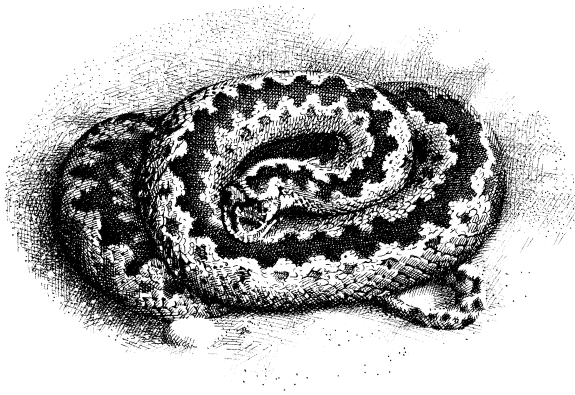




ONE



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. Pawed 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 *hair*.

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.

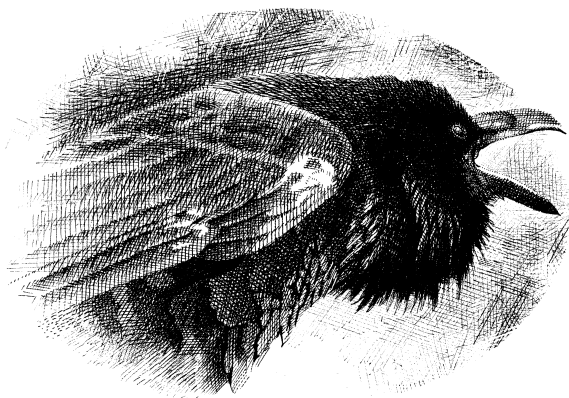
Slowly, Torak stood up. He felt the wind veering round to the east, turning chill. A shiver ran through the trees. They began to murmur to one another. Torak wished he knew what they were saying. But he knew what they were feeling, because he felt it too: something rising and blowing through the Forest.

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.

TWO



'Where's Fin-Kedinn?' cried Torak when he reached the Raven camp.

'In the next valley,' said a man gutting salmon, 'gathering dogwood for arrowshafts.'

'What about Saeunn? Where's the Mage?'

'Casting the bones,' said a girl threading fish-heads on sinew. 'She's on the Rock, you'd better wait till she comes down.'

Torak ground his teeth in frustration. There was the Raven Mage perched high on the Guardian Rock: a small, bird-like figure scowling at the bones, while beside her the clan guardian folded its stiff black wings and uttered a harsh 'cark!'

Who else could he tell?

Renn was out hunting. Oslak, whose shelter he shared, was nowhere in sight. By the smoking-racks he spotted

Sialot and Poi, the Raven boys closest to him in age – but they were the last ones he'd approach; they didn't like him because he was an outsider. Everyone else was too busy getting in the salmon to listen to some wild tale about a sick man in the Forest. And as Torak looked about, he almost began to doubt it himself. Everything seemed so normal.

The Ravens had built their camp where the Widewater crashes out of a shadowy gorge and thunders past the Rock, then over the rapids. It was up these rapids that the salmon fought their way each summer on their mysterious journey from the Sea to the Mountains. Always they were driven back by the fury of the river, and always they tried again, hurtling through the foaming chaos in twisting, shining leaps – until they died of exhaustion, or reached the calmer waters beyond the gorge, or were speared by the Ravens.

To catch them, the clan sank poles in the riverbed, and spanned the Widewater with a wicker walkway just strong enough to support a few fishermen with spears. It was skilled work, and anyone falling in risked crippling injury or worse, for the river was relentless, and the rocks jutting from the rapids as sharp as broken teeth. But the prize was great.

The Ravens' shelters stood empty; everybody was at the smoking-racks, getting in the day's haul before it spoiled. Men, women and children scraped off scales and gutted fish, while others sliced strips of orange flesh from the bones, leaving them joined at the tail for easy hanging on the racks. Sialot and Poi pounded juniper berries, which would be mixed with the dried, shredded meat to keep it sweet – or mask its taste if it was not.

Nothing was wasted. The skins would be cured and fashioned into waterproof tinder pouches; the eyes and

bones would make glue; the livers and roe would provide a delicacy at nightmeal, and an offering for the guardian and the spirits of the salmon.

Elsewhere in the Forest, other clans camped by other rivers to take part in the bounty. Boar Clan, Willow, Otter, Viper. And where the people did not camp, other hunters came: bears, lynx, eagles, wolves. All celebrating the running of the salmon, which gave them new strength after the rigours of winter.

This was how it had always been since the Beginning. Surely, thought Torak, one sick man couldn't change all that.

Then he remembered the cankered face and the pus-filmed eyes.

At that moment, Oslak emerged from their shelter, and Torak's heart leapt. Oslak would know what to do.

But to his astonishment, Oslak hardly listened as he blurted out his story, seeming more engrossed in re-tying the binding on his fishing spear. 'You say the man was Boar Clan,' he said, frowning and scratching the back of his hand. 'Well then, his Mage will take care of him. Here.' He tossed Torak the spear. 'Get down to the stepping stones and let me see you take a salmon.'

Torak was bewildered. 'But Oslak –'

'Go on, go!' snapped Oslak.

Torak gave a start. It was unlike Oslak to get cross. In fact, it never happened. He was a huge, gentle man with a tangled beard and a slightly alarming face, having lost one ear and a chunk of cheek in a misunderstanding with a wolverine. It was just like him not to blame the wolverine. 'My fault,' he'd say if anyone asked. 'I gave her a fright.'

That was Oslak. He and his mate Vedna had been the first to offer Torak a place in their shelter when he came to

live with the Ravens, and they'd always been kind to him. But Oslak was also the strongest man in the clan, so Torak made no further protest, and took the spear.

As he did, he saw something that stopped him dead. The back of Oslak's hand was covered in blisters.

'What's – that on your hand?' he said.

'Midge bites,' said Oslak, scratching harder. 'Worst I've ever had. Kept me awake all night.'

'They don't look like midge bites,' said Torak. 'Do they – hurt?'

Oslak was still scratching. 'Strange. Feels as if my name-soul's leaking out. But that can't be, can it?' He peered at Torak as if the light hurt, and his face was fearful and childlike.

Torak swallowed. 'I don't think you can lose your name-soul through a cut; only through your mouth, if you're dreaming, or – sick.' He paused. 'Are you sick?'

'Sick? Why would I be sick?' A shiver shook his whole body. 'But I can't hold onto my souls.'

Torak's hand tightened on the spear. 'I'll fetch Saeunn.'

Oslak scowled. 'I don't need Saeunn! Now go!' Suddenly he wasn't Oslak any more. He was a big man looming over Torak, clenching his fists.

Then he seemed to come to himself. 'Just – leave me be, eh? Go on. Thull's waiting.'

'All right, Oslak,' said Torak as levelly as he could.

He was halfway to the river's edge when he turned and looked back.

Oslak was still scratching. 'Leaking *out*,' he muttered. Then he went inside the shelter – and Torak saw the raw patch behind his remaining ear where the hair had been yanked out; the thick honey-coloured scab, like birch canker.

Torak felt a coldness settle inside him.

He raced down to the stepping stones, where Oslak's younger brother squatted to clean his knife. 'Thull!' he cried. 'I think Oslak's sick!'

His tale came out in a breathless jumble, and Thull wasn't impressed. 'Torak, those are midge bites. It happens every summer, they drive him mad.'

'It isn't midges,' said Torak.

'Well, he's fine now,' said Thull, pointing at the walkway.

Sure enough, there was Oslak, crouching with a spear – and on the end of it, a wriggling salmon.

Biting his lip, Torak glanced about. It all seemed so *normal*. Children played with glittering handfuls of fish-scales. Reckless young ravens teased the dogs by pecking their tails. Thull's son Dari, five summers old, splashed in the shallows with the pine-cone auroch which Oslak had made for him.

Filled with misgiving, Torak clutched his spear and waded in.

The stepping stones were four boulders between the walkway and the rapids where beginners learned to keep their balance. Thull pointed to the first stone, but Torak made his way precariously to the fourth, placing himself midriver, and downstream from Oslak. He didn't know what he expected; only that he had to keep watch.

'Keep your eyes on the salmon,' shouted Thull from the bank, 'not on the water!'

Torak found that impossible. The rocks were slippery with lichen, and around him the green water boiled, with now and then a silver flash of salmon. The fishing spear was long and heavy, making it hard to balance. It had two barbed antler prongs for gripping and holding the fish – if Torak caught any, which he hadn't in all previous attempts.

When he'd lived with his father, he'd only fished with a hook and line. With a spear, as Sialot never tired of remarking, he was as clumsy as a child of seven summers.

He forced himself to concentrate. Stabbed with his spear. Missed. Nearly toppled in.

'Let them get *past* you before taking aim!' yelled Thull. 'Catch them on their way down, when they're tired!'

Torak tried again. Again he missed.

From the smoking-racks came a hoot of laughter. Torak's face flamed. Sialot was enjoying this.

'Better!' called Thull with more kindness than truth. 'Keep at it! I'll come back later.' He went off to feed the fires, leaving Dari in the shallows, crooning to his auroch.

For a while Torak forgot everything as he strove to catch a fish without either dropping the spear or falling in. Soon he was soaked in spray. And the river was *angry*. Every so often it hurled a huge wave against his rock.

Suddenly he heard a shout from the walkway. He jerked up his head – then breathed out in relief.

Oslak had speared another salmon. With one blow he killed it, then knelt to pull it off the spear.

He's all right, Torak told himself.

As he watched, Oslak scratched his hand. Then he reached behind his ear and clawed at the scab.

The salmon slithered off the walkway. Oslak bared his teeth, wrenched off the scab – and ate it.

Torak recoiled and nearly fell in.

The sun went behind a cloud. The water turned black. The discarded salmon slid past, glaring at him with a dull dead eye.

He shot a glance at the shallows.

Dari was gone.

Another cry from upriver.

He turned.

Dari was on the walkway, tottering towards his uncle – who wasn't warning him back, but *beckoning*.

'Come to me, Dari!' he shouted, his face distorted by a horrible eagerness. 'Come to me! I won't let them take our souls!'