



THE FOREST OF THE THAURROKS

¡Skerrag ahoy!



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Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a boy called Ivan of Aldenuri. He was twelve years old and, as you've probably guessed, he came from Aldenuri. Aldenuri was a beautiful village, nestling amongst meadows and wooded hills on all sides but to the north. Northward lay the open sea, which was known in those parts as the Enden Sea. The old sailors of Aldenuri had many stories to tell about the Enden Sea ... but we will talk about that later.

Ivan was the eldest of five children. His parents, Ferrio and Anna, lived in a house on the outskirts of Aldenuri, about halfway up Illún hill. He was a happy, hard-working boy with many friends. His eyes, which were a brilliant blue-green, contrasted strikingly with his straight black hair. And though slender, he was perhaps a little taller than most of the other boys of his age.

Ivan's father, Ferrio, was the village blacksmith. The family lived in a big house with stables where their five horses and the other animals were kept. A fast-flowing stream, which was vital to Ferrio in his work in the forge, ran down the hill past the house.

Life was quiet in Aldenuri at that time. Apart from the odd harsh winter now and then, when the wolves could be seen from the village, there was nothing much to disturb the peace and quiet of the days. In the past, to be sure, there had been raids from the sea by a warlike people known

as the Kerren. But it was a long time since their last attack on Aldenuri. In fact, for all but the very oldest, who still remembered the famous deeds of the past, the Kerren had become the stuff of legend. When they got the chance, those who did remember would sit with the children, and even some grown-ups, and tell them about the olden days. And the stories they told were so vivid, so captivating, that the listeners would feel as if they too had lived through them.

On that part of the coast the days always stayed fair until the end of summer. Shafts of dappled sunlight pierced the foliage of the beeches and oaks on Illún Hill. At this golden time of year, after Philos the schoolmaster had let the children out of school, they would play, revelling in the long evenings. The favourite game of the children of Aldenuri was hide-and-seek. There were dozens of excellent hiding places to be found where you could remain hidden for hours at a time. Ivan always hid high up in an old oak tree. He knew the tree like the back of his hand, every limb, every branch, down to the smallest twig, and he could climb up and down it with great speed. Nobody had ever discovered this hiding place, which meant that he could come out when the game had been going for some time and free his captured teammates.

It was on just such an end-of-summer day that something happened which was to change the course of Ivan's life for ever....

It was late afternoon. He was hiding in the old oak tree he knew so well. He had been idly watching the comings and goings of a column of ants when suddenly his attention was caught by something glinting in a hollow of the tree a few feet below him. He climbed down quickly and put his arm into the hole. Reaching in right up to his shoulder, his fingers splayed out, he just managed to get hold of the object between his fingertips. It was caked in dirt and felt cold to the touch.

When he had scraped off some of the dirt, he saw that it was a coin of some kind, a largish coin. Or was it a medal? There was a small hole near the edge, from which it might have been hung by a chain. He set to work cleaning and polishing it again, until he could make out the curious scenes depicted on the metal. On one side there was a strange horned creature standing on its hind legs. It seemed to be trying to catch or scare away a flock of birds all around it. The birds were tiny compared to the horned creature. On the reverse there was a castle or fortified house from which a stream of birds like those on the first side was emerging. A beam of light shone down on the castle from the sky. Around the rim of both sides of the coin or medal ran an inscription in letters that were completely unknown to him.

Ivan studied the medal intently, wondering what these things meant. He was so absorbed in this, his concentration so deep, that without knowing how or why it happened, he suddenly found himself floating in mid-air, at the level of the hole in which he had found the object. It was not a great height, but it was not exactly a small one either—maybe ten or twelve feet above the ground. As soon as he realised where he was, he lost his concentration and fell like a stone. Luckily the ground at the foot of the tree was grassy and broke his fall, so that he was not badly hurt. Even so, when he stood up he felt a little shaken. The experience had given him quite a turn. Hardly surprising, really. How often does a boy find himself floating in mid-air? Had he dreamed the whole thing? Could it have had something to do with the strange medal? Had he gone mad? What was he to do? Should he tell someone or keep it to himself?

He tried to convince himself that it had all been a trick of his imagination. But the pain he felt from the fall was all too real. He had an idea. He would summon up his concentration again and settle it one way or another. No sooner said than done. Concentrating as hard as he could, he willed himself

to rise into the air and, to his amazement, he began to float as before, rising like a balloon. A few inches at first, then a foot, a yard, a yard and a half, two. Then, keeping up his concentration because he did not want to fall suddenly again, he thought about slowly losing height ... and did, coming down at the same steady rate at which he had gone up.

The experiment left him in no further doubt, and he decided to tell his parents about his extraordinary experience.

Ferrio was a good man and a loving father. But he did not take kindly to practical jokes and was not above punishing his children when necessary. Knowing this, Ivan decided not to tell his father about the incident first.

Like all mothers, Anna was more indulgent about the scrapes her son got into. But she was also more likely to be shocked by anything alarming or unexpected. So he decided not to say anything to her either. Yet he knew he must tell his parents. What had happened was too momentous to keep secret.

After much deliberation he had an idea. He wouldn't say something, he would do something. Instead of looking for a good opportunity or way of telling his parents about his amazing discovery, he would show them. Yes. That was it. He would simply rise into the air at the evening meal. Besides, as the dining room had an unusually high ceiling, it would be the perfect setting.

It would soon be supper time. As he walked slowly homeward, he thought about what he was going to do and the effect it was sure to have on his parents and his brothers and sisters.

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“Got you!” shouted a voice in Ivan’s ear as someone grabbed him by the arm. He had completely forgotten about the game of hide-and-seek. He didn’t want to play any more anyway. He was thinking with some apprehension about the moment when he would begin to fly around in the house in front of his whole family.

“I’m not playing any more,” he told Uri, the boy who had grabbed him. “It’s late. Time to go home.”

“You’re right. It must be the tenth hour at the very least. We’re going home too.” Uri’s eleven-year-old sister Leiden and little brother Aitor, who was eight, were walking along beside Uri.

One by one the children of Aldenuri finished playing for the day and went home. Uri, Leiden, and Aitor lived a little further down Illún Hill from Ivan, so they all walked together.

“What happened to you, Ivan?” said Uri, glancing down. “Look at your trousers. They’re covered in grass stains. Did you fall?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I slipped when I was getting down from a tree.”

“Boy, if I came home like that, I’d be sent straight to bed with no supper.”

Yikes! Ivan thought. *I didn’t think of that. Maybe I should go in and change before anyone sees me.*

"You're a brick, Uri," said Ivan clapping his friend on the shoulder. "You always say the right thing."

"The right thing? I thought what I said was daft. You must be feeling funny in the head. Are you hungry or something?"

"Yep. Anyway, thanks for the warning."

Aitor was nudging a stone with his foot. Leiden, a rather shy, dark-eyed, thoughtful girl with more than a passing admiration for Ivan, was standing a little way off, quietly watching her brother and his friend. But if Ivan was aware of what she thought of him, he gave no sign of it.

"Bye, Ivan," they chorused when they reached Ivan's house. And Leiden added, "See you tomorrow."

But Ivan was so absorbed in his thoughts he didn't reply. His mind had already turned to the question of how to get into the house unnoticed. The hall appeared to be deserted, as did the stairs. Closing the door as quietly as he could, he began to tiptoe upstairs. When he reached the landing, he stood listening for a few seconds before turning down the passage towards his room.

"Ivan!" a shrill voice suddenly sounded behind him. He was so intent on his cat-like progress down the passage that he jumped at the sound of his own name. When he realised that it was only his little five-year-old sister Maggie, however, he breathed a sigh of relief. Then he became watchful again. If Maggie was there, his mother would not be far away....

"Ivan," his mother called from the next room, "go and wash your hands. It's supper time. Uncle Lander's coming today. Come and give me a kiss."

Excellent. If Uncle Lander was coming, there was no way he'd be sent to bed without supper. Now he could go in and say hello to his mother.

"Coming," Ivan replied.

"Ivan, look at you. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing mother. I fell when I was playing hide-and-seek."

"Well, go and change quickly and come down straight away. Supper's ready."

The fact that his great-uncle Lander would be there did not affect Ivan's plans at all. Uncle Lander was family. He was one of those people who had the gift of being loved by children. And he in his turn loved their company. They made him feel young again, he would say.

Lander Erdein was the youngest of Anna's uncles and the only one still alive. He lived in the Erdein family house in the Assen valley, half a day's ride inland from Aldenuri.

Ferrio and Ivan came into the dining room together. When they were all sitting down, Ferrio gave thanks for the food and in came Tania with a large platter, which that evening was laden with fish caught in the stream that ran past the house.

"Trout! Yippee!" whooped the eleven-year-old Enkel, who, with his twin brother Kel, was next in age after Ivan. He was an excellent fisherman and was delighted to see that his efforts were not going to waste.

"Did you catch these, Enkel?" Uncle Lander asked. "They're whoppers."

"You should have seen the one that got away. It was at least three times the size of these."

"Don't exaggerate," said Ferrio, dryly. "I don't think trout grow that big."

"They do," said little Enkel, stoutly. "Wait till tomorrow. You'll see."

"I'd love to see it," said Uncle Lander. "Can I come with you tomorrow?"

"How are things in Erdein, Lander?" Ferrio enquired. "Any sign of autumn yet?" "Oh no," Ivan thought. "They're going to talk about the weather." Such conversations bored him stiff. The harvest, the likelihood of drought or flood, the chances of frost or hail—what difference did it make? Was there anything more pointless than speculating about

the weather? So he felt the time had come to start his flight around the room. As he began to concentrate he felt a twinge of nervous anticipation. Would it work again? But moments later, though he remained in his place, he felt the force of gravity lessen, and the next instant he floated weightlessly up into the air.

Anna opened her mouth to tell her son off for standing on his chair, then shut it again quickly, her eyes widening with astonishment as she saw that his feet were not on the chair at all but following the rest of his body, which was rising above the table and the people around it. All eyes were on one person—Ivan. Silence fell in the room, except for the clatter of cutlery falling onto table or plate.

Ivan began to enjoy himself as he continued his steady ascent under the astonished gaze of the onlookers. He was now nearing the beams, a good twenty feet above the seemingly petrified faces of the family of Ferrio of Aldenuri.

It was then, on this his third flight, that he discovered he could turn right and left, go forwards and backwards. All he had to do was will it.

Everything was going splendidly until, as children often do, his little sister Maggie loudly proclaimed what was obvious to everyone else:

“Mummy! Ivan’s flying!”

This simple statement of fact triggered a release of the rising tension in Anna at the sight of her eldest son hovering twenty feet above the ground with no explanation as to how or why.

“Ivan! Come down from there this instant!” she cried out anxiously, and promptly fainted.

The sight of his mother fainting perturbed Ivan, and he almost lost his concentration and fell again. But he managed to keep control and came down onto his chair as smoothly as he had risen from it.

“Tania,” Ferrio called, “some herb tea please! Anna! Anna! Wake up.”

Anna was coming round, ashen-faced from the shock of what she had witnessed.

"Ferrio, did you see what I saw?"

"Anna, be calm," Lander began soothingly but firmly. "Strange though it may seem, I know exactly what's going on and so, I think, does Ferrio."

"Ferrio? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Unless I'm much mistaken, I think this has something to do with my dear brother, your father Unke, and his physics experiments."

"What are you talking about?"

"Drink this," said Lander, holding up to her lips the steaming bowl Tania had brought. "It'll make you feel better. Don't worry about what you saw for now. We'll talk about it later. Better?"

"Think so. Sorry," she murmured a little sheepishly. "I'm not used to seeing my children floating in mid-air," she added with a wan smile.

"I think it's brilliant!" blurted out Enkel, who had not said a word since the arrival of the trout.

"Me too!" chimed in Kel, Maggie, and their seven-year-old sister Ruth, who was next in age after the twins.

"Ivan," said Ferrio, turning to his son with keen interest. "How did you learn to do that? Did it take long?"

"No father. Today was the first time. It just happened. By chance, really. I didn't do anything. I found an old medal or charm or something. I was examining it closely and..."

"You found yourself floating in mid-air, as you were just now. Right?"

"Yes, Uncle Lander."

"Can I see the medal?"

"Of course. It's in my pocket."

"Look at that!" Uncle Lander exclaimed in wonder. "It's a medal of Thalic origin from the Middle Age."

"Of *what* origin?" sang out Enkel and Kel together.

"It's an ancient medal dating back to the days of the

founding of our village,” said Uncle Lander, handing it back. “Tell me, Ivan, has anyone else seen you fly apart from us?”

“No, great-uncle. No one else. You’re the first.”

“Keep it that way,” said Ferrio, a little sharply. Then, to lighten his tone, he added, “First flights should always be kept within the family.... And now I think we should turn our attention to Enkel’s trout, which are getting cold. There’ll be plenty of time to talk about this flying business.”

The trout had not quite gone cold. Over supper, which they ate with redoubled gusto, the conversation turned on Ivan’s new-found ability and became more and more animated, especially on the part of the youngsters, of course.

By pudding time Anna had quite recovered, and Ivan’s brothers and sisters were more excited than ever.

“Let’s go into the garden so Ivan can give us a flying demonstration,” suggested Enkel and Kel.

“Yes! Yes! A demonstration!” chorused the others, including Uncle Lander, who was enjoying himself enormously and behaving like one of the children.