FIREBORN

TWELVE AND THE FROZEN FOREST

AISLING FOWLER

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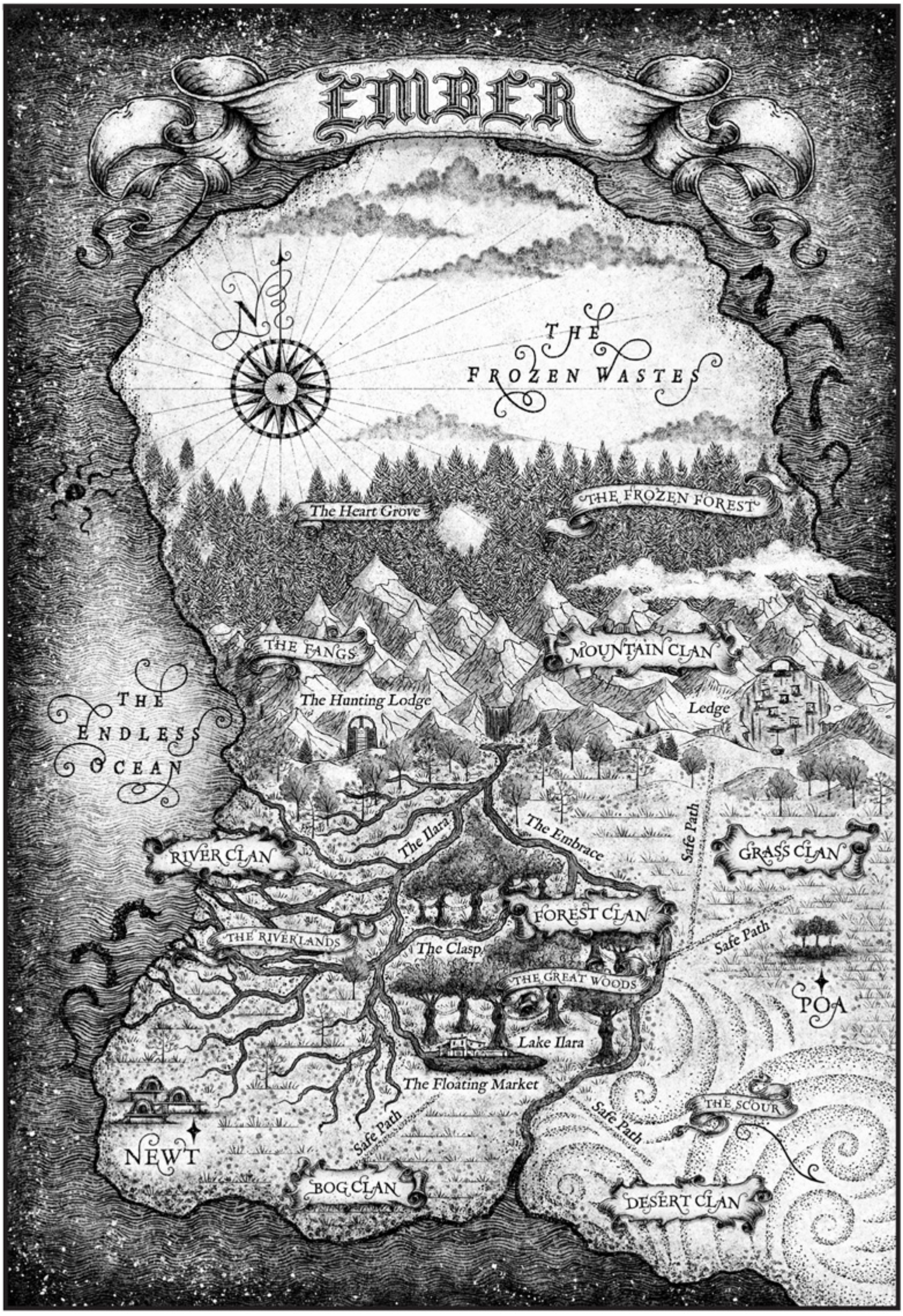
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THE
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The Heart Grove
THE FROZEN FOREST
THE FANGS
MOUNTAIN CLAN
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Ledge
THE
ENDLESS
OCEAN
The Ilara
The Embrace
Safe Path
RIVER CLAN
GRASS CLAN
FOREST CLAN
THE RIVERLANDS
The Clasp
Safe Path
THE GREAT WOODS
POA
Lake Ilara
The Floating Market
THE SCOUR
Safe Path
Safe Path
NEWT
BOG CLAN
DESERT CLAN

PROLOGUE

I pledge my life to the Hunting Lodge.
I vow to serve all seven clans as my own,
To protect them from what lies beyond.
I forsake all blood ties and blood feuds,
To offer up my name and my past.
The Hunters are my family now and always.
I swear before them that I will never
lower my weapons in the face of darkness,
Nor allow tyranny to rise.

CHAPTER 1

The sky over the Hunting Lodge was ominously dark and the air smelled of snow. Twelve gazed up at the scudding clouds with storm-grey eyes and huddled deeper into her furs, stamping her feet to stay warm. Her classmates' chatter steamed in the air around her and Twelve watched them moodily, trying to swallow her impatience.

'For goodness' sake!' shouted Weaponsmaster Victory, her eyes sweeping the group. 'If you can't even *lift* it, how on earth are you going to swing it? Anyone who can't raise their weapons over their head, return them to the armoury for something lighter at *once*!'

Several students scurried away and Twelve's scowl deepened. Losing her temper in battle class never paid off though. Victory was more likely than any of the other Hunters to punish students with

night watches or the dreaded dungeons. Plus, the lesson looked interesting if they could get to it: upright wooden stumps covered the snow-dusted training ground, promising something out of the ordinary.

'By the frost!' cried Victory as the students trickled back. 'If you can't move faster than that, every creature from here to the Frozen Forest will make an easy meal of you.'

A nervous silence fell over the assembled class.

'The brighter among you might have identified today's aim,' Victory continued, her disbelief obvious as she spoke. 'You'll be sparring in pairs while standing on the stumps to improve your balance and footwork. I don't want to see any feet on the ground.'

Twelve almost smiled as anticipation fizzed through her. This would be a challenge.

'If you haven't mastered last week's exercises, then you're going to struggle,' Victory said, her eyes lingering on a few of the younger students who were looking distinctly anxious. 'Now, form up in pairs and begin yesterday's attack sequence. Remember: constant vigilance!'

As usual, everyone scrambled eagerly away from

Twelve into their pairs. She rolled her eyes. If they were too frightened to spar with her, that was their problem, not hers. Her gaze wandered over the familiar buildings around her instead. The kitchen, dining hall, stables, armoury and resthouse surrounded the octagonal training ground where she stood. All of them were sturdy structures that had withstood the elements for centuries, but all were dwarfed by the defensive walls soaring above them. Even the council house, by far the grandest building with its beautifully carved pillars, appeared little more than a toy beneath those walls. High above Twelve's head, the two skybridges arced gracefully between the ramparts, quartering the distant octagon of sky and allowing patrolling Hunters to see for miles.

'Twelve –' Victory frowned – 'partnerless again?' There were a few sniggers. The weaponsmaster scowled and stepped closer, lowering her voice. 'Practising alone will only take you so far. You need a decent sparring partner to challenge yourself.' Her blue eyes scanned Twelve's face, piercing and expectant.

Twelve's reply was halted by a hand squeezing her arm.



'I'll p-p-practise with you,' Seven offered, carefully avoiding the weaponsmaster's gaze.

Victory's sigh as she strode away said it all.

'Keeping the weirdos together,' someone muttered. Twelve spun to confront them, her cheeks flaming, but the speaker was already lost in the shifting crowd.

The pale red-headed girl beside her beamed, and Twelve groaned. Sparring with Seven was worse than practising with a straw dummy. Her attention span was shorter than a snarrow's and her skills with any weapon doubtful at best. On top of that, although she was probably about thirteen years old, like Twelve, her build was that of a much younger girl. Twelve felt like a giant next to her. It made them particularly ill-suited and yet they were often thrown together. Everyone else avoided them: Seven was odd; Twelve was scary.

Most of the stumps were already taken so the girls threaded their way across the training ground to a less crowded spot.

'W-w-where's Widge?' Seven asked as they walked. 'I haven't seen him today.'

Widge was Twelve's squirrel, but it had actually

been the other girl who had found him as a kit fallen from his nest. Instead of keeping him, Seven had given him to Twelve, something Twelve still didn't understand.

'I'm not sure.' Twelve shrugged. 'You know he comes and goes as he likes.' She bit her tongue to stop herself saying more.

Seven nodded as she clumsily unsheathed her sword. Twelve reached over her shoulders, grabbing the hafts of her two axes. Her confidence surged with them in her hands and she leaped lightly on to the nearest log.

'Shall we?' she asked.

Seven snorted with laughter as she hopped experimentally between stumps. 'Wobbly, aren't they?'

'That's the point,' Twelve said, unable to keep a snap out of her voice. 'Can we start?'

Shouts of laughter, yelps of surprise and the clash of steel rang out across the training ground, but Twelve had only to wave an axe at Seven and the other girl would drop her weapon or fall off the stumps. In the end, she practised by herself while Seven sat and watched.

Whirl, *strike*, *duck*, *block*, *lunge*, *sidestep*. Twelve

ran through her routine faster and faster until her axes were a glinting blur. Beneath her furs she was unbearably hot, but she didn't break her flow, enjoying the challenge of keeping her balance on the precarious stumps.

'L-look out!' Seven cried suddenly. This was quickly followed by a yelp and a crash.

Twelve spun round to see a tall dark-haired boy sprawled on the ground. His face was red and furious as he spat out a mouthful of grimy snow. It was Five – her least favourite person in the lodge, despite stiff competition.

'He was c-c-creeping up behind you,' Seven said, her face pale and defiant.

Five stood up, towering over her. 'It's battle class, you idiot,' he said. '*Obviously*, we're supposed to fight.' His eyes ran pointedly over her weak stance and incorrect sword grip. 'Those of us who are any good at it anyway.'

'What, like you?' Twelve snorted.

'We all know I'm the best swordsman here,' Five said, shrugging. 'I thought I could help you, Twelve. You know, test your reflexes. After all, the dark creatures out there won't announce themselves.'

'You weren't trying to be helpful,' Seven said,

her voice higher than normal. 'You wanted to h-h-hurt her. I saw your face.'

'Really?' Five said, rolling his eyes. 'And did you see inside my head too? You could tell exactly what I was thinking? Who knew we had such a *t-t-talent* among us.'

Students nearby snorted with laughter and inched closer as Seven's face crumpled with hurt. Unexpectedly, a dull thud of anger pulsed through Twelve. She stepped off her stump, axes gripped tightly in both hands.

'Speaking of talents,' Twelve said, trying to keep her voice even, 'do you actually have any besides being awful?' Five's eyes narrowed, but she kept talking. 'You're not the best swordsman and you're not nearly as funny as you—'

Five took half a step towards her as a stocky sandy-haired boy shouldered his way through the crowd. 'I think you both need to calm down,' Six said firmly, taking Five by the arm and pulling him away. He was Five's best friend, quieter and less obnoxious, but Twelve still shot him her fiercest glare.

'I'm *always* calm!' she said. It came out a lot louder than she'd intended.

Six grinned at her, his eyes bright with amusement. 'So I see.'

'What is going on over there?' Victory's voice rang sharp and hard as she strode towards the clustered students. 'Get back to practice right now!'

The group couldn't have scattered faster if a winter wolf had pounced among them.

'Thank you,' Seven said as Five and Six slipped away.

'What for?' Twelve asked.

'S-standing up for me like that.'

Twelve's sharp response faltered – Seven's face was full of warmth, her smile dimpling her cheeks. For an instant, she looked so much like . . . Twelve quickly shook the thought away – it was always a bad idea to think about life before the lodge. Still, before she could stop herself, she felt her lips curve into an answering smile.

She turned away, shocked at herself, and hopped back on to her stump.

'You stood up for me first,' she said over her shoulder to Seven. 'Anyway, Five should be grateful. Hauling that huge ego of his around must be hard work. If I've managed to shrink it even a tiny bit . . .'

Before Seven could reply, Victory arrived, her expression thunderous. 'Why are you just standing there, Twelve?' she snapped. 'Get on with it.'

The weaponsmaster stood with her arms folded and her eyes narrowed as Twelve flowed through her routine flawlessly, until a pebble bounced painfully off her temple.

'Ow!' Twelve gasped, wobbling on her stump for the first time.

Victory tilted her head critically and rattled more pebbles in her palm. 'You should have seen that coming and reacted. Constant vigilance, Twelve.'

Twelve stared. Had the weaponsmaster really just thrown a *stone* at her?

'Five was right, you know,' Victory said, her eyes locked on Twelve's. 'Dark creatures don't announce themselves and they won't give you a second chance. Now go again.' She jerked her head at Twelve's axes.

And threw another stone.