The female tailless was whimpering and waving her forepaws, so Wolf left her and hurtled down the track.

When he smelt Tall Tailless among the willows, he began to whimper too. His pack-brother was slumped over a log, half in the Wet. He smelt strongly of blood, and wasn’t moving at all.

Wolf licked his cold cheek, but Tall Tailless didn’t stir. Was he Not-Breath? Wolf put up his muzzle and howled.

A clumsy crashing announced the female tailless. Wolf leapt to defend his pack-brother, but she pushed him away, hooked her forepaws under Tall Tailless’s shoulders, and hauled him out of the Wet.

Despite himself, Wolf was impressed.

He watched as she put her forepaws on Tall Tailless’s chest and pressed down hard. Tall

Tailless began to cough! Tall Tailless had breath again!

But just as Wolf was jumping onto his pack-brother to snuffle-lick his muzzle, he was batted away again! Heedless of Wolf’s warning growls, the female pulled Tall Tailless to his legs and they staggered up the bank. Tall Tailless kept blundering into hazel bushes, as if he couldn’t see.

Watchfully, Wolf walked beside them, relaxing a little when they reached a Den a good distance from the Fast Wet: a proper Den, not a small, airless one.

Still the female wouldn’t let Wolf near his pack-brother. Snarling, Wolf slammed her with his body. Instead of moving away, she picked up a stick and threw it out of the Den, pointing at it and then at Wolf.

Wolf ignored her and turned back to Tall Tailless, who was trying to tug off his pelt. Finally, Tall Tailless had only the long dark fur on his head. He lay curled on his side with his eyes shut, shaking with cold. His poor furless underpelt was no use at all.

Wolf leant against him to warm him up, while the female tailless quickly brought to life the Bright Beast-that-Bites-Hot. Tall Tailless moved closer to the warmth, and Wolf watched anxiously in case he got his paws bitten.

That was when Wolf noticed that one of Tall Tailless’s forepaws held something that was giving off a strange glow.

Wolf sniffed at it – and backed away. It smelt of hunter and prey and Fast Wet and tree,
all chewed up together; and from it came a high, thin humming: so high that Wolf could only just catch it.

Wolf was frightened. He knew that he was in the presence of something very, very strong.

Torak huddled in his sleeping-sack, shivering uncontrollably. His head was on fire and his whole body felt like one big bruise, but worst of all, he couldn’t see. Blind, blind, thudded his heart.

Above the crackle of the fire he heard Renn muttering angrily. ‘Were you *trying* to get yourself killed?’

‘What?’ he said, but it came out as a mumble, because his mouth was thick with the salty sweetness of blood.

‘You’d nearly reached the surface,’ said Renn, pressing what felt like cobwebs to his forehead, ‘then you turned round and swam, deliberately swam, back down again’

He realised that she didn’t know about the Nauak. But his fist was so cold that he couldn’t unclench it to show her.

He felt Wolf’s hot tongue on his face. A chink of light appeared. Then a big black nose. Torak’s spirits soared. ‘I cad thee!’ he said.

‘What?’ snapped Renn. ‘Well of course you can see! You cut your forehead when you hit that branch, and the blood got in your eyes. Scalp wounds bleed a lot. Didn’t you know that?’

Torak was so relieved that he would have laughed if his teeth hadn’t been chattering so violently.

He saw that they were in a small cave with earth walls. A birchwood fire was burning fiercely, and already his sodden clothes, hanging from tree roots jutting through the ceiling, were beginning to steam. The thunder of the falls was loud, and from its sound, and the view of treetops at the cave mouth, he guessed they must be some way up the side of the valley. He couldn’t remember getting there. Renn must have dragged him. He wondered how she’d managed it.

She was kneeling beside him looking shaken. ‘You’ve been very, very lucky,’ she said. ‘Now hold still.’ From her medicine pouch she took some dried yarrow leaves, and crumbled them in her palm. Then, having picked off the cobwebs, she pressed the yarrow leaves to his forehead. They stuck tight to the wound in an instant scab.

Torak shut his eyes and listened to the never-ending fury of the falls. Wolf crawled into the sleeping-sack with him, wriggling till he got comfortable. He felt gloriously furry and warm as he licked Torak’s shoulder. Torak licked his muzzle in reply.

When he awoke, he wasn’t shivering any more, and he was still clutching the Nauak. He could feel its weight in his fist.

Wolf was nosing about in the back of the cave, and Renn was sorting herbs in her lap. Torak’s pack, boots, quiver and bow were neatly piled behind her. He realised that to retrieve
them she must have crossed the river again. Twice.

‘Renn,’ he said.

‘What,’ she said without looking up. From her tone, he could tell that she was still cross.

‘You got me out of the river. You got me all the way up here. You even fetched my things. I can’t imagine . . . I mean, that was brave.’

She did not reply.

‘Renn,’ he said again.

‘What.’

‘I had to swim down. I had to.’

‘Why?’

Awkwardly, he brought out the hand that held the Nanuak, and unclenched his fingers.

As soon as he did, the fire seemed to sink. Shadows leapt on the cave walls. The air seemed to crackle, like the moment after a lightning strike.

Wolf stopped nosing and gave a warning grunt. Renn went very still.

The river eyes lay in Torak’s palm in a nest of green mud, glowing faintly, like the moon on a misty night.

As he gazed at them, Torak felt an echo of the sickness that had tugged at him at the bottom of the river. ‘This is it, isn’t it?’ he said. ‘“Deepest of all, the drowned sight.” The first part of the Nanuak.’

The colour had drained from Renn’s face. ‘Don’t – move,’ she said, and scrambled out of the cave, returning soon after with a bunch of scarlet rowan leaves.

‘Lucky there’s mud on your hand,’ she said.

‘You mustn’t let it touch your skin. It might suck out your own part of the world-soul.’

‘Is that what was happening?’ he murmured. ‘In the river I was beginning to feel – dizzy.’ He told her about the Hidden People.

She looked horrified. ‘How did you dare? If they’d caught you . . .’ She made the sign of the hand to ward off evil. ‘I can’t believe you’ve just been sleeping with it in your fist. There’s no time to lose.’

Bringing out a little black pouch from inside her jerkin, she stuffed it with the rowan leaves. ‘The leaves should protect us,’ she said, ‘and the pouch should help too, it’s ravenskin.’ Grasping Torak’s wrist, she tipped the river eyes into the pouch and drew the neck tight.

As soon as the Nanuak was hidden, the flames grew, and the shadows shrank. The air in the cave stopped crackling.

Torak felt as if a weight had been taken from him. He watched Wolf pad over and lie down beside Renn with his muzzle between his paws, gazing at the pouch on her lap, and whining softly.

‘D’you think he can smell it?’ she asked.

‘Or maybe hear it,’ said Torak. ‘I don’t know.’

Renn shivered. ‘Just as long as nothing else can, too.’