How can you have a stone creature, anyway?’ said Renn crossly. She’d been in a bad mood ever since losing her quiver.

‘I don’t know,’ said Torak for the tenth time.

‘And what kind of creature? Boar? Lynx? We should’ve asked.’

‘He probably wouldn’t have told us.’

Renn put her hands on her hips, shaking her head. ‘We’ve done everything he said. We’ve walked for two whole days. Crossed three valleys. Followed the stream he mentioned. Still nothing. I think he was just trying to get rid of us.’

The same thought had occurred to Torak, but he wasn’t going to admit it. In two days, the fog hadn’t lifted. It felt wrong. Everything about this place felt wrong.

After some persuasion, the Walker had returned the rest of their weapons, and sent them on their way. Following his directions, they’d left the ‘stream at the foot of the stony grey hill’, and were climbing the trail that snaked towards the top. It had a bleak, menacing feel. Stunted birches loomed out of the fog. Here and there they saw the gleam of naked rock, where the hill had been rubbed raw. The only sound was the hammer-like ‘chack-chack’ of a woodpecker warning rivals away.

‘He doesn’t want us here,’ said Renn. ‘Maybe we’ve come the wrong way.’

‘If we had, Wolf would have told us.’

Renn looked doubtful. ‘Do you still believe that?’

‘Yes,’ said Torak, ‘I do. After all, if he hadn’t led us to the Walker’s valley, we wouldn’t have seen the stone claw, and then we wouldn’t have known anything about a stone tooth.’

‘Maybe. But I still think we’ve come too far east. We’re getting too close to the High Mountains.’

‘How can you tell, when we can’t see ten paces ahead?’

‘I can feel it. That freezing air! It’s coming off the ice river.’

Torak stopped and stared at her. ‘What ice river?’

‘The one at the foot of the mountains.’

Torak set his teeth. He was getting tired of being the one who didn’t know things.

They climbed on in silence, and soon even the woodpecker was left behind. Torak became uneasily aware of the noise they were making:
the creak of his pack, the rattle of pebbles as Renn struggled ahead. He could feel the rocks listening, the twisted trees silently warning him back.

Suddenly, Renn turned and clattered down towards him. 'We got it wrong!' she panted, her eyes wide and scared.

'What do you mean?'

'The Walker never said it was a stone creature! We were the ones who said that. He only ever said it was a stone mouth!' Grabbing his arm, she dragged him up the hill.

The ground levelled out and the trail ended. Torak came to a dead halt in the swirling fog. As he took in what lay ahead, dread settled inside him.

A rockface towered above them, grey as a thundercloud. At its foot, guarded by a solitary yew tree, was a cavern of darkness like a silent scream: a gaping stone mouth.

'We can't go in there,' said Renn.

'We – I – have to,' said Torak. 'This is the stone mouth the Walker was talking about. It's where he found the stone claw. It's where I might find the stone tooth.'

Close up, the cave mouth was smaller than he'd first thought: a shadowy half-circle no higher than his shoulder. He put his hand on the stone lip and bent to peer inside.

'Be careful,' warned Renn.

The cave floor sloped away steeply. Cold flowed from it: an acrid uprush of air like the breath of some ancient creature that has never seen the sun.

'Bad place,' the Walker had said. 'Very bad place. The killing earth that gulps and swallows. The Watchers everywhere.'

'Don’t move your hand,' said Renn beside him.

Glancing up, he saw with a start that his fingers were a hair's breadth away from a large splayed hand that had been hammer-etched deep into the stone. He snatched his own away.

'It’s a warning,' whispered Renn. 'You see the three bars above the middle finger? Those are lines of power, warding off evil.' She leaned closer. 'It’s old. Very old. We can’t go in. There’s something down there.'
leash for the cub. Wolf wriggled and snapped until Torak managed to explain that he had to stay with Renn, who settled the matter by producing a handful of dried lingonberries from her food pouch. But Torak couldn’t find a way to tell Wolf that he’d be coming back. Wolf talk didn’t seem to deal with the future.

Renn gave him a sprig of rowan for protection, and one of her salmon-skin mittens on a cord. ‘Remember,’ she said, ‘if you find the stone tooth, don’t touch it with your bare hands. And you’d better let me have the pouch with the river eyes.’

She was right. There was no telling what might happen if he took the Nanuak into the cave.

With an odd sense of giving up an unwelcome burden, Torak handed her the ravenskin pouch, and she tied it to her belt. Wolf watched what was happening with ears swivelling: as if, thought Torak, the pouch were making some kind of noise.

‘You’ll need light,’ said Renn, glad to be doing something practical. From her pack she brought out two rushlights: the peeled pith of rushes that had been soaked in deer fat, then dried in the sun. With her strike-fire, she lit a curl of juniper bark tinder, and one of the rushlights flared into life: a bright, clear, comforting flame. Torak felt hugely grateful.

‘If you need help,’ she said, kneeling and hugging Wolf to stop herself shivering, ‘shout. We’ll come running.’

Torak nodded. Then he stooped and entered the stone mouth.

He groped for the wall. It felt slimy, like dead flesh.

He shuffled forward, feeling the way with his feet. The rushlight trembled and shrank to a glimmer. The stench wafted up from the darkness, stinging his nostrils.

After several halting steps, he came up against stone. The cave mouth had narrowed to a gullet: he’d have to turn sideways to get through. Shutting his eyes, he edged in. It felt as if he was being swallowed. He couldn’t breathe. He kept thinking of the weight of the rockface pressing in on him...

The air cooled. He was still in a tunnel, but it was wider, and twisted sharply to the right. Glancing back, he saw that the daylight had vanished, and with it, Renn and Wolf.

The stink got stronger as he followed the tunnel, hearing nothing but his own breathing, seeing nothing but glimpses of glistening red stone.

A sudden chill to his left, and he nearly lost his footing. Pebbles rattled, then dropped into silence.

The left-hand wall had vanished. He was standing on a narrow ledge jutting out over darkness. From far below came an echoing ‘plink’ of water. One slip and he’d be over the edge.

Another bend – this time to the left – and a
rock beneath his foot tilted. With a cry he grabbed for a handhold, righting himself just in time.

At the sound of his cry, something stirred. He froze.

‘Torak?’ Renn’s voice sounded far away.

He didn’t dare call out. Whatever had moved had gone still again: but it was a horrible, waiting stillness. It knew he was there. ‘The Watchers everywhere. They see you, but you don’t see them. Not till it’s too late.’

He forced himself to go on. Down, always down. The stink came at him in waves. *Breathe through your mouth*, said a voice in his head. That was what he and Fa used to do when they came upon a stinking kill-site or a bat-infested cave. He tried it, and the stench became bearable, although it still caught at his eyes and throat.

Abruptly the ground levelled out, and he felt space opening up around him. A dim light had to be coming from somewhere, because he made out a vast, shadowy cavern. The fumes were almost overwhelming. He was in the dripping, reeking bowels of the earth.

The ledge he was standing on ended, and the floor beyond it was weirdly humped. In the middle of the cavern, a great, flat-topped stone gleamed like black ice. It looked as if it had stood untouched for thousands of winters. Even from twenty paces away, Torak could feel its power.

This was where the Walker had found his stone claw. This was the reason for the warning

hand at the cave mouth. This was what the Watchers guarded: a door to the Otherworld.

Torak couldn’t take another step. It was like the times when he awoke so heavy with sleep that to stir even a finger seemed impossible.

To steady himself, he put his free hand on the hilt of his knife. The sinew binding felt faintly warm, giving him the courage to step down onto the cave floor.

As he did, he cried out in disgust. The floor sank beneath his boot: a noisome softness sucking him down. ‘The killing earth that gulps and swallows...’

His cry rang round the walls, and far above him he heard a stealthy movement. Something dark detached itself from the roof and swooped towards him.

There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. The softness sucked at his boots like wet sand. A foetid downrush, and the thing was on him: greasy fur clogging his mouth and nose, sharp claws tearing at his hair. Snarling with horror, he beat at the silent attacker.

At last it lifted away with a leathery ‘thwap’. But he knew that it wasn’t vanquished. The Watcher had merely come to find out what he was. Once it knew, it had left.

But what was it? A bat? A demon? How many more were there?

Torak floundered on. Halfway to the stone, he stumbled and fell. The stink was unbearable. He wallowed in choking blackness, he couldn’t see, couldn’t think. Even the rushlight turned black – a black flame flaring above him...
He staggered to his feet, shaking himself free like a swimmer gasping for air. His mind steadied. The black flame burned yellow again.

He reached the stone. On its ancient smoothness, six stone claws had been arranged in a spiral, with a gap where the Walker had snatched the seventh. At the centre lay a single black stone tooth.

‘Oldest of all, the stone bite.’ The second part of the Nanuak.

Sweat slid down his spine. He wondered what power he would unleash if he touched it.

He stretched out his hand, then snatched it back, remembering Renn’s warning. ‘Don’t touch the Nanuak with your bare hands.’

Where was the mitten? He must have dropped it.

With the rushlight he cast around, plunging his hand into the stinking mounds. Again the dizziness mounted. Again the flame darkened . . .

Just in time, he found the mitten, tied to his belt. Yanking it on, he reached for the tooth.

The rushlight glimmered on the cave wall behind the stone — and lit the gleam of thousands of eyes.

With his hand poised above the tooth, he moved the flame slowly to and fro. It caught the liquid gleam of eyes. The walls were swarming with Watchers. Wherever the light touched, they rippled and heaved like a maggot-riddled carcass. If he took the tooth, they would come for him.

Suddenly, everything happened at once.

From far above came Wolf’s sharp urgent bark.

Renn screamed. ‘Torak! It’s coming!’

The Watchers exploded around him.

The rushlight went out.

Something struck him in the back and he fell forward onto the stone.

Again Renn screamed. ‘Torak! The bear!’