

We had a bad shaman.

This is what Thorn would say whenever he was doing something bad himself. Object to whatever it was and he would pull up his long gray braids to show the mangled red nubbins surrounding his earholes. His shaman had stuck bone needles through the flesh of his boys' ears and then ripped them out sideways, to help them remember things. Thorn when he wanted the same result would flick Loon hard on the ear and then point at the side of his own head, with a tilted look that said, You think you have it bad?

Now he had Loon gripped by the arm and was hauling him along the ridge trail to Pika's Rock, on the overlook between Upper and Lower Valleys. Late afternoon, low clouds rolling overhead, brushing the higher ridges and the moor, making a gray roof to the world. Under it a little line of men on a ridge trail, following Thorn on shaman's business. It was time for Loon's wander.

—Why tonight? Loon protested. —A storm is coming, you can see it.

—We had a bad shaman.

And so here they were. The men all gave Loon a hug, grinning ruefully at him and shaking their heads. He was going to have a miserable night, their looks said. Thorn waited for them to finish, then croaked the start of the good-bye song:

This is how we always start
It's time to be reborn a man
Give yourself to Mother Earth
She will help you if you ask

—If you ask nicely enough, he added, slapping Loon on the shoulder. Then a lot of laughing, the men's eyes sardonic or encouraging as they divested him of his clothes and his belt and his shoes, everything passed over to Thorn, who glared at him as if on the verge of

striking him. Indeed when Loon was entirely naked and without possessions Thorn did strike him, but it was just a quick backhand to the chest. —Go. Be off. See you at full moon.

If the sky were clear, there would have been the first sliver of a new moon hanging in the west. Thirteen days to wander, therefore, starting with nothing, just as a shaman's first wander always started. This time with a storm coming. And in the fourth month, with snow still on the ground.

Loon kept his face blank and stared at the western horizon. To beg for a month's delay would be undignified, and anyway useless. So Loon looked past Thorn with a stony gaze and began to consider his route down to the Lower Valley creekbed, where knots of trees lined the creek. Being barefoot made a difference, because the usual descent from Pika's Rock was very rocky, possibly so rocky he needed to take another way. First decision of many he had to get right. —Friend Raven there behind the sky, he chanted aloud, —lead me now without any tricks!

—Good luck getting Raven to help, Thorn said. But Loon was from the raven clan and Thorn wasn't, so Loon ignored that and stared down the slope, trying to see a way. Thorn slapped him again and led the other men back down the ridge. Loon stood alone, the wind cutting into him. Time to start his wander.

But it wasn't clear which way to get down. For a time it seemed like he might freeze there, might never start his life's journey.

So I came up in him and gave him a little lift from within.

I am the third wind.

He took off down the rocks. He looked back once to show his teeth to Thorn, but they were out of sight down the ridge. Off he plunged, flinging the thought of Thorn from him. Under his feet the broken gritstone was flecked with pock snow, which collected in dimples and against nobbles in a pattern that helped him see where to step. Go as agile as a cat, down rock to rock, hands ready to grab and help down little jumps. His toes chilled and he abandoned them to their cold fate,

focused on keeping his hands warm. He would need his hands down in the trees. It began to snow, just a first little pricksnow. The slope had big snow patches that were easier on his feet than the rocks.

He tightened his ribs and pushed his heat out into his limbs and skin, grunting until he blazed a little, and the pricksnow melted when it touched him. Sometimes the only heat to be had is in hurry.

He clambered down and across the boulder-choked ravine seaming the floor of Lower Valley, across the little stream. On the other side he was able to run up the thin forest floor, which was all too squishy, as the ground was wet with rain and snowmelt. Here he avoided the patches of snow. First day of the fourth month: it was going to be trouble to make a fire. The night would be ever so much more comfortable if he could make a fire.

The upper end of Lower Valley was a steep womb canyon. A small cluster of spruce and alder surrounded the spring there, which started the valley's creek. There he would find shelter from the wind, and branches for clothing, and under the trees there wouldn't be much snow left. He hurried up to this grove, careful not to stub his senseless toes.

In the little copse around the spring he tore at live spruce branches and broke several off, cursing their wetness, but even damp their needles would hold some of his heat against him. He wove two spruce branches together and stuck his head through a middle gap in the weave, making it into a rough cloak.

Then he broke off a dead bit of brush pine root to serve as the base of his firestarter. Near the spring he found a good rock to use as a chopper, and with it cut a straight dead alder branch for his firestick. His fingers were just pliable enough to hold the rock. Otherwise he didn't feel particularly cold, except in his feet, which were pretending not to be there. The black mats of spruce needles under the trees were mostly free of snow. He crouched under one of the biggest trees and forced his toes into the mat of needles and wiggled them as hard as he could. When they began to burn a little he pulled them out and went looking for duff. Even the best fire kit needs some duff to burn.

He reached into the center of dead spruce logs, feeling for duff or

punk. He found some punk that was only a little damp, then broke off handfuls of dead twigs tucked under the protection of larger branches. The twigs were damp on their outsides, but dry inside; they would burn. There were some larger dead branches he could break off too. The grove had enough dead wood to supply a fire once it got going. It was a question of duff or punk. Neither spruce nor alder rotted to a good punk, so he would have to be lucky, or maybe find some ant-eaten wood. He got on his knees and started grubbing around under the biggest downed trees, avoiding the snow, turning over bigger branches and shoving around in the dirt trying to find something. He got dirty to the elbows, but then again that would help keep him warm.

Which might matter, as he could not find any dry punk, or any duff at all. He squeezed water out of one very rotten mass of wood, but the brown goo that remained in his hand resembled dead moss or mullein, and was still damp. The firestick's rough tip would never light such shit.

—Please, he said to the grove. He begged its forgiveness for cursing as he had approached it. —Give me some punk, please goddess.

Nothing. It became too cold for him to keep kneeling on the wet ground digging in downed logs. To make some heat in him he got up and danced. With this effort he could warm his hands, and it was important they not go numb like his feet had. Oh, a fire would make the night so much more comfortable! Surely something could be found here that would burn under the heat of his firestick's tip!

Nothing. His belt contained in its fold many little gooseskin bags in which there were spark flints, dry moss, firestick, and base. Dressed and carrying all his things, he could have survived this night and the fortnight to follow in style. Which was why he had been sent out naked: the point of the wander was to prove you could start with nothing but yourself, and not just survive but prosper. He needed to come back into camp on the night of the full moon in good style.

But first he had to get through this night. He began to work hard in his dance, throwing his arms around, spinning his hands in big circles. He sang a hot song and wiggled all over. After doing this

for a while, everything but his feet began to burn. But he was also getting tired. He tried to find a balance between the cold and his efforts, walking in a tight circle while also inspecting the forest floor for likely punk and duff shelters. Nothing!

In every grove some wood will burn.

This was one of the sayings that Heather often repeated, though seldom when talking about fire. Loon said it aloud, emphatically, beseechingly: —In every grove some wood will burn! But on this night he wasn't convinced. It only made him mad.

Dig!

He went at the underside of a log which had broken over another one in its fall, a long time ago. They were two crossing mounds of dirt, almost; not an impossible source. But at this moment, wet through and through. And cold.

When he saw how it was, he beat his fist on the soft wet logs. Then he had to start walking in circles again.

Later, more digging into another log gained him only a knot that was still hard, with two spurs extending away from it at an angle much like the angle needed to make a spear thrower. He replaced his first firestarter base with this flat knot, which was better. His alder firestick still looked good. All was ready, if only he had something dry enough to catch fire.

And if only it would stop raining so hard. For a while it pelted down, cold enough to be a little sleety, and all on a gusty wind. In the hard gusts it was like getting hit with cold sand. He simply had to take shelter, and so he crawled under a spruce with big branches right against the ground, where he could snuggle in tight around the trunk and feel only a few drips on him, a few tickles of wind. The spruce needles were scratchy and the ground was cold, but he flexed his shoulder up and down, and sang a hot song and swore vengeance against Thorn. Talk about bad shamans!

But all boys have to become men one way or another. Their wanderers had to be trials of skill and endurance. Hunters' wanderers were just as bad. And other packs' shamans insisted on even harder trials, it was said.

Loon banished Thorn again. He tested all the branches at the bottom of the spruce. If a dead one could be broken, a dead one well dried but still a little resinous, possibly he could pulverize a spot in it with a rock point and make a mash of splinters fine enough to catch fire under the spin of the firestick. Worth a try, and the effort itself would help keep him warm.

But it turned out there didn't seem to be a branch around the bottom of this tree that he could break.

When the rain let off, he squirmed back out and crawled around under the other spruces looking for such a branch. His hands were so cold he could scarcely grasp the branches to test them.

After a while he had broken off a few likely-looking branches. If he could get a fire started in one of them, the others would be good wood to feed to it.

He found an adequate hearth rock, and a better smasher rock. He took the best one of his dead dry spruce branches and placed it on the hearth, then hit it with the smasher. It resisted, and it was clear it would take a while to get it right, but it seemed promising. Smash smash smash. He had to be more careful than usual not to catch a finger, his hands were so clumsy. Once two years before he had smashed a fingertip, and it was still fat and a little numb at the end, its flat claw lined with grooves. He called that finger Fatty. So he hit his smasher on the side of the broken branch very carefully, once or twice hitting the hearth instead. A spark or two from those accidents made him long for his flint firestrickers. A few scattered sparks were not going to be enough to do it on a night like this. The wet wind whooshed its laughter at him, loud in the trees.

Eventually a spot on the side of his target branch was squashed into a splay of splinters, perfectly dry. He sat cross-legged with his body arched over the branch, and it seemed like the mash of splinters might burn. Breathing hard, warm except for his feet, he crawled under the best of the spruces in his grove and arranged his new kit around him. Smashed branch on the hearth rock, held there between his feet; firestick placed almost upright in the mash of splinters on the branch, held at its tilt between his palms. All set: spin the firestick back and forth.

Back and forth, back and forth between his hands, gently pushing the point of the stick down into the branch. Back and forth, back and forth. His palms ran down the stick with the force of his pushing down, and when they reached the lower end of the stick he had to grasp it with one hand, put the other against the top, and move up and catch it and begin over again, with as little a pause as he could manage. Meanwhile it kept raining outside the shelter of the spruce, and under it, even right against the trunk, drips were dripping. Really it began to look impossible, given the conditions. But he didn't want to admit that. It would get an awful lot colder the moment he admitted that.

After a long time, maybe a fist or more, he had to give up, at least on this branch. The mash of splinters was a bit too massy, and after a while, a little damp. He could get the spot just under the firestick so hot that it slightly burned his fingertip to touch it, and the splinters around that spot had even blackened a little, but they would not burst into flame.

Loon sat there. This was going to be a hard thing to tell Thorn about, assuming he survived to tell the tale. The old sorcerer would flick him on the ears for sure. You had to be able to start a fire, anytime, anywhere; the worse conditions were, the more important it got. Thorn, like most of the shamans at the corroboree, was exceptionally good with fire, and had spent a lot of time with Loon and the other kids, teaching them the tricks. He had put a firestick to their forearms and spun it, to teach them how hot the spinning got. Eventually Loon had learned how to make fire no matter how the old man complicated the task. But there had always been some dry duff, one way or another.

Now he crawled out from under the spruce and stood up, sobbing with frustration, and danced until the cold was held off him by a thin envelope of sweat. When the rain let up a little, he steamed. Already he was hungry, but there was nothing for it. Time to chew on a pebble and think about other things. Chew a pebble and dance in the rain. Cold or not, this was his wander. When daylight came at last he would find better shelter, find some dry duff, find an abri or some smaller overhang. Begin outfitting himself for his return at full moon. He

would walk into camp fully clothed, belly full, spear in hand! Clothed in lion skins! Beartooth necklace draped around his neck! He saw it all inside his eyes. He shouted the story of it at the night.

After a while he sat again under the best spruce, his head on his knees, arms wrapped around his legs. Then he got back out and shuffled around in the grove, looking for a better tuck, finding one after another and testing them. If they were good, he added them to a growing little round of camps, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. He chanted for long stretches, cursed Thorn from time to time. May your pizzle fall off, may a lion eat you . . . Then also from time to time he would shout things out loud. —It's cold! Thorn would sometimes howl his thoughts that way, using old words from the shamans' language, words that sounded like the things themselves: Esh var kalt! Esh var k-k-k-kaaaal-TEE!

He stubbed a big toe and only felt it in the bone; the flesh was numb. More curses. May the ravens shit on you, may your babies die . . . Lie on the ground under one big spruce, only his kneecaps and toes and the palms of hands and his forehead touching the earth. Push himself up and down with his arms, staying rigid. If only he could fuck the earth to get warm, but it was too cold, he couldn't get his poor pizzle to antler, it was as numb as his toes, and would hurt like crazy when it next warmed up, prickle and burn till he cried. Maybe if he thought of that girl from the Lion pack, a raven like him, therefore forbidden to him, supposedly, but they had made eyes anyway, and it would warm him to think of plunging her. Or Sage, from his own pack.

That line of thought trapped some time: seeing it all inside his eyelids, seeing her spread her legs to him. Be there inside her kolby, forget this cold rain. Her kolby, her baginaren, her vixen. Start a little fire behind his belly button, get his prong to spurt. But it was too cold. He could only mash the poor flesh around and make it burn a little, warm it in the hope it would not get frostbit. That would be so bad.

After a time the rain relented. The sky's cloudy dark gray seemed a bit lighter. No moon, no stars to tell him how close dawn was. But it felt close. It had to be close. It had been a long, long night.

He stood and swayed. It was surely a lighter gray overhead. He

sang a hot song, he sang a song to the sun. He called for the sun, the great god of warmth and good cheer. He was tired and cold. But he wasn't so cold he would die. He would make it to dawn, he could feel it. This was his wander, this was how a shaman was born. He howled till his throat was raw.

Finally dawn came, wet, gray, dull, cold. Under the storm the colors of things did not quite return, but he could see. Low clouds scudded in from the west, cutting off the ridgetops. The undersides of the clouds hung in fat dark tits. A sheet of rain fell on Lower Valley downstream from him, a black broom standing in the air between cloud and forest. With the big snow patches everywhere, the ground was lighter than the sky.

Then in just a few blinks everything got much lighter, and a white spot glowed in the clouds over the east ridge. The sun, wonderful god of warmth, over the ridge at last. Cloudy or not, the air would almost certainly get warmer. Only the worst storms had days colder than the previous night. And now the sky didn't look too bad to windward; the clouds tumbling over the gray hills had little breaks between them that were bright white. It was still windy, however, and the rain began to come down in little freshets.

Whether this day proved to be warmer than the night or not, he was going to have to keep moving to stay warm. There would be no relief from that until he got a fire lit. So he gathered his unsuccessful fire kit and held the two pieces of it in his left hand, and clasped a good throwing rock in his right hand, and took off downstream. He wanted a bigger copse of trees, with a good mix of spruce and pine and cedar and alder. The ridges and hillsides and valley slopes, and the upland behind and above them, were mostly bare rock dotted with grasses, and now covered by old snow; but in the valleys against the creeks, trees usually grew, making ragged dark green lines in the palm of any valley. Downstream a short walk, where Lower Valley's creek was met by a little trickle down its eastern flank, a flat spot held a bigger clump of trees, surrounding a little oval meadow and climbing the slopes to each side.

He made his way around the wet part of the little meadow and went to the thickest part of this grove. He slipped between the trees, grateful for their shelter. It was windier now, and there was more rain falling than he had thought when he left his night copse. In this larger grove things were very much better. He was well protected, and now that it was day he could see what he was doing. A broken cedar at the center of the grove had exposed a big curve of its inner bark, which he could pull free and use to make some rough clothes. A couple of snow-rimmed anthills spilling out of the end of a decomposed cedar log gave him sign of potential punk. There was a small hole at the end of the log; he bashed it in with his rock and tore the hole deeper, then reached in and up: on the underside of the still solid wall of the log was a section of punky duff, quite dry —Ah mother! he cried. —Thank you!

He pulled out a big handful and carried it quickly to the lee of a gnarled old pine. —In every grove OF SUFFICIENT SIZE some wood will burn, he said aloud, shouting his correction. He was going to tell that to Heather in no uncertain terms. She would laugh at him, he knew, but he was going to do it anyway. It was important to get things right, especially if you were going to make sayings out of them.

He left the dry duff well protected in a cleft at the base of a broken old pine tree, and quickly gathered a bunch of branches and broke off several more. He stashed these with the duff and then broke off ten or twenty smallish live branches and arranged them around and behind and over the broken pine tree he had chosen, making its wind protection even better. Bush pines like this old one had multiple trunks, and were thickly needled; this one was a great tuck to begin with, and with his branch walls added, hardly any wind or rain was making it through to his fire area.

After that he gathered the pile of firewood next to him, then sat down with his back against the trunk, curled in a crouch to make his body the last part of the windbreak. He crossed his legs and placed his unfeeling feet against the sides of his base.

He chopped at his firestick's tip until it was a little cleaner and sharper, then placed it in the dent on the knot base, very near his

new duff. When all seemed right, he began to spin for dear life, back and forth, back and forth, feeling his hands sliding slowly down the stick, feeling also the pressure of the stick against the base as it spun, trying to hold the combination of speed and pressure that would make the most heat. There was a feel to that, and a dance with each return of the hands from the bottom of the stick to the top, a quick little move. When he had it going as well as he could, and had made several swift hand shifts from bottom to top, he toed some of the duff closer to the blackening cup spot, a little depression in the knot which was what had caused him to pick this base in the first place; it was just what you would have cut with a blade in a flat base.

He watched the duff blacken, holding his breath; then some of the newly black spots glowed yellow and white at their edges. He gently blew on these white points, contorting so his face was closer to them, breathing on them in just the way that would push the white away from the cup into the bigger mass of duff. He bent his backbone like Loop Meadow and blew as gently as seemed right, coaxing the white heat to grow, feeding it a little wind that would not blow it out, giving it just what it needed, emptying himself out to it, puff puff puff, pufffff, this he could do, this he knew how to do, puff puff puff, puff puff puff, pufffff

and the duff burst into flame. FIRE! Even this tiny flame lofted a little waft of heat into his face, and he sucked in a breath and blew even more ardently than before, still very gently but with a particular growing urgency, like blowing in a hole on the flute when you want to make a wolf's cry jump. As he did this he also shifted to his knees and elbows, using his face as the closest windbreak for this gorgeous little flame, and breathing on it in just the way that made it bigger, making love to it, oh how he wanted it to feel good, to be happy and grow! He gave it his breath, his spirit, his love, he wanted it to spurt, to leap up like the spurtmilk out of a prong, to burn in his face: and it did!

When he saw that the little spurt of flame was holding, he began placing the littlest and driest twigs over it, in a way that would catch as much of them alight as possible without harming the blaze

below. It was a delicate balance, but one very well known to him; something he was good at, Thorn having forced him to practice it twentytwentytwentytwenty times. Oh yes, fire, fire, FIRE! Almost everyone was pretty good at fire, but Loon thought of himself as exceptionally good at it, which was part of what made the previous night's failure so galling. He was going to be embarrassed to tell the story of that first night. He would have to emphasize the terrible power of the storm, but then again, as his pack had spent the night just one valley over, they weren't going to believe much of an exaggeration. He would just have to admit he had had a bad night.

But now it was morning, and he had a fire started, and the first twigs were catching and adding their burn, so he could add more, including some bigger ones. Soon there were ten or twenty twigs alight in a fiery stack over the first burn, and their flames were a tangible yellow. Very soon the moment came when it was safe to put a pretty large handful of dry twigs gently atop the little blaze, and they would all catch almost immediately. He did that and said—Ha! Ha! and put on some larger branches. Finger sticks, then wrist branches. Happily he watched as the growing flames blackened the rounded sides of so many twigs and branches. A fire makes all right with the world.

Smoke now flew up, and the hiss and crackle from the wood showed how hot the fire was getting. The heat smacked his naked chest and belly and pizzle, which burned horribly as it warmed, in the usual agonizing tingle. He squeezed it in one hand to hold the pain in, and felt that it was a good pain, so good it was easy to feel it as a harsh form of pleasure; ah, the too-familiar burn of numbed flesh coming back to life, the itch deep under the skin, the painful tingle of being alive! Now he was going to be able to warm up even his feet! They would burn like mad as they came back to him. Ah fire, glorious fire, so friendly and warm, so beautiful!

—Such a blessing, such a friend! Such a blessing, such a friend! One of Heather's little fire songs.

Now things were really looking good. The previous night was put in its place as a mere problem, a dark prelude. With a fire lit, the

storm still blowing overhead did not matter anything like as much. He could keep this fire going for the whole fortnight, if that seemed best, or he could take it with him a certain distance, if he wanted to move, and reestablish it elsewhere. He could focus his efforts on food, shelter, and clothing, and no matter how those went, he would always have the most important thing. And it was only the first day of his wander!

He sat on the windward side of the fire and stretched out his legs around it, held up his arms over it. Hands catching the heat from right in the smoke. Oh the tingle of life coming back: —OW! It was a very different howl than the ones of the night before. Like the wolves, like his namesake the loons, he had a whole vocabulary of howls. This was the happy one, the triumphant one: —OWWW!

When he was warmed right to his toes, and had several big logs burning on a broad bed of red-hearted gray embers, he walked the perimeter of his little grove, then spiraled in through it, inspecting it. There was that cracked cedar at the edge of the little meadow, and in the shallows of the creek he found a block of flint with one sharp end and a length of rough edge, so that it resembled a massive clumsy burin. It would make an adequate chopper. He took it back to the cracked cedar and began to hack at the split in the trunk, detaching the bark and then peeling off the inner layer in sections as big as he could make them. Some of the strips were longer than he was.

When he had stripped the tree of all the inner bark he could get off, he took it back to his tuck, added some branches to the fire, and then in its glorious warmth sat down to tear the inner bark into strips. This was slow and meticulous work, but very satisfying as the strips grew to a considerable pile.

By midday he had more than he thought he would need. After tending to the fire again, he arranged the strips on some snow-free ground near his tuck. He had four or five score of them. He laid six in a line on the ground and then wove six more across them, pleased at the simple but effective over-and-under pattern. He used longer strips for the ups, and shorter ones for the arounds, and he offset the

starts of the rounds each from the next, so that the resulting tube would not have a weak line down it. Finally he reached under and pulled the weave up the middle, then wove more rounds around the back, bringing the ups that had been farthest apart together; and after that he had a tube. A legging.

He did that again, and had leggings. Then a triple-stranded length to serve as a belt to hang the tubes from; then hangers, and a simple crotch strap to cover his cold pizzle. He stepped into the leggings and tied them to his belt, and felt them catch his warmth immediately. —Ha!

After that a vest; then a hat; lastly, out of the remainders, a ragged short cloak. In rain these clothes would get wet and then tear easily, but meanwhile, in his shelter, they would give him some warmth, and when it stopped raining they would give him some protection too. What he needed for proper clothes was fur skins, of course, but that would take some getting. For now his bark suit was the best he could do, and far better than being bare, or so he hoped.

Now, being warm, he felt a real pinch of hunger. He had spotted some berry patches back in the meadow, so after putting three more big branches on the fire, he ventured out in his clothes to relocate them.

It was still windy, but the rain had stopped, and the clouds were breaking up. The verge of the meadow was furred by a bramble of duck's eye berries, and he reached in carefully and pulled some of last year's dead berries off the ground. These were black and flat, but they would give him something.

Then he went to the place where the creek left the meadow. As often happened, he saw trout in the water there, tucked under the last curve of the bank above the outlet. He was not far from his grove; through some trees he could see his fire blazing merrily away.

He walked downstream until he saw a shallow spot that would work. He heaved rocks from the bankside into the stream until he had made a little dam across it. The creek poured through the gaps in this dam so easily that the water didn't rise the slightest bit behind

it; but a fish of any size could not get through. Then he hurried back upstream to the meadow.

There he took off his new clothes, stepped into the creek, and walked downstream. When he was upstream from the last meander, he pulled a big rock from the bank and threw it hard into mid-stream, at the same time jumping up and down and shouting. No fish flashed by headed upstream, so quickly he sloshed downstream, still shouting. He saw there were no fish under the bank at the last turn; presumably they had escaped downstream.

He waded downstream toward his dam, a rock in one hand, a stick in the other. He hit his rock against rocks in the water, yelling as he went.

Then he came to where he could see his dam. Ahead of him in the water, caught between him and the dam, were three trout. He dropped his rock in the stream and reached up onto the bank and as quickly as he could pulled rocks into the water and built another dam. As he finished he had to fend off a couple of upstream rushes by one of the fish, but even that one was too frightened to try to flash past him, and the other two didn't even try. With the second dam built up well above the level of the creek, he had them in a little fish pen. —Ah! he cried. —Thank you!

He sloshed upstream to give a quick look to his camp. His fire was still burning well. He got out of the creek and walked downstream and stepped into his fish pen. He stalked one fish, he thought the one that had rushed him, moving into a position where he could reach down with both hands, very slowly, until they were next to the fish, which was trying to hide by staying still. With a single scoop outward he splashed water and fish together up onto the bank, where the fish flopped till it died. He stifled his shout, to keep from scaring the other fish, and moved slowly to the next one, tucked under the bank. He stuck his hands down very slowly, scooped again, and the second fish flew up in its mass of water and thrashed out its life.

The last one darted about and evaded several of his scoops, but then he caught it, and it too died on the bank flopping this way and that. After that he had three nice trout, each well over a hand long.

He sang the fisherman's thanks, got out of the creek and put his clothes back on, then carried the fish to the fire.

Old alder sticks broken with a twist eventually yielded an edged point sufficient to cut the fish and gut them. Then he stuck them on longer pine branches and held them over the fire until they were cooked and sizzling at their edges. They tasted great, unseasoned but trouty. He would pluck sprigs of rosemary and mint to add to later meals. As he ate, it occurred to him that he should have opened the upper dam of his fish pen before leaving it.

But that would be something for tomorrow. With his stomach full and his body dressed, sitting there by the warm fire, he was suddenly sleepy.

In another short tour of his grove he gathered more spruce branches for bedding and blanket. He made the bed right next to the fire, and when the softly needled branches were piled to his satisfaction, he went to the creek's bank and gathered wads of moss and took them back to dry them by the fire. While they dried he gathered more firewood for the night, then laid the dried mosses on the branches of his bed. He lay down on the padded bed and pulled spruce branches thick with needles over him, still wearing his bark clothing. He would keep the fire high. It would be a very comfortable night. It was still twilight, but he lay there anyway next to his pile of firewood and watched the flames, feeling happy. Only his second night, and he was fed and clothed, and in a bed by a fire! Now that would be a story to tell.

He lay there, comfortable and warm. The moon was on its second night, nicely thicker than the curved line of a first night. A fortnight goes fast, as they said. Soon the crescent set, and the night went full dark, stars pricking the black above a few remaining clouds. The undersides of the trees above him flickered together in their firelight dance. Second day of the fourth month, a wet chill in the air outside the bubble of fire warmth. Sleep took him away.

Around midnight wolf cries from a distant ridge woke him, and he threw a few branches on the bed of embers, pulsing redly under fluttering white ash. Splash of sparks; watch a branch blacken, watch

it catch fire, that sudden yellow pop into the world, that hypnotic transparent dance, and he was out again.

Later he dreamed of running up a crease under a ridge to catch a glimpse of three ibex, seen as they were topping the rise. He came on the animals right there before him, all three facing him foursquare and at ease, their neat curved horns poking the sky. Rockdancers; his mother's favorite animal; and suddenly she was there beside him, and his father too. They were looking at the rockdancers in the time of the caribou on the steppe, when the low rumble of caribou hooves sounded like distant thunder. His mother was raven clan and his father eagle, but they both clearly loved the ibex; this was what Loon remembered from that moment. He knew that being with his parents was unusual, and this knowledge woke him.

The stars had circled, it wasn't far from dawn. He tried to dive back into the dream, failed; tried then to grasp what memory of it he could, before he was exiled from it for good. All of it stood before him at once; then he tracked it from faintest moment to boldest moment; then from beginning to end. Some dreams want to be remembered, but others don't and have to be chased down. This was one of those.

So, his mother and father had visited. That had not happened for a while. He tried to see in his eye what they looked like, or understand how in the dream he knew so well who they were, even though they were just standing there beside him, not saying anything he could precisely recall. Sometimes he recalled dream conversations, other times not. This time he had known their feelings without them having to talk. They had been filled with benevolence and concern for him, and with love for the rockdancers. Loon whimpered at their absence from the living. What was it like to be in the spirit world only, how did they live there, why couldn't they cross back? Why had they died, why did things die? The mystery of it all swept through him, and he felt tiny, pierced by a vastness. If it weren't for the fire his desolation would have been complete. With the fire there beside him he could look at these matters, allow himself to feel the hurt in them, the vastness.

Right after dawn it clouded up again, but the cloud layer was thin and had no rain in it. The wind blew in fitful gusts, tearing away flakes of ash from his bed of embers. His tuck was mostly protected still, and although the side of him away from the fire was chilly, it was easy to turn and feel the radiance singe his cold skin. This was the second day of his wander; but now, despite his comfort, he felt sad and alone. He sighed. This was his initiation as a shaman, after all. He was walking into a new world, a new kind of existence; it was not meant to be merely time spent alone. This was what his parents had come to tell him: he had to face something, learn something, accomplish something. Change into something else: a sorcerer, a man in the world. Of course his parents were dead.

He went down and drank from the creek, foraged for more firewood, hefted and carried back a big chunk of old log that would help keep the fire going, becoming first its roof and then part of the ember bed.

Then it was time to find more food. He walked over to the meadow, looking for prints or scat or other sign, maybe a place for a snare. Snares were best when made of hide thongs. Bark ropes were not often strong enough. On the way past the meadow outlet, he removed the upper dam on the creek, checked and saw there were no fish in last meander to scare, so he continued across the meadow, avoiding the old snow. There were watering spots on the banksides there, with many animals' prints, but they tended to be open places, and a snare would be hard to hide. He needed a tight passage between bushes, so that an animal scared away from water would perhaps rush through the passage without looking. Eventually he found such a place. The material of the snare itself remained a problem. He went to an alder with his choprock and cut a number of switches, flexible and strong and long, and split their ends and braided them together in a triple weave. These tied low above the ground could serve as a snag that might trip a young deer or goat. It was the best he could do that morning, so he laboriously set up the snare between the two bushes. If it even tripped a small beast while he was watching, that

would give him time to leap on it. He would have to lie in wait and be there when it happened, or whoever got caught in it would thrash its way free. He would return at sundown, then, and hope to scare a drinking deer into a dash.

When the snare was as good as he could make it, he walked back toward the fire looking for good throwing rocks. Even a snow hare or a grouse would be very welcome. When he had two good rocks, he foraged up the sunrise slope of the valley, looking for more of the previous year's berries on the ground. He saw some mistletoe up in a bare-branched tree and considered climbing to it and chewing its white berries; this would make a sticky stuff that could be stranded between branches to catch small birds sticking to it. But there were no small birds yet. He came on a blackberry bramble, and while eating some old dead berries also swallowed some little white mushrooms he knew to be safe. Then he hurried back to see how the fire was going.

The fire was fine, and he placed another log on it and went out again in the other direction. Downstream, Lower Valley deepened but did not get wider, and its east ridge gapped where Lower's Upper dropped into it. Lower's Upper was a higher canyon leading northeast. Where the east ridge rose again, beyond that gap, a tall rock called the Skelk's Antler overlooked a short broad cliff. Below the cliff a steep forested slope dropped to Lower Valley creek, still mostly snow-floored.

Loon headed down to the confluence of Lower Creek and Lower's Upper, where a little frozen flat above an alder brake might have something interesting on it. There would surely be tracks.

A crashing among the trees on the slope froze him in place, and he was perfectly still when a young doe burst out of the trees up there, pursued by two brown bears. The doe had a broken rear left shank, and three-pointed down the slope slower than usual. The lead bear on the other hand ran downhill with startling speed, and caught up to the doe and knocked her to the ground and went for the throat like a wolf. Loon had seen other bears bite down on the

back of the neck, like a cat. But bears would do anything. They were almost like humans in that way, which made sense, given that they had been human in the old time. And they still looked human: big dangerous people in furs.

Loon stayed still, watched the first bear take a few bites of the deer's throat and lick up the blood. Loon's mouth was watering as he watched. The deer was still shuddering through its death; bears had no regard for propriety when it came to that.

Then the other bear attacked the first one from behind. Two young males, Loon saw, now fighting, mostly with ferocious snarls and swipes that did no damage. It looked like the continuation of some ongoing fight. They were totally oblivious to anything else, so Loon threw his two rocks at them, and hit both. They were startled by the sudden pain out of nowhere and ran off together into the trees without looking around. After that it sounded like they were fighting each other still.

Loon ran hard to the deer, completely intent and trying to see in all directions at once. He surely didn't have much time before the bears came back, or someone else came along. None of the rocks lying around had edges sharp enough to skin the deer, and the first bear had only gotten started on eating it. He pulled the body onto its belly with its legs splayed out, and with a Thank you began to hammer at the rear hips with one of his throwing rocks, soon enough breaking the hip, then separating the leg from spine, and cutting skin and ligaments, smashing the joint apart with the idea that he could carry away a leg if he had to flee. For sure the smell of blood was on the wind, which was blowing upcanyon.

He was still pounding away at the deer's hip, but it was not quite free, when a movement upslope caught his eye. It was worse than bad; three lion women were there in the trees, approaching in their easy padding way.

Loon leaped out of the little clearing and ran doubled over between trees, up the other side of the canyon and over some boulders, where he threw himself flat and tried to catch his breath without gasping.

The lions had stopped at the deer and were sniffing it as they looked around. They knew the deer had just been killed. Loon picked up two more rocks under him. If he could get back to his fire, he could probably hold these lions off, although if they saw he was alone it would be difficult, if they wanted him; they were very good at assessing their chances in any possible hunt, and would know they could kill him if they didn't care about first taking some punishment from thrown rocks. Lion women would run right into a rain of rocks if the notion took them. Hopefully the dead deer would take their attention, take the edge off their hunger.

He crawled for a while on the two held rocks and his toes, like a lizard. When he was far enough away to stay out of their sight when standing, he got up and ran as quickly and quietly as he could to his fire.

It was still burning well, banked down but ready to light any wood thrown on it. He threw on branches of all sizes to generate a quick burn, also to prepare some torches for a better defense.

That done, he hustled back toward the kill site, but on a traverse that took him above it. An open snowy stretch on this slope gave him a view down to the little flat and the lions.

The deer was now substantially eaten, but what remained would still be a feast to Loon, and the skin and bones very useful too. He had to be like a raven, if he could, and shit on them until they abandoned the remains, while not getting swatted out of the sky. So he slipped down the slope toward them, completely on point, skin tingling, the whole valley present to him, everything looking fine-edged and particular, as if he had become a hawk. Boulders glowed with light from within, and trees quivered and hummed on the breeze, which still flowed upcanyon.

The lions, each one as big as a small bear, now lolled by the remains of the deer, cleaning their bloody muzzles with their paws like any other cat. Lions with full bellies could be driven off a kill by a rain of rocks, but usually this was done by several men also holding spears. A single man was different. The lions might decide such a presumptuous fool would make a good dessert, when they wouldn't have bothered if they weren't being annoyed. So it was important to gauge their mood

and the bulk of their bellies, now splayed beside them like pale tan water bags. Loon stopped behind a fallen tree and watched for a while. The lions were big and beautiful, glowing with the magical presence they always had—immense cats, the same in form as the little ones that hung around camp, except these biggest ones, as heavy as two or three men, ran in packs like wolves. That was an awesome combination, terrifying in what it meant for any other creature. Beautiful gods wandering the world, hunter gods who feared nothing.

A rock of the right size, thrown hard and striking the head, was a terrible blow, especially coming from well above. But it was more likely he would hit them in the body, if he hit them at all. Would they then slope off, hurt and affronted, or would they charge to kill the nuisance? This was not a question he could get wrong.

For a long time he waited and watched the lion women groom themselves. Certainly they were among the most beautiful of animals, one of the nine sacred creatures, and how could it be otherwise? What living creature could be more godlike, with their indolent grace and murderous power, their feline wolfishness? The way they looked around with their black tear streaks dripping away from their eyes like festival paint; the way their gaze would come to rest on you, and you would quail and shrink; no, there was nothing like it. They could kill anything they wanted to.

This time, one of them got up after a while and wandered down to the creek to drink, and the others followed. Thus they were now some distance away. Loon judged the distance sufficient, and dashed down and chopped free the sad remnant of the leg he had intended to take originally, also with a great two-handed blow he severed the chewed head, then he grabbed both up and ran back up the canyon all the way to his fire, fast enough to sweat and gasp most of the way. When he got to his camp his heart was pounding hard.

He built up his fire again, and through the rest of that day and well into the dusk, he chopped and pulled the skin and ligaments away from the deer's leg, roasting and eating scraps of meat as he worked. When the leg was completely broken down, he moved on to the head, and feasted on the remnant of the tongue, the brains, the fat

pads behind the eyes, and the jaw meat. The leg skin and its bone and ligaments he took down to the stream and washed, working by the light of the bowl moon, third night of the month. He took it all back to the fire to dry, hoping these parts would not be attractive enough to bring in any nocturnal scavengers big enough to challenge him.

Again he built up the fire enough that it would last till midnight, and slipped under his branch blanket with the deer bits right next to him and the patch of leg skin as his pillow, its short hair soft against the side of his face. He rested then in his spruce bed and felt how full he was, how tired. It was the feeling of a good day; but he was uneasy, too, when he thought about falling asleep with no one else to keep watch over him. Those lions were out there somewhere, and they hunted at night. They would know what the fire was if they saw it or smelled it. But he was too tired to stay up all night. Sleep kept flickering out of the fire and washing over him. He could not resist it, but only gave a last order to his inner eye, to stay open and on guard. He slipped under with a rock in his hand.

That night in his dreams the lion women were hunting him, and he woke groaning several times, feeling the dread of that. When dawn finally grayed the sky he felt like he hadn't slept at all. He was sandy-eyed, and hungrier than ever.

There were new heavy clouds to the west, briefly pinked by sunrise, coming in on a new wind. Another storm, maybe. Third day of his wander, second storm. But he could stay by his fire through this one and work up the deerskin scraps into some clothes and kit.

So, back out into the cold. In the rocks bordering the creek he found a squarish block of flint that would serve as a source for blades and points and choppers. For a knapper he chose a big long chunk of chert. He carried these rocks back to the fire, and then went to the creek's meadow outlet. There were trout again under the bank at the curve, so he took off his leggings and splashed in and scared them downstream, then reconstructed the upper dam. He clambered over the dam into his little fish pen and patiently scooped four fish onto the bank, growling wolfishly as each one flew up in a sploosh of water to flop out its life. Cooked trout; and this time he was going

to add some meadow onions he had seen sticking out of the melting snow at the upper end of the meadow. They would accompany every bite of trout. His mouth watered, his stomach pinched. He went to the patch of meadow onions and dug up some bulbs using the deer's leg bone, then returned to the fire and ate the four fish with the onions. He emptied the fish guts and cooked them on the embers and ate them too when they were black; they were a bit grainy, but good.

When he was done he took the rocks he had collected and found a flat bedrock to work on. Every strike of knapper against flint he performed with the utmost care; he couldn't afford to have a smashed finger this fortnight. With that extra caution the knapping didn't go particularly well, as he was striking small and mashing flakes off. But eventually he cleanly knapped some rough blades, and one was right enough to hold in his hand and slice the deerskin. Even uncured the skin would be strong and flexible. He wanted some of it to make a proper belt to hang his leggings and crotch strap from, because what he had for a belt and ties would soon break and the leggings fall down. Other than that the cedar bark weave was holding up pretty well. A good belt would have a fold in it too, which he could use to wrap and carry his kit in. Not that he had much of a kit.

Slowly he cut strips of skin. When he had made a good belt and replaced his cedar one with it, he tied two scrap strips together to make a necklace, then punched three holes through the strip with a sharp point of flint, so he could fit some of the deer's teeth through the holes. This was not a good design for a necklace meant to last, but it was something he could make now with what he had. If the chance came later to make a better necklace, he would, but at least he had this one, if that chance never came. He wanted to return to his pack looking as good as he could.

The next morning he woke before dawn and considered the possibility that the lions might track him by his scent, or by blood that had dripped from the deer parts. It was also true that his grove was running out of easy firewood. It would be safer to move. The storm seemed gone for now, the western sky only lightly clouded. So he

slipped out of his tuck to see if anything was drinking in the meadow where he had set his snare.

There was; a young ibex was standing in the shallows. Loon crawled to the side of the meadow opposite the snare, then jumped to his feet and shouted. The ibex leaped at the sound and charged right up the passage between bushes, hit the snare and staggered, then burst through the ropes and bolted away, leaping right up the steep rock side of the valley. She didn't stop until she was high on the slope, pronging upward from rock to rock in leaps that only an ibex could perform. Far above she turned to look down at him, offended; shook her head, as if dismissing Loon's plan for her; hopped in another quick prong up, and disappeared over the ridge. Rockdancer indeed.

Loon found a stone resting in his hand. There hadn't been time to throw it. It was very hard to make a good snare without leather ropes. This one had always been a long throw.

You can only kill disappointment with a new try.

He went out to scout a new camp. He knew the area pretty well; they had crisscrossed it many times when out on the hunt. At the upper end of Lower's Upper, its creek passed through a draw and entered a high basin called Hill In the Middle, where the creek split and ran around both sides of a rounded hill that was as tall as the basin's ridges. The east ridge of this high canyon was an edge of the uplands, the west ridge dropped to a shallow valley rising farther west, up toward the ice caps. In terms of camping suitability, the creekbeds had the trees, but also the hunting animals. Possibly some kind of protected nook high on the valley walls would be better, or even a point on a ridge, overlooking a confluence. With a fire it would be impossible to hide, unless he were to find a perfect cave. The cliffs in the area were dotted with caves, but they were for the most part known, and used by both people and animals. Finding an unknown one did not seem too likely. And a big fire was his best defense, really. So, best perhaps to get a bit of height above a confluence; or head to the top of a drainage, the steeper the better, and camp in the highest copse of trees, as the place that would get the least passthrough.

He fed his fire with a big section of dry log, then took off at a fast pace, watching his footwork carefully. He was on the hunt, skin tingling, everything big and sharp in his eye, be it ever so far away. Up the frozen creek of Lower's Upper, staying clear of the bramble beds to both sides of a small icy waterfall, trying as he climbed to imitate the smooth flow of the ibex who had scorned him. Help me up, sister, make me a rockdancer. The creek lay back, and a small line of trees led to a copse under the headwall, thickest around a spring, with a flat spot overlooking the spring. Lots of downed wood, not too much snow or damp. Black spruce and bush pine for the most part, both good burners if the wood was seasoned. Quickly he searched the copse and assembled on a flat rock over the spring a pile of firewood and a mass of twigs. He even set a ring of stones and the first twig stack, with a hole for his arm to reach in to place the live ember on the flat stone in the center. All very welcoming.

Then he ran back to his old site, pacing himself to what Thorn called active rest, and gathered up into the flap of his new deerskin belt all the little things he wanted to take. He built up his fire one last time, ate some meadow onions, then coaxed a glowing pine branch, burnt through but otherwise whole and entire, out of the fire onto the ground next to it. With his choprock he broke off a piece of this ember branch about twice as long as it was wide, and pinching the yellow piece between two rocks, he placed it on a handful of fresh spruce needles, then wrapped this hissing mass into a ball and put it inside a hollowed burl he had found. Shells from the great salt sea were best for carrying embers, but those were rare, and always owned by women. Women were as good with fire as men were, and better at moving a fire from camp to camp. But his mass of needles in a burl was pretty good for a fix-up; he could hold it in one hand, keep a throwing rock in the other, and carry his fire kit and the remnants of the deer in his belt flap.

Off he ran to his new camp, pushing the pace hard this time. Every step had to be watched into its place. Overhead giant white clouds floated east on a mild breeze. It was cool in the sunlight, chill in the shade. A perfect day for moving camp.