The wolf cub did not at all understand what was going on. He’d been exploring the rise above the Den when the Fast Wet had come roaring through, and now his mother and father and pack-brothers were lying in the mud – and they were ignoring him.

Since long before the Light he’d been nosing them and biting their tails – but they still didn’t move. They didn’t make a sound, and they smelt strange: like prey. Not the prey that runs away, but the Not-Breath kind: the kind that gets eaten.

The cub was cold, wet, and very hungry. Many times he’d licked his mother’s muzzle to ask her please to sick up some food for him to eat, but she didn’t stir. What had he done wrong this time?

He knew that he was the naughtiest cub in the litter. He was always being scolded, but he couldn’t help it. He just loved trying new things. So it seemed a bit unfair that now, when he was staying by the Den like a good cub, nobody even noticed.

He padded to the edge of the puddle where his pack-brothers lay, and lapped up some of the Still Wet. It tasted bad.

He ate some grass and a couple of spiders. He wondered what to do next.

He began to feel scared. He put back his head and howled. Howling cheered him up a bit, because it reminded him of all the good howls he’d had with the pack.

Mid-howl, he stopped. He smelt wolf.

He spun round, wobbling a little from hunger. He swivelled his ears and sniffed. Yes. Wolf. He could hear it coming noisily down the
slopes on the other side of the Fast Wet. He smelt that it was male, half-grown, and not one of the pack.

But there was something odd about it. It smelt of wolf, but also of not-wolf. It smelt of reindeer and red deer and beaver, and fresh blood – and something else: a new smell that he hadn’t yet learnt.

This was very odd. Unless – unless – it meant that the not-wolf wolf was actually a wolf who’d eaten lots of different prey, and was now bringing the cub some food!

Shivering with eagerness, the cub wagged his tail and yipped a noisy welcome.

For a moment the strange wolf stopped. Then it moved forwards again. The cub couldn’t see it very clearly because his eyes weren’t nearly as sharp as his nose and ears, but as it splashed across the Fast Wet, he made out that this was a very strange wolf indeed.

It walked on its hind legs. The fur on its head was black, and so long that it reached right down to its shoulders. And strangest of all – it had no tail!

Yet it sounded wolf. It was making a low, friendly yip-and-yowl which sounded a bit like it’s all right, I’m a friend. This was reassuring, even if it did keep missing out the highest yips.

But something was wrong. Beneath the friendliness there was a tense note. And although the strange wolf was smiling, the cub could tell it didn’t really mean it.

The cub’s welcome changed to a whimper. Are you hunting me? Why?

No, no, came the friendly but not-friendly yip-and-yowl.

Then the strange wolf stopped yip-and-yowling and advanced in frightening silence.

Too weak to run, the cub backed away.

The strange wolf lunged, grabbed the cub by the scruff, and lifted him high.

Weakly, the cub wagged his tail to fend off an attack.

The strange wolf lifted its other forepaw and pressed a huge claw against the cub’s belly.

The cub yelped. Grinning in terror, he whipped his tail between his legs.

But the strange wolf was frightened too. Its forepaws were shaking, and it was gulping and baring its teeth. The cub sensed loneliness and uncertainty and pain.

Suddenly, the strange wolf took another gulp, and jerked its great claw away from the cub’s belly. Then it sat down heavily in the mud, and clutched the cub to its chest.

The cub’s terror vanished. Through the strange furless hide that smelt more of not-wolf than wolf, he could hear a comforting thump-thump, like the sound he heard when he clambered on top of his father for a nap.

The cub wriggled out of the strange wolf’s grip, put his forepaws on its chest, and stood on his hind legs. He began to lick the strange wolf’s muzzle.

Angrily, the strange wolf pushed him away, and he fell backwards. Undeterred, he righted himself and sat gazing up at the strange wolf.

Such an odd, flat, furless face! The lips
weren’t black, like a proper wolf’s, but pale; and the ears were pale too — and they didn’t move at all. But the eyes were silver-grey and full of light: the eyes of a wolf.

The cub felt better than he had since the Fast Wet had come. He’d found a new pack-brother.

Torak was furious with himself. Why hadn’t he killed the cub? Now what was he going to eat?

The cub jabbed its nose into his bruised ribs, making him yelp. ‘Get off!’ he shouted, kicking it away. ‘I don’t want you! Understand? You’re no use! Go away!’

Don’t think about Fa. Think what to do. If the bear had followed you, it would’ve got you by now. So maybe you’ll be safe here – at least for tonight.

The wolf carcasses were too heavy to drag away, so he decided to camp further upstream. First, though, he would use one of the carcasses to bait a deadfall, in the hope of trapping something to eat overnight.

It was a struggle to set the trap: to prop up a flat rock on a stick, then slot another stick crossways to act as a trigger. If he was lucky, a fox might come along in the night and bring down the rock. It wouldn’t make good eating, but it’d be better than nothing.

He’d just finished when the cub trotted over and gave the deadfall an inquisitive sniff. Torak grabbed its muzzle and slammed it to the ground. ‘No!’ he said firmly. ‘You stay away!’

The cub shook itself and retired with an offended air.

Better offended than dead, thought Torak.

He knew he’d been unfair: he should’ve growled first to warn the cub to stay away, and only muzzle-grabbed if it hadn’t listened. But he was too tired to worry about that.

Besides, why had he bothered to warn it at all? What did he care if it wobbled along in the night and got squashed? What did he care if he could understand it, or why? What use was that?

He stood up, and his knees nearly gave way. Forget about the cub. Find something to eat.

He forced himself to climb the slope behind
the big red rock to look for cloudberries. Only when he got there did he remember that cloudberries grow on moors and marshes, not in birchwoods, and that it was too late in the year for them anyway.

He noticed that in certain spots the ground was littered with woodgrouse droppings, so he set some snares of twisted grass: two near the ground, and two on the sort of low branch that woodgrouse sometimes run along – taking care to hide the snares with leaves so that the woodgrouse wouldn’t spot them. Then he went back to the river.

He knew he was too unsteady to try spearing a fish, so instead he set up a line of bramble-thorn fishing-hooks baited with watersnails. Then he started up river to look for berries and roots.

For a while the cub followed him; then it sat down and mewed at him to come back. It didn’t want to leave its pack.

Good, thought Torak. You stay there. I don’t want you pestering me.

As he searched, the sun sank lower. The air grew sharp. His jerkin glistened with the misty breath of the Forest. He had a hazy thought that he should be building a shelter instead of looking for food, but he pushed it away.

At last he found a handful of crowberries, and gulped them down. Then some late lingonberries; a couple of snails; a clutch of yellow bog-mushrooms – a bit maggoty, but not too bad.

It was nearly dusk when he got lucky and found a clump of pignuts. With a sharp stick he dug down carefully, following the winding stems to the small, knobbly root. He chewed the first one: it tasted sweet and nutty, but was barely a mouthful. After much exhausting digging, he grubbed up four more, ate two, and stuffed two in his jerkin for later.

With food inside him, a little strength returned to his limbs, but his mind was still strangely unclear. What do I do next? he wondered. Why is it so hard to think?

Shelter. That’s it. Then fire. Then sleep.

The cub was waiting for him in the clearing. Shivering and yipping with delight, it threw itself at him with a big wolf smile. It didn’t just wrinkle its muzzle and draw back its lips; it smiled with its whole body. It licked back its ears and tilted its head to one side; it waved its tail and waggled its forepaws, and made great twisting leaps in the air.

Watching it made Torak giddy, so he ignored it. Besides, he needed to build a shelter.

He looked around for deadwood, but the flood had washed most of it away. He’d have to cut down some saplings; if he still had the strength.

Pulling his axe from his belt, he went over to a clump of birch and put his hand on the smallest. He muttered a quick warning to the tree’s spirit to find another home fast, then started to chop.

The effort made his head swim. The cut on his forearm throbbed savagely. He forced himself to keep chopping.
He was in an endless dark tunnel of chopping and stripping branches and more chopping. But when his arms had turned to water and he could chop no more, he saw with alarm that he’d only managed to cut down two spindly birch saplings and a puny little spruce.

They’d have to do.

He lashed the saplings together with a split spruce root to make a low, rickety lean-to; then he covered it on three sides with spruce boughs, and dragged in a few more to lie on.

It was pretty hopeless, but it’d have to do. He didn’t have the strength to rain-proof it with leafmould. If it rained, he’d have to trust his sleeping-sack to keep him dry, and pray that the river spirit didn’t send another flood, because he’d built too close to the water.

Munching another pignut, he scanned the clearing for firewood. But he’d only just swallowed the pignut when his belly heaved, and he spewed it up again.

The cub yipped with delight and gulped down the sick.

Why did I do that? thought Torak. Did I eat a bad mushroom?

But it didn’t feel like a bad mushroom. It felt like something else. He was sweating and shivering, and although there was nothing left in his belly to throw up, he still felt sick.

A horrible suspicion gripped him. He unwound the bandage on his forearm — and fear settled on him like an icy fog. The wound was a swollen, angry red. It smelt bad. He could feel the heat coming off it. When he touched it, pain flared.

A sob rose in his chest. He was exhausted, hungry and frightened, and he desperately wanted Fa. And now he had a new enemy.

Fever.