Torak woke at dawn feeling stiff and sore. But he could move all four limbs, and nothing felt broken, so he decided he was better.

Renn was kneeling at the mouth of the cave, trying to feed Wolf a handful of crowberries. She was frowning with concentration as she held out her hand. Wolf edged cautiously forwards – then jerked back again. At last he decided he could trust her, and snuffled up the berries. Renn laughed as his whiskers tickled her palm.

She caught Torak looking and stopped laughing, embarrassed to be seen making friends with the cub. ‘How do you feel?’ she asked.

‘Better.’

‘You don’t look it. You’ll need to rest for at least a day.’ She got to her feet. ‘I’m going hunting. We should keep the dried food for

when we need it.’

Torak sat up painfully. ‘I’m coming too.’

‘No you’re not, you should rest –’

‘But my clothes are dry, and I need to move around.’ He didn’t tell her the real reason, which was that he hated caves. He and Fa used to shelter in them sometimes, but Torak always ended up outside. It felt all wrong to be sleeping between solid walls, cut off from the wind and the Forest. It felt like being swallowed.

Renn sighed. ‘Promise that as soon as we make a kill, you’ll come back here and rest.’

Torak promised.

Getting dressed hurt more than he’d expected, and by the time he’d finished, his eyes were watering. To his relief, Renn didn’t notice, as she was preparing for the hunt. She combed

her hair with an ashwood comb carved like a raven’s claw, then tied it back in a horsetail and stuck in an owl feather for hunting luck. Next, she smeared ash on her skin to mask her scent, and oiled her bow with a couple of crushed hazelnuts, chanting: ‘May the clan guardian fly with me and make the hunt successful.’

Torak was surprised. ‘We prepare for hunting in the same way. Except we say, “May the clan guardian run with me”. And we don’t oil our bows every time.’

‘That’s just something I do,’ said Renn. Lovingly she held it up so that the oiled wood gleamed. ‘Fin-Kedinn made it for me when I was seven, just after Fa was killed. It’s yewwood, seasoned for four summers. Sapwood on its back for stretch, heartwood on its belly for
strength. He made the quiver, too. Wove the wicker himself, and let me choose the decoration. A zigzag band of red and white willow.’

She paused, and her face became shadowed as she remembered. ‘I never knew my mother; Fa was everything. When he was killed, I was crying so hard. Then Fin-Kedinn came, and I hit him with my fists. He didn’t move. Just stood there like an oak tree, letting me hit him. Then he said, “He was my brother. I will look after you.” And I knew that he would.’ She scowled, sucking in her lips.

Torak knew that she was missing her uncle, and probably worrying about him too, as he tracked her through the bear-haunted Forest. To give her time, he made his own preparations

and gathered his weapons. Then he said, ‘Come on. Let’s go hunting.’

She nodded once, then shouldered her quiver.

It was a bright, cold morning, and the Forest had never looked so beautiful. Scarlet rowan trees and golden birch blazed like flame against the dark-green spruce. Blueberry bushes glittered with thousands of tiny, frost-spangled spiders’ webs. Frozen moss crunched underfoot. A pair of inquisitive magpies followed them from tree to tree, bickering. The bear must be far away.

Unfortunately, Torak didn’t get long to enjoy it. Around mid-morning, Wolf startled a clutch of willow grouse, who shot skywards with indignant gobbles. The birds flew fast and into

the sun, so Torak didn’t even bother taking aim, knowing he’d never hit one. To his astonishment, Renn nocked an arrow and let fly, and a willow grouse thudded into the moss.

Torak’s jaw dropped. ‘How did you manage that?’

Renn reddened. ‘Well. I practise a lot.’

‘But – I’ve never seen shooting that good. Are you the best in your clan?’

She looked uncomfortable.

‘Is there anyone better?’

‘Um. Not really.’ Still embarrassed, she waded off through the blueberry bushes to retrieve the grouse. ‘Here.’ She flashed him her sharp-toothed grin. ‘Remember your promise? Now you’ve got to go back and rest.’

Torak took the grouse. If he’d known she

was such a good shot, he’d never have promised.

When Renn returned to the cave, they had a feast. From the hooting of a young owl, they knew that the bear was far away; and Renn judged that they’d come far enough east to have escaped the Ravens. Besides, they needed hot food.

Renn wrapped two small pieces of grouse in dock leaves and left them for the clan guardians, while Torak moved the fire to the mouth of the cave, as he was determined not to spend another night inside. Half-filling Renn’s cooking-skin with water, he hung it by the fire; then, using a split branch, he dropped in red-hot stones to heat it up, and added the plucked and jointed willow grouse. Soon he was stirring a fragrant stew flavoured with crow garlic and big,
fleshy wood-mushrooms.

They ate most of the meat, leaving a little for daymeal, and sopped up the juices with hawkbit roots baked in the embers. After that came a wonderful mash that Renn made of late lingonberries and hazelnuts, and finally some beechnuts, which they burst by the fire and peeled to get at the small, rich nuts inside.

By the time he'd finished, Torak felt as if he need never eat again. He settled down by the fire to mend the rip in his leggings where the Hidden People had grabbed him. Renn sat some way off, trimming the flights on her arrows, and Wolf lay between them licking his paws clean, having swiftly despatched the joint of grouse that Torak had saved for him.

For a while there was a companionable silence, and Torak felt contented, even hopeful. After all, he'd found the first piece of the Nunuak. That must count for something.

Suddenly, Wolf leapt to his feet and raced out of the firelight. Moments later he returned, circling the fire and making agitated little grunt-whines.

‘What is it?’ whispered Renn.

Torak was on his feet, watching Wolf. He shook his head. ‘I can’t make it out. ‘Kill smell. Old kill. Move.’ Something like that.’

They stared into the darkness.

‘We shouldn’t have lit a fire,’ said Renn.

‘Too late now,’ said Torak.

Wolf stopped the grunt-whines and raised his muzzle, gazing skywards.

Torak looked up – and the remains of his

good humour vanished. To the east, above the distant blackness of the High Mountains, the red eye of the Great Auroch glared down at them. It was impossible to miss: a vicious crimson, throbbing with malice. Torak couldn’t take his eyes from it. He could feel its power: sending strength to the bear, sapping his own will of hope and resolve.

‘What chance do we have against the bear?’ he said. ‘I mean, really, what chance do we have?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Renn.

‘How are we going to find the other two pieces of the Nunuak? “Oldest of all, the stone bite. Coldest of all, the darkest light.” What does that even mean?’

Renn did not reply.

At last he dragged his gaze from the sky, and sat down by the fire. The red eye seemed to glare at him even from the embers.

Behind him, Renn stirred. ‘Look, Torak, it’s the First Tree!’

He raised his head.

The eye had been blotted out. Instead, a silent, ever-changing green glow filled the sky. Now a vast swathe of light twisted in a voiceless wind; then the swathe vanished, and shimmering pale-green waves rippled across the stars. The First Tree stretched for ever, shining its miraculous fire upon the Forest.

As Torak gazed at it, a spark of hope rekindled. He’d always loved watching the First Tree on frosty nights, while Fa told the story of the Beginning. The First Tree meant good luck
in hunting; maybe it would bring luck to him, too.

‘I think it’s a good sign,’ said Renn as if she’d heard his thoughts. ‘I’ve been wondering. Was it really luck that you found the Nanuak? I mean, why did you fall into the very part of the river where it lay? I don’t think that was by chance. I think – you were meant to find it.’

He threw her a questioning glance.

‘Maybe,’ she said slowly, ‘the Nanuak was put in your way, but then it was up to you to decide what to do about it. When you saw it at the bottom of the river, you could have decided it was too dangerous to try for. But you didn’t. You risked your life to get it. Maybe – that was part of the test.’

It was a good thought, and it made Torak feel a little better. He fell asleep watching the silent green boughs of the First Tree, while Wolf sped out of the cave on some mysterious errand of his own.

Wolf left the Den and loped up to the ridge above the valley to catch the smell on the wind: a powerful smell of rotten prey like a very old kill – except that it moved.

As he ran, Wolf felt with joy how his pads were toughening, his limbs getting stronger with every Dark that passed. He loved to run, and he wished that Tall Tailless did too. But at times his pack-brother could be terribly slow.

As Wolf neared the ridge, he heard the roar of the Thundering Wet, and the sound of a hare feeding in the next valley. Overhead, he saw the Bright White Eye with her many little cubs. It was all as it should be. Except for that smell.

At the top of the ridge he lifted his muzzle to catch the scent-laden winds, and again he caught it: quite close, and coming closer. Racing back into the valley, he soon found it: the strange, shuffling thing that smelt so rotten.

He got near enough to observe it clearly in the dark, although he was careful not to let it know that he was near. To his surprise he found that it was not an old kill after all. It had breath and claws, and it moved in an odd shambling walk, growling to itself while the spit trailed from its muzzle.

What puzzled Wolf most was that he couldn’t catch what it was feeling. Its mind seemed broken; scattered like old bones. Wolf had never sensed such a thing before.

He watched it make its way up the slope towards the Den where the tailless were sleeping. It prowled closer . . .

Just as Wolf was about to attack, it shook itself and shambled away. But through the tangle of its broken thoughts, Wolf sensed that it would be back.