# Viper's Daughter

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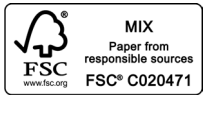


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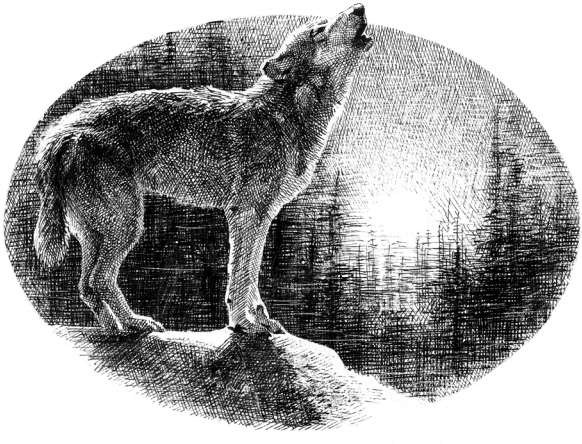

A bat flitted past Torak as he drew an arrow from his quiver. Wolf raised his muzzle and sniffed the breeze. He glanced at Torak, then into the thicket. *There.*

They crept between tangled alders, Torak squelching knee-deep in black water, Wolf's big paws making no sound. Torak picked a hair off a twig: coarse, reddish-brown. Elk calves are reddish-brown. The calf's mother must have hidden it in the thicket while she went to graze.

Torak glanced over his shoulder at the lake. Elk can swim deep underwater. She could be anywhere, diving to the bottom to uproot water lilies with her tongue.

Wolf froze: paw raised, ears rammed forwards. Dimly through the trees, Torak made out a calf-shaped darkness.

The calf whined and wobbled to its feet. It was as tall as a horse. One chop of its front hooves could split his skull.

As Torak nocked the arrow to his bow, Wolf gave a warning uff and the mother elk exploded from the lake in a chaos of white water and flailing hooves. Torak dodged. She cracked a trunk by his head. Wolf leapt and sank his fangs into her pendulous nose. She swung him high, he clung on. Torak couldn't get a clean shot, couldn't risk hitting his pack-brother. With a twist and a heave the elk sent Wolf flying. He hit a tree with a yelp. Torak floundered towards him. Mother and calf had disappeared into the Forest.

Groggily, Wolf lurched to his feet and wagged his tail. Torak gave a shaky laugh. 'That was close!' Renn would tease him when she heard how he'd nearly been brained by an elk.

As he was leaving the thicket he saw a Willow Clan hunting party, two women and two men, bearing a roe buck's quartered carcass. Wolf vanished into the Forest, as he did when strangers approached, but Torak put his fists to his chest in friendship. On impulse he asked if they'd seen his mate. 'Renn of the Raven Clan,' he called. 'She's been to see them but she's coming back today.'

One of the men turned, and in the dusk his clan-tattoos were stark: three willow leaves between his eyes, like a permanent frown. 'Saw her a couple of days ago,' he called back. 'Long way downriver.'

'Oh, then it wasn't her, the Ravens are camped *up*river.'

The man's frown became real. 'I know who I saw. Red hair, her uncle's Fin-Kedinn the Raven Leader. Summer before last she mated with the spirit walker, the boy who talks to wolves. That would be you.' His eyes narrowed and he touched a bone amulet on his jerkin: *Stay away.*

'Looked like she was going on a journey,' a woman sneered. 'She was paddling a canoe, had a pack and a sleeping-sack.'

Torak bristled. 'Then it definitely wasn't her.'

The woman sniggered. 'Maybe she's tired of you.'

Laughing, they went on their way.

Torak was still irritated when he reached camp. It was in darkness, no welcoming firelight and no Renn.

Neither Wolf nor his mate Darkfur had returned from the hunt, but the cubs pounced on Torak, leaping at his chest and whining for food, while their older brother Pebble gave him a distracted greeting. Pebble took his cub-watching duties seriously and rarely relaxed.

In the shelter Torak found the double sleeping-sack as he'd left it, although slightly chewed. He felt a twinge of unease. It was the Cloudberry Moon, when parts of the river were still choked with salmon – and salmon means bears. Renn said Torak worried too much about bears. Torak said she would worry too if her father had been killed by one.

Ah, but she could look after herself, she was the best shot in the Forest with a bow and arrow. She'd be annoyed if he went to find her.

The wind rose, blowing thistledown in his face like summer snow. The pines stirred restlessly. They knew something was wrong.

Tracking was what Torak did best, and even by starlight he found Renn's three-day-old trail. To his alarm it didn't lead towards the valley where her clan was camped, but down to the River Blackthorn where he and Renn kept their canoe. The canoe was gone. Drag-marks and bent twigs told him that Renn had paddled downriver, just as the Willow man had said.

*She was going on a journey. She had a pack and a sleeping-sack.*

This was all wrong, it couldn't be Renn. She would have had to make that gear in secret: scraping and sewing reindeer hides for the sleeping-sack, weaving willow withes for the pack. She would have had to deceive Torak for days.

No, no, it couldn't be true. Renn wouldn't do that. She wouldn't leave him without a word.

But she had.

Many Lights and Darks ago when Wolf was a cub, his father and mother and pack-mates were drowned by a terrible Fast Wet. Wolf had been frightened and hungry until Tall Tailless had come. They'd been pack-brothers ever since.

Tall Tailless wasn't a *real* wolf, he walked on his hind legs and had neither fur nor tail – but he had the heart and spirit of a wolf and he was part of the pack. Together

he and Wolf had hunted their first deer. They'd fought demons and other bad things. They'd found mates. But even though Wolf was one breath with his mate and cubs, he'd always known that it was his purpose to be with Tall Tailless and protect him. This was what Wolf was *for*.

The Hot Bright Eye was rising in the Up as Wolf and his mate trotted back to the Den with their bellies full of salmon. The cubs attacked them with eager snuffle-licks and hungry whines, *Me first! Me first!* Jostling, shoving, they gulped the delicious sicked-up fish, then collapsed in a pile and fell asleep.

Wolf's mate lay with her muzzle between her paws, and even the older cub snoozed – but Wolf was restless. Something wasn't right, he felt it in his fur. The pines guarding the Den were moaning. What had they sensed?

Now Wolf felt it too: a shadow and a threat, some creature in the Forest that didn't belong. He caught no whiff of demon, but his flanks throbbed from old wounds, and suddenly he *knew* – with the strange certainty that came to him at times – that Tall Tailless needed him.

As Wolf raced uphill to catch the scents, his keen ears caught the sounds of the Forest: a lynx sharpening her claws in the next valley, two stallions fighting many lopes away – but where was Tall Tailless? Wolf swerved to avoid a bear clawing an ants' nest. The bear lashed out, Wolf dodged with scornful ease. He wasn't afraid of bears. He wasn't afraid of anything except losing his pack-brother.

At the edge of the cliff he skittered to a halt. Far below, the Fast Wet foamed angrily between rocks. Tall Tailless sat on a log, pushing himself through the wet with a stick.

*Wait for me!* Wolf barked. But his pack-brother's ears weren't as keen as his, he didn't answer.

Wolf put up his muzzle and howled: *Wait – for me!*

Tall Tailless howled a reply: *Go back to the Den! You can't come!*

*Wait!* howled Wolf.

*You can't come!*

Wolf was stunned. Tall Tailless was leaving the pack? *Leaving Wolf?*

Wolf ran in circles, mewing in distress. A wolf does not abandon his pack. *Tall Tailless could not leave*. But neither could Wolf: he had to look after his mate and cubs.

And yet Tall Tailless *needed* him. Wolf didn't know what to do.

His mate appeared in the bracken, panting, her black flanks heaving. *Go,* her bright eyes told him. *The older cub will take turns with me to hunt and watch the young.*

Wolf ran to her and touched noses. *I come back.*

*I know.*

Wolf couldn't find a way down the cliff, and the Fast Wet was carrying Tall Tailless away. Wolf raced along the cliff-top, leaping logs, splashing through bogs. He was falling behind. In desperation he scrambled over the cliff edge and slid, digging in his claws, bashing into thornbushes.

The Fast Wet swept Tall Tailless round a bend.

Wolf lost his grip and fell head over paws off the cliff.

Long after Wolf had been left behind, his anguished howls still rang in Torak's ears. He *hated* leaving Wolf, but he couldn't ask him to abandon Darkfur and the cubs and they couldn't come too. Torak had to travel fast to have any chance of finding Renn. If only he'd been able to make Wolf understand – but how could he, when he didn't understand himself?

He'd set off the moment he'd discovered the canoe was gone, struggling on foot along the thickly wooded riverbank. No point returning to camp, he always carried what he needed to survive: axe and knife, bow and arrows, slingshot; waterskin, strike-fire, tinder pouch, sewing kit, medicine horn. He'd made little progress, and when he'd found a Boar Clan dugout in the shallows he'd taken it. Stealing a boat is almost as bad as stealing an axe. Torak told himself he could make amends later.

The dugout was ridiculously clumsy, nothing like the nimble deerhide craft he'd made with Renn. At times he paddled through a choking stink of salmon, the shallows clogged with rotting fish and black with ravens. Rip and Rek weren't among them. Torak hoped they'd gone with Renn: ravens are wary, very good at warning of danger.

He also passed bears, but they were too busy feasting in the light summer night to trouble him. A family of otters rose on their hind legs to watch him go. Their fur glinted

with fish scales, reminding him with a pang of Wolf's fishy breath when he'd been hunting salmon.

At daybreak Torak found an inlet where Renn had camped. He knew it was her by the tiny flakes of flint where she'd sharpened an arrowhead, and her footprints were as familiar as his own.

Rainwater in her tracks, a fox's paw-prints crossing the ashes of her fire: she'd camped here two nights ago – and made no attempt at concealment. She knew Torak was too good at tracking to be fooled.

Or did she *want* him to follow? Maybe she'd left him a sign? When they were apart they sometimes kept in touch by scratching marks on the pale undersides of horsehoof mushrooms; the marks quickly turned brown and didn't fade.

Torak found plenty of mushrooms on tree trunks, but no marks underneath. Distractedly, he scratched the scar on his forearm.

Renn's sign shouted at him from a boulder in the shallows: a raven's foot chalked in white, pointing upriver. *Turn back. Find the White Raven.*

Torak chewed his lip. Why tell him to seek their friend Dark?

This was hopeless, Renn could be anywhere. She could have hidden the canoe and headed on foot for any of the countless valleys of the Open Forest, or for Lake Axehead or the Deep Forest or the Mountains or the Sea. Without knowing *why* she'd left, he was travelling blind.

He began to be angry. Come on, Renn, this isn't funny.

Nevertheless, he decided to follow her sign.

Struggling against the current was hard work, and as the day wore on his shoulders began to cramp. Mist filled the valley. Dusk crept up the pines. He shivered. No warmth in his eelskin jerkin and knee-length leggings, and this summer he hadn't bothered to make boots. Barefoot and without a sleeping-sack wasn't the best way to start a journey, especially in the northernmost part of the Forest.

At last he glimpsed a white raven in a willow, a sure sign that Dark was nearby. As Torak hauled the hated dugout up the bank, the bird greeted him with an echoing ark! and flew into the Forest. Torak followed her to his friend's camp, in a dim glade guarded by watchful birch trees.

Dark sat by his fire with his Mage's drum on his knees. On it he'd scattered the little slate creatures he loved to carve: aurochs, beavers, vipers. His strange white head was bent and he was making the creatures dance by tapping the drum with a swan's thighbone. He'd set a salmon to roast and ground a pouchful of earthblood; a pile of the crumbly dark-red stone lay beside him and he was covered in reddish dust. Ark had taken on a pink tinge as she perched on his shoulder, busily preening her feathers.

At Torak's approach, Dark raised his head. For a moment his pale eyes were as remote as mountains. Then he saw who it was and his face lit up.

Torak stepped into the firelight.

Dark's smile faded. 'Ah. So she's gone.'

Torak stared. 'You *knew*?'
Dark sucked in his breath.
'What's this about?' cried Torak. 'Where'd she go?'
'I don't know where. But I think I know why.'