

## Chapter One

HIDDEN IN THE SHADOWS of the forest, Bo peeked under the low-hanging branches of a tree and watched the village children play a game. Spinning and dancing, they gathered in a circle, facing the center with their arms stretched wide and twinkling their fingers. “We’re the Stars in the night sky,” they chorused, as one child — a boy — crept into the middle of their circle, a blanket flapping around his shoulders, gray and coarse like a wolf’s pelt.

Bo longed to play with the village children, but the last time he tried to join in, they had pointed at him, chanting: “Devilchild! Shadow Creature!”

Bo was lucky an old woodcutter had found him when he was a few days old, abandoned in the forest. But he was unlucky the villagers knew he had survived a full night alone in a place infested with Shadow Creatures before Mads, the woodcutter, had rescued him. “The child must be a Shadow Creature too,” the villagers said. “How else could he survive the Dark? Or perhaps he struck a deal, a promise to lure innocent villagers into the forest for Shadow Creatures to devour in exchange for his own life.”

So Bo could only watch from the forest edge as the Starchildren spun in their circle and sang: “*Wolf so hungry, wolf so bold, don’t hurt us, do as you’re told.*”

The wolf-child howled: *Ah-wooooo! Ah-wooooo!* A shudder ran the length of Bo’s spine at the sound. *Ah-wooooo!* Baring his teeth, the wolf-child roared: “*Little Star, little Star, the hungry wolf knows where you are. He’ll chase you round, up and down, he’ll never stop until you’re found.*” The wolf-child covered his eyes with his little wolf paws and counted, “One, two, three . . .” as the Star-children danced clockwise around him.

Bo edged forward, gripping the tree beside him, the prickly, crinkly bark rough against his fingertips. He felt a pinch at his waist and looked down. A spiky vine had caught hold of him, just above the little pouch clipped to his belt. He pulled and twisted the vine, hearing it tear his shirt as it finally ripped clean off.

“Curse this forest,” muttered Bo. He’d need to stitch the tear tonight before Mads saw it — the old man hated when Bo ruined his clothes.

Bo’s head whipped up as the wolf-child shouted, “Ten!” and charged, scattering Star-children, who screamed and laughed and twinkled their little fingers.

“You can’t catch me,” they each cried.

But the wolf-child caught them all. One by one he gobbled up every last Star-child.

Bo crept forward, eager to see more, but a small growl from behind made his shoulders slump and his chest heave with an almighty sigh. “Well, I wonder,” said Bo. “Who could that be?”

He turned and saw a fox padding toward him, his tail a fiery plume flecked with white and eyes as golden as the Light in the Burning Season.

“You never listen, Nix,” said Bo, hands on hips. “I told you to stay put, didn’t I?”

Nix sat.

“Not now. Back there.” Bo flung a hand toward the heart of the forest.

“When I told you to stay by the sled. Remember?”

The fox cocked his head, snapping his mouth shut. He whimpered, low in the back of his throat.

“Don’t argue.” Bo turned around to watch the running, screaming, laughing children. “I know I’m not allowed to be here but it’s just this once, okay? Besides, you need to listen to everything I say ’cause I’m the boss. Mads said so.”

At the very edge of the green, Bo spied a little girl sucking on her thumb, resting her chin on her mother’s lap. The mother wore her fair hair braided around and around her head, and Bo wondered if that was how his mother wore her hair. Every night in bed, Bo would close his eyes and picture the mother he had never met. Every night she wore a different face.

Bo crept forward, careful to stay hidden behind the lowhanging branches but close enough to read the unease on the woman’s face as she watched the lengthening shadows stretch closer and closer to the playing children. The little girl curled the fabric of her mother’s skirt through her stubby fingers and stared wide-eyed as the wolf-child stood triumphant in the center of the green.

*“The hungry wolf has fed, now all the Stars are dead.”* The wolf-child puffed out his chest, beating it with a roar. *“The Dark will come, you’d better run, now all the Stars are dead.”*

The little girl gripped her mother’s skirt tightly. “Bad wolf,” she said, frowning. “Why bad wolf eat Stars?”

The mother stroked her child’s hair; Bo’s scalp tingled as if the touch belonged to him.

“Because . . .” said the mother. Her lips stayed parted as if to speak further but no words came to her. Bo sometimes felt that way: as if all his words had scattered like Star-children hiding from a hungry wolf. The mother shook her head and sighed. “All I know is if we don’t get you and your brother home this second, there will be no Stars to protect us from the

Dark.” She swept her child into her arms and called for her son. “Come inside now, Peter.”

“Do I have to?” The blanket slipped from the wolf-child’s shoulders. He pouted.

The Star-child at his feet giggled. “You can’t catch me,” she said.

“I already did,” said Peter, snapping his teeth.

“Inside,” said his mother. “Now.” She frowned at the Darkening sky above.

Bo looked down and found Nix sitting quietly beside him. He could see the animal’s right eye was weeping. A pink scar ran from the corner of the little fox’s eye and along the bridge of his nose — curled and thin like a beckoning finger, a witch’s finger. When the Dark was near, the scar wept.

Bo shivered.

It was true.

The Dark was coming.

The little fox barked.

“Fine,” said Bo, bending to pick up the pile of kindling at his feet. “Let’s go.”

Bo hurried to his sled, passing shadows that rippled as though alive. He knew they weren’t. Not yet. But he kept his distance anyway, hugging the kindling in the crook of his arm; Nix nudged his calves with a low bark.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” said Bo. “No need to be so bossy.”

Nix trotted ahead, tongue flopped out the side of his mouth, his teeth as sharp as the broken animal bones scattered among the fallen leaves.

The sled was overflowing because all day Bo had been scouring the forest for kindling. He would have finished ages ago if it weren't for the village children and their games. And if it so happened that he'd accidentally napped half the day by the river's edge, then no one had to know.

"Stars!" said Bo with a snort. He grinned at Nix. "I think some of those kids still believe in them, don't you? Even I know Stars aren't real. Mums and dads made them up so we wouldn't be so afraid of the Dark." Bo glanced up: through the canopy of leaves, he saw the Darkening sky. Now it was a deep, pink-tinged blue but soon it would turn a solid, unending black. At least that was what Mads said. No one knew what the Dark looked like, and if they did see it, well, they didn't live to tell the tale. Not with the Shadow Creatures.

Bo dumped his armful on top of the sled but jumped back as the whole stack came crashing down.

"Skugs fud!"

Nix nipped Bo's ankle and barked.

"I know," said Bo. "But Mads isn't here, is he? The old man can't tell me off if he doesn't hear me."

Bo restacked the kindling, then looped the rope over his shoulder and hauled the sled through the forest. Nix trotted by his side, sniffing the ground for signs of food.

"By the Light, Nix! Are you ever not hungry?" Bo laughed, a snort that danced from his mouth before disappearing into the lengthening shadows. They sure were getting long. A shiver tiptoed up and down his spine. He knew the Dark was coming, but there was still one last job to do before he could go home, a job he was already late for.

Every seventh day, it was Bo's responsibility to sprinkle a deep gold-red dust around the base of the oldest tree in the forest, a gnarled and twisted beast of a tree that haunted Bo's sleep. He was meant to do it exactly as the Light hit the third quadrant. "Don't ask, just do," Mads always said when Bo complained about this dull task. "Without that tree, there is no forest. No anything." That was what life with Mads was like — don't ask questions; just follow orders. Bo's head was so full of unasked questions he wondered how they all fit in there.

By now the Light was deep into the fourth quadrant, fading ever closer to the horizon. He hadn't meant to be so late. The Light had been warm and the grass soft and he hadn't meant to fall asleep, and then the village children had distracted him with their games. Time had slipped away from him. Bo had never once tended to the tree late, but he wasn't worried.

"All I'm doing is sprinkling a bunch of dust round an old tree," he said to Nix. "What does it matter when I do it?"

Bo pulled the sled farther into the forest, grumbling about dust and trees and Mads the whole way. When they broke into a clearing, Bo's heart quaked at the familiar sight before him.

Like a hunchbacked old man, the tree slumped in the center of the clearing, nothing within ten feet of it. "Smart of those other trees to keep their distance," murmured Bo as he left the sled at the edge of the clearing and hurried toward the ancient tree.

From beside the sled, Nix barked but did not follow.

"Coward," said Bo.

Nix growled but did not move.

Bo approached the tree carefully. Truly, it was a horrible thing. A trunk like a knotted mass of gray snakes. It wasn't tall but it was thick and wide and ugly as sin. Deep in the center at the base of the trunk was a hole, like a pit of unending Darkness.

"Let's get this over with, hey?" Bo unclipped the little pouch on his belt and untied the drawstring. The pouch felt surprisingly light. "What on Ulv?" Bo peered inside. It was empty. "But that's not possible! I filled it this morning. Mads even watched me do it, like always. He'd never let me leave the hut without making sure I had —"

Bo drew in a sharp breath as he noticed the hole in the bottom of the pouch. When had *that* happened?

He remembered the sharp pinch at his waist when he was watching the village children and the rip as he tore the vine clean off. He'd thought it was his shirt that had torn, but perhaps it had been the pouch and perhaps the dust had seeped out and . . .

"Skugs fud!" said Bo.

Nix barked.

"I know, I know, but Mads will *kill* me."

Bo worried his bottom lip with his teeth as he frowned at the tree. If he missed tending to the ugly old thing just once, it wouldn't matter, would it?

"I'll sneak some more of that dust tomorrow and come back then," said Bo. "Mads doesn't have to know." Surely it wasn't *that* important. Mads would have told Bo *exactly* why he should never miss tending to the tree if it was terribly important. Wouldn't he?

Nix barked again but Bo ignored him. There was nothing he could do about it now. It was getting Dark; he couldn't stay any longer.

A gentle *hoot hoot* let Bo know he wasn't alone — a tawny owl blinked at him from the branches of a tree, holding his gaze for a long, long moment before flapping its wings and fluttering away.

*Lucky it's only an owl and not someone who can tell on me*, he thought.

Bo pocketed the ruined pouch and turned his back on the tree. But as he walked away Bo could have sworn he heard a long, low, sighing hum emanating from the Dark hole in the center of the trunk. He looked over his shoulder — was the hole bigger? No, it was just his eyes and ears playing tricks on him.

Bo shivered and closed his eyes a moment. *Please don't let me dream about that horrible tree tonight*, he wished.