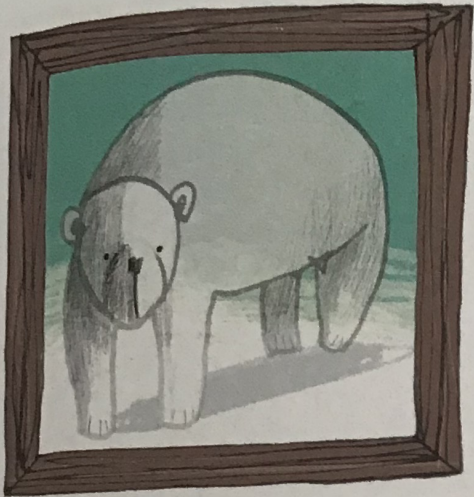


The Bear in Chains

from The Tale of Audun from the West Fjords



The men of the north tell a story about a man and a polar bear. The bears of the north tell a story about a polar bear and a man....

Audun was a young Icelandic man, without much money and with a mother to care for. So he took a job on a cargo ship sailing to Greenland. "When I return," he told his mother, "I will return a rich man."

Audun worked hard for the ship-owner and soon saved enough to buy his own cargo, to make his own fortune.

He chose to buy a polar bear, a young bear captured when its mother was killed. Audun hoped this beautiful white bear would bring him riches. So he wrapped the bear in chains and took it by boat to Norway, spending most of his remaining money on passage across the northern seas.

When he arrived in Norway, Audun was summoned to the king, who had heard of the white bear and its long journey.

"That's a marvellous bear," said the King of Norway.

"Thank you," said Audun. "I plan to give it to the King of Denmark."

The King of Norway frowned. "Why to the King of Denmark, and not to me?"

"Denmark is further from the ice where the white bears live, so this bear will be more unusual and more valuable in Denmark than in Norway."

f them.

The King of Norway laughed. "That's a good answer. I won't take offence and I'll grant you safe passage through my lands."

As the bear and Audun travelled south, by land and boat, the bear grew bigger and Audun's purse grew lighter. Eventually, he had no money left to buy food. When they reached the palace of the Danish king, the bear was thin, weak with hunger and wrapped in rusty chains. Audun was also hungry and beginning to wish he had given the bear to the Norwegian king.

Audun knocked on the back door of the palace and asked permission to give a gift to the king. The palace steward said, "You can't give that bear to our king! All dirty and skinny and rusty! We must feed it up and give it a bath, to make it fit for the king. You don't look much better. I suppose I'd better feed you up too."

Audun thanked the steward for his kindness. The steward said it wasn't kindness, he'd only feed them if Audun granted him a half-share in the bear. Audun looked at the starving bear and nodded.

The steward fed them both, then Audun bathed the bear until its fur gleamed white, though its eyes were sad and dull. Audun wrapped shiny new chains round the bear and led it to the throne room. He presented the white bear from the icy north as a gift to the King of Denmark.



The king was delighted with the white bear, though he was angry with his steward for taking advantage of Audun's enterprise. "This young man travelled from the end of the world with this magnificent bear and you tried to steal half of his honour and renown. You deserve nothing but a return to work in the kitchens."

As Audun had hoped, the King of Denmark gave him many gifts to thank him for the wonderful white bear: a bag of silver, a gold armband and a beautiful new ship with red sails, filled with valuable cargo. After a few months as an honoured guest at the palace, Audun sailed home, to make his mother proud and happy.

And that's where the story told by the men of the north ends. But the story told by the bears of the north doesn't stop there....

The bear was locked in a cage in the palace grounds, so the people of Denmark could stare at him. He was too warm, covered in heavy fur designed for colder weather. He was trapped in a small cage, unable to swim or run. He was no longer starving, but he wanted hot salty seal-meat, not dry bread, muddy onions and stringy chicken.

On the day the king waved Audun off in his splendid ship, the steward visited the cage to moan at the bear. The steward complained that despite his cunning in helping Audun, he hadn't been given silver or jewellery or ships.

The steward unlocked the cage door and threw in a rotting cabbage. "That's how we're both treated," he said, "like a stinking cabbage on top of the midden. You in a cage, me in the kitchen."

The steward slouched off back to work, but he didn't lock the cage door as he left. Perhaps he forgot.



The bear slowly pushed the door open and stepped outside. He stood on his hind legs and sniffed. Then he followed the salty scent of the sea towards the harbour, where he saw a ship with red sails heading north.

The bear dived into the sea and followed the ship.

Polar bears are wonderful swimmers. They can swim in icy waters for hundreds of miles. The bear swam behind the ship, all the way to the north islands. First to Iceland, where Audun showed his mother the king's fine gifts, then to Greenland, where Audun traded his cargo and boasted about his trip to Denmark.

So the white bear followed the ship Audun had been given by the king as thanks for bringing the bear south, and that ship led him back home. The bear returned to his family and his hunting grounds, with an amazing story to tell.

The King of Denmark never worked out where his magnificent white bear had gone. Only the bears know that the stolen bear came back home... and now you know too!

