

The Bear,
the Bull,
and the
Child of Light



a prehistoric novel

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“Father, Father! Help me!”

I had lived seven summers and never known fear. It came to me first in a dream.

I awoke trembling. The rhythmic sound of my mother’s breathing told me the cry had not been heard. Pressure below my belly reminded me that I had drunk a great deal of melted snow for my evening meal. Wriggling out from under the pile of skins and furs, ignoring the basket for night waste, I crept past the dozing keeper of the fire—on that night my grandfather Jahnuz—to the front of the cave. Lifting one edge of the inner and then the outer deerhide panel, I stepped out onto the ledge and made water over the side.

Clouds of steam rose as the warm fluid fell hissing and crackling onto the ice below. The night was clear and bitterly cold. No movement, no sound broke the stillness. The little river at the bottom, frozen solid and covered with snow, had long ago ceased conversing with boulders in its path. White towers that I knew to be pine and fir stood silent, their weighted branches merging into drifts beneath.

Breathing so deeply that the air hurt my lungs, I looked north up the narrow valley to the Great Bear hanging low in the night sky. In perfect stillness, I had been told, a patient listener could hear the song of the Sky

Hunter who nightly pursued the Bear. Hard to be patient, I thought, when standing naked on icy stone.

Suddenly the memory of the dream flooded my body. There had been no images—or none that I could remember—only feelings, sensations of terror as I felt myself falling into darkness, crying out for a father I had never known.

I heard the deerskin panels quietly open and close, and felt a blanket of rabbit fur laid over my shoulders. Lelit spoke softly. “Come back to bed, Tuli. You will need all your strength this day.” I knew that she would forbid me to go alone to check the traps if I told her what I had dreamed. Filling my lungs once more with the sharply stinging air, I turned and silently followed my mother into the cave.



Of the fifty winters I have endured since then, none has been more brutal.¹ The mountains and high hills of our land were imprisoned in cold so bitter and snow so frequent that even with their willow-webbed snowshoes, the hunters had difficulty moving through powder that was both deep and fine. Once the cold set in, few deer had been sighted in our valley, and none had been successfully tracked. Spoorshad they existed—would immediately have been covered by fresh snow. For the first time in anyone’s memory, the spirit that guides animals to give themselves to people seemed unable to provide what was needed for wintering-over in the cave.

The worst of it was that the snow came so early, even before the acorns and pistachios had fully ripened. Believing that such an unseasonal snowfall must soon melt, our hunters seized the chance to try out the two new wooden sleds that my mother’s youngest brother, Glaud, had made over the summer. One sled was bigger than the other, but both were intended to be used in bringing back deer the men were planning to kill in the

valley that winter. These were the first sleds Glaud had designed with wide wooden runners, and he was eager to test them for balance as well as for their capacity to bear weight without sinking too deeply into the snow.

A sparsely forested slope not far from our cave served as the proving ground. When we reached the top, my grandfather Jahnuz claimed the right, as head of the family, to go first. After seating himself in the larger sled, he suddenly and unexpectedly reached out and lifted me onto his lap. Imagine my delight! The angry looks on the faces of my mother's two older brothers only added to my joy, as Jahnuz and I flew whooping with glee to the valley bottom.

But after that day the snow came again and again, layer upon layer piling up around the cave. The men used deer scapulas lashed to wooden handles to clear both the ledge of the cave and the path that led down to the valley floor, while I went behind with a basket of ashes from the hearth to spread on the icy stones.

After the shoveling they would take turns scouting the valley for signs of deer. I remember once when Glaud had come back from a day of scouting, he told me that as the snow had grown deeper and the cold more intense, all life seemed to have been drained from the forest.

After the waning of the second Autumn Moon, activity within the cave itself was reduced to only what was essential, in an effort to conserve the strength of both men and women. The striking of new weapons and knives from the red-tinged obsidian so valued by my people slowed and then stopped completely, as did the mending of clothes and the weaving of mats and baskets. The cave became almost as quiet by day as by night, its occupants sleeping or lying still, opening themselves to guidance from the world of spirit.

And still the snow fell.

I could see that my mother's two older brothers and their wives were giving most of their portions of the remaining food to their sons, who

were not quite fully grown men. Watching the hollows in my mother's face become more pronounced, I felt sure that she was giving me most of her food as well. But when I tried to refuse, Lelit said that I needed to eat more than anyone else in the family, for I was the only one without experience in fasting.

"The rest of us were taught to go without food during our initiation ceremonies as a way of contacting the spirit. Your young body is growing fast, Tuli. You are already much taller than your cousins were at your age, and a great deal thinner. You need all the food we can give you and more. So eat . . . please."

Lelit worried not only for me. Her own mother, my grandmother Hana, was refusing to eat so that others could have more. Wrapped—almost smothered—in furs and skins, Hana had become so thin that there seemed to be no life left in her, but her fingers still grasped my hand when I sat beside her at the hearth.



By my grandfather's reckoning, the moon must wax and wane and wax again before the river ice would thaw and the waterbirds return to the valley with the coming of spring. The last strips of dried deer meat had been eaten, and though carefully husbanded, the tubers and seeds were almost gone from the lidded baskets in the back of the cave. Even a boy

with only seven summers could see that the remaining remnants were not going to sustain twelve people, already weakened by hunger, for another moon-cycle and a half.

Sometimes I would overhear talk among my mother's older brothers about leaving our valley for the cave of our cousins several ridges to the west. My grandfather Jahnuz repeatedly argued against it.

"Even in summer, it takes almost two days journey over the ridges to reach my brother and his family. In deep powdery snow, it would be even longer—especially for those whose life force is already depleted." His gaze exempted no one. "And besides, even if we could somehow reach their cave, how can we be certain that our cousins would have more to eat than we?"

Ultimately, we all knew that Hana would not survive such an effort, and that my grandfather would not go without her. So we stayed where we were.

Jahnuz was still going out to check his rabbit snares whenever the snow stopped, which was not very often. After much pleading, I was allowed to go with him as I had done all summer. The only rabbit in our traps that winter had been pitifully thin, offering no more than a bony morsel and a spoonful of broth for each person. But my grandfather told me that if we did not keep the snares open, the rabbits would have no way to feed us.

On the morning when the last of the lidded baskets of roots was turned upside down, my mother's oldest brother, Kamar, spotted what he thought was a deer far down the valley. The men immediately armed themselves and left the cave, confident that they would be able to track whatever was there. But by midday no spoor had been found. Unwilling to return home with empty hands, the men split up, and each floundered alone through the deep snow, desperately searching for something edible to bring back to our fire, until darkness finally forced their return to the cave.

Exhausted, almost all of the hunters fell immediately asleep. Everyone knew they would need to rest for at least another day and night to regain

some part of the strength lost in their struggle. Certain that rabbit stew would help restore them, I had begged my mother to let me go alone the next morning to check the traps.

“I am, after all, the most well-fed of anyone in the cave. I am also the lightest and thus the least likely to sink into drifts of dry powder. Especially with the wider snowshoes Glaud has made for me.”

Perhaps because the need of the family was so great, perhaps because my grandfather had nodded approval before closing his eyes, Lelit finally agreed. And so, after drinking a great deal of melted snow for dinner, I too went to sleep—and was awakened midway through the night by the dream I described earlier, the dream of falling into darkness crying out for the father I had never known.

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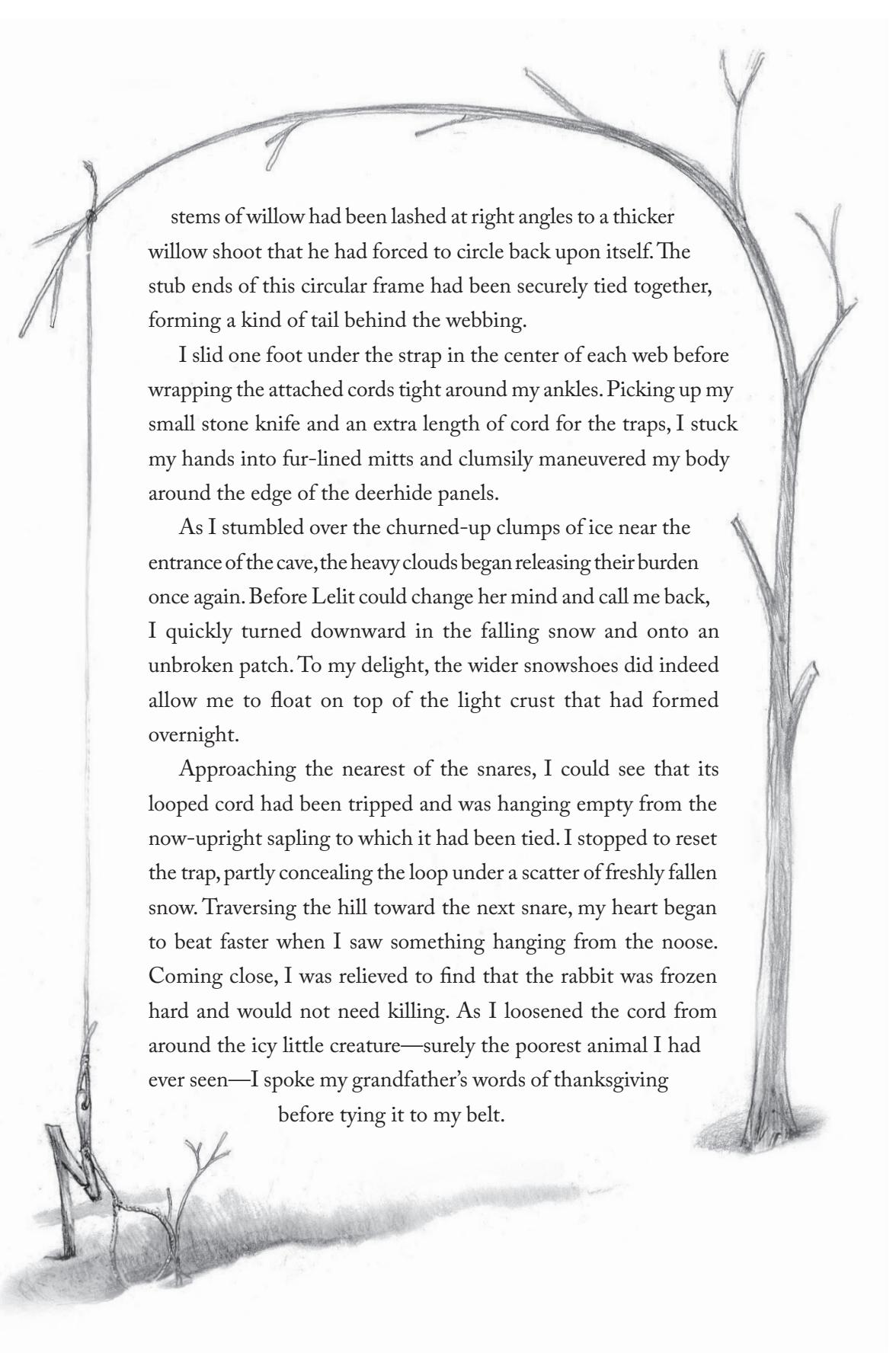
Light was seeping through the cleft at the top of the cave vault when I next awoke. My mother was already at the hearth, warming the clothes I would wear to check the snares. Made to look exactly like what the men wore, my close-fitting inner tunic and leggings were actually sewn of rabbit rather than deerskin, long strips of rabbit skin woven and stitched together to my proportions. I can still remember how gloriously soft those skins, sewn with the fur side in, felt against my naked body.

On top of the furry inner layer, I wore my deerskin tunic and leggings, and over that a hooded coat made from the pelts of beavers, sewn fur side out, that Glaud had trapped in past summers. Fully dressed, I imagined I looked quite grand, but I now think it more likely that I resembled an overstuffed beaver atop two skinny legs.

As I was pulling on my deerhide foot covers, Lelit produced an old and wrinkled scrap of bulrush root she had found stuck in the weave of one of the empty baskets.

“Eat,” she commanded, hiding her fear for me in a smile. “And promise me that you will not go beyond the farthest snare.” I nodded and tore the little piece in half to share with her in the tradition of our people, but she refused.

Slowly chewing the dried tuber into liquid, savoring its sweetness, I examined the wider snowshoes Glaud had made for me. Webs of thin



stems of willow had been lashed at right angles to a thicker willow shoot that he had forced to circle back upon itself. The stub ends of this circular frame had been securely tied together, forming a kind of tail behind the webbing.

I slid one foot under the strap in the center of each web before wrapping the attached cords tight around my ankles. Picking up my small stone knife and an extra length of cord for the traps, I stuck my hands into fur-lined mitts and clumsily maneuvered my body around the edge of the deerhide panels.

As I stumbled over the churned-up clumps of ice near the entrance of the cave, the heavy clouds began releasing their burden once again. Before Lelit could change her mind and call me back, I quickly turned downward in the falling snow and onto an unbroken patch. To my delight, the wider snowshoes did indeed allow me to float on top of the light crust that had formed overnight.

Approaching the nearest of the snares, I could see that its looped cord had been tripped and was hanging empty from the now-upright sapling to which it had been tied. I stopped to reset the trap, partly concealing the loop under a scatter of freshly fallen snow. Traversing the hill toward the next snare, my heart began to beat faster when I saw something hanging from the noose. Coming close, I was relieved to find that the rabbit was frozen hard and would not need killing. As I loosened the cord from around the icy little creature—surely the poorest animal I had ever seen—I spoke my grandfather's words of thanksgiving

before tying it to my belt.

Resetting the trap, I started off again, moving now at an angle slightly downhill between snow-draped trees and the white lumps that I knew to be outcroppings of rock. The sun had broken through the clouds, and I was feeling uncommonly pleased with myself, exhilarated by how swiftly I was able to move over the snow, wanting that feeling to go on forever.

Finding the last snare untouched, I continued traversing the hillside beyond the traps, my mother's admonition forgotten. Far down the valley I could see sunlight sparkling off a snowy mound beside an enormous oak tree. Thinking to test my new snowshoes on what promised to be an unusually deep drift, I moved swiftly across the hill until I reached a point slightly above the tree.

Turning downhill, I began to run as fast as I could, straight toward the drifted snow. With a joyful cry, I leapt from the edge of the mound to its center. Both feet landed with a soft thud, and for a moment the snowshoes held me aloft. But suddenly the surface of the drift gave way, and I plunged forward through the snow and down into darkness.

I could feel the roots of the great tree tearing at me as I fell, twisting my body and catching one of my snowshoes in such a way that when I finally landed, I was facing the opposite direction from the way I had come, with one leg sticking up behind me at an angle. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the near absence of light. The opening made by my body was already closing as layers of disturbed snow shifted above me.

Supporting myself on both hands and one knee, I turned my head and saw that the snowshoe holding my other leg aloft was lodged within the tangle of roots that now formed a canopy above me. I assumed that I had landed on the floor of a hollow beneath the tree, but as I shifted my weight to reach up and free the imprisoned leg, I suddenly felt the floor move under my body. At the same time, a pungent animal odor began to sting the inside of my nostrils.

I held myself as still as I could, hoping that whatever was beneath me could not hear the pounding of my heart. When the movement did not come again, I lowered my hand and forced my fingers to explore the surface of whatever I was lying on. What I discovered was that the prickly material, which had seemed at first like pine needles that had been blown into the hollow, was actually a pelt of coarse hair that extended as far sideways as my arm could reach.

The breadth of shaggy pelt and the solidity that I could feel under my body told me that whatever I had landed upon was of considerable size. But it took me a few moments to realize what my grandfather Jahnuz would have known at once. I had fallen onto the back of a bear.

Panic seized my chest. As I began gasping for breath, I could feel every part of my body churning. Urine poured into my leggings, and if my bowels had not already been empty, they would immediately have released their contents. Surfacing above the waves of panic came the sudden realization that what I was feeling was the same sensation that had awakened me the night before. Fear, overwhelming fear, was running loose through every part of my body.

I knew that calling out for my father as I had done in the dream would only offend—if not enrage—the bear. But the thought of my father did interrupt the chaos in my mind long enough for another image to arise. When the hunters in my grandfather’s stories had faced danger with no precedent to guide them, the first thing they did was to slow and deepen their breathing, thereby quieting the mind. Jahnuz had always stopped in the middle of the most exciting part of a tale, when the hunter was in greatest peril, to demonstrate to us how deep and slow the breath should be.

“To breathe in this way calms both the hunter and the animal,” he would say.

After several tries, I managed to take one long slow breath, which allowed me to recall my grandfather also saying that bears usually sleep through the winter unless aroused. Unless aroused. Well, that was the problem, wasn't it? How could a bear not be aroused by a person falling onto his back? And then smelling up his den with human pee?

After a longer string of breaths that were more or less deep, my mind finally became quiet enough to assess the reality of my situation. To escape without arousing the bear seemed impossible. When the layers of snow-bound roots above me had moved back into place, they had become as tightly snarled as they were before. Climbing out the way I came in would involve standing on top of the bear long enough to cut and claw my way up through that densely woven canopy. The bear would surely be awakened by the repeated shifting of my weight, and if I should slip and fall on him again . . .

To banish that thought, I began examining what I could see of the rest of the hollow. Slowly turning my head, I came upon what I thought might be another way out. Directly behind the bear was an empty space where the hollow sloped down to its end, a space that was small and narrow but low enough for a boy who was tall for his age to stand on solid ground when reaching up into the canopy.

First I needed to free my elevated leg from the entangled snowshoe. Reaching up with one hand to untie the thongs that held my foot, I then brought that leg down next to the other, thankful that its bones and muscles seemed to be intact. Kneeling with both hands and knees now fully in contact with the back of the bear, I suddenly realized that I would need both snowshoes to get back to the cave through snow that I knew to be higher than my head.

Fear began edging back into my mind. I could not afford to make any more stupid mistakes like that. I took another deep breath and slowly lifted

both hands from the bear's back. Supported by my knees alone, I then used my knife to cut and pry the entangled snowshoe out of the roots.

Once it was free, I leaned backward as far as I could and released the shoe into the space I had seen behind the bear. Holding the knife between my teeth, I then stretched both my hands back up and into the canopy. When I found a root that was thick enough to support me, I carefully lifted my whole body up off the back of the bear.

As I did so, a bright yellow eye suddenly winked open at the other end of the hollow. The bear was awake! Expecting him to come more fully—and fiercely—awake at any moment, I quickly swung my body backward through the air and dropped down into the space behind him. For a long time the only sound was the thunderous beating of my heart as I crouched motionless, peering into the darkness. I could not see the bear's eye from my new position, but I felt certain that he knew where I was.

I stood and began poking at the lowest layer of the canopy, now just above my head, with my knife. It quickly became clear that a longer, stronger tool would be needed for pushing out the clods of hardened snow that were holding the twisted mass of roots so tightly together. Desperate, I began running my hands over the dark floor of the hollow, hoping to encounter a broken piece of branch or root. Nothing but leaves and twigs met my fingers, until suddenly one hand bumped up against a more substantial object—the freed snowshoe I had dropped into that space! It took me only a moment to realize that the long stub-end, where the willow frame began and ended its encirclement, would make a perfect prod.

Poking and prying my way upward through the snow-encrusted roots, I tried to go slowly, taking no chances of disturbing the bear. But whenever my mind wandered from what my hands were doing, I found myself speeding up. The fear was always there in some form, feeding my impulse to hurry, reminding me that the early darkness of winter might well prevent me from finding my way home.

Loosened snow fell onto my face and into my eyes, collecting in the hood that hung down my back and finding its way into the neck of my tunic. As more and more snow fell from the canopy into my corner of the hollow, I packed it down under my feet, slowly raising the floor beneath me and enabling me to reach farther upward through the layers of snow-clogged roots. As I worked, I felt sure that the bear was aware of my efforts, but the dark mass before me never moved.

The small space behind the bear was half-filled with snow when my prod loosened a final layer of the canopy, and a pale slant of sunlight fell into the hollow. Tying my snowshoes together and hanging them around my neck, I began hastily pulling apart the last of the roots.

It was well after noon when I finally wriggled into the open air and managed to stand upright on a thick root that protruded out of the snow in front of the tree. Shivering with fear and cold—my body was thoroughly wet under the beaver coat—and half expecting the bear to come after me, I shook the snow out of my hood and pulled it back over my head before frantically beginning to untie the snowshoes from one another.

Suddenly I stopped, remembering that in my grandfather's hunting stories bears were treated with more respect than any other animal. They were the Old Ones, our kinsmen. I stood looking down at the opening I had made to free myself from the hollow.

"Forgive me, Old One . . . my kinsman," I whispered hoarsely, "for disturbing your sleep."

At that moment the fear released its hold on my mind, and I realized that the body of such an enormous creature could feed my starving family for a very long time.



