TEN

‘What are you going to do to me?’ said Torak as Oslak tied his wrists behind his back and then to

the roofpost. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘You’ll know soon enough,’ said Oslak. ‘Fin-

Kedinn wants it settled by dawn.’

Dawn, thought Torak.

Over his shoulder, he watched Oslak tying a

reluctant Wolf to the same roofpost on a short

rawhide leash.

His teeth began to chatter. ‘Who decides

what happens to me? Why can’t I be there to

defend myself? Who are all those people by the

fire?’

‘Ow!’ exclaimed Oslak, sucking a bitten

finger. ‘Fin-Kedinn sent runners to call a clan

meet about the bear. Now they’re deciding

about you too.’

Torak peered at the figures hunched about

the long-fire: twenty or thirty men and women,

their faces starkly lit by the flames. He didn’t
give much for his chances.

Dawn. Somehow, before dawn, he had to

get out of here.

But how? He was sitting in a shelter, tied to

a roofpost, without weapons or pack; and even if

he got free, the camp was heavily guarded. Now

that darkness had fallen, a ring of fires had

sprung up around it, and men with spears and

birch-bark horns were keeping watch. Fin-

Kedinn was taking no chances with the bear.

Oslak yanked off Torak’s boots and tied his

ankles together, then left, taking the boots with

him.

Torak couldn’t hear what they were saying

at the clan meet, but at least he could see them,

thanks to the odd construction of the Raven

shelter. Its reindeer-hide roof sloped sharply
down behind him, but in front there was no wall

at all: only a cross-beam, which seemed to

deflect the smoke from the small fire that

crackled just in front, but trapped the warmth

inside.

Straining to make out what was going on,

Torak saw people rising one by one to speak. A

broad-shouldered man holding an enormous

throwing-axe. A woman with long nut-brown

hair, one lock at the temple matted with red

ochre. A wild-eyed girl whose skull was weirdly

plastered with yellow clay to give it the

roughness of oak bark.

He couldn’t see Fin-Kedinn, but a little

apart from the others, the Mage crouched in the

dust, watching a large glossy raven. The bird
stalked fearlessly up and down, uttering the occasional harsh ‘cark!’

Torak wondered if it was the clan guardian. What was it telling her? How to sacrifice him? Whether to gut him like a salmon, or spit him like a hare? He’d never heard of clans sacrificing people, except long in the past, in the bad times after the Great Wave. But then, he’d never heard of the Raven Clan either.

‘Fin-Kedinn wants it decided by dawn . . . The Listener gives his heart’s blood to the Mountain . . .’

Had Ga known about the Prophecy? He couldn’t have done. He wouldn’t have sent his own son to his death.

And yet – he’d made Torak swear to find the Mountain. He’d said, Don’t hate me later.

‘Tell that to the others,’ retorted Torak.

‘We don’t need a boy to help us kill the bear. We can do it ourselves. I can do it. I’ll save the clans.’

‘You wouldn’t stand a chance,’ said Torak. He felt Wolf starting to nibble the rawhide with his sharp front teeth, and kept very still so as not to put him off. He prayed that Hord wouldn’t look behind him, and see what Wolf was doing.

But Hord seemed too agitated to notice. He paced back and forth, then turned on Torak. ‘You’ve seen it, haven’t you? You’ve seen the bear.’

Torak was startled. ‘Of course I’ve seen it. It killed my father.’

Hord cast a furtive glance over his shoulder. ‘I’ve seen it too.’

‘Where? When?’

Hord flinched, as if warding off a blow. ‘I was in the south. With the Red Deer Clan. I was learning Magecraft. Saunnun, he nodded at the old woman talking to the raven, ‘our Mage, she wanted me to go.’ Again he tore at his thumbnail, which had started to bleed. ‘I was there when the bear was caught. I — I saw it made.’

Torak stared at him. ‘Made? What do you mean?’

But Hord had gone.

Middle-night passed, the dying moon rose, and
still the clan meet went on. Still Wolf licked and nibbled at the rawhide. But Oslak had tied the knots securely, and Wolf couldn’t seem to get his jaws around them. Don’t stop, Torak begged him silently. Please don’t stop.

He was too scared to be hungry, but he felt bruised and stiff from the fight with Hord, and his shoulders ached from being tied up for so long. Even if Wolf managed to gnaw through the bindings, he wasn’t sure that he’d have the strength to run away, or slip through the guards.

He kept thinking about what Hord had said. ‘I saw it made . . .’

There was something else, too. Hord had been with the Red Deer Clan, and Torak’s mother had been Red Deer. He’d never known her, she’d died when he was little; but if the Ravens were friendly with her clan, then maybe he could persuade them to let him go . . .

Outside, boots scuffed the dust. Quick. They mustn’t catch Wolf at his wrists.

Torak just had time for a swift warning ‘Uff!’ – which luckily Wolf obeyed – before Renn appeared in the doorway, chewing a leg of roast hare.

Her sharp eyes took in Wolf sitting innocently behind him, then fixed on Torak – who stared back, willing her not to come any closer.

He jerked his head at the clan meet and asked if any Wolf Clan were present.

She shook her head. ‘Not many Wolf Clan left these days. So you’re not going to be rescued, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

Torak did not reply. He’d just pulled at the rope around his wrists, and felt it give a little. It was beginning to stretch, as rawhide does when it gets wet. If only Renn would go away.

She stayed exactly where she was. ‘No Wolf Clan,’ she said with her mouth full, ‘but plenty of others. Yellow Clayhead over there is from the Auroch Clan. They’re Deep Forest people; they pray a lot. That’s how they think we should deal with the bear, by praying to the World Spirit. The man with the axe is Boar Clan. He wants to make a fire-wall to drive the bear towards the Sea. The woman with the earthblood in her hair is Red Deer. Not sure what she thinks. With them it’s hard to tell.’

Torak wondered why she was talking so much. What did she want?

Whatever it was, he decided to go along with it, to keep her attention away from Wolf. He said, ‘My mother was Red Deer. Maybe that woman over there is my bone kin. Maybe –’

‘She says not. She’s not going to help you.’

He thought for a moment. ‘Your clan are friendly with the Red Deer, aren’t they? Your brother said he learnt Magecraft with them.’

‘So?’

‘He – he told me he saw the bear “made”. What did he mean?’

She gave him her narrow, mistrustful stare. ‘I need to know,’ said Torak. ‘It killed my father.’

Renn studied the hare’s leg. ‘Hord was fostered with them. You know about fostering, don’t you?’ Her voice held a touch of scorn. ‘It’s
when you stay with another clan for a while; to make friends, and maybe find a mate.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ said Torak. Behind him, he felt Wolf sniffing at his wrists again. He tried to bat him away with his fingers, but it didn’t work. Not now, he thought. Please not now.

‘He was with them for nine moons,’ said Renn, taking another bite. ‘They’re the best at Magecraft in the Forest. That’s why he went.’ Her mouth curled humourlessly. ‘Hord likes to be the best.’ Then she frowned. ‘What’s that cub doing?’

‘Nothing,’ Torak said too quickly. To Wolf he said in a stilted voice, ‘Go away. Go away.’

Wolf, of course, ignored him.

Torak turned back to Renn. ‘What happened next?’

Another look. ‘Why are you asking?’

‘Why are you talking to me?’

Her face closed. She was as good at keeping things back as Fin-Kedinn.

Thoughtfully she picked a shred of hare from between her teeth. ‘Hord hadn’t been with the Red Deer long,’ she said, ‘when a stranger came to their camp. A wanderer from the Willow Clan, crippled by a hunting accident. Or so he said. The Red Deer took him in. But he –,’ she hesitated, and suddenly looked younger and much less confident. ‘He betrayed them. He wasn’t just a wanderer, he knew Magecraft. He made a secret place in the woods, and conjured a demon. Trapped it in the body of a bear.’ She paused. ‘Hord found out. By then it was too late.’

Beyond the shelter, the shadows seemed to have deepened. Out in the Forest, a fox screamed.

‘Why?’ said Torak. ‘Why did he do it, this – wanderer?’

Renn shook her head. ‘Who knows? Maybe to have a creature to do his bidding? But it went wrong.’ The firelight glinted in her dark eyes. ‘Once the demon got inside the bear, it was too strong. It broke free. Killed three people before the Red Deer could drive it away. By then the crippled wanderer had disappeared.’

Torak was silent. The only sounds were the trees whispering in the night breeze, and the rasp of Wolf’s tongue as he licked the rawhide.

Wolf accidentally caught Torak’s skin in his teeth. Without thinking, Torak turned and gave him a sharp warning growl.

Instantly Wolf leapt back and apologised with a grin.

Renn gasped. ‘You can talk to him!’

‘No!’ cried Torak. ‘No, you’re wrong –’

‘I saw you!’ Her face was paler than ever.

‘So it’s true. The Prophecy is true. You are the Listener.’

‘No!’

‘What were you saying to him? What were you plotting?’

‘I’ve told you, I can’t –’

‘I won’t give you the chance,’ she whispered. ‘I won’t let you plot against us. Neither will Fin-Kedinn.’ Drawing her knife, she cut Wolf’s leash, scooped him up in her arms, and raced across the clearing towards the clan.
meet.

‘Come back!’ yelled Torak. Furiously he yanked at the bindings, but they held fast. Wolf hadn’t had time to bite them through.

Terror washed over him. He’d put all his hopes in Wolf, and now Wolf was gone. Dawn was not far off. Already the birds were stirring in the trees.

Again he tugged at the bindings round his wrists. Again they held tight.

Across the clearing, Fin-Kedinn and the old woman called Saeunn rose to their feet and started towards him.