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THE GREAT HUNTER

1. High Hopes

It started at a gathering, a winter gathering in the country of the Nahans. The chill had come early that year, with a terrible snowstorm. Northwind, Eastwind and the snowmakers fell upon the lands; they were in league and had hardly let up at all in three days and two nights. The Barebranch Moon was young but soon the waters would start to freeze and the Earth under the snow turn hard as oakwood. The people in their lodges could hear the wind howling and the trees creaking, and wondered how much longer it would last. They needed to go hunting, it was true, but none of them waited more keenly than a certain Garetto.

And at last Grandfather put an end to this storm - almost as quickly as He allowed it to begin. It was not long before someone noticed the changing, and word began to spread from lodge to lodge and camp to camp.

"I must go and check my snares -they have surely caught something...I might be a little while," said Garetto to the others in the lodge, though this was only partly true.

The whiteness of winter lay heavy over the camp, the lodges, the shacks, the great piles of firewood and everything in-between was thick with snow. But the wind was much calmer now and Garetto even saw the pale circle of the sun where the cloud had started to thin. Quite a few people had come out of their lodges, glad the snowstorm was over. But Garetto had much on his mind; he didn't stop to talk to anyone, so did not tell anyone where he meant to go.

Probably he should have.

Garetto was twenty-and-three summers, dark-haired, handsome, and tall as a throwing- spear. The mark of the Fox Totem lay across his cheek in dotted lines of black and a Horse Mane grew upon his head.

The lodges were cone-shaped - or nearly so - and stood in a rough circle with a wide-open space behind and in front. It was here that Garetto went first, to the giving-put in the middle of camp. He dug down through the snow with a bone scoop, to a wicker lid that covered the pit. There he made an offering to Earth Woman our Grandmother, dropping down two bloodcakes he had put by, though his mother had little enough left in her shack. But Garetto gave them willingly because he hoped to please Her. He made a hole in the snow with his spear, down to the frozen Earth below, and touched her. Some of the people were watching, he noticed, but they were not close enough to hear, so he went on. He chanted in a sacred manner - so that Grandmother would hear even from the pits of the Earth. Then he said, "Mother of the world, the very Earth is Your immortal spirit! Please accept my gifts to You and give me Your Blessing. Grandmother, look kindly on Garetto and Harensi. Make her father see that I'm a man worthy to be his daughter's -husband."

Harensi was his woman and they hoped to be wed soon. They wanted to live together and stay with their own people; it did not seem too much to ask. But it was proving harder than they thought.

For Garetto and Harensi to be wed they needed the permission of her father. It is normal, also, to make gifts to the girl's parents, the father especially. This, the bride price, will be dearest if the girl is pretty and well-made and her family of high standing. Anyone who saw Harensi might have known that her father would ask for many gifts, and Garetto expected to pay a high price. Even if this meant he would be in debt for a long time he would have given her father whatever he wanted. Garetto understood this well enough; it would show everyone what a fine woman Harensi was, and how highly he thought of her.

At the end of the last summer, Garetto went over to that camp to speak with Harensi's father - a journey of two-and-a-half days there and back. He offered seven ox-hides, a big honeycomb and a bag of good stones - flints of high quality. But the fellow just waved him away in a haughty manner and said to let him alone, and let his daughter alone. Garetto had heard it was not uncommon for a girl's father to be awkward about such things and though his offer was generous, he thought he just wanted more gifts. Later he heard the man was angry with his daughter for courting him. So angry indeed that he forbade it.

But Harensi's father could not watch her all the time, and these two would not be kept apart. Since the start of this gathering, they had met in the lodge of the widow Akkeroma. It was their secret, but they knew it was a risky thing.

Garetto wanted to speak to her father again, but Harensi warned against it. She said she would talk to him herself. Try as she did, he was too stubborn. But still they spoke of how it would be after they got wed and had a lodge of their own.

Walking out of his camp, Garetto thought again of the last time they met. He told Harensi not to be put off by her father's attitude. "If we must, we'll go away," he said. "I have kin with the Aboans; we can go to them. If your father won't change his mind, we'll leave in springtime after this gathering breaks up. ..Of course, he won't be happy about it, but we can come back after a while, after we are wed. Even if your father is still against me, you'll be my wife - what could he do then? "

"But my father is quick to anger, and so are my Great Deer uncles," answered Harensi. "You know my father has killed nine men, one of them of the Erlanko. I'm not sure you being my husband will be enough, Garetto...But if there were a child, well, that would be different. They would not make trouble for you then. "

Garetto had heard something about Harensi's father and her uncles, and what she said about the child was no small thing, he knew. But he thought for a while and said, "All right. We'll go away and not come back until then. But this could be a long time, Harensi, years even. And we might have to go further than Aboan country."

"I would go anywhere with you, Garetto, even to the edge of the world," she had said. But in truth Harensi would much rather have stayed with her own tribe. Nor did Garetto want to leave his people. The thought of leaving made him feel sick in his heart. And so he had decided to try once more to win over her father.

Many people had told Garetto he was a good speaker for his age, and his newfather used to say that if men were good speakers, and reasonable, they could come to an agreement over most things. He hoped Harensi's father would be reasonable this time. Already, seven days had passed since Garetto saw Harensi. The snowstorm lasted three days, but to him it felt more like a moon.

Though it was well after noontime it was still freezing cold. In places, the wind had blown the snow into drifts that were shoulder- high or worse. Garetto had set five snares not long before the snowstorm, in likely spots a little way from camp. These were marked with sticks but one of them he could not find in the deep snow, and the others he had to dig out with the scoop. One of these traps had caught a hare and another a stoat. The pelt of both animals had started to turn white. Stoats are no good for human beings to eat, but their pelts when white or mottled are prized by many. Hare meat is acceptable and hares have warm, soft pelts - good for caps, mittens or breech- clouts. Both animals were frozen stiff, but Garetto thought them worthy opening gifts for Harensi's father.

The camps, or bands, at this gathering of the Nahanagoans stood in a great arc west of White Horse River, at the edge of a long meadow and the trees. Garetto's band, the Udatarral, were always the second- furthest upriver, to the south. Harensi's band, the Taridoantal, were the second- furthest downriver, to the north.

Through gaps in the trees and scrub Garetto could see the tops of a hundred or more lodges and the smoke of many hearths. The camps were coming back to life, and he heard the sounds of people and dogs all around. Garetto was pretty nervous about talking to Harensi's father but could wait no longer. He tied the hare and stoat together with twine and slung them over his shoulder. He had his old throwing- spear, to test for drifts and deadfall now hidden on the paths and, if need be, to ward off dogs from other camps. The snow on the main trail was knee- deep at least; even with snowshoes the walking was tiresome and slow.

Every camp of Nahanagoans has its chief. They have war- chiefs too, when they need them, and for these winter gatherings they have ox chiefs. An ox chief leads the Great Drive, but apart from this he stands no higher than any other chief and may tell no man not of his own camp what to do. Still, winning this name is considered a very great honour. It is the elders and holy men who choose ox chiefs at the Big Councils. The last three times in a row they had picked the same man: Haranga of the Taridoantal. Everybody knew this was starting to rankle with the other chiefs. They all saw what happened at the council, how it looked like some of them would not acknowledge this Haranga. But no one would openly defy the elders and holy men, and in the end they gave their consent.

Looking back, Garetto realized that Haranga had never much liked him. This hardly troubled him before; he had little enough to do with the fellow, but now it did because Haranga just happened to be Harensi's father.

Walking into the Taridoantal camp, Garetto did not see his great aunt nor the sister of his friend who both lived here but there were quite a few people about. Many of them were busy clearing the snow around their doorways or scraping it from the walls of their lodges with scoops and big sticks. These Taridoantal glanced over as Garetto passed by, and a few dogs barked but no one said anything to him. Some of the children were making snowhills and others were throwing snowballs at each other, the lodges, the dogs, or anything else that seemed funny to them. A snowball whizzed by Garetto's head and he saw a small boy ducking behind a woodpile. He called out, "I see you!... Son of Uranga, is it? Or son of Balasula?"

"I am Bird Foot of the Taridoantal, son of Balasula and Uren Emak!" cried the little fellow.

Garetto chuckled and said, "Well, Bird Foot of the Taridoantal, try aiming better next time!"

The boy asked Garetto why he was there, but before he could answer his mother came out of lodge close by, grabbed him by the arm and dragged him inside. Garetto knew her slightly and greeted her, but she turned away without speaking. Garetto shook his head at this. He saw an older boy, a half-brother of Harensi, and greeted him. Nor did he answer; he just stared blankly. Garetto frowned, irked by such rudeness.

But there was something more - only now did he notice. There seemed to be a strained air about the place. People were going back to their lodges, talking amongst themselves or calling to their children. Some of them eyed Garetto warily. Harensi's grandmother Haranga's mother appeared now with a belly-bag of snow for melting, and when she saw Garetto you would have thought by the scowl on her face that suddenly there was a bad smell in the air. Garetto did not say anything but the old crone muttered under her breath, coughed up something and spat it in the snow by his feet. This riled him. He also began to wonder if it had been a mistake to come here alone.

But it was too late now. Haranga and four of his men were stood by the gift-tree in the open space, watching. One of these was a half-giant who towered over the rest, tall as a big bull elk at the withers. Garetto knew the name of this fellow but the others he knew only by sight. He stuck his spear in the snow head down - to show he meant no harm to anyone - and held up his hand in greeting. He even smiled as he called out, "Atae, chief Haranga! I hope you're well. I have come to speak with you."

At this, Haranga nodded, turned to the others and said something Garetto did not hear. They left him, and the chief beckoned Garetto over. He was an ugly fellow, this Haranga. His head and face were all crooked and lumpy, and his front teeth were gone. His eyes were small and vicious-looking - they spoke to Garetto of the stoat - and one was badly lopsided. Garetto thought how glad he was that Harensi had the look of her mother and not him. But he held out his hand in greeting and said, "I never told you my full name before, chief. I am Garetto of the Udatatral, son of ---"

"I know who you are," said the chief, cutting off his words. "What do you want with me?" He was frowning and would not clasp hands. Garetto had not expected this, though he should have known Haranga would not be pleased to see him. But he remembered the gifts; everybody liked them. "Chief," he said, even now thinking to win him over, "I come with gifts for you and Balo-mak... See - a hare and a

stoat? A little meat for your hearth and two good pelts, two fine pelts turning white for winter. There will be more of course, but these are to show I come to you in friendship... It's cold to be talking out here though, don't you think? Maybe we could go to your main lodge?"

But Haranga was quite unmoved. "I don't want any gifts from you," he said, his eyes hard like stones, "and nor are you welcome at my hearth."

Garetto could feel his face redden. For a moment his mind was vexed and he did not know what to say. He blurted out, "But I must talk to you!... I mean...Your daughter and me, we'd like----"

"Shut up!" growled Haranga, cutting off his words again. "Now I'll tell you something: Let my daughter alone. I will not warn you again: stop courting her or it will be all the worse for you."

Garetto was so taken aback he could not hide it.

"Ai fellow," said Haranga, "I know what you've been up to! Haranga has eyes and ears everywhere among the Nahanagoans. I know you two have met in the Tarrabelantal camp, in that Dog woman's lodge...Did you think you could hide this from me?"

Garetto had no good answer, and he wondered who betrayed them. "If I offended you, then I'm sorry," he said. "But I like your daughter very much and she likes me...if you had not banned our courtship..."

Haranga answered, "Bah, save your tongue, fellow! Nothing will change my mind. I will never allow you to wed Harensi. Now, get out of my camp and don't come here again. So saying, he turned his back on Garetto and walked off towards his main lodge.

Garetto watched after him, his spirits crushed.

Then Haranga roared at them and everyone stopped talking.

The whole camp was quiet now, very quiet. Two dogs tied to a sapling watched Garetto but, unlike before, there was nobody to be seen. But for the smoke rising from the vents, the place looked deserted. Garetto saw that his spear was gone: somebody had taken him. He had a bad feeling about all this and decided to leave quickly.

Near the front of that camp an old man appeared suddenly, by the side of a shack, and beckoned to Garetto. This was a Bear man, Sin Hara, and Garetto knew him but slightly. He had only one eye to see with, for the whole left side of his head and face was maimed. But he was the Great Seer and the people held him in very high regard. He wore an odd-looking cap that covered half his face, and fingers were missing from his left hand also. They had hardly spoken before, but now the old man said, "Beware Garetto! Four of the chief's men are waiting for you in ambush by the main trail; he told them to give you a good hiding. He means to punish you for defying him over his daughter." These words angered Garetto, but he was not wholly surprised. "Return to your camp by some other path," warned Sin Hara. "Better for you if you never meet them."

"Better for them to never meet me!" answered Garetto.

But Sin Hara just shook his head and said, "Don't be blinded by pride, young man. Four against one are not good odds...And you have only that little knife."

Indignant as he was, Garetto saw the sense in what he said. And the fellow had a sacred power too. He asked, "Did you see this in the flames?"

The old man grinned strangely and said, "Never mind how I know, Garetto. I'm trying to help you - will you not listen to me?"

Garetto nodded and answered, "I thank you, Sin Hara. I will hold on to your words. "

They clasped hands and Garetto asked, "But why help me? We two are not kin - not really - and they are your ---"

"They are my band- brothers?" said the old man, and he sighed. "Maybe so, but the truth is that some of the fruit will always be spoiled by worms or maggots, wherever the tree grows. ... And besides, I knew Etto-las; he was a good man. You're the son of his son and my brother's-wife would not be happy with me if I did not at least warn you. But you must go now, young friend, we have talked long enough. "

The main trail was nearer to the camps in some places than in others, and many smaller paths branched away from it. Sin Hara told the truth; Garetto sensed he was being watched from a grove just outside camp, between there and the trail. He doubled back on himself and stole away from the other side of the camp, between the lodges and thorn barricades. He did not feel the eyes here, but as he left he took a big stick from a woodpile. Chest- high it was and thick as a man's lower arm - just in case it came to fighting. Garetto weaved his way through a patch of scrub, crossed another trail that ran behind the camps and went a little way into the forest, all the while trudging through deep snow.

He had looped back towards the camps when two dogs came running through the trees. They snarled, baring their teeth, and one of them lunged at him. Garetto hit the dog hard with the stick, cutting its mouth and knocking out a tooth. The dog yelped, and both of them ran off. But they did not go very far and the wounded one made a lot of noise with its whining, and the other one barked. Garetto heard voices and saw two of Haranga's men. These were Falcons, but they had not yet seen him. Garetto covered his tracks with snow he shook from the branches and hid behind a big old pine. The Falcon men had their honour- clubs. When they got to the big pine, Garetto sprung out behind them.

"Akee!" he cried.

They were startled. Garetto hit one - the nearest -on the crown of his head. The fellow dropped his club, groaned, and fell down in the snow. But the stick was not as sturdy as Garetto thought; when he hit that fellow it broke in half. At once the other came at him, swinging his club. Garetto dodged the blow and hit him on the face with the frozen hare. There was a dull crack, and the fellow screamed and fell down. He kept screaming and holding his nose, which was broken and bleeding. He shouted to the others, and his voice sounded very thick, so funny it made Garetto laugh despite himself. But then he heard the other two calling back from behind a thicket. The man with the broken nose got up and started towards them. Garetto in his indignation would have seized one of those clubs and beaten him out of his senses,

but now he saw the others - the half- giant was one of them. They saw him too. Garetto bounded over the snow as fast as anyone could in snowshoes, back to the main trail. Here it ran very close to the Tarrabelantal camp, where it was more open and there were people about. The Taridoantal men followed, but they were not fast enough.

Garetto saw them, the half- giant Hoan Sula and two others watching from the edge of the trees, where they stopped. For a moment they glowered at each other. Garetto was in sight of his own camp now and knew they would go no further. He cursed at the Taridoantal men with choice words and shouted, "Watch out for me, you wretches! Watch out for Garetto, because I will be avenged!"

Some of the Tarrabelantal, also, heard Garetto's words. Many of these people were watching, and a few looked strangely at him, but he walked on before anyone could start asking questions.

They were not sure whether this gathering would last or not, but for as long as it did, Haranga would be ox chief. A common way to settle grievances among these people is on the fight- ground. But an ox chief cannot himself challenge anyone to a club- fight, and nor can anyone challenge him.

Still, Haranga's attitude only made Garetto more determined to wed Harenschi, but his spirits were crushed all the same because now he knew they would have to leave their people. And in the meantime they would have to be even more careful in their courtship. They needed some other place to meet, and he could not think where.

To be continued...
