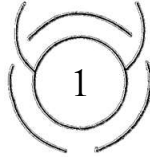


THE FATE OF OUR UNION



HILDEBRAND HERMANNSON



THE CHOSEN

Saxony, CE 109

THEY THINK THEY'RE BETTER THAN ME. Sunu lay awake in the dark after a night of unrest, repeating bad thoughts. *They didn't even bother to look.* Shifting irritably in his hay bed, he reached for the skull of a man-crippling ram, gripping its spiraling ridged horn. He'd proudly shown it to a noble's son, Aðalboran, who he thought was condescending, "not impressive," leaving Sunu embarrassed as Aðalboran strode away with the chosen hunters. *Who chose you, the gods?* The lingering impression made his head tighten and jaw tick. His younger brother's snoring heightened his irritation.

Not a good time, Thau. Sunu nudged his brother with the butt of his spear, silencing him briefly; then he snored louder. Sighing, Sunu sat up, hitting his head against buck horns he'd forgotten to remount. His face was hot as the hearth embers, whose glow spread over his kinsmen's peaceful sleep. Hoping no one heard his stirring, his eyes paused on the sunny face under his sister's curly red hair, imagining if she'd seen him she'd burst into tearful giggles. *Not a peep.*

Quietly, Sunu remounted the buck and ram skulls, with space for one more at the top of a frame post. He wondered what could fill

it better than what lay beneath it. *That's the best you can do*, Aðalboran's taunt repeated. Sunu's face muscles began to flex, then suddenly relaxed when his acute hearing detected hoofbeats in the distance. He placed an ear against the wall of his longhouse. Focusing on the thundering gallop made him forget about his pains. Eyes on an oak club he'd used to kill his prey, he resolved. *I can do better than this.*

Opening his door to a reddening dawn, Sunu brushed off the frost of his fifteenth winter to hunt in the spring forest for his destined identity—a beast more impressive than the ram clothing his body that would be praised beyond the village of his Saxon tribe and gain the acceptance of the seven chosen hunters. *They're gathering this morning.*

Sunu hastened outside, anxious to prove his worthiness. *I'll show them I deserve to be among the best.* He'd always felt like a stallion among the sheep, who'd leap over their mass with the wind in his mane. His desire to be seen was strong, reactions swift.

Sunu ran barefoot on the cold dirt, past smoky longhouses into the forest of barren trees, heavy breaths in the mist. Swiftly traversing the hunting ground, his eyes were beckoned by the sun's first rays as if the arms of the dawn goddess parting lovely red locks while he followed the hoofbeats of a mighty beast moving eastward. *Eostre, show me the greatest. Reborn light, show me the most glorious!*

A range of hills appeared on the horizon, luminous rays crowning their tops. *Little Mountain.* The tallest one, dimmed by the red sky, drew Sunu's eyes to what lay closer to the ground. *Is that gold?* He raced across the dull gray pasture to the glittering gold images. Slowing his feet before Little Mountain, Sunu gazed up at two holes in its frosted side, pouring streams of gold liquid. He stepped between them, intrigued and delighted by the honey aroma, and extended his

arms to touch. *Mead*. It flowed chill through his fingers, which he brought to his tongue. *I've never tasted the likes—like sweet, warming sun-drops.*

Thirsting, Sunu placed his horn under the mead stream, highlighting the Baltic amber circling his wrist. *Médhu*. The drink of the gods flowed down his throat, giving rise to the image of heroes—their horses thundered over a wide pasture under a broad clouded sky, raining flint arrows on cattle raiders, bolts of bronze axes reddening their dog skins, splattering their wolf skins.

Chariot wheels cracked beneath their chief, his windswept red beard whipping his naked body, gold locks thrashing behind a chiseled face of judgment. He guided his swift yellowish horses toward colossal cow thieves; his goat-helmed passenger pierced them with a copper spearhead while he struck their skulls with a stone horse-head mace.

Kléwos ndhg^whitom! Sunu heard the chief's poet sing the bravest deeds with the best words in an ancient language he found familiar, familial: ph_ater, suh_xnús, bhréh_ater. Fathers, sons, and beloved brothers fought beside the chief, Perk^wunos. *Bhréh_ater!* a cavalryman cheered as his brother emerged from the battle riding in Perk^wunos's wagon of war. He boarded the chariot; then the chief spun his spoked wheels over the rolling steppe, along a river, and toward a mountain. "Kóimos." *Home.*

Awed by the images galloping through his mind, horses flashing before his eyes, Sunu raised his horn with a rush of inspiration.

*Fathers, brothers, behold the son,
the rising horse above the herd
of cattle, sheep, and humble goats
Son's fate's imperishable fame!*



IN THE GROVE OF THE CHOSEN, with the tallest evergreens, a brown bear cloak materialized from the misty dawn; matching claws became visible around the neck of a seventeen-winters-old youth, roaring through wolf's fangs, "Aðalboran, Slayer of the Great Bear!"

"Hail!" A moose antler shield surrounded by sword-like tines appeared on the opposite side of the grove; a spear-length tine once attached came from the mist in a teen's grip. "Giwinnan, Slayer of the Mighty Moose."

They raised their sword and spear in a silent salute, then turned their heads toward footsteps.

A shaved head and shark's teeth shone like a moon in the shadows. The light revealed a shark's fin mohawk on the sea hunter's dome, fiercening the teeth around his neck. "Unsculdig, Slayer of the Big Beach Shark."

Upon seeing a shadow, all three raised their heads and caught a black-painted youth descending from the trees, his body covered with wolf heads. "Abolgan, Slayer of the Wolf Pack." He landed, shining a white grin on his black face.

Wafting stench perked the hunters' noses.

Boar fur, bearing wallow's color and odor, lay on the shoulders of a blond-braided teen wearing yellow-stained boar tusks around his neck. "Suerdthegan, Slayer of the Three Grim Hogs."

Ruffling underbrush raised the hunter's ears.

"Sounds like a *real* animal." Suerdthegan peered outside the grove into the surrounding oak forest.

"Maybe it ate the last two huntsmen," Abolgan conjured the image as his wolf heads brushed against Suerdthegan.

Aðalboran revealed a sneering fang. “Then they’re unworthy or ill-fated to be among the best.”

Among the barren trees were moving bones.

Giwinnan gasped. “Imagine what beast could be clenching them in its teeth.”

“It’s Garmr or Fenrir,” Aðalboran barked, citing the bane dog and wolf.

“Or perhaps—” Giwinnan sighed, seeing all the details. “—the best come last.”

What had appeared as a corpse was a whalebone corselet with a connecting spine on a bare hunter’s back. “Gewit, Slayer of the Mean Whale.”

Parting the evergreen leaves, a red-cloaked hunter with a long red-blond beard strode in, holding a three-foot-three femur bone, head-side up. “Hrôm, Slayer of the Small Giants.”

“Welcome, best and greatest, to the Grove of the Chosen,” Aðalboran addressed the six Saxons and the seventh Langobard standing in a circle. “We’ve gathered this Tiw’s day, dedicated to the god of oaths and the assembly, to challenge the greatest teen hunters.” They enlivened the quiet morn like a flock of fair-haired songbirds, each singing of famous deeds with inspiring words, raising his weapon to approve the current proposal, holding it still to disapprove.

“Let’s hunt a bull!” Giwinnan challenged his fellows, standing bare in their best skins and bones. “No one here has slain a wild one.”

Aðalboran shrugged, leaning against his lowered sword. “There’s danger in it, but slaying a bull’s not a big deal.” His bear was taller than two tall men when it stood on its hind legs, and its jaws were so strong they could crush a helmed skull. Cheerful were the wives made widows by the Great Bear the day they saw him with its severed head.

Aðalboran exhibited his bearskin cloak and tooth necklace, encircling a raided gold torc. “It won’t make you famous.”

“What’s left that will?” Giwinnan itched, his freckled face scanning his fellows as he lowered his antler-tine spear. His moose was too fast to be seen by average hunters until they’d been impaled by its long, sword-length antlers. After Giwinnan had approached it, swift and silent, the Mighty Moose was found instantly lifeless.

“Successful raids will make you famous *and* wealthy,” Aðalboran, with his wolfish sideburns, tempted his unique and renowned lads. “In some lands, horse-mounted raiders are so powerful they evoke awe of races from sea to unknown sea.” His details held the hunters’ attention, though only Abolgan and Suerdthegan raised their weapons. Aðalboran sharpened, twisting his sword, “If you fellows don’t have the guts for that, you can try slaying a dragon.”

Giwinnan sniffed. “You couldn’t slay a dragon.”

Aðalboran snickered. “You couldn’t slay a bull.”

Giwinnan winced, pointing toward Aðalboran’s cloak. “You probably didn’t slay that bear.”

“How would you know?” Aðalboran spat at the distance between them. “You were too scared to go near it.”

“How would any of us know?” Giwinnan waved toward his fellow hunters, the mood becoming far from playful. “None of us were there to see it.”

Aðalboran frowned, stepping forward. “Are you calling me a *liar*?”

“You called me a *coward*.” Giwinnan glared, closing the tense air between them. “That’s certainly not the truth.”

“*Prove it.*” Aðalboran shoved Giwinnan.

Giwinnan punched Aðalboran in the mouth, knocking out the berserk’s wolf canines.

Aðalboran clenched his teeth and kicked Giwinnan's bare stomach, folding his body.

"Enough." Hrôm strode forth in his red cloak, extending his bone club between them. "We can compete while remaining united."

The ground began trembling.

Giwinnan's frown lifted, the earth quaking beneath him, the evergreens swaying above him. "What in Ymir's world was that?" His gaze circled the grove, naming the primordial giant from whom the world was made.

"It's a dragon," Aðalboran baited, Hrôm's bone preventing his bite. "He can smell your womanly fear, so he's coming to make you his wife."

"Ooh!" The hunters cringed, few cracking up, concern of the tremors in their tone. "Huh?" They vigilantly followed Hrôm out of the evergreen grove into the oaken forest.

"Something *real* is shaking the ground!" Giwinnan's eyes and palms turned down. "And it's not your tall-tale bear."

"It's Woden, leading the Wild Hunt." Aðalboran mimicked a gallop 'mid the barren oaks, evoking the image of howling horsemen, barking dogs, and whistling ghosts in a sky of stirring winds. "Coming for the souls he's marked as worthy."

Mouth agape, Giwinnan stared above Aðalboran's head.

"Look me in the eye." Aðalboran jutted his face and closed one blue eye, widening the other.

Giwinnan waved his hand sideways. "You'd better *run!*"

"Or *what?* I'll be swept into the Hunt?" Aðalboran flung his arms open. "Come for me!"

Staring at what was coming, Unsculdig, Suerdthegan, Gewit, and Abolgan panicked. "*Unbelievable!*"

The fear in their eyes was so real, the tremors in the earth so intense, that Aðalboran turned his smug face and saw a mountainous thundering bull, a white muscle mass with long golden horns, charging toward them. “*Whoa!*” His smile dropped between mutton chops, reckoning it to be five times the size of a healthy ox.

The hunters bolted as the bull thundered and bellowed between them, cracking its tail like a whip. They fell to the ground as if they were autumn acorns. Leaning forward to behold its flexing leg muscles, they laid back quickly to avoid its whipping tail. The bull plowed the forest, kicking up earth with its hooves, clipping oaks with its horns.

“That’s a *big deal*, Aðalboran.” Taking revenge through courage, Giwinnan stood quickly as the others rose slowly. “Don’t just sit there like frightful girls.” Staring at the galloping bull’s rear. “Let’s follow it!”

Dispute halted, the seven hunters pursued the bull under the red dawn over its path of massive hoofprints. The thrill of danger filled them like it never had before, knowing the bull could wheel around at any time to trample them or impale them with its golden horns. The fear of being shamed for leaving the chase kept them zigzagging through the forest toward imminent death.

The bull stampeded eastward over a sprouting pasture. Shepherds scattered like frightened lambs. Aðalboran seemed most fearless, leaping over their scattering sheep, barking at the shepherds to get out of the way, as fourteen swift and springing feet followed the bull toward the sacred hills.

Giwinnan strove into the lead, before Aðalboran. The hunters’ legs toiled behind them, through hill valleys, along a winding stream. The bull remained in sight with its pure white hide until it swiftly turned into a black cave. The hunters’ bruised feet halted before a hill

so rocky and tall it was known as Little Mountain. They flanked the cave's black opening, chests pounding and spears pointed, heads poking in and out.

"I can smell him." Aðalboran sniffed as the hunters waited on edge.

On the opposite side, Giwinnan leaned into the darkness. "I can hear him."

Deep, heavy breathing came from the cave, smelling of tilled earth and bull sweat.

Aðalboran's provoking eyes fell on Giwinnan. "Go in. Lure him out."

He squinted. "What? That's suicide!"

Aðalboran lurched. "It's daring!"

"You go in." Giwinnan nodded. "If you're so *daring*."

"You have softer feet." Aðalboran whisked two scarred fingers. "And I have stronger hands."

"Bull dung!" Giwinnan glanced back at the anxious hunters, all hoping they wouldn't be challenged. "You're just as afraid as the rest of us."

Aðalboran sneered, sinking his thick brows. "You *are* scared, liar."

"Enough with the unmanly word-mincing." Giwinnan's ruddy, freckled cheeks became redder as he snatched three runic twigs from his pouch to cast a lot. "Fate will decide whether I go in this cave or you go in . . . and die."

"Or live to tell of the great deed," a new challenger urged.

The hunters raised their heads and saw Sunu weaving a song above the cave, wearing the beautifully ridged horn of the Fearsome Ram; its tip poked his left hip and curled around his back, up to his right shoulder. The ends of his golden locks flowed into its rim as if

mead were flowing from his crown, while his long face dripped orange hairs thin as a honeybee.

| | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>A war oak's fall</i> | <i>O Wyrð will spin</i> |
| <i>How tough he lives</i> | <i>no twigs can weave</i> |
| <i>For longer fame</i> | <i>his limbs he'll stretch</i> |
| <i>So root and branch</i> | <i>will bear his name.</i> |

Sunu descended Little Mountain, now a Scop of Woden's Mead, now a weaver of waelcyries' storm. Wielding his oaken club, the war oak strode taller and more fearless between the seven hunters, who'd not deemed him worthy of joining their circle.

Aðalboran gave him that condescending look. "This one's out of your league, ram."

Sunu mimicked his smirk. "Says the one who's unwilling to go into the cave?"

Aðalboran brandished his sword. "I'll kill the bull when it comes out."

"Are you a great bear or a small pup?" Sunu passed Aðalboran, pretending he couldn't see him. "The ram cannot tell from this height."

Aðalboran wrenched back. "You wish you knew me, you next-to-nobody."

"Did I hurt your feelings?" Sunu dismissed his fame. "Whoever you are."

"Aðalboran, son of Bâggebo the Bold, whose deeds you should be versing."

"Sunu, son of Leader Êrthungan, who will show you bold."

"If you go into this cave," Giwinnan shook his head as Sunu took his first step, "you won't come out alive."

“Aye?” Sunu held his storm-gray eyes on the beckoning black hole, the warnings making it more intriguing. “Is there some fearsome giant in there?”

“A giant white bull.” Aðalboran raised bent arms. “With beautiful golden horns you could only dream of.”

“Sounds like your fantasy.” Sunu wondered if it was true.

“He’s real!” Giwinnan was colorless from seeing its copper hooves up close. “He sounded like a storm rumbling through the forest—you should’ve heard him.”

“I heard, and I recall the daring words of fearless deeds you hunters boasted over man brew: ‘Before no beard’s son nor bear’s son, never in courage will I feign nor falter.’” Sunu tipped the ram horn against his honeyed lips, holding three swigs of liquor not meant for the weak or averagely strong. “Wassail!” He swigged, struck stones, then spat the booze at the sparks, turning the oaken club into a flaming torch. “I’m not wasting time fighting about the beast.” From the light of dawn to darkness, Sunu stepped into the cave. “I’m fighting him.”

“Give Thunor my greetings when you’re in Thrudheim,” Aðalboran foreshadowed the afterlife in the Thunder god’s home.

“If there were ever a hunter who could be called the most daring,” Giwinnan praised as Êrthungan’s son faded from sight, “it would be Sunu who dared the cave of the mountainous thundering bull!”

As the torch fire brightened Sunu’s eager face, his flashing eyes cast their sight all around the cave. Wall to wall, he waved his torch, searching for the dreaded bull.

In fire-lit cave, no cattle seen.

Finding nothing but his giant shadow creeping along the limestone wall, Sunu hastened his search deeper into the cave. *I doubt I'll see this fantasy bull.*

A rumbling bellow echoed five times through the cave.

They were telling the truth about the bull being in here! Sunu's intrigue was reignited, his fire inside, and he began waving his torch over every crevasse. *But I'll prove them wrong about my ability to slay it.* A drop of liquid tapped his head. He cast up his curiosity and saw udder-shaped stalactites. Then a drop fell into his mouth. It tasted like milk. He winced as white landed in his eye, then lowered his head and focused his open eye on a small light in the distance. *I found something.*

Sunu lowered his torch and followed the light, which increased with each step. Water splashed as he stepped in hoofprints as if they'd been filled with fresh rain. Sunu stopped at a large opening encircling the light he had seen from afar. It produced warmth against his chest, contrasting with the cool air against his back. *They never would have known what was in here.*

Drawn in with hopes up, Sunu stepped wide over a still, clear water track encircling a room adorned with green flora. "A little pasture in Little Mountain." Through an opening in the ceiling, the sun shone upon green grass where five red cows grazed.

"Is this a hideout?" Sunu muttered, his thoughts turning. "Or is this a trick?"

The cows raised their dawn-hued heads, staring at a bull's shadow above Sunu.

He glanced back. *What're they beholding?* The only shadow he saw was his own. *What . . .*

Eeriness came over Sunu as their eyes fixed upon him. For a second, he remained still; then curiosity moved him forward. Sunu stepped into the light, which beamed around the cows like a circular

pen. A feeling of holiness descended upon him, along with admiration for the bovines' thick and healthy bodies.

"Who do you belong to?"

No response.

Seeing nothing to hold them, Sunu herded the cows and urged them forward from the rear. They walked willingly from the sunned grass onto the shadowed rock. He had his torch over the cows, though it was unneeded, as they were glowing bright enough to see the path before him. Sunu beamed in fascination, the soft red light illuminating his face, dim lighting the cave. *Wait till they see them!* He imagined the hunters' faces as he began to hear their voices.

"I wonder if he's still alive." He sensed anxiety in Giwinnan's tone.

He felt vindicated, hearing Aðalboran admit, "If not—we'll never forget his courage."

"Never forget!" Sunu's words echoed inside the cave.

"Sunu!" The hunters gaped as his pale body appeared in the dark, behind the cows' red glow.

"Holy Audhumla!" Giwinnan invoked the primordial cow.

"I can't believe you fellows were afraid of five red cows." Sunu drove the cows out of the cave. "Glowing or not."

"That's *not* what went in there." Aðalboran gazed at the luminous milk-makers. "Though they inspire awe in their own way." As the hunters stroked their glowing hides, he was drawn to another sight becoming visible in the cave. "It's him—no taunting!"

The hunters turned and saw what appeared to be a moon in the night sky, enlarging as if it were falling, then changing into a golden crescent. They recoiled, raising their spears to the tips, as golden horns emerged beside a white bull's face.

“I think my cows belong to your bull.” Sunu walked backward in awe, staring at the head of the giant white bull, snorting and stamping its copper hoof amid the five red cows. *Now he’s after my hide.*

The bull uttered a quaking bellow, then charged. Eyes widening and blood chilling, Sunu dropped his flaming club and grabbed a golden horn. He saw its face steam and eyes bulge, feeling hot air from its snout. *Is this bull my fate?*

The bull shook its massive head, swinging Sunu like a drunken acrobat.

His hands began to slip.

Then the hunters hurled their spears.

If the bull doesn’t kill me, they might. Sunu kicked up his legs to avoid a whizzing ash point, grasping the horn with a slipping hand.

The bellowing bull continued swinging its head violently. Sunu used the momentum to saunter up onto its thick meaty neck. Straddling it, he felt the rumbling hooves beneath him as if he were riding a storm cloud. He was relieved to be ’hind its head until he saw his village coming into view between its horns.

I’d rather be killed than see them harmed.

Direly, he climbed onto its massive white head and rammed his shoulder against one of the long golden horns. Veering right, the bull smashed sidewise into an oak, stumbled a few hoofbeats, then stormed forward in a full gallop.

Jolted, Sunu adjusted his horn hold as he regained focus, seeing his clansman’s longhouse. *Not their home!* The bull lowered its head, then lashed it up. Sunu leapt back onto the bull’s neck, watching its horns tear off the thatched roof. *I should’ve left the cows.* Fingers sunk in its hide, he gaped at the roof tumbling through the air.

Sunu flew around Saxony atop the mountainous thundering bull, attacking clan group after clan—smashing huts with its hooves,

ramming longhouses with its horns, knocking pens down with its knees, chasing flocks and herds. Neither thrust spear nor thrown javelin slowed the bull's rampage—they made it more aggressive.

I must stop him! Sunu climbed back onto the bull's head and stood with arms outstretched, white-knuckled grips on its long golden horns. He strove for balance, trembling and bouncing. Tugging left, then right, he steered it away from people and property, its copper hoof knocking off a twelve-spoked wheel as it galloped past a wagon.

“Run!”

Hair whipping with his head down, Sunu saw ravaged houses and scattering tribesmen, including those of his clan. *This is unlike any other aurochs attack—chaotic yet purposeful.* Gripping its horns, he steered the bull with all his might, now to the left, now right. *Got to get him out.* The bull shook, bucked, and snorted but couldn't cast off its yoke.

Then it charged his brother.

“*Thau!*” Sunu screamed, fearing for his brother's life. He saw his dear face whip back as he ran from the bull's nearing hooves, like a trembling hart from a hunter's spear.

Not my brother! Sunu threw himself against a horn to veer the bull's course, but it lowered its head, aiming the horn at Thau. In chilling alarm, Sunu swung his body in front of the horn's tip, shielding his brother from a fatal blow.

Thau bounced off Sunu's back, pushing the horn through his abdominal flank. “*Ahhh!*” He exploded in pain, the horn tearing out of his side with gushing blood.

The bull raised his snout, bellowing. By fate's mercy, Sunu maintained his grip on the piercing horn, saving him from bone-crushing hooves.

Some leaders stepped closer to help their tribesman while others pulled back to avoid being trampled. The ground trembled beneath the hooves of the mountainous thundering bull. Amid devastated ladders and longhouses, the leaders watched helplessly as the giant bull charged toward the Irminsûl.

The fate of the World Pillar is in my hands!

Adrenaline surging, Sunu retook the bull's horns into his hands as they neared the sacred ash pillar, towering between heaven and earth.

"*This way.*" He tugged the bloody horn, steering it toward an oak—but it veered before impact. He steered it toward a giant rock; it veered, charging toward the birch grove of the sacred white horses.

Not the oracles!

The horses raised their grazing heads, spooked by the ominous hoofbeats.

"*Sunu!*" Êrthungan's son heard Giwinnan yell. He whipped back to see him running like a moose behind the bull, raising his flaming club. "Catch!" Giwinnan hurled it, hope on his freckled face.

Sunu caught the club's base, fire whipping atop.

Fear spread among the fair trees as the bull neared the sacred horses' pen. Seeing their panicky shuffles, Sunu raised his fiery oak. "Thunor!" He swung it down, striking the bull's skull like the Thunderer's hammer.

The bull bellowed and quaked.

The horses reared and neighed.

Seeing the terror in their eyes, Sunu struck the bull twice; twice more he clubbed the gold horned, cracking its skull.

The beast collapsed, thudding mightily before the pen.

Sunu flew off its neck and flipped through the air, seeing heaven then earth. "Thunor, break my fall!" He landed on the upturned

thatch roof, torn off by the bull's horn. "Ugh!" The cushioned impact still knocked the wind out of his chest and blood out of his oblique. After a painful deep inhale, Sunu sat upright. Like a chick leaving the nest, he stumbled out and saw nigh the whole of Saxony cheering.

"Sunu, Slayer of the Almighty Bull!" Hrôm the Langobard announced while the Saxons applauded. "Have thou wide-galloping glory!"

"The rainbow after the storm." Êrthungan gazed in awe at the Almighty Bull, then turned his wonderment toward Sunu. "Son, your heroism saved our village!"

Thau threw his arms around Sunu. "And my life, dearest brother!"

"I followed your example, Father, and kept our peace." Sunu hugged his shield arm around Êrthungan's neck, his club arm squeezing his brother's waist. "I love you, Thau!"

The leading men and the seven hunters extolled Sunu's extraordinary deed as they gathered around him and the slain bull. "This surpasses the ram slaying by far!" Giwinnan and Aðalboran stood peacefully beside each other at the head of the bull while two feuding families surrounding its body reconciled.

I slew it!—And everyone saw it. Sunu basked in the admiration, his brother's grateful arm supporting him, his father's inspired eyes endearing him. The bull slayer wrapped his wound in ram skin, enduring the blazing pain climbing up his ribs, hot blood streaming down his thigh as Thau helped him walk toward the Almighty Bull whose horns jutted through the horses' birch pen, framing a chariot within. Feeling warm pats from the most prominent men of his clan and other clans, he grinned through the burn, leaning a reddened knee against the giant bull's head while placing his right hand on one of its golden horns.

“You made your ancestors praise *you!*” Faderôdil, his veteran grandfather, walked to the scene, aided by his ash spear and white-armed mother, Êra.

“I’m honored, wise Grandfather!” Sunu embraced his spear in hand, heart swelling in his chest. *What today turned out to be.*

“Where did you find that beautiful, awesome bull?” his mother asked.

“It looks like it came from a giant’s pasture,” said Megin, Sunu’s cousin.

“I’ve never heard it or heard of it,” said Strang, his brother.

“It’s definitely not from around here,” said Sigi, another brother.

As Sunu posed against his trophy, he pointed toward Eostre’s Hills, over which the sun’s rays rose like outstretched arms. “I don’t know its origin, but I saw the seven chosen hunters standing before a cave, claiming something unconquerable had gone inside. I asked, and they told me they saw a giant white bull charge in. Giwinnan, Slayer of the Mighty Moose, who boldly hurled me this club, said that if I went into the cave, I wouldn’t come out alive. I proved all of them wrong.” Sunu puffed his chest. “I came out more alive with five cows as red as dawn clouds; then this bull came out to kill me, like a stormy father—had I not held onto this horn, it would be holding onto me.”

“Where’d you get the strength to hold ’em?” a tribesman asked as he gaped upon the bull.

“I didn’t know I was that strong.” Sunu shared his wonder. “I never had to use that kind of strength.”

“What’re you going to do with it?” another asked about his kill.

Sunu turned from the bull to the havoc it had wrought. “I’m keeping its head as a trophy, sharing its hide with my family; its meat I’m giving to those who need it most.”

“Hail the generous Slayer of the Almighty Bull!” Hrôm praised so all under heaven could hear.

Wârsago the Priest clapped his hand on Sunu’s shoulder. “This incredible sacrifice has strengthened our community.”

“I care about my family, clan, and tribesmen,” Sunu affirmed. “Our common weal.”

“Hail Sunu the Red Stallion,” Wârsago dubbed him, “Slayer of the Almighty White Bull!” Solemnly, he removed a copper horse torc from his neck, which bore a horse head on each end, and made it Sunu’s collar. “For risking blood and bone for Mannus’s Sons, the Holy Ash, and the Sacred Horses—this is your strength.”

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