As the four of them crossed the river by a wooden walkway, Torak stared down at the sliding water and thought about jumping in. His hands were tied. He'd drown. Besides, he couldn't leave Wolf.

About ten paces downstream, the trees opened into a clearing. Torak smelt pine-smoke and fresh blood. He saw four big reindeer-hide shelters unlike any he'd ever seen, and a bewildering number of people: all hard at work, and as yet unaware of him. With a clarity born of fear, he took in every detail.

On the riverbank two men were skinning a boar strung from a tree. Having already slit the belly, they'd sheathed their knives and were peeling off the hide by hand, to avoid tearing it. Both were bare-chested, and wore fish-skin aprons over their leggings. They looked terrifyingly strong, with raised zigzag scars on their muscled arms. From the carcass, blood dripped slowly into a birch-bark pail.

In the shallows, two girls in buckskin tunics giggled as they rinsed the boar's guts, while three small children solemnly made mud-cakes and studded them with sycamore wings. Two sleek hide canoes were drawn up out of the water. The ground around them glittered with fish-scales. A couple of large dogs prowled for scraps.

In the middle of the clearing, near a pinewood long-fire, a group of women sat on willow-branch mats, talking quietly as they shelled hazelnuts and picked over a basket of juniper berries. None of them looked anything like Hord or Renn; Torak wondered briefly if,
like him, they’d lost their parents.

A little apart from them, an old woman was heading arrows: slotting needle-fine flakes of flint into the shafts, then gluing them in place with a paste of pine-blood and beeswax. A round bone amulet etched with a spiral was sewn to the breast of her jerkin. From the amulet, Torak knew she must be the clan Mage. Fa had told him about Mages: people who can heal sickness, and dream where the prey is and what the weather will do. This old woman looked as if she could do far more dangerous things than that.

By the fire, a pretty girl leaned over a cooking-skin. Steam crinkled her hair as she used a forked stick to drop in red-hot stones. The meaty smell of whatever was cooking made feet, waiting in silence for them to approach.

The pretty girl glanced at Hord and smiled shyly. ‘We saved you some broth,’ she said.

Torak guessed that either she was his mate, or wanted to be.

Renn turned and rolled her eyes at Hord. ‘Dyrati saved you some broth,’ she mocked.

Definitely his sister, thought Torak.

Hord ignored them both, and went to talk to the man by the fire. Quickly, he related what had happened. Torak noticed that he made it sound as if he, not Oslak had caught ‘the thief’. Oslak didn’t seem to mind, but Renn flashed her brother a sour glance.

Meanwhile, the dogs had scented Wolf. Hackles bristling, they advanced on Renn.

‘Back!’ she ordered. They obeyed. Renn ducked into the nearest shelter and emerged with a coil of wovenbark rope. She tied one end round the neck of the bag containing Wolf, tossed the other over the branch of an oak tree, and hoisted the bag high: well out of the dogs’ reach.

And out of mine, realised Torak. Now even if he got the chance to escape, he couldn’t. Not without Wolf.

Renn caught his eye and gave him a wry grin.

He scowled back. Inside, he was sick with fear.

Hord had finished talking. The man by the fire nodded once, and waited for Oslak to push Torak towards him. His eyes were an intense, unblinking blue: vividly alive in that

Torak’s mouth water.

Near her, an older man knelt to spit a couple of hares. Like Hord, he had reddish-brown hair and a short red beard, but there the resemblance ended. His face had an arresting stillness, and a strength that made Torak think of carved sandstone. Torak forgot about the cooking smell. He knew, without being told, that this man wielded power.

Oslak untied the bindings and pushed Torak into the clearing. The dogs leapt up, barking ferociously. The old woman made a slicing motion with her palm, and they subsided into growls. Everyone stared at Torak. Everyone except the man by the fire, who went on calmly spitting the hares. Only when he’d finished did he rub off his hands in the dust and rise to his
impenetrable face. Torak found it hard to look into them for long — and even harder to look away.

‘What is your name?’ said the man in a voice that was somehow more frightening for being so quiet.

Torak licked his lips. ‘Torak. — What’s yours?’ But he thought he already knew.

It was Hord who answered. ‘He is Fin-Kedinn. Leader of the Raven Clan. And you, you miserable little runt, should learn more respect —’

Fin-Kedinn silenced Hord with a look, then turned to Torak. ‘What clan are you?’

Torak raised his chin. ‘Wolf.’

‘Well there’s a surprise,’ remarked Renn, and several people laughed.

A hiss ran through the watchers. Some glanced fearfully over their shoulders; others touched their clan-creature skins, or made the sign of the hand to ward off evil. The old woman left her arrows and came towards them.

No emotion showed in Fin-Kedinn’s face. ‘Who was your father?’

Torak swallowed. He knew — and so must Fin-Kedinn — that it is forbidden to speak a dead person’s name for five summers after they die. Instead they can only be referred to by naming their parents. Fa had hardly ever talked about his family, but Torak knew their names, and where they’d come from. Fa’s mother had been Seal Clan; his father had been Wolf Clan. Torak named them both.

Recognition is one of the hardest expressions to conceal. Not even Fin-Kedinn could hide it completely.

He knew Fa, thought Torak, aghast. But how? Fa never mentioned him, or the Raven Clan. What does this mean?

He watched Fin-Kedinn run his thumb slowly across his bottom lip. It was impossible to tell whether Torak’s father had been his best friend or his deadliest enemy.

At last Fin-Kedinn spoke. ‘Share out the boy’s things between everyone,’ he told Oslak. ‘Then take him downstream and kill him.’