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opening extract from

Soul Eater

written by

Michelle Paver

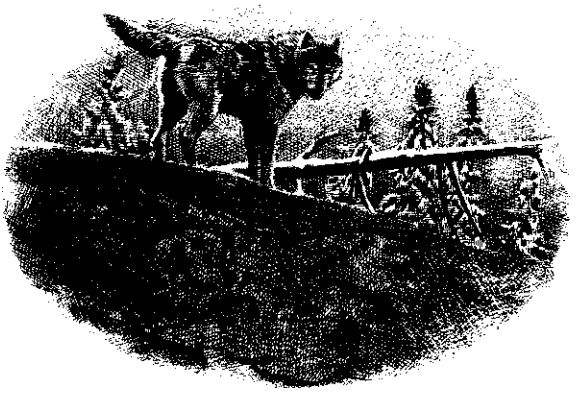
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ONE



Torak didn't want it to be an omen.

He didn't want it to be anything more than an owl feather lying in the snow. So he ignored it. That was his first mistake.

Quietly, he went back to the tracks they'd been following since dawn. They looked fresh. He slipped off his mitten and felt them. No ice in the bottom. Yes, fresh.

Turning to Renn, further uphill, he tapped his sleeve and raised his forefinger, then pointed down into the beech wood. *One reindeer, heading south.*

Renn gave a nod, whipped an arrow from her quiver, and nocked it to her bow. Like Torak, she was hard to see in a pale reindeer-hide parka and leggings, with wood-ash smeared on her face to mask her scent. Like him, she was hungry, having eaten nothing since a slip of dried boar meat for daymeal.

Unlike him, she hadn't seen the owl feather.

So don't tell her, he thought.

That was his second mistake.

A few paces below him, Wolf was sniffing at a patch where the reindeer had scraped away the snow to get at the lichen. His ears were pricked, his silver fur fluffed up with excitement. If he sensed Torak's unease, he didn't show it. Another sniff, then he raised his muzzle to catch the scent-laden breeze, and his amber gaze grazed Torak's. *Smells bad.*

Torak tilted his head. *What do you mean?* he asked in wolf talk.

Wolf twitched his whiskers. *Bad muzzle.*

Torak went to examine what he'd found, and spotted a tiny bead of yellow pus on the bare earth. Wolf was telling him that the reindeer was old, its teeth rotten after many winters of munching gritty lichen.

Torak wrinkled his nose in a brief wolf smile. *Thank you, pack-brother.* Then he glanced at Renn, and headed downhill as silently as his beaver-hide boots would allow.

Not silently enough for Wolf, who flicked a reproachful ear as he moved over the snow as soundlessly as smoke.

Together they crept between the sleeping trees. Black oaks and silvery beeches glittered with frost. Here and there, Torak saw the crimson blaze of holly berries; the deep green of a wakeful spruce standing guard over its slumbering sisters. The Forest was hushed. The rivers were frozen. Most of the birds had flown south.

Except for that owl, thought Torak.

He'd known it was an owl's feather as soon as he'd seen its furry upper side, which muffled the sound of flight when the owl was hunting. If it had been the dusky grey of a forest owl, he wouldn't have worried, he'd simply have given it to Renn, who used them to fletch her arrows. But this feather was barred with black and tawny; shadow and

flame. That told Torak it belonged to the greatest, the fiercest of owls: the eagle owl. And to find one of those – that was bad.

Wolf's black nose twitched.

Torak was instantly alert.

Through the trees, he glimpsed the reindeer, nibbling beard-moss. He heard the crunch of its hooves, saw its misting breath. Good, they were still downwind. He forgot the feather, and thought of juicy meat and rich marrowfat.

Behind him, the faint creak of Renn's bow. He fitted an arrow to his own, then realized he was blocking her view, and dropped to one knee, since she was the better shot.

The reindeer moved behind a beech tree. They'd have to wait.

As Torak waited, he noticed a spruce, five paces below him. The way it spread its snowladen arms . . . warning him back.

Gripping his bow, he fixed his gaze on the prey.

A gust of wind stirred the beeches around him, and last summer's leaves rustled like dry, dead hands.

He swallowed. It felt as if the Forest were trying to tell him something.

Overhead, a branch shifted, and a flurry of snow hissed down. He glanced up. His heart jerked. An eagle owl. Tufted ears as sharp as spearpoints. Huge orange eyes like twin suns.

With a cry he leapt to his feet.

The reindeer fled.

Wolf raced off in pursuit.

Renn's arrow sped past Torak's hood.

The eagle owl spread its enormous wings and silently flew away.

'What were you *doing*?' shouted Renn furiously. 'Standing up like that? I might have killed you!'

Torak didn't reply. He was watching the eagle owl soar into the fierce blue of the noonday sky. But eagle owls, he thought, hunt by night.

Wolf came bounding through the trees and skittered to a halt beside him, shaking off snow and lashing his tail. He hadn't expected to catch the reindeer, but he'd enjoyed the chase.

Sensing Torak's unease, he rubbed against him. Torak knelt, burying his face in the deep, coarse scruff, breathing in Wolf's familiar, sweet-grass scent.

'What's wrong?' said Renn.

Torak raised his head. 'That owl, of course.'

'What owl?"

He blinked. 'But you must have seen it. The eagle owl, it was so close I could have touched it!'

When she still looked blank, he ran back up the hill, and found the feather. 'Here,' he panted, holding it out.

Wolf flattened his ears and growled.

Renn put her hand to her clan-creature feathers.

'What does it mean?' said Torak.

'I don't know, but it's bad. We should get back. Fin-Kedinn will know what to do. And Torak – ' She eyed the feather, 'leave it here.'

As he threw it in the snow, he wished he hadn't picked it up with his bare hand. A fine grey powder dusted his palm. He wiped it off on his parka, but his skin carried a whiff of rottenness that reminded him of the Raven bone-grounds.

Suddenly Wolf gave a grunt, and pricked his ears.

'What's he smelt?' said Renn. She didn't speak wolf talk, but she knew Wolf.

Torak frowned. 'I don't know.' Wolf's tail was high, but he wasn't giving any of the prey signals Torak recognized.

Strange prey, Wolf told him, and he realized that Wolf was puzzled, too.

An overwhelming sense of danger swept over Torak. He gave an urgent warning bark. 'Uff!' *Stay away!*

But Wolf was off, racing up the valley in his tireless lope.

'No!' shouted Torak, floundering after him.

'What's the matter?' cried Renn. 'What did he say?'

'"Strange prey",' said Torak.

With growing alarm, he watched Wolf crest the ridge and glance back at them. He looked magnificent: his thick winter pelt a rich blend of grey and black and foxy red, his bushy tail taut with the thrill of the hunt. *Follow me, pack-brother! Strange prey!*

Then he was gone.

They followed as fast as they could, but they were burdened with packs and sleeping-sacks, and the snow was deep, so they had to use their wicker snowshoes, which slowed them even more. When they reached the top, Wolf was nowhere to be seen.

'He'll be waiting for us,' said Renn, trying to be reassuring. She pointed to a thicket of aspen. 'Soon as we get down into that, he'll pounce.'

That made Torak feel a little better. Only yesterday, Wolf had hidden behind a juniper bush, then leapt out and knocked him into a snowdrift, growling and play-biting till Torak was helpless with laughter.

They reached the aspens. Wolf didn't pounce.

Torak uttered two short barks. *Where are you?*

No answer.

His tracks were plain enough, though. Several clans hunted here, and all used dogs, but there was no mistaking Wolf's tracks for a dog's. A dog runs haphazardly, because he knows his master will feed him, whereas a wolf runs with

a purpose: he must find prey, or starve. And although Wolf had been with Torak and the Raven Clan for the past seven moons, Torak had never given him food, for fear of blunting his hunting skills.

The afternoon wore on, and still they followed his trail: a straight-line lope, in which the hindpaws trod in the prints of the forepaws. The crunch of their snowshoes and the rasp of their breath echoed through the Forest.

'We're getting quite far north,' said Renn. They were about a daywalk from the Raven camp, which lay to the south-west, by the Widewater river.

Again Torak barked. *Where are you?*

Snow drifted from a tree, pattering onto his hood. The stillness after it settled seemed deeper than before.

As he watched the gleam die on a cluster of holly berries, he sensed that the day was on the turn. Already the brightness was fading from the sky, and shadows were stealing out from under the trees. A chill crept into his heart, because he knew that the descent into darkness had begun.

The clans call this the demon time, because it's in winter, when the great bull Auroch rears high among the stars, that demons escape from the Otherworld, and flit through the Forest, to cause havoc and despair. It only takes one to taint a whole valley; and although the Mages keep watch, they can't trap them all. Demons are hard to see. You never catch more than a glimpse, and you can't be sure what they look like, because they change, the better to slip into sleeping mouths, and possess living bodies. There they crouch in the red darkness, sucking out courage and trust; leaving the seeds of malice and strife.

It was at this moment, at the demon time, that Torak knew the omens had come true. Wolf hadn't howled a reply

because he could not. Because something had happened to him.

Nightmare visions flashed through Torak's mind. What if Wolf had tried to bring down an auroch or an elk on his own? He was only twenty moons old. A flying hoof can kill a foolhardy young wolf.

Maybe he'd been caught in a snare. Torak had taught him to avoid them, but what if he'd been careless? He'd be trapped. Unable to howl as the noose tightened round his neck.

The trees creaked. More snow pattered down. Torak put his hands to his lips and howled. *Where – are – you?*

No reply.

Renn gave him a worried smile; but in her dark eyes he saw his own anxiety. 'The sun's going down,' she said.

He swallowed. 'In a while the moon will be up. There'll be enough light to track.'

She gave a doubtful nod.

They'd gone another few paces when she turned aside. 'Torak! Over here!'



Whoever had caught Wolf had done it with the simplest of traps. They'd dug a pit, and hidden it with a flimsy screen of snow-covered branches.

That wouldn't have held him for long, but in the churned-up snow around the pit, Torak found shreds of braided rawhide. 'A net,' he said in disbelief. 'They had a net.'

'But – no spikes in the pit,' said Renn. 'They must have wanted him alive.'

This is a bad dream, thought Torak. I'm going to wake

up, and Wolf is going to come loping through the trees.

That was when he saw the blood. A shocking red spatter in the snow.

'Maybe he bit them,' muttered Renn. 'I hope he did, I hope he bit their hands off!'

Torak picked up a tuft of bloody fur. His fingers shook. He forced himself to read the snow.

Wolf had approached the pitfall warily, his tracks changing from a straight-line lope to a walk, in which front and hind prints showed side-by-side. But he'd approached just the same.

Oh Wolf, said Torak silently. Why weren't you more careful?

Then it struck him that maybe it was his friendship with Wolf that had made him more trusting of people. Maybe this was his fault.

He stared at the trampled trail that led north. Ice was forming in the tracks. Wolf's captors had a head start.

'How many sets of prints?' said Renn, staying well back, as Torak was by far the better tracker.

'Two. The bigger man's prints are deeper when he ran off.'

'So – he was carrying Wolf. But why take him at all? No-one would hurt Wolf. No-one would dare.' It was strict clan law that no harm should be done to any of the hunters in the Forest.

'Torak,' she called, crouching behind a clump of juniper. 'They hid over here. But I can't make out – '

'Don't move!' warned Torak.

'What?'

'There, by your boot!'

She froze. 'What – made *that*?'

He squatted to examine it.

His father had taught him tracking, and he thought he knew every print of every creature in the Forest; but these were the strangest he'd ever seen. Very light and small, like a bird's – but not. The hind tracks resembled tiny, crooked, five-clawed hands, but there were no front prints, only two pock-marks: as if the creature had been walking on stumps.

'"Strange prey",' murmured Torak.

Renn met his eyes. 'Bait. They used it as bait.'

He stood up. 'They went north, towards the valley of the Axehandle. Where could they go from there?'

She threw up her hands. 'Anywhere! They could've turned east for Lake Axehead, and kept going all the way to the High Mountains. Or doubled back south, for the Deep Forest. Or west, they could be halfway to the Sea by now –'

Voices, coming their way.

They ducked behind the junipers. Renn readied her bow, and Torak drew his black basalt axe from his belt.

Whoever it was, they were making no attempt at stealth. Torak saw a man and woman, followed by a large dog dragging a sled on which lolled a dead roe buck. A boy of about eight summers plunged eagerly ahead, and with him, a younger dog with a deerhide saddle-pack strapped to his belly.

The young dog caught Wolf's scent on Torak, gave a terrified yelp, and sped back to the boy, who halted. Torak saw the clan-tattoo between his eyebrows: three slender black ovals, like a permanent frown.

Renn breathed out. 'Willow Clan! Maybe they saw something!'

'No!' He pulled her back. 'We don't know if we can trust them!'

She stared at him. 'Torak, these are *Willows*! Of course we

can!' Before he could stop her, she was running towards them, both fists over her heart in sign of friendship.

They saw her and broke into smiles. They were returning to their clan in the west, the woman explained. Her face was scarred, like birch canker, marking her as a survivor of last summer's sickness.

'Did you meet anyone?' said Renn. 'We're looking for –'

'"We"?' queried the man.

Torak stood up. 'You've come from the north. Did you see anyone?'

The man's eyes flicked to Torak's clan-tattoos, and his eyebrows rose. 'We don't meet many Wolf Clan these days.' Then to Renn, 'You're young to be hunting so far from your camp.'

Renn bridled. 'We're both thirteen summers old. And we have the Leader's leave – '

'Did you see anyone?' broke in Torak.

'I did,' said the boy.

'Who?' cried Torak. 'Who was it?'

The boy drew back, startled by his intensity. 'I – I'd gone to find Snapper.' He pointed at his dog, who gave a faint wag of his tail. 'He likes chasing squirrels, but he gets lost. Then I saw them. They had a net, it was struggling.'

So he's still alive, thought Torak. He'd been clenching his fists so hard that his nails were digging into his palms.

'What did they look like?' said Renn.

The boy stretched his arm above his head. 'A huge man. And another, big, with bandy legs.'

'What about their clan-tattoos?' said Torak. 'Clan-creature skins? Anything!'

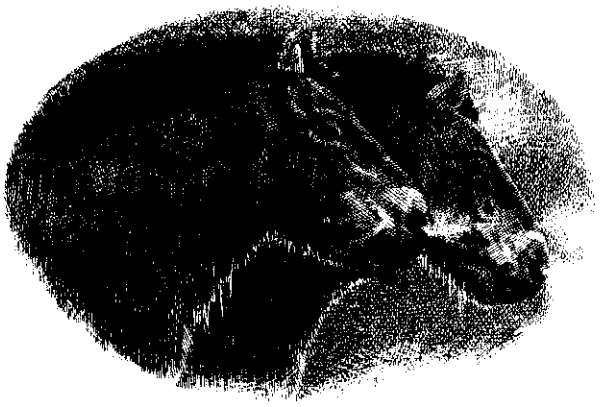
The boy gulped. 'Their hoods were up, I didn't see their faces.'

Torak turned to the Willow man. 'Can you take a message to Fin-Kedinn?'

'Whatever it is,' said the man, 'you should tell him yourself. The Leader of the Ravens is wise, he'll know what to do.'

'There's no time,' said Torak. 'Tell him that someone has taken Wolf. Tell him we're going to get him back.'

Two



Night brought a bone-cracking frost that turned the trees white, and the snow-crust brittle underfoot.

It was past middle-night, and Torak was dizzy with tiredness. He forced himself to keep going. The trail of Wolf's captors lay like a snake in the moonlight. North, always north.

With heartstopping suddenness, seven Mages loomed before him. Lean, horned shadows cut across his path. *We will rule the Forest,* they whispered in voices colder than windblown snow. *All tremble before us. We are the Soul-Eaters . . .*

A hand touched his shoulder. He cried out.

'What's wrong?' said Renn.

He blinked. Before him, seven birch trees glittered with frost. 'A dream.'

'About what?' Renn knew something of dreams, because sometimes her own came true.

'Nothing,' said Torak.