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opening extract from

Cold Tom

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The Tribe fled. Tom, frantic, heaved himself into

the purple branches of a scrubby blackthorn and

held himself as still as he could.

There were three of them. Demons. Not especially large, these ones, but heavy, hot, gross-blaring at each other with ugly voices.

Tom did his best to quieten his breath. How had demons got here? He hadn't been asleep, he was sure of it. He should have seen them long ago.

They were heading this way. They made enough noise with their trampling-so why hadn't he heard them before?

They were coming back into sight round a tangle of hawthorn, and now he could smell them, musty and foul. They kept touchng each other, holding each other, casting slave-shadows into each other's minds.

Tom held his breath so he wouldn't be sick.

They were going to pass right underneath him. Tom's heart was thudding, loud against his ribs. Demons were half blind and half deaf-but they were very close, now. The blackthorn was quivering with the tremors of their footfalls.

One of the demons stretched out a heavy arm. It snatched a branch out of its way and the whole tree heaved and whipped back and Tom's feet slipped. He fell, grabbed, caught something, and hung.

He'd set the birds squawking-but the demons didn't even turn their heads. They trudged on, half deaf, heedless. By the time Tom had found a foothold again all that was left of them was the ugly blaring of their voices. Tom drew in a long slow breath and gave thanks to all the stars.

A ruffle passed over the clearing - not much more than a stirring of the leaves - and the Tribe was there again before him. There were a dozen of them, cool and slim and silver-clad.

And every eye was on Tom.

On Tom, who hadn't given the alarm.

Tom took one look at them and forgot all about the demons. He threw himself down from the blackthorn, and he ran.

He didn't stop until he was through the thick belt of trees that encircled the clearing. Then he paused to listen. All quiet. No one following.

He went on again, quietly, slipping along the edge of the wood. In

the mist beyond the sickly winter grass was the sprawl of the city of the demons. There were demon outposts all round the common now.

Tom turned across the grass towards an isolated tangle of thorn bushes. His nest was there. He wriggled into the lining of wool-snags and curled himself into a ball.

The Tribe had come close to discovery just then. And it had been Tom's fault.

Soon the Tribe would come and sniff him out.

Unless they chose to make him wait.

He waited.