It was many Lights and Darks since Tall Tailless had come.

At first he’d slept all the time, but now he was being more of a normal wolf. When he felt sad, he went quiet. When he was angry, he snarled. He liked playing tag with a bit of hare-skin, and when the cub pounced on him he rolled on the ground, making odd yip-and-yowls which the cub guessed was his way of laughing.

Sometimes Tall Tailless would join the cub in a howl, and they’d sing their feelings to the Forest. Tall Tailless’s howl was rough and not very tuneful, but full of feeling.

The rest of his talk was the same: rough but expressive. Of course he didn’t have a tail, and couldn’t move his ears or fluff up his fur, or hit the high yips. But he usually made himself understood.

So in many ways, he was just like any other wolf. Although not in everything. Poor Tall Tailless could hardly smell or hear at all, and during the Dark he liked to stare at the Bright Beast-that-Bites-Hot. Sometimes he took his hind paws right off, and one terrible time, even his pelt. Strangest of all, he slept for ages. He didn’t seem to know that a wolf should only ever sleep in snatches, and must get up often, stretching and turning, so that he’s ready for anything.

The cub tried to teach Tall Tailless to wake up more often, by nudging him and biting his ears. Instead of being grateful, Tall Tailless just got very, very cross. In the end the cub let him sleep: and next Light, Tall Tailless got up after a stupidly long sleep, in an extremely bad mood. Well what did he expect, if he wouldn’t let his
pack-brother wake him up?

Today, though, Tall Tailless had woken up before the Light, and in a very different mood. The cub sensed his nervousness.

Curiously, the cub watched Tall Tailless set off along the pack-trail that went up-Wet. A hunt?

The cub bounded after him, then yipped at him to stop. This wasn’t a hunt. And Tall Tailless was going the wrong way.

It wasn’t just that he was following the Fast Wet, which the cub now hated and feared more than anything. This was the wrong way because — because it wasn’t the right way. The right way was over the hill, then on for many Lights and Darks.

The cub didn’t know how he knew this, but

he felt it inside: a faint, deep pull — like the pull of the Den when he’d strayed too far; only fainter, because it was coming from so far away.

Up ahead, Tall Tailless strode along unaware.

The cub gave a low, warning ‘Uff!’ — like his mother used to when she wanted them back in the Den now.

Tall Tailless turned round. He asked something in his own talk. It sounded like ‘Whatisit?’

‘Uff!’ snapped the cub. He trotted to the foot of the hill and stared at the right trail. Then he glanced at Tall Tailless, then back to the trail. Not that way. This way.

Impatiently, Tall Tailless repeated his question. The cub waited for him to catch on.

Tall Tailless scratched his head. He said something else in tailless talk. Then he started back towards the cub.

Torak watched Wolf’s body tense.

Wolf’s ears flicked forwards. His black nose twitched. Torak followed his gaze. He couldn’t see anything through the tangle of hazel and willowherb, but he knew that the buck was in there, because Wolf knew it, and Torak had learned to trust Wolf.

Wolf glanced up at Torak, his amber eyes grazing the boy’s. Then his gaze returned to the Forest.

Silently, Torak broke off a head of grass and split it with his thumbnail, letting the fine seeds float away on the breeze. Good. They were still downwind of the buck: it wouldn’t catch their scent. And before setting out, Torak had, as always, masked his smell by smearing his skin with wood-ash.

Without a sound, he drew an arrow from his quiver and fitted it to his bow. It was only a small roe buck, but if he could bring it down, it would be the first big kill he’d ever made on his own. He needed it. Prey was much scarcer than it should be at this time of year.

The cub’s head sank low.

Torak crouched.

Together they crept forward.

They’d been tracking the buck all day. All day, Torak had followed its trail of bitten-off
twigs and cloven prints: trying to feel what it was feeling; guessing where it would go next.

To track prey, you must first learn to know it as you would a brother. What it eats, and when and how; where it rests; how it moves. Fa had taught Torak well. He knew how to track. He knew that you must stop often to listen: to open your senses to what the Forest is telling you...

Right now, he knew that the roe buck was tiring. Earlier in the day, the cleaves of each small hoof-print had been deep and splayed, which meant it had been galloping. Now the cleaves were lighter and closer together: it had slowed to a walk.

It must be hungry, because it hadn’t had time to graze; and thirsty, because it had kept to the safety of the deep thickets, where there was no water.

Torak glanced about for signs of a stream. West through the hazel, about thirty paces off the trail, he glimpsed a clump of alders. Alders only grow near water. That was where the buck must be heading.

Softly, he and the cub moved through the undergrowth. Cupping his hand to his ear, he caught a faint ripple of water.

Suddenly, Wolf froze: ears rammed forwards, one forepaw raised.

Yes. There. Through the alders. The buck stooping to drink.

Carefully Torak took aim.

The buck raised its head, water dripping from its muzzle.

Torak watched it snuff the air and fluff out its pale rump fur in alarm. Another heartbeat and it would be gone. He loosed his arrow.

It thudded into the buck’s ribs just behind the shoulder. With a graceful shudder, the buck folded its knees and sank to the ground.

Torak gave a shout and pushed through the undergrowth towards it. Wolf raced him and easily won, but then pulled back to let Torak catch up. The cub was learning to respect the lead wolf.

Panting, Torak stood over the buck. Its ribs were still heaving, but death was near. Its three souls were getting ready to leave.

Torak swallowed. Now he had to do what he’d seen Fa do countless times. But for him it would be the first time, and he had to get it right.

Kneeling beside the buck, he put out his hand and gently stroked its rough, sweaty cheek. The buck lay quiet under his palm.

‘You did well,’ Torak told it. His voice sounded awkward. ‘You were brave and clever, and you kept going all day. I promise to keep the pact with the World Spirit, and treat you with respect. Now go in peace.’

He watched death glaze the great dark eye.

He felt grateful to the buck, but also proud. This was his first big kill. Wherever Fa was on the Death Journey, he would be pleased.

Torak turned to Wolf and put his head on one side, wrinkling his nose and baring his teeth in a wolf smile. Well done, thank you.

Wolf pounced on Torak, nearly knocking
him over. Torak laughed and gave him a handful of blackberries from his food pouch. Wolf snuffled them up.

It had been seven days since they’d set out from the Fastwater, and still there was no sign of the bear. No tracks. No fur snagged on brambles. No more Forest-shaking roars.

Something was wrong, though. At this time of year, the Forest should be echoing with the bellows of rutting red deer, and the clash of their antlers as they fought for females. But all was silence. It was as if the Forest was slowly emptying; the prey fleeing from the unseen menace.

In seven days the only creatures Torak had encountered were birds and voles – and once, with heart-stopping suddenness, a hunting party: three men, two women and a dog. Luckily, he’d managed to slip away before they saw him. *Stay away from men*, Fa had warned. *If they find out what you can do...*

Torak didn’t know what that meant, but he knew Fa was right. He’d grown up away from people; he wanted nothing to do with them. Besides, he had Wolf now. With every day that passed, they understood each other better.

Torak was coming to know that wolf talk is a complex blend of gestures, looks, smells and sounds. The gestures can be with the muzzle, ears, paws, tail, shoulders, fur, or the whole body. Many are very subtle: the merest tilt or twitch. Most do not involve sound. By now, Torak knew quite a lot of them, although it wasn’t as if he’d had to learn them. It felt more as though he was remembering them.

Still, there was one thing he knew he’d never be able to master, because he wasn’t a wolf. This was what he’d taken to calling ‘wolf sense’: the cub’s uncanny knack of sensing his thoughts and moods.

Wolf had his own moods, too. Sometimes he was the cub, with a puppyish love of berries and an inability to keep still: like the time he’d wriggled incessantly when Torak had held a naming rite for him, then licked off all the red alder juice daubed on his paws. Unlike Torak, who’d been nervous about performing so important a rite, Wolf had seemed unimpressed: merely impatient for it to be over.

At other times, though, he was the guide: mysteriously sure of the way they must take. But if Torak tried to ask him about that, he never gave much of an answer. *I just know.* That was all.

Right now, Wolf wasn’t being the guide. He was being the cub. His muzzle was purple with blackberry juice, and he was yipping insistently for more.

Torak laughed and batted him away. ‘No more! I’ve got work to do.’

Wolf shook himself and smiled, then went off to have a sleep.

It took Torak two full days to butcher the carcass. He’d made the buck a promise, and he had to keep it by not wasting a thing. That was the age-old pact between the hunters and the World Spirit. Hunters must treat prey with respect, and in return the Spirit would send
more prey.

It was a daunting task. It takes many summers of practice to use prey well. Torak didn’t make a very good job of it, but he did his best.

First, he slit the deer’s belly and cut a slice of the liver for the clan guardian. The rest of the liver he cut into strips and set to dry. Then he relented and cut off a bit for Wolf, who slurped it up.

Next, Torak skinned the carcass, scraping the hide clean of flesh with his antler scraper. He washed the hide in water mixed with crumbled oak bark to loosen the hairs, then stretched it between two saplings – well out of Wolf’s leaping-range. Then he scraped off the hairs – inexpertly, making several holes – and softened the hide by rubbing it with mashed deer brain. After a final round of soaking and drying, he had a reasonable skin of rawhide for rope and fishing-lines.

While the hide was drying, he cut the meat into thin strips and hung them over a smoky birchwood fire. When they were dry, he pounded them between two stones to make them thinner, then rolled them into small, tight bundles. The meat was delicious. One little piece would last him half a day.

The innards he washed, soaked in oak-bark water, and draped over a juniper bush to dry. The stomach would make a waterskin; the bladder a spare tinder pouch; the guts would store nuts. The lungs were Wolf’s share – although not yet. Torak would chew them at

daymeals and night meals, then spit them out for the cub. But as he had no cooking-skin for making glue, he let Wolf have the hooves straightaway. The cub played with them tirelessly before crunching them to bits.

Next, Torak washed the long back sinews he’d saved from the butchering, pounded them flat, then teased out the narrow fibres for thread: drying them and rubbing them in fat to make them supple. They weren’t nearly as smooth or even as the thread his father used to make, but they’d do. And they were so tough that they’d outlast any clothes he sewed with them.

Finally, he scraped the antlers and the long bones clean, and tied them into a bundle for splintering later into fish-hooks, needles and arrowheads.

It was late on the second day by the time he’d finished. He sat by the fire, pleasantly full of meat, whittling a whistle from a piece of grouse bone. He needed some way of summoning the cub when it was off on one of its solitary journeys; some way quieter than a howl. That hunting party might still be about. He couldn’t risk any more howling.

He finished whittling, and gave the whistle a try. To his dismay, it made no sound. Fa had carved countless whistles just like this one, and they’d always made a clear, bird-like chirp. Why didn’t his?

Frustrated, Torak tried again, blowing as hard as he could. Still no sound. But to his surprise, Wolf leapt up as if he’d been stung by a
hormet.

Torak glanced from the startled cub to the whistle. Once more he blew on it.

Again no sound. This time Wolf gave a brief snarl, then a whine, to show that he was a bit annoyed, but didn’t want to go too far and offend Torak.

Torak said sorry by gently scratching under Wolf’s muzzle, and the cub slumped down. His expression made it clear: Torak shouldn’t call unless he meant something by it.

Next day dawned fine and bright, and as they set off again, Torak’s spirits rose.

It was twelve days since the bear had killed

path. A couple of thrushes squabbled overhead. The fat, happy cub kept close to his side, his bushy silver tail held high.

Fat, happy and careless.

Torak heard a twig snap behind him just as a large hand grabbed him by the jerkin and yanked him off his feet.

Fa. In that time Torak had fought hunger and conquered fever, found Wolf, and made his first big kill. He’d also made plenty of mistakes. But he was still alive.

He pictured his father on the journey to the Land of the Dead – the land where arrows are plentiful, and the hunt never fails. At least, thought Torak, he has his weapons with him, and my knife for company. And all that dried meat. That blunted the edge of his grief a little.

Torak knew that the loss of his father would never leave him – that he’d carry it in his chest all his life, like a stone. This morning the stone didn’t feel quite so heavy. He’d survived so far, and his father would be proud.

He felt almost happy as he pushed through the undergrowth on the sun-dappled forest