

There were a dozen of them, spread out five metres apart. Each one carried a flaming torch, holding it high to dispel the gathering gloom of twilight. If Maddie could break through the line, or simply remain unseen while they passed her, she would be free and clear.

Actually, 'hiding place' was something of an overstatement for Maddie's position. She was simply lying prone, covered from head to toe by her cloak, among knee-high, dried stalks of grass.

She could sense the yellow glow of one of the torches now, as a searcher came closer. She resisted the unbearable temptation to look up and see where he was. Her face was darkened by mud and grime she had smeared there. But even so, it would shine as a pale oval in the dusk. She lay, face down, her eyes fixed on the stalks of dry grass a few centimetres from her face, seeing the yellow torchlight creeping over them.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she heard the rustle of boots. *Trust the cloak.* The old mantra, drummed into her brain over and over by her mentor, Will, repeated itself now. The searcher couldn't hear her heartbeat. And if she stayed still as a corpse, he wouldn't see her either. The cloak would protect her. It always had in the past and it would do so now.

'All right! I see you. Stand up and surrender.'

The voice was very close. And there was a confident tone to it. For a second, she nearly gave in to the urge to stand. But then she remembered Will's words. *They may try to trick you into showing yourself. They might call out that they can see you and tell you to stand up. Don't fall for it.*

So she lay motionless. The voice came again. 'Come on! I said I can see you!'

But the voice wasn't as confident, as if the searcher realised the ruse had been unsuccessful – or that there was nobody near him concealed in the rough grass. After a few more seconds, he muttered a soft curse and began to move again.

She realised she had been holding her breath and silently released it, feeling the tension in her body ease. Her heart rate slowed from its wild gallop to a more controlled canter.

In a few minutes, he'd be clear of her. She waited, counting slowly to one hundred and twenty, listening as the rustle of his boots moved away.

When she had gone to ground, her right arm had been doubled underneath her body, and she would use that to help her rise from the ground and begin to creep slowly away from her hiding spot. She began to apply pressure to her right hand, feeling the sharp grass stalks digging painfully into it.

Then stopped.

There had been a sound from the grass in front of her.

Will Ranger's apprentice Maddie be able to escape the line of searchers? Find out in *The Red Fox Clan!*