

the beginning. The shells break open, but the nuts inside do too, and we sit there separating out the pieces – throwing the fleshy bits into one of the pans and the shell pieces away.

The water takes ages to bubble. You couldn't call it boiling, it's just a gentle simmer. Despite the fire's good start, the flames die away quickly to this slow smoulder. We try adding more sticks and striking another match, but it only gives a couple of minutes' extra heat and we don't want to waste matches cooking a handful of nuts and nettles in the middle of the day. We're still hoping for something more substantial later on.

We munch the acorns mechanically, but then Bear spits his out. "They taste like poison, Ju."

I frown. He's right. They're as bitter as anything. "Maybe we didn't leave them long enough, or maybe the water's too cold."

The nettles are more successful. We drink the green liquid straight from the pan, the smallest one, and Bear names it Gloop, from Green Sloop. Green from the colour, and Sloop from the way you have to slurp it so you don't leave behind the soft wet leaves. They're bitter too, but not in a bad way. They must have goodness in them, surely. Green is good. Green is vitamins and iron.

Bear cheers up after the Gloop. He laughs at the green moustache around my mouth and bounds around after squirrels.

"Ghost!" he says as I'm wiping out the pans with leaves. "She found us, Ju."

I look out. It's the same cat. There's a distinctive pattern to the markings on her face – a slight unevenness from left to right.

"You think she's hungry?" Bear asks. I shake my head. The cat's staring at the fire, interested. She doesn't look hungry. She's lithe and muscular and shining.

"What do you eat, Ghost?" I say out loud. "You must eat more than nettles and acorns."

"I wish she'd catch something for us," Bear says longingly.

The trap's set again and we've left it further away this time. You hear the odd scuffle in the leaves – some mouse or rat maybe – but when we go to check the trap it's empty.

When we get up to walk, the cat follows. She keeps her distance, stopping when we stop, never getting too close. Her tread is silent, like an expert hunter's. But she's not hunting us, she can't be. Every time I look at her she blinks her yellow eyes slowly, like she's talking to us. Like she wants something from us, only I can't think what on earth that might be.

"You crazy cat," I say softly.

The sun's already dropping in the sky and it's cold, colder than ever. I think cold builds up inside you. I feel cold right down to the bone and my hands and feet hurt. I can feel the layers of flesh, hurting and freezing, freezing