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Opening extract from

Chronicles of Ancient Darkness Complete Boxed Set

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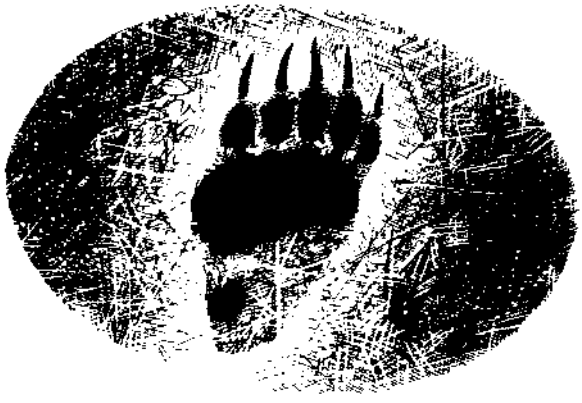
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ONE



Torak woke with a jolt from a sleep he'd never meant to have.

The fire had burned low. He crouched in the fragile shell of light and peered into the looming blackness of the Forest. He couldn't see anything. Couldn't hear anything. Had it come back? Was it out there now, watching him with its hot, murderous eyes?

He felt hollow and cold. He knew that he badly needed food, and that his arm hurt, and his eyes were scratchy with tiredness, but he couldn't really *feel* it. All night he'd guarded the wreck of the spruce bough shelter, and watched his father bleed. How could this be happening?

Only yesterday – *yesterday* – they'd pitched camp in the blue autumn dusk. Torak had made a joke, and his father was laughing. Then the Forest exploded. Ravens screamed. Pines cracked. And out of the dark beneath the trees surged a deeper darkness: a huge rampaging menace in bear form.

Suddenly death was upon them. A frenzy of claws. A welter of sound to make the ears bleed. In a heartbeat, the creature had smashed their shelter to splinters. In a heartbeat, it had ripped a ragged wound in his father's side. Then it was gone, melting into the Forest as silently as mist.

But what kind of bear *stalks* men – then vanishes without making the kill? What kind of bear plays with its prey?

And where was it now?

Torak couldn't see beyond the firelight, but he knew that the clearing, too, was a wreck of snapped saplings and trampled bracken. He smelt pine-blood and clawed earth. He heard the soft, sad bubbling of the stream thirty paces away. The bear could be anywhere.

Beside him, his father moaned. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked at his son without recognition.

Torak's heart clenched. 'It – it's me,' he stammered. 'How do you feel?'

Pain convulsed his father's lean brown face. His cheeks were tinged with grey, making the clan-tattoos stand out lividly. Sweat matted his long dark hair.

His wound was so deep that as Torak clumsily stanched it with beard-moss, he saw his father's guts glistening in the firelight. He had to grit his teeth to keep from retching. He hoped Fa didn't notice – but of course he did. Fa was a hunter. He noticed everything.

'Torak . . . ' he breathed. His hand reached out, his hot fingers clinging to Torak's as eagerly as a child. Torak swallowed. Sons clutch their fathers' hands; not the other way around.

He tried to be practical: to be a man instead of a boy. 'I've still got some yarrow leaves,' he said, fumbling for his medicine pouch with his free hand. 'Maybe that'll stop the –'

'Keep it. You're bleeding too.'

'Doesn't hurt,' lied Torak. The bear had thrown him against a birch tree, bruising his ribs and gashing his left forearm.

'Torak – leave. Now. Before it comes back.'

Torak stared at him. He opened his mouth but no sound came.

'You must,' said his father.

'No. *No*. I can't – '

'Torak – I'm dying. I'll be dead by sunrise.'

Torak gripped the medicine pouch. There was a roaring in his ears. 'Fa – '

'Give me – what I need for the Death Journey. Then get your things.'

The Death Journey. No. No.

But his father's face was stern. 'My bow,' he said. 'Three arrows. You – keep the rest. Where I'm going – hunting's easy.'

There was a tear in the knee of Torak's buckskin leggings. He dug his thumbnail into the flesh. It hurt. He forced himself to concentrate on that.

'Food,' gasped his father. 'The dried meat. You – take it all.'

Torak's knee had started to bleed. He kept digging. He tried not to picture his father on the Death Journey. He tried not to picture himself alone in the Forest. He was only twelve summers old. He couldn't survive on his own. He didn't know how.

'Torak! Move!'

Blinking furiously, Torak reached for his father's weapons and laid them by his side. He divided up the arrows, pricking his fingers on the sharp flint points. Then he shouldered his quiver and bow, and scrabbled in the

wreckage for his small black basalt axe. His hazelwood pack had been smashed in the attack; he'd have to cram everything else into his jerkin, or tie it to his belt.

He reached for his reindeer-hide sleeping-sack.

'Take mine,' murmured his father. 'You never did – repair yours. And – swap knives.'

Torak was aghast. 'Not your knife! You'll need it!'

'You'll need it more. And – it'll be good to have something of yours on the Death Journey.'

'Fa, please. Don't – '

In the Forest, a twig snapped.

Torak spun round.

The darkness was absolute. Everywhere he looked the shadows were bear-shaped.

No wind.

No birdsong.

Just the crackle of the fire and the thud of his heart. The Forest itself was holding its breath.

His father licked the sweat from his lips. 'It's not here yet,' he said. 'Soon. It will come for me soon . . . Quick. The knives.'

Torak didn't want to swap knives. That would make it final. But his father was watching him with an intensity that allowed no refusal.

Clenching his jaw so hard that it hurt, Torak took his own knife and put it into Fa's hand. Then he untied the buckskin sheath from his father's belt. Fa's knife was beautiful and deadly, with a blade of banded blue slate shaped like a willow leaf, and a haft of red deer antler that was bound with elk sinew for a better grip. As Torak looked down at it, the truth hit him. He was getting ready for a life without Fa. 'I'm not leaving you!' he cried. 'I'll fight it, I – '

'No! No-one can fight this bear!'

Ravens flew up from the trees.

Torak forgot to breathe.

'Listen to me,' hissed his father. 'A bear – any bear – is the strongest hunter in the Forest. You know that. But this bear – *much* stronger.'

Torak felt the hairs on his arms rise. Looking down into his father's eyes, he saw the tiny scarlet veins, and at the centres, the fathomless dark. 'What do you mean?' he whispered. 'What – '

'It is – possessed.' His father's face was grim; he didn't seem like Fa any more. 'Some – demon – from the Otherworld – has entered it and made it evil.'

An ember spat. The dark trees leaned closer to listen.

'A *demon?*' said Torak.

His father shut his eyes, mustering his strength. 'It lives only to kill,' he said at last. 'With each kill – its power will grow. It will slaughter – everything. The prey. The clans. All will die. The Forest will die . . . ' he broke off. 'In one moon – it will be too late. The demon – too strong.'

'One moon? But what – '

'Think, Torak! When the red eye is highest in the night sky, that's when demons are strongest. You know this. That's when the bear will be – invincible.' He fought for breath. In the firelight, Torak saw the pulse beating in his throat. So faint: as if it might stop at any moment. 'I need you – to swear something,' said Fa.

'Anything.'

Fa swallowed. 'Head north. Many daywalks. Find – the Mountain – of the World Spirit.'

Torak stared at him. *What?*

His father's eyes opened, and he gazed into the branches overhead, as if he saw things there that no-one else could. 'Find it,' he said again. 'It's the only hope.'

'But – no-one's ever found it. No-one can.'

'You can.'

'How? I don't – '

'Your guide – will find you.'

Torak was bewildered. Never before had his father talked like this. He was a practical man, a hunter. 'I don't understand any of this!' he cried. 'What guide? Why must I find the Mountain? Will I be safe there? Is that it? Safe from the bear?'

Slowly, Fa's gaze left the sky and came to rest on his son's face. He looked as if he was wondering how much more Torak could take. 'Ah, you're too young,' he said. 'I thought I had more time. So much I haven't told you. Don't – don't hate me for that later.'

Torak looked at him in horror. Then he leapt to his feet. 'I can't do this on my own. Shouldn't I try to find – '

'No!' said his father with startling force. 'All your life I've kept you apart. Even – from our own Wolf Clan. Stay away from men! If they find out – what you can do . . . '

'What do you mean? I don't – '

'No time,' his father cut in. 'Now swear. On my knife. Swear that you will find the Mountain, or die trying.'

Torak bit his lip hard. East through the trees, a grey light was growing. Not yet, he thought in panic. *Please* not yet.

'Swear,' hissed his father.

Torak knelt and picked up the knife. It was heavy: a man's knife, too big for him. Awkwardly he touched it to the wound on his forearm. Then he put it to his shoulder, where the strip of wolf fur, his clan-creature, was sewn to his jerkin. In an unsteady voice he took his oath. 'I swear, by my blood on this blade, and by each of my three souls – that I will find the Mountain of the World Spirit. Or die trying.'

His father breathed out. 'Good. Good. Now. Put the Death Marks on me. Hurry. The bear – not far off.'

Torak felt the salty sting of tears. Angrily he brushed them away. 'I haven't got any ochre,' he mumbled.

'Take – mine.'

In a blur, Torak found the little antler-tine medicine horn that had been his mother's. In a blur, he yanked out the black oak stopper, and shook some of the red ochre into his palm.

Suddenly he stopped. 'I can't.'

'You can. For me.'

Torak spat into his palm and made a sticky paste of the ochre, the dark-red blood of the earth, then he drew the small circles on his father's skin that would help the souls recognise each other and stay together after death.

First, as gently as he could, he removed his father's beaver-hide boots, and drew a circle on each heel to mark the name-soul. Then he drew another circle over the heart, to mark the clan-soul. This wasn't easy, as his father's chest was scarred from an old wound, so Torak only managed a lopsided oval. He hoped that would be good enough.

Last, he made the most important mark of all: a circle on the forehead to mark the Nanuak, the world-soul. By the time he'd finished he was swallowing tears.

'Better,' murmured his father. But Torak saw with a clutch of terror that the pulse in his throat was fainter.

'You can't die!' Torak burst out.

His father gazed at him with pain and longing.

'Fa, I'm not leaving you, I – '

'Torak. You swore an oath.' Again he closed his eyes. 'Now. You – keep the medicine horn. I don't need it any more. Take your things. Fetch me water from the river. Then – go.'

I will *not* cry, Torak told himself as he rolled up his father's sleeping-sack and tied it across his back; jammed his axe into his belt; stuffed his medicine pouch into his jerkin.

He got to his feet and cast about for the waterskin. It was ripped to shreds. He'd have to bring water in a dock leaf. He was about to go when his father murmured his name.

Torak turned. 'Yes, Fa?'

'Remember. When you're hunting, look behind you. I – always tell you.' He forced a smile. 'You always – forget. Look behind you. Yes?'

Torak nodded. He tried to smile back. Then he blundered through the wet bracken towards the stream.

The light was growing, and the air smelt fresh and sweet. Around him the trees were bleeding: oozing golden pine-blood from the slashes the bear had inflicted. Some of the tree-spirits were moaning quietly in the dawn breeze.

Torak reached the stream, where mist floated above the bracken, and willows trailed their fingers in the cold water. Glancing quickly around, he snatched a dock leaf and moved forwards, his boots sinking into the soft red mud.

He froze.

Beside his right boot was the track of a bear. A front paw: twice the size of his own head, and so fresh that he could see the points where the long, vicious claws had bitten deep into the mud.

Look behind you, Torak.

He spun round.

Willows. Alder. Fir.

No bear.

A raven flew down onto a nearby bough, making him jump. The bird folded its stiff black wings and fixed him

with a beady eye. Then it jerked its head, croaked once, and flew away.

Torak stared in the direction it had seemed to indicate.

Dark yew. Dripping spruce. Dense. Impenetrable.

But deep within – no more than ten paces away – a stir of branches. Something was in there. Something huge.

He tried to keep his panicky thoughts from skittering away, but his mind had gone white.

The thing about a bear, his father always said, *is that it can move as silently as breath. It could be watching you from ten paces away, and you'd never know. Against a bear you have no defences. You can't run faster. You can't climb higher. You can't fight it on your own. All you can do is learn its ways, and try to persuade it that you're neither threat nor prey.*

Torak forced himself to stay still. Don't run. Don't run. Maybe it doesn't know you're here.

A low hiss. Again the branches stirred.

He heard the stealthy rustle as the creature moved towards the shelter: towards his father. He waited in rigid silence as it passed. Coward! he shouted inside his head. You let it go without even trying to save Fa!

But what could you do? said the small part of his mind that could still think straight. Fa knew this would happen. That's why he sent you for water. He knew it was coming for him . . .

'Torak!' came his father's wild cry. *'Run!'*

Crows burst from the trees. A roar shook the Forest – on and on till Torak's head was splitting.

'Fa!' he screamed.

'Run!'

Again the Forest shook. Again came his father's cry. Then suddenly it broke off.

Torak jammed his fist in his mouth.

Through the trees, he glimpsed a great dark shadow in the wreck of the shelter.

He turned and ran.