

Across a bleak and threatening landscape, two Ice Age boys chase their sister's murderer in a desperate battle to regain her artist's spirit, and, with it, ensure the survival of themselves, their family and their tribe.

The Horse Painters

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# **THE HORSE PAINTERS**

**by**

**Peter Stockwell**

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## PART ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

A mountain of dirty matted hair, the horn green with tendrils of moss. Angry, weak eyes peering through a white cloud of breath, the rhino stood tall as a man at the shoulder.

“Keep still, little brother,” said Aariak.

Umalik froze, heart pounding. His sister spoke softly to the animal.

“Behave yourself or I’ll draw you.” Slowly it dropped its head, relaxed, and began to crop the grass.

“That’s better; I wouldn’t really have drawn you. We don’t eat rhinos, you see. Come on, Ummie, I’ll show you some new pictures.”

They moved quietly away, taking care on the uneven ground. High limestone cliffs rose on either side of a deep gorge, a fast moving stream swirled around rocks. Moss and tough grasses grew along the banks, churned up by the feet of countless animals. A weak sun shone onto the cliffs opposite, picking out holes of caves in the lighter rock. It was cold in the shadows where they walked, stars of frost patterning the grass.

Both were dressed in long fur jackets and trousers tied tightly round their ankles. Umalik was short with black hair and a brown, weather-beaten face. Aariak tall and slim, dark hair tucked into the collar of her jacket.

Aariak ran swiftly, splashing through puddles and mud.

Umalik hopped after her, his twisted foot slowing him down. She stopped.

“Sorry, I forgot.”

“Carry on, I can keep up.” He puffed big, steaming breaths in the clear air.

Aariak laughed. “I know, but you wouldn’t say, even if you couldn’t.”

Following an animal trail they reached rising ground covered with low bushes, then branched off towards a big cave. Not far inside Umalik could see pictures of horses and bison drawn in outline on the ceiling and walls.

“I just did this one,” Aariak pointed to a picture of a deer with fine, branched antlers.

“It’s good,” said Umalik, admiring the carefully drawn lines.

Aariak nodded. “The deer will come now. Look, Uirngut’s been here again.”

She nodded at a crudely painted bird.

“The animals don’t listen to him, but he still comes and paints. See the lines below my drawing? Your age in summers, fourteen.”

Umalik was pleased. “That’s good, we can add one every summer. Where’s yours?”

“I got bored. I’d have had to do as many as yours and four more. Then I’d have to do Aku and Father and Grandfather and I’d have run out of space.”

They climbed out of the cave, waded across the stream and into the sunlight. *Squark, squark*, two brown birds zigzagged away from the edge of the water. Ahead a tall, strong-looking boy of about Aariak’s age was following the same path.

“Hello, Uirngut,” called Aariak, “you’ve been drawing in the picture cave.”

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The boy looked back. He was dark with black hair, like them, but even from a distance they could see his strange, golden eyes.

“You can’t stop me, I’m as good as you,” he shouted and kicked a stone viciously, sending it bouncing down the slope and into the stream.

“I don’t want to stop you, I liked it.”

Uirngut turned his back and scrambled upwards, sending more stones rattling towards the water.

“Poor Uirngut,” said Aariak, “he so wants to be a fine artist.”

The path forked around the side of the cliff. Aariak and Umalik could see light from a fire flickering inside one of the caves. They could smell food. A boy of about twelve summers sat in the entrance. He looked much like Umalik, the same sun burnt face and brown eyes, but with a horse’s mane of black spiky hair sticking straight up above his ears.

“I tried out my new harpoon,” he called. “I got four fish, Grandfather is cooking them.”

“Be careful, Aku,” warned Aariak, “there’s a rhino about.”

“I’m not scared of rhino.” Aku pretended to throw his harpoon, a plaited leather bracelet slipping down his wrist.

“You’re stupid if you’re not,” came a gruff voice from inside the cave. “They can run faster than you and that horn’s better than any spear. Keep out of their way.”

A small man, dressed like the others in furs, with a kindly, wrinkled face and a white beard was arranging fish onto flat stones.

“Have some, they’re good,” he said.

Aariak picked one up and ate around the bone. “Uirngut did a picture in our cave. It’s not very good. Have you seen him around?”

“He’s gone back to the other cave,” Aku said through a mouthful of fish.

“You need to be careful of Uirngut as well as the rhino,” his grandfather muttered. “Remember he’s not one of us. My father told me his family was no good a long time ago and he was right.”

Aariak frowned. “Uirngut’s done nothing wrong. We must be nice to him, he seems to be alone.”

“Let’s hope his family keeps away. We don’t want trouble,” Grandfather replied, poking the fish with a stick.

“Where’s Father?” asked Aariak, warming her hands at the fire.

Aku beamed. “He’s gone to catch hares and he’s taken Wolf with him. I’m going to have a new pair of fur gloves.”

As they spoke a shadow fell across the entrance and a big man entered clad in skins with fur leggings tied round his feet to make stout boots. He carried three dead hares. Aariak ran and put her arms round him, “Father, you’re back, I knew you’d get something,” she said, giving him a squeeze.

“Aku’s gloves won’t be much good,” he blew on the animal’s soft fur. “Look, they’re moulting into winter coats.”

A full grown wolf, grey and shaggy with pale eyes, wandered in sniffing the air and wagging his tail, pleased to be home. Aku grabbed him before he reached the fish.

“Wolf’s useless,” said Father. “He finds game all right, then he frightens it away.”

The days were getting short. From inside the cave they could see clouds beginning to cover the setting sun. It was cold; a few flakes of snow drifted down to melt quickly on the wet ground. Father was skinning the hares with a flint knife. Shadows from the fire flickered on the walls casting strange shapes, now dark, now light. The smoke made Umalik’s eyes water. Aariak sat close to the fire scraping away with a sharp

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flint at a piece of bone. After a while she took earth from the cave floor and rubbed it onto her work.

“It’s done,” she said, giving it to Grandfather.

“You are a great artist,” he murmured, admiring the craftsmanship. “Look at this, Umalik.”

The bone had a finely drawn horse’s head on it. Red earth from the floor rubbed into the lines made the figure stand out from its white background.

“I like the mane,” Umalik rubbed his thumb over the ridges on the bone.

“We’ll see if he comes,” said Aariak softly.

Aku yawned. “I must sleep.”

Father laughed. “You’re always the first to sleep. You’re growing, little one. We’ll sleep at sunset.” He threw a handful of wood onto the fire.

Later, Umalik lay awake, listening to the noises of the night. He liked to work out what was making them. The trumpeting of swans flying away for the winter was easy, like the *curllee* of the long-beaked bird that Uirngut had drawn. He could hear big animals moving near the stream, maybe bison having a drink. Then a whinny. Of course, the horses had come. He was nearly asleep, but suddenly half woke to hear footsteps moving quietly. The fire was almost out. Dimly, he could see Aku curled up in a corner and Father and Grandfather in another, all sleeping under heaps of skins. Aariak was by herself, not far from the entrance. Were those footsteps again? Maybe he was dreaming. He thought he saw a tall figure holding a thick animal skin over Aariak, pushing down hard with both hands. A harsh voice muttered, “Now I’m the best painter of all.” There was a gasp and some movement, then nothing. The intruder paused and looked upwards, golden eyes glittering in the last of the firelight. Then he was gone.

Umalik leaped up and ran past the fire, scattering sparks

and ashes.

“Aariak, are you all right?” He shook her shoulder, but she was still.

Father was on his feet. “What’s wrong?” he shouted.

“Uirngut was here; he’s hurt Aariak.”

Father went to Aariak and gently pulled the furs back. He leant over her for a long time, then stood up. “She’s dead,” he breathed through clenched teeth. “How could this happen?”

Aku was crying softly, holding on to Grandfather. Umalik’s mouth was dry; he was blinking back tears. There was silence lost in the drip, drip of water somewhere in the cave. Father crouched down, stroking Aariak’s black hair. It was Grandfather who spoke, his voice quavering and sounding old.

“We are going to have to kill Uirngut. He has taken Aariak’s spirit. Without it there will be no more pictures, no more animals and we will have nothing to hunt. We will die. Whoever kills Uirngut will regain Aariak’s spirit and return it to her family. He will be the new painter. We must do this, we can’t all die.”

The fire was out. Father was just visible by hazy moonlight filtering into the cave. He was still stroking Aariak. “Who can do it?” he asked. “I must stay to feed you all. You are too old, Grandfather, and Umalik is too young.”

“It must be Umalik; he can do it.” Aku was hopping from one foot to the other shouting.

Umalik’s stomach bounced, how could he keep up? Uirngut was much bigger than him. He would not have a chance.

Father sighed. “It might be our only hope. Could you do it, Umalik? Tell us if you don’t think you can. We’ll understand.”

Inside Umalik’s head a voice was saying, ‘*No, no, I’ll never win,*’ but then he remembered what Aariak had said:

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“You can always keep up.” He had to for her.

“I’ll try,” he said.

“Get some sleep,” Father told him, a strange kindness in his gruff voice. “You must be up early in the morning. Uirngut has a head start, but there’s no point in tracking in the dark and you’ll need provisions.”

There was a whimper from outside. Wolf arrived, sniffed at the furs covering Aariak’s body and shivered.

“If he’d been here when Uirngut came, he might have warned us,” said Grandfather, “but you may as well take him, Umalik, when you go. He just might help you track Uirngut.”

“Or he might not,” added Aku.

Next morning Father gave Umalik a skin bag. Inside was some dried meat, a fine flint knife, bone harpoon heads and three bone fishhooks with a coil of line, plaited from plant stems.

“You can find sticks to mount the harpoon heads. They’re easy to carry like this. Take a light spear, there are some at the back of the cave.”

Umalik had pains in his stomach; he was scared but excited at the same time. It would be all right, everything would be all right, he just had to keep believing it.

Father held Wolf and pushed the animal’s nose amongst Aariak’s furs. “Uirngut’s scent will be on these. Maybe Wolf will follow it.” Wolf struggled free and ran out of the cave.

Umalik went to each member of his family and embraced them, first Father, then Grandfather and lastly Aku, giving him the biggest hug of all.

Aku was crying again. “Father,” he sobbed, “Umalik can’t go alone. I’m going with him.”

Father put his arm round Aku. “You can’t go. You’d slow him down. In two or three summers you’ll be big and strong, but not yet. What if neither of you came back? Your

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mother died last winter, now Aariak. You are the last of the family, I can't let you go." There was fear in his voice and Umalik sensed Father did not have much hope of his return.

Umalik shouldered his bag and picked up a short spear. He looked awkwardly at his family. "I won't be long," he said, and then thought how stupid that sounded as he went out of the cave and into the clear, cold air.

## CHAPTER TWO

U malik followed the stream until the cliffs of the gorge dropped away to nothing. He was in a wild, open landscape: to one side great plains of grass stretched away forever, to his right lay thick forest. A trail led out of the gorge through golden-leaved bushes, some nibbled or torn by animals, others reaching above Umalik's waist. Pine trees were everywhere, a few on the grassy plain, then densely packed forest and beyond, faint ghosts of mountains. Patches of melting snow glistened white against the haze of a blue horizon. He felt a breeze on his face as it tossed yellow leaves in flurries and whirlwinds, skimming through the grass. The sun had disappeared behind clouds which disgorged hammering rain. Umalik pulled up his hood, he was feeling cold and wet, but he kept plodding on, looking as far ahead as possible, in the hope that his quarry had not got too far away. The rain stopped as quickly as it had begun and there was bright sun. For a second Umalik thought he saw a man silhouetted in the clear light against the skyline, then in the shadow of a cloud, he was gone. Umalik screwed up his eyes. Nothing. Maybe it had been an animal or simply a trick of the light.

Wolf, who had disappeared into the trees, shot out at high speed and ran in front, looking back into the forest. They both carried on, slipping and sliding over rough ground.

Suddenly, there was movement in the trees, the cracking of branches, and a rumble of breath. Three mammoths lumbered slowly towards the grassland, their curved tusks white against brown shaggy coats, trunks swinging. One animal stopped and shook its head, sending droplets of water upwards sparkling with intense brilliance. For a moment there was a flash of rainbow against the sun and then the huge animal raised its

trunk and trumpeted loudly. Far off out on the plain the call was repeated, again and again. The beasts turned and ambled towards a shallow pool of water, their feet squelching in the soft mud as they drank.

Umalik called to Wolf, who was still padding behind him, and they continued into a wet, marshy area. Animal paths were everywhere, branching off in all directions. Now it was marshier, some of the grasses with heads of white fluff growing on the stems. Umalik headed in the direction of where he thought he had seen the man. Without warning, he lost his footing and fell, sinking into the soft, wet mud. He kicked with his feet, thrashing wildly, but felt himself sliding further into the bog.

He reached for the grass and pulled, tufts coming away in his hands. Umalik could hardly see through the greenery around him and the smell of the bog stifled his breathing. He clutched at his spear, trying not to lose it, while struggling to pull himself free, but the more he tried, the further he was sucked into the mud. There was no point, but he called loudly for help, then his head dropped; he was going to die.

He could hear on the wind the croaks of ravens gathering. Then there was another noise, a squelching and splashing, coming nearer. An animal? Umalik was sobbing and panting in short, terrified breaths. His mind was beginning to spin out of control. Vainly, he raised his spear to defend himself.

Then a voice he knew. "Hold tight to the spear, I've got the other end. Help me pull you out." Umalik thought he was dreaming. "Come on, hold tight." It was Aku.

Umalik gripped for dear life and was slowly, slowly pulled free. He did not ask questions but just sat, wet, dirty and shaking, head in hands, tears making two clean lines on his muddy face. Wolf was there, sniffing and wagging his tail. At last, Umalik looked up.

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“Where did you come from? How did you find me?”

Aku was nearly as muddy as Umalik, his spiky hair matted and dirty. “I followed you. I couldn’t let you go alone. I had a big row with Father. He kept saying I was too young and something would happen to me, so I ran away. I followed you and then I heard you call and I pulled you out.” He grinned through the mud. “When we get back I’ll tell Father you were the one who fell in the bog.”

“Thanks,” said Umalik, and really meant it. He was feeling sick and exhausted and would have given anything to be back home in the cave by a warm fire with all of his family there with him.

“We’d better make a shelter,” said Aku, taking charge. “It’s going to be dark soon. We need food and we both need sleep.”

He broke some branches off the trees and made for higher ground. Then he propped the branches up in an arch and put smaller branches over them. Slowly, Umalik got strength and movement into his limbs and began to help. At last they had somewhere to sleep. It was not much, but it did keep the wind off. The sun was low and the sky turned pink; it quickly grew dark. The boys crawled into the shelter and lay under their wet furs. They ate some dried meat and tried to sleep. Umalik found himself playing the animal sound game, but it was more threatening and less of a game out here in the open. Wolves howled a long way away. Nearby he could hear large animals moving through the bushes and he hoped they were only bison or horses. There was a scrabbling and panting much closer. His heart leapt, then there was the thump of a tail on the ground. Wolf snuggled between them; sniffed Umalik’s face and, sighing deeply, went to sleep.

It was a long night. Umalik kept waking, stiff and cold, reliving his escape from death. Aku was not moving, sleeping

the sleep of exhaustion. Umalik wondered what to do next. He had made little progress the first day. Back in the cave, what seemed like a long time ago, Father had talked of tracking. Uirngut was too far ahead for tracking, he could be anywhere. Now Aku was sure to slow him down, but without Aku, he'd be dead. Wolf was dreaming, his paws twitching, breath snuffling. Umalik gave him a shove and he stopped. They would just have to carry on as best they could. The only reassuring thing was that Uirngut could not travel in the dark either.

When they woke, damp and still tired, the wind had dropped; the plain was white with frost and trees stood black against a pale horizon. A herd of bison moved slowly, feeding as it went, steam from their nostrils drifting upwards in the still, pine-scented, air. The boys splashed their faces in a pool, the icy water like knives cutting through skin.

“Where did you see Uirngut?” asked Aku.

“Maybe I saw him.”

“Where did you maybe see him?”

Umalik pointed. “Way over on that ridge. It might have been anything.”

Aku grinned. “You’ve got good eyes. It was Uirngut; he hasn’t got far.”

Umalik was not so sure. “That was yesterday. He might have kept going all night.”

“Not with this mud and stuff. Besides, he doesn’t know we’re after him. He thinks he got away. He’s slowed down, you’ll see.”

The boys finished the last of their dried meat and picked some berries from a bush. Still hungry, they started walking. Groups of bison were moving in the same direction, followed by a pair of ravens which swooped to the ground before soaring away in wide circles. On the edge of the herd were half grown

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calves keeping close to their mothers. The earth throbbed with the sound of their feet. In all the noise Umalik heard a faint cough. “Aku,” he whispered. “Lions.”

“Where are they? I can’t see them.” Aku’s voice was excited.

Umalik looked around, nothing, then behind. A sandy shape just visible in the grass.

“Behind us; there’ll be another one.” They could see nothing.

“We’re in trouble, little brother,” Umalik whispered. “We’re between the lions and the bison.”

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