

The Hunt for the Great Bear

By David Calcutt

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There was a river running through the middle of the valley lined with trees on either bank, and beyond the trees were meadows of long grass. At the far edge of the meadow across the river was a high bank like the one we stood on, with more trees along the top. The waters of the river sparkled and flashed in the sunlight, and a warm breeze blew up from the valley and brushed across our faces and filled our heads with the rich, sweet smell of things growing, and the scent of living beasts.

The Gotcher Brothers spoke, and there was the sound of wonder and amazement in their voices that we all felt.

“Do you see them?”

“I see them.”

“We all see them,” said Tusk.

And we stood on that ridge gazing down.

It was like looking at the pictures of the animals on the cave wall, and like those animals there were some I could name and some I couldn't. There was a small herd of deer standing in the long grass of the meadow just up from the river, and I could see them twitching their short tails, and bending their heads to nibble at the grass, and I could see the living shine of the light on their dark brown coats. Not far away there were two smaller animals I'd never seen before. They had dark fur and long bodies with tails almost as long as their bodies, and they were bounding together through the grass, until one of them turned suddenly and jumped on the other one, and they were rolling down to the bank of the river and rolled off the bank into the water with a splash, then up came their heads, and they went swimming off downstream. Further upstream from them there was some kind of big, shaggy-coated bull with a broad muzzle and two long curved horns like the ones Fool had worn on the Rock, only these looked even longer than those, and as I watched it lowered its muzzle to the water and I heard a snuffling sound as it drank from the river, and saw its breath steaming off the surface.

And the more I looked, the more animals I saw. As if the creatures were appearing out of the valley itself.

Squirrels ran up down the trunks of the trees that lined the riverbanks, and sat in the branches, chattering. Two wolves came trotting down the high bank on the other side of the river. Rabbits hopped and scuttered through the grass in the meadow. Some kind of large, light-skinned cat lay sleeping across the top of a flat-topped rock. It swished its tail slowly from side to side, yawned and blinked. And staring out from between the thick clumps of long grass, two golden eyes suddenly appeared. My heart thumped. It was the creature I'd seen the day before, the creature I'd failed to kill. My grip tightened on my spear. Perhaps this time I wouldn't fail. Because that's what I was here. That's what we were all here for. To kill.

"Beautiful, ain't it?"

I turned my head to see who'd spoken, and it was Shafter, standing next to me, with that big grin on his face, only nothing nasty in it, and a light in his eyes that I could feel in my own.

"Just like the golden time," I said.

"It is the golden time," said Fool. He was standing on the other side of me, and gazing down into the valley like the rest of us with his face flushed and that light of wonder in his eyes. His voice was very soft when he spoke, but we all heard it. "It's the golden time come again," he said.

"But is it real?" said Sneak.

"Let's find out," said Tusk.

He lifted his spear and held it level and took aim along it.

One of the small herd of deer had come down to the river to drink. It was a young male with short horns, and as Tusk raised its spear, it lifted its head suddenly from the water and looked up, straight towards us. And as if this was some kind of signal, all the other animals stopped what they were doing and raised or turned their heads and looked at us. Suddenly the whole valley was still, and every creature in the valley was still. I could hear the breeze ruffling the grass and the leaves, and the rattling of the water as it ran over the stones on the bed of the river. And we were still as well, looking down at the animals. I felt as if my feet had grown deep roots down into the earth.

But then there as a soft grunt close by as Tusk flung his spear from his outstretched arm, and it flew into the valley, across the river, and pierced the young deer's throat. The deer jerked, and remained standing for a moment, then shuddered, and its legs crumbled under it,

and its body collapsed and fell forward and lay with its tail twitching. It all happened in complete silence.

And not a single animal moved. They remained as they were, looking up at us, as if nothing had happened, and the deer didn't lie dead on the riverbank, with blood beginning to pump out of the wound in its throat. It was strange. I felt as if I was watching everything from a long way off, in some other place where I had no voice and my flesh was numb, and my feet were rooting deeper and deeper into the earth.

Then Tusk let out a wild, high-pitched yell, and we threw ourselves forward with whoops and howls and screams and went charging down into the valley.

And then there was a great slaughter of the animals.

Tusk yanked his spear from the throat of the deer he'd killed and in a single movement he turned and flung it towards the rest of the herd. At the same time the others flung their spears. Every spear struck, and six deer fell, either wounded or killed outright. The wounded were finished off with one or two more jabs, and the few deer that were left standing were killed as well. Within a few minutes of us charging down the bank the whole herd lay dead on the bloodsoaked grass. But the really strange and terrible thing was that while the killing was going on none of the deer panicked or even tried to escape. They just stood there blinking and swishing their tails, as if either they didn't understand what was happening, or were just waiting their turn to be killed.

Tusk stood among the bodies of the killed deer, and we stood around him. His hands were red with blood and there was a wild look on his face. And that same look was on all our faces, and its flame burned in our eyes and in our hearts. We heard the wildness, and the joy in his voice when he called out.

"We've just started, lads! Now for the rest!"

Then everyone raised their spears and gave out a loud yell and went running in different directions across the valley to carry on with the killing. But I didn't go with them. I wanted to. That same wildness and blood fury was in me. This was what I'd come for, to hunt, to become a hunter like my father, to kill and bring back food for our people, and be greeted by them as a hero. I wanted to be running through the valley, yelling with the others, seeking out creatures to be slaughtered. But I couldn't, because I didn't have my spear. It was only when we started running down into the valley that I realised it was gone, that I must have left it behind somewhere, probably in the woods. It was useless to think of going back for it. By the time I returned the killing would be over. I felt stupid. Angry with myself too,

and frustrated. But there wasn't anything I could do about it. So I stood among the bodies of the slaughtered deer and watched what happened.

I saw Shafter making his way towards the rock whether big cat had lain sleeping. It was up on its feet now, on the rock, crouched as if to spring forward, and its teeth bared. But it didn't spring forward, and Shafter threw his spear and it went into its chest between its front legs. The cat gave a snarling yowl of pain and tumbled off the rock and staggered around in circles, biting and clawing at the spear that was dangling from its chest. Shafter hesitated when he came up to the cat, then realised that it wasn't going to attack him, and took hold of the spear and pulled it out, then stabbed down again quickly and very hard three or four times. The cat yowled even louder and more horribly as the spear went in then fell back and twitched and lay still.

Along the riverbank the Gotcher Brothers were tackling the bull. They stood on either side of it, plunging their spears into its back, then drawing them out and plunging them in again, while the bull bucked and bellowed and stamped the ground with its hooves. The Brothers were dodging out of the way of its widespread, curved horns, but I could see that it wasn't trying to attack them. If it had they'd have been gored and tramped flat in a few moments. The bull was just swinging its head from side to side as the spears went in, and its neck was drooping with the weight of it. Then the weight of its whole body seemed to become too much for it to hold up anymore, and the bull's front legs bucked and gave way and its head dropped forward, thrusting its horns into the earth and mud of the riverbank. The Brothers let out a whoop of joy together and laughed as they struck down with their spears to finish it off.

Sneak was in the middle of the river with the water almost up to his waist. He was stabbing down at something beneath the surface, then he pulled his spear out and held it upright above his head with one of the animals I'd seen playing in the river earlier struggling on its point. It was making a loud and high-pitched, squealing cry. Something was splashing in the water around where Sneak was standing, and he flipped the animal off the end of his spear onto the bank, stabbed down with it into the water again, and brought up the second creature. He flipped that one onto the bank as well, and then waded out of the water to finish them off.

Nearby was Fool, making his way along the riverbank, spearing squirrels down out of the trees. He wasn't even having to throw. He just jabbed up with the point of his spear among the branches, and each jab brought a squirrel down.

Between where I stood and the river, Tusk was tackling the two wolves by himself. They stood on either side of him, snarling, backs arched, the fur bristled around their necks. But they made no attempt to attack him or defend themselves as he drove his spear first into the one, and then into the other.

That wasn't the end of it. The killing went on. For every animal that was killed, another two or three appeared – more wolves and deer, bulls and wild cats, and plenty of squirrels and rabbits. It was as if the cries and yowls and snarls of the slaughtered animals were calling others into the valley to be killed as well. And Tusk and the others didn't seem to be tiring of the slaughter. They went about it with a wild joy that gave them strength. There was a killing fury in them that I could sense, and almost smell it was so strong, and I knew that as long as there were animals to be killed, they'd carry on killing them.

Then something happened to me. I became filled with terror. A terror so sudden and strong it swept through me like a flood of dark water. I couldn't see and I couldn't breathe, as if I was drowning. And at the same time, coming out of the darkness, I could hear voices howling and shrieking and screaming, the voices of the animals being killed. And that was the terror I was feeling. The terror of the animals. The screaming grew louder, it ripped through the darkness and suddenly I could see again, and the voices stopped. I stood, gasping for breath, squinting into the bright sunlight. And there was a face looking at me.

It was the face of the creature whose eyes I'd seen looking at me out of the grass, when we'd stood on the bank above the valley. The same small wolf-like creature I'd seen in the woods the day before. It was standing just a few feet away, at the edge of the circle of slaughtered deer, its black and red fur bristled and standing up along its spine. Although it wasn't very big, it had broad shoulders and powerful-looking front legs, with claws curving outwards from each paw, and a long muzzle with its lower jaw hanging open as if was grinning, and showing rows of stubby, sharp teeth.

As suddenly as it had come, the terror that had filled me up was gone. There was only one thought in my head. I had to kill this animal. That's why it was here, standing in front of me. It had come to offer itself, as all the other animals were offering themselves. The words that Fool had spoken on the Rock, and in the cave, spoke themselves again in my head.

Eat my flesh and drink my blood,

Given free for the human good.

And though I didn't have my spear with me, I remembered that I had the blade. I took it out and gripped it tight, feeling the weight of it in my hand, the sharpness of its edge. Old iron. From the golden time. That's what my father had told me. And here I was in the golden

time come again, and with a weapon from those times, about to kill my first animal. I would be a true hunter at last, like the others. Like my father. I held the blade out in front of me and took a step towards the creature. It gave a low growl but didn't move. I took another step, and another, then crouched down so that I was right up close to the animal and staring into its face. Still it didn't move. I could hear it panting, and making those low growling noises in the back of its throat. I felt the sour heat of its breath on my face. Its eyes were fixed on mine, and I was looking into the little gold flames that flickered in the black of its pupils. I dropped my gaze. Between its lower jaw and the broad curve of its chest there was a patch of thick reddish fur around the creature's throat. I knew that if I struck there the blade would go in easily. Just one thrust and the animal would be dead. And I knew that it wouldn't try to stop me. My heart was banging against my ribs. My skin pricked and felt stretched tight. My palm itched where it squeezed the shaft of the blade. I was ready. It was time to make my kill.

But then I hesitated. Just for a moment, but it was enough. My grip on the blade weakened. Slowly, I lowered my arm, and let it rest across my knee, the blade hanging down like a dead weight. I felt the ache in my legs and sat back on the grass. The animal opened its mouth wider and gave out a sharp, rasping snarl, then turned and bounded away through the long grass, across the meadow, towards the trees. I watched it go. I felt sick, weak and empty. Sweat dripped into my eyes, blurring my vision. I let it stay. I sat there for a long time.

Then I heard Tusk calling. I stood and wiped the sweat from my eyes. He was standing not far from the edge of the river, with his spear lifted crosswise above his head, calling out a long cry of triumph. The others answered him, then began to move towards from different parts of the valley, all of them making for the river, to gather there. The sun was going down. The whole valley shone and glistened with a deep redness, of light, of blood.

I went to join them at the river. They too glistened with blood, their hands, their faces, their arms. Shafter and Tusk and Sneak had stripped off their tunics and their chests were shining with blood. Now they were all kneeling or crouching on the riverbank and washing themselves. Washing the blood into the water. They were talking, laughing, their voices loud. They didn't look up. As if they'd forgotten I was there. I stood watching them and listening to them, not hearing what they said, only the sound of their voices, like the sharp cries of birds clattering among the trees, like stones thrown and splashing in the waters of the river. There were no birds.

Then Shafter stood. He wiped the water from his face with his hands and turned towards me. Grinning. That big, wide grin cutting his face in half. He looked at me like he'd only just realised I was there, and started talking.

“Here he is, lads. The champion. Look at him. Covered in blood. Must have killed more than the rest of us put together. And without a spear. Didn't need one. Didn't even need to use that old iron blade of his. The animals just give up and dropped down dead when they saw him.” He came towards me and his grin seemed to get even bigger. “Bloody useless,” he said to me. “Right from the start. Total waste of space.” He kept coming towards me, but slow, almost like he wasn't moving. “You ain't no hunter. Never was, never will be. Never be nothing but a bloody useless total waste of space.” Like him and everything around him was slowing down. “You let one go. Let one escape. Same as before. You ain't got the guts, have you, that's why. Ain't got the guts nor what it takes.” He bent down and straightened up again and he kept on coming towards me, only now he was carrying something in his right hand. “It's about time we seen what you're made of. Eh, little Grubhunter? Shall we? Yes. Let's take a look and see just what it is you're made of.” Then he stopped coming towards me and swung his right arm through the air, and I saw what it was he was carrying. It was a large branch he'd picked up from the riverbank, and I saw it the moment before it struck me on the side of my head. I felt the blow but it didn't hurt, and there was no pain at all while I was floating in the darkness.

But my head was banging when I woke up. I was lying on hard ground and it was cold. I opened my eyes. There was a dull light. There was the sound of the river. I turned my head and a sharp pain ran through it. I could see somebody's feet standing close to my face. A voice spoke.

“He's awake.”

It was one of the Gotcher Brothers. The other one spoke next.

“Now that we're almost back.”

I closed my eyes again. The noise of the river came closer. Voices rose out of it.

“What you say?”

“About time.”

“Hey. Grubhunter.”

“He can't hear you.”

“He's gone again.”

“No he ain't.”

A foot kicked me in the ribs. I opened my eyes and saw Shafter's face grinning down at me.

"Get up," he said. "Unless you want me throw you in the river."

I pushed myself up and saw that I was sitting on the bank of the river. I looked across. There was ice floating in the water, a line of trees on the far side. On this side the bank was lined with rocks. I turned my head. Tusk and Sneak and Fool were sitting a little way in from the bank round a fire. The ground rose up behind them, a steep slope covered with birch trees. The sky above the treetops was a red. I knew the place. We were almost back at the Shelter.

I tried to think what had happened and how I came to be here. But my head was still banging and I couldn't think straight. All I could bring to mind right then was the valley filled with animals, us standing on the bank looking down into that valley. I said the first thing that came into my head.

"What happened to the golden time?"

The Gotcher Brothers looked at each other and frowned.

"Eh?"

Then they looked at me.

"Golden time?"

"What you talking about?"

"It was here," I said. "The golden time. There was a valley and it was full of animals."

The Gotcher Brothers laughed out loud together, doubling up and slapping their knees. I stared at them. Sneak spoke from over by the fire.

"That's where you've been, is it, Grubhunter? Off in the golden time."

"Off in the Dead Land," said Shafter. "And that's where we should've him."

He gave me another kick then walked over to the fire and squatted down.

I stood up and looked around, at the river, the rocks, the trees. The ice on the water, the dying light. Places and things I knew but they were strange. There were pictures in my head that didn't join and I couldn't fit them together to make any sense. I walked over to the fire. The Gotcher Brothers were still laughing behind me. Fool was sitting away from Tusk and Sneak with his back against a rock. He was staring at the ground in front of him.

"What happened?" I said.

He looked up at me then, quick and sharp, but he didn't say anything. I kept my eyes fixed on his. "What happened to me?" I said to him. "We were in the cave. How did I get here?"

It was the Gotcher Brothers who answered, coming over from the riverbank, first one, then the other.

“You woke up and started running around.”

“Shouting out something about the Great Bear.”

“Saying it was coming to get us.”

“Woke us all up, you did. Making a right noise.”

“Then you ran out of the cave and fell off the ledge.”

“We found you lying on the rocks.”

“We thought you was dead.”

“Pity you wasn’t,” said Shafter. “It would have saved a lot of bother.”

“He means cos he did most of the carrying.”

“We kept telling him you’d wake up, but you didn’t.”

“You was out good and proper.”

“Ain’t surprising, though, that knock you got on your head.”

I raised my hand and touched my fingers to the side of my head where it throbbed. There was a big, round lump there and a deep cut that was crusted with dried blood. Shafter was grinning at me. And then I was looking at another Shafter grinning at me with his face up close and a branch swinging round towards me, and it was so real that I flinched.

“That was some knock you had,” said Shafter. “To knock you all the way into the golden time.”

Tusk was poking the fire with a stick. He looked up and spoke for the first time.

“The golden time’s long gone,” he said. “And it ain’t been much a time for us. We haven’t brought nothing back with us. Not even that hare I killed.”

I remembered the hare.

“What happened to it?” I said.

“We ate it,” said Sneak. “This morning, before we set out.”

“And I had your share,” said Shafter. “In case you was thinking of asking for it.”

He was grinning. But I wasn’t listening to him. I was still thinking about what Sneak had said. And remembering something else.

“This morning?”

“Yes,” said Sneak.

“You set out this morning?” I said. “From the cave?”

Sneak looked at me, squinting through his sharp little eyes, and a thin smile on his mouth.

“That’s what I said.”

I shook my head. There was something not right.

“How come?” I said. “We were two days in the boat.” I stopped, and looked back at the river, then turned back to Sneak. “Where is the boat?” I said.

“Where we left it, I suppose,” he said.

“How come you left the boat?” I said. “How come we’re walking?”

Sneak didn’t answer. He just kept staring at me with his eyes squinted almost shut, and Tusk was still poking at the fire with the stick, and nobody else spoke either, and all around there was a deep silence pressing in on us, pressing down. Then Tusk dropped his stick and scooped up a handful of ice and snow and threw it onto the fire, and the flames hissed and sputtered.

“We went in a circle,” he said. “When we were climbing through the trees. We went up and round and back on ourselves.”

I remembered that, seeing the sun going down on our right, knowing we were facing north again.

“So when we left the cave we just came straight down,” said Sneak. “Only took us a day to get to the river.” He pointed out. “Just over there. We came across on the ice.”

“Carrying you all the way, little Grubhunter,” said Shafter. “Only you ain’t so little. You’re a heavy bugger.”

“We were all for eating you,” said one of the Gotcher Brothers.

“You’d have made a good meal,” said the other one.

“Only Shafter wouldn’t hear of it.”

“He wants you all to himself when we get back.”

I turned away from them and looked at Fool. I wanted to talk to him, to hear what he had to say. But all this time he hadn’t spoken a word, and he was still staring at the ground. Then Tusk dropped the stick he was holding and scooped up a handful of snow and ice and threw it onto the fire. The flames hissed and sputtered. He threw on another handful and the fire went out. Then he stood, and Sneak stood with him.

“Come on,” said Tusk. “We ain’t far. Let’s get back.”

“What about the boat?” I said.

“It won’t be going anywhere,” said Sneak. “We’ll bring it back tomorrow.”

“You can bring it,” said Shafter. “All on your own. See what it’s like to carry a dead weight.”

“You can carry this for now.”

It was Fool, speaking for the first time. He stood up, and I saw that he was holding a spear in each hand. One of them was mine, and he held it out towards me.

“Thanks,” I said. I smiled at him, and he gave a weak smile back, then turned away.

We started off walking over the rocks alongside the river. Tusk and Sneak in front, me just behind them. Shafter and Fool and the Gotcher Brothers behind me. Nobody was saying anything, and there was just the slow sound of the water running in between the ice flows, and the creak of the ice, and our own breathing sharp in the cold evening air. It wasn't long before we came to the place where we'd kept the boat, and took the track that led up the slope through the trees. The snow was deep and hard packed and it was spattered with the red light of the setting sun coming down through the branches.

We were nearing the top when Fool dropped back and walked beside me.

“You all right?” he said.

I shrugged. I wasn't sure how I was.

Fool wasn't looking at me, and he had his head down. He spoke soft, and low.

“What did you mean? What you said about the golden time? You said it was here.”

I tried to think, tried to see through the tangle that was still in my head, to fit the broken pictures together.

“It was,” I said. “Or I was there. We all were.” And as I spoke it started coming back to me, what had happened, what I remembered, the pictures joining themselves up. “It was in the cave. The Great Bear. It came down off the wall and chased us off the cliff and into the wood and we were running all night.” But I was having to speak fast and keep them there before they started breaking up again. “Then the sun came up and there were leaves on the trees and we came to the valley and it was filled with animals.” I stopped and took hold of his shoulders and turned him round to face me. “Just like you told,” I said to him. “Just like the golden time. You said it. It was the golden time come again.”

Fool's eyes were wide and there was a look in them, like he was frightened, but more than that, something else, and he was going to say something, but Shafter cut in.

“That's crap you're talking. That knock on the head must've knocked your brains about.”

“Or knocked them right out,” said one of the Gotcher Brothers.

“If he had any to start with,” said the other.

But I could see Fool didn't think that, and I wanted to tell him more about it, because suddenly it was clear, and I knew he'd be able to make sense of it. But before I got chance Tusk spoke from up ahead.

“Wait. Stop. Something’s wrong.”

We’d come to the top of the slope now, in the wood where we’d cut our spears two days before. Where they’d said I could go with them on the hunt. There was a dull light, frost glistening on the bare branches. Tusk and Sneak stood together and they were looking through the trees towards where the Shelter was and they were standing very still. Both listening. And we stood and listened too. There wasn’t a sound. It was silent. And we didn’t just hear the silence, we felt it. A tightness stretched across the air, like when you stretch a skin to make a drum. The kind of silence that’s there before you beat the drum. All that had gone before folded into that silence and those stilled and terrible moments of waiting.

Then Tusk made a movement with his hand and stepped forward, and we stepped forward and came out of the trees and we stood above the Shelter and saw what had happened there.

End of Part One

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