

# The Fangs of Otan

*A She-Cougar Fights for Life and Safety in  
the Untracked Wilds!*

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*Yeepek's curved talons sank into the tender  
back of a female kitten*



**E**VERY nerve fiber, every muscle in the long, sinuous body of the she-cougar rippled with pleasure. Under one of her huge fore-paws was a squirming, spotted kitten, a vigorous

little male. Although his teeth were scarcely cut, he put up a stout fight against these persistent, routine ablutions.

Otan, the mother, had a litter of three. This was

practically their first day outside the cave lair and at once Otan's troubles had begun. She had nursed her brood and then had begun their ablutions. The other two were close by—rolling, tumbling, snarling as they played. At least Otan was sure they had been close to her.

It was the sudden *soosh* of rushing wings that gave her warning to the contrary. With a snarl she whirled and leaped, all in one motion.

Out of a lazy blue sky had plummeted Yeepek, a great bald eagle. His curved talons were already spread and sinking into the tender back of a little female kitten.

Otan struck swiftly. She leaped high as Yeepek attempted to zoom off with that wriggling, spotted shape securely clamped in his talons.

Otan struck through feathers to flesh. Yeepek shrieked with pain and in anger. His talons opened and the cougar kitten crashed heavily to the rock.

Swiftly Otan struck again, but Yeepek had recovered poise and balance. He was dripping blood and went zooming off to the upper craglands, there to scream his wrath and hatred of the great tawny one below.

In spite of Otan's tender ministrations, the little spotted one died.

The struggle for the life and safety of her young had begun for Otan. It was such incidents as this that made her a killer; that roused her savagery to a point where she became ruthless. Otan knew only one code—the law of propagation of her kind and their protection.

In all the wilderness there was no more devoted mother than Otan. Likewise, there was none whose enemies were so numerous.

Now her blood burned through her veins. She quickly cached her remaining kittens in the den, while she stole out to pad back and forth in a slinking patrol, as she gasped low throat sounds of hatred of all creatures of the hinterland. . . .

**A**NOTHER day. Otan stretched on the very edge of a promontory, watching the antics of a pair of bighorn lambs.

She licked her chops. Up there in the higher levels was a good source of food, but a source well guarded.

Otan lifted her gaze to include the stout form of Chag, a huge ram whose massive curved horns were a deadly threat to all predatory hunters. The sight of them sent a shudder rippling along Otan's

spine. Twice in her career she had been struck by the horns of Chag. This old chieftain seemed always alert. His large eyes gushed flame at the slightest sign of danger to his ewes or their young. But this morning, old Chag was not in position to see Otan.

The she-cougar must have food. It was drawing close to the time when she must teach her kittens about game flesh and bone. So far, they had thrived solely by nursing. They were not yet old enough to cut up and masticate meat for themselves. That would come later, as their teeth strengthened. But Otan knew the value of green bone for those young teeth.

She slid along a few feet with snakelike grace, watching the effect of her stealthy movements on the bighorn creatures above. Satisfied that she had not been detected, she commenced her sinuous stalk of death, gliding off right to a spot where the chasm between her and the lambs was narrower. There she bunched herself, ready for the leap, but suddenly her body stiffened. A fresher, stronger sheep scent assailed her nostrils.

Her tail twitching, Otan slowly turned her head.

Down on a lower level, almost directly beneath her where, near a gushing spring, the grass was lush, grazed a lone, yearling ram. Otan slid a moist tongue over her chops. She bellied down, catlike, to watch the young ram's movements. Soon, she knew, he would grow sluggish from his gorge of grass.

There, he was blowing now! His sides were distended, and he was making ready to flop to rest.

Slowly, Otan rose to a crouch. She shifted on her toes, making sure of her foothold.

She was about to spring when a clutter of loose rock on the north slope precipitated a small slide, a slide which brought the ram snorting to his feet. Out of the shadows of a craggy cleft emerged a squat, silver-tipped shape.

Otan suppressed a deep snarl as she glimpsed the form of her greatest enemy. The newcomer was Mishi, a sour-tempered old barren she-grizzly, a killer if there ever was one. Something had gone wrong with the grizzly's footing to have caused that small slide.

The young ram spun. He was ready to leap to safety, when Otan sprang. She struck, but missed.

Mishi and she-cougar met in a mad flurry of threshing bodies. Two of the most hated rivals in all the wilds had come face to face, fang to fang,

talon to talon.

Twice in the career of her motherhood, Otan had been forced to give battle to Mishi. What Mishi lacked in weight—she was smaller than the average of her kind—she made up for with speed and savagery. Twice she had attacked the young of Otan. And Otan never forgot.

**L**IKE a tawny flurry of savage fury, the she-cougar struck, roweling the grizzly's near flank with her talons. Blood gushed.

A horrible *woof* of anger and pain exploded from Mishi's gaping jaws. With a speed belying her bulk, she whirled and charged. Otan rocked back, but lashed out as she coiled, with four sets of fiendish talons.

Mishi was torn across one eye. Bellowing her wrath she was forced back and commenced to sway about Otan in a circle. Bloody froth flecked from her great tusks.

Again they came together, but Otan was smashed back with a terrific paw stroke to the shoulder.

From the higher levels, where Chag snorted and stamped his warning to his kindred, frightened eyes popped as they watched the grim drama below. Chag was sending his flock leaping to the higher ridges; vertical leaps which could only be emulated by the white goat and his kind.

Below, with a great advantage of weight, Mishi swayed back and forth, content to wait for an opening. She had one other great advantage. Otan was an active mother, gaunt from her devoted care of her young. Her underparts were tender.

But Otan lacked none of her usual fortitude. Time and again she threatened, making swift ten-foot leaps, only missing her objective, Mishi's squat back, by a scant hair.

She bled from a gash in her right flank. The scent of her own blood warned her of Mishi's speed and power. But she realized that a fight to the death was inevitable. There was no place in this range for herself and Mishi, the plunderer.

But her young must for the time being remain her chief thought. Wisely, honorably, she started to withdraw. Head lowered, slobbering her anger, Mishi followed, blinking red flame from her piggy eyes, chortling deep snarls as she watched the tawny one glide backward toward the edge of a crevasse.

Otan knew of that crevasse. When sufficiently

close to its edge, she would whirl and leap. Such was her intention. But all at once one of her hind paws slipped over the edge. She lost her balance, and in that brief split second, Mishi charged.

With a smashing right blow to the shoulder, she broke Otan's precarious hold on the slippery rock. One stifled scream, and the tawny one spun into space, to crash heavily on the rocks below; a drop of nearly twenty-five feet.

Blackness at once engulfed Otan, but quickly her brain partially cleared. She uttered a piteous throat sound, almost a hollow groan as she sagged limply down.

Above, Mishi swayed back and forth, *woofing* her calls of victory and further challenge. Dimly, Otan heard. She stirred and stretched her aching body to all fours, but straightway sagged back again. A sharp spinal pain assailed her. Time and again she struggled to regain her equilibrium; again and again she helplessly flopped back.

**T**HE day dragged on, and to Otan's tortured mind came the thought of her young. True, her kittens could not alone make their way from the den, but there were many lurking beasts which could gain an entrance. For example, there was Tarat, the wolverine; and in all the wilds there was none as ruthless as he.

Such thoughts helped retrieve more and more of Otan's fighting spirit.

Nearby, a tiny spring of icy water gushed through a rocky fissure. Slowly, in great pain, she dragged her form to the water. There she drank thirstily, and laved her throbbing wounds. Then gallantly she dragged herself back to the lair.

From time to time she picked up the dread scent of Mishi. Fierce snarls escaped her, proclaiming an even greater hatred, and as this passionate heat of anger and hatred flushed her bloodstream, it brought her strength. One day, when her kittens were sufficiently strong, and her own normal strength regained, Otan would haunt the trail of the silver-tip and then there would be no mistake in her timing.

A low *meow-w-w* escaped her as she caught the faint whimpers of her kittens. She clawed her way on—on, until at last she dropped limply into her den, to nurse her ravenous brood.

For many days Otan, the tawny one, lay deep in her cave. Her throat was parched, her body burning with a terrific fire. Save for a small quantity of

snow which had dropped down a vent into the cave, she had not touched her tongue to water; nor had she eaten any food, save the scraps of an old cache which was buried in a deeper recess of her lair.

More than once as she throbbed through a night vigil, she heard the scrape of claws, the claws of a venturesome predatory animal outside her cave. She sniffed the nauseous scent of Tarat, the wolverine who, like a slinking devil, prowled just outside waiting—waiting until his keen nose told him that Otan had weakened to a point where it would be safe to enter and put an end to her.

But Otan refused to die. Her body wasted, for her kittens exacted a heavy toll as they vigorously punched her as they greedily nursed, several times a day. Faithfully, Otan fed them and although her efforts were puny, she also attempted their daily ablutions.

This evening, just at dusk, she pricked up her ears. Out of the lower slopes had come a long, defiant call—a shrill bugle.

Otan licked her chops. She recognized that familiar call. It was the shrill call of Naiak, the wild stallion. Each year at this time of early spring, he led his band of shaggy mares and their progeny to the wind and sun-swept slopes where they found the first grazing. Naiak's movements were as regular as those of the migratory caribou in the far northern latitudes.

Otan was stirred. In all the wilderness there was no flesh so succulent as that of young horseflesh. But one other relished this flesh as much as Otan. That other was Mishi, who wreaked havoc with the mustang band each spring.

**N**OW Naiak's call was closer and more challenging. Otan shuddered. She knew the power of the gray one's lightning hoofs. He was swift with his pivots and attacks. Otan knew. More than once he had broken up one of her attacks on his band. Once, at this season of the year, he had battered to a pulp one of Otan's mates.

But the calls of Naiak brought new life to Otan. She pushed a kitten from her and stretched her wasted form. By sheer fortitude alone, she dragged herself to the cave's opening. There she paused, panting.

She sniffed the soft, aromatic odors of balsam and pine which floated down on a gentle night wind; and from every quarter came the stirrings of many small creatures. Nearby a spring of fresh

water gushed out of a fissure to cascade musically to the lower levels. Otan's whole being burned for want of a drink.

Whimpering softly to her young, she forced herself to all fours. Her limbs buckled beneath her. But she persisted and for a long moment swayed unsteadily, but upright.

Now she moved forward a pace or two. Her right side threatened to give, but she struggled on, cautiously, carefully. All at once, her hair bristled. Half turning, she uttered a savage snarl.

Tarat, the slinking killer, rocked back, to coil on his back, his deadly claws lashing at empty air. But Otan knew better than to attempt an attack, in her condition. She advanced a faltering, threatening pace or two, pouring snarls of warning from her throat.

Tarat at last withdrew. Cheated of a kill, he sprayed the zone with his nauseating musk, and went scampering off. In his wake slunk Otan, headed for the nearest water.

Belly down the tawny one advanced on the pool with the utmost stealth. Ahead, not only was there water, but a creature of flesh and blood.

Wah, a male marten, was crouched there, waiting until some lesser creature came down to drink.

With the wind in her favor, Otan slit her eyes, so that their glare would not give her away. But now she was forced to practice all her stealth. She was in no condition for one of her long, accurate death leaps. She was obliged to steal in to within a yard or so of the marten. And then she must be deadly accurate, for Wah was one of the swiftest creatures of the whole hinterland. Slowly, scarcely breathing, the cougar moved forward a few inches at a time, her gaunt, sinuous form writhing like that of a python.

Wah stirred. He cocked his head sharply, turning his snakelike neck, searching for warning scents. Suddenly he made a sharp clacking noise with his teeth. Otan's nerve fibers reacted. She knew that Wah's prey was approaching—some small creature which would arrest the marten's full attention.

She watched him stretch his neck forward, toward a dark, narrow cleft. It was her cue. She moved in and suddenly laced out with a lightning-like stroke of a forepaw.

Wah was pinned. He shrilled a sharp cry of pain, and swiftly coiled his neck about as Otan

struck down with her fangs.

**T**WO sharp needle points impaled the cougar's tender nose. For his size, Wah's jaws were powerful. He clamped on a terrific hold, in his extremity.

Otan gurgled a rasping snarl and with her free forepaw went into action. With a fierce one-way slash of her fierce claws, Wah was disemboweled. For the first time in many days, Otan tasted fresh blood. But water was her first thought. She laid the dead marten to one side until she had quenched her thirst, and laved her burning body so that the incessant throbbing ceased. Then turning, she crunched soft bone and flesh, and quickly there was no scrap left save a small tuft of hair.

As she moved on back to her lair, Otan paused, her nose wrinkling with a great pleasure, for the night wind in a fickle change had brought her the scent of Naiak and his kindred.

But all at once, the tawny one stiffened. Mingled with that horse scent was the dread scent of Mishi, the silver-tip.

Otan's lips peeled back. Her soft whispers turned to long caterwauling screams of rage. Almost before Naiak and his band had become established at the lower plateau, Mishi would scatter them, perhaps driving them off entirely.

For upward of two hours, Otan stood poised on the very edge of her rimrock, listening, sniffing. And with each sound and scent from below, there came to her a new strength.

From below came a sudden stampeding sound of drumming hoofs; the hated scent of Mishi again, and then a long, grim silence. Otan's form twitched and rippled with a consuming anger. Soon she would have to meet that silver-tipped plunderer. But not until she had regained full strength; not until her kittens were able to move swiftly and accurately.

Otan padded back to the lair and for the first time since her battering and fall, she slept long and soundly, awakening only when with the coming of a new day, the kittens voraciously demanded their dawn feed. . . .

Spring came with its riot of sound and full color. First a whirring rush of bird life.

Otan had not recovered quickly from her fight with Mishi. Festering claw wounds had bothered her, making her nervous about venturing from the lair zone. In the great wisdom of her motherhood,

she had contented herself with hunting only small bird and rodent life.

Now she listened to the gabble of newly arrived waterfowl on a nearby creek. From a distant lake came the long, eerie, ghostlike wail of Moakwa, the loon sentinel, a call which was caught and flung back in weird echoes by the foothills.

Day followed night in regular sequence. Otan continued to build up her strength, while her young grew swiftly to a point where now they demanded meat. It was not, however, until near the end of June that Otan felt strong enough to venture forth in search of a big kill.

For many long hours that first day out she had scouted the hills for sign of a nomadic bighorn. But these mountain sheep were the crafty ones, well guarded by the old rams and ewes whose watchful eyes were hawk-like.

**B**UT there was, in spite of this vigilance, always a wanderer—usually a venturesome young ram who, flushed with the first yearnings of his growth, had shifted off in quest of a mate. It was such a youngster that Otan now stalked, as the first purpled grays of dusk softly draped the heights.

Otan lay belly down in a shallow draw, sniffing strong scent of sheep. This was a spot recently evacuated by a small band of ewes. Above her, a young ram was making methodical, vertical drops from ledge to ledge.

As he reached the bottom of the draw, the youngster snorted his contempt and disgust. He commenced to paw at the mossy turf. Shaking his head and immature horns, he proclaimed a fierce, passionate anger.

Slowly a semblance of composure returned and he minced off toward the small waterhole, nothing more than a spongy seepage. There he blew into the soggy moss before starting to slake his thirst by sucking the water through grass and moss.

Like a bolt of forked lightning, Otan sprang. Her timing was unerring. She landed squarely along the back of her prey, but the youngster was strong. For a moment he held up her weight, whirling in an attempt to throw her clear, but Otan was not to be cheated of this kill. Her terrible fangs were cutting their way down through his hair and tallow to the spinal cord.

From a nearby scrub pine, old Ah-Hoo, the great horned owl denizen, poured out his deep, eerie wail of death. The ram suddenly burbled a

rattling throat sound and slumped limp and lifeless to the turf.

Swift as a rapier thrust, Otan tapped the ram's jugular and drank eagerly of warm, fresh blood.

For a long moment, when her desire for blood had at last been sated, she padded about her kill, voicing low throat sounds—the proclamation of possession. Then suddenly she leaped away and bounded to her lair.

One by one, in her mouth, she carried her kittens to the kill, careful each time to make sure there was no plunderer nearby.

She chewed from the sheep carcass a slab of mutton. This she tossed to the young. And while she herself fed, she listened to the snarls of the kittens as they had a tug-of-war with their first fresh meat.

They were unable to do more than worry off small fragments of mutton, but this had been their first lesson at a kill. From now on, their education would be extended. Otan would even lead them short distances, allowing them to watch as she struck down some lesser hinterland creature. They would learn the value of quiet, of discretion and patience. . . .

Late September brought the first frosts, when the hinterland was quickly changed from a place of varying greens to a riot of multi-tinted foliage and mosses.

Otan's young were now more than half grown—two sleek youngsters now able to accompany her down to the low rangeland draws. It was here she searched for fresh sign of Naiak and his band, but she was soon aware of the fact that the horse creatures had left. By now they were far to the south, in the meadow flats where the wild mint flavored the lush, succulent grasses.

Today, Otan's young trailed her as she stole up on the tracks of a young spike mule-deer buck. For two miles she patiently loped, or trotted on in the deer's wake, now and then having to backtrack, to cuff her young which were often intrigued by soft stirrings in the thickets. They were flushed with the urge to hunt out a rabbit, or grouse for themselves.

Now Otan came to a sharp halt in a scant poplar glade. It was here that Utik, the buck, had stopped dead in his tracks. He stood quivering in every limb, every muscle, as though instinctively scenting danger, yet not knowing exactly where to locate it.

Otan's every nerve fiber grew suddenly taut. She, too, was all at once aware of a menace. Her

nose wrinkled and she peeled back her lips.

One of her young ones whimpered—a scarcely audible note, yet one heard by Utik, the buck. His great ears pricked sharply up, and forward, and he snorted wildly.

Otan shifted on her toes, testing her footing before she leaped. Fully tensed, and set, her body rippled a brief moment. Then, like an arrow, she sprang.

Utik buckled at the knees. He was down with the first smashing impact of the cougar attack. He recovered and attempted to run, but only stumbled a few paces when suddenly all was black. Otan's fangs had done their grim work.

Quickly the cougar whirled, to cut the jugular, when a warning scream reached her. She whirled, a hideous half-snarl, half-scream escaping her as she glimpsed the terrible form of Mishi, the silver-tip.

Mishi's great jaws were closing on the back of a kitten! Mishi had ambled along against the wind scenting both the odor of Utik, and the scent of the cougar family.

Otan issued a strange sound for one of her kind—a sound of piteous appeal, and yet it registered only her burning anger.

At Otan's charge, Mishi flung her massive head, tossing the dead young cougar from her. Her tusks were dripping red slaver as she rushed to meet Otan's attack. Grizzly and she-cougar went down together in a rolling mass of furry hellishness. Fangs and talons lanced and slashed in a mad fury of the devil's designing.

At last Otan's claws found an opening. She struck savagely downward with her left rear paw, opening a terrible gash along Mishi's belly.

With a bellow of pain and rage, Mishi relinquished a tusk hold on one of the cougar's forepaws. She whirled away, a grotesque, bleeding shape.

Back at a discreet distance, crouched young Yik, Otan's sole remaining youngster. Yik had always been the most vigorous of her brood. He had always demanded—and got—the biggest share of the food from the first day of his birth. Yik, by his own power, had already killed a woodchuck and two squirrels.

**F**OR a long moment he shuddered and whimpered with a great fear, but now as he watched his mother whirl again to attack, a new feeling manifested itself. It was an instinctive

fighting courage—the heritage of his great sire, a male of over two-hundred-and-forty pounds weight.

Shaking the last vestige of his early fear from him, Yik, although little more than half grown, stretched himself. His tail began to twitch. He began to circle back, crouching every so often to watch the progress of the battle.

Now he watched Mishi whirl like lightning on her haunches, to smash a battering blow to Otan's near shoulder. Otan was down, but quickly she coiled as Mishi charged. First her left and then her right paw raked the big one's jowls, bringing more gouts of blood.

Piggy eyes flashing, Mishi backed off a pace or two. Shoulders well humped, her huge head swaying, she mouthed her anger and hatred. She was giving her entire attention to the bellied-down shape of the tawny one, Otan.

Otan knew the value of playing possum, feigning semi-helplessness. She was gasping, her sides bellowing as though almost completely winded. But although her slitted eyes seemed to be focused directly on Mishi, Otan was looking beyond, to that sleek, slinking shape of young Yik.

Otan wanted to call a warning, but she realized that it might be fatal to her son. Yik was bunching. Otan stirred as she watched him shift from one set of toes to the other, as he had seen her do, as instinctively he tested his footing.

As his back undulated in a ripple of movement, Otan half rose. This slight move on her part brought immediate action from the silver-tip. Head down, Mishi was ready to strike.

In that moment, Yik leaped. This was his first death leap, and his timing was excellent.

Mishi reared, bellowing her wrath. Shocked by the surprise rear attack she was, however, only momentarily thrown into a near panic. As she reared, she whirled in an effort to dislodge that cougar shape, but Yik had a deep claw hold and steadily he was chewing his way through that thick mass of grizzly hair.

He was not mature enough to effect a kill, but he had given Otan a respite, a chance.

The she-cougar rushed, but was met by two lightning forepaw smashes. Fortunately for Otan, she was ready, and took only part of the force of those blows. She took them going away in a graceful, sideward flirt of her lithe form.

Again and again she rushed the silver-tip,

hoping to hold Mishi on her hindquarters, trying to keep her from flopping to her back, when Yik wouldn't have a chance beneath that five-hundred-pound bulk. Time and again she threatened the old she-bear. Had Otan been in Yik's position, Mishi's last breath would long since have left her great body.

It was fear for her son that held Otan. She had taken a savage battering from those forepaws. Now she knew that there was only one move left to Mishi. She waited for that sudden backward drop.

**I**T CAME. With a wild *woof*, as she felt those immature fangs at last find a danger spot near her spinal cord, Mishi went over backward, but like a flash Otan was in at her throat. Mishi was forced to roll before her weight could possibly crush out the life of Yik.

In a mad flurry Mishi lashed out with her massive forearms, pounding, clawing, battering.

Otan sprang clear. She called swiftly to young Yik who, unhurt, save for a bruise or two, leaped to safety. The young one slunk carefully to his mother's side, and received a flick of her warm tongue, while Mishi swayed back and forth on her broad pads, whipping herself into a frothy temper as she bled profusely from many claw wounds over her body.

It was now that Otan realized she must practice all the instinctive wiles of her sex. Mishi was too great an adversary for her in open battle; but Mishi must go.

Small creatures of the wilderness were drawing in close, attracted by the strong scents of the kills, and of fresh blood of the belligerents. Into the gathering dusk came the gleam of many sets of inquisitive eyes.

Otan suddenly called sharply to Yik, a cry which sent him bounding off toward the hill country. She half turned and commenced to stagger away. She seemed to drag along a helpless hindquarter.

Mishi raised her bulk to her hind paws and commenced to flail the empty air, grandiosely proclaiming a victory. To her, the fight was won. There remained only the coup de grace and that would shortly come.

Head down, she commenced to trail the dragging she-cougar.

Otan moved sluggishly along, up one slope and then another, getting deeper and deeper into the

forbidding shadows. Yik was nowhere in sight.

Mishi came to a sudden halt. There was no further sign of the tawny one. Otan had mysteriously vanished from the ledge rock trail. The she-grizzly snarled and continued on in the trail of Yik, a trail which followed a tortuous shelf of rock.

Again the silver-tip halted, to sniff sharply.

Above, on the next rock level, crouched Otan. Like many another wilderness mother in a crisis, she had simulated helplessness, to good purpose, with grim design. Her eyes gleamed fiercely as she watched the swaying movement of that hulking menace below. Now, like a shot, she sprang.

A bellowed *woof* boomed from Mishi's throat as Otan's weight crashed to her back. She reared and attempted to whirl so that she could crush that clinging shape against the sheer wall. But there was no room for such maneuver.

No longer was there a set of puny, immature fangs and claws at her back and neck, but cutters which were swiftly sinking to a death stroke.

There was but one move left to Mishi—a suicidal move, an outward leap which would take her and that clinging cougar shape down to certain death together.

But Otan was prepared. As her fangs struck the great spinal cord, and Mishi whirled to leap, Otan's agile form flung off the she-bear's lacerated back.

**M**ISHI toppled backward and tumbled in a grotesque mass to death on the jagged rocks nearly fifty feet below. But Otan dropped not too heavily onto a slab of rock not more than ten feet down. She was uninjured in the fall.

For a long moment she listened for sign of life from that pulped mass beneath her, then slowly, cautiously, she began a skillful descent of the cragland.

At the death site, Otan sniffed sharply at the dead form of her most hated rival. No longer would there be anything to fear from the smashing paws and terrible tusks of the silver-tip she-bear.

Otan leaped to a large boulder and poured out a call to Yik. She called again and again, until at last his answer reached her, shrill and clear in the night air.

In a few moments he was down at her flank, muzzling her, running his sleek young shape the full length of hers, making soft throaty sounds of pleasure.

Together they moved back toward the poplar glade, where Utik, the buck lay stiff and stark. As they neared the kill, Otan leaped forward, snarling fiercely. She scattered a half score of small rodents and creatures filled with blood lust.

Circling the buck a time or two, listening for sign of any greater menace, she at last whimpered to Yik, who bounded forward. Swiftly the she-cougar clawed out a large slab of warm flesh for Yik. She tossed this back to him and whispered a husky gasp of contentment as she heard his young fangs slosh into its succulence. Then, and only then, did she begin her own feast.

Otan and her son ate their fill. Young Yik wanted to slink away to the thicket and lie down, so full was his greedy belly. But there was another lesson to be learned. Otan instructed him in the art of burying, or concealing the remains of the deer carcass—a cache of food for another meal. It was routine work for the she-cougar, albeit other lesser or even greater animals might find and clean up the carcass in the meantime.

Satisfied, gasping her complete contentment, Otan at last called to her son, and led him back to the lair where as the grim wilderness throbbed throughout another night of many tragedies, she and Yik slept a long sound sleep.




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