

The Oukkri Toukkri

Conor Stuart Roe

It was that first winter of blushing greenery, that winter when the winds blew soft, the rains fell gentle, and the grasses grew thick. It was the winter when we came to know the farmers.

The first night, we all sat by the fireplace and warmed our feet against its glow as we ate. Dinner was a fillet of salmon, butter-fried morels with ramps, pease porridge, and a slab of flat bread made from rye and acorn flour - a much better dinner than the salt-cured horse meat we ate so often while we traveled. The spoons were made of wood and cow bone, and the bowls were fired earthenware. We'd been given hand-shaped clay mugs to drink from, and we filled them with beer mixed with water out of a beautiful ceramic pot, with ochre spirals on the sides and handles shaped like ram's heads.

The houses there were long and dug into the earth. A dirt floor was beneath us and rose up at the edges to form walls to about waist height. Above this, larch boughs were dug in at an angle and came together overhead like ribs, to form a peaked roof like a long, straight spine. The sides and top of the house were covered by branches packed with mud and straw. The fireplace was dug into the wall near the entrance and the smoke piped outside through a hole. From where we were, whenever someone pulled back the hanging furs at the entrance as they passed in or out, we felt a draft of the cold, late-autumn air. Further inside the house, other men and women from the town went about their nightly business, hanging furs and leather up on cords to dry, and children ran

and shouted as they played. Some were beginning to lie down for the night on their bed of fur and aspen branches.

Closest to the fire sat that man named Omo who had welcomed us in. He had convinced the inhabitants there - his wife and children, their spouses and children, cousins, and seemingly many others - to allow us to rest two nights in exchange for one foal to slaughter and some pouches of medicinal herbs as we made our way across the land as we always did to find new grazing for our horses. The people here spoke a tongue very different from ours, but Omo was a chatty person and seemed to have picked up several travelers' languages in his years.

Omo had a smile in his eyes, and as we finished eating and began to sit back in our chairs, he said, "You're brave to come up this far north so close to Midwinter. In my lifetime, horse folk like yourselves have always been clear of this land by the time of the harvest moon. When the days get so short and cold, strange things begin to happen in this woodland."

Someone asked what kinds of things. He sat and thought for a moment, before saying, "Well, I've heard of a great many, some stranger than others. Some of them don't even surprise us anymore. Ehmm... does your lot, for instance, know how to build traps in a river for catching fish?"

No one said anything. After a moment, he declared, "Ah, well. That's a good one to start, the story of where we got that from. Some time around my father's childhood we learned to make them, and that's a story they call

The Cunning Stork

"Well, at that time there was a hunter named Ohppi a little older than my father, who went down to the river with his bow one day to try to find an animal to catch. He got down by the bank and went to hide and watch for anything that might come by. Well, he sat a while and saw nothing,

but he began to hear an angry chatter, first quiet then growing louder. The words were shrill and hard to pick out at first, but the longer Ohppi listened the more he grew to understand it, first single words, then the whole thing. And this is what he heard:

'No, you did! It was those rotted willow sticks you found!'

'That wasn't why! You packed the mud too loose, it was what began to wash away first!'

"And as he sat and listened he noticed that what he'd taken to be just a cluster of fallen branches caught in the stream was in fact half a dam, and inside were two beavers squabbling over whose fault it was that the river had swept away the other half.

'It doesn't matter, anyway!' one of them said. 'We'd better build it again before dusk or else the fox will come and eat us both!'

"Ohppi was transfixed. He didn't want to kill them now! It's rare to overhear animals talking like that, and he wanted to hear what they'd say. Just then, a white stork who overheard them too came and lit on a log beside their dam, and said:

'I don't mean to butt in, but it was hard not to hear you from way overhead, the way you're squabbling. If the fox wasn't going to find you before, he certainly will with that racket. But I have an idea: I have keen vision, and from the branches of the pine over there I can surely spot a fox coming this way from any direction. That I'll do, and distract any who should come by, if you'll build the stream by your dam narrow and deep and stick branches in the riverbed in a line so that fish become trapped there for me to eat.'

"The beavers agreed, and the stork flew off and sat in the high branches of the tallest pine tree. The hunter wanted to observe the stork on his lookout, so Ohppi slowly crept over by the trees to see what it would do next.

"After a while, a red fox came by with a big frog hanging from its mouth. The stork saw it as soon as Ohppi did, and silently swooped down from its branch to land in front of the fox.

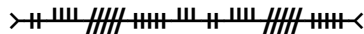
'Hello, Sir Fox,' it crooned. 'That's a mighty fat looking frog.'

'It's a juicy one!' the fox replied. 'I'll bet you'd like to have it, but I'll fight you off if you try!'

'There's no need for fighting,' the stork soothed him. 'I would like to have it, but I'll bet you'd like to hear what I have to tell you. I know of some beavers around here now whose dam has broken open, and if you find them before they rebuild it you can catch them and have both for yourself.' Storks don't like the taste of beavers. 'If you give me the frog, I'll show you to them.'

"The fox agreed and dropped the frog in his excitement, and as soon as he did so the stork grabbed it with its beak and ate it in one swallow. It upheld its end of the bargain: after eating, it took off and flew over to the same log right beside the beavers. They were so busy building and arguing again that they didn't notice the stork, nor did they notice when the fox bounded over until it had them both by the neck, and the fox ate them both for dinner.

"The fox couldn't even move after that for being so fat. Fortunately for the stork, the beavers had finished building the trap as it had instructed, and it sat on the log spearing fish until dark, when Ohppi left. Ohppi shot neither the fox nor the stork, but took back the story of what he saw to our town, and we've been trapping fish so ever since."



We sat in enthralment as he told the story. When he was finished, someone pointed out that we never hear animals speaking. "Yes, it's rare here, too." Omo replied. "You must listen long enough to learn the sounds of their words, and most woodland animals won't stay by people for

so long unless you hide from them like Ohppi did. I find most horse folk are surprised to hear stories of animals speaking. You mostly interact with your horses, I suppose, and domestic animals don't say much because they haven't got much to say!

"One of the only animals around here that'll willingly talk to people is the *kaakraa*, what you'd call the raven, but that's because it knows how to trick them with its words. Ravens are a very powerful sort of creature too, and have a magic to them that most beasts don't. If you hear a *kaakraa* talking, you'd better not stick around to listen, or else you might be gotten the best of. There's one woman I know of from around here who got swindled - that's the story of

The Trapper and the Raven

"Some generations ago a woman named Iite was out in these woods setting snares for deer and boars that roam the land. I don't know if you've seen these traps: you stick three stakes in the ground by a sapling, then lash two sticks between them like so:" He took a piece of charcoal from the edge of the fire and drew us a little picture on the bottom of his plate. "You bend the sapling down and tie a cord to the tip, then thread it around this stick and tie the rest into a slipknot that you lay open on the ground, with a bait in the middle. When an animal steps inside and disturbs the stick, the sapling is released and pulls the slipknot tight around its legs.

"Well, while setting one of her last snares of the day, Iite stumbled on a rock and stepped into her own trap. She was a good layer of snares, and the sapling, a rather large one, whipped up and the knot pulled tight around her legs. The trap was built to suspend a deer, so she was left completely dangling with her fingertips unable to touch the ground if she stretched. Her stone knife she'd dropped onto the ground below, and even as she bounced and swayed she couldn't reach it. She tried pulling her body up to untie herself, but the cord was strong and she couldn't keep her head above her waist for long enough to work at it.

"It was getting dark and cold, and with no one around to help she feared hypothermia. Just then, a black raven flew up and landed on a branch beside her.

'Do you need help?' it asked in a deeply concerned voice.

'Yes! I beg you!' cried Iite.

'I can undo the cord.' said the raven. 'But it will be very tiring for my beak. I have but one small favor to ask in return. I will be so tired from picking the cord apart that I'll need a little food to revive me. Do you have any grain back home?'

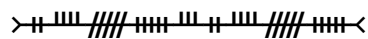
'Barely any.' said Iite. 'The harvest was very bad this year, which is why I'm driven to trapping.'

'I see...' the raven pondered. 'Perhaps you can pay back your debt in installments, then? It's a new moon tonight. I ask that you find only one grain of millet to feed me tonight. On the next new moon, you can pay me back some more with two grains. The new moon after, I ask only four, and that every new moon after you ought simply to double the number of grains. That way I can eventually get enough millet to fill my belly, and hopefully the harvest will be better by the time I'm asking for a bit more.'

"Iite saw that the raven was trying to trick her, but had no other choice. She would not need to provide very much grain any time soon, and perhaps she could kill the raven or find another way to pay the debt in the meantime. She agreed, and the raven set about yanking and tearing at the leather cord with its beak. After several minutes, the cord finally broke and Iite fell upon the dirt below. She stood and walked back to her home, with the raven flying behind, and when there she procured a single pearl of millet from a sack in her house. This pacified the raven; it did not look greedily upon the whole sack but simply took the one grain and left.

"Iite had nearly forgotten about the raven by the next moon. But on the night of the new moon, there it sat on a post beside her longhouse. She nearly cried out in surprise upon seeing it, but she remembered that she only owed it two little pieces of millet, so she gave these and it left again.

"By the time a year had passed, Iite had to give the raven a full bowl of grain each new moon. Another four moons went by, and it was expecting to receive a sack the size of a cow's head. Although the harvest had indeed been better that next year, Iite could no longer afford this tithe to the raven, and she hatched a plan. On the night of the new moon, she sat in wait with a wooden lance by the entrance of her home, where she always found it. When the raven came and sat on its post, she lunged out and struck at it. The lance struck its wing and a bit of blood flowed forth, but it was not severely injured and managed to take off. It did not fight back, but simply flew away and called behind it, 'thus your promise to me is broken, and so mine to you!' And Iite felt her legs become bound up together again. Though she looked down and could not see nor feel any cord around her legs, they were bound together all the same and she could never remove them one from the other, never walk or run again for the rest of her days."



We were stunned. We had never heard of creatures with such powers. "Yep," Omo added. "There are some really strange forces that come out the further north you get. The *kaakraa* aren't even the worst of them, though. In the plains where your kind mostly spend your time you don't have them: the *tamppo*, a strange sort of people with all kinds of magic. They come from the other side of earth, from beneath the ground we sit on, but in winter here when it's so dark and cold, some of them cross the barrier and come to this side. When they come over they prefer the forests and caves where they have shelter during the day, and at night they run wild.

"They even live underwater and burrow underground. I understand you burn your dead, but here we've always buried them. We give them pottery and bone jewelry and flowers, and they take these as they pass underground and reanimate in the *tamppo* world beneath the earth."

Someone asked whether it was possible for living people to pass over to their side of the world. "Yes," he said, with a thoughtful wrinkle in his forehead. "It's dangerous, but it's been done. The one that I know of within my life is that of the woman Ahpo,

The Lamenting Wife

"When I was a young man of about 17, not long before I married Tuviti in fact, there was a group of hunters who went out to hunt deer, and one among them named Sia was gored by the antler of a feisty buck. He died of his wound, and this was high up in the hills, so his companions performed the burial rites for him there and left him on the mountainside.

"He was only a few years older than me and had been married to his wife Ahpo for less than a year. When the hunting band came back into town and told Ahpo what had happened, she was stricken with grief and would not speak but ran up into the hills herself to find him.

"Based on the description that his companions had given, she found his grave without trouble. She had brought with her a digging stick, and began to shovel away the soil, but try as she might she could not find his body - he had already sunken down into the *tamppo* realm. Rather than be discouraged, she dug even more fervently, boring a great tunnel until she began to find caves and pockets of space. Finally she broke through to the other side, a great open expanse of air, like a cave, surrounded by earth and stone and mostly shrouded in darkness, although in the distance in many directions she could see fires lit by the *tamppo*.

"The air was bitter cold. There were a great multitude of plants in the *tamppo* world - ferns, mosses, and many others that evade description in our language. They were not only green, but red and purple and black. There were many pools and streams, and the ground beneath her feet was almost always damp - the only exception was that in places, the floor was solid ice. Where

she'd come out, she could see rocks and crags directly overhead, but as she went further it opened up and she would not be able to tell that there were not an open night sky above, if not for lack of stars or moon.

"She walked toward the largest cluster of lights in the distance, and when it drew close she could see that they were many stoves and hearths over which *tamppo* were roasting fish and vegetables. She had never seen *tamppo* before, but she knew what they look like - they have the same general form as people, but come in a wider variety of shapes and sizes. Some are completely hairless and have gills and slick skin, others stand much taller than ordinary people and have skin like bark and swollen muscles like those of bears, and some would only come to your knee and have wings and razor-sharp fingers and teeth. In their world, they use no shelter, sleeping and cooking in the open air.

"As she approached, a great cry went up among the *tamppo*, and they called for their chief. One among them, about normal height and in fact not so different in appearance from an ordinary man, stepped forth. 'You must be the wife of Sia!' he proclaimed.

'That I am,' said she. 'Have you got him?'

'He is among us. He has only just come, though, and he will need time to reawaken. He's resting now.'

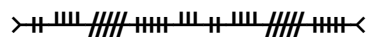
'Where have you got him?' she cried, and stormed into their encampment.

"When she started forward, the *tamppo* shrieked and came at her, and began to claw and bite at her. She was fearless out of bravery and love for Sia, but she could not have fallen anyway. You see, she was in fact dead almost as soon as they came upon her, but their world is for the dead, and the dead go there to reawaken and gain the power of the *tamppo*, so injury only strengthened her in that plane. As they struck at her, blood spilled forth from her body, and they even brought

her to the ground more than once, but in that world the bodies of the dead heal and are reshaped, and after every blow she was weakened for a time but found her strength again.

"After long separation from the world of people, newly arrived souls begin to forget their love of their homes and take delight in the strange powers of the *tamppo*, but the memory of home and love was still fresh and strong for Ahpo, and she was determined to return with Sia. Eventually the *tamppo* bored of tormenting her and released her, and she went forward to find in the middle of their encampment her husband asleep on a fur on the ground, surrounded by the possessions he'd been buried with. She pulled him over her shoulder and started back the way she'd come, carried Sia across the rocks and into her tunnel. But as she began to cross back over to our world, she grew more and more faint. She was too young in the *tamppo* world and was not yet strong enough to cross the boundary back. As she tried to reenter our world she grew weak and her injuries began to pain her. She pressed on for days, with Sia remaining sleeping on her shoulder, but every time she let up she slid back down, and eventually exhaustion overtook her and she, too, fell unconscious and slipped back into the *tamppo* realm, where she and her husband eventually reawoke and forgot their love of this life.

"Other hunters have been up to that hill since, and although there are no linden trees anywhere else in that forest, two linden trees have grown up over Sia's grave."



Someone asked, if she never came back, how Omo could possibly know what happened when she burrowed into the grave. And to that, he grinned with satisfaction. "I thought you might ask. It took our people a long time to understand what happened to Ahpo. But, you see, the ravens who crossed over around that time saw what happened, and when they came back they couldn't help but tell that story. They love to hear about the time that the *tamppo* were disturbed so by a person, and eventually the other creatures began to hear about it, and in little bits and pieces we

heard it from them. If the story hadn't made such a stir, I don't think any part of it would have made it back to our ears."

Why do the ravens love to hear about the *tamppo* being disturbed, we asked. "Well, there's a sort of conflict they have," Omo said. "A good story I know about that is that of

The Oukkri Toukkri

"What you have to understand is that the *kaakraa* and the *tamppo* hate each other. They are both the predominant masters of magic in their own domains - the *kaakraa* on this side, and the *tamppo* on the other. Both creatures are wise and cunning, and both will eat just about anything. The *kaakraa* fly over to that side, too, over the northern ocean, and some people think that the *kaakraa* and the *tamppo* help preserve the balance between the two worlds with their constant stalemate.

"One year a long time ago, a great pestilence came over this land. Insects came down from the sky one summer and ate our millet and rye right off the stalk, and chewed holes through the juiciest acorns of our sturdiest oaks. Now, a good many people went hungry, and to fend off starvation people had to slaughter their animals and spend long autumn days in the forest looking for food. The ravens became upset by the pestilence because they too like to steal our grains off the stalk, and to hunt the mice that inhabit our storehouses when they're plentiful.

"The *tamppo*, though, were happy. What the *tamppo* lack in their land is fine furs to make clothing from, and the people here hate the *tamppo* for coming in the night and stealing our goats and sheep for fur and wool. But when the people were slaughtering and hunting so many animals, they had no need for so many skins nor the time to shear their sheep or tan their hides, so the *tamppo* would simply take the skins and furs for themselves after the people would leave.

"Now, the people, the ravens, and the *tamppo* all came to the same conclusion about the pestilence. Nothing could cause that besides the Oukkri Toukkri, of course."

He gave us a knowing look, but we all looked back at him with blank stares. After moment, his smirk turned to a wide-eyed look of surprise. "You don't know about the Oukkri Toukkri? I thought all peoples that know this region had stories about it!" The brave among us shook our heads no.

Omo gave an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, as though he were disappointed to have something else to tell us about, but the twinkle in his eyes betrayed his excitement that he got to be the one to let us in on such an interesting secret. "So, if you go down to the bogs at night, what sound would you hear?" He was determined to draw out the explanation as much as possible. Omo was a very dramatic man. "When dusk comes you hear the *iiksi tiiksi* of the little wood frogs chirping. Sometimes, you find a very big, very old frog, and the deeper sound it makes is more like an *aankki taankki*. So you can imagine what the Oukkri Toukkri is - it's the biggest frog of them all, who makes a deep, resonant croak *oukkri toukkri* (on the rare occasion it chooses to make a sound at all)!

"The Oukkri Toukkri is a big warty brown frog the size of a house that lives on the shores of the many lakes out here - no person knows exactly where it is now. It has a kind of power too, though very different from the *kaakraa* and the *tamppo*. All the other frogs obey the Oukkri Toukkri, and through them it has a strange sort of influence over the insects and the water and all manner of other nature.

"Anyhow, the ravens were so upset that they decided to send an emissary to the Oukkri Toukkri. They met amongst themselves and selected the finest and most eloquent speaker from their ranks. This was a raven named Tatva, and she went to the Oukkri Toukkri where it sat at the edge of the water. They were hundreds of frogs of varying sizes sitting and hopping around the Oukkri

Toukkri, diving into the lake or leaping about the grass for food, but it simply sat, with its glistening haunches the size of elm trunks upon the sand.

"She strutted back and forth over the mud, her black feathers glistening, and fine words spilling from her beak beseeching it to end the pestilence. Like all frogs, the Oukkri Toukkri cannot speak (in fact it cannot make any noise other than *oukkri toukkri*) and it simply sat silently with its two eyes gazing off in different directions, neither at Tatva. When Tatva finished her speech, the Oukkri Toukkri sat for a long time without reacting. The sun began to set. Eventually, it began to move its head about a bit, to get a better look at Tatva. And then, it opened its mouth and its great pink tongue emerged and shot straight at Tatva, enveloping her and pulling her back into his open jaw. He swallowed Tatva whole and did nothing else.

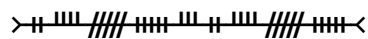
"When the *kaakraa* heard about this offense, they were furious, but there was nothing else they could do. They could hardly kill it, and the way its mysterious influence works, killing may just as well have worsened the pestilence or made it permanent. And maybe the Oukkri Toukkri did heed Tatva's words, because the next year the insects did not come, and in fact the harvest was extremely bountiful, the most fertile harvest in living memory.

"This time, the *tamppo* were angry, because the people had no need for hunting, and instead of going out on hunts on their dogs could stand watch over the livestock fields. The *tamppo* are very lazy and did not want to go hunting animals for fur themselves, and so began to walk around in tattered clothing or even naked for lack of material.

"Now the *tamppo* decided to send their emissaries to the Oukkri Toukkri. They were confident that they would fare better than the ravens, because many of the *tamppo* are quite large and might intimidate the great frog. They sent two men, Taakinpiirpatre and Ankkepvustukvo (the *tamppo* have long, preposterous names), both of whom stand twice as tall as ordinary men, with clubs in hand to try to threaten the Oukkri Toukkri into submission. They told it that the *tamppo* wished for a less plentiful grain harvest next year. When the Oukkri Toukkri did not seem to

heed them, they began to smack it with their sticks, but those only sunk into its blubbery flesh without causing injury. The Oukkri Toukkri hopped some way away, each of its great bounds carrying it the full length of this house and shaking the ground like an earthquake, and then began to breathe deeply and loudly, its cavernous throat billowing full with every inhale. A great stench came over the air as it breathed out, and Taakinpiirpatre and Ankkepvustukvo began to cough and had to flee. From what I've heard, they fell ill over the next few days and died.

"That was many generations ago, and people still tell of it. Not since then has any being tried to disturb or dissuade the Oukkri Toukkri."



By the time he had finished the odd tale of this great frog, he was speaking in nearly a whisper. The logs in the fireplace had burned down to ash and smoldering embers, and all the other people in the longhouse were fast asleep. The lids of our eyes were drooping as well, not only from the late hour but from the plentiful beer in this land of rye farmers. Omo kept sitting by the fire with a sly grin to himself, but we had begun taking our leave, one by one, and at the conclusion of his story he left us to our rest. We bedded down that night in tents or on the floor of the longhouse, and in its cozy warmth and safety we slept long and sound.

The next morning, we were awakened not by the blazing winter dawn as we are accustomed on our hard days of riding and encampment, but by the gentle din of the townspeople's mellifluous language and the banging here or there of pots as they prepared millet porridge fragrant with honey, cranberries, and blackcurrants. We went out to attend to the horses, who had fared well in the night and were grazing the grasses near the town, where the woods had been burned to yield farms and grazing lands.

This was the winter, remember, when the weather was mild and we began to roam those lands which before had been treacherous and barren to us.

Omo woke even later than us, and when he did he came outside with wild hair and uncovered feet and spent many minutes looking at our horses and the bright sky. "You know," he said at last to those of us close enough to listen, "I was ruminating more on the stories I was telling you last night. It came to me something I heard in passing as a child, from the generations before me. I may not look young, but there are some in this town even older than I, and I think even they would not quite remember this: some long time ago, our people knew yours better, it was said. Tell me, for I did not ask last night - why have your people come here so close to the darkest day? What have you seen on your journey?"

We told him of how the sky had been mild and the lands plentiful, how our horses had sought northward and remained fat and hale even as we pressed into these swampy, wooded lands. We needed only say a little before a knowing smile came over his face and he said, "Ah, I thought it might be so. Our harvest has been quite a bounty this year as well. Even in summers past, I think the people of this town might not have been willing to feed you so well as last night, but our grain stores have been overflowing of late. And as I think on it, I may have an idea why. I have hope that we may experience such vitality of the land for years to come, and that we may enjoy the meeting of traveling people such as yourself more frequently. In fact, I suspect that this all begins with a band of traveling people, and with some of the things I told you of yesterday. Remind me that I have another story to tell tonight."

For the day we amused ourselves in that place. The horses were quite content, so we wandered about, sampling the berries and winter fruits of the forests, bartering with townspeople over herbs and equipment, or helping our hosts chop wood and haul water for the meal that night. The light was short, only a third or less of the day, and it wasn't long before we found ourselves returning to the longhouse. It was just as well - we were eager to hear Omo's account.

When we came in, we found whole trout and strips of salt-cured beef smoking on green sticks over the fireplace. Omo was already seated there, smoking the leaves of the bearberry plant from a bone pipe. We took the meat and fish down onto our plates, still sizzling, and were given bowls

of salt, the large gray-green chunks of salt those people have, to sprinkle over the fish. We took endive and chicory from our baskets, gathered in the day, and took millet porridge remaining from that morning. It was as sumptuous a meal as the day prior. We settled in to sitting on the dirt floor, many of us in the very same places as the night before, and began to turn expectant eyes toward Omo. Even the steaming, fragrant food could not distract our attention from the business at hand.

He had been sitting, smoke curling over his head, and had barely opened his eyes a crack as we filtered in to take our seats. He almost looked asleep, but opened his eyes with a start as a sudden, waiting silence replaced our chatter. "Oh! I suppose you want to hear the tale I spoke of earlier!" He turned his attention for the first time to the food - it seemed as though he hadn't noticed it being laid out. Seeing the large brown trout, he gestured and gave us a sly smile. "Those fish traps, eh?" He did not serve himself, but simply took a strip of meat from over the fire, lazily peeled it apart and chewed it as he spoke. Licking his fingers, he said, "Yes, well, it's good that I told you some of the stories of our people yesterday, this one has got a bit to do with those. Quite a bit, in fact, with the last one, the story of the Oukkri Toukkri. The stories I told you last night may have seemed strange and preposterous, passed down by senile old men like me or wisecrackers looking for a gullible audience, but I hope this one convinces you that there's as true as I sit here.

"As I mentioned, we get a good many peoples traveling through here like yourselves, from the south or the east with their horses or cows. We even have some traveling up the rivers from the coast by canoe to sell shells, medicines, and flint. What we don't have is many from the north.

"There are round about thirty to forty longhouses in this town, which is pretty sizeable for the area as far as I gather from travelers. You'll probably know that better than me. Further north, there's certainly nothing of this size. The people thin out - their only livelihood is fishing and herding *tantoostu*... oh, do you have a word for those? A kind of huge hardy deer that lives up that way." One among us knew of such a thing - a reindeer, they called it. "Yes, a reindeer," Omo

went on. "All they have is fishing and reindeer, and they don't have much reason to come south. So we were quite surprised by the arrival of

The Strangers

"A few years ago, during the late autumn, around this time of year in fact, there was a day when four traveling people rode through our palisade. On reindeer, I might add - reindeer! I knew that people kept those animals but I never thought they could be tame enough to ride. They were three men and a woman, all with long black hair. Their skin, especially on their arms and legs, was covered with thin black tattooed lines, and their clothing had hanging from it rows of bone and shell beads that rattled when they moved.

"They had an energy about them. If you go far enough north, you get to where they have night for days around Midwinter, or if you go far enough a moon or more. When that happens, the *tamppo* run absolutely shameless through the land, and the people there have a much closer acquaintance with them and their strange ways. They were from those parts, and you could tell that they had an acquaintance with magic. At first people were afraid of them and even tried to close the gates as they approached. But we let them in, and they actually proved to be quite friendly and helpful. They were good at speaking to animals and had all kinds of strange knowledge... let me give you an example:

"That was around a time when the hunt was none too good. We hadn't seen many deer or rabbits around but we knew there was a group of capercaillie birds living on one of the hills up there on account of seeing their droppings. We just couldn't seem to track them - those kinds of birds spend a lot of time on the ground but every so often they fly a short ways and you lose the trail. Well, one of that group had just the thing. He had a few of our people dig a deep pit, then he took an herb from his bag and boiled it in water. The plant had a strong odor dry, but when he boiled it, the water turned red and the steam carried that stench through the whole air, a kind of sweet

earthy smell. He tossed the water and the herbs into the pit and we walked back a ways and hid. After a couple of hours, the whole group of capercaillies flew over, six or seven attracted by the smell, and hopped down into the pit to find it. Well, they had them then, as their wings are too weak to escape a hole like that, and with a few lances they went over and killed the lot and had a feast that night!

"Another one did this of his own accord: he asked one of us for a sack of millet - he was willing to pay. He took two big barrels as well, and walked out to one of the bogs near here. Now, by that bog grow cranberry bushes, and people sometimes try to go get them, but they're buried in among the thorns and the bears get the ones close to the trails or water. But he went over there and sat for hours, a whole day nearly, until he saw two sparrows land near him and listened in on their conversation. He interrupted with an offer - he'd give them the whole sack of millet in return for as many berries as they could pick. Those birds aren't too fond of the cranberries, but millet fills them up well, so they accepted and brought others of their kind to help. The man put out the barrels and within an hour, twenty or so birds were flying to and fro dropping berries in the barrels, and when they were both full he kept his promise and dumped out the millet for them. He lashed up the barrels on either side of his deer's saddle and walked beside the beast all the way back to our town with them.

"A real help was when they helped us keep away the *tamppo*. That was the time of year when they start stealing our goats and cows again, and already three or four had been taken from town. One night, someone said they saw a group of big creatures in the distance. We all came out - I was there - and you could see through the trees on the edge of town some kind of big black forms, bigger than people. The giants, they must have been. Those four strangers were all in agreement. They had us gather up sticks from rowan trees and light them in a line of little fires. No sooner had we done so then we heard a terrible cry from the woods where we'd seen them, and we saw the creatures lumber away. The smoke from the rowan wood had sickened them and driven them away. We looked afterward but never found any trace of them, but for the rest of the

winter we kept little fires of rowan wood burning and no more animals were taken. We try to keep it up now, but rowan is harder and harder to find as we chop down the rowan trees by us.

"But the strangest story of the strangers' help that I've heard is certainly that of

The Lungfish

"I'm sure you saw as you were riding in how many lakes are on this land. There are a few nearby that people use to bathe and fish in. Well, while the strangers were with us, a girl of about 10 or 12 named Chachou drowned in the lake while bathing alone. She never came back, but people found her clothes on the bank, so they knew what must have happened. Her parents were stricken with grief, not only because she had died but because she hadn't undergone the proper funereal rights. She must be properly buried with possessions and ornaments to take on to the next life. But that lake was deep, deep, and it was impossible to swim down and find her body.

"So one of the strangers, a man named Oona, told the father Neiskko that he knew what to do, and he took a fishing rod and bucket and went with him to the shore of the lake. Once there, Oona went into the trees and came out with a little plant, a sort with purple speckled leaves and a purple root we call *kaarccchunki*. He put this root onto the hook and dropped it into the water. After a few minutes, he got a bite and pulled in a long, slimy fish that glinted red and silver in the light, and filled the bucket with water and dropped the fish in.

"Oona then instructed Neiskko on what to do. He said that the man must dive down deep into the water. Once down there, he must find the beasts kept in this lake. You see, just as your folk have tamed some horses by capturing and breaking them as foals, so too have the *tamppo* tamed horses in their own way. Their horses have magic placed upon them that drives them to dwell in the water, and they can swim and dive as strongly as any other water-dwelling creature and live off the kelp and other plants in the depth. They still breathe air, but they hold it like a seal while

they dive, and the *tamppo* magic allows them to hold it for as much as an hour. The *tamppo* ride them underwater as you ride yours on land.

"The currents in the lake could have carried the body of Chachou anywhere across the floor by now, so finding it by swimming was not possible. A horse must be ridden to search. The horses would not allow Oona to ride, he said, because they would be able to smell the blood of *tamppo* soaked into his skin and fear him, so Neiskko must find and ride one himself.

"Neiskko understood why the horses must be ridden, but there was one thing he didn't understand. 'How will I stay down for so long?' he asked. Oona pulled the fish from the bucket and told Neiskko to open his mouth. When he did so, Oona plunged this fish tail-first into his throat. Neiskko could feel the fish wriggling in his neck and could not breathe, but Oona instructed him that once he was underwater and the fish could breathe, he'd be able to breathe as well as long as he kept the fish's tail in his throat.

"Neiskko was very uncomfortable but felt that he would choke if he stayed on land, so he dove headfirst into the icy water. As soon as he did so, the fish stopped wriggling. It did try to slip out, but Neiskko clenched his teeth so that it could not escape. He pulled water in and out of the gaps in his teeth, and found that if he expanded his lungs normally, he was able to breathe from the tail of the fish. For another moment he hung in the water uncomfortably, but he was resolved to find his daughter so he tried to ignore the feeling of the fish in his mouth and swam downward.

"After not a long time, he saw a group of three horses paddling in the distance, grazing on the plants that grow in the depths of the lake. Their hooves were wide like oars and their hair was green with algae. They were outfitted with saddles and reins, though grime and snails had taken residence in the hems and crevices of the saddles. He approached them slowly and calmly, the way one does any strange livestock, and they allowed him to come near. He swam to the smallest one and touched it on the nose. It was slick and slimy, but the animal nuzzled at him. He paddled

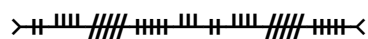
himself up and behind it and seated himself on the saddle. Grasping the reins, he found that it was alert and willing to ride.

"He spurred it gently with his heel and it began paddling with its great feet. It was not exerting itself, but even so its speed was much more than that of a swimming person, and Neiskko's eyes and face were buffeted by the water. He sat low to the animal and spurred it further, and it gained speed and began to pull him through the water nearly as fast as a horse gallops on land.

"He led it through the lake, back and forth, searching for the body. At long last, near where he'd begun, he saw in the murky water a pale, bloated body floating near the lakebed. Involuntarily, he let loose a cry of dismay at the horrible decayed state of Chachou's body, only a few days after her death, and the fish slipped out of his mouth and darted away into the abyss almost faster than Neiskko could spot it. For a moment he panicked, but he was determined to save Chachou's soul, and with the speed of his horse he could have her to the surface in a short amount of time.

"He rode onward, quickly, to her body. Holding his mouth tightly shut, he grasped her by the foot and spurred the horse back up. The surface neared but the weight of the two strained the small horse, and as they almost broke the surface Neiskko's vision faded as his eyes rolled back in his head.

"He awoke coughing and vomiting water as Oona pushed on his stomach, the two of them paddling at the surface of the lake. Oona had rushed into the water as soon as Neiskko had surfaced, fortunately not far from the bank, and had managed to pull him up. Chachou's body was somewhat buoyant and had not sunk far, and Oona dove down and pulled it back up. The two men swam to the shore, where Neiskko was able to grieve his daughter's decayed body, and they took her back to town where she was allowed to properly pass on to the next realm."



He took pieces of beef in ones and twos to eat as he told the account, and at this point he filled his mug with beer, then fished more bearberry leaves from a sack on the floor, packed them into his pipe, and lit it with a stick from the fire. You said that this all had to do with the big frog, we all insisted. Omo certainly was capable of belaboring a story. "Ah yes," he said, "I'm getting there. You see, we were grateful to have the strangers providing this unexpected help, but we were a bit confused as to why they'd come. They did graze their animals, and they paid their way by trading goods with us, but that did not seem to be their chief purpose. They spent most days wandering the land around us, and at night, they would sit together in their tent and talk their language for hours in serious voices. They were carrying many weapons - wood javelins and spears, long stone knives and hunting axes, bows, and even strange clubs with stone blades fixed into them - and strange jewelry and amulets besides, made from animal bones and colorful sea glass. One of the men wore a pendant made from a snake skull. When we asked, they would only say that they were on the track of something strange in our lands.

"After ten or so days of staying with us, a few people said they'd seen them in the forest with ravens perched on their shoulders, talking and planning with them like they did with each other. To some, this was reason enough to expel them - people thought they were plotting some kind of grand trick. I think their kind simply have a bond with the ravens over a shared enemy. I assumed that they were hunting some particular *tamppo* in revenge. None of us could have really guessed what they were after. This story was relayed us by them after their deed was done. You'll see soon enough why they didn't want to tell us the full detail of their plans."

The Banishment of Riinkkupri

"The strangers were very close with not only the ravens, but all the birds of the land. They would send the sparrows and woodpeckers up into the skies to perform reconnaissance for them. One of them in particular, Yittri, the man who'd convinced the sparrows to pick cranberries for him on

one of his first days here, soon became familiar with the birds around and could often be seen with them fluttering about him as he walked.

"Oona, the one who helped pull Chachou from the depths, he was very interested in the streams and lakes, as well as the plants. He would often walk through the woods inspecting plants, or go to the streambeds and dredge up mud looking for salamanders and frogs. Espuo, the one with a snake skull pendant, was a tracker. He'd often spend days at a time alone walking through the hills, and one day came back with the skinned pelt of a brown bear. He was very tall and strong, and had tattoos on his face. The last is Chatru, the sole woman of their group. She was the one among them who spoke most with land animals. She would consort with the otters and moose in our woods, and was the keeper of their reindeer. She also had skilled hands - she would carve their tools and weapons, and was the sharpest shot with a bow.

"After a while, it became clear that each of them had a particular goal here. Yittri and Espuo spent time together patrolling and observing the land, and often mentioned finding moose and boars viciously butchered in the woods. They asked us, and we said that we never hunt moose, and on the rare occasion that someone kills a boar, a whole band will carry it on sledge back to the town to be smoked, rather than butcher it in the woods. Chatru fashioned slings from leather and was experimenting with making fired clay orbs, hollow inside, and filling them with liquids and throwing them from the sling. Meanwhile, Oona would come back with baskets of plants from the woods and ground them into pastes and tinctures, and also captured frogs and salamanders to keep in vases and experiment with.

"All this we saw and became increasingly confused by their strange activity. We could not see what it was adding up to until they told us after. On one fateful day, their task was accomplished, and this is what they told us when they returned:

"Back in their home in the north, the *tamppo* were making a concerted effort to drive the people and living creatures from their land. The ravens and people were fighting back, but they also

depended on powerful local spirits. Just as the Oukkri Toukkri here moderates the nature and prevents imbalance between the realms, many other lesser and greater spirits inhabit other regions, and several of these in their land help to stave off the imbalance sought by the *tamppo*.

"Their arrival here centered around our Oukkri Toukkri. I don't fully understand it, but it contained some sort of power that both they and the *tamppo* thought would tilt the balance of influence on their frontier. There was a *tamppo* named Riinkkupri that had arrived here long before them in search of the same power, but neither force was yet sure how to locate the Oukkri Toukkri or extract its magic. The *tamppo* had not attempted to disturb the Oukkri Toukkri since that time many generations ago, and given the conclusion to that story all sides were wary to proceed.

"Riinkkupri was a fire spirit, a rare kind among the *tamppo*, but this meant that it was able to fare better here than most of them. Usually, *tamppo* come here for only night raids, or doze in caves or covered areas, but since the work demanded that Riinkkupri stay active for a moon or more, only one of its sort was up to the task. Riinkkupri was skulking through the woods, subsisting off large animals and searching for information about how to approach the Oukkri Toukkri in much the same way that our strangers were.

"So Yittri and Espuo were searching for information about the whereabouts of the Oukkri Toukkri, as well as trying to keep track of Riinkkupri - where it was, what it knew, and what it would do next. Oona and Chatru, meanwhile were searching for ways to extract the power from the Oukkri Toukkri.

"You see, everything that the Oukkri Toukkri swallows remains in its belly. It has thousands of years of amulets, charms, potent plants, and the bones of powerful *kaakraa* or *tamppo* stored there, and uses these to strengthen its powers. It has observed the arrival of humankind and our taming of reindeer and horses in the blink of an eye, and been a neutralizing party in the conflict

between the realms for as long as it has raged. So the strangers, and Riinkkupri, were trying to get some of these ancient items from its stomach to assist them in their fight.

"On the night that they decided they were ready to strike, they took everything they'd made with them. Riinkkupri had actually found the Oukkri Toukkri first but wasn't sure how to get the items from it yet. Yittri's spies had followed it, and so found the Oukkri Toukkri too, buried in the mud at the banks of a great lake close to the sea. The four rode their reindeer as fast as they could to it. Riinkkupri became aware through its own spies that they were en route, and so came as well to Oukkri Toukkri despite being unprepared, thinking it may be able to wrest the items from those strangers, or even kill them in open combat.

"The four pulled their steeds up to the bank where their ravens were swarming. Their loud chatter had disturbed the Oukkri Toukkri, and it was heaving its great body from the sand. Just then, Riinkkupri arrived as well, riding on the back of a jet-black horse with a saddle made from seashells, so that the *tamppo's* skin would not burn it up. Riinkkupri's skin was white as ice, and orange flame flicked off its tongue and out of its nostrils as it spoke.

'So, you found the Oukkri Toukkri as well,' it hissed.

"The strangers said nothing, but kept their distance. Chatru notched an arrow that she'd specially made from rowan wood, and fired it at Riinkkupri. The branches of the rowan tree are twisted and thin, and the arrows made from it do not fly straight. Chatru loosed two but both missed their mark, flying off into the air behind the *tamppo*.

'Wooden arrows shot by a novice archer? This is what you have for me? Even if you strike me, it will hurt me no more than a bug bite.' it taunted.

"But the third hit its mark in Riinkkupri's shoulder. Riinkkupri simply laughed at first, but as the stick of rowan smoldered and smoked in its burning body, it began to understand. As on that

night that the townspeople made bonfires from rowan wood, the smoke got into Riinkkupri's lungs and it coughed and wheezed.

"The shouting and fighting disturbed the Oukkri Toukkri and it began righting itself to prepare to hop away. In a hurry, the ravens gathered about began to harry it and peck at its head, and it opened its mouth to lash its great long tongue at them. They were quick, but one or two disappeared into its slimy jaws. Quickly, Chatru dropped the bow and pulled out her sling and ceramic spheres, and Oona filled them with a tincture he'd prepared from the *autihtia* plant. She threw their strange ammunition expertly into the gaping maw of the frog. At first it did not notice, but after several orbs met their marks it began rolling its tongue around in its mouth and working its jaw in disgust.

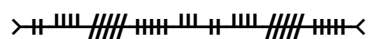
"Yittri explained to the birds that they should leave the frog, and turn their attention to Riinkkupri. The *tamppo* was looking faint from the rowan smoke, but as he saw the strangers turn their attention to him he regained his expression of composure. The ravens began to descend on him, but with his club and javelin he stabbed at them and beat them back. But when the Oukkri Toukkri made a great bound away from the scene, shaking the ground violently, the black horse panicked and reared, and under attack from the ravens Riinkkupri lost its balance and fell back onto the sand.

"Espuo had one of his special clubs with stone blades, and on the keen edges of these was a tincture made from the berries of the *kaumoneha* plant, what you call bog myrtle. He rushed up to the fallen Riinkkupri and began to strike at it, and where the club pierced Riinkkupri's skin the flesh began to smoke and glow like ember. Riinkkupri was terribly strong and quick, though, and after a moment it grasped the club out of the air, where it burned in half in the *tamppo*'s hand. Riinkkupri blew a great gust of flames at Espuo, which engulfed his chest and left shoulder, and Espuo fell back, but in another moment Oona's poison set about its work in earnest. Riinkkupri began to clutch at its wounds, before beginning to writhe and smoke and glow, and its whole body turned to white ash and sunk into the wet sand, retreating back to the other side.

"Then in the distance, where it had leaped off into the prickly heather, the Oukkri Toukkri began to make a horrible wet croak, less like its usual *oukkri toukkri* than an *uurruu vuurruu*. Its throat sack heaved in and out, and after a moment it closed its eyes and opened its mouth wide, and with a cough it began to expel all sorts of matter from its belly - gemstones, bones, tree trunks, fish scales, and the ravens it had swallowed a few moments before, which flew off unsteadily but apparently unharmed. The strangers couldn't guide their horses through those tough shrubs, but they (besides Espuo, who lay injured) went out on foot as the Oukkri Toukkri hopped far away down the lakeshore, and began sifting through the goods. They filled satchels with amulets and bones and their poor reindeer were heavily laden when we saw them again.

"They had kept their affairs secret out of fear that we would be upset at their plans to remove some of the power from our Oukkri Toukkri and end our hospitality to them before their mission was through. Some townspeople were indeed upset, but many more were indifferent. The Oukkri Toukkri's influence on us is distant and uncertain. Sometimes it keeps the *tamppo* at bay, but other times it causes famine and abets them. To the Oukkri Toukkri, we are but one more thing subject to the force of nature.

"Espuo was badly burned, but Oona prepared a salve and he began to heal quickly. We allowed them to stay in town a few days more to recuperate, but they seemed in a hurry to leave, and after the third night they took to their reindeer once again and started back north. That was the day of Midwinter, and I don't envy the icy trek they had in store. Still, the way of life they find up there is as important to them as our is to us, and yours is to you as well, I'm sure. I hope that the items the strangers took helped them in their struggle at home."



So, what does this have to do with us, and with the greenery of the land, we pried? "Right, right, that. Well, when the strangers left, we weren't sure what exactly the impact on the Oukkri

Toukkri's influence would be, and neither were they. Some in our town, as I said, were not so optimistic, and foretold famine or imbalance. They thought it would be angry at being disturbed, and wreak its vengeance on us for aiding the strangers. But, the Oukkri Toukkri - I don't think it gets angry, nor holds grudges. When the *kaakraa* harangued it, the Oukkri Toukkri did not become angry, it even did as they asked. Nor do I think it was truly harmed - I'd say that what it coughed up isn't a tenth of what was in its belly. I just don't think that the Oukkri Toukkri can be so easily weakened.

"In any case, since the time that the strangers left, we have noticed just the opposite of what some feared. It is as though the land and the sky breathed a great sigh. That winter proceeded fairly typically, except that no more animals were stolen. Spring came early: the rains fell warm and the flowers on the trees bloomed large and beautiful. This summer and autumn, our trees and grain stalks have swollen with fruit. And now, approaching Midwinter, we are not yet bundled up so tightly around the fire as we often are, and no heavy snow or ice has blanketed our grazing grounds.

"The strangers told us when they left that Riinkkupri had stalked our lands since well before their arrival, but they didn't know how long. Hearing you say that the lands all around were more mild and verdant than you'd seen in years past, and remembering what I heard of horse people walking through our lands in my parents' lifetime, I have decided just today what must have happened. I think Riinkkupri came here before I was born, with its insatiable, burning hunger for the heat of the living, and sapped the warmth and life from the animals and plants of this place. I think it allowed other *tamppo* more freedom to roam our lands, too - Riinkkupri alone could not have been stealing all those animals the winter before the strangers came. We were infested with those cunning shadows of the dead without even knowing it, and it took those mighty strangers to cure us.

"Our people have buried our dead for as long as any of us know, but perhaps you are right to burn your bodies. Every person buried is another who will come back to harry their

grandchildren one day. I suspect there is much our peoples might have to learn from one another, and with the new warmth and vitality come over these woods, maybe we will see more of you grazing your animals out here."

At hearing that, we were glad, and promised that we would pass through again to graze our animals, trade our goods and knowledge, and someday hear the rest of the stories that this clever man had to tell us. Many of us sat and talked late into the night and heard more of the ways of this town, and told of our own ways, our cremation rites and our incantations and herbs to make old mares bear another foal, and even told a few stories gathered from the other lands we roam. And since that day we have kept our promise, passing through every year or every other year to trade and renew our friendship with the farmers.

That was our second night with Omo, and we kept our pact with the people of the town. The next morning we rose with the sun, bid our farewell and headed with our horses out into the hills. The grazing was good, and we stayed in that region for forty days more. On the night of Midwinter, the moon shone bright, and the air was crisp and cold, but we built a great fire and passed that long night in laughter and peace. In our time in those parts, we didn't run into any demons or talking animals, but if we passed by the lakes or bogs around dusk we did hear many an *iiksi tiiksi*, a few *aankki taankki*, and off in the distance once or twice we thought we could make out, if only barely, a deep and thrumming *oukkri toukkri*.