

The Paradise War

By Stephen R. Lawhead

Chapter One

An Aurochs in the Works

*Since all the world is but a story,
it were well for thee to buy
the more enduring story rather than
the story that is less enduring.
the judgment of St. Colum Cille
(St. Columba of Scotland)*

It all began with the aurochs.

We were having breakfast in our rooms at college. Simon was presiding over the table with his accustomed critique on the world as evidenced by the morning's paper. "Oh, splendid," he sniffed. "It looks as if we have been invaded by a pack of free-loading foreign photographers keen on exposing their film—and who knows what else—to the exotic delights of Dear Old Blighty. Lock up your daughters, Bognor Regis! European paparazzi are loose in the land!"

He rambled on a while, and then announced: "Hold on! Have a gawk at this!" He snapped the paper sharp and sat up straight—an uncommon posture for Simon.

"Gawk at what?" I asked idly. This thing of his—reading the paper aloud to a running commentary of facile contempt, scorn, and sarcasm, well mixed and peppered with his own unique blend of cynicism—had long since ceased to amuse me. I had learned to grunt agreeably while eating my egg and toast. This saved having to pay attention to his tirades, eloquent though they often were.

"Some bewildered Scotsman has found an aurochs in his patch."

"You don't say." I dipped a corner of toast triangle into the molten center of a soft-boiled egg and read an item about a disgruntled driver on the London Underground refusing to stop to let off passengers, thereby compelling a train full of frantic commuters to ride the Circle Line for over five hours. "That's interesting."

"Apparently the beast wandered out of a nearby wood and collapsed in the middle of a hay field twenty miles or so east of Inverness." Simon lowered the paper and gazed at me over the top. "Did you hear what I just said?"

"Every word. Wandered out of the forest and fell down next to Inverness—probably from boredom," I replied. "I know just how he felt."

Simon stared at me. "Don't you realize what this means?"

"It means that the local branch of the RSPCA gets a phone call. Big deal." I took a sip of coffee and returned to the sports page before me. "I wouldn't call it news exactly."

"You don't know what an aurochs is, do you?" he accused. "You haven't a clue."

"A beast of some sort—you said so yourself just now," I protested. "Really, Simon, the papers you read—" I flicked his upraised tabloid with a disdainful finger. "Look at these so-called headlines: 'Princess Linked to Alien Sex Scheme!' and 'Shock Horror Weekend for Bishop with Massage Parlor Turk!' Honestly, you only read those rags to fuel your pessimism."

He was not moved. "You haven't the slightest notion what an aurochs is. Go on, Lewis, admit it."

I took a wild stab. "It's a breed of pig."

"Nice try!" Simon tossed his head back and laughed. He had a nasty little fox-bark that he used when he wanted to deride someone's ignorance. Simon was extremely adept at derision—a master of disdain, mockery, and ridicule in general.

I refused to be drawn. I returned to my paper and stuffed the toast into my mouth.

"A pig? Is that what you said?" He laughed again.

"Okay, okay! What, pray tell, is an aurochs, Professor Rawnsion?"

Simon folded the paper in half and then in quarters. He creased it and held it before me. "An aurochs is a sort of ox."

"Why, think of that," I gasped in feigned astonishment. "An ox, you say? It fell down? Oh my, what won't they think of next?" I yawned. "Give me a break."

"Put like that it doesn't sound like much," Simon allowed. Then he added, "Only it just so happens that this particular ox is an ice-age creature which has been extinct for the last two thousand years."

"Extinct." I shook my head slowly. "Where do they get this malarkey? If you ask me, the only thing that's extinct around here is your native skepticism."

"It seems the last aurochs died out in Britain sometime before the Romans landed—although a few may have survived on the continent into the sixth century or so."

"Fascinating," I replied.

Simon shoved the folded paper under my nose. I saw a grainy, badly printed photo of a huge black mound that might or might not have been mammalian in nature. Standing next to this ill-defined mass was a grim-looking middle-aged man holding a very long, curved object in his hands, roughly the size and shape of an old-fashioned scythe. The object appeared to be attached in some way to the black bulk beside him.

"How bucolic! A man standing next to a manure heap with a farm implement in his hands. How utterly homespun," I scoffed in a fair imitation of Simon himself.

"That manure heap, as you call it, is the aurochs, and the implement in the farmer's hands is one of the animal's horns."

I looked at the photo again and could almost make out the animal's head below the great slope of its shoulders. Judging by the size of the horn, the animal would have been enormous—easily three or four times the size of a normal cow. "Trick photography," I declared.

Simon clucked his tongue. "I am disappointed in you, Lewis. So cynical for one so young."

"You don't actually believe this"—I jabbed the paper with my finger—"this trumped-up tripe, do you? They make it up by the yard—manufacture it by the carload!"

"Well," Simon admitted, picking up his teacup and gazing into it, "you're probably right."

"You bet I'm right," I crowed. Prematurely, as it turned out. I should have known better.

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to check it out." He lifted the cup, swirled the tea, and drained it. Then, as if his mind were made up, he placed both hands flat on the tabletop and stood.

I saw the sly set of his eyes. It was a look I knew well and dreaded. "You can't be serious."

"But I am perfectly serious."

"Forget it."

"Come on. It will be an adventure."

"I've got a meeting with my adviser this afternoon. That's more than enough adventure for me."

"I want you with me," Simon insisted.

"What about Susannah?" I countered. "I thought you were supposed to meet her for lunch."

"Susannah will understand." He turned abruptly. "We'll take my car."

"No. Really. Listen, Simon, we can't go chasing after this ox thing. It's ridiculous. It's nothing. It's like those fairy rings in the cornfields that had everybody all worked up last year. It's a hoax. Besides, I can't go—I've got work to do, and so have you."

"A drive in the country will do you a world of good. Fresh air. Clear the cobwebs. Nourish the inner man." He walked briskly into the next room. I could hear him dialing the phone, and a moment later he said, "Listen, Susannah, about today . . . terribly sorry, dear heart, something's come up . . . Yes, just as soon as I get back . . . Later . . . Yes, Sunday, I won't forget . . . cross my heart and hope to die. Cheers!" He replaced the receiver and dialed again. "Rawnsone here. I'll be needing the car this morning . . . Fifteen minutes. Right. Thanks, awfully."

"Simon!" I shouted. "I refuse!"

This is how I came to be standing in St. Aldate's on a rainy Friday morning in the third week of Michaelmas term, drizzle dripping off my nose, waiting for Simon's car to be brought around, wondering how he did it.

We were both graduate students, Simon and I. We shared rooms, in fact. But where Simon had only to whisper into the phone and his car arrived when and where he wanted it, I couldn't even get the porter to let me lean my poor, battered bicycle against the gate for half a minute while I checked my mail. Rank hath its privileges, I guess.

Nor did the gulf between us end there. While I was little above medium height, with a build that, before the mirror, could only be described as weedy, Simon was tall and regally slim, well muscled, yet trim—the build of an Olympic fencer. The face I displayed to the world boasted plain, somewhat lumpen features, crowned with a lackluster mat the color of old walnut shells. Simon's features were sharp, well cut, and clean; he had the kind of thick, dark, curly hair women admire and openly covet. My eyes were mouse gray; his were hazel. My chin drooped; his jutted.

The effect when we appeared in public together was, I imagine, much in the order of a live before-and-after advertisement for Nature's Own Wonder Vitamins & Handsome Tonic. He had good looks to burn and the sort of rugged and ruthless masculinity both sexes find appealing. I had the kind of looks that often improve with age, although it was doubtful that I should live so long.

A lesser man would have been jealous of Simon's bounteous good fortune. However, I accepted my lot and was content. All right, I was jealous too—but it was a very contented jealousy.

Anyway, there we were, the two of us, standing in the rain, traffic whizzing by, buses disgorging soggy passengers on the busy pavement around us, and me muttering in lame protest. "This is dumb. It's stupid. It's childish and irresponsible, that's what it is. It's nuts."

"You're right, of course," he agreed affably. Rain pearly on his driving cap and trickled down his waxed-cotton shooting jacket.

"We can't just drop everything and go racing around the country on a whim." I crossed my arms inside my plastic poncho. "I don't know how I let you talk me into these things."

"It's my utterly irresistible charm, old son." He grinned disarmingly. "We Rawnsons have bags of it."

"Yeah, sure."

"Where's your spirit of adventure?" My lack of adventurous spirit was something he always threw at me whenever he wanted me to go along with one of his lunatic exploits. I preferred to see myself as stable, steady-handed, a both-feet-on-the-ground, practical-as-pie realist through and through.

"It's not that," I quibbled. "I just don't need to lose four days of work for nothing."

"It's Friday," he reminded me. "It's the weekend. We'll be back on Monday in plenty of time for your precious work."

"We haven't even packed toothbrushes or a change of underwear," I pointed out.

"Very well," he sighed, as if I had beaten him down at last, "you've made your point. If you don't wish to go, I won't force you."

"Good."

"I'll go alone." He stepped into the street just as a gray Jaguar Sovereign purred to a halt in front of him. A man in a black bowler hat scrambled from the driver's seat and held the door for him.

"Thank you, Mr. Bates," Simon said. The man touched the brim of his hat and hurried away to the porters' lodge. Simon glanced at me across the rain-beaded roof of the sleek automobile and smiled. "Well, chum? Going to let me have all the fun alone?"

"Curse you, Simon!" I shouted, yanked the door open, and ducked in. "I don't need this!"

Laughing, Simon slid in and slammed the door. He shifted into gear, then punched the accelerator to the floor. The tires squealed on the wet pavement as the car leapt forward. Simon yanked the wheel and executed a highly illegal U-turn in the middle of the street, to the blaring of bus horns and the curses of cyclists.

Heaven help us, we were off.