

Ursa Major (cont')

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The bear finds finds itself to be no longer the master of its own destiny.

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Ursa Major Continued 4 The seal launched itself into the water like a black torpedo in a disappearing sheath of silver bubbles. It was no longer the cumbersome inhabitant of the land but was transformed into its antithesis; a creature entirely of the sea able to glide, dive and rise effortlessly. No obvious propulsion was in evidence to cause its slippery speediness. It could turn about - even turn full circle - within less than its own length. It performed barrel rolls repeatedly and its joy was its dynamism; it's turning, tumbling, oily progress a silent, hunting roller coaster. The fish flashed silver then smoked red in the instant finality of the ambush. Triumphantly the seal swam vertically and at top speed, it breached and slid to a sideways halt in the frigid air. Its unexpected arrival startled and scattered the other seals barking and bouncing into the water. The blue ice turned vivid red; this stain was now the only evidence of the fish which the seal had turned head first and eaten alive. The seal launched itself into the water like a black torpedo in a disappearing sheath of silver bubbles. This time the myriad shoals of arctic herring proved their match and the chase finally ran its course. Disoriented and fatigued by the distance it had swum in pursuit of the fish the seal realised that it would have to breathe in unfamiliar water. It rose vertically again but this time cautiously, hugging the precipitous wall of the huge floe. As its ascent closed to the surface the ambient light around it increased and it slowed its progress until its movement almost stopped in negative buoyancy. It breached the surface of the water silently. Not even the faintest of ripples was created by its blunt, whiskery nose as it sought the life giving air; it was its silent exhalation that was to prove so costly. 5 It had started to snow heavily and the bear had arranged itself into a great hulking mound. The snow had piled high on her back and occasionally sloughed off in a mini avalanche causing a drift to accumulate on the leeward side. Only the black, radar nose betrayed her existence in this otherwise white world. Then gradually the snow eased and as it did so the breeze changed direction. Immediately the bear's nostrils flared at the scent of fish, blood and oil. She was instantly convulsed into still readiness. The eye that was not covered by her huge forelimb slowly opened and then she started to move. As she elongated herself by pushing her back legs rearwards, the immense hump of her snowy back diminished. Her front legs became the mirror opposite and in this strangely comical position the incredible length of the creature could be seen. She extended the giant claws in all four of her leviathan paws and gained silent purchase on the ice. She was in this way able to belly-slide, inch by

inch towards the hypnotic scent. The seal was completely unaware of the nose, the eyes, the jaws and the claws that waited with trembling patience. Then with a speed so astonishing as to seem unnatural the white bear sprang forward in a spray of snow, ice and panic. Huge forelegs crashed into the water. The claws were like shark's teeth. They latched deeply into the stricken seal. The first drops of red coloured the sea. The bear tasted the iron rasp of blood. This provoked her into an even greater frenzy of murderous effort. The helpless seal was yanked clear of the water and like the Indian club of an insane juggler was bounced unnecessarily from side to side between the bear's front paws. With a last effort the helpless seal was wrested onto the ice. Standing suddenly upright with her forearms stretched out to the sides the great white bear raised her chin and chopped and clapped her jaws together and produced a truly chilling sound. Then she bellowed her pleasure and victory to the ice and the ocean. Nearby a seal rose and bobbed casually, resting and replenishing with air. As it did so it turned and absently watched the bear and the seal. After a few moments it arched its back and descended once again to pursue the scattering fish. Far away to the south a sea eagle, white against a darkening sky warped its wings and shrieked its clarion call. 6 The bear continued to hunt from the floe and it honed its skill to such perfection that it began to tire of seal. Often it gorged only on the blubber or if it was lucky enough to catch a pregnant female, the foetus, the rest of the carcass was left on the ice to freeze. The bear piled on kilo after kilo of fat. To the north the ice sheet had fractured and the sun now rose and set in random quarters of the horizon. The seals became less frequent visitors as their opportunity for air increased in the now open waters around the perimeter of the floe. Then the southern sky darkened as a storm gathered warmth and energy. The bear was used to winter storms; weeklong whiteouts during which the air temperature would plummet below minus fifty degrees driven ever downwards by catabatic wind. But this storm was of a different nature and would prove worse than any than the great white bear had lived through. With the rising temperature brought by the southern clouds the snow became heavy and wet and then it turned into rain. The outer edge of the enormous storm's black vortex spiralled northwards at great speed until within hours, its epicentre was over the arctic winter hunting grounds. By mid-day the light had failed and then the first distant rumbles of thunder began to echo between the flatness of the sea and sky. A huge electric storm developed. Enveloping sheets of lightning arced between the angry roiling clouds and forks of lightning vaporised the ice, each flash accompanied by its instant visceral thunder roar. The lightning bolts revealed in a thousand fleeting chiaroscuro instances the entire ice sheet as a sharp and brittle landscape. When the storm at last broke the bear and its precarious refuge had been driven far to the south. The wind now swung to the north, the waves pushed warmly on the ice and Polaris continued to retreat.