

Return of the Lion People

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For those who have been willing to sacrifice
their lives that others might live in peace

Chapter 1

Like so many recent hunts, this one had been more difficult than in times past. The people of the Wolf Clan had searched for the herd of mammoths for days. Some of the hunters wanted to give up and go home. The terrain was rugged, they were far from their village, and the weather was miserable and rainy. A few of them grumbled because the mammoth herds were becoming smaller than ever.

The animals they hunted were members of the elephant family. At the shoulder, they were more than twice the height of a grown man. They had a powerful trunk and long, curved tusks. These animals were able to withstand cold weather because of their fur and a thick layer of body fat. Like many other plant-eating animals, mammoths spent most of their time foraging for food.

“Look up on the ridge,” said Tulio. “Griffo seems to have found the mammoths.”

Without making a sound, the boy at the top of the ridge gestured to the other hunters. He had spotted the mammoths, and they should come to him. He did not shout for fear of scaring the great beasts.

The older men led the group, which included several boys, a girl, and two wolves. Maddia and her brother, Tulio, followed behind the others with the wolves, Nasha and Albo. Maddia had found Nasha, the gray wolf, as a pup. A year later, they had tamed Albo with the help of Nasha. Albo had somehow become separated from his pack and was wandering alone. The two wolves were now part

of their clan, as were the puppies that had been born to them not long ago.

When they got to Griffio, the group was careful to speak quietly and remain hidden from the mammoths. They did not want to frighten the herd after working so hard to find them. The mammoths had been grazing in the valley and were now on their way toward an open, grassy plain.

“They are just leaving the valley,” whispered Griffio. “And look at the last mammoth. It has been wounded, perhaps in a fight with another male.”

The trailing mammoth in the herd was clearly injured. It was limping on one of its front legs where there was a gash. A second puncture wound was on its shoulder. These were probably caused by the tusks of another mammoth, possibly the dominant animal. Mammoths sometimes fought for the leadership of the herd, and wounds of this kind were not unknown. The mammoth’s wounds would probably heal over time, but while they did, it was more likely to be attacked by a pack of wolves or a group of humans.

Baratho, the clan leader, described the plan. Maddia and Nasha, along with two of the men, would get between the injured mammoth and the rest of the herd. They would make a commotion and hope that the herd would continue moving out of the valley and that the lone mammoth would retreat backward. Once it was separated from the herd, the hunters could attack with spears and rocks thrown from the sides of the valley. This strategy had evolved over many years and was surprisingly effective. Although this group assault on the mammoth was dangerous, it was less risky than any other method the clan had developed.

“What about Albo and me?” asked Tulio. The boy, who was almost as big as most of the men, felt a little left out of the plan.

Baratho smiled and put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I would like you and the white wolf to stay here to help out where it is necessary. If anything goes wrong in trying to separate the mammoth from the herd, we will have to be rescued. You two must serve as our reserve and be ready to move instantly. We are all depending on you. If we are in trouble, you will have to distract the mammoth and give us an opportunity to escape.”

The answer was satisfactory, at least to the boy. The white wolf would much rather have been involved in the action. While the others moved into position, Tulio and Albo waited in a place that gave them easy access to either group of hunters. Albo was so eager to join the pursuit that Tulio had to sit beside him with his arm around the wolf’s neck. “Be patient, my friend,” he said to the wolf. “Our time will come.”

Maddia and Nasha, along with two hunters, came down from the ridge. They moved quietly from rock to rock in order to stay out of sight. When they reached the valley floor, they hid in a clump of bushes growing among some large boulders. Even the most alert animals would have trouble noticing them.

The rest of the hunters worked their way behind the mammoth. They found a spot where they could descend from the ridge quickly. Holding their position, they waited for the right time to attack.

Baratho gestured to Maddia and the others near the mouth of the valley, and they burst out of their hiding

place. They made as much noise as they could, hoping that the herd of mammoths would move in one direction and the lagging animal in another. Nasha chased the fleeing herd for a short distance, but once Maddia was sure they were moving off, she called the wolf, which bounded to the girl's side. The mammoth turned and shuffled back into the valley.

The hunters on the ridge moved down swiftly. One after another, they came as near to the mammoth as they could and threw their spears, hoping to add to the mammoth's injuries. Zibio managed to get close enough to run his spear into the side of the mammoth. It proved to be serious, and the mammoth became wobbly on its feet.

As the mammoth stumbled, the hunters who had been with Maddia ran up and stabbed it with their spears. Maddia stayed back, as she had been told, and kept Nasha away from the action. The two of them would only have added to the confusion as the hunters tried to finish off the mammoth. They also had to be prepared if the other animals in the herd changed direction.

By now, the mammoth had rolled onto its side and was dying. The hunt had gone better than anyone could have wished for, and none of them had been hurt. The meat from the mammoth would feed their tribe for many days. The tusks, skin, bones, and other body parts would be used by the clan. Nothing of the mammoth would be wasted.

Nevertheless, all of the hunters had mixed feelings. The mammoth was a beautiful beast that did not threaten humans, and nothing was as imposing as a mammoth herd on the move. The people of the clan thought that all living things had a special place in nature, and they only killed for

food or to protect their lives. After a successful hunt, they would give thanks for the food they received and show their respect for the animal that sustained them.

Baratho turned to signal Tulio to come down from the ridge. The boy and the wolf bounded down, happy to be with the others. Like Maddia, Tulio held Albo back from the activity near the mammoth.

All the hunters had used their spears to bring the mammoth down. The spears were now stuck in the mammoth, and it was too dangerous to try to retrieve them.

“Maddia, let me have your spear,” said Baratho. He repeated his request to Tulio.

Knowing what he had in mind, they handed their spears to Baratho, who in turn, passed one to Zibio, the father of Maddia and Tulio. With the mammoth on the ground, they could drive the spears into the heart or lungs and end the animal’s life.

The clan leader and his friend approached the mammoth carefully. Together, they lunged at it, driving their spears as deeply into the animal as they could. They turned and ran from the animal as it passed through its death throes to the stillness of its end.

When the mammoth stopped moving, the hunters advanced cautiously. One at a time, they pulled their spears from the lifeless body. They gathered around the animal and tapped the butt ends of their spears on the ground. As a group, all of them chanted the ancient words of celebration and gratitude to the mammoth for all it would offer them through its passing. They honored the spirit of the animal as it left this world.

Moving the parts of the animal back to camp was hard work and would take two days. The hunters would carry as much as they could back to camp today. Tomorrow, they would return with others from the clan and get the rest of the animal. Some of the flesh would be eaten by animals in the night. There was little they could do about that. They could post guards and make a fire, but the threat of enemies and animals made that unrealistic.

“Cut the biggest pieces of meat,” Baratho told Tulio and Lakus, his younger brother. “Leave the skin attached, and try to avoid bones. We shall put the meat on spears so it can be carried by two people on their shoulders. The skin is stronger than the meat and will help to keep it on the spear.”

Turning to Zibio and Griffio, he said, “Take the tusks first. They are very useful, and we should not leave them here tonight. If they prove to be too heavy to be brought all the way to camp, we can hide them on the way.”

Baratho oversaw the butchering. Tulio and Lakus had been on many hunts. This was the first time they had been asked to remove the meat. The clan leader showed the boys where the best pieces of meat were. He demonstrated how to cut the meat so that a spear could be passed through the skin. This would allow two or more pieces of meat to be hung from a spear. A pair of hunters could then lug the meat on their shoulders.

“Maddia, I think the wolves deserve a treat,” suggested Baratho. He hacked off two pieces of meat and handed them to the girl.

The wolves were standing a short distance from the mammoth. They were eager to dine on the carcass, but they were obedient to Maddia, who had told them to stay where they were. As she walked to them with the meat, they knew that it was for them. They wagged their tails in anticipation. When she gave the meat to them, they ate in distinctive ways that reflected their personalities.

Albo, the male, had been adopted as an older wolf. He took the meat at once, walked a few paces away, and ate it ravenously. Nasha had been raised from a pup by Maddia. She sniffed the meat, licked Maddia's hand, and took it gently. She looked at Maddia as if she would be willing to share the meat. Maddia petted her head and sat beside the wolf. Nasha understood that there was no need for her to share the meat, and she began eating.

When all was ready, Baratho led the group back to the village. He and Zibio started out in the lead. Each of them would alternate with one of the others who was bearing a heavy load, allowing the carrier to serve as the advance guard. By rotating the tasks, no one was overly burdened, and a fresh guard was always at the front of the group.

In the rear were Maddia, Tulio, and the wolves. They carried nothing because they had to control the wolves and be on the lookout for danger. The back of the group was the most likely place that an enemy or animal would attack. The wolves, because of their nature, would be able to detect a threat before the humans.

Fortunately, on this day, there was no danger. The group arrived at the camp late in the afternoon. Some of the meat was cooked for the feast that night. Extra meat would

be used for the meals tomorrow. The remaining meat was impaled on spears outside of camp so animals would not get it. The meat would be cut into strips, dried, and smoked to preserve the meat for the future.

Everyone slept peacefully that night, content with a successful hunt. They were looking forward to the morning, when they would retrieve the rest of the mammoth. No one had any idea how eventful the next day would be.

Chapter 2

Three shadowy figures knelt among the boulders at the side of the valley. They huddled together to stay warm because the morning air was cool. The sky was becoming brighter as evening slipped away.

When the sun rose above the hills that surrounded them, they looked carefully in every direction. Feeling confident they were safe, they trotted toward the slain mammoth on the ground in the middle of the valley. Using stone hand tools, they cut off pieces of meat and ate it raw. The three of them were near starvation and desperately needed food. Moreover, they knew that starting a fire might attract unwanted attention.

The woman and two girls worked quickly. After eating their fill, they took as much meat as they thought they could carry. The mammoth would provide them with food for several days. They did not know when they would find meat again.

“Let me show you how to cut the skin,” said Tali, the older of the girls. She slid her tool between the skin and the meat. They separated easily because her blade, made of the black stone called obsidian, had an unbelievably sharp edge. Tali cut the piece of hide off and then repeated the process two more times. These pieces of skin would let them carry the meat.

The woman worked silently, cutting strips of meat from the carcass. She looked at the pieces of skin that Tali held and smiled. Her daughter had not only learned well how to use the knife, but she was teaching her younger sister, Dani.

Unknown to the three of them, they were being watched. A cave lion had wandered over the ridge, attracted by the smell of mammoth. With barely noticeable steps, the huge beast crept stealthily down the slope. It was a short distance from the humans when the woman saw the lion.

The cave lion was a vicious predator. The largest of the big cats ever to walk the planet, it was a ruthless killing machine. Despite its size, this lion moved both quietly and swiftly. Few animals could defend themselves against a fully-grown cave lion, which struck out with a claw to disable the prey and kill it with a bite of its powerful jaws. Humans feared cave lions, but they often honored them in ceremonies, hoping that showing respect might move the spirit of the lions to spare them.

This lion, however, did not care if humans honored its kind. It was hungry and would have fed on the mammoth had the humans not been around. Their presence triggered its hunting instinct, and the lion crouched low to the ground.

The woman knew they were all in peril. The mammoth had meat enough for a dozen lions, but there was no way the three of them could leave without attracting its attention. She understood at once what she had to do. In order to save her children, she must lure the lion away and sacrifice her life.

Turning to the girls, she used a series of gestures, pointing out the lion, silencing them, and signaling that she would move off. They must go in the other direction, and she pointed toward a small opening among several rocks. If

the girls could make it to the crevice, the lion might not be able to get to them.

Despite knowing her fate, the woman did not give in to her urge to hug the girls. She touched each of the girls, not wanting to distress them further with a tearful hug. She took a deep breath and turned to confront the lion.

Vica walked away from the girls. She chanted in a low voice, making one of the few sounds she could hear. The chant was something she had learned as a girl, for although she could not hear the voices of other humans, she could feel the vibrations of her own voice. These sounds could be heard by others, and they were often made during the ceremonies of her clan. Her people were convinced that Vica had a special gift and could sense their prayers despite being unable to hear their voices. She was also aware of the sound of the drum and could chant in time with the other members of her clan.

The chant brought Vica some measure of peace. She knew that the lion would take her life, and she prayed that her journey to the spirit world would be swift and painless. Her chant, combined with the belief that she had saved her daughters, let her enter a trance-like state. She turned to look at the lion, which had followed her with its eyes in preparation for an attack.

Tali and Dani had done what their mother had indicated. They moved to the rocks and crawled as far inside as they could. They brought the meat they had cut from the mammoth, as their mother had told them. Tali gave the meat to Dani and positioned herself protectively in front of her sister. As quietly as she could, Tali moved

small rocks to block the opening. They were as safe as they could be, given the circumstances.

Seeing that the girls had made it to the cleft in the rocks, Vica was about to run in order to draw the lion from them. But for some reason unknown to Vica, the lion had looked away. Standing up from its crouch, the lion began moving up the slope again, glaring into the distance occasionally. Vica was bewildered by what was happening. For a moment, her heart was filled with hope. Then she looked in the direction of the lion's gaze.

The cause of the lion's retreat was obvious. Two wolves were approaching, and the rest of the pack was probably not far behind. A cave lion might survive a battle with a pack of wolves, but it might not. This lion pranced off, perhaps to return to the mammoth at a later time.

As quickly as Vica's hopes had been raised, they were dashed. The wolves were a more serious threat than the lion. A pack of wolves would make short work of her, and because they can smell better than the lion, they would detect the scent of the girls. Being somewhat smaller than the lion, the wolves might be able to work their way into the gap and get to the girls.

Vica turned and pulled the cutting stone from her tunic. She would have given her life to the lion without a struggle, but not to the wolves. She might be able to injure one or more of the wolves before they killed her, which increased the chances of her daughters' survival.

The wolves trotted toward her at a slower pace than Vica expected, and the rest of the pack did not appear. In fact, as the wolves drew near, they stopped running and walked cautiously. As if on command, they halted, and to

her amazement they sat still not ten paces from her. What was more astounding was that several humans ran from the rocks toward her and the wolves, and the animals seemed to be waiting for them.

The lead person in the group seemed to be no more than a boy. He ran toward her shouting in a way that was not threatening. Being deaf, she could not hear him, but his face showed a mix of concern and reassurance. She interpreted his look correctly, for Griffio had seen the lion prepare for its assault. He was relieved that it had chosen to withdraw rather than to challenge the wolves.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he came to Vica. He gestured at the others, who stayed with the wolves. Although the wolves were comfortable with humans, Griffio was aware that most people they encountered regarded the wolves as a threat. Considering what the woman had just been through, he did not want to add to her distress.

Vica responded by moving her head up and down. She could not hear his words, but she knew what he had asked from his expression, the shaping of his lips, and the situation. She was relieved and replaced her cutting tool in her tunic. She held out her hands with her palms up, a gesture that was universally recognized as a greeting. There was no weapon in her hand, and her fists were unclenched.

Pointing toward the wolves, Vica made a gesture that suggested she did not understand. Griffio knew what she was wondering, having gone through the same experience with others who did not know the story of how his clan had tamed the wolves.

“Do not be afraid,” the boy said shaking his head. “They are not dangerous. They are our doggas.” He spoke

the word the people in the region used for the wolves who lived with them. The word “docga” described a stranger who came to humans at a time of great need to help them through the difficulty. Docgas might stay with the clan or disappear just as mysteriously as they had arrived. The wolves were, indeed, docgas, and they had been of service to the clan in many ways.

The woman pointed at her ears and put her hands over them. She wanted him to understand that she could not hear. She then motioned to him, encouraging him to come with her. She led him to a small opening among the rocks, bent over, and waved. Some of the rocks were dislodged, and to the boy’s surprise, two girls crawled out. They held pieces of meat in skins, which they clutched tightly to their chests.

The taller girl strode up to him while the younger one clung to the woman’s leg. “Mother cannot hear,” she said. “Nor can she speak. She understands many things, and she uses hand movements with us. Do not think she is stupid, as some people have. She is the bravest and wisest woman I have ever known. I am Tali, my sister is Dani, and our mother is Vica.”

Griffo smiled at Tali and bowed to the girl as a sign of respect and understanding. He held his hand out to the girls and Vica in friendship. The boy knew at once that the woman and the girls must be very capable indeed to have survived on their own this far from any settlement.

“I am called Griffo. We killed this mammoth yesterday. I see you have taken some of the meat, to which you are welcome. There is plenty for us all. Do not be frightened by us or the wolves. I will tell you their story.”

As Griffo spoke, he saw that the girl moved her hands. Vica's eyes dodged back and forth between Griffo and Tali's hands. She nodded to show that she understood. The kindness of the boy was evident, and she showed no anxiety when he waved his hand and the rest of the group approached with the wolves.

The girls slid behind their mother as the other humans and wolves got closer. The wolves sniffed the woman and the girls, who despite their fear of the animals, could not resist holding out their hands to let the wolves smell them.

"The gray one is Nasha, and the white one is Albo," said the girl who had followed Griffo. "My name is Maddia. You look hungry."

Maddia pulled some seed cake out of her tunic. She broke it into pieces and gave it to Tali and Dani, who ate it eagerly. Smiling, she pulled the arm of the boy who was behind her. She reached into a fold of her brother's tunic and took out another seed cake, which she handed to Vica. "Tulio is my brother, and there has never been a time when he did not have extra food."

To Maddia's surprise, Vica seemed to understand everything she said, even though neither Dani nor Tali had gestured. She had heard the girl tell Griffo that her mother was not stupid, and now she knew exactly what Dani meant. Her mother could not hear or speak, but her mind was as sharp as anyone's. She understood from Maddia's behavior that she was teasing her brother.

A dozen more people joined them, most of whom were men, but a few women were with them. There was much talk among them as Griffo explained what he knew

of the woman and the girls. In time, they would return to their village with the rest of the mammoth. The three strangers would be invited to go with them. For the moment, however, they relaxed with the woman and girls to give them time to recover from the ordeal.