF BANE

MICHELLE PAVER



ZEPHYR

an imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2022 at
Head of Zeus, part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2022
Interior art © Geoff Taylor, 2022
Jacket art and design © John Fordham Design, 2022

The moral right of Michelle Paver to be identified as the author and of Geoff Taylor and John Fordham to be identified as the artists of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

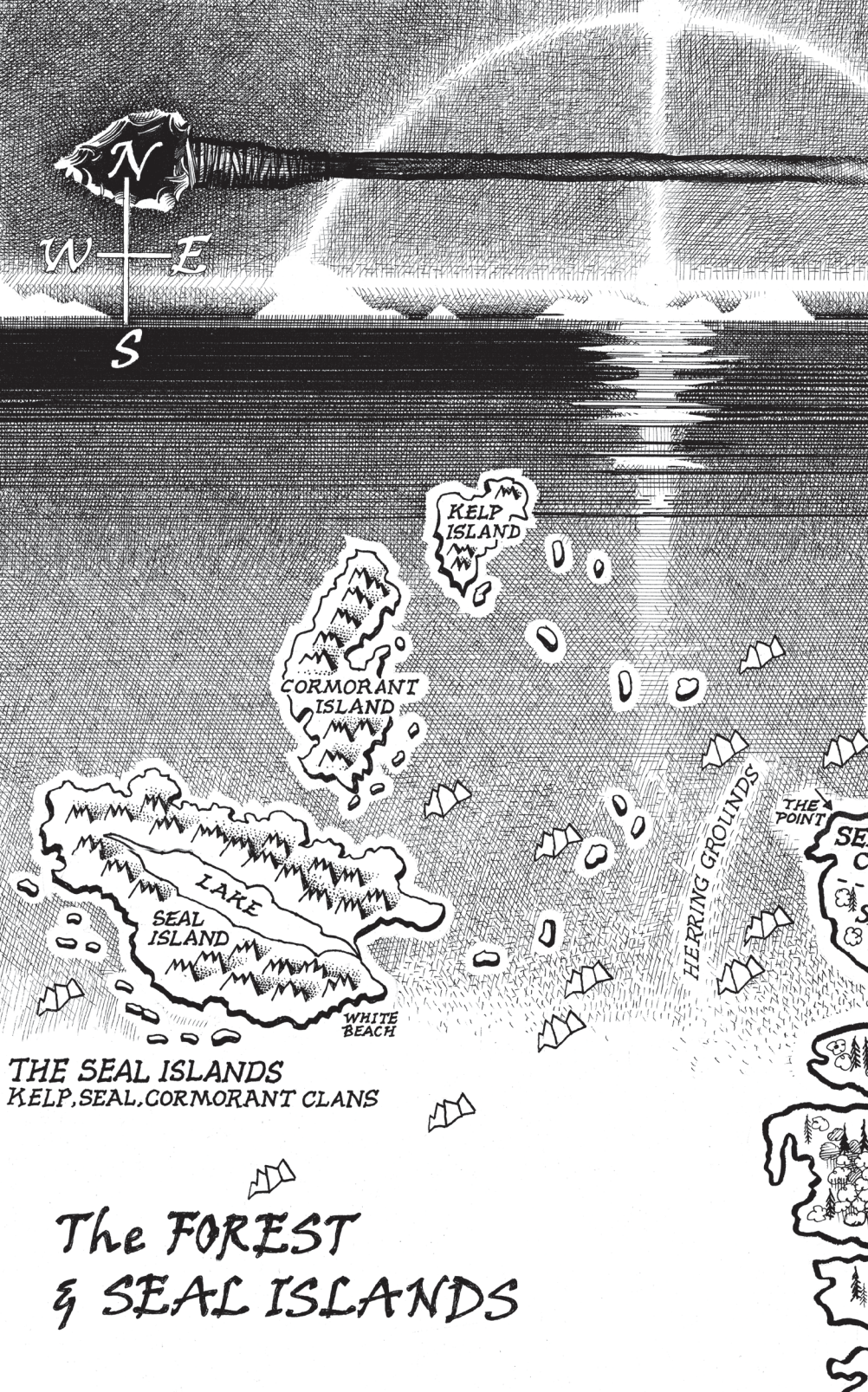
ISBN (HB): 9781789542448
ISBN (E): 9781789542462

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



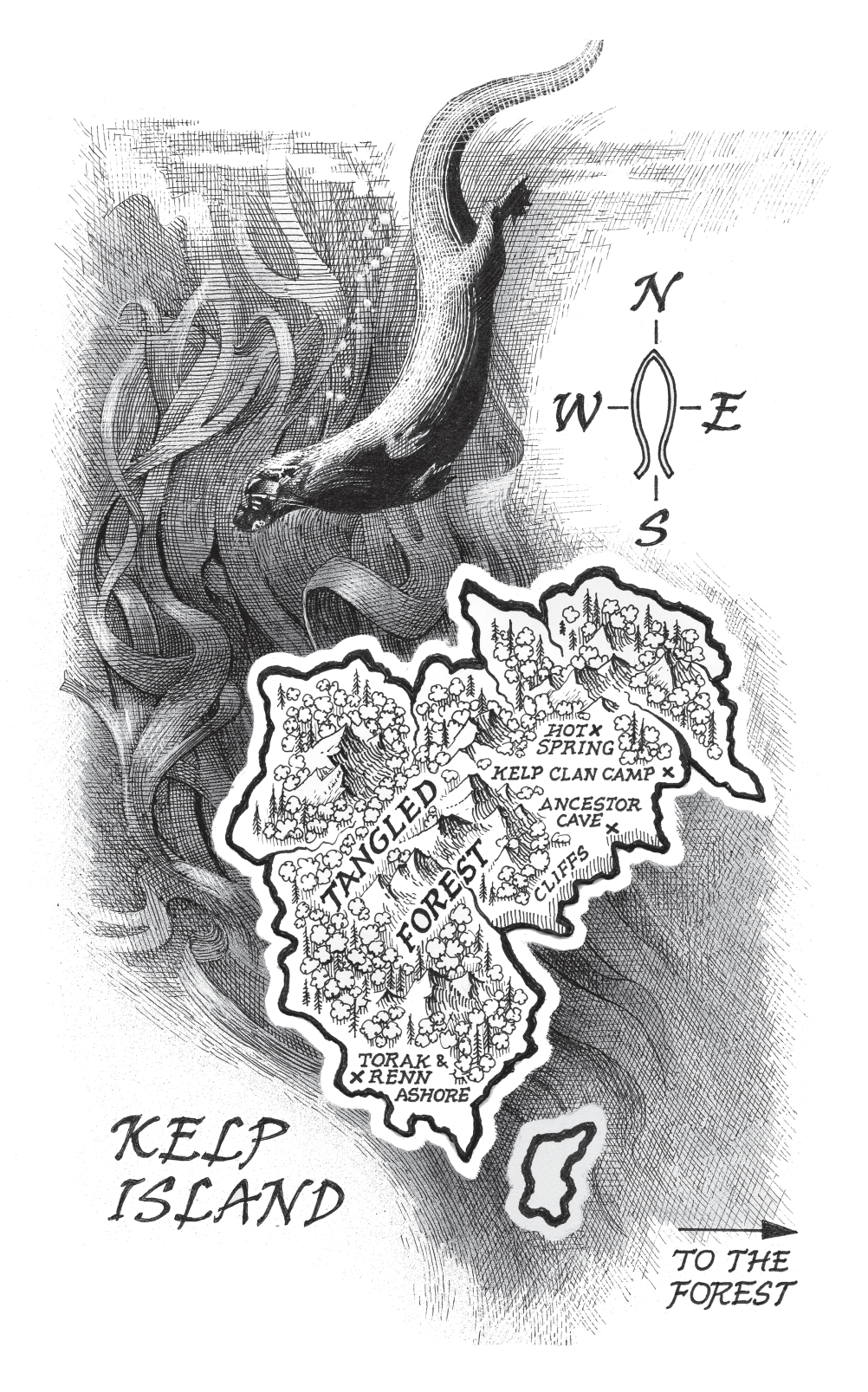
Head of Zeus Ltd
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
www.headofzeus.com



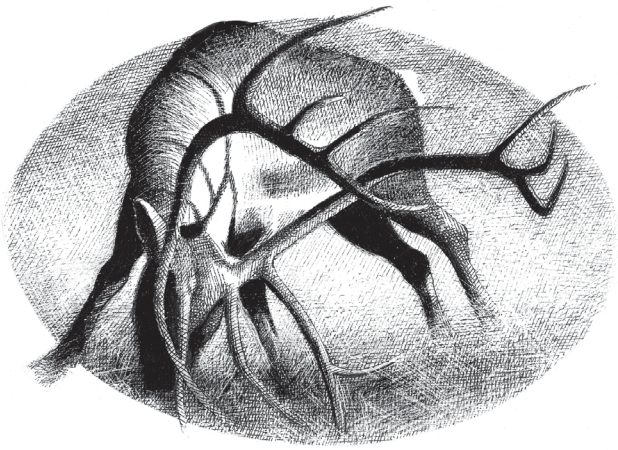


The FOREST & SEAL ISLANDS


TO THE FAR NORTH
WHITE FOX, NARWAL, PTARMIGAN WALRUS CLANS
RIVER BLACKTHORN
ICE RIVER
THE HIGH MOUNTAINS
SWAN, ROWAN, MOUNTAIN HARE CLANS
ICE RIVER
WOLF CLAN
GREEN RIVER
LAKE AXEHEAD
OTTER CLAN
WHITEWATER
TWIN RIVERS
RIVER AXEHANDLE
VIPER CLAN
RIDGE
HOGBACK
CROWWATER
SPARE DEN
RAVEN CLAN
DEN
BURNT LANDS
THUNDER FALLS
WIDEWATER
THE DEEP FOREST
ELK RIVER
THE NECK
RIVER CUTSTONE
EAGLE
AN
THE OPEN
RIDGE
BLACKWATER
THE SHIELD
SACRED GROVE
FOREST
RAVEN BONE-GROUND
ALMON
LAN
WINDRIVER
WILLOW CLAN
HILLS
AUROCH, FOREST HORSE, RED DEER CLANS
RUSHWATER
WHALE CLAN
TUMBLEROCK
RIVER HORSELEAP
AUROCH ROCK
FASTWATER
REDWATER
FA KILLED
FELLS


N
W
E
S
HOT SPRING
KELP CLAN CAMP
ANCESTOR CAVE
CLIFFS
TANGLED FOREST
TORAK & RENN ASHORE
KELP ISLAND
TO THE FOREST

ONE



The wolves have no idea that the Demon is watching. No idea that their shiny little lives could be snuffed out in a heartbeat.

Since dawn the Demon has been observing them from the ridge. Through the snowbound pines it makes out the red boulders where the she-wolf is digging her den. She's inside. Two wolves are padding about among the rocks. They seem to be guarding her, but they're bored and eager to play. One snaps an icicle off a boulder and bounds away, the other gives chase.

Now the she-wolf is backing out of the den. Her black pelt is clotted with mud, her belly swollen with unborn cubs. Hungrily the Demon licks the tang of her spirit off the wind. It would be easy to kill her, a single arrow destroying many lives… But she is not the one the Demon wants. The Demon is after her mate.

There.

Far up-valley near the frozen river, two more wolves are weaving between the trees. The lesser one with the white throat doesn't count; the Demon's quarry is the great grey wolf. Such souls it has, unbearably bright! The Demon hates and hungers for those souls – it longs to devour them and gain their power. Then at last it will claw its way out of this mortal body and be free...

Prickling with desire, the Demon pushes off on its long bone skates and sweeps downhill. It finds a snowbound thicket within arrowshot and downwind of the den. The she-wolf has gone back inside. Her 'guardians' play on, oblivious.

The Demon takes an arrow from its quiver and sniffs the poison on its black flint head. It nocks the arrow to its bow.

Sooner or later, her mate will return. Yes.

The Demon settles to wait.



In the next valley to the south, Renn, studying the tracks Torak had found, caught a shiver of malice on the wind and lifted her head.

'What's wrong?' said Torak with his eyes on the snow.

'Not sure. Maybe just a trace of his presence.'

'But only a trace,' he said in disgust. 'If this *is* his trail it's two days old.'

In the distance Wolf howled. Torak cupped his hands to his mouth and howled back. An instant later they heard Wolf's deep-throated reply.

Renn threw Torak a questioning look. He shrugged. 'Whitethroat went after another beaver.'

'Are they allright?'

'Yes. Why?' He was walking slowly, his lean brown face remote as he scanned the snow for signs.

Renn didn't reply. Nine days into the Moon of Roaring Rivers, and by now every valley should be noisy with cracking, grinding ice – and yet the thaw hadn't come. Winter still held the Forest in its grip. Was this why she felt a creeping unease?

Rip flew onto an overhead branch, scattering her with snow. 'I wish you wouldn't do that,' Renn muttered, brushing off her reindeer-hide parka. The raven fluffed his chin-feathers and gave her a gurgling greeting, then flew off, scattering more snow.

It's probably just lack of sleep, Renn told herself. Yesterday while making arrowheads she'd nicked the ball of her thumb, and the cut was swollen and painful. Last night's storm hadn't helped either. It was well out to Sea, nowhere near their camp, but since the Thunderstar struck, the most distant growl of thunder was enough to jolt her awake in a cold sweat.

Three moons since the disaster, and although the Burnt Lands were further east, even here by the coast the Forest bore scars: earlier they'd passed a swathe of pines felled by an earthshake.

Torak was beckoning to her and she hurried towards him, her snowshoes whispering over drifts.

He'd found a bootprint, boldly stamped for all to see.

'It's him, isn't it?' she said.

He nodded. 'Left foot turns slightly inwards. And I found this snagged on a branch.' Between finger and thumb he held up three long strands of yellow hair.

'Naiginn,' Renn said between her teeth.

Torak made to cast away the hairs but she took them from him. 'I may have a use for them.'

'A finding charm?'

'Maybe.'

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

Ten paces off, a young birch tree was dying. Its white bark had been wantonly slashed, and whoever had attacked it had made sure it would die by slicing away the soft bast underneath.

'Only a demon kills without reason,' growled Torak.

Nearby in the snow they found the body of an otter. Naiginn had eaten its eyes, tongue and brain, and had left the rest to rot, violating the Pact which forbade wasting any part of a kill.

A muscle worked in Torak's jaw. 'Scrabble marks in the snow. As if – oh no, she can't have been alive when…'

Renn felt sick with revulsion – and *shame*. Naiginn was her half-brother, her bone kin: an ice demon trapped in the body of a young man.

She pictured his once-handsome face, one side now puckered and scorched. His ice-blue eyes with their lightless black pupils. No human feeling, no sense of right or wrong.

Dead meat only gives me the taste *of souls*, he'd told Torak once. *I need* living *flesh! Every frightened, fluttering spirit makes me stronger – it loosens my bonds!*

Slipping off her mittens, Renn wrapped Naiginn's coiled hairs in a scrap of bast from the murdered birch and stowed them in her medicine pouch. While Torak laid his palm on the tree-trunk and quietly asked the Forest to help its souls find a new home, she stroked the otter's rich fur and bade its spirit be at peace. But was that possible if Naiginn had eaten its souls?

'Can you sense him at all?' Torak asked in a low voice.

She shook her head. Pushing back the sleeves of her parka, she showed him the zigzag tattoos on her wrists. 'They're not itching. He's long gone.' She frowned. She had a nagging sense that there was something they were missing.

Torak seemed to think so too. 'The last we heard of him,' he said thoughtfully, 'was the start of the Moon of Green Snow. Since then we've found no trace – until now. What was he doing *here*?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, this part of the Forest's hardly deserted. The Willow Clan's camped just round that spur. Sea-eagles in the next valley, near the mouth of the Elk River, Ravens Clan upstream from them, then us and the wolves. And he knows we're after him, he knows the clans are on the lookout – so why is he blatantly *here*?'

'He's bad at hiding? He's from the Far North, doesn't know the Forest as we do.'

'But he knows enough to cover his tracks. Think about it, Renn. Three days ago he just *happened* to meet those Whale Clan fishermen out at the herring grounds – and "let slip" that he was heading here, to the Windriver?'

'He did give them a false name—'

'—but didn't bother hiding his clan-tattoos – or his scars! I think he *wanted* them to suspect that he wasn't who he said. He knew they'd tell Fin-Kedinn – and that we'd get to hear of it. And now he's left this trail for us to find… No, Renn, he's telling us, "Naiginn was here!"'

'Maybe he's daring us to come after him.'

'Mm.' Uneasily he fingered the green basalt axe jammed in his belt. 'He's after souls,' he mused. 'The brighter the better. So why bother with saplings?'

Suddenly Renn had a dreadful thought. Naiginn hungered for bright, strong souls – and one creature had the brightest of all. 'He's not after trees,' she said. 'This is a decoy.'

Torak's grey eyes widened and the blood drained from his face. 'He isn't luring us *to* him, he's luring us *away*!'

'Because he's not after us—'

'He's after Wolf.'



The reindeer threw down its head and charged at Wolf, who dodged its head-branches and darted round to nip its heels. Whitethroat, his less experienced pack-brother, leapt straight at its chest. The reindeer attacked with both

forelegs, kicking Whitethroat nose over tail into a drift – then fled through the trees and galloped off along the frozen Fast Wet.

Whitethroat scrambled out of the drift and made to give chase, but Wolf shot him a glance: *Let it go!* The reindeer was too healthy and strong, not worth risking a spike in the guts.

Embarrassed, Whitethroat nuzzled under Wolf's chin to say sorry for spoiling the hunt, and Wolf gave him a reassuring soft-bite on the ear. *You learn. We go on.* Together they trotted up the slope to catch the smells.

The Hot Bright Eye was rising in the Up, and magpies were clattering about in the pines, snapping twigs for their nests. Wolf liked the time of the Bright Soft Cold, as the drifts made it easier to trap prey. And all was well with the pack. Tall Tailless and the pack-sister were hunting in the next valley, and Pebble and Blackear were guarding the Den. Darkfur was in a bad mood. She always was when her belly was full of cubs, but Wolf knew that if he tried to help her dig she would only growl at him and kick out furious spurts of earth.

The wind carried the scent of beaver: Whitethroat was eagerly sniffing. He was a fast runner, but young and not very clever. He still hadn't learnt that if you tried to dig a beaver from under the Bright Hard Cold, it simply swam away.

Suddenly Wolf caught a new scent that made his claws tighten and his hackles bristle. *Demon.*

Wolf knew in a snap that this wasn't one of the lesser demons that lurk in shadows and can be swiftly chased underground. This demon was cunning and immensely powerful. It stalked the Forest as a pale-pelted tailless, and in the past it had attacked Wolf and Tall Tailless and the pack-sister.

And this time it was horribly near the Den.