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The First Hunter

written by

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The First Hunter

By

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Barrington Stoke teen

Chapter 1

Prints in the Dew

My name is Tan. I grab the meat from the big cats and snatch it up. Claws and fangs don’t stop me. They call me Tan the Snatcher. I’m fast.

Our place under the cliff is deep and dry. We sleep here, behind our fire. Dip hunts with me. He has the fire that scares off the cats. He scares them off their kills, so then I can snatch the meat. I’m fast, but he’s brave.

I’m the Snatcher. Dip is the Brand-man. The stick with the fire is called a brand. Dip waves the brand to scare the cats.

So that’s Dip and me. Then there’s Gak and Lom who carry the meat home and Sil and Mab who are the mothers. Dol is the Old One and there are four Little ones. Last of all is

Wid, the Fool. We all live togther in our place under the cliff.

Wid the Fool looks after the Little Ones so that Sil and Mab can hunt for mice and frogs, eggs and honey. Wid’s head is full of feathers and fur but he’s my friend. Dol is Mother to us both.

It is morning. The grass is wet, but the sun is coming. I get up from under the cliff and look downhill to the grass-land. In the night we heard a lion kill a buck. Now the lion has that meat, his kill. It’s watching the meat somewhere safe and secret. Maybe under a clump of trees. I can’t see the kill but my nose can smell it.

“Tan.” Dip calls to me. He comes out from under the cliff and stretches. “Are you ready?”

I nod. “Ready and hungry, Dip. Is Gak awake?”

“He’s coming now. Have you got your knife?”

“Of course.” I show him the sharp blade of flint. “And you – have you got your fire stick – the brand?”

Dip stoops and pulls a stick from the fire. It’s still hot. I can see its smoke. “Right here,” Dip says, and holds the smoking stick up high.

A Little One gets up too and comes over to us. His name is Bub. He rubs his eyes. “Can I come with you, Tan? I’m fast and strong.”

“Fast *and* strong,” I laugh. “You’ll be a Brand-man *and* a Snatcher, Bub.” I muss his hair. “But not today, eh? One more winter, then we’ll see.”

Bub goes grumbling back to the shelter as Gak comes out. The three of us start downhill, leaving bare-foot prints in the dew.

The grass is long and yellow, like the lion. He's hard to see. "There." I point. "In the tree-shadow." I whisper. Dip nods. "I see him. I see his kill too, four steps to his left. It's a zebra." The kill has stripes, like the shadow.

Dip bends down and pulls up some long dry grass. Gak and I watch the lion, who is sleeping, full of meat. Dip winds the grass round and round the smoking stick to make his brand. "Ready?" he whispers. I nod. Gak nods.

Dip puts his mouth near to the brand and blows. The stick glows. The grass crackles. Flames leap. Dip runs at the lion. He screams and waves the brand over his head. The lion wakes, lifts his head and snarls. His mane is like the flames. The lion stands, ready to charge, but then he sees the fire. He backs off, growling. Stands over his kill.

Dip is brave, he doesn’t stop. He runs at the great cat. The stick is high over his head and ablaze with fire. The lion roars. This is the worst part. Sometimes a lion will charge the fire, kill the Brandman with one slash of its terrible claws. Most times it will turn and bound away, but not very far.

This cat turns, trots into thorn bush and looks back at us. It wants the kill. Dip follows the lion to drive it a little farther away. Now it’s my turn. I run to the zebra, slash open its skin with my knife and cut deep. “Quick!” warns Dip, “soon he’ll charge the flames.”

I’m working as fast as I can. Zebra flesh is tough, *stringy*. The meat won’t come away. Then Gak is beside me. He grips the hoof and pulls. He’s strong - he tears the leg from the zebra’s body, heaves it onto his back and trots away. It’s as if it’s the leg of a mouse – not the heavy leg of a zebra.

“All clear, Dip!” I leap up, run after Gak the Carrier. I don’t look back, but I know Dip will back off slowly. He’ll keep on waving his brand until he’s with us. And when the lion sees what’s left of the kill, still under the trees, it will lose interest in Dip. If he’s lucky. Brandmen need luck and courage. Dip has both.

Gak walks uphill like a man carrying nothing. The others have seen him coming, seen the meat, seen Dip and me and no lion. They dance in front of the cliff where we can see them. They’re laughing and singing. We’re all hungry, our mouths water as we think of the feast we’ll have.

This time, it’s only the zebra that’s died.Chapter 2