

# A HORDE OF RAVENS



By Jillian  
Powell

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## Chapter 1

*43 CE*

He heard it before he saw it: a harsh, throaty cry. His hound, Bran, stopped in his tracks, one paw raised, and scanned the skies. It was a raven, as black as soot. Conan watched it fly with its slow, steady wingbeat over the salt marsh. It carried news of a warrior's death, so the old men said, or it might be the war goddess Morrigan who took on the glossy feathers of a raven when she flew over battlefields. Men said she could prophesy who would be the winners and losers in a battle. Whenever he saw a raven, Conan knew that darkness and death were close by.

He called Bran to his side, waiting with his slingshot in case a rabbit or hare came into sight. Bran would spot it first, and give chase, but Conan was getting quite expert with the slingshot now and they made a good hunting team. He had made the slingshot himself, just as he had made the bone flute he carried everywhere with him. If he practised with that, he felt sure he would be able to lure birds closer, within range of the slingshot. That was his plan. His father had taught him to make the flute. That was the way of his tribe. His best friend Carr had made a drum and together they could make quite an interesting sound. When he wasn't looking after the livestock or out hunting with Bran, that was what Conan liked doing best: creating music with his friend.

The salt marsh could be a bleak and lonely place. It was here that his tribe harvested the valuable sea salt that they traded for other goods like the iron and bronze his father Drest, a blacksmith, needed for his work. But it was also a good place for hunting with his slingshot. When the tide retreated, wading birds threaded their way between the reeds and grasses, delving for worms in the mud. But today the marsh seemed deserted except for Conan, Bran and the solitary raven.

They began heading inland towards the woods. Perhaps he would have more luck hunting there. As they headed away from the marsh, the grasses began to get taller and Conan relied on Bran to weave his way along the path home, following familiar scents. Here and there tangled bushes blocked their way; Conan took out a knife to cut a path

through. The sight and sound of the raven were still on his mind and he would tell his father when he got home. A messenger for sure, but of what?

Bran was some way ahead when he let out a howl and vanished into tall grass.

“Bran! Here, boy!” Conan called. He took out his flute and blew three short notes. Bran did not appear, so Conan quickened his pace. It was then that he heard it: a strange, strident bellow that echoed across the landscape. It was a sound unlike any Conan had ever heard. Fast upon it came a rushing sound, as if the air were being cut by a scythe whipping across heads of barley.

Conan blew his flute again but the notes died on his lips as he saw the animal approach. It was a massive beast, larger than anything he had ever seen. Its legs were as thick as tree trunks. Its skin was wrinkled and grey as ash. It had curving white tusks as sharp as knives and a long, flailing nose that swept from side to side, flattening the grasses. The ground seemed to shudder as it rampaged towards him. As it came closer, he could see that on its head and body it wore heavy armour made from bronze plates that rattled and shook menacingly. On its back, it carried a red tower held on by chains, which it seemed to be trying to shake loose. Conan could not tell whether its shrill bellowing was a cry of fear or rage. Whatever it was, it had seen him. There was no time to run. He stood stock-still and waited to see what it would do. For a moment, boy and beast stood face to face. Its small, dark eyes, framed between massive, flapping ears, met Conan’s. If it were to attack, he would be helpless. His knife and slingshot would be little use to him now. Yet his flute was still in his hand. Very slowly and quietly, Conan raised it to his lips and blew a few notes. The huge beast seemed mesmerised.

“There,” Conan said softly. “I shan’t hurt you, and you won’t hurt me, will you? Or Bran? You won’t hurt us, will you?”