

# The Hunt for the Great Bear

By David Calcutt

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We were two days on the river. It was hard going, and slow, steering the boat between huge slabs of ice, the passage between them so narrow sometimes we couldn't use the paddles and had to push our way through with our hands. When we started out the land on either side was high and sloping and covered in beech woods. Further on it flattened out and the shore on either side was bare rock and scrub. There were six of us paddling, three on either side and one of us taking it in turns to rest at the back. The boat was a large pine-trunk hollowed out and we'd all helped make it, everybody in the Shelter, men, women and kids, burning it first then scraping it with sharp stones and scraps of Old iron. Then smoothing and shaping the sides as best we could and fixing pieces of hide soaked in pine-resin along the inside to help make it watertight. The hides came from animals killed way back and were worn pretty thin and as soon as we got on the river water started coming in. So the one at the back didn't get a lot of rest because he had to keep bailing out. For most of the time we were on the river we sat with our feet in freezing water.

Towards the end of the first day the land started to rise again and soon we were passing between high cliffs thick with snow and ice. Soon we came to a place where there was a narrow strip of shoreline beneath the cliffs so we pulled in and hauled the boat over the stones and gravel and rested there for the night. There were some clumps of small thorny bushes growing against the bottom of the cliffs and we cut some of them to make a fire, and sat round the flames eating our supplies and trying to get warm. We were all tired and nobody said much. Just sat there chewing and looking into the flames then one by one lying down and pulling our robes right about us and falling asleep. In all that first day we hadn't seen any sign of life, neither bird nor beast nor fish. No sound but for the suck and slap of the water against the boat and the creaking and grinding of the ice.

We woke at first light and ate a few more supplies then pushed the boat back into the river and went on. The river began to widen and the cliffs dropped away on the right and

there was a flat plain of packed snow and pine woods further off. The mountains in the distance glowing red in the morning sun. I was paddling and my arms and shoulders ached and there was a pain stabbing down through my back and all the excitement I'd felt about going on my first hunt was long gone. It was all just hard slog.

We were paddling through a narrow channel between two large ice flows. I was sitting on the left of the boat, with one of the Gotcher Brothers in front and Shafter behind. Sneak, Fool and Tusk were paddling on the right and the other Gotcher Brother bailing out at the back. It was about midmorning and I'd been paddling since we set off. There was a crust of ice along the edge of the boat, ice on our clothes and in our hair. And the glare of the sun off the iceflows was so bright, and off the channels of water running between them, I had to keep my eyes nearly shut against it. All I could see was a kind of frost-glitter through my lashes and that same spangle of light flashing deep inside my head.

Suddenly there was a jolt, and a loud scraping sound and I was thrown back in my seat. The others were thrown back as well. The Gotcher Brother in front of me fell sideways into the water in the bottom of the boat and got up cursing. We'd run up against an ice flow that stretched all the way across the river. The channel we'd been paddling through had been getting narrower and now we were stuck and couldn't go back. None of us had noticed. We'd all been blinded by the glare of the light, lost inside the glitter of the ice.

Tusk climbed out of the boat and walked a little way then stopped. He stood looking down the ice flow with his hands on his hips. Then he scratched the top of his head. We were all silent, waiting to hear what he'd say, though we knew it could be only the one thing. But still he stood there staring out at the ice and scratching his head as if just looking at it and puzzling over it could make it crack and let the water run through it. At last he turned and came back to the boat.

"Looks like we'll have to walk for a bit," he said.

"How far?" said the Gotcher Brother at the back.

"Till the ice breaks up again," said Tusk.

"What if it doesn't?" said the other Gotcher Brother.

"It will," said Tusk. "It's got to."

"We could hunt here," said Shafter.

"Look around you," said Tusk. "It's empty."

He was right, we could see that. Around us the land was silent. Only glints and flashes here and there off the snow, flickers of hard, bright colour. The blue weight of the sky pressing down.

“We’ve got to go further on,” said Tusk.

“Carrying the boat,” said Sneak.

Tusk turned to him.

“Carrying the boat.”

“What if the ice don’t break up?” said Sneak.

“It will,” said Tusk. “And we’ll keep going till it does. Maybe we’ll go further than anybody’s been before. Find a new land, filled with game. Fat with it. Animals just waiting for us to kill them. Offering themselves, like in the old times.”

I don’t think any of us really believed him. I’m not sure he believed himself. And Sneak had a look on his face like he thought there was more to be said. But he didn’t say it, and nobody else said anything either, because Tusk had spoken, and that was that.

So we climbed out of the boat and hauled it up on to the ice Tusk took up position near the front with where it narrowed to a point, and Sneak just across from him. Me and Fool took the left hand side in the middle, and the Gotcher Brothers took the right. Shafter stood alone at the back, and at Tusk’s word we took hold of the boat and lifted.

“Let’s go,” said Tusk, and set off carrying the boat across the ice.

It was harder work than paddling. The sides were smooth and slippery, and we were wearing our mittens too and so that it was hard to keep a grip, but we didn’t dare take them off. It was a heavy boat, made for standing up to the knocks and battering of fast water, and not for carrying. We’d only been going a short while before my legs and arms and shoulders were burning with the strain of it. Nobody spoke, and all you could hear was the heavy sound of our breathing and our feet crunching on the ice.

We went on like that for a good while. I had my head pushed down as low as I could trying to ease the ache in my neck and spine, and I was watching my feet shuffle across the ice. Then I saw my left foot suddenly slide forward, and then my leg went up from under me and I fell back, pulling the boat and the others with me, and there was a heavy crunch as it dropped onto the ice, and cries and curses as the others slipped and fell as well.

“Bloody idiot!”

Somebody kicked me. It was Shafter, standing above me, the only one who hadn’t fallen. He lifted his leg to kick at me again but I rolled out of the way and his leg shot up from under him and down he went. I’d like to think it was the weight of him made the crack in the ice appear, but it wasn’t. The crack was already there, and I was lying next to it, a long,

wide, break in the ice, about an arm's length across from one side to the other. I don't know why none of us had seen it. I suppose we'd all had our heads down, just trudging.

I looked over the edge of the crack down to the water below. It was clear and bright and slow moving. Then suddenly something dark flicked through it, a ripple of shadow and a flash of light, and it was gone. And it was like something had rippled and flicked through my blood as well. I rolled over and sat up. The others were getting to their feet. Shafter was already up and coming towards me. I looked him straight in the eyes.

"A fish," I said.

He stopped. A puzzled look came over his face like he didn't understand what I'd said.

"What?"

"A fish," I said. "I saw fish. Down there in the river."

The others turned their heads towards me and I could tell they didn't believe me. Sneak came walking over.

"Let me look," he said.

He knelt down beside the crack and leaned over, peering down at the water. I watched his face. His squinty eyes were narrowed, almost shut, his lips drawn tight and thin. Then I saw his mouth twitch, and his arms stiffen. He looked up at me, then stood and spoke to the others.

"Grubhunter's right," he said. "There's fish down there."

"The river's alive," said Tusk.

Then the others all knelt down along the crack looking for fish. And Fool made his way along the edge of it, walking further and further, till he stopped and turned back towards us and waved his arms above his head then pointed down the flow and called out.

"It's breaking up! The ice! There's a passage through!"

And even as his voice was still ringing through the air, there came another cry, a long, high-pitched whistling cry from above, and we looked up and saw a broad-winged bird turning slow circles in the sky. A buzzard. There were woods close to the shore now, covering the sides of a slope that rose up to long ridge. The buzzard was high above this ridge, just wheeling round in the air, and calling out that long whistle-cry again. And it pulled right through me, that cry, like it was something in me calling out to the bird, watching it riding the air with its spread wings, wanting to leap up there with it and kick free of the earth. There was a kind of joy in it and a kind of sadness too. A longing for something I couldn't name. Then I saw the moon up there, coming up out of the tops of the trees, pale and shivery looking, and his eyes like the empty eyes of the dead when they stare at you a long way back

out of nowhere. And it seemed to me that the buzzard and the moon being there at the same time had something to do with each other. Though it took Fool to put it into words.

“It’s come from the moon,” he said. “The old man’s sent it. A sign and a calling.”

The moon calling us, with his bone face and dead man’s voice. It gave me a shiver to think of that. Calling us to what? I didn’t know then. None of us did. Maybe we wouldn’t have followed if we had.

The buzzard gave a final long cry, throwing it out like a line of sound across the sky, and it swung away on that line over the ridge and out of sight on the other side. And we heard it cry once more drawing into the distance and the bird and its cry were gone. Only the moon left, growing bright and harder-edged and colder.

Tusk spoke.

“The river’s alive,” he said. “And the land’s alive too. We’ll camp here tonight and tomorrow we’ll hunt.”

We picked up the boat and carried it off the ice flow and onto the shore and we made out camp in the shelter some large rocks that lay along the bottom of the slope. The camp was just us huddled among the rocks with our spears and supply bags and making a small fire from branches we cut from the trees growing further up the slope. While we were doing that Sneak and Shafter went back onto the ice flow with their spears and came back a little while later with three fish they’d taken out of the water, big ones with bright red bellies and hooked mouth and their tails still flapping when Sneak and Shafter dropped them down among the rocks.

“Beats chewing on old roots and hard tack,” said Sneak.

Better than even the taste of them was the smell that came off them after we’d gutted and spitted them and they were roasting over the flames. It was that sharp, smoky, flesh-cooking smell, that got down our throats and into our stomachs first and opened them from the tight fists they’d been, wide-open and singing with emptiness, and set our mouths to tingling and aching for that first bite of flesh. We hadn’t any of us eaten cooked meat for a long time, not since the last hunt of the summer the year before, and just the few mouthfuls of it we had of it brought a sweat to our faces and made our blood run thick and deep in our veins. I began to feel good about the trip again, and forgot all those bad luck thoughts and for the first time I felt I was a real hunter. The woods were alive with creatures, and we’d hunt them down tomorrow and pile them on the shore, and I’d make my first kill and go back to be praised a hero with the rest. I sat there picking my teeth with a fishbone and staring into

the heat of the fire where all the animals I was going to kill were shaping themselves out of the flames, like I was staring back into the golden time world itself.

“What’s that you say, Grubhunter?”

I looked up. Shafter was grinning at me over the top of the fire. The light from it fluttered red across his face and somehow made his grin seem even wider. His eyes were just two black holes with little icy glints of light in them. It took me a while to realise he was talking to me.

“What?” I said to him.

“That’s what I said to you,” he said. “What were you saying?”

“I wasn’t saying anything,” I said.

He leaned forward a little.

“I seen your mouth moving,” he said. “Jabbering away there with no sound coming out.”

The sun was almost down now and it was getting dark. The others were sitting round the fire looking at me and Shafter talking at me and me not having any idea what he was going on about. I looked a question at them. One of the Gotcher Brothers answered it. Now they were sitting next to each other I couldn’t tell one from the other again.

“He’s right,” he said. “You were sitting there staring at the fire and talking to yourself.”

Now this was just a habit I had sometimes when I sitting and letting my mind drift. My lips would just start moving by themselves, little twitchy movements, without my knowing anything about it. They weren’t saying anything and I wasn’t talking to myself, but with the others looking at me like they were, and waiting for me to speak up, I thought I’d better say something. And what came into my head was something smart and it was out before I could stop myself.

“If I was talking to myself it was for me to hear and nobody else.”

It was the wrong thing to say, but Shafter was just waiting for me to say something like it, because was on to it straight away.

“Hunters don’t keep anything to themselves. All’s shared and in common. That’s right, ain’t it Tusk?”

Tusk was sitting a little way off from the rest of us, away from the fire, and his voice came out of his shadow in the dark.

“That’s right.”

“See?” said Shafter. “Nothing to yourself. Not even your words. Not even your thoughts. And if you don’t know that, little Grubhunter, you shouldn’t be on this hunting trip with us.”

I was caught and nobody was going to help. I sat still. Shafter leaned in even closer, his face hanging right above the flames, and lit the colour of the moon when it’s full of blood.

“So tell us what you was chuntering there to yourself,” he said. “What was it? Some kind of spell, was it? Some kind of muttering magic? To make you a better hunter than all the rest of us. Was that it? Eh?”

Now I really didn’t know what he was talking about, or trying to get at.

“I don’t know any kind of magic,” I said.

“Is that right?” said Shafter.

“Yes,” I said.

I was aware suddenly how quiet everything was, just the hiss and crackle of the fire, only the two of us talking with the flames of that fire between us. The others sat around watching and listening. And I knew that they wouldn’t be joining in because whatever was going on now was between me and Shafter, and it had been between me and Shafter right from the start.

Shafter dropped his voice when he spoke next but the sound it seemed to strike off the rocks above us and go booming out across the ice.

“I thought you knew some magic from your dad,” he said.

I stared at him, letting his words die away, and kept staring in the silence that came after. That ugly grin of his was almost the only thing I could see now and I wanted to put my fist through it. And I knew that was what he was waiting for, and that’s what the others were waiting for as well. To see how far he could push me before I lost it. I swallowed and put my hands in the pockets of my coat under my robe and clenched them into fists. I tried to keep my voice from shaking too much.

“My father didn’t know any magic either,” I said.

“Well that’s strange,” said Shafter, and he made wide eyes like he was being all innocent. “I thought he knew some of that disappearing magic. I thought maybe he learned it off the Travelling Man.”

There was a jolt in my stomach as if I’d been punched there and my throat was tight and swollen. I clenched my fists tighter in my pockets and something cut into the fingers of my right hand. It was the old iron blade my father had given me before he went away. And I felt just then like I knew why he’d given it me and why my hand was closed around it. Without

thinking about it I began to draw it slowly out of my pocket, while all the time I kept staring at Shafter and listening to his talk.

“He’s full of tricks, ain’t he, that Travelling Man? Who knows where he comes from, who knows where he goes to? Turns up one day, gone the next. Must be some kind of magic he’s got. Everybody says it. And your dad must have learned that magic off him, that disappearing magic. Because all of a sudden he’s gone as well, him and the Travelling Man both. And he must have learned it so good, your dad, that he’s disappeared himself right away and he ain’t coming back again.”

The blade was out of my pocket now and out from under my cloak. I had it gripped in my hand and resting along the top of my leg. Shafter hadn’t seen it. Or if he had, he wasn’t letting on. He just sat there staring at me through the flamelight and waiting for me to come back at him. My body was shaking and I couldn’t stop it and my eyes were going blurred. I heard that stormwind coming in from far off like I’d heard it back there on the Rock, howling across the plain and getting closer and louder. Then it was inside my head, and I had to get away from it and I felt my feet start to push themselves into the ground and my hand gripped the blade tight and began to lift it.

“That’s enough now.”

It was Tusk speaking, and his voice was soft but it cut through the sound of the wind, and it was gone and I was just sitting there with the others around the fire. I turned and saw Tusk looking at me, and saw how his eyes glanced down at the blade in my hand and then glanced up again and across the fire at Shafter.

“Enough. Okay?”

Shafter leaned back from the flames.

“Okay,” he said.

He coughed and spat into the fire and stood. He lifted his arms above his head and clasped his hands together, then cracked his knuckles and stretched.

“Think I’ll do a bit of spear practice before it gets dark,” he said. “Anybody else?”

The Gotcher Brothers looked at each other and nodded. Then they stood and stepped round the fire to Shafter and the three of them walked away to get their spears. I sat looking into the fire. I felt like I had on the Rock when they’d all been laughing at me, only now there wasn’t anybody laughing. I loosed my grip on my blade and took my hand away. As I did I knocked against the blade and it slipped off my leg and I heard drop on to the ground. I left it there and just kept staring into the fire.

“You did all right.”

I looked up. It was Sneak. Tusk and Fool were gone and there was only him and me left sitting by the fire. He was leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees and his face turned towards me. There was something about his face that made me uneasy. As if it wasn't his real face at all, but a mask he was wearing over it. Two slits cut into it for the eyes and one slit for the mouth. The same as the animal mask Fool wore on the Rock, only this was a human mask instead. A mask of Sneak's own face we was wearing over his real one. That's how it seemed. He might have been looking at me and smiling or not. I couldn't tell.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Up against Shafter. You didn't lose it. I thought you might but Fool said you wouldn't. He was right."

"Taking bets, were you?" I said.

"We wanted to see how you'd do."

I'd been feeling sick and shaky before, I'd wanted to punch Shafter in his face, maybe even go for him with the blade. I hadn't been angry, though. But I was getting angry now.

"So you had it planned, then."

"Not really," said Sneak. "We knew Shafter would have a go at you sometime. We talked about what we thought you'd do."

"Like a test." I said.

"Kind of."

I looked away from him into the fire. It was starting to burn low.

"I'm glad I passed," I said.

"So am I," said Sneak. I felt him move and there was a scuffling sound and then his hand was held towards me with my blade laid across his palm. "If you'd tried to use this on him, he'd have killed you."

I reached out took the blade, gripped it in my fist.

"You'd have stopped him before he did, though," I said.

Sneak stood up. There was a small pile of cut branches lying nearby and he took a few steps over to them and picked up a couple and came back.

"He's hard to stop, is Shafter," he said. And he threw the logs on the fire. The flames sputtered up and I sat back away from the flying cinders and ash. When I looked round Sneak was walking away through the darkening shadows to where Shafter and the Gotcher Brothers were throwing their spears.

I opened my fist and looked at the blade lying in my palm, caught in the deep light of the fire, and remembered when my father had given it me, asking me to hold out my hand and

laying the blade across it. The night before he went away. Feeling the weight and shape of it, the long curve like a bird's wing, its chipped and flaky edges. Feeling a pride too, something passed on from him to me. Old iron. Passed from him to me and him and taking him away and me left alone with what he'd given. *Old iron.* The words spoke themselves in my head. Not like my voice speaking. *Old iron.* Some other voice from far back. A voice old like the iron, older than anything I knew, or anybody else. Older than the world maybe.

*Old iron.*

The weight and shape of it. The long curve.

I could have killed Shafter with it. Or him me.

The voice spoke again.

*It's what I was made for. It's what I'm for.*

I closed my fingers over the blade and put it back in the pocket of my coat. I hunched myself forward and stared into the flames. The new wood was hissing and crackling and I could feel the heat of the flames fierce on my face and in my eyes. But I kept on staring into them, thinking and remembering, and I sat there staring into them for a long time.

It was old iron took my father away. Old iron and the Travelling Man. They went in the night and I never saw them go and never saw either of them again. They were sitting round the fire talking about the old iron. My father asking the Travelling Man where did it come from? The Travelling Man shaking his head, muttering something I couldn't hear. I was sitting with them but it was late and I kept drifting into sleep and out of it again. My father hadn't long come back from hunting. A bad trip. Six of them went out and only three came back. Two of them wounded and they both died in the winter that followed. People talked against my father, said he'd brought it on them. But when I asked him why, what had happened on the trip, he just said they had bad luck and didn't say anything more. When next hunting time came round Tusk and the others went out, though only Tusk and Sneak had the training. That was just a year before I was allowed. By that time my father was gone. I fell asleep by the fire with to the sound of his voice, and when I woke in the morning they were both gone away.

And then later in the night I had a bad dream. I woke up suddenly out of it with my heart beating hard and fast and a cry stuck in my throat like a lump of stone. I was on my back with my cloak wrapped round me, and staring up at the sky and all its stars, and feeling the cold biting into me. I couldn't remember what had happened in the dream. It was just

pictures and noises fading away and all that was left was that lump of cry stuck in my throat and the feeling that something terrible thing had taken place and I should have been able to stop it but I couldn't.

I lay there waiting for the feeling to pass. I could hear the others breathing in their sleep nearby. I turned over onto my side. There was dull glow from the fire. It was almost out. I was looking along the ground towards the rocks where the ground started to slope up and everything was lit up clear and sharp, so I knew the moon must still be up, and it was around the middle of the night. There was one rock I was looking at. It seemed to stand out from the others, and there was something strange about its shape. It reminded me of something. And I was lying there trying to work out what it was when the rock moved.

Suddenly my heart was thumping again. I lay still and didn't even blink. It was a figure I was looking at, some kind of animal, crouched and stooped with its head pushed forward. As I watched, it lifted its head and turned it slowly from side to side, like it was sniffing. My spear was lying next to me and I slid my arm out from under my cloak and took hold of it. I didn't know what kind of animal it was and it didn't seem to have seen me or any of the others sleeping around the fire. It just crouched there turning its head and sniffing at the air. I wondered why it wasn't taking any notice of us, and thought that maybe it couldn't see very well. Blind, even. All the better for me if it was.

Because although I was scared, I was excited as well, and thinking that this could be my chance, that if I could get myself up onto my knees I could make a throw at the animal. Make my first kill. The first kill of the hunt and me, little Grubhunter, the one who made it. So I was starting to ease myself up off the ground, keeping my hand gripped tight on my spear, when the animal suddenly swung its head round and looked straight at me with its eyes wide open and I saw its face.

It was Fool.

I let go my spear and stood up and walked over to him. He watched me all the way and it was only when I was up close to him that he stood up as well. I kept my voice low when I spoke, so as not to wake the others.

"What are you doing?"

"Did you hear it?" he said to me.

"Hear what?" I said.

He turned his head and looked up towards the pinetrees on the high ground. There was a thick mass of them covering most of the slope and running along the ridge at the top and

the moon was high above them and the frost on their branches glistened in its light. Below all was thick shadow and darkness.

“It came from up there,” said Fool.

“What did?” I said.

“The sound.”

“What sound?”

He turned back to me.

“You didn’t hear it?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

But even as I said that part of my dream came back to me, the end part just before I woke. An echo of something, fading. A voice or a cry or something like that. A look must have come across my face because Fool took a step or two nearer to me and pushed his face close up to mine.

“You heard it,” he said.

“It was a dream,” I said, but I wasn’t sure of anything now. “I think it was a dream. I don’t know.”

“Maybe we had the same dream,” said Fool. He was staring hard into my eyes and it felt like he was trying to look inside me, or through me. As if I wasn’t he wasn’t sure if I was really there, that he was still dreaming, and I was part of his dream. Then suddenly he grabbed hold of my wrist and started speaking fast, in a whisper, his words tumbling over each other. “We both heard it. It came into our dream and it was part of our dream, and then it called and woke us out of it.”

If I’d been scared when I woke up, I was even more scared now, and it was Fool that was scaring me, the way he was talking and acting. I tried to pull away from him, but he wouldn’t let me go, and his fingers were biting into my wristbone.

“You’re hurting.” I said to him.

He glanced down at his hand holding my wrist, and a surprised look came on his face. Then he let go and turned away, sudden again, and looked up towards the slope. He spoke slowly now, and his voice was a whisper like the wind across the snow.

“It called out. Up there. That’s where it is. Something’s waiting for us. Up there.”

He looked at me again, waiting for me to speak, but I didn’t have anything to say, so he turned away and walked across to the fire and lay down under his cloak. I stayed where I was, looking up at the trees with the moon above them, his old bone face shining cold and

hard, and below them the thick shadows of the dark. I was there a long time, standing and listening, but there didn't come any sound, not then, nor after the moon's falling.

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