

TWELVE



Cold air burned Torak's throat as he tore through a willow thicket towards the river. Stones bloodied his bare feet. He hardly noticed.

Thanks to Wolf, he'd got out of the camp unseen, but not for long. Behind him came a deep, echoing boom. Birch-bark horns were sounding the alarm. He heard men shouting, dogs baying. The Ravens were coming after him.

Brambles snagged his leggings as he skidded over the riverbank and splashed down into a bed of tall reeds. Knee-deep in icy black mud, he clamped his hand over his mouth to stop his steamy breath betraying him.

Fortunately, he was downwind of his pursuers, but the sweat was pouring off him, and he was still clutching the rawhide rope from his ankles; the dogs would easily pick up his scent. He didn't know whether to toss it away or keep it in case he needed it.

Confusion swirled in his head like an angry river. He had no boots, no pack, no weapons – and nothing with which to make any more, apart from the knowledge in his head and the skill in his hands. If he managed to escape, what then?

Suddenly, above the horns, he heard a yowl. *Where are you?*

At the sound, Torak's doubts cleared. He couldn't leave Wolf. He had to rescue him.

He wished there was some way he could howl back – *I'm coming. Don't be afraid, I haven't abandoned you* – but of course there wasn't. The yowling went on.

His feet were freezing. He had to get out of the river or he'd be too numb to run. He thought fast.

The Ravens would expect him to head north, because that was where he'd said he was going when they'd captured him; so he decided to do exactly that – at least for a while – and then double back to the camp, and find some way of reaching Wolf, hoping that the Ravens would be tricked into continuing north.

Further downstream, a branch snapped.

Torak wheeled round.

A soft splash. A muttered curse.

He peered through the reeds.

About fifty paces downstream, two men were stealing down the bank towards the reed-bed. They moved carefully, intent on hunting him. One held a bow that was taller than Torak, with an arrow already fitted to the string; the other gripped a basalt throwing-axe.

It had been a mistake to hide in the reed-bed. If he stayed where he was, they'd find him; if he tried to swim the river he'd be seen, and speared like a pike. He had to get back into the cover of the Forest.

As quietly as he could, he started clambering up the bank. It was thick with willows which gave good cover, but very steep. Red earth crumbled beneath him. If he fell back into the river, they'd hear the splash . . .

Pebbles trickled into the water as he clawed at the dirt. Luckily the booming of the birch-bark horns masked the noise, and the men didn't hear.

Chest heaving, he made it to the top. Now to head north. The sky was overcast, so he couldn't get his bearings from the sun, but since the river flowed west, he knew that if he kept it directly behind him, he'd be heading roughly north.

He set off through a thick wood of aspen and beech, taking care to trail the rawhide behind him so as to leave a good strong scent.

A furious baying erupted behind him, terrifyingly close. He'd trailed the rope too soon. Already the dogs had picked up his scent.

In panic he scrambled up the nearest tree – a spindly aspen – and had just managed to screw the rawhide into a ball and throw it as far as he could towards the river when a massive red dog burst through the brambles.

It cast about beneath Torak's tree, loops of spit swinging from its jaws. Then it picked up the scent of the rawhide, and raced off in pursuit.

'There!' came a shout from downstream. 'One of the dogs has found the trail!'

Three men ran beneath Torak's aspen, panting as they struggled to catch up with the dog. Torak clung to the tree trunk. If one of them looked up . . .

They pushed on and disappeared. Moments later, Torak heard faint splashes. They must be searching the reeds.

He waited in case more followed, then jumped down from the tree.

He ran north through the aspens, putting some distance between himself and the river, then skidded to a halt. It was time to turn east and head back towards the camp – provided he could find some way of putting the dogs off his trail.

Desperately he looked round for something to mask his scent. Deer droppings? No good: the dogs would still chase after him. Yarrow leaves? Maybe. Their strong, nutty smell should be powerful enough to mask his sweat.

At the foot of a beech tree, he found a pile of wolverine droppings: twisted, hairy, and so foul-smelling that they made his eyes water. Much better. Gagging on the stench, he smeared his feet, shins and hands. Wolverines are about the same size as badgers, but they'll fight anything that moves, and they usually win. The dogs probably wouldn't risk an encounter.

The booming of the horns suddenly cut off.

The silence beat at his ears. With a clutch of terror he realised that Wolf's yowls had also ceased. Was he all right? Surely – surely the Ravens wouldn't dare harm him?

Torak fought his way through the undergrowth towards the camp. The ground rose, and the river ran swiftly between tumbled boulders slippery with moss.

Ahead, smoke curled into the heavy grey sky. He must be getting close. He crouched, straining for sounds of pursuit above the rushing water. With every breath, he expected to hear the thwang of a bowstring; to feel an arrow slicing between his shoulder blades.

Nothing. Maybe they'd fallen for his trick, and were following his trail north.

Through the trees, something big and domed rose into

sight. Torak lurched to a halt. He guessed what it was, and hoped he was wrong.

Like a huge toad, the mound squatted above him. It was a head taller than him, and thickly covered with moss and blueberry scrub. Behind it stood two smaller mounds, and around them loomed a dense thicket of yews and ivy-choked holly trees.

Torak hung back, wondering what to do. Once, he and Fa had come across mounds like these. This must be the Raven Clan's bone-ground: the place where they laid the bones of their Dead.

His way to the camp – to Wolf – lay through the bone-ground. But would he dare? He wasn't Raven Clan. He couldn't venture into another clan's bone-ground without angering their ancestors . . .

Mist floated in the hollows between the mounds, where the pale, ghostly skeletons of hemlock reared above his head, and the purple stalks of dying willowherb released their eerily drifting down. All around stood the dark, listening trees: trees that stayed green all winter, that never slept. In the branches of the tallest yew perched three ravens, watching him. He wondered which one was the clan guardian.

A baying of dogs behind him.

He was caught in a trap. Clever Fin-Kedinn: throwing his net wide, then tightening it around the quarry.

Torak had nowhere to go. The river was too fast to swim, and if he climbed a tree, the ravens would tell the hunters where he was, and he'd be dropped like a shot squirrel. If he burrowed into the thicket, the dogs would drag him out like a weasel.

He turned to face his pursuers. He had nothing with which to defend himself; not even a rock.

He edged backwards – straight into the largest mound.
He stifled a cry. He was caught between the living and the
dead.

Something grabbed him from behind and dragged him
down into darkness.