

For Love of Games



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By
Major Ursa

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The Prime of the sabretooth Pride returns home to find the Pride and her world in an uproar. Enemies have come to hunt their allies, the hairy tuskers. Someone has to defeat the invading Ulug. Everyone looks to Cat of course. Winning the Great Game is what she does. So many opponents and some many games. Can she win the Great Game? Of course, she tells herself. She is Cat and this was what she lives for.

Chapter 1

The Hunting Game

The mist of the place between worlds churned around her in thick clouds that blocked her vision. It did not matter, her other senses more than compensated for the mist. Besides, she had learned all of the mist's games on her many trips to and from the ogre's world. Cat drew a deep breath in through her nose and mouth, both scenting and tasting the world around her. There was nothing to challenge her passage through this land. To her right she detected the faint odor of the purple and pink flowers that grew along the sides of the bluff where the Pride ruled. As the scent filled her nose, Cat began to purr. The delicate fragrance was one that she enjoyed. It smelled like home.

Cat followed the scent. Her nose was never wrong. Great hunters did not get lost just because they could not see. Even prey understood the value of nose and ears. But only a few, like her, understood the language of the wind on fur and whiskers, the meaning of ripples and warmth beneath the pads of one's feet, or recognized the taste of predator and prey that hung in the air. Each sense had its own story to tell the hunter who listened. Cat had mastered them all. That was why she ruled the Pride.

The mist began to thin around her. Cat sensed the barrier between worlds a few steps in front of her. She knew it was there even though it had no scent, taste, or smell. It could not be seen. She stepped confidently across it and into the semi-darkness of her lair. It was past time for her to return. As the Prime, she had responsibilities.

She extended her front legs, reaching far across the lair. She released a contented rumble at the pure pleasure of stretching this way. Her claws almost reached the far side of the cave as her muscles slowly relaxed. Cat held that position as her jaws opened in a yawn that exposed every one of her impressively sharp teeth. Her claws extended and contracted in the ecstasy of the moment.

As her jaws closed once more, she dug her claws into the stone near the far wall. Then slowly, Cat pulled her claws through the stone as she drew her body back. More deep lines appeared on the floor of the cave as she sharpened her claws. Cat admired the new furrows she had made. Mine! No future Prime would want this cave after her. Her claim to this cave could never be erased, not even by time itself.

Cat sat back on her haunches and began to groom her pelt. The scorch mark on her right flank was almost gone. None of the injuries she received in the ogre's world lasted long once she returned to her own place in the Astral Plain. New fur was already sprouting to cover the burns from the elf's fire. In a short time, none in the Pride would ever know that she had been injured. That was good. The Prime was supposed to appear invincible. It discouraged challenges. She did not like killing members of her Pride.

She chuffed as she remembered the recent battle. Her ogre had given her great fun this time. It had been a very exciting game. Seldom did her prey make the hunting game such a challenge. She raised a paw and licked at the claws that had killed the elf. Nothing excited her like dangerous prey. The only real disappointment was that she had not claimed both kills. She would have greatly enjoyed stealing the ogre's kill too. That would have put him in his place. It was never good to let males become too full of themselves.

Cat considered her newest cub's performance. Her ogre was becoming a much better hunter, especially for a male. She could not deny his growing skill. Of course, he would never have become the hunter he was without her help. She had spent so much time teaching him that he could not help but improve. His understanding of the Great Game would be impressive once he finally stopped acting like such a youngling. If it took all two-legs this long to mature, how did the species ever survive? Two complete cycles of the seasons she had spent raising him, and still he called her to aid him

for the more challenging games he played. No cub in either of her litters had taken half that time to learn to hunt on its own.

She could never admit how much she enjoyed going to his world. His games were more exciting than anything the Pride ever did. The ogre had a talent for getting himself into all kinds of trouble, more so than any of her other cubs. Soon though, he would not need her anymore. She would miss their games when he realized he could win those games on his own. That time might be closer than either of them expected. His kills in this last hunt had been quite impressive. But that time had not yet come and, until it did, she would not deny herself the pleasure of winning his games. That was her right as Prime after all.

Cat growled as she stared out the entrance to her lair. She had barely returned and already, boredom had come to her. What was it about the ogre and his world that she enjoyed so much? He was just a male and a cub at that. She did not, would not, need him! Was there nothing in her lands that stirred her the way the ogre's games did? Well, there was the Dark One. Thoughts of him stirred her blood in a much different way. She had mated with him twice now and looked forward to the next time her season came upon her. The Dark One had defeated several powerful males to stand at her side. She wondered briefly who would win if the Dark One and the ogre battled? Her ears flicked in excitement at the thought of that battle. Then they flattened when she realized that this was a game she could not win. Either the Dark One would be lost to her or her ogre and his games. There would be no draw if those two fought. Neither would ever back down. She would definitely need to keep those two away from each other.

Cat began to pace as she considered the rest of her visit to that other place. The female two-leg had been gone when the game finished. She had smelled the bloodlust come over her ogre. Whoever had taken the female was about to die. It was obvious that the ogre had claimed her and Cat knew how that battle would play out. She did not understand it though, the female two-leg had not come into her season. Why were the males preparing to fight over her. It made no sense to Cat.

When her trail had disappeared, the ogre had taken her to the place of stone. The little dragon had tried to stop them from entering its lair. The ogre had let her play with it. It had been fun batting at it as it floated in the entrance to the large cave. But Cat sensed the small dragon might

be dangerous. Best not to use claws on that one unless she had its neck between her teeth. Even that might not end well for her. Cat had let it fly away.

The thought of that tiny morsel in her mouth made her realize how hungry she was. She had not fed on her last kill. Elf was not a prey she would willingly eat. All two-legs left a foul taste in her mouth. There had been no time to hunt after that. Once her ogre had discovered that he had lost his female, he was in too big of a hurry for her to hunt for prey she could eat. Now her stomach growled in protest.

Cat had no doubt the ogre would eventually find the trail of the one that had taken her. His scent made it clear that he would challenge the offending male or any other that got in his way. When he did find this female, things would not end well for the other male. All this fuss for a female that was out of season. It made no sense. Two-leg mating games were just strange. Cat would enjoy seeing how the tale ended, but she knew she would not. The ogre would not want her help in such a battle. And since he would not need her any time soon, Cat had time to fill her empty belly.

She glanced out at the horizon, now clearly visible through the entrance to her lair. The sun was just coming up. Most members of her Pride would still be sleeping off full bellies from the previous day's hunt. That should give her some time before the petty squabbles of the Pride got on her nerves. She truly hated Pride politics. As Prime, she was expected to judge the merits of any disputed game. Too many sought to use her to advance their claims in an attempt to avoid embarrassing losses in the Great Game.

Even if there were no issues that required her attention, there would be complaints about her absence. The Pride did not like that she was called to serve in the two-legs world. It was the one thing both her rivals and supporters agreed upon. The Prime was too important for such dangerous forays. Her role was to rule, not serve. "Choose another to go in your place!" was their frequent cry. "It is beneath you," others said. They were all foolish kits. Her skills were constantly honed in that other world. If the others ever learned of the games she played at the ogre's side, there would be no end to the challenges to take her place.

Cat wandered out of her lair to stand on the ledge overlooking the Pride's valley. To her right, beyond the rising sun, lay the great sea. The Pride left the lands along the sea to the two-legs. What good was a land where the

water was too salty to drink? Straight ahead, the new sun already glittered off the ice wall that marked her northern boundary. Each year, the ice retreated a little more and the Pride lands grew larger. To her left lay a rugged land filled with trees and bushes that blocked her view. The Tuskers claimed that place and the Pride allowed them to live in peace. Tuskers did not hunt and her kind did not eat green things from the ground. Not competing for food made them good neighbors for each other.

Her eyes swept the lands she claimed as her own and a rumble of contentment sounded in her chest. The valley was a good place for her people to live. Life thrived here in the shelter of the bluff. Fresh water flowed from the ice to feed the lush grasses of her valley. Prey lived among those grasses, multiplying each rotation of the seasons. It was as if the valley had been created as a gift to the Pride. The Pride lived a good life here and they defended the land from all who would take what was theirs. That was as it should be. And so, it would remain as long as the Pride was strong. And what else could they be but strong? She was their Prime.

Cat turned her back to the valley below and stared up the cliff face as her stomach complained about being empty. She ignored the growling emptiness as she considered her options. A boring hunt in the valley or a challenge that would relax her before the many mewling complaints stole the joy from her day. There really was not a choice. The challenges of the high plain beckoned her.

The top of the bluff was at least twenty feet above her lair. Small outcrops scattered along the cliff face made access to the high plain possible. Cat refused to even consider using them. She was the Prime and such things were beneath her dignity. She crouched for the span of a single heartbeat and then sprang. She cleared the cliff top easily, not needing to scramble for purchase at the top. She landed lightly and then turned to survey her domain.

Standing there, clearly visible, she spread her jaws wide to announce her presence. Her primal roar could be heard from the bluff where she stood all the way to the ice wall far across the valley. Her message was simple, "MINE!" At that terrifying cry, thousands of birds beat their wings, seeking the safety of the air. Small things scurried into their holes and larger creatures ran to escape her. Her world now knew that the Prime had returned. The terror of the prey was as it should be. She was Cat and this was her home. Let any who dared challenge her.

Then she turned her back on the valley. The high plains and the hunt lay before her. Her battle challenge had been no less effective here. Even here, the prey understood that the hunter was coming for them. Cat studied the scene before her. Far across the plain, the mountain that burned rose into the sky. Dark smoke rose above it to paint the clouds. At its feet lay a hunting ground beyond compare. Someday, her litters would claim this land too.

The prey on the high plain had been stirred up by her challenge. Cat chuffed in amusement. Such was the way of the hunter and the hunted. Prey here was almost too plentiful. The high plain had few predators to thin out the many plant eaters and none of those predators were any real danger to her. She had taught the dire wolves the folly of hunting her long ago. That left only the Rocs that nested high on the smoking mountain. The great birds preferred prey that did not rip out their soft underbellies. With a grin of anticipation, she began to lope towards the smoking peak.

Her stomach rumbled again, but she ignored it. This was about more than simply filling her belly. This was a part of the Great Game. She must not dishonor that game by taking easy prey. She would not dishonor herself by taking an easy kill. There must be a challenge. Of course, her food must also taste good, but she had no doubt that she could achieve both goals. She was Cat after all.

As she moved, her keen senses told her of the tale of life on the plain. Her eyes tracked the reindeer as they hurried from her path. They were tasty. Normally, she would relish the chase. But it had been too long since she had eaten and she did not have the energy for a long run. Her ears told her of the many creatures hiding in the grass and bushes around her. There was no challenge in killing them. The smell of sloth drifted from a stand of trees not far away. They were slow but knew how to fight. They also tasted vile. She would not hunt them.

Movement in her peripheral vision caused Cat to drop to her belly. Something large was about to cross her path and it did not smell of fear. Cat studied the two shapes moving slowly as they grazed. A pair of hairy one-horns was eating its fill of the soft grasses. It was a female who appeared to be escorting her young back to the herd. They were vulnerable because they were alone. The wiser female only took occasional mouthfuls of grass as she scanned for danger. Her young was oblivious to any and all threats.

Should she take one of them? It would be a fine fight. The female would be a fierce opponent as she fought to let her young escape. Her victory over the female would be worthy of her effort. The problem was that the battle was the easy part. Then she would have to get past the one-horn's armor plates to get to its flesh. That was messy work and more trouble than she wanted to deal with. She would let them go. But not without doing her duty. The young one-horn needed to be taught a lesson. Otherwise, it would never grow to be challenging prey.

Cat lay silent and still until the female had passed her position. Then she made a quick rush at the young one-horn. It squealed in fear at the sight of her and then it began to run. It was slow to start, but eventually gained speed. At its cry of terror, the female spun and lowered its horn. It was prepared to fight her. Cat chuffed loudly as she walked away. Perhaps, someday, she would hunt the young one-horn again. Such was the way of the Great Game.

Rather pleased with herself, she moved on. She did not hurry, it; was an almost perfect day for a hunt. Just over a small rise, she spotted a dozen or so hoppers playing in the grasses. Her mouth watered. Hoppers were very tasty and quite filling. Hoppers were roughly twice the size of normal rabbits. More importantly, they had magic. When frightened, they teleported a short distance away in a random direction. To catch one, she had to be very quick. To catch a specific hopper took great skill. Cat had both agility and skill. Besides, hoppers were just too much fun to resist.

Cat studied the terrain around the hoppers very carefully. Off to the right of her prey was a small mound of dirt. She counted four holes hidden by piles of dirt on the mound. Those would be the hopper's burrows. She must not let them reach their holes or the hoppers would win the game. She must not be overconfident because, over short distances, hoppers were much faster than she was. Her excitement grew as she considered the game she was about to begin. Stupid as they were, hoppers often outwitted even a skilled hunter. But not her.

Before she initiated the game, she must choose her prey. Catching a hopper was seldom a challenge for her. But catching a specific hopper, that was the supreme test of skill. Cat relished the challenge.

She began to study the herd. Cat was very hungry. A small hopper just would not do. Her attention kept returning to the overly plump hopper with the lop ear. Its brown fur and large black spots called to her. That would be

her dinner or she would return to her lair hungry. She would win this game or an empty belly would be her penalty.

Cat dropped to her belly and began to move towards the small mound. One foot moved at a time. Step by careful step, she made it to the hopper burrow. The prey neither saw nor scented her. The grasses she moved through did not quiver enough to give her away. During her quiet stalk, the hoppers had drifted closer to their holes. Then it was time. Cat stood and growled.

The hoppers panicked; the smell of their urine filled the air as did the sound of a dozen soft pops. Almost in unison, every hopper disappeared. Cat rushed forward scanning the area around her. At her third heartbeat, hopper bodies began to reappear all around her. There! Three body lengths away, at an angle to her right, the lop-eared hopper appeared. Seeing her, it began to run away from her. It was fast for such a fat little furball. But Cat was fast too.

She leapt at her prey and the three other hoppers that had appeared next to it. Even the hopper's strange dimensional leaps took time to recharge. She did not catch them this time, but she was close when four more soft pops sounded in her ears. Cat guessed; leaping left this time in anticipation of the where her prey would reappear.

Three heartbeats later, nothing appeared near her. Her hopper and one other had reappeared a short distance straight ahead of where they had disappeared. Both were still running at full speed. With a menacing roar, Cat pursued them. That feline growl sent the entire herd into another frenzy of movement. Instinct took over as Cat charged forward. This time Cat sprang for a spot behind the madly racing pair of hoppers.

It took two more leaps before a small white ball of fur appeared almost between her front paws. It was not either of the hoppers she had pursued. This was not her chosen prey and she would not settle for less. Without extending her claws, she slapped the small hopper aside. She chuffed briefly as it tumbled away, emptying its bowels as it rolled across the ground. Then she charged after the lop ear that was now surrounded by a cluster of its kind.

She charged them and they fled. Cat lost herself in the joy of the chase. Three hops later, her prey was tiring. At most a few more times and she would have it. But the holes were closer now. If it got lucky... Cat leapt

towards the holes as the lop ear disappeared again. This time something soft and warm appeared practically beneath her. By now, she knew the lop ear's scent. Her jaws snapped closed and the warm taste of her prey filled her mouth. Cat feasted. The game was hers. She fed hungrily, ignoring the remaining hoppers as they raced for their holes.

Chapter 2

The Prime Game

Cat stepped to the edge of the bluff and stared down. Things were not as bad as she had expected. Only three members of the Pride were waiting to speak to her. All three stood on the ledges below her lair as was appropriate. One did not intrude upon the Prime without consequences.

The two on the ledge just below hers were fools, older females that imagined themselves capable of advising her. Her lips drew back in a snarl as she considered them. They had no skill in the Great Game and, even worse, were not even good hunters. They did not even realize that she was above them, ready to pounce. Both were prey disguised as hunters. What advice could they ever give one such as her? Neither of them had ever had the courage to challenge the old Prime when her strength began to fail. Instead, they had encouraged the youngest hunter in the Pride to do what was their duty. Cat had done what was needed and the old Prime had thanked her at the end. And the two fools, they had quickly learned they could not manipulate her the way they had planned. So, why were they here?

Her curiosity grew as she recognized the third feline, relaxing one ledge below the fools. There was no mistaking that one's darker pelt. It was her daughter, known by the Pride as Huntress. She was the most promising kit from Cat's first litter. Her daughter had achieved much in her short life. Huntress's position as leader of the hunt had nothing to do with Cat being Prime or any other game of Pride politics. Her daughter had more

than earned that role with her cunning and with her claws. Someday, when Cat's strength was taken by the passing of the seasons, Huntress was the one she hoped would grant her that final mercy, sending Cat on to the next phase of the Great Game.

Cat evaluated her daughter as the younger feline casually groomed her fur. Huntress's absorption in her task made Cat wonder if she had misjudged her daughter's potential. Then Huntress raised one front paw high as she smoothed the fur near her paw. The claws on that paw suddenly extended and Huntress met her mother's gaze without fear or surprise. Cat grinned. No, her daughter was not the fool she pretended to be. Deception was always a good game to play with one's enemies. Her point made, Huntress retracted her claws and lowered her leg. Her daughter went back to grooming, but her attention never wavered as she watched the occupants of the ledge above her.

It was time to make her presence known to those less observant than her daughter. Cat dropped lightly to her own ledge. The two older felines shifted nervously at her sudden appearance. Cat growled softly to acknowledge her visitors. With a contemptuous flick of her short tail, Cat walked into her lair.

Cat reclined on the far side of the lair, her front paw idly tracing the deep furrows she had left across the entire length of the cave. Cat had no need to feign indifference as the two older felines entered her lair. But it was hard to restrain a purr of satisfaction as those two crawled in with their bellies to the floor. Both stopped well out of their Prime's reach. Huntress entered last, stopping just inside the lair. Her daughter's head was lowered respectfully, but she did not cower as the two fools did.

Cat's ears flicked in annoyance; they were already wasting her time. Her two 'guests' took that gesture of disdain as permission to rise and speak to her. Cat began to flex her claws in agitation as each of the fools waited for the other to begin. It had been a good day until now. She growled deep in her chest. "Why do you bother me on such a fine day? Go hunt or play the Game."

The female to her left replied, "We come bearing news of a grave threat to the existence of the Pride. We have done our best to deal with this peril during the Prime's untimely absence. Now that you have returned from that other place, we seek your wisdom, my Prime."

Cat's gaze shifted to her daughter. Huntress did not show the level of concern that the older females did, but she had come with them anyway. That meant something was up. Cat was wary as she asked, "What is this danger that worries you so? And why have you not dealt with this threat like true predators?"

The older felines shifted uneasily at the accusation in her growl. Huntress's eyes glittered merrily at her mother's words.

The feline to her right sputtered in protest, "It is not a simple matter like a rogue male, my Prime. The problem is complicated. We did not wish to anger you by making decisions in your absence."

Cat hated their groveling. She could smell their fear. As they had been under the old Prime, they were afraid to fight the battles that needed fighting. They would use her until the day she did not win. Then they would find another to be their tool. They could not play the Great Game, so they plotted. Sadly, they were not even good at that. They were weak and their presence weakened the Pride. Soon, very soon, Cat would be forced to drive them out or kill them.

Cat rose to her feet with a growl of frustration. "You did not answer my question. What danger comes?"

Both females backed away. As if that extra distance would protect them if they angered her further. The first female whined her response. "The Ulug Ulu have come again to the shores of the Great Sea. They hunt on Pride land."

Cat slowly sat down, considering what she knew of the Ulug Ulu. It had been generations since the Ulug had crossed the seas to intrude upon the Pride. Even then, they had not dared to hunt her people. Cat did not understand why this was such a problem. "Ulug are little more than prey. They know only what their eyes tell them. They do not even have claws of their own. Why are they not dead?"

At the displeasure in her tone, both females dropped once more to their bellies. Cat hissed a warning. If either of them lost their water in her lair, she would purge the smell with their blood. Finally, one of them found the courage to mumble, "They hunt in packs like the dire wolves above. They hunt using large sticks with sharp, shiny tips. At night they sleep together surrounded by guards armed with fire. They leave us no chance to hunt them, my Prime."

Cat surged across the furrows on the floor, her lips pulled back in a snarl. "Our enemy does not act like the prey they are because you have forgotten how to be hunters. I will not have the stink of your fear in my lair. Go!" Cat raised her right front paw. Its claws were fully extended as she glared down at them.

The two females practically fought each other to be the first out of her lair. Cat scented blood as she scrambled out of the cave. Cat looked up to see the amusement in her daughter's eyes. With a shake of her head, Cat grumbled, "Why do I let them live?"

Huntress chuffed softly. "Because they have their use when you go off to play games with that ogre you are so fond of."

Cat gave her daughter a stern look. "Careful, daughter. I am in no mood to hear that complaint, not even from you."

Huntress dropped her gaze. "From me it is not a complaint, Mother. I see how you are when your return from that place. If anything, I am jealous. The games there must be most entertaining."

Cat was mollified by her daughter's words. "What have you learned about our enemies?"

For the first time, her daughter's ears laid back. Cat smelled anger, not fear, emanating from her daughter. Huntress's eyes grew hard as she gave her report, "They came first in ones and twos. Our scouts killed or chased them off as was their duty. The prey learned, though, and then came in smaller hunting packs. We sent those running in fear too." Cat watched her daughter's lips pull back in a snarl. "Now they hunt in large packs, carrying those sharp sticks that pierce our flesh. Again, the scouts did their duty. They came together and attacked. The Ulug drove them off. The Pride lost two scouts in that hunt."

Cat began to pace back and forth. "Those fools mentioned a larger group. How many invaded our hunting grounds?"

Huntress shook her head. "There are three hunting packs, each with at least ten Ulug. The main herd is much larger than all of the packs combined. The hunting packs rejoin the herd each night. I have tried to slip between their guards, but their fires are many."

Cat began to put the pieces together in her mind. There was a dangerous game that she had learned in the ogre's world. It was called war. Had it come to her world too? There was one more thing she needed to ask. "Do they hunt the Pride to take our hunting ground?"

Huntress growled a negative. "They search for something, but not the Pride. Their packs kill for food for they are many, but nothing they find seems to excite them. Still, to feed so many will quickly deplete our prey."

Cat gave her daughter a look of approval. "You have played the game well. This game is most unusual. Where does their path lead?"

"They travel towards the ice wall," Huntress replied. "It makes no sense, there is little prey near the ice wall. It is a place filled with low brush and tall grasses. What prey could they desire there?"

Understanding came like the hopper that appeared between Cat's paws a short time ago. It was a hunting game, but the Ulug hunted a prey her kind knew to leave alone. She quickly explained the game to her daughter, "The Ulug will hunt the hairy tuskers. The long sticks are for a very large prey."

Huntress protested, "That is too much meat, even for the Ulug."

Cat nodded. "They do not hunt for meat. They desire the hairy ones' tusks. In their world such things have value."

Huntress hissed her disgust, "Killing prey you do not eat is a forbidden game. Every predator knows that. Rotting meat spreads disease. Our land will be tainted for generations."

Cat grunted. Her brain was traveling the paths of the many games she knew. There was always a game that could be turned to her advantage. She remembered one, but it was not a game the Pride could play alone. They would need help. Could Cat convince the hairy tuskers to play along? Using them in the game would require a game within a game. Cat grew excited at the prospect.

Cat's mind raced as she considered all of the possibilities. If she could win this game, it would be a lesson the Ulug would regret for many seasons to come. More importantly, if she played the game well; her cunning might even silence those two old females for at least a season, maybe two.

Cat purred softly as she selected who to involve in this game. Some, like the Matriarch of the hairy tuskers, she would have no choice about

including. Others would be drawn in simply to make the Great Game more enjoyable. Perhaps there were many smaller games that could be played within the larger game of teaching the Ulug to stay out of the Pride's hunting grounds. This would be most entertaining. But she would need a partner. She wondered if the bull that the ogre called Ride would help her. He was only a male but, like her ogre, he was becoming quite proficient at the Great Game.

Her daughter began to chuff again. Cat gave her a quizzical look. Huntress's voice was filled with humor as she remarked, "You are scheming again, Mother. I can smell your excitement for this game you plan. Is there room in this game for me and my hunters?"

Cat's eyes flashed in amusement. "A small role if you wish it, Daughter. This is a game best played by one, me. I intend to give the Ulug exactly what they seek, just not the way they are expecting it."

Huntress's ear flicked in irritation. "With all due respect, Prime, I have seen their numbers. Even you cannot hunt them all without help."

Cat gave her daughter a look of superiority. "This is not a game of hunting or even battle, Daughter. It is a game where everyone gets what they want." At her daughter's puzzled look, Cat continued, "Never mind. It will make sense at the end. But there is one thing you can aid me with. What males are within our lands?"

Distaste was evident in her daughter's response "Males. Really Mother? They are practically useless. Most can barely keep themselves fed."

Cat's whiskers quivered in irritation. Huntress dropped her head at the rebuke. "There are three relatively young males still in or near the valley. One is my litter mate."

Cat did not want young fools that did nothing but roar and strut about. She needed one who was nearly as cunning as she was. Cat knew exactly who she wanted to participate in her first game. "Where is the Dark One's lair?"

Cat could barely contain her mirth when her daughter hissed in disgust. Huntress' face looked like she had been offered day-old meat from a lesser hunter's kill. "What do you want that one for, Prime? He is old. His body has grown thick and he is slow. His dark pelt marks him as different, an outcast."

Cat chuffed this time. None of her daughters had ever questioned why their pelts were darker than her own. But she knew why. The Dark One was magnificent in battle. He had defeated every other male within a week's travel when her time had come upon her. Her need had grown each time he had been victorious. No other male had stood a chance against him. He had sired both of her litters and she expected he would sire more in time. Perhaps someday her daughters would figure it out. Or, perhaps not.

Cat dismissed her daughter's opinion. Huntress was too young to understand this game. Cat knew better than any in the Pride what the Dark One was capable of. If her daughter was lucky, she would learn to be a better judge of males before she felt the need to play the mating game.

Cat would have the Dark One's help whether Huntress approved of him or not. She would have his help even if he did not want to join her game. He was just a male; his mind would not be that hard to change. His cunning in battle would give her the edge she needed. With a soft growl of warning, Cat demanded, "Where will I find the Dark One?"

Huntress shifted nervously, realizing that she had crossed a line with her mother. "He lives in solitude up near the ice wall. There is a place towards the rising sun where the retreating ice left a number of large rocks. His lair is among those rocks."

Cat moved past her daughter to stand near the exit from the cave. "Tell your scouts to keep watch on the Ulug. They are to watch them, not hunt them. I want this prey to feel safe so they relax their guard." Cat moved out onto the ledge and curled up in a patch of sunlight. "For now, my belly is full and the sun is warm. I desire a nap. When I wake, I will deal with those who hunt our lands."

Huntress bowed her head and left. Cat knew her daughter was not happy about the game Cat had chosen to play. But this was one of the good things about being the Prime. She did not answer to anyone but herself.

Cat closed her eyes, but her other senses remained alert. Her fur grew warm as she lay there. Life was good. Cat dozed off.



The lush grass of the valley caressed her body as she ran towards the ice wall. Grass runners fled as she leapt over the many small streams that crossed the land. Other smaller creatures froze in place hoping to avoid

her notice, but she could smell their fear. Cat ignored them all. She had fed well that morning. This part of the valley was filled with prey. The future of the pride depended on keeping it that way. She would not allow the Ulug to destroy her domain.

Turning so the sun was at her back, Cat followed the ice wall. The ground was soft and moist here. The ice no longer gripped the land, but the chill of the ice melt was cold against her pads. The sharp scent of a predator filled her nose. The Dark One had marked this region as his own. In the distance, she could see the large boulders that formed his lair. Cat paused to study the area. Even she would not rush into the Dark One's lair unannounced.

The boulders the Dark One had chosen to lair among were huge. Each was easily twice the size of a full-grown hairy tusker bull. Those tall rocks were dark against the white of the ice wall. The scent of the Dark One was everywhere, but that was the only trace of him she could find. The area was eerily quiet. The only movement she detected was the shifting of grass in the light breeze.

Cat began to circle the rock formation until the breeze blew across her fur towards the rock, carrying her sweet scent to the Dark One's hiding place. He was a male. He would come to her. Cat paused and waited. The fur on her back rose as she sensed unseen eyes studying her. Still, she waited. The game of patience was one she had mastered long ago. Her heart beat faster as a shadow shifted high on the tallest rock. A powerful form, as dark as the rock on which he had lain, stood. Even for a male, he was magnificent. Their eyes met and she purred in victory, that soft sound calling him to her.

The Dark One dropped from his high perch to the grass below. Despite his size, he moved in near silence. Again, they both waited, but she refused to give him even the semblance of victory over her. With a soft grunt, he began a sensuous stalk towards her. She watched his approach remembering those times he had fought for her attention.

He paused just beyond the range of her spring. As she had known, he was no fool. The Dark One's golden eyes roamed across Cat's body. His interest left a warm feeling inside her, but there was no time for that particular game while the Ulug were on her land. So, she pretended indifference as she stepped closer.

He stopped again, just outside the reach of her claws. The Dark One drew her scent into his lungs. His eyes were puzzled, but still interested. He studied her for many heartbeats before he asked, "Why are you here, Prime? It is not your season yet. If it was your time, the wind would have carried that message to me long ago."

Cat could not help herself. Baiting him was not wise, but it would be fun. "And if it was my time Dark One?"

He did not preen like other males. She liked that. Instead, he chuffed his response, "You know what I would do, Prime. And none would gainsay me and live."

His confidence made Cat want to purr in satisfaction. Only the strongest and most cunning male would sire her litters. The Dark One had proven himself twice already. But now, she needed his strength to fight a different enemy. She wanted him beside her when she faced the Ulug. He would not battle them for the Pride. The Pride had sent him away long ago. But he might fight them if she could sting his pride.


Cat sat, turning her face from him as if he mattered little to her. "My hunters say that you are getting old and thick witted. Perhaps you are not the warrior you once were?"

The Dark One sat on his haunches looking bored with her insult. "They may think what they wish, Prime. It does not diminish me or what I can do. I am not a kit to be manipulated by such words. When your season comes again, then I will show you what I can do. So, I ask again. Why are you here, Prime?"

There might be more to the Dark One, she realized, than she had given him credit for. Her thinking had been less than clear when her need had been upon her. Would he respond to reason? She decided to give it a try. "The Ulug have claimed part of the Pride's hunting grounds. They must be taught a lesson."

The Dark One rose and began walking towards the rocks that formed his lair. His voice held a mixture of anger and regret as he growled softly, "The Pride discarded me long ago. I was barely old enough to hunt when I was sent away. An aberration is what they called me! Let the Pride solve its own problems. Or its Prime. Unless the Ulug come to my small domain, they are your problem, not mine."

Cat watched him strike proudly into his lair. Words seem to whisper on the wind. "I am sorry, Cat," was what she thought she heard. But she knew his pride would not let him say such words. Cat turned away from the setting sun and began to lope towards her next stop. She purred as she ran. He would not defend her lands, but he would defend his own. Males were so easy. The Dark One would serve her and the Pride. And then, perhaps, it would be time for the Dark One to return to the Pride.



The sun was now well above the hilltop where she lay. Two Ulug scouting parties had already left the main encampment to pillage the Pride lands. Below, the remaining two-legs scurried around like little bugs whose hive had been kicked over. To Cat's mind, while it was entertaining to watch, the confusion served no purpose. She would never understand why breaking camp was so difficult for them. But it was the Ulug way. Each sunrise, they ran about preparing to move. Then they would travel deeper into her domain before making camp once more. Ulug just were not good hunters.

Good or bad, they were finally getting close to the prey they sought. A day, three at the most, and their scouts would find the spore of the hairy tuskers. It was time to begin the series of games that she had worked out in her head. So many games entwined into one. This was one of the reasons she was so successful as Prime. A single opponent could be defeated with a little luck. To overcome multiple opponents at the same time took skill. Today, she would test herself against the Ulug, the tuskers, and even the Dark One. She would best them all before the sun rose again. She was Cat and this was the way she played the Great Game. This was what made life so much fun.

Cat watched as the last Ulug hunting party moved out. This group was headed for the ice wall. It would pass right below her hiding place. Cat chuffed softly. The Ulug did not know it yet, but they would go hungry this night. And, by midday, they would need a new hunting party.

Cat backed away from her vantage point. With the hilltop behind her, Cat moved swiftly through the tall grass. She must find a place to wait for the Ulug to come to her. This was a game from the ogre's world. The ambush game was part of a two-leg game that her ogre called war. Her kind did not play these games. The Pride only hunted for food, not for fun. She had

mastered the game anyway. She was Cat and she did not like to lose any games.

Putting herself along the path of the Ulug hunters was not hard. How hard could it be when they made so much noise as they moved through the tall grass? Often, they tripped and fell like young kits, their feet tangled in roots and stalks that any fool should see. It would have been funny if it was not so sad. At other times, they yelled to each other. Was there any prey in the valley that did not know they were hunting? Cat found it an easy task to travel alongside the Ulug, watching and studying them.

The first move of this game would be hers. She need only anger the Ulug with a quick win in the ambush game. That would get their attention. Once angered, they would play the game of chase without thinking about what they were doing. Prey that did not think were much easier to manipulate. But which of the Ulug should she choose to begin the game? Two of the hunters liked to range ahead of the pack. Those two spent more time chattering their strange tongue than they did searching for danger. Either of them would do.

Picking up speed, Cat was soon ahead of the hunting party. Unlike her prey, she moved through the tall grass without disturbing the stalks with her every step. Cat found a slight depression and settled in to wait for her prey to arrive. She felt their approach with the pads of her feet. They did not know how to walk softly as they hunted. The harsh clicks of the Ulug language told her they were very, very close. Then one of the two Ulug she had selected swept the grass aside with its long stick.

Before the Ulug's eyes had time to focus on her, Cat sprang. Her extended front paws struck the Ulug in the center of its chest. Even in armor, it was much lighter than she was. Her weight knocked it backwards. Its heel caught on a root and it toppled backwards. The Ulug landed hard on its back, slamming its head against the ground. Cat's front claws found no purchase on the slick armor. She began to slide across her prey until her rear claws sank deep into the meaty part of the Ulug's legs. Her slide halted, Cat raised one paw and struck at her prey's head. There was a satisfying crack and its head twisted far to one side. The Ulug stopped moving. It had not even had time to cry out.

Its mate, or the one she assumed was its mate, more than made for the dead Ulug's silence. The second Ulug cried out in what Cat assumed was fear or anger. It also raised its long stick into the air, turning the sharp

point in her direction. Cat did not hesitate, she leapt away. This time, there was no stealth in her movements. She bounded high over the grass as she ran towards the ice wall. She would follow the wall to the Dark One's lair. It would soon be time for him to play his unwilling part in her games.

Yells erupted behind her as she raced away from the Ulug. The hunting party left their dead companion where it lay in their hurry to catch her. The thrilling chase she had hoped for was a disappointment. She actually had to slow down to avoid losing her pursuers. How did a race that was so helpless survive in a world filled with predators? Cat had to work harder to keep the Ulug behind her than she would have to lose them forever.

The game of chase ruined, Cat did what she could to bring the Ulug to the next game. She moved out onto the shorter grass near the melting ice. She splashed through puddles leaving large prints for her trackers to follow. Cat even resorted to moving in a straight line so the Ulug would not grow confused. And despite all that, she still had to go slow so that they could keep up. The Hopper game had been more fun than this game was. Finally, the dark rocks of her destination came into view.

This was the tricky part of the game and definitely the game's only challenging part. She could not just run into the Dark One's lair with a pack of Ulug on her heels. She would not let anyone think she needed a male's help to defeat mere Ulug, especially not the Dark One himself. Nor could she appear to be helping him defend his own lair. She would not belittle him that way. Besides, she had no doubt who would be victorious in that brief battle. Then he would come to her, full of male pride, seeking her admiration. She could grant him a bit of what he desired for she would already have won her game against him.

All she had left to do was to get the Ulug to attack the Dark One's lair while she watched from a distance. There was nothing difficult in that. Not for her at least. Cat put on a burst of speed. Surely, even the Ulug should be able to figure out where she was heading. Cat ran straight towards the entrance to the Dark One's lair. When she could clearly see the mottled pattern in the rocks, she used the speed she had built up to leap far to her left. Cat landed in clump of yellowed grass and sank to her belly. Her part of this game was finished. All that remained was to watch and wait.

The Ulug lumbered into view long moments later. Their eyes were fixed on the rock formation before them. They never even noticed the deeper imprints of her feet where she had leapt to the side. Their sole focus was

on the opening between the two large rocks where they assumed she was hiding. She watched them push and shove as they charged ahead. Each wanted to be the first within the lair. Each wanted to be the one to claim her pelt. Cat felt a feline grin stretch her face as she considered the surprise that awaited them.

There was more shoving and a few barks of anger as they fought to get inside. Cat could only shake her head as, one by one, they pushed their way between the rocks. As the last one entered, a proud form rose from the same high rock where she had first seen the Dark One. A younger male would have roared out his challenge before dropping on the invaders. Such a fool would have found the sharp sticks raised and waiting for him. Her Dark One was not such a fool. He did not give them any warning before he fell on them from above. In fact, the only sound to reach her ears was the screams of the Ulug. They died quickly; their long sticks would be utterly useless within the confines of the lair.

It was almost disappointing how quickly the game finished. Her disappointment did not last for long though. The Dark One strode from his lair eyes searching for more Ulug. He found none. The sight of him standing there splattered with his enemies blood took her breath away. He was as magnificent today as he had been each time he had fought for her. Forgetting herself, Cat stood, taking two steps forward so he would see her.

The Dark One was standing before her in a heartbeat. She had not even seen him move. Cat refused to show her surprise. She examined him for injuries. The Ulug had failed to touch him with their weapons. Every drop of blood that marred his dark pelt was that of his enemies. She expected no less from the male who sired her litters. He was not her equal, but he was as close as a male could get.

There was a mix of nettle rage and humor in his voice as he remarked, "I assume that you have no idea how or why the Ulug decided to attack my lair."

Cat's only response was to chuff softly as she stalked to his side. Before he could react, she leaned in close to him, rubbing her neck against his shoulder and flank, marking him forever with her scent. Then she backed away watching as his eyes blinked in surprise.

The Dark One slowly shook his head. “The standing stones of my lair will never lose the stink of Ulug. Your Pride has cost me yet another home.”

Cat shook her head. “Perhaps it is time that you returned to the bluff. I believe there is a lair there that would suit you well.”

The Dark one grunted in disbelief. “The Pride will never accept me.”

Cat turned her back on him and began to walk once more along the ice wall. Her growl echoed from the ice wall as she told him and the entire valley, “The Prime decides what the Pride will and will not accept. Let them challenge me if they do not agree with my choice.” She glanced back one last time to see him standing there, staring at her in wonder.

Cat began to run for the place where the sun always set. The hairy tuskers lived there. It was time for them to play their part in her games. It was time for them to save themselves from the Ulug.

Chapter 3

The Great Games

The sun had trekked well across the sky by the time Cat entered the grazing ground of the hairy tuskers. The Herd lived on the far end of the long valley claimed by the Pride. For some unknowable reason, the tuskers preferred the higher ground where the grasses were short, the ground was drier, and the insufferable trees grew everywhere. Cat did not like trees. They were harder to get prey out of than a burrow was. Despite the claims of the Herd, leaves were not good to eat. They tasted worse than grass did.

The hairy tusker's choice of food and terrain made them excellent neighbors for the Pride. No matter how big or small either group was, there was no competition for space or food. The two groups had lived in peace for as long as there had been a Herd or a Pride. Now the Ulug had come to hunt their lands. They would join forces against a common foe. At least, that was Cat's plan. She doubted the female known as the Matriarch would share Cat's view on the matter. Cat had a plan and it was a very good game indeed.

Shadows were growing long by the time Cat caught a whiff of a tusker. No, Cat quickly realized, there were two tuskers. A female and her calf. That would make the situation a bit more tense, but Cat did not have time to circle around to find a different tusker to speak with. Cat moved to the edge of a clearing where she could see both tuskers clearly. Cat considered her options and then coughed to announce her presence.

The ground shook as the calf bolted for the trees on the far side of the clearing. The female moved protectively between her young and Cat. Long, sharp tusks wove a pattern of death as the female warned Cat away from the fleeing calf. Cat sat back on her haunches and licked the fur on her shoulder. She was not here to hunt after all. Cat's indifference seemed to confuse the female tusker.

When the calf had disappeared from sight, the female calmed down, but only a little. She continued to swing her tusks from side to side as she asked, "Why are you here, She who is Prime of the Pride? This land is claimed by the Mother of All and her Herd."

Cat gave her shoulder one last lick, refusing to be intimidated by the cow that towered over her. In a calm voice, she replied, "I bring news of a threat to the Herd. I would speak to the bull known as Ride."

The female tusker considered her request. "That name does not exist among us. She who is Matriarch and Mother of All has selected him as her Mate. With that honor, he is now known simply as Consort."

Cat feigned indifference to the desires of the Matriarch. The ogre called the bull Ride and that was all that mattered to her, "I wish to speak to her Mate so that I can warn him that predators come to hunt the Herd."

The female began to back away from Cat, moving slowly along the path that the calf had taken. Her long snake-like trunk blatted in what could only be laughter. "Such matters are far beyond the understanding of a mere bull, even the Mother of All's consort. To She that rules us will I bring your tidings. Their merit, She will decide." The female began to turn away, but paused for one last warning, "Here you must remain, Prime. To further invade the Mother of All's domain would not be wise."

Cat watched the female tusker disappear. Cat could only shake her head at the madness of it all. She had not believed there could be anything worse than Pride politics. Apparently, things were even worse in the Herd. Was this why the bull named Ride spent so much time in the ogre's world? Cat shuddered at the thought of what it must be like for him as consort to the Matriarch. On the bright side, she was about to offer him a game of unparalleled fun.

With nothing better to do, Cat dozed as she waited for the Herd and its Mother of All to decide if they would listen to her or not. Cat had been moving constantly for two days now. Even a little sleep would do her

good. Cat dreamed about hunting on the high plain. She had finally run a magnificent reindeer stag to the limit of its endurance. The kill and the game were hers. Then the ground began to shake. The smoking peak exploded, sending fire and flaming rock everywhere. The ground rumbled and shook beneath her feet...

Cat snapped out of her doze when a large shadow took away the warmth of the sun. She looked up to see a gigantic tusker, its shaggy form filling her vision. Its curved tusks that were longer than she was at full stretch. Its dangerous trunk was close enough to grab her. Cat was not happy that it had gotten so close without her noticing. Nothing that big was supposed to move so quietly. Cat rose to a sitting position, showing no surprise at the behemoth looming over her.

The bull's long trunk curled around a cluster of grass, tearing it off just above the ground. "I see you One who is Cat." The long snake-like trunk twisted around and shoved the grass into Ride's mouth.

Cat realized again how much she hated talking to tuskers. The formality of their words made her want to scream. The way their words twisted and ran backwards made her brain hurt. Ride did not speak this way to the ogre. Why was he tormenting her this way? Then cat noticed who stood behind him and she understood. One followed the rules when the Mother of All was about.

Cat decided to play nice. She did not want to lose the game just because she angered the old cow. If she lost her temper, they would not let her speak to Ride again. With only a hint of sarcasm, Cat replied, "It would be difficult not to see you too great bull of the Herd."

The long trunk stretched in her direction. Cat was prepared to swat at it, but it only sniffed her and withdrew. "The scent of the ogre named Shorty is fresh on you. Hidden his scent is beneath the blood from an ancient Herd enemy. What tale do you bring to the ears of the Mother of All and her humble servant?"

Cat was about to answer when another voice came from behind Ride. This one was female. "For what reason does the ruler of the Pride come to the Mother of All without warning? Great unrest you have caused within the Herd."

Witty responses flowed through Cat's mind. She discarded them, one after another. She was the Prime and she would not be drawn into a kit-like

squabble. Ride, as if realizing that he had missed his chance to keep the peace between the two dominate females, stepped back. Standing behind him was the Matriarch of the Herd. Female tuskers were normally much smaller than the bulls. The Matriarch was far from normal. She stood almost as tall as Ride and he was the largest bull that Cat had ever heard of.

Cat had to prevent the conversation from becoming a battle for dominance between the Prime and the Matriarch. If she did not, her game would end before it started. The Herd and the Pride might also cease to exist. And, Cat admitted to herself, because the thought of a long conversation with the Matriarch was just too painful to consider. But what was more important to the Mother of All than her pride? Cat swallowed her grin and replied, "The warning I bring is too important to trust to one of lesser rank than the Prime herself. The safety of the Herd and its young is at stake, so I came as quickly as I could."

The Matriarch's ears twitched and her long trunk rose into the air. "Few are those foolish enough to anger the Herd. Fewer still have the power to harm even the least among the Herd. Our place is here where our enemies are few. Mistaken, the Prime must be." The Matriarch paused for a moment and then her eyes lit up with humor. "Or, perhaps, one among your Pride told a tale to make the Prime look foolish?"

Knowing that the Matriarch was trying to make her angry did not make this game any easier. Cat's response to the old cow's insinuations was much sharper than it should have been, "Ulug! The Ulug have come to slaughter your young!"

The Matriarch glared down at Cat. It was plain to see that she distrusted that warning. The Matriarch actually stomped one of her massive feet, protesting loudly, "Impossible! The Ulug were chased from this land generations ago. They crossed the salt sea, never to return."

Cat struggled not to stalk away and leave the Mother of All to watch her children die. Cat could always take the Pride up onto the high plain. Better that than to put up with such insolence. But before she could turn her back, Ride spoke in support of Cat.

"Take her scent, Mother of All," he urged. "One of the Ulug, the Prime has slain this day. The scent of its blood is strong on the Prime."

Cat again remained still as one of the dangerous hairy tusker trunks reached for her. The first pass of that appendage was quick, more an obligation than a willingness to believe Cat. Then the Matriarch's trunk came back giving Cat a more thorough examination. The anger in the female's eyes burned brighter, but this time it was not aimed at Cat.

The Matriarch turned her ponderous form and began to walk away. "A Council the Herd must hold. An answer we will give you, Prime, when we have decided on a course of action." The Matriarch moved into the trees, her trunk held high in the air. A trumpeting noise rang out, calling the females of the Herd to a council of war.

When she was gone from view, he asked, "She who is Cat, is there a reason why The Pride has not slain the Ulug who walk your valley?"

The tension that had been building within Cat fell away as she realized she had beaten the stubborn leader of the Herd. It had been close. Now it was time to set the hairy tuskers on the path that Cat had chosen for them. "One must be able to reach the Ulug to kill them. There are many Ulug and each carries a long, sharp stick."

Ride nodded in understanding. He had seen such weapons in that other world where he and Cat often went. "If the Herd just charges the Ulug, it will die."

"As would the Pride," Cat agreed.

Ride motioned with his trunk making a questioning gesture. "Did She who considers all in life to be a game come without a plan? Or does the Prime know how to defeat this enemy?"

Cat gave him her most predatory grin. "And if I do have a game in mind to play? What then, Ride of the Hairy Tuskers?"

Ride shook his head. "First, that name displeases the Mother of All. Among the Herd, I am simply the consort. In this world, my role is simply service to the Mother of All."

Cat played along with his game of words, wondering where it was headed. "Then of what use are you to me, consort?"

The tusker she knew as Ride peered down at her from the consort's eyes. "If I knew this plan of yours, it is possible that the Mother of All might

come up with a similar plan. The Mother of All is more likely to agree to a plan she thought up on her own.”

Cat chuffed for only a moment before she began to explain, “What neither can do alone, Pride and Herd can accomplish together. But it must be this night while the Ulug are confused.” At the consort’s curious look, Cat explained, “The Ulug had a disappointing day. They did not do well at the Great Game.”

Cat gave him the essentials of the game. She may have forgotten to mention that she was the only member of the Pride that was playing this particular game, but that really was not information that he or the Matriarch needed to know. Cat watched the consort disappear into the trees without a sound. For the second time that day, Cat told herself that nothing that big should be as silent as the bull apparently was.



The night came alive with flickering stars and dancing tendrils of the mist between worlds. This view had no equal on any of the worlds that Cat had visited. As much as she enjoyed the games she played at the ogre’s side, this view would always bring her back here where she belonged. This would always be home.

Thoughts of traveling reminded her that the night was running out on her plan. The Herd had still not decided to join her game. A stick snapped somewhere in the semi-darkness. Or had they decided? Cat stared at the trees across the way to see an amused expression on the face of a tusker bull. Stepping on the fallen branch had been intentional. Ride, not the consort, stood with one foreleg raised over a downed branch. The young bull liked games as much as she did.

“Well?” Cat asked, knowing the answer but wanting to hear it anyway.

Ride ambled to her side. “A gathering of the Herd has been called by the Mother of All. She Who Rules has formulated a brilliant plan.”

“Really?!” Cat replied with all the sarcasm she could muster. “And what is this plan?”

With a self-satisfied look, Ride explained, “The consort of the Mother of All is to eliminate one of the sentry positions around the main Ulug camp. The Mother of All has decided to allow the Pride to assist me in this.”

Cat could not help herself, she chuffed at the absurdity of it all. “It’s a good thing then that one of us knows where we are going.”

Cat led the way into the darkness, the hairy tusker moving swiftly by her side. Cat steered a course by the light of the mist that took them well around the Dark One’s lair. His part in the game was over unless things went terribly wrong. And how could that happen? It was Cat’s plan whether the Matriarch realized it or not.

Prime and consort, Cat and Ride, they ran through the night until fingers of fire rose up from the land, dimming the light of stars and the mist above. Both stopped to stare at the force arrayed against them. Six individual fires, equally spaced from each other, ringed the main Ulug encampment. Those were the sentries. The main camp blazed with so many fires that they seemed to merge into a single giant bonfire. The dark forms of Ulug warriors danced between the flames. It was there that the Herd must go.

That meant getting past the sentries. Those posts were far enough apart that Cat could easily have led the whole Pride into the Ulug camp. But to what purpose? The Ulug outnumbered the Pride. The Pride could never win that game. A tusker stampede though was another game altogether. But the sentries were close enough to each other that the Herd would never make it into the interior without alerting the Ulug with their long, sharp sticks. This was the reason Cat was here. She would unlock the Ulug’s defenses.

Ride’s massive ears lifted. He appeared to concentrate on something behind them. Cat watched him expectantly. “The Herd is coming. Time it is, She who is Cat, for you to tell me this part of your plan.”

Cat did not take her eyes off the sentry post she had selected. The one just to her left would be the Herd’s path into the Ulug camp. Only one of the two Ulug at that post was even looking into the darkness. She took a step forward before answering, “The plan is simple. I hunt.”

Cat felt a gentle touch on her back. She spun to slap away the bull’s long trunk, but Ride had already withdrawn it. His voice was soft as he replied, “Alone is not the Herd way. This does not seem to be a good plan.”

Cat hissed in anger at his words. “I am the Prime. I am no kit learning how to take prey.”

The bull did not argue with her. He simply asked, “Then what purpose do I serve here?”

Cat glared up at him. “When I have taken the prey, you may lead the Herd into the Ulug camp.”

The consort was suddenly standing there in the darkness. “Never will a bull be allowed to lead the Herd. The Mother of All, will lead the charge as is her duty and her right. She and the other females will pass through the Ulug encampment first, trampling all in their path.”

Cat paused. She understood the relationship between males and females. Or she thought she did. Females in the Pride were the superior hunters. Their role in the Pride had been decided long before a Pride even existed. She had seen Ride fight in the ogre’s world. She would no more keep him out of a battle than she would the Dark One. The Herd was even stranger than Cat had imagined. It was mostly curiosity that made her ask. “I know you Ride. Why do the bulls not fight as well?”

There was a long pause as Ride seemed to consider her question. “The Shes of the Herd understand working in unison. Cooperation is a useful skill when raising our young.” He swung his head from side to side, his deadly tusks cutting a dangerous arc through the space between them. “Bull do not play well together. It is not our way.”

Understanding came to Cat. Perhaps the Herd was not so different after all.

Ride’s voice grew eager as he continued, “The bulls will enter after the Herd has passed through the Ulug ranks. Then the Ulug shall beg for mercy. They will not find any once the rage takes its hold on us.”

This was a problem Cat had not anticipated. “Some Ulug must escape or their tribe will not learn the folly of hunting our lands.”

Ride shook his head. “The Mother of All must see to that. I am just a bull and will do what bulls do. No Ulug shall walk away from me.” His long trunk pointed towards the sentry fires. “Go, She who is Cat, and do what you must do.”

Cat realized it was futile to argue with him. She could see the anger rising in him already. She slipped into the darkness, heading towards her chosen prey.

Cat began her stalk. This game came as naturally to her as breathing. A step, shift her weight forward, bring a rear foot forward, and breathe. Each movement flowed from the last. Her eyes remained slitted as she watched the enemy from the corner of her eye. She would not allow the light of the fire or the mist above to reflect from her eyes. Nothing must betray her presence to her prey. The Ulug made it almost easy. She did not need to worry about the wind. Ulug did not use their noses. The fire snapped and crackled. This prey would not hear the soft sound of grasses rubbing against her fur. Best of all, the light of their fire blinded them to the darkness. Ulug were, as her ogre liked to say, “No bery smart.”



The rational part of Cat slowly rose back to the surface of her mind. Instinct honed over countless hunts had taken over as she crept across the open space between Ride and the outer ring of sentries. Reaching that ring, she had become a part of the shadows as she slipped between two of the fires that marked the Ulug’s outer defenses. To come this far had required great skill, but nothing compared to the next phase of the hunt.

It was time to demonstrate to the uncaring cosmos above why she was the ultimate predator. With an army of enemies at her back, she needed to sneak up on the alert guards posted in front of her. Well, maybe not so alert, Cat admitted. They were only Ulug after all.

Passing between her enemies was much easier than it should have been, even for her. Cat remained unnoticed as she worked her way behind the sentry post. Even the unexpected arrival of a third Ulug warrior had not disrupted her plan. The extra guard, an unseeing fool, had come within reach of her claws without noticing her. She could have killed him then, but she had not been in range of the other two sentries yet. She could be patient. She was Cat and this was her hunt.

Now she lay alongside one of the many rocks the retreating ice had left scattered across the valley. The rock was cold. It sucked the warmth from her muscles, making them stiff. But in the night, the rock was nearly the same color as her pelt. It provided a perfect place to observe her prey. The Ulug should have noticed that the rock had grown larger, but they didn’t. As for the cold stone, she would not allow it to affect her. She was Cat.

The three Ulug became the center of her world. They were more than close enough to reach in a single bound. The challenge was to eliminate all three

of them before any of them could raise an alarm. The main Ulug camp must not suspect what was coming for them. Cat studied her prey. Even for her, three quick kills would be challenging. Cat liked challenges.

The closest Ulug crouched with its armored back to her. More shiny metal covered its thick head. Even her claws did not penetrate metal easily. The Ulug lowered its head. What was it doing? Cat drew the night air into her lungs. The smell of burnt meat assailed her nose. Her nose twitched in disgust as the smell. She would never understand why two-legs insisted on ruining their meat by putting it in fire. Fire burned away all of the juices that gave the meat its flavor. Perhaps someday two-legs would be more civilized, but Cat doubted it.

The Ulug's head bent even lower. She could hear it feeding on the vile meat it had ruined. But as its head bent low for each bite, a gap appeared between its armor and the metal on its head. Cat could clearly see its skinny neck in that gap. One slash of her paw would most likely shatter its spine. This Ulug would die first, the taste of its ruined meal still on its tongue.

The second Ulug sat on the far side of their fire. It leaned against another rock, facing her. It did not move. Was it already dead? Ignoring the feeding sounds of the first Ulug, Cat listened carefully for any sign of life. Between the other Ulug's bites, she heard the rhythmic sound its deep breathing. Then she saw its lips flutter as it rumbled softly. This Ulug slept. She would let this one live the longest.

Now she turned her attention to the last Ulug. It posed the greatest danger. It had a weapon in hand. The long stick it gripped would be almost useless once Cat got in close to it. By the time it brought the stick's sharp point around, Cat's own claws should have done their work. She would spring from the first Ulug to this one's back. From there, she could drop to the ground and deal with the sleeping sentry. One, two, three and the game would be won.

The time for thinking was done. The time for doing was upon her. Cat drew in a deep, cleansing breath and released it. She took another breath as her muscles tightened. Cat thrust against the cold stone with her front paws, adjusting her angle. Then her rear legs uncoiled and she was soaring through the darkness. She was halfway to her prey when the Ulug lowered its head for another bite.

Her front paws hit the metal covering the Ulug's head at the same instant. The Ulug's head twisted to the side as her weight drove its skull towards the ground. The crack of its neck was loud to Cat's sensitive ears. There would be no need for a slash to sever its spine. The Ulug was dead on impact. Her rear legs landed on the Ulug's armor back half a heartbeat later. Her extended claws slid down the armor until they reached a wide strip of leather at the Ulug's waist. To the next prey, Cat's instincts cried out.

Her muscles, still cold from the rock she had lain against, were slow to react. Cat leapt towards the standing Ulug. Her prey, more alert than she would have expected was already turning towards her. It did not matter though. It would be easier to rip out its throat from the front than from behind. Cat's front claws extended as she reached for the Ulug.

Time slowed as Cat flew towards her prey. So many things seemed to happen between one heartbeat and the next. She saw it bring its long stick around. It would do the Ulug no good, she was already too close for it to use the sharp pointy end of the stick. But this prey was tricky. With hands spread far apart, the Ulug thrust the stick out in her direction, its shaft seeming to block the way to the vulnerable places not protected by the Ulug's armor.

Time snapped back to normal without any warning. The round shaft of the long stick caught Cat in the chest. With a loud grunt, the breath exploded from her lungs. Her deadly front claws fell well short of the Ulug's fear-filled face. Despite its quick reactions, the Ulug warrior was not prepared for something Cat's size to land on it. The Ulug went over backwards with Cat coming down on top of it. While Cat fought to draw in a badly needed breath, the battle instincts that made her the Prime, took over.

Cat's rear legs curled under and around the stick. Those powerful legs had the reach that her front claws did not. Cat reached for the Ulug's eyes. She felt her claws sink deep into the Ulug's flesh as she raked downward. What had been intended as a cry of alarm came out as a wet gurgle. Cat spun from the warrior who had exceed her expectations. There was one Ulug left to be dealt with before the battle was done.

A partial breath slipped into her lungs, helping her to push away the blackness that threaten to consume her. Cat looked at the rock, but the sleeping Ulug no longer leaned against it. Instead, her prey stood on the far side of the rock. It would have been an easy leap and a quicker kill except

for the two-leg thing that the Ulug held in its hands. Her ogre had given that weapon a name. He called it a crossbow and it spit death in the form of a tiny stick. The crossbow was already loaded and the Ulug was raising it in her direction. Even the Prime could not beat that little stick once it was in flight. Cat wondered if she had somehow miscalculated.

Time slowed again as the weapon came to bear on her. Strangely, the stars and the glowing mist behind the Ulug went out. Darkness outlined the death meant for her. Something long and incredibly flexible reached over the Ulug's shoulder. The Ulug's eyes went wide with shock as that serpentine form wrapped itself around the Ulug's neck, lifting him from the ground and shaking him like a kit might shake a field mouse. For the second time that night, Cat heard the crack of neckbones breaking in the silence.

Cat drew another breath as the universe returned to normal. The shadow that had taken away the stars and the mist resolved into the form of a huge hairy tusker bull. Ride dropped the Ulug to the ground and then stepped on it, crushing its lifeless form beneath one foreleg. She had not heard his approach, again. Cat hated that. He was only a male. And now he would think he had saved her.

Cat looked up into Ride's face, trying to think of something witty to say that would salvage her pride. She shivered as she saw the edge of madness in his oversized eyes. Would he even remember saving her when this was done? She took a step backwards as Ride raised a gore covered foot and smashed it down on the dead Ulug a second time. The tusker's voice was barely above a whisper as he spoke, "Go... Cat... Mother... Comes..."

The ground began to vibrate as Cat sprinted into the darkness. This was not the place to be. She could only hope that the Ulug would not notice the ground moving beneath their feet. Or if they did notice, it would be too late.

A part of Cat wanted to find a place to watch her victory in the Great Game she had played. But the sane part of her remembered the look in Ride's eyes as he punished the dead Ulug. Some things were better not seen. She slowed as she headed towards her lair, the stars and the mist guiding her steps. She had won! She had played flawlessly.

Then she remembered the Ulug pointing its weapon at her. Had she really miscalculated? No, she was Cat. She did not make mistakes. Especially not

big ones. She remembered Ride lifting the Ulug into the air and shaking the Ulug. The sound of the Ulug's neck breaking echoed in her memory. Of course she had not made a mistake. She had allowed the big bull to accompany her after all. Rides's participation in the game was just another of her many great decisions.

Cat slowed her run to a walk as she considered all that she had accomplished this night. Then she began to compose the tale she would sing to the Pride of her victory in the Great Game.