

## THE BULL

Crouched behind an outcrop high in the Montana Rockies, I scanned a dry ravine in the frigid valley below for an elk herd led by a phenomenal bull. Although this bull stood over six feet at the shoulder and displayed an incomparable eight-by-eight rack, he harbored an indomitable spirit far exceeding his physical stature, rendering this encounter not a conventional hunt, but a clash of intrepid wills. This bull felt my presence as acutely as I felt his, and a defining moment between hunter and prey was at hand.

I had tracked the herd's movements for over a week, and had correctly predicted its nocturnal arrival in this valley. Despite the sheer cliffs and rockslide that confined the ravine, I knew the herd could not resist the lush aspen grove inside. Their sole route of escape lay in the ravine's only opening. I had set my trap, and the crescendo was mounting.

As the showdown loomed, I pondered my philosophical obsession with hunting in general, and this bull in particular. Hunting kindled my primordial nature--but not as a perverse desire to kill for killing itself. Rather, I hunted as a "noble savage" in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau--striving not to dominate nature, but to stake my niche as a vital element within nature itself.

Emulating Rousseau's ideal, I felt facing this ultimate challenge would confirm I killed not for arbitrary glory, but for natural virtue. A lesser animal would merely linger as meat in my freezer, but regarding this ultimate beast as a worthy adversary--rather than a trophy--would cement my standing in nature as an honorable hunter.

A faint movement in the tamarack trees halfway up the adjoining mountain roused me from my muse. Probably a flock of bighorn sheep--or mountain goats. No other indigenous animal

could scale the rocky incline leading to that trail. I shrugged off this distraction and resumed my vigil.

I knew the herd would soon need water, compelling them to leave the ravine, traverse the clearing, and scramble for cover to a small ridge fifty yards away. I would have more than enough time to sight in on the bull.

The nagging movement on the far mountain roused me once again. This time a strange uneasiness enveloped me. Careful not to shirk the ravine, I peered through my field glasses and caught the surrealistic sight of the bull traipsing the high trail. He had bested me by jettisoning his cows and somehow forging the rockslide.

Grasping my rifle, I struggled to the rocky overhang above the outcrop. As I once again squinted through my binoculars, I spotted the bull disappearing through the pass.

I betrayed my stoic nature by slamming my rifle down, clutching my head, and falling to my knees. No man had ever earned his reward more than I had. No one had ever worked harder for a kill. I agonized over the endless hours I had spent scouting this valley and analyzing every facet of the bull's behavior. But no one could have taken this maneuver into account. He was an elk, not a mountain goat. He had defied nature by scaling that rockslide and, with this single exploit, shattered my quest for self-realization.

Pursuing him would prove futile. Descending my mountain roost, traversing the valley, and circling the peak would take at least eight hours. By that time he would be well into Canada. I could do nothing but concede my defeat.

I did not look up as the remaining cows took this opportunity to flee the ravine. I stared at the mountain pass, half rebuking myself for my failure, half marveling at this bull's resolve.

After regaining my composure, I returned to my perch and gathered my gear. I packed my rucksack, descended the outcrop, and began the long trek back.

As I trudged through the rocky valley, I sensed my lapse in virtue and admonished myself for abandoning Rousseau's ideal. The noble hunter does not dwell on defeat; he embraces the natural hunting process. As the vanquished, I had no choice but to suffer my fate and persevere. The shrewd bull had won this round, but I began formulating strategies for next year. I would scout every nook of this valley and study all possible elk migrations. I would know that bull better than he knows himself. Losing him this year would render next year's hunt even sweeter.

While still daylight, I reached the logging road, located my Jeep, and loaded my gear. Instead of driving straight to the highway, however, I drove behind the foothills, hoping to salvage some consolation by bagging another elk, or at least a mule deer, in the lower thickets. I reached the hills below the pass about thirty minutes before dusk, leaving little time to locate game.

When I rounded the last foothill and surveyed the area, I spotted an unconventional jerking motion in a small cluster of pines one hundred yards up the slope. I stopped my Bronco, grabbed my rifle, and strode toward the movement. As I neared, I glimpsed a reddish-brown flash, verifying it as an elk. Probably a stray cow, wounded by a hunter, who then lost her herd.

Creeping closer, I saw its hindquarters through the trees and reckoned it too large for a cow. It had to be a good sized bull. As I approached within fifty feet, I froze as I beheld the unmistakable eight-by-eight rack.

With my heart hammering, I studied him through my field glasses and realized his plight. After traversing the pass, he had stepped into an abandoned bear trap, clamping his foreleg like a

vice. His physical condition suggested he had been trapped there several hours. I recognized signs of dehydration in his posture and, worst of all, his eyes glazed with resignation.

If I could manage to release him, his broken leg would nevertheless guarantee a death sentence in the Montana winter. If wolves didn't devour him, exposure and dehydration would soon take his life.

Though Montana Fish and Game regulations prohibit shooting a trapped elk, the now well-established noble savage in me understood that natural order must supersede man's arbitrary laws. I could not allow this great animal to suffer an ignominious death.

As I caressed my rifle stock, I knew he wanted it this way. He would prefer a dignified death from a virtuous hunter's bullet, to a sterile shot from a faceless game warden. I approached to within twenty feet, knelt on one knee in respect, and readied myself for the shot. I sighted on his broad forehead, pondering the injustice of the most majestic elk in the Rocky Mountains meeting such an undistinguished death.

While I prepared to slay my idol, he abruptly shifted to an aggressive posture, and shifted his eyes from resignation to resolve. In an unearthly effort to dislodge his mangled leg, he lunged toward me. Stunned by this shocking reversal, I dropped my rifle and stumbled backward. I could scarcely grasp the extent of his tenacity as he again lunged forward.

One more thrust and he broke free. As the ground rumbled, it seemed an entire elk herd, rather than a single bull, rampaged before me. He spun and hobbled twenty yards down the slope, stopping to assess his injury. As if to prove his vitality, he stomped his foot three times before looking up at me. The trap had shred a sizeable portion of tissue from his foreleg, yet he had somehow incurred no ruinous breaks.

When I regained my breath, I realized an untrapped elk was fair game. Envisioning that eight-by-eight trophy on my living room wall, I grabbed my rifle, stood up, and faced the bull resolute, primed to reclaim victory.

As I beheld this indomitable creature, however, I again felt dishonor in my transitory weakness, and returned to my virtuous bearing. Although he was now legal game, arbitrary advantages defile the balance of nature. With natural law again prevailing, I shouldered my rifle, praising myself for my honorable restraint.

The bull sensed my concession, trotted up to a small ridge, and turned to face me once more. We knew we would meet again. In the natural world, neither hunter nor prey concedes a struggle until one of them prevails.

As our eyes held solemn communion, I lifted my Winchester and plugged him through the bowels with a red hot slug. The huge bull's rear legs buckled, leaving him in a surreal sitting position, clawing at the hard ground with his forelegs.

I approached him and shoved my rifle to his chest. I lingered, relishing the frantic look in his eyes. Twisting the gun barrel deep into his breast, I blasted him through the heart. As he flopped to the reddening ground, his heaving chest and flailing limbs faded to a quiver. I brandished my knife and sliced open his throat, unleashing a crimson gush of blood.

As I sat on his twitching ribs, I realized my victim bequeathed me nothing more than the bloody stench of reality.