SKIN TAKER

MICHELLE PAVER

Copyright © Michelle Paver 2021

ZEPHYR

an imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2021
by Head of Zeus Ltd

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021
Interior art © Geoff Taylor, 2021
Jacket art and design © John Fordham Design

The moral right of Michelle Paver to be identified as the author and of Geoff Taylor and John Fordham to be identified as the artists of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781789542417
ISBN (ANZTPB): 9781800241435
ISBN (E): 9781789542431

Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C020471
FSC
www.fsc.org

Head of Zeus Ltd
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
www.headofzeus.com

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

ONE

A Lynx Clan hunter saw it first. He was trudging along a ridge, checking his snares, when he spotted a brilliant spark of light moving fast across the night sky.

The hunter had seen such stars before. He knew they meant the World Spirit was shooting arrows at demons, so he was reassured as he went on his way.

Midwinter, the Dark Time, when the sun is asleep in its cave and doesn't show its face for two whole moons. No wind. Silent pines watching him pass. The only sounds the crunch of his snowshoes, the creak of his reindeer-hide parka and leggings. His breath.

As he approached the next snare he could see as clear as day, thanks to starlight and snowglow, and the rippling

Copyright © Michael 2021

green radiance in the sky which the clans call the First Tree.

Good. He'd snared a willow grouse.

The horsehair noose was frozen stiff, so was the bird.

As the hunter stooped to retrieve it, something made him glance up. He was startled to see that the star had grown much brighter, and doubled in size.

On the riverbank Renn poked her head out of the shelter. 'Come on, Torak!' she called crossly. 'We need to get going!'

'I'll catch you up!' he replied without turning his head.

'No, you won't, you'll invent an excuse and stay here!'

He blew out a cloud of frosty breath. *Perfect* conditions for ice fishing. He'd hacked four beautiful holes and laid a stick across each one, from which he'd hung his lines and hooks. To attract the fish he'd made torches of folded birch bark jammed in split sticks, and set them in a row. The First Tree was helping too, shining so brightly it was sending the trout crazy, he'd already caught three. Why couldn't he stay here peacefully with the wolves?

Wolf bounded up as if he'd heard Torak's thoughts and licked the frost off his eyebrows. With a grin Torak pushed Wolf's muzzle aside. His thick winter pelt was sprinkled with snow and his breath smelt of fish. It would take too long to tell him in wolf talk that his shadow was spooking

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

the trout, so Torak distracted him by backing away on all fours, uttering eager little grunt-whines: *Let's play!*

Lashing his tail, Wolf went down on his forelegs: *Yes, let's!* Then he pounced, soft-biting his pack-brother's arm with muffled growls and hauling him over the ice.

'You know I'm not leaving without you,' called Renn. In the glare of the torchlight she was a black figure by their shelter, but in his mind Torak saw her red hair tucked behind her ears, her pale, well-loved, infuriatingly stubborn face. 'Dark *wants* us at the Feast,' she insisted.

'Yes, but *why*?'

'I don't know, he said it's important. And he's our friend, and he never asks us for anything!'

Torak tossed a trout onto the far bank and watched Wolf race after it. He heaved a sigh.

The Moon of Long Dark was over and they were into the strange days before Sunwake, when the endless blue night was briefly lightened by a false dawn. The sky would grow pale, as if the sun was about to show itself above the Mountains – only for darkness to return as the sun retreated into its cave.

It was an edgy time when each clan did its best to ensure that in a few days the sun really would rise above the peaks. The Boar Clan burnt a whole spruce tree on a hilltop. Renn's clan, the Ravens, held the Feast of Sparks underground, while their Mage ventured even deeper to kindle the need-fire, and everyone sang and—

'Too many people,' grumbled Torak.

Copyright © Michelle Paver 2001

'Oh, Torak, it's not that bad, last winter you enjoyed it!'

He heard the smile in her voice and snorted a laugh. But the holes were freezing over, so he applied himself to clearing them with the butt of his ice scoop, flicking the shards for Wolf's mate, Darkfur: she loved chomping ice.

Wolf lay on the far bank, gripping the half-eaten trout in his forepaws. Behind him on the slope the cubs, Blackpaw and Tug, were pouncing on snowdrifts in futile attempts to catch lemmings. Their older brother Pebble was away guarding the pack's range. As a cub he'd been carried off by an eagle owl, and though he'd grown into a handsome young wolf, the ordeal had marked him, and he rarely relaxed.

Renn was shovelling snow onto the fire with an auroch's shoulder blade. Rip and Rek lit onto the shelter and gurgled a greeting. She gave the ravens a distracted nod. 'It's not as if we've far to go,' she told Torak. 'They're only camped a daywalk away.'

But Torak could be stubborn too. He *liked* the feel of this sleeping valley. The river dreaming under the ice, the alders asleep on its banks. Even the pines were dozing, only a single watch-tree remaining properly awake.

He'd chosen this spot because a family of beavers had dammed the river to make a pool which sheltered many fish. Not far from where he knelt, the beavers' lodge was a mound of blue snow, the air above it faintly quivering from the warmth of the furry bodies snuggled within.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Again he sighed. Renn was right. If Dark really wanted them to come…

'What's that over there?' she said in an altered voice.

He raised his head. 'Where?'

'There.'

She stood facing north, pointing at the sky.

Wolf and Darkfur had seen it too. They stood with ears pricked and tails stiff, bodies rigid with tension.

Slowly Torak rose to his feet.

It was low in the sky above the pines spiking the hilltop: a huge, brilliant, blue-white star.

'It's getting bigger,' said Renn.

In the Deep Forest the Lynx Clan hunter stood motionless, his frozen grouse forgotten at his feet. His hand crept to the fur amulet at his throat and under his breath he whispered a prayer to his clan-creature. The star had grown unbearably bright, as big as his fist.

Shielding his eyes with his arms, the hunter lurched against a pine. He heard a strange whistling noise, like a vast flock of geese rushing towards him.

The star was brighter than the sun, turning night to dazzling day. Its shadow passed across Torak, he heard a

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

whistling like the rush of enormous wings – then a growl of thunder. 'Get under those rocks!' he yelled to Renn.

Darkfur was streaking across the ice towards her cubs, Renn shouting something he couldn't make out – then the sky was raining fire, a hot wind blowing him off his feet.

He fell with a crash. The ice was heaving, the river waking up. The thunder was louder – but how could there be thunder when there were no clouds?

A stink of singed fur, his parka was on fire. Beating out flames, he struggled to his feet.

He saw pines bending like blades of grass, others flying overhead like spears. On the far bank a blazing poplar had fallen, pinning Wolf to the ground. On the near bank the shelter had collapsed, Torak couldn't see Renn. Next moment he realized that the white thing poking through the wreckage was her hand. Who to help first, Renn or Wolf? *Who?*

A boom like a thousand thunderclaps, swelling to a deafening solid roar…

Silence.

Torak could feel the ice buckling beneath him, see the hillside shaking, trees toppling, boulders crashing – but he couldn't *hear* anything. The Forest was burning, engulfing him in fierce choking smoke.

He could no longer see Renn or Wolf.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

The Lynx Clan hunter had fallen to his knees. Thunder roaring, trees thrashing, the whole sky on fire—

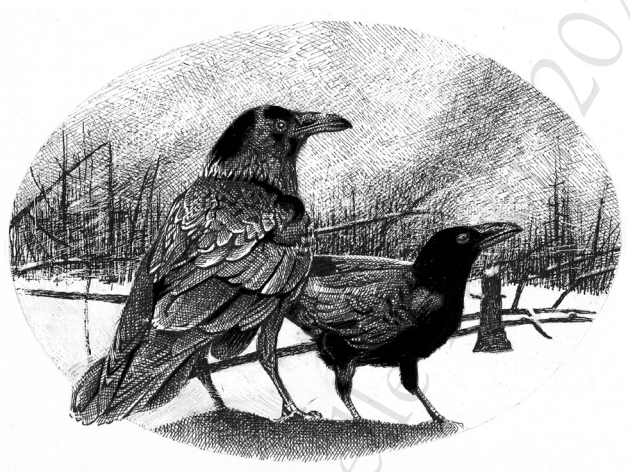
That was the last thing he ever saw.

The Thunderstar blasted entire valleys to cinders. It turned frozen rivers to raging torrents.

It obliterated the heart of the Forest.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

TWO



Wolf growled and made to snap as Renn gently probed his flank. He slumped back, apologizing with sleeked ears and a twitch of his tail.

'Two broken ribs,' she declared. 'But he's not bringing up any blood, I think he'll be all right.'

Torak rubbed his mouth with a grimy hand.

'I'll take a look at your burns,' she said.

'What?'

'Your chest…'

He realized his parka and jerkin were torn open, his breastbone scorched raw. 'Doesn't hurt,' he muttered.

'It will soon—'

'Leave it!' he snapped.

Copyright © Michael Morpurgo 2021

She stared at him.

He couldn't bring himself to say sorry. Besides it was true, his chest didn't hurt. Why then did he feel this ache deep inside, as if a hook had snagged under his ribs and was tugging his innards?

Renn had been dazed when he'd dragged her from the wreck of the shelter. To shield her from flying debris he'd left her under a boulder, then rushed to rescue Wolf. Already the river had been almost impassable. Since then it had become a raging chaos of grinding ice floes and dead trees.

The earth had ceased its terrible shaking, there hadn't been a landslide for a while, but the valley still rang with the crash of falling trees. Through the bitter grey haze Torak made out the red glimmer of fires dotting the slopes. To the south the sky glowed a dreadful crimson. Above it an immense cloud of black smoke was spreading like a gigantic hand.

'I'll sew up your parka,' said Renn.

'Don't bother.'

'If I don't,' she said between her teeth, 'you will freeze.' She was grimy with soot and owl-eyed with shock, but her tone warned him to let her have her way.

She'd finished and was putting her needle back in its case when a howl rose from the far side of the river. Darkfur's long, wavering cry of grief.

Wolf lifted his head and tried to howl a reply, but broke off with a yelp. He lay down, his amber eyes dull.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Renn put her hand to her mouth. 'Not the cubs?' she whispered.

Torak nodded. 'I saw them when I found Wolf. Curled up as if they were asleep. Must've been killed by the blast.'

She was shaking her head, mouthing, *No, no, no.*

Torak remembered Tug stalking a puffball last autumn. The cub's triumphant pounce had turned to outraged yelps when the mushroom exploded, engulfing her in spores and sending her sneezing back to her mother.

'What about Pebble?' said Renn.

He didn't reply.

'Oh no … are you *sure*?'

'Work it out, Renn! If he was alive he'd have howled back by now!'

She was biting her lips. 'He was always worrying about the cubs… Maybe it's better he didn't live to—' Her voice cracked.

Torak got to his feet. 'River's rising,' he said brusquely. 'Must be blocked downstream. What gear did you salvage from the shelter?'

She opened her mouth, then shut it. 'I'm sorry. I forgot.'

'*What*? I told you to save what you could while I went to find Wolf!'

'And I didn't,' she retorted. 'And now it's been swept away by the river – like those beavers in their lodge—'

'Did you really salvage nothing?'

'I said I'm sorry!'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

'*Sorry*? Renn, it's the middle of winter, we've no shelter, no sleeping-sack, no food—'

'And right now I don't *care*!' she flung back. 'I've no idea what just happened – or if Fin-Kedinn's alive or dead, or Dark, or the rest of my clan! Have you even *thought* about them?'

Torak rubbed his face.

Sooty water was lapping at his boots. Stooping, he lifted Wolf in his arms. 'Come on,' he muttered. 'We've got to find shelter higher up.'

Wolves are tougher than men. That was just as well, because Torak only managed a few paces carrying his pack-brother before he had to set him down.

Bees' Nest Ridge had become a near-unclimbable tangle of smoking stumps and burnt trees, their trunks studded with rocks embedded by the force of the blast.

Wolf was whining as he picked his way uphill, Renn struggling grimly over a smouldering root mass. Her face was so filthy Torak couldn't make out her clan-tattoos, the three blue-black bars on each cheek, with the red moon-bleed mark under the left one. He offered her his hand. She ignored it.

He wanted to shout: Fin-Kedinn's my foster father, I love him too! But he felt strangely cut off from her.

Darkfur's howls were still echoing across the valley.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

The she-wolf had stayed on the other side of the river to grieve, and would follow when she was ready.

To Torak, Darkfur's howls and the roar of the torrent, the crash of trees, sounded weirdly muffled. There was a faint crackling in his head, and behind it a terrible lifeless silence.

He came on the twisted remains of a fawn, then the pathetic, shrivelled carcasses of woodpigeons. He felt the pain of bewildered tree spirits thronging the air. When a tree dies, its souls find the nearest seedling, which becomes their new body. But in this valley there were no saplings left alive – so where could they go?

Wolf had halted, panting and trembling. Torak caught up with him and touched foreheads, asked if he needed to rest.

Wolves don't only grunt and whine and howl, they talk with their whole bodies. Torak spoke wolf talk imperfectly, but he understood what his pack-brother was telling him. *The cubs are Not-Breath. The pack lives. We go on.*

Torak swallowed. Wolf's resilience made him feel ashamed.

Suddenly Wolf pricked his ears and turned his head. He'd heard something. A moment later Torak heard it too: the resonant caws of ravens.

Renn broke into jittery laughter. 'Rip and Rek! I'd forgotten all about them!'

The ravens' caws sounded muffled, they were calling with full beaks.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

'They've found food!' cried Torak.

The reindeer had been burnt to cinders, except for one foreleg that was merely singed. Renn let Rip and Rek keep the foot, while she and Torak chiselled off every scrap of shrivelled meat, saving half and dividing the other half in three. Then they split the long bones and shared the marrow with Wolf, savouring the rich fatty goodness.

Rip and Rek strutted about, preening and shaking out their wings. They actually seemed to be *enjoying* the devastation. They loved having so many carcasses to scavenge, and the smoke was perfect for ridding their feathers of lice.

Renn was also looking steadier after some food. 'We need to rest. How about that for a shelter?' She pointed to where part of the slope had collapsed and a slab of granite lay aslant boulders. In the hollow underneath, juniper bushes were still smouldering.

Torak made a face. 'So long as another earthshake doesn't bring down that slab and squash us.'

'I'm too exhausted to care.'

The fire had swept through so fast the earth remained frozen, and without a sleeping-sack it would be vital to stay off the cold ground. Torak cleared the smoking undergrowth from the hollow and lined it with as many fire-heated stones as he could find, then he and Renn covered them with scorched boughs, making a warm base to lie on.

After that they woke a long-fire in front of the hollow, piling rocks behind to throw the heat inside. At least there

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

was no shortage of firewood. Renn had found a blackened rowan that was still standing, it burnt well enough.

Water was a problem, as Wolf had warned them off the nearest stream: Renn guessed it had been poisoned by the smoke. The seal-gut waterskin Torak carried inside his parka for melting snow was nearly empty, and he'd forgotten to fill it at the river before they left. He and Renn took a mouthful and he gave two handfuls to Wolf.

'So what gear *do* we have?' he said, uneasily aware that they should have checked earlier.

'Only what we had on us when the – it – struck.'

Luckily they both always carried what they needed tied to their belts, so they still had their flint knives, tinder pouches, sewing kits, medicine pouches, waterskins. Torak had his slingshot, but he'd lost his axe and bow. Renn had her axe, but had lost her quiver and bow. She was particularly grieved about the arrows, black flint fletched with snow owl feathers which she'd been given the previous autumn. 'So we've got wrist-guards and finger-guards,' she complained, 'but nothing to shoot with.'

'Or any prey to shoot, by the look of it.'

'We don't know that for sure.'

Torak didn't reply.

'At least I still have my amulet.' She touched the raven foot which hung on a thong at her neck. 'And you've got yours. And I've got my duckbone whistle.'

'Mm,' he said.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2004

He watched her take her medicine horn from her ravenskin pouch and shake earthblood into her palm. She dabbed a little on his forehead and on her own, then between Wolf's ears where he couldn't lick it off. 'Lots of demons about,' she said. 'I'll put lines of power around the shelter.'

You didn't need to be a Mage to know what she meant. Tree-roots hold demons in the Otherworld. With so many trees dead, they'd be finding it easy to escape.

Torak knew this should worry him as much as it did Renn, but something was stopping him from feeling it. The ache under his ribs was worse. And still that faint crackling in his head, like branches burning. He felt as if he was seeing Renn through a grey haze.

He realized suddenly why the silence was troubling him. No wind. Had it too been destroyed?

Renn had saved a piece of reindeer gristle and was putting it on top of the shelter as an offering to her clan guardian. Torak didn't have a clan guardian, and though he usually offered to the Forest, that felt all wrong. He felt as if he should be praying *for* the Forest.

'Pray to the First Tree,' suggested Renn.

'The First Tree. Yes.' Cutting off a lock of his long dark hair, he laid it beside her offering.

The hollow was just big enough for the three of them, although Wolf kept turning around, trying to find a position that didn't hurt. Torak was doing that too, the burns on his chest were throbbing with a vengeance. Renn

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

– omitting to say I told you so – smeared on spruce bark and beaver-fat salve. It stung viciously, but helped a bit.

Even without a sleeping-sack they were fairly snug, thanks to the clothes they'd got in the Far North last autumn: duckskin jerkins with the feathers against the skin, seal-hide parkas and leggings with the fur on the outside, whale-hide boots and musk-ox wool socks. Fortunately their reindeer-hide mittens were strung on sinew thongs threaded through their sleeves, so they still had these too.

Torak lay on his back with Renn's head on his shoulder. Her hair smelt of smoke. He could feel the tension in her body. 'Sorry I snapped at you earlier,' he muttered.

She shrugged. 'I should've checked the shelter.'

'Doesn't matter.'

They both knew it wasn't true.

In his mind Torak was back on the frozen river in that terrible moment when he'd had to choose between Renn and Wolf…

'Was it a star?' murmured Renn.

'I don't know.'

'But who sent it? And *why*?'

They were silent, neither wanting to voice what was in their minds. *Are we the only ones left?*

After a fitful sleep they decided to climb to the top of Bees' Nest Ridge and find out.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

Through the ashen pall the sky was the colour of blood. Torak guessed it must be around the time of false dawn, but couldn't be sure.

He had tried to make Wolf stay behind in the shelter and rest, but he'd insisted on coming too – and though he was in pain, he set a faster pace than his pack-mates. At times he waited, tongue lolling, for them to catch up.

It was eerie, climbing a hillside where only the previous morning beech trees had murmured in their dreams and thrushes had squabbled over mistletoe berries, the snow beneath criss-crossed with the tracks of many creatures going about their lives.

Torak came upon more carcasses incinerated beyond recognition. Then he found something bizarre wedged between two boulders: the burnt remains of a dugout.

Only one clan made boats by hollowing oaks.

'*Boar* Clan?' panted Renn when she saw it.

Torak broke off a piece of blackened wood and turned it in his fingers.

'But the Boars are camped two daywalks to the south-east,' said Renn.

They were silent, struggling to imagine the force which could hurl a dugout all the way up this ridge.

As Torak resumed the climb, the ache under his ribs sharpened. He began to dread what he might find when he reached the top.

Wolf was waiting for him again. He was swinging his tail, his slanted amber eyes warm as they briefly met

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Torak's, then glanced away. Uttering affectionate little grunt-whines, Wolf snuffle-licked his pack-brother's chin. *When the Great Bright Beast-that-Bites-Hot attacked from the Up*, Wolf told him, *you saved me*.

Torak flushed with shame. He had helped Renn first, his pack-brother second – and Wolf didn't know. He was *grateful*.

Above him tree stumps spiked the sky like broken teeth. Wolf's hindpaws wafted ash in Torak's face, making him cough. He spat into his palm. His spit was black with soot. He could taste it, gritty and acrid in his mouth. It took him a moment to realize what this meant. He was breathing in dead trees.

Below him Renn was fingering the clan-creature feathers sewn to her parka, worrying about her clan. He thought of Dark, and his hand went to the small slate wolf at his neck which his friend had carved as a gift. He called down to her: 'Crowwater Caves are deep! If they were inside when it struck, they could have survived.'

She looked at him. 'You felt the earth shake. You saw those rockfalls. What if they're trapped? What if…' She couldn't finish. Torak could find no words to comfort her.

Wolf had crested the ridge and stood with heaving flanks and drooping tail.

Torak hauled himself over the last mound of debris and stood beside his pack-brother. His knees buckled.

'What can you see?' called Renn.

He couldn't speak.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

On a clear day from Bees' Nest Ridge you could see all the way north to Lake Axehead, and east to the High Mountains, south to the Deep Forest and west across the Open Forest to the Sea. Now, through the charcoal haze, all Torak could see was devastation.

He stood swaying, assailed by waves of dizzying pain, breathing in the lost souls of thousands of trees.

'Torak, what is it?' Renn was shouting.

'The Forest…' he croaked. 'It's gone.'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

THREE

Dark opened his eyes.

Blackness pressing on his face. Silence so intense it made his ears ring. Shakily he put his hand in front of his nose. Couldn't see a thing. Was he dead?

Reaching out, his fingers hit rock – and everything came rushing back. He'd gone deep into the caves to wake the need-fire for the Feast while the others waited above. He'd almost arrived at the Cave of the Sun when it happened. Rocks jolting awake with a deafening roar, the tunnel twisting like an eel…

After that nothing.

He found that he was lying on his side. Bruised all over, left ankle throbbing. He flexed it. Yelped. Lay listening to his ragged breaths.

Copyright © Michael 2021

Stone dust trickled onto his face. No more shouting, Dark. Last thing you need is another rockfall.

All winter he'd been seeing omens of disaster. Faces glaring from clouds, hillsides collapsing in embers. Whatever it was, it must have happened at last.

Behind the tang of shattered stone he caught a familiar smell. Ash. A Forest fire? Was that it?

He thought of the clan gathered at the cave mouth to welcome the sun. Had they got underground in time? Was Ark with them? Or was she flying about, terrified and alone among the burning trees? What about Fin-Kedinn? Torak, Renn, Wolf?

Don't think about them. Panic now and you're lost.

Lost… He already was. No light, no sound to guide him. Just the pounding of his heart.

If only he had light! He might recognize some oddly shaped boulder, or get his bearings from the slant of a roof.

Rolling over, he clawed stone so soft it crumbled. Earthblood. Crowwater Caves were riddled with veins, not only red, but yellow and rarest purple. All had power against demons, though you had to ask the Hidden People before digging it out.

The feel of earthblood steadied Dark, and he groped for his gear. Drum smashed, Mage's belt still round his waist, pouch slung over his back. Waterskin empty: he'd been intending to fill it at the underground lake.

Wriggling out of his parka, he pulled off his fawn-skin jerkin, put his parka back on, wound the jerkin round his

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

head to protect it from the inevitable bumps. At least he wasn't cold, the caves were so deep they never froze.

The cave he was in was roomy, but standing in total darkness makes you dizzy, so he crawled, casting about blindly like a mole. Catching a whiff of colder air he veered towards it, moving slowly and carefully, as you have to underground.

He seemed to be labouring up a mound of fallen boulders. They hated being climbed, did their best to tip him off. He pictured Hidden People watching from the blackness.

The Hidden People live in rivers and rocks and they look like us, except their backs are hollow and rotten. Above all things they hate being seen. Growing up on his own in the High Mountains, Dark had learnt not to get in their way. But the Hidden People of Crowwater Caves were said to be more dangerous, and swifter to punish.

In his pouch his stone creatures clinked, and for comfort he reached inside, his fingers recognizing badger, salmon, frog. He touched something else. *The rushlights!* How could he have forgotten? He'd brought a whole bundle to light his way to the Cave of the Sun!

Most were in pieces, but he found one intact and groped for the tinder pouch at his belt.

Men twice his age would have struggled to strike a spark in pitch blackness, but Dark was a Mountain boy, and Mountain clans revere fire. It didn't take long to kindle tinder with his strike-fire and coax the rushlight

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

awake. He screwed up his eyes against the glare, and on a boulder his giant shadow gave an edgy laugh.

Shielding the rushlight with his palm to avoid being dazzled, he saw that the cave walls were covered in handprints: red, yellow, even purple. He'd never been here before, though he'd often made such marks himself, dipping his hands in a mix of earthblood and tallow and pressing them to rocks to stop demons coming through.

But he hadn't made these handprints, they were ancient, some blurred by sooty smears where an ancestor had wiped his torch to stop it dripping. This made Dark feel a bit less alone.

It was awkward, crawling with the rushlight, so he decided to make a holder. He found a patch of the pale-grey clay the clans call moon milk, and formed some into a ball the size of a pigeon's egg. Taking a stick of kindling from his pouch, he moulded the clay ball onto one end, then stuck his rushlight upright in the clay, and gripped the other end of the stick between his teeth, like a pipe. Good. Now he had both hands free and could keep the light to one side, so it couldn't blind him.

Crawling further, he came to a special handprint. It had been made in reverse, by spitting earthblood at the ancestor's flattened hand to leave its pallid ghost outlined in purple.

Breath-painting takes time and is very powerful, because breathing leaves part of your souls in the stone. Dark felt kinship with the long-dead Mage who'd done this. Placing

Copyright © Michele Paver, 2021

his hand on the print, he begged the ancestor to help him find a way out. His hand fitted exactly, except that the ancestor's little finger had been missing the last joint.

Soon afterwards Dark came to a man-high crack in the cave wall. Chill air flowed from it. 'Thank you,' he murmured, rising to his feet and edging in sideways.

Dark was thin, but he had to hold his breath to squeeze along the tunnel. It had more twists and turns than a viper, but at last he was out into another cave. More handprints. Another special one outlined in purple, very like the first.

His belly turned over. *Exactly* like the first. It fitted his hand, except it was missing the last joint of the little finger. It was the same print. He'd just gone in a circle.

His thoughts tumbled in panic. *Breathe, breathe.* What would Fin-Kedinn do now?

Shakily he swept the cave with his rushlight. Spotted a cavity in the wall at shoulder height. Hoisted himself in. Room to crawl if he kept his head low.

He hadn't gone far when his light sank to a glimmer and an icy finger touched the back of his neck.

He shut his eyes. Oh no, please, not this…

When he opened his eyes, a naked boy his own age was crouching before him.

His name had been Aki of the Boar Clan. Dark had seen him two days ago, bulky in reindeer-hide clothes as he trudged through the snow, carrying a hare carcass. Short hair in a fringe, stiff hide mantle, tusk on his chest. But then he had been alive.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

The thing crouching in the tunnel had lost its name-soul, and with it all memory of who it had been. Blackened skin hung in shreds from the ghost's charcoal limbs. Its head was scorched hairless, empty eye sockets staring sightlessly at Dark.

'I'm sorry you died,' he told it. 'But you must not come closer.'

The ghost pointed at him. Its blistered lips mouthed: *Follow.* It disappeared down the tunnel.

Sometimes ghosts seek the living. Maybe Aki would lead him to survivors. Then again, sometimes ghosts wander into places from which there is no escape. And there's no telling which they'll do, as they don't know themselves. That's why you should never follow a ghost.

Dark took a breath – and followed.

The rushlight died. At the same moment he felt space opening around him. The ghost had led him to another cave. He fumbled for a second rushlight. At last it flickered awake…

He gasped. He was inside a rainbow. Everywhere he turned, crystals flashed and winked, a scintillating wonder of astonishing colour: radiant scarlet, dazzling blue, the violet glare of thunderclouds, the black glitter of eyes…

His next thought was that he shouldn't be here.

The ghost had vanished, but beyond the rushlight Dark glimpsed pale stone figures shrinking back into the gloom.

'I'm sorry!' he whispered to the Hidden People. 'I know this cave belongs to you!'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

At the far end he spotted a low mouth of darkness, it might be a way out. 'Please, let me go in peace!'

Water dripped from shadowy stone heads emerging from the roof. As he crawled, Dark felt them turn and watch him pass.

The hole was only a forearm high and narrower than his shoulders. Taking the jerkin from round his head, he used it to bind his sprained ankle, then lay flat on his belly with the rushlight in his leading hand and eased himself in slantways.

Behind him a rock fell with a crash, echoes turning to stony laughter. *Don't come back!* warned the Hidden People.

The tunnel was so low he had to belly-crawl, pushing himself forwards on the toes of his good foot. What if it led nowhere? Was this their punishment? Don't think about that – or the weight of rock pressing down…

After an endless time he was out. Some impulse made him glance back. He'd emerged from under a giant boulder which had once fallen from the roof, and now lay on top of a rock no bigger than his head, this rock narrowing to a point on which the boulder was poised. If, while crawling, he had chanced to kick that rock loose, he would have brought down the boulder and been crushed.

Bat-squeaks reached him, high on the edge of hearing. Wings brushed his face. Relief washed over him. The bats knew him and he knew them – and he *thought* he knew this cave.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

When he'd been here last its roof had been furred with sleeping bats, but now they were flitting in confusion, woken from their winter sleep by the earthshake. Dark felt a flash of pity. Once awake, they had to feed, or they were doomed. And where would they find flies in the middle of winter?

The ghost was back, squatting on a column of glistening stone, beckoning to him.

At the same moment someone slammed into Dark and pinned him against the wall. The point of a flint knife jabbed painfully under his chin. 'What *is* it?' rasped a voice in a gust of foetid breath. 'Why does it follow?'

'What? What d'you mean?'

The knife jabbed harder. 'What *is* it? What's its *name*?'

'My name's Dark, I'm—'

'*Dark*? That's not a name!'

'It's the only one I've got!'

Flinging him on his back, the man knelt over him, engulfing him in an eye-watering stink.

At least – Dark *thought* it was a man. He was old and gnarled as a storm-battered tree. The tattered remains of his parka were crusted with snot, and he'd lost most of his toes to frostbite: instead of boots he'd carelessly wrapped his stumps in lengths of gut which he'd ripped from some creature's innards without bothering to clean. His mane was a thicket of filth, and in his matted beard Dark glimpsed a half-eaten lemming and a large cave-beetle, feebly wriggling.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

Belatedly Dark realized that he'd dropped his rushlight, he was seeing by the glare of a pine torch jammed in a crevice. No point trying to escape with his bad foot, he put his fists to his chest in sign of friendship. 'My name really is Dark. I'm Swan Clan but I live with the Ravens—'

'Why'd they call him *Dark* when he's white as chalk?'

'I was born without colour, that's why my clan threw me out. They hadn't yet named me, so I made one up. I thought it might help.'

The old man brought his head close to Dark's. A face as rough as bark, a mangled ruin of a nose. One eye an empty socket, the other peering suspiciously into his.

With a cackle the old man sat back on his heels, yanked a leg off a clump of putrid squirrels dangling from his waist and began to munch.

Warily Dark sat up, easing his bad foot.

The old man spat a furball at the ghost, and narrowly missed. He grinned, baring toothless black gums. Shot another searching glance at Dark. 'No wonder its clan threw it out! Hair like cobwebs, moon-milk eyes… Eyes that see ghosts.'

'I think … you can see ghosts too.'

He hawked and spat. 'And demons. The slinkers and slitherers, fighting to break through…'

Suddenly Dark knew who he was. 'Renn and Torak told me about you! People call you the Walker!'

'The Walker, the Walker,' mocked the old man through a mouthful of rotten squirrel.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

He's mad, but not all the time, Renn had said. *Fin-Kedinn knew him long ago when he was wise, before it all went wrong.*

'Torak says you know about caves,' said Dark. 'D'you know the way out?'

Rummaging in his beard, the Walker found the beetle and crunched it up. 'The Walker used to chase demons into the Otherworld,' he mumbled. 'He knows all the deep places under the earth. But no demons here now, oh no. All gone, escaped into what's left of the world.'

Again he leant close, overpowering Dark with his stench. 'Can Chalk Boy feel it too? Everything burnt, the demons let loose?'

Dark heard a rush of wings overhead. On its column the ghost reached blackened arms towards the bats – and vanished.

Dark heard voices coming nearer. He recognized them!

'It's worse than you think,' hissed the Walker in his ear.

When Dark looked again, the old man was gone.

Copyright © Michele Paver, 2021

FOUR

'I *told* you!' shouted Sialot, a belligerent young Raven with more muscle than sense. 'We're the only ones left!'

A Viper child began to wail, which started off the others.

'We don't know that for sure,' said Dark. Inside he was appalled. The ragged group around him comprised his Ptarmigan friend Shamik, a handful of Ravens, a few Vipers who'd been at the Feast – but not Fin-Kedinn. And not Torak or Renn either, though he'd been desperately hoping that they'd joined the others while he'd been underground. 'What *happened*?' he said. 'Did anyone see?'

'They did.' An older Raven, Thull, swung his pine torch, and two men and a woman flinched from the glare.

Copyright © Michael 2021

Dark had never encountered their clan before. Their faces were red with earthblood, their heads weirdly narrow as if squashed, their front teeth filed to fangs. Dark could see these clearly as all three were grinning with fright.

'Who are you?' he said. 'What did you see?'

'They're Kelps,' Sialot said dismissively. 'But what's that got to do with—'

'Let them speak.'

The earthblood on the woman's face was cracked, her eyes blank with shock as she watched the disaster unfold in her mind. 'We were at the cave mouth,' she said dully. 'The wind was getting up, blowing snow off the trees.' Her features twisted. 'I saw a whirlwind dancing. I heard thunder from a clear sky… Terrible heat, a great star with a fiery tail. The hills quaking with fear—'

'And now we're trapped,' muttered Thull. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Among the missing were his mate and son.

Sialot opened his mouth but Dark spoke first. 'Maybe not. I'll lead until we find Fin-Kedinn – and I'll tell you why I don't think we're trapped. I've been smelling ash, and if ash can get in, that means we can get out.'

Sialot scowled, wishing he'd thought of that. The others waited for Dark to go on.

'Anyone hurt?' he said. 'Anyone got water?' No to both. Taking Thull's torch, he indicated a shadowy tunnel. 'Lake's not far, we can—'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

'No, we can't!' cut in Sialot. 'There's something terrible down there.'

'What do you mean?' said Dark.

'Giant bear, from the sound of it,' said a Viper woman.

'Or a demon,' said Thull. 'We all heard it, it won't let us near the water.'

'I was going to tell you,' said Sialot with a curl of his lip. 'But you were so keen to take charge.'

'Well, now you've told me,' snapped Dark. 'Everyone stay here, I'll be back.'

Can't be a bear, he thought as he headed down the tunnel with the torch. No bear would den this deep. More likely one of the Hidden Peoples' tricks.

He caught the drip-drip of water and the tunnel opened out. Beyond the torchlight, impenetrable black: he sensed the lake only by its chill. He took a step forwards.

Echoing growls warned him back.

Certainly sounded huge, the growls reverberating through the rocks beneath his feet. He told himself that caves often do odd things to noises.

Or could he be wrong about that bear?

The growls sank to menacing rumbles. Dark spotted a fissure near the water. The noise was coming from inside.

He crouched before it.

A savage snarl.

Torch shaking in his fist, Dark peered in.

A monstrous shadow, a gleam of eyes…

Dark blinked. *'Pebble?'*

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Subdued voices drifted across the lake. The search parties led by Sialot and Thull were holding torches to every crevice, watching the smoke: if there was a way to the world above, the smoke would tell them. As yet, nothing.

Nearby, the Vipers were doing the same with the third torch. The Kelps – whom the others had shunned because they were strangers – were working in darkness, feeling the rocks by hand. Dark was using a broken rushlight, while talking softly to Pebble in the hopes of enticing the young wolf out of his hiding-place.

Dark could hear him prowling inside, but the fissure that led to Pebble's cave was so low he would have had to crawl to get in – and Pebble, panting and yawning with fright, was in no state to be approached, not even by someone he trusted. His fur had been singed to the skin and his pads scorched, Dark heard him yelp at every step. Who knew what horrors he'd endured?

From his pouch Dark took a small slate otter and placed it within the crack. As a cub Pebble had loved licking stones, it was how he'd got his name. Maybe Dark's smell on the otter would give comfort, even lure him out.

'It's all right, Pebble,' Dark whispered, kneeling at the fissure. From within came the near-inaudible keen of a wolf in pain.

Dark reached in his arm and waited, his mind seething with terrible images. Why was Pebble on his own? What

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

had happened to Darkfur and the cubs, and Wolf and Torak and Renn?

Breath warmed his palm. In the gloom he glimpsed a raw red nose. 'Pebble, it's me…'

A cry rang across the lake: 'We've got something!'

Running footsteps. Pebble retreated into his cave.

'Come and see!' panted Thull.

Chill air was flowing from a crack at the top of a huge mound of boulders. People were feverishly heaving them aside. Shamik, who had a withered arm, was holding the last remaining torch.

Dark scrambled up and started helping. It was back-breaking work and he could feel everyone wondering, what if this only leads to another cave? What if we're trapped?

Suddenly icy wind blew back his hair. Torchlight flared, and a man's grimy hand reached through from the other side.

'Dark, is that you?' cried Fin-Kedinn.

'And that was when you found us,' finished Dark.

'You did well,' said Fin-Kedinn.

Dark flushed. The Raven Leader rarely praised, and only when he meant it.

With people working from both ends it hadn't taken long to clear the way out, but the first wild reunions had

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

swiftly turned to horror. Choked-back sobs for loved ones still missing, gasps at the devastated valley, cruelly visible in the false dawn.

Fin-Kedinn hadn't given them time to brood. He'd sent some to seek firewood and survivors. The rest were building shelters near the cave mouth.

Pebble was still refusing to leave his hiding-place. Dark had left a scent trail with scraps cut from his parka, hoping that in time it would encourage the young wolf to follow.

'I didn't tell them about the Walker,' Dark said in an undertone. 'D'you want me to go back in and find him?'

Fin-Kedinn shook his head. 'He'll come out when he's ready.'

They were at the edge of camp, the Raven Leader seated on a boulder with his one-eared dog Grip at his feet, Dark squatting with Ark perched on his shoulder. Usually dazzling white, the raven was grey with soot, furiously preening. Dark too was grey all over, ash gritty in his mouth.

Fin-Kedinn was sorting a pile of half-charred branches into kindling, torches and firewood. 'Tell me again what he said.'

'He said it's worse than we think.'

The Raven Leader frowned. 'Your foot. Is it broken?'

'I'm fine, it's just sprained.'

Fin-Kedinn looked at him, his blue eyes startling in his blackened face. 'How many can you see?' he said quietly.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Dark's throat worked. Being able to see ghosts had never troubled him before – but now… 'So many. Willows, Rowans, Vipers, Boars … Thull's mate and son. I'll have to tell him.'

'Not yet.' Fin-Kedinn held out his strike-fire. 'You're better at this, take over.'

It wasn't long before Dark had lit two torches. He handed back the strike-fire, aware that Fin-Kedinn had given him the task as a distraction. Where were Torak and Renn? Dark dreaded catching sight of them among the ghosts thronging the edge of camp.

A distant howl floated on the wind. Another wolf answered. Both desolate with grief.

Dark caught his breath. Beneath the grime the blood drained from Fin-Kedinn's face.

'That's Wolf and his mate,' said Dark. 'They're mourning the dead.'

Wolf's flank still hurt when he sneezed, and he was sneezing a lot, because of all the ash.

Wrinkling his muzzle, he watched Tall Tailless smash the Bright Hard Cold with a rock, the pack-sister kneel to fill her deerskin with Wet. Wolf took one sniff and leapt, knocking the skin from her paws. He whined an apology but couldn't make her understand that the Wet was bad – so he told Tall Tailless, who told her in tailless talk.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

They looked dejected as they struggled on. Just as well they couldn't see the Breaths-that-Walked on the ruined hillside. All the lost spirits. Taillesses, prey, trees…

But Wolf had no time for pity, he was worried about the pack. When the Great Bright Beast had attacked from the Up it hadn't only eaten the Forest, it had killed his cubs and ravaged his mate with grief. Wolf *missed* her. That hurt far worse than his injured flank.

He was also worried about Tall Tailless, who was wounded inside and hiding it. Wolf felt cut off from his pack-brother by a strange prickly blackness.

The pack-sister had made a Den below the top of the hill and they were settling to sleep. Wolf prowled the slopes, keeping watch against demons. This was hard, as the stink of dead Forest had eaten all the smells.

The ravens who belonged to the pack cawed a warning: they'd spotted a demon sneaking towards the Den. With a growl Wolf chased it away.

When he returned, only the pack-sister was huddled asleep. To his horror Wolf saw Tall Tailless standing on the hilltop, at the very edge. He was swaying, and though his eyes were open, Wolf knew he was asleep.

Hurtling uphill, Wolf flung himself at his pack-brother and knocked him backwards onto the ground. He stood over him, barking.

Tall Tailless blinked and rubbed his face. He stared at the Up. High overhead, the Bright White Eye was half-shut, her many little cubs glinting around her.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Tall Tailless asked Wolf if he could hear the Tree of Light. Wolf said no, it was gone. His pack-brother heaved a sigh that hurt so much Wolf felt it too. He tried to lick Tall Tailless's muzzle but he pushed him away. Wolf didn't know what was wrong, or how to make him better.

The Dark was growing lighter when Tall Tailless got to his feet and stumbled off to join his mate.

The ravens were playing in the Up, flying beak-to-tail. Another raven joined them, this one grey instead of black. In a snap Wolf realized what this meant. Eagerly he raced after the birds.

Yes! Down in that smoky valley, the glimmer of small Bright Beasts-that-Bite-Hot! *Clever* birds, they'd found the tailless pack that smelt of ravens!

It didn't take long to fetch Tall Tailless and the pack-sister. When she spotted the Den of the taillesses she began to whimper. Now she was running, scrambling over whatever lay in her path – and the leader of the raven pack was limping towards her, leaning on his stick, and she was throwing herself at him and he was holding her tight.

Wolf was glad. *Now* he could go and fetch his mate. Soon the pack would be together again.

And then, surely, Tall Tailless would get better.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

FIVE

Renn, picking her way by torchlight to the underground lake, saw Darkfur emerge from Pebble's hiding-place. The black she-wolf was barely visible as she padded to the water to drink, Pebble creeping behind her, whining at every step.

It was the first time the young wolf had left his cave, and Renn froze. Dark, kneeling by the lake, was speaking softly to encourage him.

Renn felt a sneeze begin. She pinched her nose. No use. The sneeze echoed. Pebble lost his nerve and shot back into his cave.

'Sorry,' called Renn.

Dark clenched his fists and stared fixedly at the lake. She was surprised. Dark never got angry.

Copyright © Michelle Paver 2021

'We need you in camp,' she told him with an edge to her voice.

'Coming,' he replied without turning round. From his parka he drew a young hedgehog with singed bristles and set it down to drink. He was rubbing his forehead, as if the clan-tattoos he'd got last autumn were bothering him. Renn thought he looked like a thin, exhausted ghost.

Well, I'm exhausted too, she thought irritably.

Five days since she and Torak had reached camp, and she'd barely slept. A trickle of survivors had swelled numbers to over sixty: many burnt or injured by flying debris, some so shocked they could do nothing but shake. And always people wondered why more didn't come. In winter the Mountain clans followed the reindeer into the Forest, and the Sea clans retreated inland from the gales that battered the coast. All had been seeking shelter under the trees when the Thunderstar struck.

By common consent, Fin-Kedinn had been chosen as camp Leader. He'd been tireless: settling fights, organizing supplies, encouraging by his presence. When he'd called a clan meet, even the word had heartened people. Clan meets were what they'd had before the Thunderstar.

'More survivors just came in,' said Renn.

'I know.'

'Dark, I need your help—'

'I said I'm coming!'

They glared at each other.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

I'm hating this too! she wanted to shout. I'm worried Fin-Kedinn's working too hard, and I haven't seen Torak for days, and I can't stop wondering, what if the whole Forest's gone?

Even thinking that made her breathless and sick. The Forest was everything. It gave shelter and fire, bark for rope-making and nets, nuts and berries for medicine and food. Hunters and prey depended on it to survive, and it never let them down. How could it be gone?

'Someone's coming,' said Dark.

'Oh no,' muttered Renn.

The Kelp woman was making her way towards them holding a slimy, fishy-smelling mess.

'Go away,' said Renn and Dark together.

'Herring skins for the wolf's paws,' Halut said flatly. 'Very good for burns.'

'We know that, we're Mages,' snapped Renn. 'Why have you been hoarding herrings instead of handing them in for rations?'

'Only the skins, we keep dried ones for medicine. I've soaked them. Is the wolf in there?'

'He won't let you near,' said Dark. 'He hates strangers.'

'Then you do it.' Halut dumped the fish skins in Renn's hands and turned to go. She hesitated. 'Do wolves really have golden eyes?'

Renn was startled. 'Surely you've seen a wolf?'

'There aren't any on our island.' The narrow face caked in earthblood looked wistful. Then she scowled. 'You

Copyright © Michelle Paver 2021

shouldn't call him Pebble. Wolves are sacred.' She touched her fang-like teeth. 'That's why we do this.'

'Well, that's his name,' retorted Renn. But after Halut had gone she felt bad. No wonder the Kelps were prickly. Everyone was ganging up on them. 'It's just they look so weird,' she said.

Dark snorted. 'I look weird too.'

She didn't reply. She'd realized why he was down here, avoiding the latest survivors. Their clan-tattoos were thirteen red dots on the forehead. Same as his. 'Swans,' she murmured. 'Oh, Dark, I'm sorry.'

He shrugged. 'Doesn't matter.'

Yes, it does, she thought.

When Dark was a boy, his father had taken him into the mountains and abandoned him. For seven winters he'd survived on his own. Renn couldn't imagine how it must feel to come face to face with the clan which had left you to die.

'D'you think the herring skins will work?' he said in a voice that warned her he didn't want to talk about it.

'Um – no. But it'll give the wolves something to do.'

Ever since the Thunderstar, Pebble had been desperate to be a cub again, staying safe in his cave. His mother, having howled herself hoarse for her dead cubs, had found fresh purpose in caring for him. She'd become adept at dodging the camp dogs, and brought him any scraps she could scavenge from the surrounding hills.

She was with Pebble now, and the tiny cave was

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2004

cramped. Renn squeezed inside while Dark knelt in the entrance, holding the torch. Renn bound Pebble's paws with strips of fish skin, both wolves watching every move. When she'd finished, she couldn't help smiling. Pebble was already nibbling the binding on one forepaw, his mother licking his hindpaws.

'Shows how much Halut knows about wolves,' Renn said, giving Darkfur's flank an affectionate scratch. The she-wolf swept the floor with her tail. 'Still, I suppose it might help—' She broke off.

'What is it?' said Dark.

'Back up, will you, I'm coming out. Found something snagged in her underfur.'

A boy was calling from the cave mouth: 'Scouts have returned, clan meet's about to start!'

Renn and Dark ignored him. They were staring at what lay in her palm.

A spruce twig: its needles a fresh, vibrant green.

Renn waylaid Fin-Kedinn in the Ravens' shelter as he was leaving for the clan meet. He turned the spruce twig in his fingers, then handed it back. 'Tell no one,' he said under his breath.

She gaped at him. 'But surely—'

'It may not mean what you think. It could've caught in her fur before the Thunderstar struck.'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

'*Or* it means there are *living trees* out there! It'd give people hope!'

'Hope which might be dashed, Renn. We tell no one till we're sure.'

'But—'

'Enough! Time to start the clan meet.' His face was carved sandstone, his voice brooked no argument. Smouldering, Renn obeyed.

The whole camp was gathered around the long-fire. It was an overcast night, the sky heavy with snow. Firelight flickered on sooty faces streaked with mourning marks.

Among the scouts, Renn spotted Torak. He was gaunt with exhaustion, frowning at the sky. She failed to catch his eye.

Dark was edging through the crowd towards her when one of the newcomers spotted him. A tall man with an angular face, he took in Dark's appearance and his jaw dropped. He recovered swiftly, forcing a smile and reaching to touch the younger man's shoulder. To Renn's astonishment, Dark flung him off with a snarl, leaving the man aghast.

The man's long hair was nutbrown, but in his hollow cheeks and prominent jaw Renn detected a resemblance to Dark. As her friend approached she said quietly, 'That man, is he—'

'My father,' Dark said between his teeth. Next moment he was asking the clan guardians to watch over the camp in a clear voice which betrayed no sign of what he was feeling.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Fin-Kedinn declared the clan meet open and people quietened down, eager to hear from the scouts. As the speaking-stick was passed from hand to hand, a shocked silence fell.

'No trace of the Boar Clan…'

'Or the Otters. The cliffs on the eastern shore of Lake Axehead have collapsed, nothing left of their camp…'

'Rowan Clan hunters say the Thunderstar struck the Mountains, shattered a whole peak…'

'I heard that it destroyed the cave where the sun sleeps! The sun is dead!'

'They say where it struck it made a boiling lake. This cooled to a swamp, and from it crawled creatures that have no souls. People call them Skin-Takers… They prey on the dead and the dying.'

'Crowwater valley's flooded for two daywalks downstream.' This from Torak. 'Landslip prevented me finding out why.'

'I know why.'

It wasn't a scout who'd spoken but a Salmon Clan hunter who'd just arrived with his daughter. A silent child about eight summers old, she was clutching her father's wrist, which ended in a stump, an old injury long since healed.

Fin-Kedinn nodded at Torak to pass the man the speaking-stick.

'My name's Gaup,' he told the throng. 'Crowwater's blocked because it flows into the Widewater. That's blocked

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

too. Half the Hogback's collapsed, it's buried the river upstream of Thunder Falls.'

Jaws hung open, heads shook in disbelief. The Widewater was the greatest river in the Forest – and the richest in salmon. If it wasn't flowing by spring, the salmon would not swim up from the Sea. And the clans depended on the salmon run. It had never been known to fail.

Sialot sprang to his feet. 'Why worry about spring? What about *now*? How can we hunt when there isn't any prey? How can we fish when the rivers are poisoned? And why,' he added accusingly, 'are we feeding strangers when we haven't enough for ourselves?'

Roars of agreement, and menacing glances at Gaup.

'I don't *mind* if they're able-bodied,' Sialot went on. 'But we can't waste supplies on strangers who can't pull their weight!'

Neither Gaup nor his daughter responded to his slurs, but Shamik clutched her withered arm to her chest. Dark put his arm around her and glared at Sialot.

'What you're all ignoring,' shrilled a Willow woman, 'is that this is *our fault*! We angered the World Spirit, that's why it sent the Thunderstar!'

'It's not *our* fault, it's the Kelps!' yelled a Viper man. 'Everyone knows Sea clans hate the Forest!'

'And Forest clans dishonour the Sea!' Halut shot back. 'This is your fault, not ours!'

'What about the Mages?' shouted a Whale girl. 'Why didn't they see this coming?'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

Until now Fin-Kedinn had stood watching the angry, frightened people. Taking the speaking-stick from Gaup, he waited.

A hush fell.

'You chose me to lead,' Fin-Kedinn said calmly. 'So that's what I'll do. All this talk about differences – but one thing binds us *together*. Whether you're from the Sea, the Forest, the Mountains or the Ice – each of us is a hunter. Like all hunters, when we kill prey, we keep the Pact which our ancestors made with the World Spirit: we waste nothing. Like all hunters we've known bad times – the sickness, the demon bear. We've come together and survived. That's what we'll do now.'

Muttering and head-shaking. Not many were persuaded.

'It's *not true* the sun is dead,' continued the Raven Leader. 'The false dawn grows longer every day, you *know* this! You know it means that soon we'll see the sun. It's *not true* that every river is poisoned! The underground lake isn't, and yesterday Thull found sweet water to the south-west. It's *not true* that all prey is dead! The Swans tell me they've seen fresh reindeer tracks. If one reindeer survived – and wolves and ravens too – other creatures may be alive. And who knows – ' he glanced at Renn – 'there may be valleys where the Forest still lives. We will find them.'

He paused to let that sink in. 'Tomorrow we go ice fishing and we track that reindeer. Tonight we finish what we started before the Thunderstar: we hold the Feast of Sparks to wake the sun.'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021

Renn and Dark had performed the Sun Chant and while everyone was settling to eat, she showed Torak the spruce twig. He wasn't as encouraged as she'd expected, but he went down into the caves to ask Darkfur where she'd been.

He returned soon after, shaking his head. 'Many lopes, that's all she said. Wolves don't know about north and south.'

'I still think it's a good sign,' said Renn.

He sat cross-legged, passing a scrap of green amber from palm to palm. Renn asked where he'd got it. From one of the Kelps, he said.

Nearby, a squabble broke out. 'Oh, what now?' muttered Renn.

Camp rations were a bitter gruel of scorched pine-nuts, acorns and tough auroch's ear mushrooms, but for the Feast this had been enriched with whatever supplies the clans had been able to salvage after the Thunderstar. The Ravens had contributed some dried salmon flatcakes, the Willows a few pickled beaver feet, the Sea-eagles smoked cods' tongues. The Swans had given dried elk livers, the Kelps a pouch of herring roe in seal oil. The fight was over whether it was wrong to mix Forest food with that from the Sea.

Wearily Fin-Kedinn rose and raised the speaking-stick. 'Some of you,' he said into the resulting silence, 'have forgotten the story our elders used to tell. Listen – and remember.'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

It began to snow, fluffy flakes falling gently on tired faces.

'In the time that was, when even the stars were dark,' said Fin-Kedinn, 'the First Tree began to grow. Its branches pushed up the sky. Its roots made the earth. From its seeds grew the Forest.' His voice was a beam of light in the darkness, leading away from the horror of the present to the murmurous green past.

'The World Spirit took a handful of leaves and blew on them: they became hunters and prey, and for a time all was well.' He paused. 'Then the Great Wave attacked the land. As the floodwaters rose, all creatures feared they would drown. So they banded together to make a raft. Beavers felled trees. Our ancestors twisted ropes out of horses' tails. Aurochs and boars hauled logs, our ancestors tied them together. Frogs and mice mixed mud with the underfur of deers and wolves, and plugged gaps. Birds plucked their down to keep the people warm. Salmon laid their eggs on kelp fronds, so that everyone had food while they were afloat. And when at last the waters sank, hunters and prey returned to the Forest and were saved.'

Watching the whole camp hanging on her uncle's words, Renn's heart swelled with love for him. Fin-Kedinn had cared for her since she was little, when her father was killed. Now he was caring for them all.

It was snowing more thickly, cloaking the filthy camp in glistening white.

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2001

According to the ice clans, a snowfall means the moon is making a new face for itself of walrus ivory, and sweeping the shavings from its shelter. Renn couldn't see the moon, but she knew it was there. It hadn't forsaken them. There was still hope.

She turned to Torak. He too was watching the sky, but his face was drawn. 'You're not eating,' she said softly.

'I'm not hungry. When did you last see the First Tree?'

'What…? But it's snowing, we won't see it now.'

He frowned down at the green amber in his hand.

'Torak, what's wrong? What aren't you telling me?'

He looked at her. She saw his clan-tattoos, two dotted lines on his cheekbones with the scar cutting across the left. She saw the quartered circle tattooed on his forehead. She saw his vivid, bloodshot, light-grey eyes. She gasped. The little green flecks that she loved… They were gone.

'What's happened to you?' she whispered.

'Come with me.' Taking her wrist, he pulled her to her feet. 'Someone you need to see.'

Copyright © Michelle Paver, 2021