Speaking Bear Leader's Quest

By James R. Hardin

We trudged along the unfamiliar icy shoreline. We'd left Small Paws and Keen Eyes behind to dig their dens and wait for their cubs, but the other fourteen bears in Speaking Bear Clan shambled behind me dutifully, wide paws thudding softly in the thin snow.

The midday sun was not far above the horizon, telling me winter was coming soon. So late in the year, and still no sign of floating ice, or seal-prey, or any prey at all. With a group this large, we could kill anything we could find, even a muskox-prey or a walrus-prey—but we had to find anything first.

It had been a long, foodless summer, longer than I remembered from my young days, and everyone was especially hungry. That's what had brought us so far from our usual territory, trying to find new prey.

I paused to look back at my charges, moving dull white lumps casting long shadows that reached the black water. It was not my imagination; everyone was thinner. I hoped we wouldn't lose either of Long Nose's cubs, like we had one of Quick Paws's last year.

The young bears thought this was normal. They didn't believe the stories from me or the other older bears about plentiful ice and prey years ago. As Speaking Bear Leader, I felt I should be doing something to find us more prey, something more useful than leading everyone on this trek, perhaps to nowhere.

Suddenly, I picked up a strange scent. It smelled faintly of warm, living blood, but was mixed with sharp odors I couldn’t identify. I stopped and raised my head, looking around and sniffing. Dark Nose tapped my shoulder and pointed at something far ahead of us moving toward the water.

It was smaller than a bear, but walked upright on two legs, making it taller than I was at the shoulder. It was covered in brightly colored shiny skin, colors I didn't

recognize and didn't know the names of, that wrinkled as it walked.

Surely it couldn't be—but it had to be one of the human-prey from First Speaking Bear's crazy stories. Farther beyond it stood an impossible angular thing that matched First Speaking Bear's description of a "truck." If First Speaking Bear had still been alive, he'd doubtless have laughed and said "I told you so."

I sent four bears to sneak behind the large rocks farther from the water's edge and cut the human-prey off from its truck. Dark Nose and I slipped into the cold sea and swam quietly toward it, only our heads visible above the dark surface. The others waited where they were.

When the human-prey saw Dark Nose and me emerge from the water, it started to run away from us, but stopped when my other four bears stepped out from hiding. It turned around slowly like the trapped animal it was, staring at the half-dozen white bears surrounding it, clutching the unnaturally straight black stick it held against its chest. "Oh God," it said, "they told me I shouldn't come out here alone. But I've never seen any bears here before, let alone six. And since when do they hunt in packs?"

What! I was so surprised I shouted, "The human-prey can talk!"

The human-prey whipped its head around to face me, eyes wide, and shouted, "The bears can talk!"

"Yes, we can talk," I said with pride. "But only us, the Speaking Bears Clan. First Speaking Bear taught us many years ago."

"First Speaking Bear," the human-prey said quietly. Its voice was abnormally high and smooth, as if a seal-prey could talk, unlike my proper rumbling tone. "That must have been Boo-Boo."

"First Speaking Bear mentioned that name when he first met us." I growled softly. "But he told us to never say it again."

"Yeah, I guess I don't blame him." The human-prey stood up straighter. "Listen, you know we humans gave you this ability, right?"

Now I was curious. "First Speaking Bear told us he'd stolen the ability to talk from a human-prey. But he always refused to explain how."

"I can tell you what happened. We had a scientist among us who had developed a process to enhance intelligence. But no one at his university thought it would work, and he wound up being sent up here, sort of banished, to help us study polar bears.

"He captured a bear, this Boo-Boo—" I growled again, a little louder—"um, this First Speaking Bear, and tried his enhancement process on it. Over the next couple of years, he taught the bear to talk, to everyone's surprise. He was almost ready to publish a paper when Boo-Boo killed him and escaped."

No wonder First Speaking Bear had never told us the rest. It was embarrassing to think of a bear being captured and held by a small prey animal. Before I could ask how this could have happened, the human-prey said, "But how is it that *you* can talk? Bears aren't intelligent enough to learn speech without enhancement."

I glared at it. "Apparently we are. First Speaking Bear taught others, like me. And now we work together to school our cubs. Having language has taught us the advantages of cooperating instead of living and hunting alone.

"But we never thought we'd actually encounter a human-prey, let alone one who could talk. Do you belong to a special clan of speaking human-prey?"

The corners of the human-prey's mouth turned down. "I don't think I like that name. But no, I'm not special. All of my species can talk."

I was impressed. Imagine what an entire species could do with language! "Then you must be a very cooperative species indeed."

Its mouth-corners turned down even further and it looked at the ground. "No, not particularly," it said quietly. Then it raised its head and looked me directly in the eye, but I didn't sense a challenge, so I let it pass. "Speaking of cooperation, now that we can converse like reasonable people, you aren't going to kill me, are you?"

Talking or not, it was still just a human-prey. "Of course we are," I said. "We can talk already, so all we need from you is meat." I started toward it, raising a forepaw for the strike.

The human-prey took a step back and pointed its long, straight stick at me, as if such a tiny stick carried by such a tiny creature could intimidate me. Then it glanced

around at the other bears encircling it. "Wait, wait," it said quickly. "The way things have been going, I'm sure you're very hungry. If you let me live, maybe I can help you. Yes, I can help you."

I paused. Never before had we needed help, but never before had times been this bad for my clan. "Help us how?"

"Have you noticed changes in your habitat? Less ice? Fewer seals?"

"Yes, it is as you say."

"Well, my species has been causing all that."

Hot anger roared through me. I reared up on my hind legs and bellowed, "Then we should kill you now, and hunt down the rest of your species!"

"No, no," the creature said, turning its head rapidly from side to side. "That won't work. For starters, there are too many of us. Billions."

“How many is ‘billions’?” I asked. “I know all the numbers First Speaking Bear taught us, all the way up to ninety-nine.”

The human-prey's mouth compressed for a moment, then it said, "Well, um, it’s more. A lot more. But besides that, many of us want to stop this destruction. That's why I'm here, actually. I'm measuring the ice and trying to understand the details of what's happening. These changes are harming us too, although I guess they're harming you even more."

"Do you human-prey know how to stop these changes?"

"Yes."

"If you know how to stop the changes, and the changes are harming you too, then surely you will stop them soon."

The creature turned its head again. "Well, it's not quite that simple."

I cocked my head and stared at it. "These changes are hurting you, and you know how to stop them. What could be simpler?"

"Many people profit from sticking to the old, destructive ways. Others just don't want to make the effort. So, lots of people refuse to believe there is a serious problem, despite all the evidence. Humans are remarkably good at believing whatever we want

to.

"But you—a talking polar bear! With firsthand knowledge! We have a group called the United Nations where the leaders of many countries, or clans, meet. I could take you there. You could make your case in—well, in person! Tell them how climate change is affecting you directly! That should sway people!"

I sat down in the snow. "If your clan leaders are doing nothing even when human-prey are being harmed, why would they care about bears?"

"I don't know. Sometimes animals seem more sympathetic than people. It might help, or maybe it won't."

The human-prey leaned toward me, lowering its stick so it pointed at the ground. "It might help, and it certainly won't hurt. Look, the United States Geological Survey is predicting that your population will shrink by two thirds within the next thirty years. Some are even worried about eventual *extinction*. Shouldn't you take any chance, however slim, to save your species? *All* of them, not just your clan?"

I sat, listening to the sighing wind, the soft gurgle of waves at the sea-edge, and the complete absence of seal-prey barking. I heard the rest of the clan behind me shuffle toward us, but they stopped while still far back, maybe sensing the importance of the moment. The human-prey and the closer bears watched me, motionless.

Finally, I spoke. "I am Speaking Bear Leader. My clan is hungry, and you are worth more than an adult seal-prey. But I will pass up immediate gain to try to save my people in the long run. I will go with you."

The human-prey blew out a long breath, sending a faint white mist from its mouth. "We humans have a lot to learn from you." Then the ends of its mouth curled up, exposing its pathetic little teeth. "This is going to be even bigger than when that young activist Greta Thunberg addressed them!"

I wondered what an activist and a Greta Thunberg were. The human-prey seemed to have many more words than First Speaking Bear had.

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I stepped through the opening into the meeting cave of the human-prey United

Nations. Like so many things they built, it was incredibly huge, rising up to the height of many bears. Artificial stars were scattered across its ceiling, shining so intensely that the interior was as bright as day outside. And it was so hot, worse than any summer day at home. How could the human-prey stand it?

The cave floor was filled with sitting human-prey, all staring at me. So many human-prey! Certainly more than ninety-nine. Enough to feed my clan for months!

The noise of the speaking human-prey faded as I walked across the raised platform and stopped beside a large central block, looking back at them. I couldn't understand most of their speech anyway. The first human-prey I'd met had explained that many of them spoke languages entirely different from the one I knew. A foolish idea that bears would never have come up with—what was the point of having language if people still couldn't understand each other?

I had seen many amazing things during my journey here. Caves that could fly higher and faster than any bird, comfortable dens they built wherever they wanted, and so much food that even I was full! These human-prey had abilities that could only be called magic. Yet, despite all their power, they were apparently too stupid to understand the simplest things.

So I, a wise bear, would try to explain it to them.