When Torak crawled stiffly from his sleeping-sack, the valley below had disappeared. The Breath of the World Spirit had swallowed it whole.

He yawned. Wolf had woken him often in the night, racing about and uttering urgent half-barks: \textit{kill smell} – \textit{watch}. It didn’t make sense. Every time Torak went to look, there was nothing but a stink of carrion and an uneasy feeling of being watched.

‘Maybe he just hates fog,’ said Renn grumpily as she rolled up her sleeping-sack. ‘I know I do. In fog, nothing’s what it seems.’

‘I don’t think it’s that,’ said Torak, watching Wolf snuffing the air.

‘Well what is it, then?’

‘I don’t know. It’s as if something’s out

there. Not the bear. Not the Ravens. Something else.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I told you, I don’t know. But we should be on our guard.’ Thoughtfully, he put more wood on the fire to heat up the rest of the stew for daymeal.

With an anxious frown, Renn counted their arrows. ‘Twenty between us. Not nearly enough. Do you know how to knap flint?’

Torak shook his head. ‘My hands aren’t strong enough. Fa was going to teach me next summer. What about you?’

‘The same. We’ll have to be careful. There’s no telling how far it is to the Mountain. And we’ll need more meat.’

‘Maybe we’ll catch something today.’

‘In this fog?’

She was right. The fog was so thick that they couldn’t see Wolf five paces ahead. It was the kind that the clans call the smoke-frost: an icy breath that descends from the High Mountains at the start of winter, blackening berries and sending small creatures scuttling for their burrows.

Wolf led them along an auroch trail that wound north up the side of the valley: a chilly climb through frost-brittle bracken. The fog muffled sounds and made distances hard to judge. Trees loomed with alarming suddenness. Once they shot a reindeer, only to find that they’d hit a log. That meant a frustrating struggle to dig out the arrowheads, which they couldn’t afford to lose. Twice, Torak thought he
saw a figure in the undergrowth, but when he ran to look, he found nothing.

It took all morning to climb the ridge, and all afternoon to scramble down into the next valley, where a silent pine forest guarded a slumbering river.

‘Do you realise,’ said Renn as they huddled in a hasty shelter after a cheerless nighttime, ‘that we haven’t seen a single reindeer? They should be everywhere by now.’

‘I’ve been thinking that too,’ said Torak. Like Renn, he knew that the snow on the fells should be driving the herds into the Forest, to grow fat on moss and mushrooms. Sometimes they ate so many mushrooms that they even tasted of them.

‘What will the clans do if the reindeer don’t come?’ said Renn.

Torak didn’t answer. Reindeer meant survival: meat, bedding and clothes.

He wondered what he was going to do for winter clothes. Renn had had the foresight to put hers on before she’d left the Raven camp, but she hadn’t been able to steal any for him, so all he had was his summer buckskin: not nearly as warm as the furry parka and leggings which he and Fa made every autumn.

Even if they did find prey, there’d be no time to make clothes. Beyond the fog, the red eye of the Great Auroch was climbing ever higher.

Torak shut his eyes to push the thought away, and eventually fell into an uneasy sleep. But whenever he awoke in the night, he caught

that strange carrion stink.

Next morning dawned colder and foggier than ever, and even Wolf seemed dejected as he led them upstream. They reached a fallen oak bridging the river, and crawled over it on their hands and knees. Soon afterwards, the trail forked. To the left, it wound into a valley of misty beech trees; to the right, it disappeared up a dank gully, its steep sides an uninviting jumble of moss-covered boulders.

To their dismay, Wolf took the right-hand trail.

‘That can’t be right!’ cried Renn. ‘The Mountain’s in the north! Why is he forever going east?’

Torak shook his head. ‘It feels wrong to me too. But he seems sure.’

Renn snorted. She was clearly having doubts again.

Looking at Wolf waiting patiently, Torak felt a twinge of guilt. The cub wasn’t even four moons old. At this age, he should be playing by his den, not traipsing over hills. ‘I think,’ he said, ‘we ought to trust him.’

‘Mm,’ murmured Renn.

Hoisting their packs higher on their aching shoulders, they entered the gully.

They hadn’t gone ten paces before they knew that it didn’t want them. Towering spruce trees warned them back with arms spread wide. A boulder crashed in front of them; another struck the path just behind Renn. The stink of carrion grew stronger. But if it came from a kill-site, it was a strange one, for they heard no
ravens.

The fog closed in until they could barely see two paces ahead. All they could hear was the drip, drip, of mist on the bracken, and the gurgle of a stream rushing between fern-choked banks. Torak began to see bear shapes in the fog. He watched Wolf for the least sign of alarm, but the cub plodded along, unafraid.

At midday – or what felt like midday – they halted for a rest. Wolf slumped down, panting, and Renn shrugged off her pack. Her face was pinched, her hair soaking. ‘I saw some reeds back there. I’m going to plait myself a hood.’ Hanging their quivers and bows on a branch, she moved off through the ferns. Wolf heaved himself up and padded after her.

Torak squatted at the edge of the stream to refill the waterskins. It wasn’t long before he heard Renn coming back. ‘That was quick,’ he said.

‘Out!’ bellowed a voice behind him. ‘Out of the Walker’s Valley or the Walker slits throats!’

Torak spun round and found himself staring up at an unbelievably filthy man towering over him with a knife.

In an instant he took in a ruined face as rough as tree bark; waist-length hair matted with filth; a rancid cape of slimy yellow reeds. And at last the carrion stink was explained, for around the man’s neck hung a pigeon’s softly

rotting carcass.

In fact, everything about him seemed to be rotting: from his empty, festering eye socket to his toothless black gums, and his shattered nose, from which hung a loop of greenish-yellow slime. ‘Out!’ he bellowed, waving a green slate knife. ‘Narik and the Walker say out!’

Quickly, Torak put both fists over his heart in the sign of friendship. ‘Please – we come as friends. We mean you no harm –’

‘But they already did harm!’ roared the man. ‘They bring it with them to the beautiful valley! All night the Walker watches! All night he waits to see if they will bring harm to his valley!’

‘What harm?’ Torak said desperately. ‘We didn’t mean it!’

There was a stirring in the bracken and Wolf threw himself at Torak. Torak clutched the cub close, and felt the small heart hammering.

The man didn’t notice. He’d heard Renn creeping up behind him. ‘Sneaking up, is she?’ he snarled, lurching round and waving his knife in her face.

Renn dodged backwards, but that only made him angrier.

‘Does she want them in the water?’ he cried, snatching their bows and quivers from the branch and holding them out over the stream. ‘Does she want to see them swim, the pretty arrows and the shiny, shiny bows?’

Mute with horror, Renn shook her head.

‘Then they drop knives and axes quick, or in they go!’
They both knew that they didn’t have a choice, so they tossed their remaining weapons at his feet, and he stowed them swiftly under his cape.

‘What do you want us to do?’ said Torak, his heart hammering as fast as Wolf’s.

‘Get out!’ roared the man. ‘The Walker told them! Narik told them! And the anger of Narik is terrible!’

Both Renn and Torak looked round for Narik, whoever he was, but saw only wet trees and fog.

‘We are getting out,’ said Renn, eyeing her bow in the enormous fist.

‘Not up the Valley! Out!’ He gestured to the side of the gully.

‘But – we can’t go up there,’ said Renn, ‘it’s too steep –’

‘No more tricks!’ bellowed the Walker, and hurled her quiver into the stream.

She screamed and leapt after it, but Torak grabbed her arm. ‘It’s too late,’ he told her. ‘It’s gone.’ The stream was deeper and faster than it looked. Her beloved quiver had disappeared.

Renn turned on the Walker. ‘We were doing what you said! You didn’t have to do that!’

‘Oh yes he did,’ said the Walker with a toothless black grin. ‘Now they know he means it!’

‘Come on, Renn,’ said Torak. ‘Let’s do as he says.’

Furiously, Renn picked up her pack.

If their journey had been hard before, this was worse. The Walker strode behind them, forcing them almost at a run up a rocky elk trail that at times had them climbing on their hands and knees. Renn went in front, stony-faced, grieving for her quiver. Wolf soon began to lag behind.

Torak turned to help him, but the Walker sliced the air a finger’s breadth from his face. ‘On!’ he shouted.

‘I just want to carry –’

‘On!’

Renn cut in. ‘You’re Otter Clan, aren’t you? I recognise your tattoos.’

The Walker glared at her.

Torak seized his chance and hoisted the flagging cub in his arms.

‘Was Otter Clan,’ muttered the Walker, clawing his neck, where the crusted skin was tattooed with wavy blue-green lines.

‘Why did you leave them?’ asked Renn, who seemed to be making a supreme effort to forget about her quiver and befriend him, in order to keep them alive.

‘Didn’t leave,’ said the Walker. ‘Otters leave him.’ Twisting a wing off the pigeon, he sucked it between his toothless gums, taking in with it a generous loop of slime.

Torak swayed. Renn turned pale green.

The Walker was making spearheads,’ he said through a rancid mouthful, ‘and the flint flies at him and bites him in the head.’ He gave a bark of laughter, spraying them both. ‘Bits of him going bad, getting sewn up, going bad again. In the end his eye pops right out, and a raven eats it. Ha! Ravens like eyes.’
Then his face crumpled, and he pounded his head with his fist. ‘Ach, but the hurts, the hurts! All the voices howling, the souls fighting in his head! That’s why the Otters chase him away!’

Renn swallowed. ‘One of my clan lost an eye the same way,’ she said. ‘My clan is friendly with the Otters. We – we mean you no harm.’

‘Maybe,’ said the Walker, removing a bone from his mouth and stowing it carefully inside his cape. ‘But they still bring it with them.’ All of a sudden, he halted and scanned the slopes. ‘But the Walker was forgetting. Narik asks him for hazelnuts! Now where did the hazel trees go?’

Torak hefted Wolf higher in his arms. ‘The harm you think we bring,’ he said. ‘Do you mean –’

‘They know what he means,’ said the Walker. ‘The bear demon, the demon bear. And the Walker told him not to summon it!’

Torak stopped. ‘Told who? Do you mean – the crippled wanderer? The one who made the bear?’

A jab of the knife reminded him to keep moving. ‘The crippled one, yes of course! The wise one, always after the demons to do his bidding.’ Another bark of laughter. ‘But the Wolf boy doesn’t know about demons, does he? Doesn’t even know what they are! Ah yes, the Walker can always tell.’

Renn looked surprised. Torak avoided her eyes.

‘The Walker knows about them,’ the man went on, still scanning the slopes for hazel trees.

‘Oh yes. Before the flint bit him, he was a wise man himself. He knew that if you die and lose your name-soul, then you’re a ghost, and you forget who you are. The Walker always feels sorry for ghosts. But if you lose your clan-soul, then what’s left is a demon.’

Leaning forwards, he engulfed Torak in a blast of rank breath. ‘Think about that, Wolf boy. No clan-soul, and you’re a demon. The raw power of the Nannuak, but with no clan feeling to tame it; just the rage that something’s been taken from you. That’s why they hate the living.’

Torak knew the Walker was telling the truth. He’d seen that hatred himself. It had killed his father. ‘What about the crippled one?’ he asked hoarsely. ‘The one who caught the demon and trapped it in the bear? What was his name?’

‘Ah,’ said the Walker, gesturing at Torak to move on. ‘So wise, so clever. To start with, he only wants the little demons, the slitherers and the scurriers. But they’re never strong enough for him, he always wants more. So then he calls up the biters and the hunters. Still not enough.’ He grinned, giving Torak another blast of carrion breath. ‘In the end,’ he whispered, ‘he summons – an elemental.’

Renn gasped.

Torak was mystified. ‘What’s that?’

The Walker laughed. ‘Ah, she knows! The Raven girl knows!’

Renn met Torak’s eyes. Her own were very dark. ‘The stronger the souls, the stronger the demon.’ She licked her lips. ‘An elemental
comes into being when something hugely powerful dies – something like a waterfall or an ice river – and its souls are scattered. An elemental is the strongest demon of all.’

Wolf wriggled out of Torak’s arms and disappeared into the ferns. An elemental, Torak thought dazedly.

But this talk of demons was upsetting the Walker all over again. ‘Ach, how they hate the living!’ he moaned, rocking from side to side. ‘Too bright, too bright, all the shiny, shiny souls! Hurts! Hurts! It’s their fault, the Wolf boy and the Raven girl! They bring it with them to the Walker’s beautiful valley!’

‘But we’re nearly out of your valley,’ said Renn.

‘Yes, look,’ said Torak, ‘we’re nearly at the
top –’

The Walker would not be calmed. ‘Why do they do it?’ he shouted. ‘Why? The Walker never did them any harm!’ Brandishing their bows above his head, he gripped them at both ends, as if to break them in two.

That was too much for Renn. ‘Don’t you dare!’ she shouted. ‘Don’t you dare hurt my bow!’

‘Back!’ roared the Walker, ‘or he snaps them like twigs!’

‘Put them down!’ yelled Renn, leaping at him and trying in vain to reach her bow.

Torak had to act fast. Quickly he opened his food pouch, then held out his palm. ‘Hazelnuts!’ he cried. ‘Hazelnuts for Narik!’

The effect was immediate. ‘Hazelnuts,’
murmured the Walker. Dropping their bows on the stones, he snatched the nuts from Torak’s hand and squatted on his haunches. Then he pulled a rock from his cape and began cracking them. ‘Hm, nice and sweet. Narik will be pleased.’

Quietly, Renn retrieved the bows and brushed off the wet. She offered Torak his, but he didn’t take it. He was staring at the rock which the Walker was using to crack the nuts. ‘Who is Narik?’ he said, keen to keep the Walker talking so that he could get a closer look. ‘Is he your friend?’

‘The Walker can see him plain enough,’ he muttered. ‘Why can’t the Wolf boy? Something wrong with his eyes?’ Plunging his hand into his cape, he drew out a mangy brown mouse. It was clutching half a hazelnut in its paws, and looked up peevishly at being interrupted.

Torak blinked. The mouse sneezed and went back to its meal.

Tenderly, the Walker stroked the small, humped back with his grimy finger. ‘Ah, the Walker’s fosterling.’

The rock lay discarded on the ground. It was about the size of Torak’s hand: a sharp, curved claw – made of gleaming black stone.

Where there’s a stone claw, might there also be a stone tooth? Torak glanced at Renn. She’d seen it too. And from her expression, she’d had the same thought. ‘Oldest of all, the stone bite.’ The second part of the Nanuak.

‘That stone,’ Torak said carefully. ‘Would the Walker tell me where he got it?’
The Walker raised his head, dazed from stroking his mouse. Then his face convulsed. ‘Stone mouth,’ he said. ‘Long time, bad time. He’s hiding. Otters have thrown him out, but he’s not yet found his beautiful valley.’

Again Torak and Renn exchanged glances. Did they dare risk another outburst?

‘The stone creature,’ said Torak. ‘Does it have stone teeth inside the stone mouth?’

‘Of course!’ snarled the Walker. ‘Or how could it eat?’

‘Where can we find it?’ asked Renn.

‘The Walker said! In the stone mouth!’

‘And where is the creature with the stone mouth?’

Suddenly, the Walker’s face went slack, and he looked very tired. ‘Bad place,’ he whispered.

‘Very bad. The killing earth that gulps and swallows. The Watchers everywhere. They see you, but you don’t see them. Not till it’s too late.’

‘Tell us how to find it,’ said Torak.