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90,000 years Before our era



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«Издательские решения»

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90,000 Years Before our Era / S. Yazev-Kondylykov — «Издательские решения»,

The end of the Pleistocene. The end of the great Ice Age. And on Earth live people with disproportionately large heads, whose memory preserves the memory of their ancestors. This historical tale tells of a small tribe of Neanderthals, led by the mighty and brave Nam-Ur, and of the hard trials that befell them.

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90,000 Years Before our Era

Serg Yazev-Kondylykov

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90,000 YEARS BEFORE OUR ERA

Dedicated to My Wife, Olya

Chapter 1

Nam-Ur was exhausted. His injured leg ached unbearably, and his shoulders throbbed from exertion. Again and again, the treacherous, cold Mun had risen over the nighttime steppe in her many guises; again and again, mighty Vu had replaced her, spreading his scorching embrace across the earth. Yet there seemed to be no end to the journey.

His little tribe trudged dejectedly across the steppe, drenched by rain and scorched by the sun. Pale, withered grasses rolled across the plain like ocean waves, and the wind swept through them. Only a bearskin, tightly fastened at the waist with a broad leather strap, shielded Nam-Ur from gusts so cold they pierced to the bone. Apart from a small leather loincloth covering his massive, bowed thighs, his stocky, almost square, hairy body was bare.

He rubbed his sloping forehead with one powerful hand.

How could this have happened? Why had the mighty spirits grown so angry with his tribe?

Many times the treacherous Mun had gazed with her cold eye upon the tribe's huts, which stood beside the Tall Pine on the bank of the Great River.

They had come there long ago.

The Great River, whose clear, swift waters ran so freely, curved at this place and was not as broad as it was upstream.

Hemmed in by steep banks, its waters slowed their cheerful rush. Dense thickets of blackberry, raspberry, and wild rose grew along both shores, with a pine forest stretching beyond them.

At first Nam-Ur had been frightened of the great mountain on the opposite bank.

Several times a year it would begin to shake for no apparent reason, sending stones crashing and splashing into the river, terrifying his people and Nam-Ur himself.

He had even wanted to move the tribe's camp farther upstream, where the tasty, fatty fish were less plentiful, but the land was quieter and there was no frightening mountain. The tribe's fat, carefree shaman, however, assured Nam-Ur that the spirits were responsible for everything and that he would try to appease them.

Every year, before winter's cold arrived, the shaman sacrificed to the spirits a large black boar killed by the hunters in fresh snow. For a long time, in a loud voice, he begged them to spare Nam-Ur's tribe from disaster. He spoke to them of the mountain as well.

Nam-Ur called it the Dancing Mountain.

There were many delicious fish in the Great River.

Sometimes, watching their strong, supple bodies as they played without a care in the clear waters warmed by the rays of kind and mighty Vu, Nam-Ur wished he could turn into a fish himself and swim far, far away.

But fish were most abundant in spring, when the old ice, yellowed by the long winter, was just beginning to break up. Grinding and crumbling as they drifted downstream, the floes climbed over one another, crushing each other's backs in a final battle before yielding to the river awakening from its long sleep.

Then fish appeared in the Great River — so many fish. Filled with millions of new lives, they hurried toward lands unknown to Nam-Ur, there to continue their kind in the throes of love, often dying afterward. The enormous mass of fish, confined within the river's narrow banks, filled it to overflowing. At such times the Great River groaned and boomed, and to Nam-Ur it seemed as though a single Great Fish were swimming along it.

Yet these were fish — hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of fish.

Greenish-silver pikeperch, whiskered, snake-like burbot, fat sturgeon and beluga sturgeon, swift sterlets, slender starred sturgeon, and other fish, large and small, crowded against one another, pushing

one another to the surface and onto the banks. On and on they swam, toward the place where mighty Vu began his journey.

There were so many that at times the water itself disappeared beneath the living, undulating mass.

On such days, a feast began along the shores of the Great River.

Clouds of gulls circled over it until late evening, their piercing, irritating cries echoing over the tribe's camp.

Sometimes a gull seized a fish too heavy to carry. The foolish, greedy bird could no longer take flight; the hunter became the prey, and its white feathers drifted for a long time among the countless shoals of fish.

Cunning, wary foxes came down to the river, along with fierce wolves made gaunt by the long, snowy winter. Sometimes even the lord of the local forests — the bear — visited the banks with his slow, rolling gait.

With teeth, claws, and fangs, they greedily seized the still-living, half-suffocated fish and dragged them ashore.

But there were enough fish for everyone. Great white heaps of half-gnawed fish skeletons littered both banks of the Great River.

There was enough for the people, too.

With joyful cries, the women and children of Nam-Ur's tribe caught fish with their bare hands and carried them back to camp. Sated foxes and wolves lost all their caution.

Then Nam-Ur's skillful, powerful hunters had little trouble coming within spear-throwing distance of wolves and foxes almost drunk with food. A spear hurled by an expert hand finished the job.

At that season Nam-Ur's hunters gathered many fox and wolf skins to cover their shelters carefully when the bitter winter frosts arrived.

But the flood passed, the spawning ended, the water receded, and life returned to its usual course.

There were still plenty of fish, of course, but catching them was once again the work of the tribe's grown men.

On that fateful morning, having asked the spirits' permission as always, Nam-Ur crawled out from under the light shelter on the high riverbank and set out to catch fish with Bru and Kruk, the most agile men in his tribe. Mighty Vu, who gave life to every living thing on earth, had not yet extended his hot embrace. The morning was fresh, and the scent of damp grass was sharp.

Armed with birchwood spears, the men climbed onto the fallen tree trunks brought down by the spring flood and stood perfectly still, like statues.

They did not have to wait long. A huge, inquisitive beluga sturgeon swam up to the very edge of the submerged trunk and thrust its pointed snout into the mud near shore. Nam-Ur watched without breathing.

That one could feed the entire tribe, he calculated. If only he did not frighten it away.

Raising a little cloud of silt, the beluga continued searching the riverbed for something.

Nam-Ur's heart beat faster. Slowly, very slowly, he drew back his spear, then drove it into the water with all his strength, taking care not to strike the bony plates protecting the fish's body.

He was lucky. The spear pierced the beluga's thick upper lip and passed right through it.

Maddened by pain, the huge fish jerked violently aside, but Nam-Ur's powerful, short arm held the spear tightly.

"Nam-Ur has caught a fish, a very big fish!" he shouted, and tumbled into the river, dragged along by the desperately struggling beluga.

Bru and Kruk, who were nearby, hurried toward his cry.

Brandishing their spears and splashing through water up to their waists, they ran to Nam-Ur's aid.

The sight of the enormous fish astonished them.

"The spirits, the good spirits, have sent us a fish — a very big fish!" they cried joyfully, and began stabbing the bleeding beluga with their spears, trying to strike its eyes.

Eventually they succeeded, but even then the fish continued to fight desperately.

Kruk, the strongest of them, tried to approach it from behind, but the blow of its mighty tail knocked him into the clear waters of the Great River.

That only made him angrier. Seizing his spear, Kruk began striking the beluga's tender, unprotected flanks.

At last, after a fierce struggle, the beluga stopped resisting, and the men dragged it onto the bank.

Without a word of agreement, they all stripped off their wet leather loincloths and fell blissfully onto the warm river sand.

"What a big fish. Such a very big fish," Nam-Ur mused lazily, his eyes half closed as he stroked the beluga's still-quivering body. "We must make an amulet from its head. Let it bring happiness to my tribe and frighten away evil spirits."

Suddenly the Dancing Mountain shook, and stones began rolling down from its summit.

Exhausted and drowsy in the sun, the men paid it little attention.

The Dancing Mountain had shaken before; they were long accustomed to it. But after a while they heard a tremendous rumbling. It came from underground, and that made them wary.

Nam-Ur propped himself up on one elbow and stared toward the Dancing Mountain. A thin plume of smoke had begun rising above it.

Then came a blow of such force that the earth itself seemed to shudder. Before Nam-Ur's astonished, terrified eyes, a gigantic mass of rock broke away from the mountain and plunged thunderously into the river, scattering myriads of droplets that glittered in the sun.

But Nam-Ur and his companions did not see the end of it. Leaping instantly to their feet and cursing the evil spirits that had brought such disaster upon their tribe, they raced toward camp.

The river was faster.

Only a moment earlier it had lapped gently at their feet like a quiet lamb. Now it had become a raging beast.

Blocked by a thousand-ton mass of shattered rock, its swift, clear waters sought a way out. They searched and found none. Roaring and crashing, crushing everything alive in their path, the waves — suddenly dark — spread rapidly across the land.

Nam-Ur and his companions had not covered even a quarter of the distance when the raging waters of the Great River overtook them.

Clawing frantically at tree roots and tufts of grass jutting from the bank, the men struggled upward.

Bru was the first to be taken by the Great River.

Nam-Ur caught one last glimpse of his big black head amid the boiling whirlpool and heard his final cries. Then Bru vanished forever into the Great River. He could not swim at all.

Nam-Ur was next. A great wave covered his head. Kicking frantically at the furious waters and spitting out river water mixed with sand, he felt the little bush he had managed to seize — his last hold on life — slowly pulling free of the bank. Another minute and he would have disappeared into the Great River like Bru.

But Kruk helped him.

Having climbed fairly high up the steep bank, Kruk was safe for the moment.

Nam-Ur's desperate cry for help brought him back.

"Take my hand, Nam-Ur!" Kruk shouted with all his might.

With relief, Nam-Ur grasped his strong, hairy hand.

But their ordeal was not over.

A great aspen, torn up by the roots by the Great River, spun violently through the water and struck Kruk's arm.

Kruk groaned dully with pain, and Nam-Ur felt with horror that his companion's strong, firm grip had somehow weakened.

Biting his lips against the pain, Kruk hung from a pine root above the water rushing madly beneath him.

"Hold on, Nam-Ur!" he shouted desperately, and, mastering his pain, tried to pull himself up with his uninjured arm.

He succeeded. For the time being, both Kruk and Nam-Ur were safe.

With his good hand, Kruk wiped the beads of sweat that strain had brought to his forehead.

"What happened to you, Kruk?" Nam-Ur asked anxiously when he reached his side.

Instead of answering, Kruk silently nodded toward the arm hanging limp as a whip.

Now it was Nam-Ur's turn to help Kruk.

Taking his good arm in one powerful, hairy hand, he helped his companion climb the sheer slope.

Soon they reached the camp.

There was no time to lose.

Although the water had stopped rising for the moment, Nam-Ur saw dark clouds circling like a pack of wolves around the summit of the Dancing Mountain on the opposite bank.

"The spirits are angry with us!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "We are leaving!"

He spotted the shaman.

Usually arrogant and puffed up with his own importance, the man now seemed to have shrunk into himself. His eyes darted about.

"You old fat rat! Nam-Ur told you!" Nam-Ur shouted, but there was no time for an argument. A strong wind was rising. The sky darkened rapidly.

"Everyone is leaving!" Nam-Ur cried. "The spirits are terribly angry with us. Everyone must leave this cursed place!"

The lame craftsman approached him.

"Nam-Ur, who will carry my stones? Tlum could make many fine spearheads from them, and Nam-Ur's hunters would kill many animals with those spears."

"There is no time, Tlum," Nam-Ur answered hurriedly. "The shaman must have made a bad offering to the spirits, and now they are furious with us."

Meanwhile the wind was growing stronger. The treetops bent and groaned, shedding their last leaves.

"Tlum will not go without his stones," Tlum suddenly declared stubbornly. "Where will Tlum ever find such good stones again?"

"Then take them with you!" Nam-Ur said in exasperation.

"Tlum cannot," the craftsman replied in despair.

It had happened long ago.

Tlum had been young and strong when, on a narrow forest trail in the first snow, he encountered a vicious, restless cave bear that terrified everyone in the tribe.

Tlum had won the fight.

The bear's brownish hide, Tlum's gift, had adorned the mighty body of Ur-Nam, Nam-Ur's father, who led the tribe in those days.

But victory had come at a terrible price.

Even after being pierced by a spear thrown by Tlum's powerful hand, the treacherous, savage lord of the forest had managed to slash him with its paw.

Tlum had been carried back on a litter.

His companions hurriedly cut down a small birch, laid him on it, and dragged him toward camp, leaving a thick trail of blood behind them.

Many times cold Mun rose and winked treacherously at him with her yellow eye while his faithful Ku nursed him.

He drank much decoction of birch bark. Many fish passed along the Great River.

The wound healed, but long, thin pink scars remained, running from his calf toward his groin, and Tlum's left leg began to waste away.

"Tlum cannot," he repeated, and tears appeared in his eyes.

"Ki will help Tlum!"

Nam-Ur turned around.

"Ki will help Tlum," repeated the small, clever son of old Kmu. "Tlum is a good craftsman, and Ki will be proud if Tlum trusts him to carry his stones."

By now the sky was completely dark.

The wind was gradually becoming a storm.

The people of Nam-Ur's tribe hurriedly gathered their belongings, tying their dry hides together with thin cords made from hare sinew.

An explosion of terrifying force rang out, and a dazzling white column of flame burst from the summit of the Dancing Mountain.

For an instant, day triumphed over night.

The people of the tribe fell to the ground in terror.

Then the Dancing Mountain vomited forth an enormous mass of red-hot stones.

The explosion was so violent that most of them flew across the river, and a rain of fire passed over the forest.

The dry forest burst instantly into flames, and the wind, now a storm, rapidly fed the blaze.

"The spirits have cursed us!" Nam-Ur shouted with all his strength. "Leave! Leave this cursed place!"

Abandoning their meager possessions, the people of Nam-Ur's tribe rushed in panic upstream.

"Not that way!" Nam-Ur's commanding voice stopped them. "The spirits do not want us to live beside the Great River. We are going into the steppe."

A roaring wall of fire rolled toward the bewildered people.

"We are going into the steppe!" Nam-Ur shouted again.

He wheeled sharply around and ran onto the plain. Overcome with terror, the people fled after him.

Chapter 2

"The tribe cannot go any farther," Nam-Ur decided, and ordered everyone to stop.

The weary, tormented people collapsed onto the grass.

They sat in silence. Even the children did not cry.

"Nam-Ur," someone said, touching his arm, "vultures are circling not far from here. Perhaps the people of Nam-Ur will find a little boar meat or hare meat."

"Go and look, Blum," Nam-Ur said.

A little while later Blum came running back, excited and delighted.

"We will have food! Nam-Ur's tribe will not go hungry. Blum has found almost the whole carcass of a young deer. But we must hurry. Blum saw wolves."

Several men leaped up, took their spears, and hurried toward the circling vultures.

But a pack of wolves reached the carcass first.

Growling greedily, they threw themselves upon the still-warm fawn.

"Get away! Away!" shouted Blum, the strongest of the men. "Nam-Ur's tribe will not go without food!"

The wolves merely snapped their teeth viciously in reply.

Then Blum hurled his spear.

He threw it with such force that the foremost and boldest wolf, pierced through, leaped high into the air, turned over, and fell dead upon the ground.

The others retreated hastily, their tails between their legs.

But they did not go far. In the gathering darkness, their green eyes gleaming, they sat back on their haunches and howled loudly.

They will not leave us alone so easily, Blum thought.

"The wolves have left so little of the deer," Nam-Ur thought bitterly. "There will only be enough for the women and children." He swallowed hungrily. "The men will have to make do with the wolf we killed." He quickly turned his eyes away from the remains of the fawn.

Taking Blum and several other men with him, he went to three stunted birches nearby to cut branches for a fire.

"It is a good thing Ki helped Tlum," Nam-Ur thought as he rapidly cut the branches with his flint knife. "A clever boy. I must tell Tlum to watch over him and teach him his craft."

When they had cut enough branches, Nam-Ur and his companions carried them back to camp.

Ka, the keeper of fire, took from his bag of hare skin a small hollowed-out block of linden wood. Inside it was kept perhaps the most precious possession of Nam-Ur's entire tribe.

It held Fire. Two unimpressive pieces of iron pyrite now rested in Ka's palm — two stones that contained warmth, protection from wild beasts, and the delicious smell of freshly roasted meat.

From the same bag he took several dry tinder fungi. Bending low over them to protect the Fire yet to be born from gusts of wind that could kill it at the very beginning, he struck one stone hard against the other.

One spark leaped into the tinder, then another. Still Ka worked.

At last the tinder began to smolder, and then a tiny, newly born Fire appeared.

Thirty pairs of eyes followed it intently.

Very carefully, so as not to destroy it, Ka began adding small pieces of birch bark.

Before long the Fire grew stronger, its flames rose higher, and the whole tribe gathered around it.

Fire gave them warmth and peace. They would also cook their food over it.

But first Fire needed to be fed well.

Ka carefully laid a thick birch branch on the flames.

As if delighted by this new portion of food, the Fire hummed cheerfully, and its tongues of flame began greedily licking the slightly damp wood.

It was time to skin the fawn. Kruk usually did this, but his arm had still not healed, so Nam-Ur undertook the task himself.

With one strong stroke of his flint knife, he cut off the fawn's head. Inside it, as Nam-Ur knew well, lay the delicious, nourishing brain.

As chief of the tribe, Nam-Ur could have eaten it by himself, and nobody would have reproached him. But Kruk had saved his life, and Nam-Ur had not forgotten.

Then he took a sharp fragment of limestone that the provident Tlum had brought along, and with a swift motion slit the skin on the fawn's chest and belly.

"The hide will protect us from the weather," Nam-Ur thought. "Who knows how much farther we must travel before we find a roomy, dry cave?"

He stripped off the hide and tossed it to the women.

They quickly fastened it to the ground with sharp birch pegs and immediately began scraping away the bits of reddish flesh with thin stone blades.

Next he opened the fawn's belly and removed its intestines.

He decided to give its heart and liver to Kruk as well. "Let him be as swift and noble as a deer," Nam-Ur thought.

The fire burned merrily on the steppe, flinging its flames far into the darkness.

The men quickly drove thick, forked birch branches into the ground on either side, then ran a stout, sharpened, bark-stripped birch pole through the fawn.

"If only we had fish now," thought Nam-Ur. He remembered the hot summers on the Great River, when piles of fish lay outside the tribe's light shelter, amber-colored fat dripping from their heads and tails.

"If only we had some fish," he thought again.

But that belonged to the past, the distant past. He would have to grow accustomed to a new life.

Nam-Ur sighed regretfully, swallowed the saliva that hunger brought to his mouth, and began skinning the dead wolf.

Its entire body gave off a sharp, unpleasant odor, and he had great difficulty cutting it up.

The men of his tribe watched everything he did closely and tried to ignore the tempting smell of roasting venison.

But the fragrance was so delicate and delicious that their eyes kept sliding toward the place where the fawn was roasting.

After roasting the wolf over the fire and chewing its tough, unpleasant meat, Nam-Ur tried to lose himself in a brief, troubled sleep.

He laid aside the spear from which he had scarcely parted in recent days, spread out the freshly skinned wolf hide, lay on his back, and closed his eyes.

But the wolves had not forgotten the people. Hungry and angry, they surrounded the camp in a tight ring, slowly drawing closer.

There were many more wolves than people, but the fire frightened them. Wolves knew the deadly power of Fire. More than once they had fled from swiftly spreading forest fires. But hunger was stronger…

Kruk and several other men, whom Nam-Ur had posted to guard the tribe, gripped their spears and stared tensely into the darkness.

The wolves were quiet.

A large, full-grown she-wolf, her intelligent green eyes shining in the dark, crept slowly and cautiously toward the human camp.

She approached from the side where the firelight was weakest. The appetizing scent of human beings filled her nostrils. Like the other wolves, she was afraid of people and afraid of fire, but not far away, in her den, she had left six hungry, broad-browed cubs.

The she-wolf crept closer to the camp and, almost maddened by the enticing smell, made a long, swift leap.

Her sharp, predatory muzzle struck something soft.

She seized the soft, tender creature in her jaws, swung it onto her shoulders with one powerful motion, and bounded away.

In the gray light before dawn, Blum just managed to glimpse her shadow. He hurled his spear blindly, but missed. At once a loud, piercing scream filled the camp.

“The wolves have stolen my little girl!” Kru wailed, wringing her hands.

Blum was already chasing the she-wolf. The five-year-old girl was as light as a feather, and the wolf was quickly leaving him behind.

The men running with Blum gradually fell back. Their spears whistled through the air and buried themselves in the ground far behind the wolf, doing her no harm.

Only Blum continued the pursuit. A hill rose ahead, and the she-wolf began to slow.

Gripping his spear tightly, feeling his legs grow heavy as lead, Blum struggled to keep up.

He drew the cold morning air through his wide-open mouth and stared ahead, breathing hoarsely.

The wolf was still far away, though the climb was difficult for her too.

“She is getting away!” In despair Blum hurled his spear.

He put all his strength into the throw, yet it fell several paces short.

Then, in the predawn gloom, Blum failed to notice a stone jutting from the ground. He stumbled over it and fell.

The she-wolf ran to the top of the hill.

Against the light of the fading moon, Blum clearly saw her sinister silhouette, with the small child on her back.

A moment later she disappeared.

Blum had hardly hurt his leg. What burned far more painfully was the shame and frustration of letting the wolf escape.

Cursing the evil spirits that had brought such misfortune on his tribe, Blum turned back.

From a distance he saw Kru running toward him. Wringing her hands and crying loudly, she threw herself onto his neck.

“The wolves have stolen our daughter! The wolves have stolen our daughter!” she sobbed.

Blum sank helplessly to the ground.

Blum was a strong, healthy man, and Kru was a strong, healthy woman. But the spirits had not given them children.

Cold, treacherous Mun had risen many times while Olle, the clan leader’s wife, cared for Kru.

Blum had brought Kru many beautiful, silvery skins of a small, unfamiliar animal.

And then, just when Blum had lost all hope, Kru bore him a daughter.

The fire of life blazed anew in Blum’s chest. No hunter in Nam-Ur’s tribe was faster or braver than he.

Very early in the morning, when mighty Vu was only beginning his journey, Blum would slip out from beneath the shelter, go down to the Great River, and search its banks for pretty, shining pebbles with which little Li loved to play. Once, after a strong wind, when the river’s waves had subsided, Blum found a beautiful shell on the bank.

It was much larger than the shells from which the women of his tribe gathered delicious mollusks to roast over the fire.

Blum carefully opened it with a sharp piece of pebble and, to his astonishment, saw a small pale stone the size of a pea nestled in the mollusk's flesh. Trying not to damage it, he carefully pried it loose with his rough finger. The little stone glowed with a soft, gentle light.

"Uyoh!" cried the astonished Blum. He had never seen a stone like it before.

He studied it for a long time. In his mind he called it a tiny fragment of Mun.

Reverently he carried it to his faithful Kru.

"The mighty spirits are protecting our little girl," Kru said as she examined the stone. "They must have sent this to us."

Then Nam-Ur himself, the leader of the mighty tribe, used a pointed wooden stick and grains of riverside sand to bore a hole in the shell. He fastened its halves with amber-colored resin taken from a red pine, threaded a slender hare sinew through the hole, and hung it around Li's neck.

Blum still remembered her ringing childish laughter. Now the memory echoed painfully in his chest.

"Blum's daughter will surely become a fine healer, as good as Olle," the women of the tribe said respectfully. "The spirits would not have sent her this little bright stone for nothing."

And now Li was gone.

Supporting the utterly weakened Kru between his arms, Blum trudged with her back to camp.

The bright light of great fires, lit all around the encampment, dazzled him.

No one was sleeping now.

The women stood in a tight circle around the drowsy children, speaking in low voices about what had happened.

The men paced silently around the camp, gripping their spears until their hands hurt, scanning the darkness.

Nam-Ur knew perfectly well that the girl could no longer be brought back, and that any delay would only harm the tribe. The autumn rains were approaching. But as a father himself he sympathized with Blum and gave the order to prepare a hunt for the she-wolf.

Morning came slowly. Gray mist lay across the steppe.

Pru, the fat shaman, was also preparing for the hunt.

He sensed the tribe's displeasure. More than once he had caught sidelong glances, sometimes openly hostile.

"Pru could not quiet the Dancing Mountain," he heard them whisper. "Old fat Pru could not come to terms with the spirits."

Much therefore depended on the success of Blum's hunt for the she-wolf. Perhaps even Pru's life depended on it.

Into a bowl recently made from the jawbone of a young deer, he poured powder from dried red fly agaric mushrooms, which he always carried at his waist in a small leather pouch made from hare skin.

This time he added considerably more than usual. "It will be easier to talk to the spirits this way," he thought, and poured in a little water.

Then he threw several small stones into the fire. When they were red-hot, Pru carefully lifted them with a forked birch branch and dropped them into the water. It hissed, sending up steam.

He did this several times until the water grew hot.

After drinking the disgustingly bitter brew, Pru sat for a while and then put on his amulets made from the skulls of young foxes.

The brew began to take effect. Pru felt his heart pounding.

The sun was slowly rising above the steppe.

Pru stepped into the middle of camp, threw his short, thick neck far back, and shouted: "Listen, people of the mighty tribe of Nam-Ur! Listen to what Pru will say to the spirits!"

He spread his arms wide and began whirling in a frenzied dance, muttering disconnected words.

The people of Nam-Ur's tribe watched respectfully.

Nam-Ur watched too, his eyes half closed. Since the events at the Dancing Mountain, his faith in the shaman's powers had fallen sharply.

"Old fat pig," Nam-Ur thought as he watched Pru's wild leaps, "you are doing a poor job of talking to the spirits. They may not even hear you. Blum has lost his little girl, and what can be dearer to a father than his child? Blum is as furious as a cave bear now. A fire of vengeance burns in his chest, and Nam-Ur will help him. Blum, the best hunters, and I will find the gray wolf's tracks and bring her hide back to camp, even if you fail to reach an agreement with the spirits."

Tears came involuntarily to Nam-Ur's eyes.

Pru waved his arms ever more erratically. His already disconnected words became still more incoherent, and his wild leaps ever more grotesque.

Finally he began muttering unintelligible sounds. His eyes widened. For an instant it seemed to him that mighty Vu had winked his great eye and was hurtling down from the sky. Pru fell helplessly to the ground, white foam appearing at his lips.

"That has never happened to Pru before," Nam-Ur thought in bewilderment. Then, looking at the anxious faces of the tribespeople, he proclaimed loudly: "The mighty spirits have told Pru that they will help the tribe. You may prepare to hunt the she-wolf."

Nodding their approval, the men dispersed through the camp and began their preparations.

Clamping their spears between their knees, they used stone scrapers with triangular notches, borrowed from provident Tlum, to sharpen the points carefully, then hardened them over the fire. Some made new spears.

But Blum prepared more carefully than anyone.

He begged Tlum for a sharp stone spearhead and was now fitting it to his weapon.

After sawing off the tip of his spear with a small, jagged-edged stone, he cut a groove with a sharp flint blade, inserted the point, and began binding it in place with thin but strong red hare sinews. Weeping Kru had given him the sinews. The veins on his forehead swelled with effort.

When he had finished, Blum raised his spear toward the sky and said grimly: "Old, vicious she-wolf, you will not escape Blum. Blum will run you through with this spear and bring your stinking hide back to the tribe before mighty Vu finishes his journey."

The sun was already high when the hunters left camp.

Blum walked at their head.

His sharp eyesight, made keener still by sudden grief, had no difficulty picking out every trace the wolf had left behind.

Here was a tuft of her fur. There were blades of grass pressed down by her body.

Suddenly something gleamed in the grass.

Blum bent down quickly, and his knees almost gave way again.

It was the shell that Nam-Ur had hung around Li's neck. Perhaps it had fallen off as the wolf ran, or perhaps the little girl herself had torn it free to leave a sign for those who might rescue her.

With an enormous effort of will, he mastered himself.

The hunters descended the hill and stopped. Beyond it, the she-wolf's tracks were lost in the grass.

Blum drew the air into his nostrils greedily, but in vain. Evidently the wolf had run in another direction.

"Blum will find you all the same, you old, treacherous she-wolf," he growled.

Having fed her cubs, the she-wolf lay outside her den in the hot sunlight, watching them play happily and without a care.

Suddenly her sensitive nose caught the familiar scent of people, but mixed with it was another smell that alarmed her.

Raising her broad-browed head, she looked toward the approaching danger.

The scent grew stronger.

The she-wolf seized her eldest cub by the scruff and dragged it into the den.

“Pak has found the she-wolf, Blum!” one of the hunters cried, running up to the breathless man. “Her den is very close.”

Blum nodded gratefully and ran after him.

Before reaching the den, the hunters stopped. It was important not to startle the she-wolf too soon.

They crept quietly toward the entrance. The she-wolf lay still too.

Suddenly one of the smallest cubs gave a thin, plaintive yelp.

“Aha! So here you are, you old vicious she-wolf!” Blum exclaimed triumphantly, and began savagely thrusting his spear into the den.

But the burrow was deep, and his spear could not reach her.

Cowering at its far end, shielding her trembling, whimpering cubs with her own body, she glared fiercely at the spear points flashing before her muzzle.

Carried away by the hunt, Blum tried to crawl into the broad outer section of the burrow.

But the she-wolf raised the fur along her neck and sprang at him.

Only a reaction as quick as the wolf’s saved him. He managed to jerk back, and her clawed paw missed his face by barely an inch.

Realizing they could not seize her quickly, the hunters retreated a few paces and began loudly discussing what to do.

The she-wolf was in the den with her litter and, as they understood, would sooner die than leave it. But if there were another exit, she could easily escape through it.

They searched the ground carefully and found no second entrance. That made their task easier.

But how were they to reach the she-wolf?

Burning with a desire for revenge, the enraged Blum tried to dig down into the burrow from above.

He soon abandoned the idea. The hill in which the den had been dug was large, and he and the other hunters would have had to dig for a long time.

Then they lit a fire and began throwing burning brands into the entrance. That did not work either.

The brands struck the twisting walls and never reached the far end.

The cubs coughed and sneezed, and the she-wolf shook her head in the acrid smoke, but she would not come out.

Then the men had another idea.

Choosing a young aspen, Blum drew a large stone knife from his belt.

Holding it in his right hand, he swung hard and struck the first blow.

The knife bit laboriously into the wood, but Blum was in no hurry.

After cutting into one side of the tree, he moved around to the other.

At last the aspen fell.

He stripped off its branches, chopped away the heavy root end, and sharpened the thinner end of the trunk. Then he held the point in the flames.

“Mighty spirits, help me,” he whispered, staring at the end of the aspen, “to kill the she-wolf and avenge Li.”

The pointed end blackened and charred.

Blum touched it with a finger, satisfied, and said spitefully: “Now you will not escape me, you old, treacherous she-wolf.”

The men seized the thick end of the trunk and began driving it into the burrow like a battering ram.

“Uh! Uh!” they grunted with concentration.

Now they made faster progress.

The sharp end, hardened in the fire, pierced the burrow's soft earth with ease, plunging deeper with every blow.

Realizing there was no escape now, the she-wolf growled low and bared her fangs.

But she had no intention of fleeing.

She burst from the den and fastened her teeth around one of the hunters' throats.

One brief instant, a dry snap of jaws, and a man fell to the ground with his throat bitten through.

The wolf sprang away from him, crouched on her paws, and prepared for another attack.

But Blum's spear was faster.

He struck so hard that the spear passed right through her, pinning her to the ground.

The she-wolf jerked convulsively and gave a loud howl.

"Aha, old treacherous she-wolf!" Blum said triumphantly. "So I have caught you at last. Now Blum will avenge Li's death."

He picked up a heavy stone axe and, looking straight into the wolf's eyes as their light began to fade, dealt the first blow.

He struck the hated beast again and again, until her head was a bloody pulp.

"Where are the wolf's children?" Blum cried in a hoarse, almost animal voice. "Blum will kill them as she killed Li!"

The little gray bundles, left without their mother, began crawling from the burrow, whining pitifully.

At that moment Blum could scarcely understand that the cubs had done nothing to cause his daughter's death. Rage, pain, and despair filled him and demanded an outlet.

"Take that!" he shouted. Swinging with all his might, he struck one cub against the aspen.

The tiny bundle gave a faint squeak and lay still.

Blum did the same to the second cub, the third, the fourth, and the fifth.

Then, suddenly, it was as though a muddy veil had lifted from his eyes.

"What is Blum doing?" he thought in horror. "They are only children too, like Li, only animal children. They are innocent of her death."

Utterly spent, Blum leaned against the aspen.

The sixth and last cub crept from the burrow.

He was the smallest of his brothers, and one of his front paws was injured. He was hungry.

Whimpering, he nudged his mother's side.

Then he sniffed his brothers and sisters.

As though realizing that they would never again play merrily with him in the sunshine, the cub turned and limped toward a small aspen grove nearby.

The hunters watched him go in silence.

The sun was setting when they reached their camp.

Bright fires burned all around. Nobody was asleep.

Kru ran out to meet Blum.

Sudden grief had scorched her soul.

Deep inside, she understood that Li was unlikely to be alive.

Wolves were not people. Yet a tiny spark of hope had remained.

Now it was extinguished.

Li was not beside Blum, nor had he brought back her remains.

"Blum has kept his word!" he declared solemnly. "The old treacherous she-wolf is dead." With that he threw the dead wolf at Kru's feet.

"But Li is not here," Kru whispered, and her arms fell helplessly to her sides.

Blum turned abruptly and walked away into the steppe with quick strides.

For a while Kru stood motionless, stunned.

Blum kept walking away.
“I love you!” Kru cried desperately. “I love you, Blum! Don’t go!”
Blum shuddered when he heard her. He stopped for a second, then quickened his steps again.
“I love you, Blum!” Kru cried once more and ran after him.
Blum stopped. Then he turned and slowly, very slowly, began walking back toward camp.
Kru ran toward him.
* * *
Holding each other silently, they sat beside the brightly blazing fire until morning.

Chapter 3

Several more days passed.

The sun no longer shone so brightly in the mornings. Bitterly cold dew lay on the grass, and Nam-Ur struggled to wake his people, practically dragging them from beneath their warm skins to make them walk on and on.

“The cold will soon be here, and great waters will fall from the sky,” he thought anxiously. “Then we shall perish among these stunted grasses. There is nothing here from which to build even a simple shelter.”

The shaman Pru was unhappy with Nam-Ur’s decision. He believed the tribe should have followed the river, where so many delicious, fatty fish lived.

He could see that some of the people also disapproved of Nam-Ur’s decision. Although Pru’s own influence had increased greatly after Blum caught the she-wolf — and grateful Blum had even brought him her hide — it was still dangerous to challenge Nam-Ur openly.

“Just wait, Nam-Ur. My turn will come,” Pru thought maliciously, stroking his fat belly with satisfaction.

“Nam-Ur!” called Brag, a broad-shouldered, stocky, almost square man. “The people are hungry. Treacherous Mun has winked her cold eye at us many times, and for a long while now we have eaten nothing but a scrawny deer, nimble green lizards, and disgusting caterpillars. Perhaps Pru was right when he said we should go upstream along the Great River.”

“Perhaps,” Nam-Ur said thoughtfully. “But the mighty spirits are taking revenge on us. I doubt they would want us to return there.”

Pru listened intently to their conversation.

Brag was a distant relative of Pru’s.

* * *

The day slowly faded.

The crimson sun had almost disappeared below the horizon. Its last rays cast long shadows from people, shrubs, and scattered trees, transforming the steppe beyond recognition.

The women cooked a simple meal over the fire.

The men rested beside it after their exhausting march. Some played with the children.

Nam-Ur was not among them. He had gone far out into the steppe.

Anxious thoughts had furrowed his broad, sloping brow.

A light breeze began to rise.

Nam-Ur wrapped his bearskin more tightly around himself.

“Why are there no horses here?” he wondered painfully. “There must be horses on the steppe.”

Suddenly his keen ear caught a faint tapping sound.

Excited, Nam-Ur lay down and pressed his ear to the earth.

Now he could hear the beat of hooves more clearly.

Far away, almost on the horizon, his sharp eyes made out two horses.

They came closer.

A young mare the color of fire and a stallion black as pitch galloped lightly side by side, their slender legs, seemingly carved from stone, barely touching the ground.

The free steppe wind streamed through their magnificent manes.

From time to time the mare would spread her beautiful, full tail and run away from the stallion. Then, with flaring nostrils and a loud, joyful neigh, he would catch her. Waves of powerful, steel-hard muscle moved beneath his satin coat.

When he caught up, he gently nipped her neck with strong white teeth.

The mare pretended to be displeased, tossing her head playfully. Then their game began again.

They ran this way for a long time.

Nam-Ur could not help admiring them.

At last the mare seemed to grow tired of the game. Neighing loudly and invitingly, she raced toward the setting sun, with the stallion galloping swiftly after her, his neck arched.

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