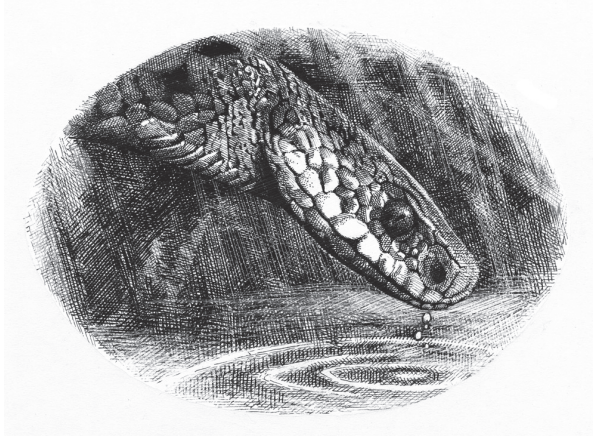


# ONE



The viper glided down the riverbank and placed its sleek head on the water, and Torak stopped a few paces away to let it drink.

His arms ached from carrying the red deer antlers, so he set them aside and crouched in the bracken to watch. Snakes are wise, and know many secrets. Maybe this one would help him deal with his.

The viper drank with unhurried sips. Raising its head, it regarded Torak, flicking out its tongue to taste his scent. Then it coiled neatly back on itself and vanished into the ferns.

It had given him no sign.

But you don't *need* a sign, he told himself wearily. You know what to do. Just tell them. Soon as you get back to camp. Just say, 'Renn. Fin-Kedinn. Two moons ago,

something happened. They held me down, they put a mark on my chest. And now . . . '

No. That wasn't any good. He could picture Renn's face. 'I'm your best friend – and you've been lying to me for *two whole moons!*'

He put his head in his hands.

After a while he heard rustling, and glanced up to see a reindeer on the opposite bank. It was standing on three legs, furiously scratching its budding antlers with one hind hoof. Sensing that Torak wasn't hunting, it went on scratching. The antlers were bleeding: the itch must be so bad that the only relief was to make them hurt.

That's what I should do, thought Torak. Cut it out. Make it hurt. In secret. Then no-one need ever know.

The trouble was, even if he could bring himself to do it, it wouldn't work. To get rid of the tattoo, he'd have to perform the proper rite. He'd learnt that from Renn, whom he'd approached in a roundabout way, using the zigzag tattoos on her wrists as an excuse.

'If you don't do the rite,' she'd told him, 'the marks just come back.'

*'They come back?'* Torak had been horrified.

'Of course. You can't see them, they're deep in the marrow. But they're still there.'

So that was the end of that, unless he could get her to tell him about the rite without revealing why he needed to know.

The reindeer gave an irritable shake and trotted off into the Forest; and Torak picked up the antlers and started back for camp. They were a lucky find, big enough for everyone in the clan to get a piece, and perfect for making fish-hooks and hammers for knapping flint. Fin-Kedinn would be pleased. Torak tried to fix his mind on that.

It didn't work. Until now, he hadn't understood how much a secret can set you apart. He thought about it all the time, even when he was hunting with Renn and Wolf.

It was early in the Moon of the Salmon Run, and a sharp east wind carried a strong smell of fish. As Torak made his way beneath the pines, his boots crunched on flakes of bark scattered by woodpeckers. To his left, the Green River chattered after its long imprisonment under the ice, while to his right, a rockface rose towards Broken Ridge. In places it was scarred, where the clans had hacked out the red slate which brings hunting luck. He heard the clink of stone on stone. Someone was quarrying.

That should be me, Torak told himself. I should be making a new axe. I should be doing things. 'This can't go on,' he said out loud.

'You're right,' said a voice. 'It can't.'

They were crouching on a ledge ten paces above him: four boys and two girls, glaring down. The Boar Clan wore their brown hair cut to shoulder length, with a fringe; tusks at their necks, stiff hide mantles across their shoulders. The Willows had wovenbark strips sewn in spirals on their jerkins, and three black leaves tattooed on their brows in a permanent frown. All were older than Torak. The boys had wispy beards, and beneath the girls' clan-tattoos, a short red bar showed that they'd had their first moon bleed.

They'd been quarrying: Torak saw stone dust on their buckskins. Just ahead of him, he spotted a tree-trunk ladder notched with footholds, which they'd propped against the rockface, to climb up to the ledge. But they were no longer interested in slate.

Torak stared back, hoping he didn't look scared. 'What do you want?' he said.

Aki, the Boar Clan Leader's son, jerked his head at the antlers. 'Those are mine. Put them down.'

'No they're not,' said Torak. 'I found them.' To remind them he had weapons, he hoisted his bow on his shoulder and touched the blue slate knife at his hip.

Aki wasn't impressed. 'They're mine.'

'Which means *you* stole them,' said a Willow girl.

'If that was true,' Torak told Aki, 'you'd have put your mark on them and I'd have left them alone.'

'I did. On the base. You rubbed it off.'

'Of course I didn't,' said Torak in disgust.

Then he saw what he should have seen before: a smudge of earthblood at the base of one antler, where a boar tusk had been drawn on. His ears burned. 'I didn't see it. And I didn't rub it off.'

'Then put them down and get out of here,' said a boy called Raut, who'd always struck Torak as fairer than most. Unlike Aki, who was spoiling for a fight.

Torak didn't feel like giving him one. 'All right,' he said briskly, 'I made a mistake. Didn't see the mark. They're yours.'

'What makes you think it's that easy?' said Aki.

Torak sighed. He'd come across Aki before. A bully: unsure if he was a leader, and desperate to prove it with his fists.

'You think you're special,' sneered Aki. 'Because Fin-Kedinn took you in, and you can talk to wolves and you're a spirit walker.' He raked his fingernails over the scant hairs on his chin, as if checking they were still there. 'Truth is, you only live with the Ravens because your own clan's never come near you. And Fin-Kedinn doesn't trust you enough to make you his foster son.'

Torak set his teeth.



Covertly, he looked about. The river was too cold to swim; besides, they had dugouts on the bank. That meant there was no point running upriver, either – or back the way he'd come, he'd be trapped in the fork where the Green River merged with the Axehandle. And no help within reach. Renn was at the Raven camp on the north bank, half a daywalk to the east; and Wolf had gone hunting in the night.

He set down the antlers. 'I said you can have them,' he told Aki. He started up the trail.

'Coward,' taunted Aki.

Torak ignored him.

A stone struck his temple. He turned on them. 'Now who's the coward? What's brave about six against one?'

Beneath his fringe, Aki's square face darkened. 'Then let's make it even: just you and me.' He whipped off his jerkin to reveal a meaty chest covered in reddish fuzz.

Torak froze.

'What's the matter?' sniggered a Boar girl. 'Scared?'

'No,' said Torak. But he was. He'd forgotten the Boar Clan custom of stripping to the waist for a fight. He couldn't do that, or they'd see the mark.

'Get ready to fight,' snarled Aki, making his way down the ladder.

'No,' said Torak.

Another stone whistled towards him. He caught it and threw it back, and the Boar girl yelped and clutched a bleeding shin.

Aki had nearly reached the bottom of the ladder, his friends swarming after him like ants on a honey trail.

Grabbing one of the antlers, Torak ducked behind a pine, hooked the tines in the nearest branch, and swung into the tree.

'We've got him!' shouted Aki.

No you haven't, thought Torak. He'd chosen this tree because it grew nearest the rockface, and now he crawled along a branch and onto the ledge they'd just left. It was littered with quartz saws and grindstones, a small fire, and an elkhide pail of pine-pitch, planted in hot ash to keep it runny. Above him the slope was less steep, with enough juniper scrub to make it climbable.

Throwing stones and dodging theirs, he raced to the ladder and gave it a push. It didn't budge. It was lashed to the ledge with rawhide ropes, no time to cut it free. He did the only thing he could to stop them coming after him. He seized the pail and emptied it down the ladder.

There was an outraged roar – and Torak dropped the pail in astonishment. Aki was faster than he looked – he'd nearly reached the ledge. Without meaning to, Torak had just dumped hot pine-pitch all over him.

Bellowing like a stuck boar, Aki slid down the ladder.

Torak clawed at juniper bushes and hauled himself towards the ridge.



He ran north-east through the trees, and their cries faded. He *hated* running away. But better be called a coward than get found out.

After a while the slope became gentler, and he was able to skitter down it and make his way to the river again, keeping off the clan trail and sticking to the wolf trails which he could find almost without thinking. Once he reached the ford, he could get across and double back to the Raven camp. There'd be trouble, but Fin-Kedinn would be on his side.

In a willow thicket on the bank, he came to a halt, the breath sawing in his chest. Around him the trees were still waking from their long winter sleep. Bees bumped about among the catkins, and a squirrel dozed in a patch of sunlight, its tail wrapped around the branch. In the shallows, a jay was taking a bath. No-one was coming. The Forest would have warned him.

Shaky with relief, he leaned against a tree-trunk.

His hand moved to the neck of his jerkin and touched the tattoo on his breastbone. The Viper Mage hissed in his mind. *'This mark will be like the harpoon head beneath the skin of the seal. One twitch, and it will draw you, no matter how hard you struggle. For now you are one of us . . .'*

'I'm not one of you,' muttered Torak. 'I'm *not*!'

But as he'd lain awake through the storm-tossed nights of winter, he'd felt the mark burning his skin. He dreaded to think what evil it might do. What evil it might make *him* do.

Somewhere to the south, Wolf howled. He'd caught a hare, and was singing his happiness to the Forest, his pack-brother and anyone else who was listening.

Hearing Wolf's voice lightened Torak's spirits. Wolf didn't seem to mind his tattoo. Nor did the Forest. It knew, but it hadn't cast him out.

The jay flew up, scattering droplets, and for a moment, Torak followed its flight. Then he pushed himself off the tree and began to run. He left the thicket – and Aki head-butted him in the chest and sent him sprawling.

The Boar Clan boy was almost unrecognisable. His reddened eyes glared from a skull that was black and slimy with pitch, and he stank of pine-blood and rage. 'You made a fool of me!' he shouted. 'In front of everyone, you made a fool of me!'



Struggling to his feet, Torak scrambled backwards. 'I didn't do it on purpose! I didn't know you were there!'

'Liar!' Aki swung his axe at Torak's shins.

Torak jumped out of the way, then side-stepped and kicked Aki's axe-hand. Aki dropped the axe. He drew his knife. Torak drew his too, and they circled one another.

Torak's heart hammered against his ribs as he tried to remember every fighting trick Fa and Fin-Kedinn had taught him.

Without warning, Aki lunged. He mistimed it by a heartbeat. Torak kicked him in the belly, then punched him hard in the throat. Choking, Aki went down, grabbing at Torak's jerkin. The throat-lacing ripped – and Aki saw it. The mark on Torak's chest.

Time stretched.

Aki released him and staggered back.

Torak's legs wouldn't move.

Aki glanced from the mark to Torak's face. Beneath the pine-pitch, his features were blank with shock.

He recovered fast. He pointed one finger at Torak, aiming straight between the eyes. He made a sideways cut of the hand: a sign Torak had never seen before.

Then he turned and ran.



Aki must have regained his dugout and paddled faster than a leaping salmon, because when Torak finally reached the Raven camp by mid-afternoon, the Boar Clan boy had got there first. Torak knew at once from the stillness of the Ravens as he ran into the clearing.

The only sounds were the creak of the drying racks and the murmur of the river. Thull and his mate Luta, whose

shelter Torak shared, stared at him as if he were a stranger. Only their son Dari, seven summers old and Torak's devoted follower, rushed to greet him. He was yanked back by his father.

Renn burst from a reindeer-hide shelter, her dark-red hair flying, her face flushed with indignation. 'Torak, at last! It's all a mistake! I've told them it isn't true!'

Behind her, Aki emerged with his father, the Boar Clan Leader, and Fin-Kedinn. The Raven Leader's face was grim, and he leaned on his staff as he crossed the clearing; but when he spoke it was in the same quiet voice as always. 'I've vouched for you, Torak. I've told them this can't be so.'

They had such such faith in him. He couldn't bear it.

The Boar Clan Leader glared at Fin-Kedinn. 'Are you calling my son a liar?' He was a bigger version of Aki: the same square face and ready fists.

'Not a liar,' replied Fin-Kedinn. 'Simply mistaken.'

The Boar Clan Leader bridled.

'I've told you,' said Fin-Kedinn, 'the boy is no Soul-Eater. And he can prove it. Torak, take off your jerkin.'

'*What?*' Renn turned on her uncle. 'But you can't even *think* –'

Fin-Kedinn silenced her with a glance. Then to Torak, 'Quickly now, let's clear this up.'

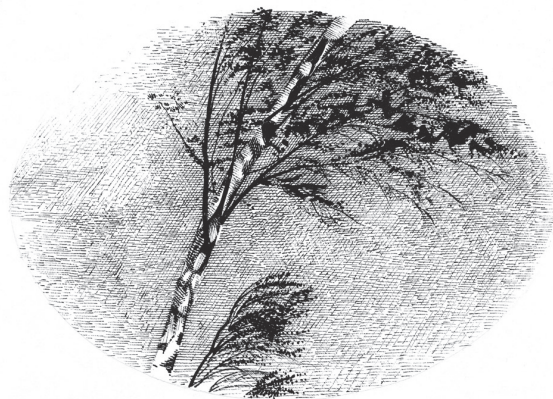
Torak looked at the faces around him. These people had taken him in when his father was killed. He'd lived with them for nearly two summers. They had begun to accept him. Now he was going to end that.

Slowly he took off his quiver and bow and laid them on the ground. He untied his belt. There was a ringing in his ears. His fingers belonged to someone else.

He said a prayer to the Forest – and pulled his jerkin over his head.

Renn's mouth opened, but no sound came.  
Fin-Kedinn's hand tightened on his staff.  
'I told you,' cried Aki. 'The three-pronged fork, I *told*  
you! He's a Soul-Eater!'

## Two



Why didn't you tell me?' said Fin-Kedinn in the voice that made grown men blench.

'I wanted to,' said Torak. 'But I . . . '

'But you what?'

Torak hung his head.

They were alone in the clearing. The Boar Clan Leader and his son had left to gather their people, and messengers had been sent to clans camped within reach. Fin-Kedinn — who'd been scraping a reindeer skin before Aki burst in — had returned to his work: a sign to the others to get on with theirs and leave Torak to him. Some had gone hunting, or to spear fish upriver. There was no sign of Renn.

The Raven camp was eerily calm. Torak saw a deerhide canoe drawn up on the bank; a wovenbark net draped over

a juniper bush. Around him the birch trees were a brilliant green, the undergrowth bright with blue anemones, yellow celandine and silver fish-scales. Nothing to show that a storm had broken over his head.

He watched Fin-Kedinn fling the hide over a log and stretch it taut. The veins on the Raven Leader's forearms bulged, and his movements – usually so measured – were savage. 'If you'd told me. We could have found a way.'

'I thought I could get rid of it without you knowing.' Torak realized how that sounded: covering one lie with another.

Fin-Kedinn took a deer's rib-bone and started scraping fat from the hide with short, vicious strokes. 'You brought that evil mark into my clan.'

'I didn't mean to! Fin-Kedinn, you've got to believe me! I tried to fight, but they were too many!'

The Raven Leader flung down the scraper. 'But *you* sought them out! *You* got too close!'

'I had to! They'd taken Wolf!'

'Ah, there's always a reason!' The force of his anger made Torak step back. 'You're just like your father! I warned him not to join them, but he wouldn't listen. He said they meant to do good, he went on calling them the Healers even after they'd turned evil.' He broke off. 'In the end it killed him. And it killed your mother.'

Torak saw the deep lines at the sides of his mouth, the pain in the fierce blue eyes. This was his fault. He had hurt this man whom he'd come to love.

The Raven Leader went back to work. Torak smelt the stink of dead reindeer, and watched the bloody fat bubbling over the edge of the rib-bone. He pictured a knife slicing into his own flesh to rid it of the Soul-Eater tattoo. 'I'll cut it out,' he said. 'Renn says there's a rite.'

'Which can only be done when the moon is full. We're in the moon's dark. You've run out of time.'

A gust of wind brought the smell of rain, and Torak shivered. 'Fin-Kedinn. I'm not a Soul-Eater. You know this.'

The scraper stilled. 'But how will you prove it?' He met Torak's eyes, and his own were filled with a sorrow that was even more frightening than his anger. 'Don't you understand, Torak? It doesn't matter what *I* believe. It's everyone else you've got to convince. This is out of my hands. Only your own clan can vouch for you now.'

Torak's heart sank. He was Wolf Clan, but his father had kept him apart from them, and he'd never even seen the rest of his clan. Few had. The Wolf Clan had been deeply ashamed when its Mage – Torak's father – turned Soul-Eater. Since then, it had stayed hidden, becoming as shadowy and elusive as its clan-creature.

Torak touched the tattered scrap of wolf fur sewn to his jerkin. Fa had prepared it for him, so it was precious. It was also his only link with his clan. 'How do I find them?' he said.

'You don't,' said Fin-Kedinn. 'Not if they don't want to be found.'

'But what if they don't come? If they don't vouch for me –'

'Then I'll have no choice. I'll have to obey clan law and cast you out.'

The wind strengthened, and the birch trees lifted their branches – as if Torak was already outcast, and they feared to touch him.

'Do you understand what it means,' said Fin-Kedinn, 'to be outcast?'

Torak shook his head.

'It means you would be as one dead. Cut off from everyone. Hunted like prey. No-one could help you. Not



me. Not Renn. We couldn't talk to you, give you food. If we did, we'd be outcast too. If we saw you in the Forest, we'd have to kill you.'

Torak went cold. 'But I didn't *do* anything!'

'It's the law,' said Fin-Kedinn. 'Many winters ago, after the great fire which scattered the Soul-Eaters, the clan elders made this law to stop them coming back. To stop others joining them.'

The first spots of rain pattered onto the reindeer hide. 'Go to your shelter,' said the Raven Leader without looking up.

'But Fin-Kedinn –'

'Go. The clans will gather. The elders will decide.'

Torak swallowed. 'What about Thull and Luta and Dari? It's their shelter too.'

'They'll build another. From now on, don't talk to anyone. Stay in the shelter. Wait for the clans to decide.'

'How long will that be?'

'As long as it takes. And Torak . . . Don't try to escape. You'll only make it worse.'

Torak stared at him. 'How could it be worse?'

'It can always get worse,' said the Raven Leader.



Torak learned the truth of that two days later, when Renn finally came to see him.

Until then, he hadn't caught a glimpse of her. His shelter faced away from camp, so he couldn't see much except by peering through gaps in the hides, or when he went to the midden. The rest of the time he sat and watched the small fire before the opening, and listened to the clans gather.

Late on the second day, Renn stalked up to the shelter. Her face was pale, the blue-black bars of her clan-tattoos livid on her cheekbones. 'You should have told me,' she said stonily.

'I know.'

'You should've *told* me!' She kicked the doorpost, and the shelter shook.

'I thought I could get rid of it in secret.'

Squatting by the fire, she glowered at the embers. 'You lied to me for two whole moons. And don't tell me that keeping silent isn't lying, because it is!'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

She didn't reply. Over the winter, she'd developed a tiny freckle at the corner of her mouth, and he'd teased her, asking if it was a birch seed and why didn't she wipe it off. He couldn't imagine teasing her now. He'd never felt so bad.

'Renn,' he said. 'You've got to believe me. I'm not a Soul-Eater.'

'Well of course you're not!'

He drew a breath. 'So – can you forgive me?'

She picked at a scab on her elbow. Then she gave a curt nod.

Relief flooded through him. 'I didn't think you would.'

She went on picking at the scab. 'We've all got secrets, Torak.'

'Not like this.'

'No,' she said in an odd voice. 'Not like this.'

Then she surprised him by asking which of the Soul-Eaters had put the mark on his chest.

' – It was Seshru. Why?'

She ripped off the scab and dug her fingernail into the rawness underneath. 'Where were the others?'

He swallowed. 'Thiazzi held me down. The Bat Mage watched. Eostra . . .' He shuddered as he recalled the ghastly wooden mask of the Eagle Owl Mage. 'I didn't see her. But there was an owl, watching from an ice hill . . .'

Suddenly he was back in the freezing dark of the Far North. He felt the powerful grip of the Oak Mage. He saw the hunched bulk of the Bat Mage standing guard, and caught the orange glare of the greatest of owls. Then Seshru the Viper Mage was blotting out the stars, and he was staring up into eyes the deep blue of the sky before middle-night. He watched her perfect mouth pronouncing his fate as she drove the bone needle again and again into his skin and smeared him with the blood of murdered hunters. *This mark will be like the harpoon head beneath the skin of the seal. One twitch and it will draw you . . .*

'Torak?' said Renn.

He was back in the shelter.

'What are you going to do?'

'What I should have done in the beginning. I'm going to cut it out. Tell me how to do the rite.'

'No,' she said without hesitation.

'Renn. You've got to.'

'No! You couldn't do it on your own, you don't know Magecraft.'

'I've got to try.'

'Yes, and I'll help you.'

'No. If you helped me, you'd be outcast too.'

'I don't care.'

'Well I do.'

Renn pressed her lips together. She could be incredibly stubborn.

So could he. 'Renn. Listen to me. Not long ago, they took Wolf – because of me. He was nearly killed – because

of me. That's why I haven't howled for him now, because he'd only try to help, and get hurt. If you got hurt because of me . . . ' He stopped. 'You've got to swear – swear on your bow and your three souls – that if they cast me out, you won't try to help.'

A noise in the clearing. Torak saw the bent figure of the Raven Mage hobbling towards them.

'Renn!' he said in an urgent whisper. 'Do this for me! Swear!'

Renn raised her head, and in her dark eyes, two tiny flames leapt. 'No,' she said.



'The clans have gathered,' said Saeunn in her raven's croak. 'The elders have decided. Renn. Leave.'

Renn lifted her chin.

'Leave.'

Defiantly, Renn turned to Torak. 'I meant what I said.' Then she was gone.

The Raven Mage told Torak to gather his things, and waited at the mouth of the shelter, clutching her staff in one shrivelled claw. Her sunken eyes watched him without pity. A life spent peering into the world of the spirits had detached her from the feelings of the living.

'Not the sleeping-sack,' she rasped.

'Why not?' said Torak.

'The outcast shall be as one dead.'

Torak's belly turned over. Until now, he'd clung to a faint hope that Fin-Kedinn might be able to save him.

The rain came, pattering onto the hide roof and making the fire smoke. He picked up the last of his gear and glanced around. Often, he'd hated this shelter. He'd never

got used to the Raven way of staying in the same camp for three or four moons, instead of moving on every few days, as he'd done with Fa. Now he couldn't imagine leaving it and never coming back.

'It is time,' said Saeunn.

He followed her into the clearing.

The clans were gathered about a huge long-fire. It was still light, but the rain clouds turned it to dusk. Torak was glad of the rain. People would think he was shivering with cold, not fear.

The crowd parted to let them through, and he took in a blur of firelit faces. Raven. Willow. Viper. Boar. But no Mountain or Ice clans, and none from the Deep Forest or the Sea. This was a matter for the Open Forest. He wondered when his kinsman in the Seal Clan would get to hear of what had happened. What would Bale think?

Aki had planted himself at the front of the throng. He'd scrubbed his skin clean of pine-pitch, but it had gone a blotchy red, and he'd had to cut his hair short, like boar bristles. He wore two throwing-axes in his belt, a birch-bark horn at his hip, and a triumphant expression. Clearly he would lose no time in hunting the outcast.

Rain hissed on the fire and dripped off the trees that watched at the edge of the clearing. Rain trickled down Renn's cheeks like tears. But it couldn't be tears, because Renn never cried.

Fin-Kedinn was waiting by the fire with the other clan elders. His face was impassive. He didn't look at Torak.

Saeunn hobbled to Fin-Kedinn's side, and addressed the clans. 'I am the oldest of the clans of the Open Forest,' she declared. 'I speak for them all.' She paused. 'The boy bears the mark of the Soul-Eater. The law is clear. He must be cast out.'

'Ah.' A sigh rose from the crowd.

Torak's knees sagged.

'Wait!' A man's voice called from the edge of the clearing.

All heads turned.

Torak saw a tall figure step into the firelight. Rain plastered his long dark hair to his skull, except for two shaven strips at the temples. His eyes had an odd yellow gleam, but his high-boned face seemed strangely familiar.

Then Torak saw the clan-tattoos, and the back of his neck prickled. Two dotted lines on the cheekbones. A strip of sodden grey fur on the left side of his parka.

Aki had seen it too. 'No!' he cried. 'You can't stop it now, the elders have spoken!'

The tall man stared at Aki – and the Boar Clan boy drew back, abashed.

'Who are you?' said Torak.

The tall man turned and fixed his gaze on him. 'I am Maheegun. Leader of the Wolf Clan.'