



opening extract of spirit walker

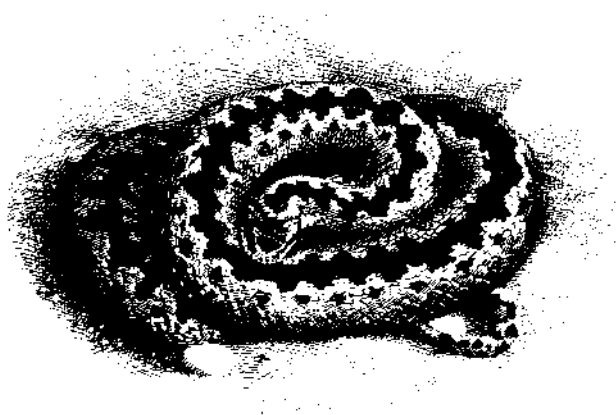
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ONE



The auroch appeared quite suddenly from the trees on the other side of the stream.

One moment Torak was gazing at sun-dappled willows – the next, there she was. She stood taller than the tallest man, and her great curving horns could have skewered a bear. If she charged, he was in trouble.

By bad luck, he was upwind of her. He held his breath as he watched her twitch her blunt black muzzle to taste his scent. She snorted. Paved the earth with one massive hoof.

Then he saw the calf peering from the bracken, and his belly turned over. Aurochs are gentle creatures – *except* when they have calves.

Without a sound, Torak drew back into the shade. If he didn't startle her, maybe she wouldn't charge.

Again the auroch snorted, and raked the ferns with her horns. At last she seemed to decide that he wasn't hunting her after all, and slumped down in the mud to have a wallow.

Torak blew out a long breath.

The calf wobbled towards its mother, slipped, bleated, and fell over. The cow auroch raised her head and nosed it to its feet, then lay back to enjoy herself.

Crouching behind a juniper bush, Torak wondered what to do. Fin-Kedinn, the Clan Leader, had sent him to retrieve a bundle of willow bark that had been soaking in the stream; he didn't want to return to camp without it. Neither did he want to get trampled by an auroch.

He decided to wait for her to leave.

It was a hot day at the beginning of the Moon of No Dark, and the Forest was drowsy with sun. The trees echoed with birdsong; a warm south-easterly breeze carried the sweetness of lime blossom. After a while, Torak's heartbeats slowed. He heard a clutch of young greenfinches squealing for food in a hazel thicket. He watched a viper basking on a rock. He tried to fix his thoughts on that, but as so often happened, they drifted to Wolf.

Wolf would be nearly full-grown by now, but he'd been a cub when Torak had known him: falling over his paws, and pestering Torak for lingonberries . . .

Don't think about Wolf, Torak told himself fiercely. *He's gone. He's never coming back, never. Think about the auroch, or the viper, or –*

That was when he saw the hunter.

He was on this side of the water, twenty paces downstream, but downwind of the auroch. The shade was too deep to make out his face, but Torak saw that like him, he wore a sleeveless buckskin jerkin and knee-length leggings, with light rawhide boots. Unlike Torak, he wore a boar tusk on a thong around his neck. Boar Clan.

Ordinarily, Torak would have been reassured. The Boars

were fairly friendly with the Raven Clan, with whom he'd been living for the past six moons. But there was something very wrong about this hunter. He moved with an awkward, lurching gait, his head lolling from side to side. *And he was stalking the auroch.* Two slate throwing-axes were stuck in his belt – and as Torak watched in disbelief, he pulled one out and hefted it in his hand.

Was he mad? No man hunts an auroch on his own. An auroch is the biggest, strongest prey in the Forest. To attack one on your own is asking to be killed.

The auroch, happily unaware, grunted and rubbed deeper into the mud, relishing the relief from the troublesome midges. Her calf nosed a clump of willowherb, waiting for her to finish.

Torak rose to his feet and warned the hunter with urgent slicing motions of his palm: *Danger! Go back!*

The hunter didn't see him. Flexing his brawny arm, he took aim – and hurled the axe.

It whistled through the air and thudded into the ground a hand's breadth from the calf.

The calf fled. Its mother gave an outraged bellow and lumbered to her feet, casting about for the attacker. But the hunter was still downwind; she didn't catch his scent.

Incredibly, he was reaching for his second axe.

'No!' Torak whispered hoarsely. 'You'll only hurt her and get us both killed!'

The hunter wrenched the axe from his belt.

Torak thought swiftly. If the axe found its mark, the auroch would be unstoppable. But if she was startled instead of wounded, maybe she would merely make a mock charge, and flee with her calf. He had to get her out of range of that axe, fast.

Taking a deep breath, he jumped up and down, waving

his arms and yelling 'Over here! Over here!'

It worked – in a way. The auroch gave a furious bellow and charged at Torak – and the axe hit the mud where she'd stood a heartbeat before. As she splashed towards Torak, he threw himself behind an oak tree.

No time to climb it – she was almost upon him. He heard her grunt as she heaved herself up the bank – he felt her heat on the other side of the tree-trunk . . .

At the last moment she swerved, flicking up her tail and blundering off into the Forest, her calf galloping after her.

The silence when she'd gone was deafening.

Sweat poured down Torak's face as he leaned against the oak.

The hunter stood with his head down, rocking from side to side.

'What were you *doing*?' panted Torak. 'We could've been killed!'

The hunter did not reply. Lurching across the stream, he retrieved his axes and stuck them in his belt, then shambled back again. Torak still couldn't see his face, but he took in the hunter's muscled limbs and jagged slate knife. If it came to a fight, he'd lose. He was just a boy, not even thirteen summers old.

Suddenly the hunter stumbled against a beech tree and began to retch.

Torak forgot his alarm and ran to help him.

The hunter was on hands and knees, spewing up yellow slime. His back arched – he gave a convulsive heave – and spat out something slippery and dark, the size of a child's fist. It looked – it looked like *bair*.

A gust of wind stirred the branches, and in a shaft of sunlight Torak saw him clearly for the first time.

The sick man had yanked handfuls of hair from his scalp

and beard, leaving patches of raw, oozing flesh. His face was crusted with thick honey-coloured scabs like birch canker. Slime bubbled in his throat as he spat out the last of the hair – then sat back on his heels, and began scratching a rash of blisters on his forearm.

Torak edged backwards, his hand moving to his clan-creature skin: the strip of wolf fur sewn to his jerkin. What was this?

Renn would know. 'Fevers,' she'd once told him, 'are most common around Midsummer, because that's when the worms of sickness have longest to work: creeping out of the swamps during the white nights when the sun never sleeps.' But if this was a fever, it was unlike any Torak had ever seen.

He wondered what he could do. All he had was some coltsfoot in his medicine pouch. 'Let me help you,' he said shakily, 'I have some . . . Ah no, stop! You're hurting yourself!'

The man was still scratching, baring his teeth as people do when the itching is so unbearable that they'd rather turn it into outright pain. All at once, he dug in his fingernails and savaged the blisters, leaving a swathe of bloody flesh.

'Don't!' cried Torak.

With a snarl the man sprang at him, pinning him down.

Torak stared up into a mass of crusted sores, into two dull eyes filmed with pus. 'Don't – hurt me!' he gasped. 'My name – is Torak! I'm – Wolf Clan, I –'

The man leaned closer. '*It – is – coming,*' he hissed in a blast of putrid breath.

Torak tried to swallow. 'What – is?'

The cankered face twisted in terror. 'Can't you see?' he whispered, flecking Torak with yellow spit. '*It is coming!* It will take us all!'

He staggered to his feet, swaying and squinting at the sun. Then he crashed through the trees as if all the demons of the Otherworld were after him.

Torak raised himself on one elbow, breathing hard.

The birds had fallen silent.

The Forest looked on, appalled.

Slowly, Torak stood up. He felt the wind veering round to the east, turning chill. A shiver ran through the trees. They began to murmur to one another. Torak wished he knew what they were saying. But he knew what they were feeling, because he felt it too: something rising and blowing through the Forest.

It is coming.

Sickness.

Torak ran to fetch his quiver and bow. No time to retrieve the willow bark. He had to get back to camp, and warn the Ravens.