Renn was huddled in her sleeping-sack, thinking about getting up, when Torak appeared at the entrance to the shelter, making her jump.

'Time we got started,' he said, crouching by the fire and handing her a strip of dried deer meat. From the shadows under his eyes, she guessed that he hadn’t slept any better than she had.

She sat up and took a half-hearted bite of her daymeal. The scrape on her cheek felt hot, and the bruise above her eye hurt. But worse than that was the creeping dread. It wasn’t only the nearness of the cave, or terror of the bear. It was something else: something she didn’t want to think about.

'I found the trail,' said Torak, cutting across her thoughts.

She stopped in mid-chew. 'Which way did they go?'

'West, round the other side of the hill, then down into a beech wood.' He reached out and stirred the fire, his thin face sharp with anxiety. 'The bear was right behind him.'

Renn pictured Wolf racing through the Forest with the bear closing in. 'Torak,' she said, 'you do realise that when we track Wolf, we’ll also be tracking the bear?'

'Yes.'

'If we catch up with it –'

'I know,' he broke in, 'but I’m sick of waiting. We’ve waited all night, and still nothing. We’ve got to go and find him. At least, I’ve got to. You can stay here –'

'No! Of course I’m coming with you! I was only saying.' She looked at the salmon-skin mitten hanging from the roofpost.

'Do you think it’ll work?' said Torak, following her gaze.

'I don’t know.'

The charm had sounded so clever when she’d explained it to him yesterday. 'When someone gets ill,' she’d said, feeling quite important, 'it’s usually because they’ve eaten something bad. But sometimes it’s because their souls have been lured away by demons. The sick souls need to be rescued. I’ve seen Saeunn do it lots of times. She ties little fish-hooks to her fingertips to help her catch the sick souls; then she takes a special potion to loosen her own souls, so that they can leave her body and find the –'

'What’s this got to do with the Nunnauk?'

'I’m about to tell you,' she’d said with a
quelling look. ‘To find them, Saeunn has to hide her own souls from the demons.’

‘Ah. So if you do what she does, you can hide the Nanuak from the bear?’

‘I think so, yes. To disguise herself she smears her face with wormwood and earthblood, then puts on a mask of rowan bark tied with hairs from each member of the clan. That’s what I’m going to do. Well, in a way.’

After that, she’d made a little box of folded rowan bark, and smeared it with wormwood and red ochre. Then she’d put the stone tooth inside, and tied it up with locks of her own and Torak’s hair.

It had been a relief to be doing something instead of worrying about Wolf, and she’d felt proud of herself. But now, in the freezing dawn, doubts crowded in. After all, what did she know about Magecraft?

‘Come on,’ said Torak, jumping up. ‘The tracking’s good. Light’s nice and low.’

Renn peered out of the shelter. ‘What about the bear? It might have lost Wolf’s scent and come back for us.’

‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘I think it’s still after Wolf.’

Somehow, that didn’t make her feel any better.

‘What’s wrong?’ said Torak.

She sighed. What she wanted to say was: ‘I’m really, really missing my clan; I’m terrified that Fin-Kedinn will never forgive me for helping you escape; I think we’re mad to be deliberately tracking the bear; I’ve got a horrible feeling that we’re going to end up at the one place I don’t ever want to go; and I’m worried that I shouldn’t even be here, because unlike you, I’m not the Listener and I’m not in the Prophecy, I’m just Renn. But it’s no use saying any of this, because all you can think about is finding Wolf.’ So in the end she simply said, ‘Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.’

Torak threw her a disbelieving look and started stamping out the fire.

All morning, they followed the trail through the beech wood and then through a spruce forest, turning north east and steadily climbing. As always, Renn was unsettled by Torak’s skill at tracking. He seemed to go into a trance, scanning the land with endless patience, and often finding some tiny sign that most full-grown hunters would have missed.

It was mid-afternoon and the light was beginning to fail when he stopped.

‘What is it?’ asked Renn.

‘Sh! I thought I heard something.’ He cupped his hand to his ear. ‘There! Do you hear it?’

She shook her head.

His face broke into a grin. ‘It’s Wolf!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’d know his howl anywhere. Come on, he’s up that way!’ He pointed east.

Renn’s heart sank. Not east, she thought. Please not east.
As Torak followed the sound, the ground got stonier, and the trees shrank to waist-high birch and willow.

‘Are you sure he’s here?’ said Renn. ‘If we keep going, we’ll end up on the fells.’

Torak hadn’t heard her; he was running ahead. He disappeared behind a boulder, and a few moments later she heard him excitedly yelling her name.

She raced up the slope and rounded the boulder into the teeth of an icy north wind. She staggered back. They had reached the very edge of the Forest. The edge of the fells.

Before her stretched a vast treeless waste, where heather and dwarf willow hugged the ground in a vain attempt to avoid the wind; where small peat-brown lakes shivered amid tossing marsh grass. Far in the distance, a treacherous scree slope towered above the fells, and beyond it rose the High Mountains. But between the scree slope and the Mountains, glimpsed only as a white glitter, lay what Renn had been dreading.

Torak, of course, was unaware of all that. ‘Renn!’ he shouted, the wind whipping his voice away. ‘Over here!’

Dragging her gaze back, she saw that he was kneeling on the bank of a narrow stream. Wolf lay beside him, eyes closed, the ravenskin pouch at his head.

‘He’s alive!’ cried Torak, burying his face in the wet grey fur. Wolf opened one eye and feebly thumped his tail. Renn stumbled through the heather towards them.

‘He’s exhausted,’ said Torak without looking up, ‘and soaking wet. He’s been running in the stream to throw the bear off the scent. That was clever, wasn’t it?’

Renn glanced around her fearfully. ‘But did it work?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Torak. ‘Look at all the marsh pipits. They wouldn’t be here if the bear was near.’

Wishing she could share his confidence, Renn knelt and fumbled in her pack for a salmon cake to give to Wolf. She was rewarded with another, slightly stronger, tail-thump.

It was wonderful to see Wolf again, but she felt oddly cut off. Too much else was crowding in on her; too much that Torak didn’t know about.

She picked up the ravenskin pouch and loosened its neck to check inside. The river eyes were still in their nest of rowan leaves.

‘Yes, take it,’ said Torak, lifting Wolf in his arms and laying him gently on a patch of soft marsh grass. ‘We need to hide it from the bear right away.’

Renn untied the rowan-bark box that held the stone tooth, and tipped in the river eyes; then she refastened the box, put it back in the pouch, and tied it to her belt.

‘He’ll be all right now,’ said Torak, stooping to give the cub’s muzzle an affectionate lick. ‘We can make a shelter over there in the lee of that slope. Build a fire, let him rest.’

‘Not here,’ said Renn quickly. ‘We should get back to the Forest.’ Out on this windswept
fell, she felt exposed, like a caterpillar dangling on a thread.

‘Better if we stay here,’ said Torak. He pointed north towards the scree slope and the white glitter. ‘That’s the fastest way to the Mountain.’

Renn’s belly tightened. ‘What? What are you talking about?’

‘Wolf told me. That’s where we’ve got to go.’

‘But – we can’t go up there.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because that’s the ice river!’

Torak and Wolf looked at her in surprise, and she found herself facing two pairs of wolf eyes: one amber, one light-grey. It made her feel very left out.

‘But Renn,’ said Torak patiently, ‘that’s the shortest way to the Mountain.’

‘I don’t care!’ She tried to think up some reason that he’d accept. ‘We’ve still got to find the third piece of the Nanuak, remember? “Coldest of all, the darkest light.” We’re not going to find it up there, are we? It’ll be cold all right, but there’s nothing up there!’ Nothing but death, she added to herself.

‘You saw the red eye last night,’ said Torak. ‘It’s getting higher. We’ve only got a few days –’

‘Aren’t you listening?’ she shouted. ‘We cannot cross the ice river!’

‘Yes we can,’ he replied with terrifying calm. ‘We’ll find a way.’

‘How? We’ve got one waterskin and four arrows between us! Four arrows! And winter’s coming, and you’ve only got summer clothes!’

He looked at her thoughtfully. ‘That’s not why you don’t want to go up there.’

She leapt to her feet and stalked off; then marched back again. She said, ‘My father died on an ice river just like that one.’

The wind hissed sadly over the fells. Torak looked down at Wolf, then back to her.

‘It was a snowfall,’ she said. ‘He was on the ice river beyond Lake Axehead. Half an ice cliff came down on him. They only found his body in the spring. Saeunn had to do a special rite to get his souls together.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Torak. ‘I didn’t –’

‘I’m not telling you so that you’ll be sorry for me,’ she cut in. ‘I’m telling you so that you’ll understand. He was a strong, experienced hunter who knew the mountains – and still the ice river killed him. What hope – what chance – do you think we’d have?’