

Jim Kjelgaard

# FIRE- HUNTER

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH RAY  
HOLIDAY HOUSE, NEW YORK



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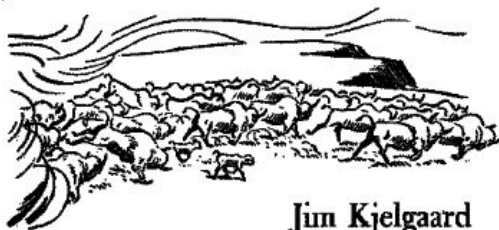
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IRISH RED  
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OUTLAW RED  
BUCKSKIN BRIGADE  
KALAK OF THE ICE  
WILD TREK  
CHIP, THE DAM BUILDER  
A NOSE FOR TROUBLE  
FOREST PATROL  
TRAILING TROUBLE  
SNOW DOG  
REBEL SIEGE  
DESERT DOG  
WOLF BROTHER  
STORMY  
HIDDEN TRAIL  
HAUNT FOX  
LION HOUND  
BOOMERANG HUNTER  
WILDLIFE CAMERAMAN





Jim Kjelgaard

# FIRE- HUNTER

ILLUSTRATED BY RALPH RAY  
HOLIDAY HOUSE, NEW YORK



*FOR  
LOUISE RASCHIG*

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*Modern ideas of what life was like in prehistoric times are based on two sources of information. One consists of actual remains, such as stone implements and fossilized bones, and their location and relationship to each other. The other is scientific guessing—reasoning, for example, that if primitive tribes today do so-and-so, then under similar conditions prehistoric men would do thus-and-thus. So, by knowing a little and deducing a lot, a general picture is built up, which is incomplete only in details.*

*Still, a story must have details, and to get them I had no choice but to make them up. I have, however, always tried to keep them plausible, as what might have happened, in the light of scientific facts and theories. An exception is the telescoping of time. The developments that occur in the time-span of this book undoubtedly took many generations. And yet who is to say?*

JIM KJELGAARD





# FIRE-HUNTER

## CHAPTER 1

THE TOP of the hillock which the tribe was climbing was studded with boulders, some so big that they overhung both sides of the hill. The rank scent of feeding bison was borne over the hill and down the side by a shifting wind.

Hawk, the Chief Spear-Maker, licked his lips. Though the tribe had seen much game in the past few days, most of it had been either too agile or too fierce for the hunters to attack. Even the mammoths had learned that only in numbers lay safety from human hunters, and aside from occasional small game the tribe had seen nothing except herds of big, dangerous beasts. It was suicide to attack a herd of mammoths, even with fire, for one such animal was capable of engaging every hunter in the tribe. But the giant bison were a different matter.

Hawk licked his lips again. In eight days they had eaten only seeds and wild fruit which the women had gathered, and one doddering old camel that had been about to fall from old age when the hunters overtook it. Seeds and fruit were all right when nothing else was to be had, but a wandering tribe needed red meat to maintain its strength.

As they drew nearer the top, the smell of the giant bison became stronger. It was a herd of more than two hundred animals, and had not yet taken alarm. That was good, for not in four seasons had the tribe run across a herd of bison as big as this one. If they were successful in the hunt, there would be all the meat they could eat, and much left for the scavenging wild dogs, dire wolves, and saber-tooth tigers that always gathered wherever game was killed.

Wolf, the Chief Hunter, remembered and spoke of the time when such herds had been fairly common. Tribal legend recalled when the earth had trembled to the pounding hooves of countless giant bison, but that was no more. Hawk had never wondered why.

Like all the rest, he was ruled by simple tribal laws and taboos, which were the accumulated wisdom of generations. It was tribal law that Hawk should be Chief Spear-Maker, because he was the most skilled in the methods and rites of spear-making. Similarly, the tribe must have a Chief Fire-Maker who thoroughly understood the magical properties of fire, their greatest protection. Aside from the Chief Fire-Maker and the Chief Spear-Maker, the rest of the men were, most of the time, hunters, for the demand for food was never-ending. And all food, whether meat brought in by the hunters or seeds or berries gathered by the women, must be shared, no matter who had found it. When the tribe was in danger, everyone, women and children included,

helped defend it. Most important of all, the tribe must always live and travel as a group; one human alone was at the mercy of wild beasts.

Other than that there were few laws, but these few were inflexible. The tribe was a unit, and every member must contribute his share. If anyone failed, all might die.

Hawk paused a moment, and glanced backward to take mental tally of the women and girl children. The boy sons of hunters, armed with spears and clubs to fit their size, were at their fathers' heels, up ahead. But, as Chief Spear-Maker, Hawk's place was not with the hunters. It was with the women and children, and he did not like it.

For a second his eyes dwelt on Willow, daughter of Wolf, and his face lightened. Willow was lithe and swift, and already skilled in basket-making and a knowledge of seeds, roots, and fruits. The only reason she had not yet been taken by a hunter of another tribe lay in the fact that not in two moons had they met another tribe. All were scattered, desperately seeking the fast-disappearing giant bison.

Hawk grunted his annoyance. He was a man in his own right, for he had seen sixteen summers. Eight years had he sat at the feet of his father, to learn the mechanical details, the rites and incantations, that went into spear-making. Now he was Chief Spear-Maker himself, for less than a moon ago his father had fallen to a saber-tooth tiger. But though Hawk had a man's responsibilities and privileges, he could not have Willow, because it went without saying that she must be taken by a man of some other band.

Suddenly Hawk stiffened, and sniffed another breeze that blew in from the north. The tribe was being shadowed by a pack of wild dogs, which hoped to scavenge after the hunters killed. But the dogs seemed to be merely following; there was no indication that they would attack. Hawk returned his attention to the bison.

They were grazing in a meadow, and remained unsuspecting. Turning around, raising his right hand as a signal that the rest must halt, Wolf, the Chief Hunter, went on alone. He seemed to melt right into the earth as he approached one of the big boulders and peered around it. Hawk watched keenly.

It had never occurred to him to question why there had once been numberless giant bison and why there were now so few. He knew only that his tribe were bison hunters, and that they lived largely on bison flesh. Because the tribe's sole idea was to get enough food any way it could, Hawk had never considered the hunters wasteful in spite of the fact that they often wiped out an entire herd of bison with one fire drive. They might kill hundreds when they could use no more than ten, but that was their way of life.

For an hour, while the sun approached its noontime high, Wolf remained silently in position. He was watching the bison, and because he had not yet signaled the hunters, Hawk knew that the herd was not in position for a fire drive. He turned around to place the positions of the women and seven girl children.

As Chief Spear-Maker, he could not hunt, but he could wield a club or spear in common defense, and when the hunters went out for game, it was his duty to help protect the tribe's more helpless members. Hawk sniffed the breezes from all directions, but could detect no alien scents save those of the giant bison, the pack of wild dogs, and, faintly, the odor of a woolly rhinoceros. There was no immediate peril.

Hawk toyed idly with a spear shaft he had been fashioning. It was a well-balanced, carefully scraped piece of wood, with a curiously flattened knob on one end. But the shaft was just a little too slender and flexible for a hunting spear. Something in that very quality had kept him from casting the shaft aside.

Four days ago, entirely by accident, he had thrust the knobby end of this shaft into a litter of loose pebbles and leaned on it. The shaft had bent under his weight, then the end had snapped suddenly out of the pebbles. Hawk remembered vividly what had happened, and was still puzzled by it.

When it had snapped away, the end of the shaft had shot a small pebble straight into the middle of a pond. Afterward Hawk had picked up a similar pebble, and tried to hurl it into the pond. He could not throw such a light object half as far as the shaft had snapped it. There was something in the flexible shaft, some mysterious power which he lacked, and he had spent much time wondering about it.

After an hour and a half, so slowly that he seemed scarcely to move, Wolf raised his hand. At once Kar, the Chief Fire-Maker, went to his side. Hawk quivered eagerly.

The time was here; the bison had evidently moved into a suitable position and the fire drive was about to take place. One by one the hunters moved up beside Wolf and Kar, the boy hunters imitating exactly everything they did. The sight made Hawk writhe with impatience. He, too, wanted to be with the hunters, but he dared not join them. Whoever violated tribal law was banished from the tribe, and banishment meant sure death, for no lone human being could survive in this savage wilderness.

Kar and Wolf disappeared over the top of the hill. One by one, in order of experience, the hunters and their sons crawled past the boulders and down the other side. Presently, their spears and clubs with them, all were out of sight.

Hawk glanced once more at the women and girl children, who were sitting and lying in the tall grass. They were safe, for the wild dogs were still far away in the deep forest, waiting patiently. The dogs knew that they had almost no chance of making a kill should they attack the giant bison. But they were an experienced pack, familiar with humans. Always, after a fire drive, there were numerous dead animals that the hunters did not use. The dogs could afford to wait.

Since there appeared to be no danger threatening the women, Hawk was unable to restrain himself any longer. He could not join in the hunt, but he could watch it. If danger came, he could reach the women and children in time. Crawling toward the top of the hill, he lay prone behind a boulder. Cautiously he peered around it.

He looked down on a wide river meadow where rank grass grew shoulder high to a man. But no men were in sight. Hawk knew that they were crawling through the grass, dispersing themselves at strategic intervals to intercept any bison that tried to break through their encircling ring. As they advanced, they gave no sign of their presence. Nothing but a stray breeze that carried their scent to the bison could betray them now.

Hawk turned his eyes toward the bison. The entire herd, bulls, cows, and calves, was feeding toward the river. Hawk looked toward the river, and uttered a puzzled grunt.

Getting enough food was an always-present problem, and an opportunity such as this could not be missed. But was Wolf not risking too much in his present preparations? The herd could be ringed with fire, but there was only a six-foot embankment at the edge of the river. Driven down that by the flames, more bison would escape than would be killed or injured. Maybe the entire herd would get away. Hawk wondered if it would not have been wiser to follow the herd and wait until it could be driven into a deep canyon or over a high cliff.

Reluctantly Hawk put his doubts aside. Wolf was a mighty hunter; it was unlikely that he would fail.

The unsuspecting bison fed on, moving slowly nearer the river as they did so. To all outward appearances the meadow was a peaceful one, containing nothing save the herd of bison and a few bright-colored birds that flitted about the tall grass. Even the wary birds had not yet detected the hunters.

Then, after another hour, a wisp of smoke arose.

Hawk's excitement mounted, and he burned with an inward tension. The fire drive was under way.

Several hunters were on their feet now and running as fast as they could, flaming torches of twisted grasses in their hands. They paused at twenty-foot intervals to touch their torches to the dried grass, and ran on.

Leaping fire crawled up the grass where the hunters had first lighted it, and long tongues of flame licked hungrily out toward more grass. In a matter of seconds, behind the racing men, a curving line of fire sprang up and began to spread both ways. In a frenzy of excitement, Hawk leaped to his feet and shouted hoarsely. Then he was aware of the women and girl children beside him.

Now that there was no further need for concealment or quiet, they had come up to watch. Their faces were alight with anxious hope, for they and their men would eat well only if the savage scene below worked to their advantage.

A great, rumbling bellow came from the besieged herd. Cows with calves at their heels trotted nervously toward the river. Massive bulls stayed in the rear, shaggy heads lowered toward the approaching flames, alert to meet any danger. Watching, Hawk scarcely breathed.

It was an alarmed herd, but not the panic-stricken one it should be. Obviously the bison had been in other fire drives, and refused to be stampeded toward the dangerous river bank. Some of the bulls wheeled in ahead of the cows, turning the whole herd. For a few moments they stood still, the calves in the center and the bulls and cows in a protecting outer ring. Then, at a swift run, the entire herd started away from the river, toward one side of the encircling fire ring.

Hawk turned his attention toward the hunters. They had leaped into the burned part between the blaze that was burning toward the bison and the fire that was running back into the forest behind them. They were advancing behind the fire, but something was wrong; the far side of the meadow was too wet to burn. Yellow smoke rose from it, but scarcely any flame. The bison, too much hunted and too wise to fall into the trap designed for them, were going to try to break through the weakest part of the fire ring.

The wind freshened, keeping the smoke low and blowing it toward the river. The meadow was covered by a thick blanket of smoke that rose halfway up the running bison, so that only their shaggy backs and heads were clearly visible to the watchers on the hill.

Hawk stood still, watching with growing despair as the running hunters raced toward the herd's line of escape. Only one man blocked it. He was Short-Leg, one of the poorer hunters, and as the shifting smoke revealed him clearly, Hawk's keen eyes could see that he was holding his spear wrong. He gripped it too high, so that he could not get the weight of his body behind any thrust he made, and he was sure to miss. Hawk looked anxiously toward the other hunters.

They were running as hard as they could to put themselves in position for a strike, but the herd's sudden shift of direction had left them at a disadvantage. The bison had too much start and were running too fast. Hawk groaned in dismay as he saw Short-Leg stab at a huge bull. Neither well nor strongly thrust, the spear was pushed lightly aside by the bull's ponderous leg.

Then the smoke closed in and quarry and hunters were lost to sight.

Hawk turned away, not having to see any more to know the outcome of the hunt. But the tense women continued to stare at the swirling smoke blanket, as though the very fierceness of their gaze would help the men who were trying to get the desperately needed food.

Moodily Hawk toyed with his spear shaft. He thrust the knobby end against a pebble, bent the shaft, and watched the pebble snap away. With respect that was close to awe, he picked up the shaft and twirled it between his fingers. He bent the slender stick, feeling the tensile strength within it. The shaft had life and power of its own, but he knew of no way to control it and make it serve him.

There was something about that mysterious power of which he was just a little afraid. His father had told him, over and over, that the spear-maker's secrets lay in the strength of certain resilient hardwoods and the cutting edges of certain stones. These properties were strong magic, his father had said, and never, under any conditions, were they to be treated lightly or trifled with. Human skill could combine the wood and the stone to make a properly balanced spear, but if the spirit of each part was not treated with respect, the spear would not fly true.

His father had also said that there was a way, by combining a short piece of wood with a spear, to throw that spear a very great distance. He had been given such a magic throwing-stick by an old spear-maker of another tribe. Although Hawk had carefully preserved it since his father's death, he did not understand the secret of its power, for his father had never felt that the time had been right to reveal it. The ways the tribe knew, and had always known, were good ways, his father had believed.

Now, handling the slender shaft, Hawk wondered if there were some connection between its power and the magic of the throwing-stick. Going over to his pile of extra spears, he picked up the mysterious implement.

It was the length of his arm, a carefully polished stick with a short piece of branch protruding at right angles from one end. The branch had been cut off so that only two inches remained. Where the branch joined the stick, a smooth hollow had been scraped or worn. Hawk looked at the throwing-stick in bewilderment. He grasped it at both ends, and bent it in his hands. It was stiffer than the slender spear shaft that had snapped the pebble, but he could feel the same living strength. But he did not know what to do with it; the magic would not reveal itself to him.

A bedraggled, discouraged little group, the weary hunters straggled back. After the bison had broken through their fire, they had chased the herd a long way without overtaking so much as a calf. There was no meat.

As the hunters joined their hungry women and children, the wind ruffled the grass, and a bouncing little antelope-like creature appeared suddenly. It stopped forty feet away, head alert and ears erect as it studied the group. One of the hunter's sons threw a spear that fell short by ten feet. The little animal skipped away, and the boy listlessly went out to retrieve his spear. Except for Hawk, the hungry men paid no attention. From time immemorial they had lived chiefly on the giant bison, and other game was only incidental. The boy should have known he couldn't hit anything so small and fleet.

Hawk stared intently at the place where the little antelope had disappeared. The problem of finding meat was becoming more and more serious. Except for large beasts such as bison, which could be trapped in fire drives, and were consequently becoming scarcer, the land was alive with game. But the tribe had never had much success in hunting the smaller animals because they were so agile; they could avoid

the ordinary hurled spear. So, in the midst of plenty, the tribe was hard-pressed for food of any kind.

Kar, the Chief Fire-Maker, went into the forest and returned dragging a small tree for his night fire. He went again, bringing back an armful of dead branches and dry tinder. Kar stamped about the place where his fire was to be, one step sideways with his left foot and one with his right. Hawk looked disinterestedly on. All this was fire ritual, and no business of his.

Short-Leg, the hunter who had missed his strike at the bison, had been standing moodily by himself. Finally he spoke.

"My spear failed me, Spear-Maker."

"My spears do not fail," Hawk replied shortly.

"I struck at a bull. My spear missed," Short-Leg insisted.

"I saw you. You did not hold your spear as a hunter should, and it is your fault because you missed."

Short-Leg's eyes gleamed redly, and he snatched at the club dangling from his girdle. Hawk sprang to his feet, ready to defend himself.

"Peace," Wolf commanded. "We have trouble enough, without you two fighting. You will make Short-Leg another spear?"

"I will."

Kar and two young apprentice fire-makers had by now brought a great load of wood and piled it by the night fire. It leaped high, spreading welcome warmth over the hungry people who huddled around it. Kar passed his hand over the fire and it glowed blood-red. Hawk watched, and wondered.

The customs and beliefs of the tribe were deeply ingrained, a part of him, and it was not for him to question them. Yet, sometimes, he was puzzled by them. The incantations and rituals he himself used in the making of spears—just what connection did they have with the true worth of a spear? He knew that it had been Short-Leg, and not his spear, who had been at fault in the bison hunt. Yet he must make a new spear—and it must be made in a certain fashion, and in no other way. Puzzling over this idea, Hawk idly began drilling his slender spear shaft deep into the ground.

Wolf stiffened suddenly, his nostrils distended as he sniffed the breeze. A moment later Hawk had the scent, and almost at once the rest of the hunters were alert.

For three days, always maintaining a respectful distance, the wild dogs had been trailing them. But until now, as their scent had proven, they had been interested only in scavenging any excess game killed by the hunters. Now the harmless scent had

changed to a threatening, dangerous odor. Hungry, and having failed to get any bison, the wild dogs were aroused.

Spears in their hands, clubs swinging at their fur girdles, the men arranged themselves in a protecting circle around the fire, facing outward toward the gathering darkness. The women and children snatched whatever stones they could lay their hands on and took up positions behind the men.

A fierce pleasure surged through Hawk. Forbidden to hunt lest his spear-making skill be endangered, he had to content himself most of the time with chipping flint heads, fashioning spear shafts, and binding the heads to them. He found action of the sort he craved only when the camp was attacked, and everyone called on for defense. He leaped erect, snatching up a spear, but still hanging tightly to the shaft he had drilled into the ground. Its supple length bent under the pressure of his hands and the weight of his body.

He looked beyond the ring of light cast by the fire, the only haven in the savage wilderness, into the brooding shadows. Most of the time the tribe was safe near the fire, but not tonight. Now the hunger-maddened wild dogs were stalking the camp. They knew that the tribe was not in a good position for defense; thick grass provided concealment right up to the light of the fire. The only visible evidence of the impending attack was an occasional ripple in the grass.

A sudden strange idea seized Hawk and he gripped the imbedded spear shaft so tightly that his knuckles whitened. The stick, the live green stick with so much supple strength! He had been looking for a way to make it hurl a spear, and now he had found it! Hawk bent the shaft back, and placed the butt of his spear against the flattened knob at the end. Supporting the spear with both hands, holding the shaft back, he searched the tall grass.

The next time he saw the grass move, he bent the shaft a little farther and released the spear. It shot from his hands into the tall grass, and disappeared without striking its intended target. Hawk groped for another spear.

The next moment the dogs closed in.

With no time to use the shaft again, Hawk grasped the second spear in his hands and braced his feet. Leaping gray shadows in the tall grass, the dogs appeared. Seeing one, Hawk hurled his spear. It flew as straight as the wood from which its shaft was fashioned. There was a shriek of pain, then a few bubbling growls.

Almost before the spear left his hands, Hawk snatched his club and sprang forward. A big black dog, a beast fully as tall as Hawk, leaped from the grass with jaws gaping wide. Its polished ivory fangs glinted in the firelight as it sought a throat-hold. Agile as a cat, Hawk side-stepped and smashed the dog's skull with his club.

All the men, having thrown their spears, were busy with clubs. Hawk saw a hunter drop his club when a great dog sprang at him, and throw up his hands to shield his



face. Wolf dashed to the man's rescue.

The next instant Hawk pivoted on the balls of his feet and, club raised, raced toward the fire. He hadn't seen any dog break through the line of men, but one had, for the women were smashing at it with their stones. Hawk whirled among them, and brought his club down on the dog's head. The beast took two staggering steps and collapsed.

But he had not been quick enough. One of the girls was on her knees beside the fire, red blood bubbling from her mangled thigh.

It was Willow.



# SPEAR SHAFT

## CHAPTER 2

FOR A moment Hawk stood still, the club dangling idly from his hand. The scene was commonplace; someone was always being hurt or killed by wild beasts. But, though ordinarily Hawk would not have given a second glance, he felt troubled because it was Willow who lay there on the ground.

Slowly Hawk turned his back on her and walked away from the fire. He could do nothing here anyway; he had no knowledge of the secrets of the medicinal herbs and grasses, and was a little afraid of the incantations with which the old medicine woman of the tribe applied them.

The wild dogs had retreated, leaving five dead behind them. Back in the forest there was a confused chorus of growls and snarls, then a few high-pitched screams. The pack had set upon and torn apart one of their wounded members, and now they would eat. The humans around the leaping fire relaxed. The pack had suffered a crushing defeat, and it was unlikely that the dogs would attack again, at least until they had marshaled their ripped forces.

Wolf came in, dragging two of the dead dogs by their rear paws. He took them to the fire and dropped them near the one Hawk had killed. Other hunters came with the other two dogs.

The tribe arranged themselves near the fire, the women and girl children nearest and the men making an outer ring. Save for the fire, and the people around it, the wilderness was a dark and menacing void. This was the way it always had been and, as far as anyone knew, the way it always would be. Merely staying alive was a desperate business.

Kar threw more wood on the fire, and its leaping flames brightened. The little knot of humans sat close beside it. Life during the day was never without its danger, but at night, when prowlers were rampant, anyone who went beyond the fire's outer circle of light took his life in his hands.

Thus would it be all through the hours of darkness. Not one minute would lack a hungry beast that hoped to catch and eat a human being. There was no way to strike back. Fire and unity, the ability to throw many spearmen against any and all attackers, were the tribe's only protection.

But the dangers of the night were only normal. Death threatened, but life must go on. The women were working with flint knives, preparing the dogs for cooking, and presently the mingled smell of cooking meat and scorched hair filled the air. Attracted

by that odor, a pair of saber-tooth tigers came near and beat a restless patrol around the night camp. They coughed and snarled, but nobody moved. The tigers feared the fire, and as long as they were there no lesser brute would dare come near. In one way the tigers' very presence was a guarantee of safety.

While the women cooked, the men rested. Hawk again fell to studying his slender spear shaft.

He realized that there would be a great advantage in hurling a spear farther than the strongest man could throw it. If the hunters were able to do that, they could remain a proportionately safe distance away from a maddened bison or cave bear. They could strike their enemies that much farther away, and kill game which now stayed out of spear range. Again Hawk drilled the spear shaft into the ground, and pondered.

Using the mysterious power of the shaft, he had hurled a spear much farther than even Wolf, the mighty, could throw one. But he had hit nothing. Hawk braced another spear against the flattened end of the imbedded shaft and bent it back. Yes, the power was still there.

Slowly, snarling in anger because they dared come no nearer, the pair of tigers were still beating a measured patrol around the camp. Now and again one or the other would make a short, savage rush, rippling the tops of the tall grass at the farthest reach of the firelight, but coming no nearer. Hawk studied their routine.

They were making a rhythmic, methodical beat. They always traveled at about the same speed, so that they were in the same places at the same time as their patrol led them around the fire. They always charged toward the camp at one place where the grass was thickest. Seized with a sudden, bold idea, Hawk bent the shaft a bit more, and took a new grip on the spear.

His senses were nearly as keen as those of the wild beasts against which the tribe constantly fought, and after he had studied the tigers' motions a few minutes he knew exactly where they were. He waited, his eyes on the patch of dense grass, measuring the fierce pair's progress. At exactly the right moment he shot his spear.

As he released it, the tall grass rippled from the tiger's half-rush toward the fire. There was the solid impact of a spear striking flesh, and the tiger's growl changed to a high-pitched scream. The wounded tiger's mate roared threateningly. The grass bent as before a powerful wind while both great cats charged angrily about. Continuing to scream, the spear-stricken tiger leaped so high that his blocky form showed for an instant over the tops of the grass. Then there was only a string of coughing snarls that grew fainter as both beasts sought a refuge in the forest.

Hawk stood still, trembling at the thing he had done and not at once able to comprehend it. The fierce tigers had always been part of the night, a routine portion of the dangers of darkness. They never came near the fire, but neither did even the mightiest hunter ever think of molesting the creatures. Now, at night, a man had

deliberately attacked a tiger. Furthermore, it had been a spear-maker who had done so, not a hunter.

It was too much to understand all at once. The hunters, awe-stricken, sat in silence. Women and children stared wide-eyed toward the faint snarls that marked the retreating tigers. Even the smell of cooking meat seemed for the moment to be suspended. Then Wolf spoke heavily.

"What demon possessed you, Spear-Maker, that you dared do such a thing?"

Short-Leg was on his feet, chattering angrily. "He broke the law! He hurled a spear without cause! I saw him!"

"Tell us!" Wolf repeated sternly. "Tell us why you did it!"

Hawk found his voice. "I did not throw the spear! The power of the wood threw it." He faltered, and pointed to the supple shaft, lacking words to explain because he himself was not entirely sure what he had done. He had acquired a new power, so new that there were no words for it. To show them all its magic, Hawk snatched up another spear, braced it against the shaft, and shot. The spear made a long, clean arc, flying above the grass tops and falling in the darkness. Nobody, not even Wolf, could throw a spear half that distance, and in spite of his uncertainty, Hawk was proud.

"It is forbidden!" Short-Leg shrieked. "Trouble will come because the Spear-Maker meddles with that of which he knows nothing!"

The hunters made a little half circle, awed and fearful. This was magic of the blackest sort. There was a prescribed way to throw a spear, and since time began men had thrown them in just that way. Sacred custom had been violated, and anything could happen now. The only flicker of real interest was in Wolf's eyes, but he, too, shrank back from the mysterious thing he had witnessed. He stared hard at Hawk.

"You know the law," he said. "All your spears will fly false unless you use them only in defense of the tribe. The tiger was not attacking us."

"It is true, Wolf," Hawk admitted. "But it is also true that I was not hunting, which is what the law forbids. I am Chief Spear-Maker and I accept my place as such. But this is good magic and great power which has come to me. Will you not use it yourself?"

The hunters were now staring at Wolf, their chosen leader. He was a brave and skillful hunter, but the Chief Spear-Maker's argument about the law was too much for his simple mind. He did realize, however, that the other hunters were afraid of this new power.

"It is not our way of hunting," Wolf said, turning away.

Hawk pulled the slender shaft out of the ground and laid it with his extra spears and shafts. To relieve his own awed excitement he counted them. There were a dozen shafts and a dozen spears, an extra one for each man. And when the sun rose, he must

make another spear for Short-Leg, who was dissatisfied with the one he carried. Hawk looked sideways at the leader, the only man who had shown real interest in the spear-throwing shaft. But, in the face of opposition from all the rest, even Wolf dared not press that interest too far.

Hawk sat alone, shunned by the awe-struck hunters. He accepted a piece of half-cooked dog brought to him by one of the women, and gnawed hungrily on it. As he ate, he stole a glance at the little cluster of women and children. They, too, were now eating, the men having been given the best parts. Even Willow, lying on a bed of grass that the women had prepared for her, was listlessly nibbling a strip of meat. Her thigh was no longer bleeding.

Hawk gave all his attention to the food in his hands, tearing the stringy meat from the big bone with his powerful jaws. Dog was not the best of food. It lacked the strength-giving qualities of bison, or any of the other grass-eaters, but it would serve when nothing else was to be had. After he gnawed the bone clean, Hawk lay down to sleep.

Black night still reigned when he awakened. Hawk sat up, locating by his odor the leopard that had taken over the tigers' patrol. The wind brought him the scent of wolves and, far off, the faint odor of the wild dogs. They had gone only far enough to lick their wounds, and had not departed. But it was unlikely that they would attack again.

Kar, sitting with his chin on his knees, rose to throw more wood on the fire. The flames flared brightly, revealing some of the men sleeping and a few wakeful. One of the women rose to bring them more meat. Hawk ate his slowly; he was not as hungry as he had been. When he had eaten enough, he lay down to sleep again.

This was their life. When they had enough to eat, they gorged. Uneaten meat would spoil anyhow, and tomorrow was far away. Keeping alive and fed today were the important parts of living.

The next time Hawk awakened morning had come and a warm sun was pouring through the tall trees. He stretched luxuriously, then looked to his sheaf of spears. When he rose and walked near one of the hunters, the man moved quickly away from him. The rest looked suspiciously at Hawk. Not forgotten was last night, and the witchcraft by which he had stricken a hunting tiger at a distance greater than any man should be able to hurl a spear.

Relieved of his night duties by another day, Kar was lying in the grass with his head pillowed on his arm. Kar must never sleep at night, for only to the Chief Fire-Maker fell the responsibility of the night fire. But he could sleep during the day whenever the tribe was not on the move.

Hawk glanced toward the women. Some were busy near the fire, cooking the remainder of the slain dogs, but two were grinding dried berries in a hollow stone, using a smaller stone to crush the berries into powder. Willow had risen from her bed

of grass and was sitting with her back to a stone, staring wanly at the fire. A compress of green herbs bound her injured leg. Hawk looked at her pale face; obviously Willow was badly hurt.

Hawk licked his lips, and bolted his portion when a woman brought him another piece of meat. It was one of the last pieces, and when it was all gone the tribe would have to move on. Again Hawk glanced at Willow. If she could not go with the rest, she would be left behind to certain death; a hungry tribe could not risk starvation for the sake of an injured girl.

Hawk picked up the slender spear shaft and twirled it between his fingers. Respectfully he gazed at the shaft, a thing more powerful than any man. Even now he had not acquired all of the secrets it contained. He knew only that there were better ways of spearing than any yet put into use by his fellow tribesmen. Perhaps more of the strange new power would be revealed to him. When Hawk caught Wolf staring at him, he put the shaft down.

Covertly he studied it, then glanced sideways at Wolf. Except for the leader, the hunters feared the spear-thrower. And Wolf did not dare risk their fear. Hawk cast about for something he might do to win over the leader. The power of the shaft was good, as had been proven by his striking the tiger last night, but how could he persuade the rest to accept it?

The sun climbed higher, and the women served the last of the meat. Carrying skin containers, two of the women rose and went to a spring that bubbled from beneath one of the boulders. They filled their containers, returned to the fire, and kneaded the coarsely ground berry powder into flat cakes. These they put on hot stones to bake.

The men looked disinterestedly at them. Having had meat, they wanted more. Baked cakes were acceptable to satisfy great hunger, but they were not good food. However, since their bellies were filled for the present, nobody was inclined to move. It was good to take full advantage of rest periods whenever they occurred because, soon enough, there would be none.

Hawk busied himself making another spear. He knew the capabilities of every man in the tribe and fashioned his spears to fit the user. Wolf could throw a large shaft with a heavy head and do deadly work with it. The rest took proportionately lighter spears and Short-Leg needed the lightest of all.

The Chief Spear-Maker selected a smooth shaft of the proper weight and balanced it in his hand. It had already been scraped smooth by one of his helpers, but there was one place that needed further scraping. Hawk worked with a rough piece of flint, the top of which had been chipped to fit his hand. Again he tested the shaft by balancing it, and this time he found it better.

From his pouch, he chose a head, a carefully chipped piece of flint to fit the spear, and lashed it on with bison-skin thongs.

Hawk balanced the completed spear in his hand, feeling it as a part of him. It was good, and would fly straight, but there was more yet to be done. Though Hawk knew it was good, the hunter who would use the spear must have confidence in his weapon.

He glanced at the willow-bordered streamlet that wandered away from the spring, and carefully studied the various small birds flitting about the branches. This was one part of spear-making which only he knew thoroughly. There were different birds with different flights, and much depended on selecting the right one.

The newly made spear in his hand, Hawk rose and walked down the hillock. At the bottom was a tar pit, and the hot sun had made it a sticky mess. He thrust a stick into the tar, and turned it until the stick was coated.

Carrying the dripping stick, he returned to the willows and lightly coated some of their thin branches with tar. The little birds took alarm when he approached, but returned as soon as the Chief Spear-Maker went back to the fire. Three birds alighted on the tar-coated branches, and fluttered wildly as they tried to escape. Hawk waited until another bird was caught, then trotted over to his captives.

He was conscious of the hunters' keen interest as he approached, but nobody offered to help. This was a part of spear-making that he alone could do.

Hawk slowed his steps as he came near the fluttering birds, and cast an expert eye over them. Two were little insect-eaters whose life depended on their ability to twist and turn; they had to be able to do so in order to catch the insects that dwelt among the willows. As a consequence, they seldom flew straight for more than a few feet.

But the other two birds were fruit- and bud-eaters, suited to his purpose. Hawk disengaged the two birds he did not want and let them go. They bobbed erratically into the willows. He closed his hand about one of the other prisoners. Gently, not hurting it, he worked its feet out of the sticky tar. As he did so, he noticed that in thrashing about, trying to free itself, the bird had broken its tail. It couldn't be mended, but that made no difference; it was the right kind of bird.

Ceremoniously Hawk thrust the spear's point at the sky, then at the earth, then at the four winds. He poised the spear in throwing position and let the bird go.

Bending and twisting, unable to keep itself straight with its broken tail, the bird wobbled into more willows a hundred feet away. Hawk stared, dumbfounded. This was the acid test of a spear. If the bird flew straight the spear would be certain to fly straight. Always before such birds had flown in a perfectly straight line, but now no hunter would accept this spear or dare use it. Hawk walked slowly back to the fire.

Two of the women were supporting Willow between them and guiding her about. Willow hobbled stiffly, painfully, unable to use her injured leg to good advantage. But she must move; the tribe would not stay here and the women knew it. If Willow could not accompany them, she would certainly be left behind.

Short-Leg looked up at Hawk. "Do not ask me to use that spear, Spear-Maker. I saw the bird fly."

Without replying, Hawk broke the spear shaft across his knee and threw the head away. Whether or not the flight of the bird had anything to do with the flight of the spear, it was tribal tradition that spears must be tested in this way. Hawk fashioned another spear.

This time, when he approached the willows, he was more careful. He had learned something—even a bird that normally flew straight could not do so when it had a broken tail. Hawk added this to his store of knowledge. When he selected another bird he chose the same kind but looked it over carefully to make sure there were no broken feathers.

Again he went through the exact ritual. When he released the bird, it flew straight as a dart to another bush. Hawk carried the spear back to the fire and gave it to Short-Leg.

Kar rose and stretched, and looked questioningly about for more meat. There was none. Kar grunted his disappointment and, stooping to pick up his spear and club, went into the forest for wood. From now until the sun rose again, Kar would maintain his vigil.

The women had put Willow back on her bed of leaves, and the girl lay there with one arm across her eyes, while the old medicine woman changed the compress of herbs that covered her wound.

Hawk stretched out by the fire and slept a few minutes. When he awoke, it was dark and the tribe had settled down for the night. Save for Kar and one sentry, the rest of the men and boys slept lightly. Hawk tested the night winds.

There were no scents save some far off, and the inevitable nearer one of the tiger that patrolled the camp, hoping somebody would stray from it. Then, from the distance, Hawk caught the scent of the wooly rhinoceros. It was still alone, and in almost the same place it had been when he first scented it. Hawk lay down to sleep again.

The camp awoke hungry, for during the night even the berry cakes had been eaten and now there was nothing left. This, too, was a normal part of things. The tribe was a wandering unit with no settled home and not often at the same sleeping place twice. It must constantly follow the game upon which it depended for most of its food, and the time had come again.

Without ceremony, Wolf started out. The hunters and Kar fell in behind him, but Hawk lingered, as was his duty. Willow rose painfully, and would have fallen had not one of the women caught her. The two women who had helped her yesterday looked questioningly at each other, then at the backs of the men. Fear and doubt were in their faces; they wanted to help the girl but not if helping her would cause them to be left behind. They urged Willow along the line of march, while other women took up



Hawk's extra spears and shafts. Up ahead, one of the men turned impatiently, gestured with his arm, then went on with the other hunters.

The distance between them and the women who were trying to bring the crippled girl along increased. Hawk stayed behind, spear and club ready. But the women were becoming restless now. Their strength lay in all the men, not in just one, and they knew it. They talked softly among themselves.

Then, below the crest of another hill, the men stopped.

Hawk knew why, for scent of the wooly rhinoceros came plainly to his nostrils now. The hunters had not stopped out of consideration for the women, but because they were near game. When Hawk and the women came up, Wolf was on the crest of the hill, looking over. Walking openly, for this was no herd of nervous bison but a savage beast that almost always stood to fight, the rest went up the hill when Wolf beckoned. Hawk looked down on the scene below.

It was another river meadow, but a barren one. The grass was short, scarcely high enough to cover a man's ankles, and the rhinoceros stood nearly in the center of the meadow. An armored behemoth with two long spears in his ugly snout, he was dozing in the midday sun. Nothing else was near.

The hunters talked softly among themselves, debating the possibilities. Here there was no opportunity for an effective fire drive, for the grass was too short to burn. Any assault on the wooly rhinoceros would have to be a direct attack, and that was always dangerous. Nevertheless, it could be done.

The hunters decided to attack.



Hawk walked down the slope with them, trying to conceal his great excitement. Here was the chance to use the power of the green shaft, the opportunity for which he had been hoping. At the very best, with every advantage on the hunters' side, a woolly rhinoceros was a dangerous beast, a snorting ton of fury that, once aroused, would turn aside for nothing. His hide could be pierced, but not by any thrown spear. Brute strength was needed to penetrate the beast's heavy armor. But if a hunter could stand at a distance, and shoot a spear that would sink into the creature's vitals. . . . Hawk glanced at Wolf, who had apparently forgotten all about the shaft. It was no use; the hunters would have nothing to do with Hawk's new power.



The Chief Spear-Maker remained in his proper place, a little behind the hunters. The woolly rhinoceros came awake, and tossed his long snout viciously. Two of the more

agile hunters fainted in front of him, while Wolf went in from the rear to thrust at the monster's tendons.

On a sudden, irresistible impulse, Hawk drilled his spear shaft into the ground. He braced a spear against the knobby end, bent the shaft way back, and shot. There was a sudden snap as the shaft splintered. The spear wobbled in flight, brushed the wooly beast's side, and bounded off.

Grunting in anger, the rhinoceros wheeled suddenly. Unbelievably agile for anything so huge, he twisted back, dipping his long head. When the sharp horns on his snout came up, the foremost one slithered squarely into Short-Leg's belly. The skin on the man's back bulged, then the horn broke through and Short-Leg was lifted from the ground.

He screamed once, while his dangling arms and legs writhed and twisted. The rhinoceros pivoted, and, still grunting, trotted across the meadow, bearing Short-Leg's drooping body with him.

Wolf turned on Hawk, his face dark with anger and fear. "This time, Spear-Maker, you have truly broken the tribal law. You are no longer of us!"

The hunters dived on Hawk's pile of spears, each man snatching the one made for him. They wheeled, and at a fast trot started across the river meadow. For a second the women hesitated. Then, as one, they followed their men.

Willow sat where she had been abandoned. Scarcely noticing her, Hawk stood in dumb despair. His new-found power had failed!



# LEFT TO DIE

## CHAPTER 3

IN THE distance, the wooly rhinoceros was scraping its snout on the ground, trying to rid itself of its gruesome burden. The retreating tribesmen, sure that they were fleeing black misfortune in the person of their Chief Spear-Maker, did not look back. Even the women did not waste many backward glances at the pair who had been abandoned in the wilderness. They were as good as dead already. With no hunters to help them, and Willow crippled, very shortly they would furnish a meal for a pack of dire wolves, or a saber-tooth.

Hawk walked slowly forward and retrieved the spear he had shot. Then he stood still, leaning on the spear and watching the backs of the departing tribesmen.

A vulture flew overhead, and began to wheel in slow circles over the place where the rhinoceros had scraped Short-Leg's body from its horns. A moment later there were a dozen more in the sky. Vultures always seemed to know before anything else when there was food to be had. One by one, they planed to earth. The rhinoceros stamped his ponderous feet and snorted at them. He shook his massive head. Hawk watched dully.

The bent shaft, he knew now, was not a good thing. Its magic worked when conditions were exactly right, but one who lived by his spear must be ready to hurl it in a split second. He could not always depend on finding the right sort of ground into which he might drill the hurling stick, and drill it fast. Nor could he know when the power might choose to leave the shaft, and the wood break. And all of it together had led to banishment.

Willow moved painfully. Steadying herself against a stone, she stood up. Hawk glanced at her, as though for the first time aware of her presence. She was only a girl, and crippled, scarcely able to move without help. Therefore she was useless, and the tribe had been right in abandoning her. But as long as she was still alive, she seemed in some way to be his responsibility. Hawk looked again to his weapons, checking his spear shaft carefully for strength and making sure that the head was properly bound.

Fire was the first essential to keeping alive, and though Hawk had never built or tended a fire he had watched Kar and his assistants do it. He knew the stones from which Kar produced the spark to ignite his fires, but he was not sure he could find any along the river meadows. Nor did he know whether he could control the power of fire. However, the fire at last night's camp was sure to have live sparks buried in its dead ashes. It would be wise to return there.

Hawk swung on his heel and started away. Then he stopped and looked back at Willow. She was leaning against the boulder, her eyes fixed despairingly on the meadow grass. She had made no protest when Hawk walked away from her. It was the creed of the wild land in which they lived that cripples had no right to expect help. But they were both forsaken, and though Hawk knew that Willow could not help him in her present condition, her mere presence was reassuring. She was human, one of his own kind.

"Come with me," said Hawk with unaccustomed gentleness. "We will go back to last night's camp."

The dull despair left Willow's eyes, and hope flashed within them. She had been resigned to her fate, knowing that the wounded never lived long. Now, even though she knew that both of them together had small chance for survival, the will to live was strong. She let go of the boulder and took a stiff forward step. She stumbled, almost fell, and caught herself. Hawk picked up one of the extra spear shafts the departing tribe had left behind, and offered it to her. Then he started out, spear and club ready.

Twenty yards away, a small mottled wild cat crouched in the grass. Its tail twitched, tufted ears were erect, and yellow eyes gleamed. So silently had the wild cat come that even Hawk had not detected its presence.

Knowing that the smaller of these two humans was wounded, and having marked her as its prey, the cat glared at the man in rage. But it made no move to attack because it had no wish to face an armed man. It crept back into the tall grass and disappeared.

Hawk's keen eyes followed the little cat's circling course through the grass, and he took a new grip on his club.

They walked slowly, Hawk suiting his pace to Willow's hobbling shuffle. He was aware of the cat that slunk around them, of furtive life represented by hares and other small creatures, but there was nothing large, nothing that meant danger. They stopped on top of a hillock and looked down at a grove of trees.

A monstrous ground sloth, a beast fully eighteen feet long, moved slowly among them. The dull-witted, harmless creature reared to curl its long tongue around a small branch and strip off the leaves. Bruising them between its hard, toothless gums, it swallowed the leaves and reached out for more.

Hawk looked questioningly back to where the tribe had disappeared. It wanted food, and here was easy game to last all of them for many days to come. The giant sloths were neither agile nor quick-witted. When attacked, they tried only to get away unless they were in some corner from which there was no escape. Then they fought fiercely, and were so big and strong that they could kill or seriously injure anything they could reach with their long, hooked claws. But they were unable to strike fast, and a group of skilled hunters could always kill one.

However, the tribe was gone beyond recall and just one man could not hope to kill a beast so huge. Much as he and Willow needed meat, the giant sloth would have to go on his slow, harmless way.

When they reached the site of last night's camp, Hawk poked in the white ashes with a stick, and uncovered a bed of glowing coals. Then he hesitated.

Secretly he had questioned some tribal practices and taboos, but now that it was necessary for him to take over another man's task he was filled with uncertainty. Kar had always been the Chief Fire-Maker and only Kar knew all the secrets of fire. Anyone else who tried to control its power would be interfering with something about which he knew little. Anything could happen.

Deliberately Hawk kept his eyes from Willow, who had seated herself on her former bed of leaves and was applying a fresh herb compress to her wound. Hawk looked all about, and discovered nothing dangerous. Spear in hand, club dangling from his girdle, he went into the forest.

He knew the various kinds of wood because, in experimenting with spear shafts, he had used limbs from most of the trees. But he had also watched Kar and his helpers bring wood in, and had noticed that wood suitable for spears was evidently not acceptable for fires. Almost always in starting a fire, Kar had used dead wood, whereas a spear-maker needed the straightest, hardest, and greenest shoots.

As he strode among the great trees he remained alert to everything about him. He automatically noted where to find a future supply of spear shafts, where small animals had their secret lairs, where there were nesting birds, and where beasts had been. The faint, stale odor of wild dogs still clung to the mat of fallen leaves, but the dogs had left.

Hawk soon found what he was seeking. A mighty tree had fallen, dragging others with it, and the place was now an almost impenetrable mass of dead and dying branches. Hawk broke a branch from the dead tree and dragged it back behind him.

When he cast his branch on the glowing ashes, a shower of sparks rose. Powder-thin ashes sifted into the air and for a moment hovered in a tiny gray cloud. Hawk watched, perplexed.

This was the way it should be done, for this was the way he had seen Kar do it. But no flame and scarcely any smoke rose from the tree limb. Hawk squatted beside it, his eyes intent as he sought to fathom the mystery of fire. He had never built one, and obviously there were secrets connected with the proper making of a good fire that he did not know.

"Use small pieces."

Hawk turned in astonishment to find Willow kneeling beside him.

"Break off small pieces and put them against the hot ashes," she repeated.

She seemed so sure of herself that Hawk broke some slender twigs from the end of the bough, and laid them on the ashes. Almost at once a little tendril of smoke leaped up and a second later there was a tiny tongue of flame. The flame grew, licking eagerly around the bough. Hawk glanced at Willow with a look of respect. Plainly there was more to this fire business than he knew. Even women, ordinarily the lesser part of the tribe, seemed to know more about it than he did.

The fire rose, and began to burn fiercely at the big bough. Again Hawk went into the forest for wood. He was worried because night was certain to bring wild beasts and they would need a fire all night. But the flames seemed to be eating the wood faster than he could carry it. Returning with all the wood he could carry, he threw an armful of dry branches on the fire. Rising sparks made a bright shower, and the flames raged high.

As darkness began to fall, Willow wearily fell asleep on her bed, and Hawk began a frantic search for enough wood to last them through the night. Now he was no longer as careful in what he selected; anything would do. Green branches went with dead ones onto the fire. As he piled them there, Hawk noticed that the fire burned more slowly. He squatted beside his blaze, looking intently into it, seeking an answer to the puzzling question of why his fire did not now consume the wood so rapidly.

When he rose he had learned something new. Dead wood created a fierce blaze, but wood with sap still in it burned slower. Therefore, dead wood was the firemaker, but green was its keeper. Having found this out, Hawk brought in a large pile of both. As night shadows became deeper, he sat silently beside his fire. When a tiger coughed out in the darkness he scarcely even glanced up.

Never in the history of his tribe had a tiger attacked human beings who were sitting around a fire. Of course a pack of starving wolves or wild dogs might come, and if so they would have to be dealt with, but there was small use in worrying about anything before it happened. Let the next hour bring what it would. They were safe for this one.

Hawk picked up an extra spear shaft and began to toy with it. He drilled the shaft into the ground, bent it with his hand, and tried to brace his spear against it. He pulled the shaft out of the ground and examined it again. It was not good to drill it into the earth; there were too many things that could go wrong. But the slender shaft still retained its supple strength, and would, no matter where it was.

Hawk tightened his fingers around it, then squeezed so hard that his clenched knuckles whitened. He could not depend upon finding a place to brace his shaft whenever he needed it, but a man's hand was always ready! This, then, was the answer! Hawk laid the shaft back in his hand and tried to brace a spear against it. He could not. The spear was lying parallel with the shaft and there was nothing against which it might be held. The shaft needed a cross-piece or projection of some kind, something against which the butt end of the spear could be braced.

Feverishly Hawk took up the throwing-stick, which his father had never showed him how to use. At last he knew! The magic had finally been revealed to him. Hawk grasped the smooth end of the throwing-stick and swished it experimentally through the air. The smooth end fitted his clenched hand perfectly and, almost of its own volition, the other end rose easily into the air. All the power and strength, all the magic of wood, were there. Hawk was no longer in doubt as to how it should be used.

Holding the smooth end in his right hand, Hawk laid back the throwing-stick until it was level, and shoulder high. Then he fitted the butt of a spear against the hollow at the base of the branch. It worked smoothly, naturally, as it was supposed to work. The butt of the spear was braced against the short branch; the center of the spear shaft fitted easily into his palm, and the spear had an almost perfect balance. Hawk did not throw at once, but he felt that he could hurl the spear a great distance. The throwing-stick seemed to double the length and strength of his arm.

Hawk removed the spear, then put it back into position. Again and again, never releasing the spear, he swung his arm back, then forward. Then he looked around. Some distance away, faintly revealed in the fire's dancing light, was a tuft of withered grass. Hawk swung his arm forward and cast his spear at the grass.

The weapon landed almost two feet to one side of the tuft, but some hunters could never come within two feet of their targets anyway. Retrieving the spear, Hawk threw again, allowing for his previous margin of error. This time the spear landed within a few inches of its target. Again he cast the weapon. Out of a dozen throws, he hit the tuft of grass squarely four times. Had it been an animal of any size, he would have struck it every time. The magic of the throwing-stick was his!

Suddenly aware of danger, he raced lightly forward, snatched up his spear, and held it ready. Willow rose from her bed, struggled to her feet, and looked around. Painfully she bent to catch up a large stone lying at her feet.

The wild dogs were coming back. The wind told Hawk that there were only two of them, but that they were determined to attack. Theirs was a fighting scent, the odor of intent beasts of prey. As he followed their progress by the breeze, Hawk balanced a spear in the throwing-stick.

Had there been a pack of dogs he would not have done such a thing. The spear-thrower was new and experimental, and he had practiced too little to know much about it. If he kept the spear in his hands he could certainly kill one of the dogs, but there were only two and he thought he could handle both with his club, if the spear-thrower failed. He waited tensely.

He saw motion in the grass, but restrained himself. The instinct to hurl a spear was born in him; spears had always been the most important part of his whole life. However, all his life he had thrown spears with arm power alone. Now he waited because he was not sure; for a second he was tempted to remove the spear from the



throwing-stick. Then the feel of it gave him confidence. It was strong and good. He must trust it.

He shifted the spear a bit, remembering the lessons taught by practice. To control the eager spirit of the green wood, the spear must be held exactly right and the throwing-stick must be given just the right motion. Hawk remained still until the wind and the gently rustling grass told him that the approaching dogs were about as far away as the tuft of withered grass had been. He squinted his eyes, trying hard to see. The head and fore parts of a dog were framed in the grass.

They were there for only a split second, but that was enough. Anyone who lived by hunting had to learn, first of all, to take advantage of opportunities. Hawk cast his spear.

He heard it strike, and saw a thrashing in the tall grass. Instantly he was running forward, his club upraised. Meeting the other dog, he side-stepped as it struck at his throat. Hawk smashed his club solidly down on the dog's head. It staggered, threw itself about, and went limp.

Scarcely pausing, for he was in the fire's outer glow and therefore in a very dangerous place, Hawk went forward to get the spear-stricken dog. It was a female, and the one he had killed with his club was a big male. Doubtless they were a mated pair with puppies somewhere in the forest.

Hawk dragged both dogs to the fire and left them beside Willow. Then he squatted down near the fire.

He still shivered with excitement at the power of the wonderful new weapon that was now his. It was a long-sought answer to two pressing problems: how to stay far enough from dangerous game and at the same time attack it; and how to reach out and kill small, agile beasts which hitherto had eluded the hunters. At last he had a weapon with which he could strike at an unheard-of distance.

Hawk sat still, so entranced by the new and wonderful spear-thrower that he paid small attention to the familiar smell of burned hair and roasting meat. But when Willow brought him the roasted haunch of one of the dogs he tore happily at it. Finished, he looked to his fire and lay down to sleep.

His slumber was light. Ceaseless vigilance, an ability to be awake and on one's feet fighting, all in the same instant, was the price of life. Hawk awakened at intervals to tend his fire and to test the various winds. No danger threatened.

He slept sporadically, satisfied that all was well and still refusing to worry about what tomorrow might bring. Banishment should have meant death in a matter of hours, but he and Willow were still alive and had food in plenty. They also had fire, their surest protection. Hawk rested contentedly, knowing that at any moment he might have to fight for his life but accepting that fact as a normal part of existence.

With dawn he rose and ate more meat which Willow cooked. The day would bring its own special problems and the question of coping with them occupied his thoughts.

Until now his life had been a nomadic one. The tribe to which he had belonged had always found it necessary to wander, to follow the game herds upon which they depended for food. Often they passed one season hundreds of miles from where they had spent the previous one. There was no such thing as a settled or permanent home.

And the tribe, with a dozen strong hunters, had been able to wander. That many spearmen, presenting a united front, could beat back almost anything that attacked. Even the ferocious saber-tooth was not a match for twelve spears.

But Hawk knew that he could not possibly wander now. Even if he were not accompanied by the wounded Willow, one man alone was no match for all the dangers of traveling. He must have a haven, some place of safety, and the fire was the safest place he knew. He hauled more wood and built his fire up. Then he looked restlessly about.

The second absolute necessity for just staying alive was plenty of food. For the present he had plenty, but it would not last. He must get more, and the fact that he had to hunt meant that he must leave the safety of the fire.

Hawk carefully fashioned two more spears for himself, then lashed points to them from the flints and thongs in his pouch. He tried them both for balance, and fitted them to his spear-thrower. Satisfied, he glided softly into the forest.

Seeking game, Hawk walked as cunningly and as carefully as any four-footed hunter. He used his eyes, ears, and nose, as completely as any beast of the forest. Always he hunted into the wind, so that he might be sure of everything about him.

Suddenly he halted, his nostrils dilating as they detected a faint scent. The odor strengthened, bringing to him positive news of a great cave bear. Hawk stood still, smelling, looking, listening. Cave-dwelling bears were monstrous things, even more savage than the saber-tooth tigers. From time to time, when they were desperate for food, the tribe's hunters had attacked and killed a bear, but such a creature was far more than a match for one man. Still, for safety's sake, he had better locate the bear's cave.

Cautiously he stole forward, only to halt again as a new scent began to mingle with that of the bear. It was the odor of dire wolves, giant beasts larger than the deer they usually hunted. A pack of them must be after the bear.

Just ahead of him was a small hillock crowned with a group of trees. Hawk ran swiftly up the slope and stopped beneath a tree whose low-hanging branches offered a quick climb to safety if need be. He peered around the trunk.

Across a small meadow, and against the side of another hill, the cave's black entrance made a gaping hole. Taller than a man, it was little more than a yard wide. Nothing

was visible, but Hawk was sure that the bear was within his den. Wolf scent grew stronger.

They swept into sight, a score of them. Lean gray beasts, each almost as tall as a man, the pack was strong and knew its prey. Even a herd of giant bison might fear such a pack. Should they attack a marching tribe, one unprotected by fire, the best the hunters could do would be to climb the nearest trees. Unfortunate humans caught on the ground would be torn apart in seconds.

The pack was intent on the bear's den, and without hesitation swept in to attack. To Hawk, watching from the opposite hill, the cave's dark entrance seemed to become a shade darker, and then the massive head and shoulders of the bear were framed in it. The wolves were leaping now, crowding each other in their eagerness to close. They swept in from every angle.



Like swift clubs the bear's paws flashed. His great jaws snapped, and three wolves lay where they had fallen. More pressed in, so many that, for a moment, the cave's mouth and the bear were almost hidden beneath a wave of wolves.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had started, the fight was over. Leaving its dead behind, the battered pack withdrew. For a few minutes the wolves milled uncertainly, as though they would attack again. Then they trotted away.

Hawk waited until he was sure they were gone before he left the sheltering trees. It had been a surprising fight. The bear should have been killed, and would have had he been caught in the open. But he had chosen his position well and defended it easily. His tender flanks and belly, his most vulnerable parts, had been protected on three sides, and he had won his battle.

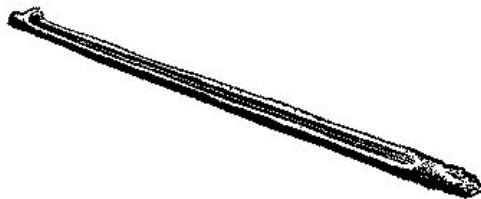
It was something to think about. Hawk added the incident to his wealth of forest lore.

He continued his hunt, searching out those places where he thought game would be. Presently he stopped again. Just ahead, a herd of antelope was feeding. Hawk stalked the small beasts carefully. He fixed a spear in his throwing-stick, stepped around a tree, and found himself within a few yards of the antelope.

They reacted in their usual fashion. Leaping and jumping erratically, they seemed for a moment unable to decide just where they were to go. Hawk cast his spear and saw it transfix a buck. Entering one side, the spear head and six inches of shaft protruded through the other. Happily Hawk went forth to retrieve his game. Again he had done it. Again he had killed game at a greater distance than a man could throw a hand spear by strength alone.

As Hawk shouldered the little buck, he straightened and stood still, alerted by the scent of dog. It was a puzzling odor, last night's stale smell mingled with a faint but fresh one. Hawk followed his nose.

He looked beneath the roots of a great tree at two snarling puppies.



# SABER-TOOTH

## CHAPTER 4

A LARGE tree had blown down, and when its imbedded roots had been torn out of their resting place they had carried a great quantity of dirt with them. It still clung to the upraised roots, forming a roof of mingled earth and small stones. Beneath it, crouched as close to the back wall as they could get, the furry puppies slunk close together for comfort and safety. They were too old to be sucklings, and beaten trails proved that they had already made short hunting expeditions of their own into nearby thickets and bramble patches. One was dun-colored, the other silvery gray. They snarled their defiance of the intruder.

As Hawk peered into the den, he realized that these were probably pups of the two dogs slain in attacking his camp. Deprived of their parents' protection, only miraculous luck had kept them from falling prey to some predator. If left alone, they would certainly be killed before long because they were too small to defend themselves. Hawk considered.

He should not leave them here, and thus let something else rob him of what, by right of discovery, was his proper food. But there was meat in plenty at the camp and now he had the little antelope buck as well. In hot weather meat spoiled quickly, and if he killed these puppies now the chances were good they would rot before he and Willow could eat them.

A happy thought occurred to him.

He needn't kill the puppies at all. They were small, and could be captured easily. If he caught them alive, and carried them back to the fire, they could be tied and held prisoners. They needn't be killed until he and Willow needed meat.

Hawk stood for a full minute interpreting the various sights, sounds, and scents. To capture the puppies he must get down on his hands and knees and crawl part way into the den. Before he did so he wanted to be sure that no danger threatened. But he could see nothing unusual.

He returned his attention to the puppies, who were pushing as hard as they could against the back end of the cave and watching him with bright, hostile eyes. Hawk crawled into the cave and reached out his hand.

Instantly the silver-gray puppy was upon it. Launching himself with all the fury at his command, he slashed with his white, needle-sharp puppy teeth. Hawk grimaced as he withdrew his scratched hand. The puppy took a stance in front of his companion, as though to protect him. He snarled and bristled fiercely.

This time Hawk struck hard, sweeping his hand forward and clenching his fist around the puppy's fore paws and body. The puppy squirmed, and tried to get his teeth into play. He could not because Hawk gripped him too strongly. Instantly transferring the silver-gray puppy to his left hand, Hawk snatched the other with his right.

As quickly as possible, dragging the pair with him, he withdrew from the cave. He stood erect and retested the winds, then looked and listened. All was peaceful.

The puppies were squirming to free themselves. The silver-gray had got hold of Hawk's horny left fist and was enthusiastically chewing on it. Unable to get any purchase, or to brace his body, he could not break the skin with his small puppy jaws. But he could make himself felt. Hawk took the puppy by the scruff of his neck, tucked him under his right arm, and kept his right hand tightly closed around the dun-colored one. The pups squirmed and wriggled, trying to get away, and Hawk cuffed them.

He stooped, shouldered the little antelope, clasped his spear and throwing-stick in his left hand, and started back toward the fire. As he neared it, he stopped and slunk into a thicket. A saber-tooth, a big one, was lying on a ledge of rock, studying the fire. Cautiously Hawk retraced his steps. He took a new direction, around the tiger, and trotted lightly into camp.

Having reached the safety of the fire, Hawk glanced back at the ledge upon which lay the saber-tooth, and sniffed the breeze to get the tiger's scent. It was a big male, and the very fact that it was so stealthily intent on the fire was proof that it was hunting. They would have to be very wary. Hungry meat-eaters had almost endless patience. If this one had decided to watch the camp, it might wait for days on end. But there was no danger as long as they stayed close by the fire.

Willow, who had been out gathering seeds, was grinding them in a hollow stone she had found. She left her work and rose, for the first time able to walk with some freedom. Now she had only a painful limp. Young and strong, she would now recover quickly from the wound.

She looked at the puppies in Hawk's arms, and took them from him. Then she sat down, cradling the pups and playing with them. They wriggled from her arms to the ground, and Hawk raised his club, scowling his annoyance.

This was not the way to handle the puppies; they would run away at the first opportunity and should be confined or crippled so they could not run far. But he stayed his descending club. The puppies seemed perfectly contented to stay near the girl. When one ventured a little way from her, it returned as soon as she snapped her fingers. Hawk forgot about them.

He stretched out beside the fire and went instantly to sleep. This he must do when he could, for only rarely was there an opportunity to rest. He dared not relax when he went hunting, and night required constant vigilance.

An hour later he sprang erect, his hand shooting out to the club at his side. Then, looking for what had awakened him, he saw the silver-gray puppy making a ferocious attack on his fur girdle. The other one was tumbling over and over in the grass, waging a fierce mock battle with a stick. Smiling at their antics, Willow became sober-faced as soon as Hawk sprang to his feet.

For a moment he was angry. He raised his club, tempted to smash the gray puppy's brains out with it, but the look of pleading on Willow's face made him desist. He lowered the club, pushed the puppy out of the way with his foot, caught up his spear, and stalked haughtily off to gather more wood. Unabashed, the gray puppy trailed at his heels.

A flock of big, turkey-like birds scattered ahead of him. One by one they rose to wing away. Hawk drew back his club to hurl it at one of the birds, but he was forestalled by the gray puppy. Yapping hysterically, he flung himself forward and leaped upon a running bird.

He fastened his small teeth on the wing feathers, and strained backward with all his strength. The running bird dragged him, but the puppy would not let go nor could the bird rise while thus encumbered. Hawk stepped forward, grabbed the running bird, snatched it away from the puppy, and wrung its neck.

He stood still, dangling the big bird by its twisted neck and smacking his lips. Such game was a delicacy which the tribe almost never enjoyed because the hunters could seldom get close enough to kill it. The Spear-Maker looked down at the panting puppy, who now reared against his knee, stretching an eager nose toward the bird. Hawk stared quizzically at him.

A few hours ago the puppy had been a wild, savage thing, ready and willing to fight him as best it could. Now it was almost tame. Too young to know any better, it had accepted the humans in place of its own parents, and had even aided in the hunt.

This was something entirely new to Hawk, and therefore something he could not understand. Certainly he would not have the bird had not the puppy caught it for him. This much he realized. But there was, in his mind, no possible connection between one single incident and the idea of using the puppy as a hunting companion. Men had always hunted for themselves and he would continue to do so. But at least he felt more kindly disposed toward his small prisoner.

He gathered an armful of wood and returned to the fire. The dun puppy gambled happily out to meet him. Kicking him aside, Hawk threw the dead bird down beside Willow. The gray puppy sat expectantly on his haunches, turning bright little eyes from Willow to Hawk and back at the bird. He barked sharply, and wagged his furry tail.

Hawk ate a piece of antelope, saying nothing about the remainder. Certainly there was more missing than he and Willow had eaten, therefore she must have fed the puppies

while he had been sleeping. That was all right as long as there was plenty.

His meat finished, Hawk tossed the bone to the gray puppy and moved restlessly about the camp. The lurking tiger posed a very real threat, and one that must be dealt with. It was not the ordinary night prowler or occasional daytime visitor. This tiger had marked its quarry down and evidently had a plan. It seemed to know humans and their habits, and sooner or later would catch Willow or Hawk, or both, away from their fire and in a place where they might safely be attacked.

Armed with the two spears, his throwing-stick, and his club, Hawk left the fire. He circled through the forest to the rocky ledge upon which he had seen the tiger. It had left, and Hawk moved cautiously up to the place where it had been. He found the tiger's resting place in a ledge of rocks from which the camp could be studied to perfect advantage. Keeping a spear poised, and constantly on the alert, Hawk followed the tiger's tracks.

For a moment he was puzzled because they led downhill and away from the camp. He stooped in order to study the tiger's trail more clearly. The beast was a long way ahead of him, but there was always the possibility that it might circle and lay an ambush. Hawk hunted into the wind, always trying to know what lay ahead, and whenever the tiger's trail veered with the wind, he circled until he picked it up again. A half hour later he knew why the tiger had abandoned its watch of their camp.

A large herd of camels had moved into the area. Their scent came faintly at first, but as Hawk moved nearer, the odor strengthened. They had passed among the little hillocks and winding valleys toward the same river meadows upon which the tribe had unsuccessfully attempted to trap the giant bison. Hawk swerved from the tiger's trail and climbed a hill.

From the summit he looked into a partly wooded valley. The camel herd had passed here, so many of them that they had left a beaten road behind them. Below, in the valley, Hawk saw the tiger.

It was eating from a large camel it had pulled down. Vultures were wheeling through the sky, and others had already alighted in the nearby trees. Endlessly patient, they were waiting until the tiger was through before they descended to feast on what remained. Skulking in the grass were two other hopeful scavengers: a pair of wild cats that were also lingering until the tiger was finished before they fought over whatever was left.

Hawk had previously noticed that the saber-tooth was an old beast. Yet it was not too old to kill a full-grown camel. Even though some of its vigor was gone, it was a beast to watch carefully. Hawk went back down the hillock and started toward the river meadows.

From another vantage he looked down upon the camel herd. Hundreds strong, they were feeding avidly on the rich river grass. Judging by their condition, they had



journeyed a long way from some arid, drought-stricken pastures. But at last they were here and now would give themselves over to satisfying their hunger. They would stay here until the river meadows were grazed bare or until they were driven elsewhere by raiding beasts.

Already the raiders were gathering. As Hawk watched, a small pack of dogs swooped upon a camel calf feeding at its mother's side. The mother whirled to defend her young, striking high with her big hooves. Three of the dogs fainted before her, luring her away and distracting her attention while three more went in and killed the calf.

Hawk turned away, satisfied. The camel herd was a blessing in more ways than one. He himself could hunt them, for one man could kill a camel. Also, it was very unlikely that any predator would bother to stalk a man when there was easier and safer game to be had. He was sure that the tiger would stay near the camel herd as long as the camels stayed.

But, though Hawk needn't fear the tiger in the near future, there were other things he must do. Never far from his thoughts was the fact that he was a lone man. Banished from his tribe, he lacked the safety which numbers alone could furnish. When faced with danger, he could not present the many spear points that the tribe could.

He needed more striking power, more weapons. But if he carried two spears and a club he was already burdened down with everything he could conveniently carry and handle. The throwing-stick was a thing of great power, but suppose he was confronted by a pack of dogs or wolves? After he had thrown his two spears he must still rely on his club, and that meant dangerous, close-quarter work. Hawk turned back toward the fire, giving all his thoughts to this new problem.

All about were the scents of small beasts: rodents, deer, antelope, and different tree-climbing creatures. According to their natures, they either bounded out of his way or froze tightly where they were, hoping to escape detection by staying quiet. Hawk paid no particular attention to any of them, for these were creatures he needn't fear and at the present didn't want. But suddenly he stopped, his nostrils dilated. The wind bore him the scent of another wild cat, and he knew from the odor that the cat was in a dangerous mood. Furthermore, it was coming his way. He fitted a spear into his throwing-stick.

The little cat came upon him suddenly, bursting out of the grass and hurling itself recklessly toward him. Hawk waited, not wanting to cast his spear until the right moment and not afraid of the little cat anyway. He could kill it with his club if need be, but the throwing-stick was a new power, and he wished to use it as much as possible. When the bouncing wild cat was about twenty feet away, Hawk smoothly cast his spear.

The flint-edged point snicked into the beast's neck and came out its back. The cat reared straight up, clawing at the spear shaft, then fell on its side. For a moment its paws twitched feebly, then it was still.

As Hawk walked slowly up to his fallen quarry, he understood why it had rushed at him in such an insane fashion. In the recent past, the cat had foolishly tackled a porcupine, and had become half-crazed from the pain of the quills. There were so many of the needle-sharp barbs in its cheeks and face that the tawny gray fur was almost hidden beneath them. The cat had evidently tried to bite the porcupine, and had succeeded only in filling its mouth and tongue with quills. Hawk looked at the little spears with respect.

He knew the porcupines, some of which were almost as big as dire wolves. They were stupid things that knew only how to gnaw bark, and to eat grass and roots. But of all the creatures in this savage land, porcupines were the only ones equipped to survive without fighting. Any beast that attacked those bristling arrays of small spears did so to its own sorrow and frequently its own death.

Hawk pulled his spear out of the wild cat and shouldered the carcass. It was meat, and therefore to be saved. But it had also given him an idea. A human could not carry and handle more than two or three full-sized spears, but what if, like the porcupine, he were armed with many small ones?

When Hawk returned, Willow was turning the bird over the fire on a long spit. The puppies crowded over to frolic about him, and he pushed them aside, his nostrils twitching from the savory smell of the cooking fowl.

Hawk tore hungrily at his portion, and looked appreciatively at the girl. Meat prepared this way was delicious, much better than that which was just hung over the fire on a green stick. Usually the outside of that was burned and the inside raw. The bird was cooked to a flaky turn all through. Hawk wiped his hands on his fur girdle, threw the bones to the puppies, and let them scramble for them. His stomach filled with hot food, Hawk sighed happily.



"I never had such food before," he said. "It is good."



Her own portion finished, Willow sat cross-legged beside the fire, weaving a basket from limber willow shoots she had gathered. Hawk watched her idly. The art of basket-making had long been known to the women of his tribe. When they gathered a store of food, they used woven baskets in which to keep it. But the baskets were never kept for very long. On a long march nobody wanted to carry extra or unnecessary weight. Only on those rare occasions when the tribe stayed somewhere for an extended period did baskets appear.

Hawk looked up quickly, distracted by a rustling sound. But it was only the skin of the bird they had eaten. Pending some possible future use, Willow had hung it on a limb and he had heard the feathers rustling. Returning to his problem of more weapons, Hawk went to the dead cat, pulled a quill from its cheek, and looked at it.

Although he had tried many times, he had never been able to make any practical use of the little barbs. The quills served their original owners well enough, but they were too thin and flexible even to think of tipping a hand spear with them. But he might make a small spear and see how it worked.

Hawk emptied his pouch of flint spear heads and studied them intently. All had been fashioned for heavy spears. Attached to a shaft smaller than that for which they had been designed, they would make it unwieldy and top-heavy. Nor could they be reshaped without spoiling them. He put all the spear heads back into his pouch.

Unmindful of the gray puppy that tagged at his heels, he rose and walked to an outcropping of stone on the side of the hill. He pried among the tumbled pieces of flint that had broken off, examining every piece with painstaking thoroughness, rejecting most of them. He was not concerned with size, but rather with flaws, conformation, and the way any given piece might be expected to flake. Finally, after an hour's search, he returned to the fire with half a dozen rough pieces of flint.

Now it was necessary to haul more wood for the night's fire. Grudgingly, reluctant to leave his task, he rose and went into the forest. While he made trip after trip, Willow

sat quietly, shaping her basket. When it was finished, she lined the bottom with grass, then put in a large quantity of seeds she had gathered. As Hawk brought in his last load of wood, she began cooking more meat.

Holding a long piece of flint in his right hand, Hawk pried a flake from one of the pieces he had selected. Carefully, making no sudden moves that might injure the small head, he pried another flake off. Ordinarily it took only a few minutes to make a good spear head, but these, being smaller, must be made with great care. The Spear-Maker continued to shape the head he had planned, using pressure to remove one tiny flake at a time.

When he was finished he looked critically at the point in his hand. It was very good, better than most of the spear heads in his pouch, but he thought he could make a still better one. By the fire's light he crouched down again and went to work. Willow had been sleeping for hours when he finally thrust the last half-finished head into his pouch.

With morning he resumed his task, so absorbed in it that he forgot all else, except to eat what Willow gave him. Finally he balanced half a dozen flint heads in his hand. Again and again he inspected them minutely, looking at each for flaws. He could find none. He went into the forest and returned with an armful of hardwood shoots.

He knew what he had in mind, but he was somewhat at a loss as to how to accomplish it. The darts must be lighter and shorter than spears, but they must be long enough so that he could rest them in the throwing-stick and still balance them. With a sharp piece of flint he scraped a stick until it was perfectly smooth. Working with painstaking precision he smoothed off all the uneven edges, so that the stick balanced perfectly. He made another, and another.

It was noon of the following day before he had finished his task. He had half a dozen darts, better fashioned and balanced than any hand spears he had ever made. All six of them did not weigh as much as two spears, nor would they be any harder to carry. With mounting excitement he fitted one into his throwing-stick, getting the feel of it in countless practice casts before he finally threw.

A grunt of disappointment escaped him. Lacking the weight of a spear, the dart wobbled in flight and fell three feet to one side of the tuft of grass at which he had aimed. Nor could he get as much distance with the lighter weapon. He tried again and again, and failed each time to strike the tuft of grass. Hawk sat before the fire, chin in his hands. There must be some way to make the darts fly straight, but what was it? A shadow fell across him and he looked up.

Willow stood beside him, offering him baked cakes on a flat piece of stone. Hawk glared at her.

"Where is the meat?"

"There is no more. You have not been hunting."

Without answering Hawk reached out to grasp the dun-colored puppy by the scruff of its neck. He lifted it with one hand, and reached for his club. This was why he had brought the puppies; now let them serve as food. He raised his club.

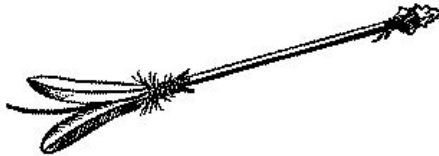
Willow moved so swiftly that she was in and out before the heavy club could descend. She snatched the puppy from his hands, and stepped backward. Hawk stared, too startled to move. A woman had defied him! As he got to his feet with a growl of rage, she swung away from him, shielding the puppy.

"Do not kill it! We have food!"

Hawk took a threatening forward step. Willow stood her ground for a moment, then turned and ran. The gray puppy raced at her heels. Furious, Hawk ran after them, club in hand.

Willow ran across the clearing to the border of the woods. At the base of a huge, lichen-encrusted boulder, she stumbled and went to one knee. Quickly she rose, turning to face the enraged Hawk. Her eyes widened in fear, but not of the man. She was staring over his shoulder.

Turning, Hawk saw the hunting saber-tooth between them and the safety of their fire.



# TAIL FEATHER

## CHAPTER 5

THE TIGER crouched close to the ground, a fierce, tawny menace. Its saber teeth, long upper tusks protruding six inches from either side of its jaw, flashed white in the sunshine. Its short tail was bent in a half curve behind it, and the powerful shoulders rippled as it gathered itself for the attack. It did not snarl, but merely looked with deadly eyes at the two humans it had trapped.

Hawk backed cautiously, keeping Willow behind him and scarcely noticing the puppies. To have an enemy between him and the nearest place of safety was a situation that should never occur. He glanced quickly at the fire, where he had left his spears and throwing-stick. He knew that it was impossible to fight a saber-tooth with just a club alone. But that was all he had, and he clenched his fingers around it desperately.

He wasted no time wondering why the tiger was here instead of harassing the camel herd, where he had been sure it would be. Instead, he glanced all around, taking exact note of everything that lay about him. A little to one side was a nest of boulders. If he could get to them before the tiger charged, the boulders would serve as weapons should he lose his club in the fight. They would also supply some slight protection. Hawk began edging toward the boulders.

The tiger followed him, in no hurry. A cat who knew it had a victim trapped, it was taking its time and playing a bit before delivering the final killing blow. The tiger advanced a step at a time, hind quarters near the ground and humped shoulders rising. Hawk gauged the distance to the boulders, and planned his next move.

Men of the early wandering tribes were distinguished from beasts principally by their intelligence, their ability to think. It was a man, and not a tiger or bear, that had first thought of picking up a piece of flint and using it as an axe. It was a man who thought of tying a flint head to a stick and thus having a spear. Man learned that fire could be a servant rather than a terrible master. Man, eternally groping for cause and effect, rather than meekly accepting what offered, had progressed because he was inquisitive. Despite the fact that many had died because man insisted on tampering with things toward which no mere instinct had directed him, those who survived had learned more and more.

A deer or antelope in Hawk's place would have trembled and awaited the tiger's charge. A wolf might have prepared to fight back, knowing his case was hopeless but fighting by instinct. Hawk sought a means to outwit his foe because he knew that even hopeless situations could be changed. He should have died when he was banished, but he had not. If he died now, it would not be because he had not tried to live and to

protect the girl with him. Again he gauged the exact distance to the boulders, and gripped his club a little more tightly.

All in a split second, the tiger made Hawk's decision for him. Stiffening his tail, he padded rapidly forward, snarling. Hawk took two quick steps to the side. As he did so, he shouted as loudly as he could. It was a war cry, and a challenge, meant to focus the enemy's attention upon him and to keep that enemy away from what must, if possible, be protected. He was aware of Willow's breaking away, running toward the pile of boulders. He grasped the club with both hands, ready for the most smashing blow he could deliver.

Without any warning, a new warrior entered the fight. Shrilling his own war cry, the gray puppy flung himself straight at the mighty saber-tooth.

He was small, weighing scarcely a dozen pounds, but every inherited sense and instinct had taught him that, from the time he was old enough to walk, he must help protect his own kind. Accepting Willow and Hawk as such, he was giving everything he had to give.

The tiger stopped, diverted by the attack. When it slapped with its paws, the gray puppy wasn't there. Instead, he was boring in from the side, scoring the saber-tooth's flank with his puppy teeth. The tiger twisted around, spitting its rage at this insignificant tormentor. But now the other puppy had entered the fight on his brother's side. The tiger pounced with both paws and pinned the dun-colored puppy between them. A shrill scream rent the air.

For a split second Hawk hesitated, for he had neither expected nor counted on interference. Then he recovered himself. The tiger had made a kill, and for at least a short time would gloat over its triumph. It would rend and claw the dead puppy before turning to deal with the other one or before again centering its attention on Hawk and Willow. There would be a brief lull, and Hawk took fullest advantage of it.

He wheeled, pushing Willow around. Instantly she fell in beside him, and they raced around the preoccupied saber-tooth. Hawk heard the tiger's angry cough, but did not look back for now it was a question of speed.

As they reached the fire, he heard the gray puppy's shrill battle cry again. Almost without breaking stride Hawk swooped to snatch his spears and throwing-stick. He swung about.

The saber-tooth had come as near the fire as it dared. Having cast the body of the dun puppy aside, it was snarling in enraged frustration at the two humans. The gray puppy continued its valiant attack, and the tiger swung to strike at it. But the puppy was too agile and elusive.

Hawk fitted a spear into his throwing-stick and purposely advanced. Seeing him, the tiger paid no further attention to the fiercely attacking gray puppy. The little dog was

nothing more than a nuisance, now that bigger game was in sight. The saber-tooth crouched and gathered itself to meet the man's attack.

Hawk slowly continued, keeping his eyes on the tiger, on its tense muscles, its jerking tail, and its glaring eyes. At every second he must know exactly what it was going to do next.

Precisely at the right time—in another flick of an eye the saber-tooth would have charged him—he stopped and cast his spear. It sang through the air, glancing along the tiger's neck and burying itself in one of the humped shoulders. Hawk stood his ground, for to run now might prove fatal, and fitted his second spear into the throwing-stick.

The saber-tooth roared in pain and rage, and turned to bite at the protruding spear shaft. Blood ebbed from around the imbedded flint head, and ran down the tawny leg.

Hawk kept his eyes on the tiger, awaiting his second—and last—chance to throw a spear. Fortunately, the saber-tooth was intent on rending the spear shaft, as though that were a live enemy which had hurt it, and had no thought for anything else. Hawk cast his second spear.

This time he struck where he had wanted to, in the neck, and a gush of blood spouted around the shaft. The saber-tooth roared again, and reared on its padded hind feet. With powerful front paws it struck at the spear shaft, fell over backward, twisted to its feet, and came forward with great, leaping bounds.

Hawk stood with his club ready, prepared to fight to a finish. The tiger had been mortally hurt, but was possessed of such strength and vitality that there was no way of telling just when it would collapse. Then it faltered, coughed hoarsely, took three stumbling steps, and sank to the ground.

Still full of fight, the gray puppy charged up, seized a fold of tawny skin, and strained backward with all his strength. Puppyish growls that foretold the fighting dog to come rolled from its distended throat.

Hawk turned to find Willow, a heavy stone in her hands, at his shoulder. Then he looked back at the puppy.

Bristled, stiff-legged, he was walking around and around the tiger. At last convinced that it was dead, he turned contemptuously to scratch dirt over the fallen enemy. Walking proudly, he came back to join Hawk and Willow.

It was over. They had been attacked by one of the most ferocious of their enemies, and they had defeated it. The fight had left its valuable lessons, too. When the gray puppy brushed Hawk's leg, he reached down to stroke him lightly. The puppy wriggled in delight, and turned to lick his master's hand. From now on his place as a valued member of the camp was secure.



Hawk and Willow grasped the dead tiger by the front paws and dragged it over the grass to the fire. They knelt on opposite sides, flint knives in their hands, while they removed the thick pelt, pulled out the embedded spears, and cut up the meat. And it was Hawk himself who hacked a choice part from one leg and gave it to the dog. The gray puppy lay before the fire, growling softly as he gnawed his portion.

The skinning and dismembering of the tiger and the dead puppy over, and the offal dragged far enough so scavengers would feel safe in coming to feed on it, Willow devoted herself to cooking while Hawk stared into the fire.

It had been a very close call; without the intervention of the two pups he and Willow might have been killed. Obviously they needed better protection than they had, and the answer to that lay in Hawk's ability to strike hard and often at any foe. But how to acquire that ability?

Hawk fondled his six darts, and balanced them in his hands. If only the darts were not deflected by any chance wind! If he could find some way to make them obey him, to hit what he threw them at . . .

He started suddenly, alarmed. Again it was only the bird skin, fluttering in the wind. Irritably Hawk rose, tore it from the bush, and scowled at the rustling feathers. Then he noticed the square-tipped tail. He studied it thoughtfully.

This he had seen before in some connection, but he could not at once remember what it was. Then, suddenly, he had it. The bird, the little bird which proved whether or not a spear was true! The one with which he had tested Short-Leg's first spear had not been able to fly straight when its tail feathers were broken. But the second one *had* flown straight. What did the tail feathers have to do with it? Did the bird with the broken tail lack the same power that his darts did?

Hawk plucked a couple of feathers from the skin and laid them in the palm of his hand. He looked closely at them, but could see no connection between birds and darts. He let a feather drift to earth, closely watching its erratic course. Again and again he let the feather drop.

By nightfall he was no nearer a solution to his problem. He had tried letting the feathers drop from every possible angle and in every possible way, and there was nothing about their descent to indicate how they helped guide a bird or how they might guide a spear. Still puzzled, Hawk brought in more firewood and lay down to sleep.

His problem was there to greet him when he awakened. He was sure that there was something important in the fact that birds could fly straight when they had a whole tail, but couldn't when they did not. But what was it? He stared moodily into the fire. When he finally rose the gray puppy followed him. Hawk paid no attention, but walked directly to a place near the willows and leaned on his spear, studying the birds flitting about the branches.

They were of various kinds, from little insect-eaters to fruit-and-bud eaters, and had different methods of flight. The insect-eaters could bend and twist with unbelievable agility as they pursued their prey. For the most part, the others flew straight. But all seemed to use their tails a great deal, bending them according to the direction in which they wanted to turn or holding them straight if they wished to fly straight.

Hawk's interest heightened. As he watched, a big predatory bird swooped out of the sky toward the willows, and the little birds scattered frantically. The big bird selected a victim, and banked sharply to cut it off. The little fruit-eater dove close to the ground, so close that the tips of his beating wings almost touched the earth. The baffled attacker spread his wing and tail feathers wide, to avoid striking the ground, and rose sharply into the air.

Hawk wandered slowly back to the fire. He had seen and learned much that he had not known before. With renewed interest he picked up a dart and examined its slender length. He took hold of the butt end and squinted down the shaft, then examined the butt.

A bird's tail was attached to the rear extremity. Always, when the bird wished to fly straight, and apparently they could do so whenever they wished, the tail was straight. Hawk rolled the dart over and over in his hand. Experimentally he laid one of the feathers against the butt, holding it in place with his thumb. He bound it with sinew.

Hawk stood erect, the dart in his throwing stick, and cast at a tuft of grass. Great excitement seized him.

The dart landed to one side, but it was much nearer the target than any he had thrown so far. Also he thought he knew what was wrong. A self-taught master of balance, the Spear-Maker had noticed that the butt of the thrown dart had traveled too low in flight.

He retrieved the dart, unwound the strip of sinew and laid another feather on the butt, on the opposite side. Carefully he rewound them with the sinew, and pulled experimentally to make sure they were tight. He stood up and cast the dart again.

A happy shout of triumph burst from him. The dart had struck the grass tuft squarely, within two inches of the place at which it had been aimed. Hawk bounded high in the air, overcome with elation. He raced happily forward to retrieve his dart, and cast it again. Twenty times he cast at the tuft of grass and every time the dart hit close to where he wanted it to hit.

This was it; he had found the answer. Hawk crouched by the fire, fletching the rest of his darts. Willow, who had been watching with great interest, sat across the fire as he worked. She had buried the dead puppy's skin in the damp ground by the willows, and when it was soaked she had scraped the hair from it. Then she had stretched it out in the sun, with stones on the edges to keep it taut. Now she was working with the cured, parchment-like skin.

She folded it, forming a long, deep pouch, and pierced the edges at intervals with an awl made of sharpened bone. She laced it with sinew, then cut a long, thin strip of skin which she folded in half. This she attached to serve as a shoulder strap. When Hawk finished fletching his darts Willow gave him the container she had made. Hawk looked at it, puzzled.

"It is for your darts," Willow explained. "You can carry all of them within it."

Hawk grunted his pleasure. The container was well and strongly made, and was a very practical arrangement. He put his darts in it, heads down and feathered butts protruding. When he slung the filled pouch over his shoulder, he could instantly reach any dart. A new sense of confidence rose within him.

Now, carrying his club, spears and throwing-stick, his darts in the pouch, he was armed as several men. He could strike hard and fast at anything that threatened, and he needn't depend exclusively on the club after he had thrown both spears. Now he could keep on throwing, and though the darts lacked a spear's range and power, he could still hurl them from the throwing-stick farther than the average hunter could throw a hand spear.

The pouch of darts on his shoulder, and the puppy trotting happily beside him, Hawk ranged into the forest. He did not try to drive the puppy back, nor tell Willow to hold it, because he cared little whether or not he found game. There was meat in plenty at the camp. The Spear-Maker was roaming largely because he wanted to try his darts on various targets and under different conditions.

Trotting ahead of him, the puppy stopped suddenly. His ears were alert, and one fore paw was lifted as he remained intent on something. Hawk watched closely. He knew that wild dogs hunted game in this fashion, but had never seen a hunting dog at such close range.

The puppy took a few more steps and dropped his head to the ground. He snuffled audibly, and his tail began to wag. Keeping his nose to the ground, the puppy trotted swiftly away. He did not bark, or make any sound. Hawk advanced to find out what the puppy was hunting.

A deer had passed this way, but to the man the scent was very faint. Hawk had to kneel close to the ground in order to detect it at all. Plainly dogs had an exceptionally keen sense of smell. It was much better than his own, for the puppy had been some distance from the dim trail when he smelled it.

Since the puppy was now out of sight, Hawk began practising with his darts. Time after time he cast them, gaining more and more confidence in his ability to control their feathered flight.

Presently he heard the puppy barking sharply, the sound coming rapidly nearer. A deer appeared among the trees, the puppy almost at its heels. Hawk tensed himself, for here

was an opportunity to throw at a moving target. Crouching in the brush, he laid the throwing-stick in position, fitted a dart into it, and waited.

The deer was a bounding shadow in the forest. It appeared, then disappeared, and appeared again. Hawk kept his eyes on a little opening through which the running deer's course would take it, and not until the deer was in that opening did he step from behind the bush.

Seeing the motion, the deer jumped spasmodically, then stood still a moment, head thrown up. Hurrying, but not fumbling, Hawk cast the dart. It flew straight to its mark. The deer gave a single bound, staggered, and fell.

Hawk ran forward. The deer had been pierced just where he wanted to hit it, behind the foreleg, and it had died almost at once. He pulled out the feathered shaft and looked at it proudly. It was good. In the darts he now was master of a weapon with three-fold magic: the hardness of stone, the strength of wood, the flight of birds.



# MAMMOTH HERD

## CHAPTER 6

NO LONGER a puppy, but a strong, agile beast who had grown unbelievably in a very few months, the gray dog sat by the fire, staring into the forest. His tail was straight behind him, his pointed ears alert, and his head slightly turned as he sought stronger evidence of some scent or sound that must have come very faintly to him. On the other side of the fire, Hawk watched intently.

In the months they had been together he had learned both to trust the dog and to understand him better. In return, the dog had given whole-hearted loyalty to the humans. Nothing could persuade him to leave the camp for very long unless Willow or Hawk went too. Then the dog cheerfully accompanied them.

As time went on, Hawk had also perfected his darts, experimenting ceaselessly until he found just what he wanted. He had discovered that, by using the broad parts of wing feathers instead of tail feathers about the butt of the dart, he could get better distance without sacrificing any accuracy, and he had made a new and better throwing-stick. By using a different wood for the shafts, and shaping the flint heads narrower, he could carry nine darts instead of six in his pouch. Continual practice had made him an expert marksman. He knew just what he could do with his darts, exactly how to throw them, and as a consequence he seldom missed.

He was surer of his ability to protect himself, Willow, and their camp from any beast that threatened, even saber-teeth. While remaining prudent, and never going out of his way to seek trouble with the larger beasts, he was no longer in such fear of them. But now a new factor had entered.

He had hunted incessantly; he had to hunt most of the time if he and Willow were to have enough to eat. First the darts and then the dog had increased his hunting ability, so that he could consistently get many kinds of game which the tribe's hunters had almost never been able to bring down. The consequence was that game within easy striking distance of their camp was becoming scarce and wary. The less alert had fallen first; most of what was left had learned to avoid him.

So Hawk now watched the dog very carefully to know just what had attracted his attention. If it was game he could bring down, he would go get it. The dog turned to look at him, whined, and took a few forward steps.

Hawk shouldered his pouch of darts and picked up his throwing-stick and spear. He had learned that the dog reacted differently to different game. If a saber-tooth, a pack of dire wolves, a cave bear, or any other formidable thing were out there in the forest, the dog would be bristled and fearful. For small game he would be eagerly impatient.

Now he was questioning, anxious but uncertain. Therefore he smelled large game which he thought the two of them together might handle.

The dog waited a moment, and again glanced over his shoulder to see what the man was going to do. When Hawk followed him, the dog headed toward the forest, holding his head high the better to catch the elusive scent.

He did not travel fast because as yet he did not have a sure lead. Born to parents that had always had to find their own food, there was within the dog an instinctive and finely developed hunting sense. He knew when to go fast, and when it was better to travel slowly. Only when they were well within the great trees did he increase his pace.

Hawk trotted after him. He stayed alert to the scents, sounds, and sights of the forest, but he need not be as cautious as he once would have been. Experience had taught him that the dog's nose was much keener than his, and that he reacted faster to any possible threat. Hawk centered most of his attention on keeping the dog in sight.

The dog turned to look questioningly at him, and Hawk correctly interpreted the look. He and the dog lived under the same conditions, and faced the same problems. Though one was human and the other animal, they were not so far apart but that each was able to understand the other. Now the dog wanted to know whether they should go on or abandon the hunt.

Hawk stood still, concentrating all his faculties on a strained, intense investigation of whatever lay in the wind. He detected and rejected the scents of various rodents and tree-dwelling beasts. Finally, and faintly, he got the scent which was now very plain to the dog.

It was a giant elk, a monstrous beast with an antler spread so big and clumsy that it frequently troubled its owner in heavy brush or thick forest. This very unwieldiness, coupled with its lack of offensive ability, was its undoing, for already the great elk were very scarce. In his whole life Hawk had seen no more than a dozen of them.

He fitted a dart to his throwing-stick, and at this signal the dog whisked into the forest and disappeared. Hawk trotted easily toward a place he had in mind. The elk would try to escape the dog, but it would not seek deep thickets for a refuge. The elk knew better than to go there.

Hawk soon reached a hillside he knew, a slope where trees with slender branches grew in scattered clumps. He tested the wind, and took a stand where his scent would not betray him.

This was the way he hunted with the dog. The dog's function was to find game and trail it. No pursued beast ran in a straight line. Sooner or later it would circle, and Hawk used his knowledge of animals to determine the place where he might intercept any quarry. He poised a dart in his throwing-stick and waited.

He was a little more tense than usual. This was no deer or antelope he awaited but a monster the size of a bison. It would be a real test of his darts, for until now he had attacked nothing as big as this. A half hour later, he saw the elk.

It came through the trees on the lower slope of the hill, almost exactly where he had expected it to come. Its head was up, massive antlers laid along its back, as it raced swiftly ahead of the pursuing dog. Hawk gauged the distance between the elk and himself and drew his arm a little farther back as he made ready to throw. Just at that instant the elk swerved.

Having seen or scented him, it turned toward the far side of the sparsely forested hill. Hawk ran toward it, trying to lessen the distance, then stopped and cast.

It was a mighty throw, a determined attempt to get the food represented by this huge beast, but the distance was too great for much penetration. He saw the dart pierce the elk's side, and the mottled feathers on the butt trembled from the impact. The elk faltered. Then, regaining its stride, it raced swiftly away.

Hawk took up the trail at a dead run. It was easy to find because a blood spoor marked it, and could be followed by the eye alone. The elk was badly wounded. Though it might run a long way, it would weaken as it ran and could be eventually overtaken. When it was caught, it should be easy prey.

The dog overtook and passed Hawk, flying along the trail as if he knew exactly what to expect. The man pressed along as fast as he could, sure of success.

This had happened once before. He had wounded a buck, and it had run away with his dart. He had tried and been unable to stop the dog from following, but when he had reached the buck the dog was holding it at bay, preventing further flight. The kill had been an easy one, and so Hawk had learned to let the dog run along on the trail of wounded game.

He came suddenly upon the dog, which was bristled and snarling. When Hawk stopped, the dog came back to stand against his knee. He looked inquiringly up, willing to go on but wishing first to know his master's decision.

Hawk considered.

The wind brought him plain scent of a pack of dire wolves. They had evidently intercepted the elk, dragged it down, and were probably feeding on it already. Anger flared in Hawk's eyes. He thought of the dart in the elk, and of the eight darts remaining in his pouch.

There were undoubtedly more than eight wolves in the pack, and they would fight savagely to defend their kill. It would be folly to attack; he had no chance of winning the fight if he started it. Glumly Hawk changed direction and went on in search of other game.

After a time he passed the home of the great cave bear, and swerved to examine it again. The bear was not in its cave, but some distance down the valley, crushing its ponderous way through a tangle of sweet berries. It bent the bushes to the ground, licked up their fruit, and trampled on over the crushed bushes. Hawk swerved and went on. Only a foolish or very desperate lone hunter would try to kill such a beast.

The dog started off on a deer's trail. Hopefully Hawk took a stand where he thought the deer would run, but after an hour the wind brought no scent or sound of the chase. Obviously the deer was a wise one, aware of possible ambushes and with no intention of being trapped. Discouraged, Hawk gave up his stand and returned to the fire. The dog would come in after the deer had outdistanced him.

Grinding seeds in her hollow stone, Willow looked expectantly up. Hawk unslung his pouch, put his throwing-stick beside it, and leaned his spear against a log of wood. Listlessly he bit into one of the cakes Willow brought him, then took another, bigger bite. The cakes were not tasteless, but had a flavor such as he had never known before. He looked inquiringly at Willow.

"There was a little meat left," the girl explained. "I cut it into small pieces and cooked it with the seeds."

"It is good."

Hawk ate his fill of the cakes, and sat staring into the fire, as though he expected to find something there. But there was no answer in the dancing flames and he knew it. There was only one solution to the problem facing them—the age-old remedy his tribe had always sought when faced with a scarcity of food. When there was little game, they must move to some place where there was a chance of finding more.

"We go tomorrow," Hawk said sullenly.

Willow said nothing, but resigned disappointment showed in her face. The life of a wandering hunter was a hard one, with danger at every turn and privation likely. Not soon again would they know the settled comforts of this camp.

The panting dog came back and threw himself wearily down beside the fire. Hawk inspected his darts, looking to the heads, shafts, and the bindings that tied the one to the other. He made a new dart to replace the one carried away by the giant elk, and collected more flints for additional heads. There was no telling where their travels would lead them or what they would encounter on the way. He might be too busy fighting or hunting to have any time for spear and dart making.

Willow was busy with her own preparations. She had gathered and dried a quantity of seeds, berries, and roots, and was packing them into skin containers, which were easier to carry than her open baskets. She, too, realized that neither of them knew where, how far, or for how long they would travel. They could carry with them only the simple necessities of their way of life: Hawk's weapons and materials for making more, dried food, and the all-important fire stones.



Sleeping by the fire that night, the hungry dog growled and twitched his paws as he dreamed of game he had hunted and eaten or game he would like to hunt and eat. He awoke and sniffed the air, then settled himself in a more comfortable position and went back to sleep. This was his life, too, and had been the life of his ancestors. When they killed game, all could eat. Otherwise, all went hungry.

The next morning, Hawk leading, Willow following, and the dog ranging from side to side, they began their uncertain trek toward better hunting grounds. Because they were the logical places to find game quickly, Hawk started toward the lush river bottoms. He might find a herd of bison there, or camels, or horses. Possibly there would be deer and antelope. But just what he would find, or exactly where he would find it, he did not know.

As they walked, the dog ranged farther and stayed away for longer intervals. He, too, knew that the object was to seek game, but even he could find none. They seemed to have left the camp, and its scarcity of wild life, for a place where it was even scarcer. Save for an occasional bird, they saw nothing.

The humans trudged stolidly on. They had been through this before. There was food here for grass-eaters, and the meat-eaters always followed them, but for some inexplicable reason, at various times, all the game deserted certain areas. They had no choice but to seek further.

Then, far in the distance, Hawk heard the dog bark.

It was a shrill sound, a far-carrying one that left faint echoes rolling in the distance. The dog had found game too big and too fierce for him to attack, and he had bayed it. The bark was to summon his mates, his pack. The dog barked again and again. There was a faint snarling and growling.

For a few seconds, Hawk stood perfectly still. Then, having located the dog's exact whereabouts, he trotted swiftly toward it, Willow at his heels. The dog's continuous barking and snarling became louder, fiercer. Then Hawk caught a glimpse of a giant sloth.

He slowed down, knowing now what he had to deal with. The great sloths were powerful creatures and therefore dangerous, but they were neither swift nor intelligent. Soon they came upon the dog and his cornered quarry.

The sloth was in a grove of trees, and all about a litter of stripped and broken branches attested to the fact that it had been feeding there for some time. Now it was backed against a tree, a solid, massive mountain of flesh. The dog swept swiftly in front of it, and the monster struck out with its front paws.

It missed completely; the dog was far too quick to be trapped by anything so slow. But when it struck at the dog it turned, and Hawk saw something he had not noticed before. The sloth was protecting a quarter-grown calf that huddled at its side. Hawk calculated his chances.

He might kill the mother sloth, but it would take most of his darts to do so and then what if the sloth waddled off, wounded? His darts would be gone, and he and Willow might be attacked by something before he could make new ones. But perhaps he could kill the young one.

He circled cautiously, a dart ready in his throwing-stick. Working its mouth nervously, the giant sloth wheeled with him. Hawk feinted in the opposite direction, and the sloth turned to meet this new thrust. It was slow and stupid, but determined when the defense of its own young was involved. Always it managed to shield the calf with its own ponderous body.

Hawk kept moving, awaiting a chance to hurl his dart. Then the dog attacked.

He flung himself in with a rush, leaping high as he grasped a mouthful of the sloth's coarse hair. As swiftly as he had attacked, the dog retreated, escaping the blow of a massive claw-tipped paw by a hair's breadth. But in wheeling to repel the dog, the sloth exposed its calf.

Hawk hurled his dart, and saw it bury itself to the feathers in the calf's chest. The calf groped at it with both front paws, and started to waddle away. Hawk cast another dart, that pierced the back of the neck and severed a vital nerve. The calf slowly tumbled to the ground.

Still the mother sloth refused to leave. Flicking its long tongue in and out, it stood protectingly by the calf's body. The dog snarled furiously in, and out again. The sloth struck at him and stood her ground, refusing to leave the calf.



Hawk pondered. He had killed the calf, but could not get at his prize unless he could drive the mother away. Deliberately he danced in front of her, teasing her to strike. When the giant sloth tried to crush him he leaped backward. The dog barked furiously. The sloth pursued them a few feet, looked back at her calf, and returned to it.

"Fire! Try fire!" Willow cried.

Hawk looked appreciatively at her. Fire had driven the giant bison, and it might work on this great beast. Going into the grove of trees, he sought among the lower branches for twigs covered with dry bark. He shredded this into the finest of tinder and made a little heap on the ground exactly to windward of the sloth. Keeping dry sticks ready, he struck a spark into the tinder.

It caught, making a tiny glow that might live or might die out. Hawk got down on his hands and knees to blow into it. The newborn spark glowed more hotly, then a tiny flame spread through the tinder. Hawk laid a few twigs on the little fire, then added more. In a moment a plume of smoke blew about the giant sloth's head.

It snorted, shook its head, and stared nervously. Then the smoke increased. At a lumbering trot, the sloth started away. A hundred yards from the fire it stopped, looked around, then at a slow walk it started toward another grove of trees. Its own personal tragedy was already forgotten in the pressing need to get more food to keep its massive body alive.

As Willow bent over the dead sloth, a stone knife in her hand, Hawk gathered more wood for his fire. They had started out to seek food and now had much more than they

could possibly carry. Therefore, their camp would automatically be right here until the meat was gone.

While Willow tended the new camp, Hawk and the dog ranged into the surrounding country scouting for game signs. The sloth would not last forever; they must locate more game for the future.

But in ten days the dog found and ran only one deer at which Hawk could get a fair shot. But the wounded animal escaped, and they could find nothing else. They must move again.

The rich river bottoms, the best grazing lands, were still the logical place to go. Of course, if they attracted herds of grazing animals, the grass-eaters, in turn, would draw more dangerous beasts. There would be saber-teeth in plenty, packs of dire wolves and wild dogs, and the whole range of meat-eaters, big and small. There might be men, too, the fiercest hunters of all, and they might or might not be friendly. Though different tribes could live amiably together, in times of hunger any tribe that found a good hunting place would defend it. But that chance they had to take.

Cautiously, his own senses always alert and keeping his eyes on the dog, Hawk led Willow over the small hillocks, toward the river bottoms. Three days later, they looked down on the meadow where the unsuccessful fire drive had been attempted. All scars of the fire were gone, and a rich carpet of green grass covered the meadow. A herd of mammoths fed there.

There were twenty in the herd, ranging from immense, heavy-tusked bulls to calves at their mother's side. As Hawk watched, a bull circled cautiously. He faced into the wind, his trunk extended. The Spear-Maker took interested note.

The hairy elephants were so big, and so strong, that almost nothing dared attack a herd. But obviously this one had known danger and was expecting it again. Although the bull could not have scented them, he seemed to have some premonition of their presence. Hawk drew Willow back into the sheltering forest.

Evidently there were, or had been, human hunters ranging the river meadows. If so, they were desperate hunters. Failing to find giant bison, camels, or other game which they could kill with comparative safety, they had been attacking the mammoth herds. As a result, the mammoths were alerted. Whoever went into the river bottoms now did so at the risk of his own life. To be seen meant to be attacked. Unlike the sloths, the mammoths were intelligent beasts and despite their bulk they could whirl and twist like cats.

The dog sat down, ears pricked up as he studied the herd of mammoths. He looked questioningly at Hawk, and fell in beside him as the two lone humans started up the series of forested hills that rose out of the flat river meadows.

The meadows had been flooded by a veritable inundation of mammoths. The lumbering beasts were everywhere, and all seemed aroused and belligerently ready for

whatever danger might come. But Hawk saw no humans, only a few saber-tooths that probably hoped to catch a calf separated from its mother, and a pack of dire wolves. Though he continued to study the situation, Hawk did not dare go down into the meadows. He would have to find his food on the forested slopes.

But there was nothing, and that night they made a hungry camp in the hills. The next morning they went on.

Ranging ahead, the dog bristled and came to a sudden halt at the edge of a little clearing. Lips curled back from long fangs, he backed against Hawk's legs. Hawk fitted a dart into his throwing-stick and intently sniffed the various winds. He looked all around, then centered his attention on the clearing.

There was a trampled place in the center of the valley. All about were smashed bushes, and a few broken tree limbs. Faintly dominating all was the scent of mammoths.

The dog snarled, and pressed closely against Hawk's legs as he went forward, Willow following fearfully.

He stooped, attracted by an object that met his eye, and picked up a spearhead. As he examined it, he realized that it was one he himself had made. Near it, smashed into splinters, was the broken shaft. The spear was one he had made for a hunter of his own tribe. Then he knew.

Some of his former tribesmen had died here, but what had killed them? There were no tracks in the trampled earth save those of mammoths, and rains had obliterated most of those. There were no bones, but of course anything left to eat had already been devoured by starving beasts, and bones might have been dragged away. Nothing whatever remained except the broken spear. Had the tribesmen, driven by desperation, attacked and been trapped by a herd of mammoths? Had they been overwhelmed by a pack of dire wolves? Or had hunters of some other tribe killed them? Perhaps his whole tribe had been wiped out here in a grim, determined battle for food, without which they could not live.

Shuddering, Hawk left the place. He led Willow up the opposite hill and looked again into the river bottoms. His interest quickened.

Far out, near the river's edge, a herd of a hundred or more mammoths was dozing in the sun. But just beneath the hillock, a single cow and her calf had detached themselves from the herd and were wandering alone. Hawk remembered the young sloth. If he could somehow manage to kill the calf, then wait until the rest departed, he and Willow would have meat. Hawk turned to the girl.

"Hold the dog," he directed, "and wait for me."

Quietly he slipped down the slope. This would be the ultimate test of his hunter's skill and ability. He must get near the mammoth and her calf without being detected, then

cast his dart and escape before he could be overtaken.

Hawk hid himself in the tall grass and crept forward, careful to stay downwind. Carefully he raised himself just far enough so he could see his intended quarry.

The cow, suspicious, shuffled nervous feet, spread her ears, and snaked her trunk in various directions. The calf, too young to be aware of any danger, squealed happily. It ran a few steps, intrigued by something it heard or saw, and the cow promptly followed. She whacked it with her trunk, grunted, and shepherded her baby toward the river.

Hawk followed, knowing that he had to get his shot before she neared the rest of the herd. He ran swiftly along, maneuvering for position.

Suddenly, without any warning whatever, a thrown spear came so close to his head that he felt a little wind brush him as it passed. Hawk spun around.

Coming through the grass, spread out to cut him off, were more than fifteen strange hunters. There was no escape; the hunters were too well dispersed and coming too fast. Nor was there any doubt about their purpose; for whatever reason, they were deadly intent on killing him.

Without hesitation Hawk ran straight toward the cow. He hurled his dart, not at the calf, but at its mother. The cow bellowed for help.

Answering bellows and angry trumpeting came from the herd at the river's edge. They wheeled, and at top speed stampeded to the aid of their wounded comrade.



# ESCAPE

## CHAPTER 7

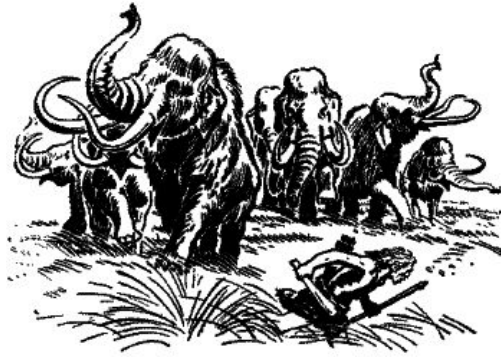
THE DART was sticking in the cow's neck, just behind her flaring ear, and a little blood dribbled down her hairy side. She bellowed again, high and shrill, and waved her trunk. Wheeling on her huge pads, she examined her calf to make sure it was safe. Then she whirled and launched herself straight at Hawk. Behind her appeared the charging herd, literally shaking the earth as it pounded along. In another few seconds everything in the meadow would be overwhelmed.

But Hawk was poised for instant action, another dart ready in his throwing-stick. When the cow swerved toward him, he cast his dart straight at the calf.



It skidded across the baby's back, plowing a bloody furrow with its flint head. The calf squealed its alarm. Instantly the cow pivoted and returned to it. She stood protectively over her baby, rumbling threats while she awaited the rest of the herd. Hawk turned and ran, straight toward the enemy tribesmen.

At the best he had only a very few seconds, and two kinds of enemies to avoid. He had purposely aroused the mammoth herd, hoping by so doing to divert the human hunters on his trail. But now he had to run back toward the enemy tribesmen, to escape the greater danger of the thundering mammoths.



His ruse had worked. The hunters were running, too, most of them scrambling toward a high pinnacle of rock that reared from the base of a nearby hill. Seeing the many hunters, the approaching herd bulls roared their defiance and led the herd toward the pinnacle. Hawk stooped, so that the waving grass reached over his head, and veered toward the left, away from the rock pinnacle. He swung far out, making a wide circle, and when he thought he had run far enough he changed his course to take him back into the forest where he had left Willow. Not until he was well within the trees did he stop to catch his breath.

He tried to look back, but the trees obstructed his vision and he could not see what the angry mammoths were doing. The roaring and trumpeting of the enraged herd filled the air. They were, Hawk guessed, milling around the base of the pinnacle where the hunters had found safety. High above the mingled sounds, there came the angry squeal of a cow.

Hawk shivered. This was undoubtedly the cow at which he had cast his dart to bring on the stampede, the mother of the calf he had wounded. She had probably assured herself that he was not among the hunters on the pinnacle, and now was seeking him. The cow knew her real enemy. Again she squealed, and Hawk decided that she had detached herself from the herd and was casting about for his scent. He started running again.

He had no plan beyond finding Willow and taking her to some safe place, but he knew they would have to move fast. The enemy tribesmen would know, from the action of the cow, that he had not been killed in the stampede. Therefore they would trail him at the first opportunity, and human hunters were far more deadly than any other kind. Judging by their first actions, these tribesmen would not be contented until they had caught and killed him.

Without any warning another spear sailed out of the brush, flicked into a tree a few inches from his shoulder, and quivered jerkily.

Hawk realized that he had made a mistake in assuming that all the hunters had fled to the pinnacle of rock. And in that confidence, and his haste to return to Willow, he had



become careless. He had run with the wind instead of against it, and therefore had been unable to scent whatever might lie ahead of him. Now he dodged behind a tree, fitted a dart to his throwing-stick, and made ready to defend himself.

There were three hunters after him, savage, hairy men with bison-skin girdles flapping about their waists. Hawk noted with relief that none of them carried throwing-sticks; he had that much advantage, at least.

As soon as he saw them, Hawk cast his dart and struck the first hunter squarely in the throat. The wounded man dropped his spear, clutched at the dart with both hands, and took two backward steps. Then he fell, dead or dying.

The two remaining hunters screeched their rage, and melted into the brush. Hawk waited, knowing that he could do nothing else, for now he could see neither of his enemies. He tried to locate them by their scent, but the eddying wind came in fitful gusts and he could detect only occasional snatches of either man's odor. They were working around him, one to either side, until such time as one or the other, or both, were in position to throw another spear.

Again there came the squeal of the enraged cow. She was very near the forest now, working out the way Hawk had taken and still on his trail. He tensed himself.

In the deep brush at the left he caught the faintest sound. His back to the tree, Hawk stood perfectly still, trying to pierce the brush with his eyes but unable to do so. The two men hunting him had worked out a cunning strategy. He could be seen. They were in brush where they were hidden, and they knew it. When both had maneuvered themselves into position, they would attack.

Faintly the sound came again, and Hawk saw a slight motion in the brush. With lightning swiftness he cast another dart. The man in the brush rolled into sight, clawing at the dart in his chest, and Hawk pivoted.

The other man was closing in, club held high. Hawk snatched at a dart, but knew that he could not possibly shoot in time. The man was almost upon him, and coming fast. Hawk grabbed for his club and stepped forward to meet the attack. As he did so, his toe caught under an unseen vine and sent him sprawling. Hawk threw himself sideways.

Then, as though he had appeared by magic, the dog hurled himself out of the brush, straight upon the hunter. The man whirled to meet this new attack. He half-swung his club at the dog, but before he could complete the blow, a rock struck him squarely on the side of the head. He dropped in his tracks, and Willow stood framed in the brush.

"Hurry!" she panted.

Hawk leaped to join her, and the dog bounded alongside. From behind they heard the smashing of trees and brush, and the angry trumpeting of the cow mammoth. She had body scent now and was coming fast.

Willow plunged deliberately into the thickest brush, a tangle of vines and small trees, and threaded an agile way through it. Hawk followed, silently approving her strategy as he did so. There was no place in the forest they could go where the mammoth would be unable to follow, but at least the brush would slow her. In open forest again, Willow swerved sharply to the right.

A moment later Hawk saw why she had turned. Some of the small hills were separated by gentle valleys, others by deep gorges, and they were now approaching such a gorge. About forty feet wide at the top, its sides dropped sharply down in uneven layers of rock. Scrambling from ledge to ledge, they worked their way down one side and up the other. Hawk turned to lift the dog over the last high ledge, and they clambered to the top. Willow turned breathlessly.

"The mammoth cannot cross here!"

"No," Hawk agreed, "she cannot."

He sat down, panting heavily while he regained his spent breath. The dog, tongue lolling, whirled to look back in the direction from which they had come. He did not bark, or make any sound, for the value of silence had been born within him. A few seconds later the cow mammoth appeared on the opposite side of the gorge.

Somewhere she had brushed against a tree or ledge of rock and broken the dart; its ragged end still protruded from her neck. She stamped angry feet, extended her trunk to its full length, and screamed her hatred of the two humans. Cautiously she tested a ledge with her front feet, seeking a safe way down, and when she could not find it she beat a restless patrol back and forth on top of the ledge.

Hawk watched her calmly, no longer concerned about her or the herd. That danger had been passed. But there was another, vastly greater peril to worry about.

The hunters trapped on the rocky pinnacle would be likely to remain there for a considerable length of time; the herd of mammoths would see to that. But the mammoths would eventually go away to feed, and when they did the men could escape.

Their first thought would be the man they had tried to trap, and when they took the trail they would find out that Willow was with him. Whatever had been their original reason for attacking Hawk, they would be doubly determined to catch him when they found the man he had killed.

Somehow they would have to be thrown off the trail, and that would be a very difficult feat; all men who lived by hunting were past masters in the art of tracking. A broken twig, or a bent or broken blade of grass, were usually enough. Hawk turned to Willow.

"We must escape the hunters who are sure to follow," he said. "Even without them, the situation here is not good. There are only mammoths to hunt, and they are too

dangerous. There was not much game around our old camp, but it could be hunted. We must return."

Hawk led off, still following the hillocks that flanked the river meadows. The pursuit, certain to follow, would be patient and relentless. To throw it off, they would need all the guile and craft at their command. By traveling away from their old camp instead of toward it, the pursuers might be deceived into thinking they were going to continue in that direction.

They walked carefully, choosing each place to put their feet down. They avoided grass or brush whose broken or trampled appearance might betray them, and walked on stones or stone ledges where they were available. Often Hawk circled to cut back on their trail and brush out some real or fancied mark.

It was mid-afternoon before Hawk swerved away from the hills, making the first arc of a great circle that would carry them back to the camp they had left. When he turned, he walked down a rock ledge that sloped in the direction he wished to travel. They stopped at the end of the ledge.

Beyond was nothing but sand, a great area of white sand in which sparse tufts of grass grew at scattered intervals. Hawk looked worriedly back toward the hills. He doubted if the hunters would escape from the mammoths in time to see them crossing the sand, but he and Willow would leave plain tracks. Still, there was no guarantee that they would not run into more sand if they returned and sought a new way, and they had to travel in this direction if they would reach their old camp.

A strong breeze blew down the ledge and plucked at the sand. Its surface ruffled gently.

Stooping, Hawk gathered the dog in his arms and held him tightly. He started across the sand. Behind him, Willow stepped exactly in his tracks. On the other side of the sand-covered area at last, Hawk stopped and looked back.

Their tracks were still plain, but the wind was filling them; before the hunters came along it might cover them completely. They would have to trust the wind.

An hour later Hawk turned toward a grove of trees. Night was coming, and any human foolish enough to travel at night did so at the risk of almost certain death. But at least the hunters would not travel at night either. He and Willow had eluded their pursuers so far, and were safe from them until morning.

The trees were chunky forest giants with tough vines dangling thickly from huge limbs. Hawk stopped beneath one and looked up into its interlaced twigs and branches. If they were to hide their trail, a fire was out of the question. Therefore they must spend the night in a tree. Hawk grasped the trailing end of a vine and put his weight on it. The vine held. It would not come tumbling down, or break and let them fall. Hawk motioned Willow to climb up.

She went up hand over hand. Halfway to the first limb she twined her legs around the vine and rested. Then she resumed her climb and drew herself up on the great limb. Leaving all his weapons except his knife behind him, Hawk followed. Once on the limb, he turned around to examine their night's bed.

The limb itself was so large that they might have lain on it without too much danger of falling, but the crotch at the trunk was much safer. They walked down the limb, and settled themselves in the massive spread of branches that rose from the crotch. The space was large enough so they could sleep comfortably and safely.

At the foot of the tree, the dog was curled in a furry ball, his bushy tail over his leathery black nose. The dog got up, padded restlessly about, and returned to his bed at the foot of the tree. He knew how to take care of himself at night, and there was no need to worry about him.

When he awakened sometime during the night, a bright moon had risen and was shedding a soft brilliance that almost matched the light of day. Hawk stirred uneasily. He had been awakened by a sensation of danger, a premonition of something that was not as it should be, and was troubled because he could not locate what had caused it.

Then there was a distinct, alarmed snarl. It came from the dog, and Willow awakened quietly. She sat up, looking questioningly at Hawk but making no noise. Hawk walked up the limb and stopped at the vine they had used to climb the tree.

He looked down, but could see nothing. There was another snarl, then a series of them, and the dog came out of the moon-painted shadows to bristle at the base of the tree. He was facing the brush, snarling, and Hawk swung out on the vine.

A moment later a dire wolf came out of the brush and circled the dog. The dog was big, but the wolf dwarfed him. For a second it continued to circle, then closed in. The dog leaped aside, and fainted at his enemy.

Unhesitatingly Hawk scrambled down the vine. The dog had helped him when he was hard-pressed by the enemy hunters, therefore he must not let the dog fight alone. Hawk leaped lightly from the vine, catching himself on the balls of his feet, and snatched up his spear.

The wolf, aware of the fact that a new enemy was entering the fight, left the dog and sprang forward. Hawk hurled his spear, and knew he had made a hit. But the wolf scarcely paused. Hawk groped for his club.

As he found it, the dog closed in from the rear. Savagely, aroused to the very peak of fury, he sliced at the wolf's haunch, leaped away, and sprang in again. The wolf doubled to deal with him, and when it did Hawk swung his club. It struck home, in a vital spot, but the wolf was too big and too full of life to die easily. It growled throatily, and dragged itself forward to close with the man.

Club swinging, Hawk sprang to meet him. He side-stepped the wolf's vicious lunge, and struck with his club. It smashed solidly down on the wolf's head, but still the monster came on. Hawk struck again and again, beating the wolf with bone-crushing blows. Finally the wolf lay still.

For a moment the dog worried the wolf, then stood quietly while Hawk knelt beside him. He ran his hands over the dog, and brought them away sticky with blood. Certainly the dog had been hurt, but he did not seem to be crippled and could move freely. A wild thing, and powerful, the dog could survive anything except a crippling wound. Hawk considered.

He did not want to leave any evidence of a fight along their escape route. There would certainly be blood stains at the base of the tree and they would not be easy to erase. However, now that they had meat, they should certainly take advantage of it, even though they could not build a fire. With his knife Hawk hacked off both hind quarters from the wolf and had Willow pull them up into the tree by the vine. Safe in their retreat, the humans ate raw meat, while at the base of the tree the dog satisfied his hunger on the remains of the wolf.

The next morning, packing such meat as they could carry, they went on. As they left, Hawk looked back at the tree. Vultures were already circling it; they would soon devour whatever was left of the wolf. But that would not be enough to throw the pursuing hunters off. Only a man or a saber-tooth could kill a dire wolf, and there would be no evidence of tigers around the tree. Should the hunters come this far, they would have all the proof they needed that Hawk and Willow had fled this way.

On the second day, after spending another night in a tree, they completed their great circle and came back to their former camp.

The ashes of their fire were a cold, damp mass, and already green grass was laying a fresh new carpet over the trampled, bare earth. A herd of antelope, grazing in the meadow, danced away. At this evidence that grass-eating creatures had come back to the clearing, Hawk grunted in satisfaction. They had found no game except mammoths elsewhere, but apparently some animals which had moved out of the rest of the country had come back here. He and Willow had done well to return.

But there was still something lacking. Hawk had proved that he could defend their camp against any animal that dared attack it. They were not dealing with animals now, but with men, and should the enemy hunters come they would do so craftily. They would surround the camp, and strike from all sides. Even though Hawk might kill two or three with his superior weapons, he could not destroy them all. If a determined group of humans attacked the camp, they could take it and kill its defenders. He paced nervously back and forth.

There were many places to which he might take Willow, but moving had not proved a happy experience. Food they must have, and as long as they stayed here he could get food. Furthermore, if they moved again they would probably run into other hunters

and just as likely they would be hostile. They would stay here, then, and try to strengthen their defenses. But first came the more immediate needs of fire, food and weapons.

Hawk rebuilt the fire, gathered wood, and with the dog at his side ranged into familiar hunting country. The dog found a track which Hawk identified as that of a deer, and he took a stand where he thought the deer would pass. After a short interval he saw it coming and killed it with the first dart.

Now they had meat, and he could attend to the next most important matter. On their ill-fated venture to the river he had lost half his darts, and must make more at once. Hawk busied himself chipping flint heads, and fashioning dart shafts. On the other side of the fire, while she waited for meat to cook, Willow was contentedly weaving another basket.

Hawk worked on his darts until night, then lay down to sleep. With morning he finished them and went out to hunt again.

Certainly there was more game than there had been. Apparently animals needed only a few days of security to make them bold again; creatures which had formerly fled to hide from him were no longer so wary. Hawk considered the significance of that. While the dog ranged into the forest he squatted on a stone, waiting, trying to bring some orderly arrangement out of this new thing he had learned.

Hitherto he had hunted all parts of the country which he could easily reach, which meant all the country within striking distance of the fire, indiscriminately. He had been guided only by the game itself, and had hunted where he thought he would find the most.

Perhaps it would be wise to do things differently, to divide his hunting range into sections and leave one alone while he hunted another intensively. When game grew too scarce wherever he was hunting, he could go into one of the other sections. That way he might assure a constant supply of meat.

After a while the dog came back and sat down at the base of the rock. He had failed to find any game, and let Hawk know it by whining. Hawk leaped from his rock and went on.

Presently bear scent came very strongly to his nostrils and Hawk remembered that, very close to this place, the great cave bear had its home. He circled to go around the cave, then changed his mind and swung closer to it. He had remembered something else. Although in recent years his tribe had traveled mostly in open country, following game herds, it had at times taken shelter in caves when attacked.

That might be his answer, too. If he could get possession of the bear's cave, and the hunters came, he would not have to meet them on all sides. They could reach him only from the cave's entrance, and would have to come singly. Hawk crept cautiously down until he could see the cave.

As quietly as he had approached, he slipped away and returned to the fire. He thrust a knotty club into the fire until it blazed, and held it high.

"Come with me," he told Willow. "We are going to drive the great cave bear from its home."



# CAVE BEAR

## CHAPTER 8

THE GREAT cave bears were large and powerful, and as ferocious as saber-tooths when aroused. If a dozen hunters attacked one they could kill it, but somebody was almost sure to be hurt. For one man to attack a bear deliberately was unthinkable.

But Hawk had learned a valuable lesson from his encounter with the giant sloth. They were larger than bears, and though slow and stupid, they had enormous vitality. Since the dull-witted sloth had been disconcerted when smoke blew about its head, Hawk thought it might be possible to smoke the great cave bear out of its cave.

That would not be the end of it, he realized. The monster bear would not willingly relinquish its home and would get back in if it were possible. Such a beast, always lurking about and awaiting an opportunity to re-enter, would be far too dangerous to leave around the cave. Therefore the bear would have to be killed.

Hawk reviewed his plan, in his mind going over and over each tiny detail. He knew that he must have everything right beforehand, because once the fight was started there would be no stopping it and even a minor slip could spell disaster.

As they approached the cave, Hawk gave Willow his torch, and told her to hold the dog. Then he went on alone.

He advanced cautiously, carefully staying downwind, until he could see the bear. It was outside the cave, busy ripping the lower branches off a tree laden so heavily with purple, meaty berries that some of the branches were already broken from the weight of the fruit alone. Hawk parted a leafy branch so he could see better.

The bear was about forty feet from the door of its cave, eating berries from a branch it had broken. It licked furry chops with a berry-stained tongue, and looked all around. Then it reared on its hind paws, braced its body against the tree, and ripped another branch down.

Hawk shivered, partly from excitement and partly from nervous fear. The bear was a monstrous beast, three-quarters of a ton of sheer brute strength. It would not be an easy thing to overcome.

The bear turned, silently and swiftly for all its bulk, and gazed steadily at the tree behind which Hawk lay. Some eddying breeze had carried an alien scent to it, or perhaps some deep-seated instinct had merely made it suspicious. At any rate it was alert, without being sure of just what might be trespassing on its domain.



Hawk slipped away. He moved slowly, always careful to place his feet so that he would make no noise and traveling with the wind. Conditions were as he had hoped to find them, and now he could put the rest of his plan into effect.

When there was sufficient distance between himself and the bear, Hawk ran swiftly back to Willow and the dog. He looked to his supply of darts, picked up his hand spear and throwing-stick, but left Willow with the torch. She fell in behind him when he started back toward the bear.

The dog trotted tensely by his side, sensing that they were after game which the man had already located. Furthermore, since the man kept the dog beside him, it would be dangerous game. Hawk stopped, and the dog stopped beside him, quivering with excitement.

The blazing torch in her hand, Willow waited questioningly. She, too, had a part in this or she would not have been brought along. But, like the dog, she did not as yet clearly understand what that part was. Hawk turned to her.

"The dog and I will drive the bear into the cave," he explained. "Stay here with the torch until you hear me call. Then come as fast as you can and give the torch to me."

"I understand."

The dog at his side, Hawk slipped away. They came within the area where the bear's scent could be detected, and the dog looked inquiringly at Hawk. The man did not turn aside and the dog moved two steps ahead of him, sure now of their quarry. Ordinarily they avoided creatures as powerful as this, but the dog was willing to fight anything as long as the man thought it should be fought.

Making no attempt at concealment, Hawk walked openly into the clearing in front of the cave.

Having scented or heard him, the bear was waiting. It stood at the foot of the tree from which it had been ripping branches, feet braced and tensely alert. Its ears were flicked forward, its eyes questioning, and its snout moving slowly from side to side. The bear took an uncertain step, and reared on its hind legs the better to see. Dropping to the ground, it stood still a moment more and then snarled, its jaws gaping wide. Hawk fitted a dart into his throwing-stick, shouted and bounded forward.

He stopped suddenly, for this was part of his plan. To wound the bear where it was, and to lack a place of refuge, would mean disaster. The bear must be driven into the cave and forced to take a temporary stand there. Hawk had started a false attack to incite the dog; he wanted him to go after the bear on his own initiative.

The dog snarled forward. Hawk halted, and stepped back with the dart still poised in his throwing-stick. If his plan went wrong now he would have to go in anyway and help the dog. He watched tensely.

The bear remained beneath the tree, snarling at the onrushing dog. Then, when less than twenty feet separated them, the bear wheeled and lumbered into its cave. It turned about in the entrance, knowing that it could defend itself there.

Hawk breathed easier. This was the way he had hoped it would work out. The bear would not run from a man, but it had been assaulted by at least one pack of wolves and, presumably, by wild dogs as well. It knew that it could stand them off if protected on three sides by the mouth of the cave.

The bear's enormous head and front shoulders protruded from the cave. The dog leaped in and out again, never going near enough to be hit by one of those sledge-hammer paws.

Keeping his throwing-stick beside him, and a dart ready, Hawk grasped a handful of dry grass, wrenched it loose, and laid it on the ground about twenty feet from the cave's opening. A gust of wind scattered the little pile, and Hawk laid a dart on it to hold it. He gathered more dry grass, and more, until he had a great pile. Then he raced to a bit of nearby marsh land, pulled up some swamp roots and damp muck, and laid them on top of the grass. Then he called Willow.

At the cave, the dog continued to harass the bear. He feinted, growling and barking, and leaped in to snap whenever an opportunity offered. But at no time did he put himself within reach of the bear's paws, which would have broken his back as easily as a stone breaks an egg.

The blazing torch in her hand, Willow broke out of the forest and ran lightly into the clearing. Handing the torch to Hawk, she stepped back, cast about until she found two rocks, and held one in each hand while she awaited whatever came.

"Stay near the fire," Hawk cautioned Willow. "Don't leave it no matter what happens."

He touched the torch to the great heap of dried grass he had gathered, and threw the torch on top of the pile. The sun-dried grass exploded in a roar of flame, and for a moment blazed high. Then, the readily combustible portion having burned out, thick yellow smoke rose from the wet swamp refuse. Hawk stepped back, his darts ready.

So far everything had worked well, even the wind's direction and force. What happened now depended on whether or not he had been able to guess how a cave bear would react to smoke.

Like a large, elongated feather, yellow smoke curled toward the cave. It paused there, as though not quite knowing where to go, then sent an exploring finger into the cave. The bear backed up. In a moment it was almost hidden by smoke; only its furious snarls showed it was still there. Suddenly the bear came out.

Every hair on its body was erect, lending it an appearance of being much bigger than it was. Coughing, snapping its jaws continuously, roaring mad, it ran to one side of the

fire, out of the smoke, whirled about, and faced the two humans. The dog bored in from the side, and the bear swung to slap ineffectively at him.

A dart ready, Hawk advanced. The crucial test had come; from now on it was up to him and the dog. Hawk hurled his dart with all his strength. It sang through the air, and buried half its length in the bear's shaggy side.

The bear stood erect, a mountain of flesh that for a moment walked on its legs like a man. Dropping to all fours, it exploded its fury in a mighty, snarling roar, and charged.

Hawk retreated back toward the smoldering fire. In attacking the great cave bear, he had counted on the fire as a safe retreat. Now his reckoning was to endure the acid test; would fire stop a wounded, enraged bear?

A thick plume of smoke enveloped the oncoming bear. It stopped, shifting its fore paws uneasily, and backed up. The dog threw himself furiously upon it.

Another dart fixed in his throwing-stick, Hawk walked out of the smoke to where he could have a clear view. The bear, safely away from the smoke, was sparring with the dog. Hawk loped toward them, and when he was near enough he threw the dart. The bear turned, bawling its rage, and bit at the shaft protruding from its side. Then it threw itself at the dog.

Hawk readied another dart, and circled to get in good throwing position. Careful not to let the bear between himself and the smoke blanket, he threw the third dart.



The bear grunted, spun in an erratic circle, and struck with blind fury at a nearby clump of grass. As though that were its real foe, and the thing that had hurt it, it hit again and again until the grass was ripped to shreds. It lumbered to another grass tuft and destroyed that. When the dog came near it bellowed at him and in a series of insane hops tried to pin him between its front paws.



Hawk followed, ready to shoot another dart. But since he could not tell which way the wounded bear would leap next or what it would attack, he dared not get too near.

The bear broke suddenly. Racing across the clearing in long leaps, it headed straight for the sheltering trees. Running, it was a terrifying sight. Blocky legs worked like swiftly moving pistons, carrying the bear's huge body along so fast that even the pursuing dog was hard put to keep up.

Although the dog was barking and snarling continuously, the sounds of the running pursuit faded deeper and deeper into the forest. Hawk followed, confident now that his battle was won. The bear would run for a long way, probably, but the darts were sunken deeply and eventually they must take their toll of even such strength as the bear's. It could not run on forever.

For as long as he could hear him, Hawk guided himself by the barking dog. When the noise faded in the distance, he ran along the plainly marked trail. Bright spots of blood showed on the leaves, with here and there a patch of coarse hair. Faintly, he heard the barking dog again.

He ran easily, fast enough to cover distance swiftly but not so fast that he would tire himself out. Five minutes after he was again within hearing of the dog, he came upon his quarry.

The great cave bear was backed against a tree, swaying from side to side, its front feet braced. When it saw the man it left the tree and lurched forward, growling hoarsely. Hawk stood still and fitted another dart. He could take his time now; the bear's pace was a mere crawl. Hawk cast his dart.

Straight and true, it sailed to its mark. Still the bear tried to come forward. It had lived all its life by brute strength, and would fight as long as that life remained. The bear made one more valiant effort to crawl forward, then lay still.

Hawk remained where he was, troubled by an emotion he had never felt before. He lived in a world whose basic rule was kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, and he hunted and killed as much as he could because, if he did not, he could not continue to live. But he felt a strange sympathy for the bear, a stout and lonely creature like himself, which had given up only when there was nothing left with which to fight.

Solemnly Hawk approached the inert monster and intently studied the curving claws, that were polished to ivory whiteness by almost constant digging for roots and small animals. He would keep those claws, he decided, and from now on would conduct himself as the bear had. When the time came, he too would fight with all his heart and strength.

But he had no time for further contemplation of the bear's might; the grim business of simply staying alive was too pressing. The bear represented a great deal of value in both fur and food, and scavengers must not have it. Also, Willow was alone in the clearing and save for the fire she was defenseless. He must secure the bear and see to her safety.

He shredded tinder, added kindling to it, struck a spark, and when the fire blazed he arranged green sticks on it. He piled them high, to arrange here a fire that would last until such time as he was able to return. While the fire burned, nothing would dare come near his prize. Then he called the dog to his side and trotted back to the cave.

Willow, who had built her own fire into a roaring blaze, waited expectantly beside it.

"The bear is dead," Hawk told her. "It lies in the forest, well-guarded by fire."

He went eagerly to the cave, the real prize for which he had dared challenge a great cave bear. Hesitantly he entered, and when the dog would have backed out Hawk pulled him roughly to his side and made him stay there. At the same time, he fought a growing desire to escape from the place himself. He had been born under a tree, and except for scattered occasions when his tribe had taken shelter in caves or under ledges, he had lived his whole life in the open. The cave made him nervous because he was confined. Still, the real purpose for which he had wanted it remained foremost in his thoughts.

Dimly illumined by the little daylight that filtered through the opening, the cave was roughly circular in shape and about thirty feet in diameter. Spear-shaped stalactites depended from the roof, but there was no evidence of dampness or water. To one side was the bed of leaves and sticks where the bear had slept.

Willow came in behind him. At first hesitantly, then eagerly, she explored the cave. Already she could foresee some of its possibilities as a home. More interested in its offer of safety, Hawk swung to look at the entrance.

The cave's opening was somewhat taller than a man, and just wide enough so that anyone standing in it would have plenty of freedom for action. Any enemy would have to come through the entrance, and if there were more than one, only one at a time

could attack. The place could easily be defended. A man on the inside could not possibly be overwhelmed from the sides or rear. It was a snug retreat, ideal for their purposes.

While Willow remained inside to complete her examination of their new home, Hawk went out, crossed the clearing into the forest, and gathered wood. He arranged a fire in the middle of the cave's floor, and lighted it with a burning brand from the still-smoldering fire with which he had driven the bear out.

Almost instantly they were coughing and sputtering. Instead of a cheerfully crackling blaze, the fire was nothing but a smoking pile of assorted sticks. There was no place for the smoke to go, and no draft to fan the fire. This was something Hawk had not counted on. As the cave filled with smoke, he ran out the entrance, Willow at his heels. They looked back into the cave.

"The fire will have to be built nearer the entrance," Hawk said. "It does not like to be shut in the cave."

Willow said nothing, but her face was thoughtful. Hawk took a deep breath, stumbled back into the cave, and knocked the fire apart. He stumbled out again, coughing smoke from his lungs. After a few moments he peered cautiously into the cave.

The smoke had lifted, and was hanging near the ceiling, most of it in a cleft that seemed to extend up into the roof. Hawk re-entered the cave, gathered his scattered sticks, and moved them to a new place just inside the entrance. He lighted his fire again and stood back to await results.

They were infinitely better insofar as most of the smoke could now escape through the entrance. Some still went back into the cave and left a foggy wreath, but at least the cave could be entered without danger of choking. Hawk grimaced. From a fighting man's viewpoint the cave was the answer to his needs, but he already knew that he was not going to like living in it.

"Stay here," he told Willow. "I am going back to the bear."

The dog accompanied him when he set off toward the place where he had left the bear. Once he was back in the forest Hawk felt better. He had done what he wanted to do, and assured himself of a place from which he could fight almost any number of men who dared to come against him, but he was still uncomfortably aware of the cave's restrictions and of its sense of confinement. It was much better to be free, and in the open, than in any cave. But there remained the grim necessity of having a place he could defend; they needed the cave.

When Hawk returned with the bear's shaggy skin, Willow was in the cave. She had carried two boulders inside, and built a platform of sticks on top of them. Standing on this platform, she was digging at the cleft in the cave's roof with a sharpened stick. A shower of dirt and pebbles fell about her, and gathered in a growing pile at her feet.

Hawk looked at her, puzzled, but said nothing. Women were always busy, and much of what they did made little sense to him, so there was no point in questioning her. Going back to the bear, he brought an ample supply of the meat, laying it on ledges near the top of the cave. He stood doubtfully back because a heavy pall of smoke swirled there. Still, smoke shouldn't spoil the meat and certainly it was safer inside the cave than it would be anywhere else.

Then he returned to their old camp to bring up Willow's baskets and an additional supply of shafts for making new darts.

That night he built up the fire and slept on the grass outside the cave, the dog beside him. He liked it better there, for the wind carried most of the smoke away. Rising at intervals to replenish his fire, and to scout the winds, Hawk spent a comfortable night.

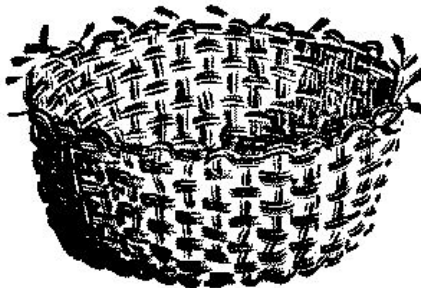
The next morning he again took up the seldom-absent problem of renewing his stock of weapons. Willow, who had refused to sleep outside the cave, was again on her platform deepening the hole she was making in the roof. She had already dug so far that she had had to use a longer stick, but there was still no explanation as to what she was doing. Hawk grunted and left the cave.

The dog at his side, he started toward the ledge of rock where he found the best flints for dart heads. As they started up the slope, the dog roamed ahead, nose to the ground.

A hare leaped out of the grass ahead of them and scooted swiftly away. The dog gave half-hearted chase, then returned when Hawk called him. The hare ran to the top of the ledge and turned to look back. As it sat up, it was clearly silhouetted against the skyline.

Then something like the swiftly moving branch of a tree rose near the hare. It flashed toward the little animal, then disappeared. The hare leaped high, stiffened convulsively, and fell back.

It had been struck by a big, deadly grass serpent whose bite meant instant death.



# GRASS SERPENT

## CHAPTER 9

THE DOG trod warily, the hackles on the back of his neck raised. He knew that when they wished to lay an ambush, the deadly grass serpents were able to conceal their odor, but the scent was very plain now. It was a musty smell, and strong, faintly reminiscent of crushed, pungent leaves. The dog started a wide circle that would bring him to a little rise from which he could see the snake but at the same time would keep him from going too near.

Hawk stooped to pick up a rock. It was a woman's weapon, but very effective for fighting snakes. He had met such serpents before, but luckily there was not a great abundance of them. When they wanted to feed, the few that existed haunted grassy trails along which hares and other small game were apt to run. The serpents were vicious creatures, so sure of themselves and their own power that they refused to move aside for anything. Angered, they would freely attack whatever provoked them. Once they had fed, they sought sunny ledges and lay on them almost unmoving, until they were ready to feed again.

Hawk kept his eyes on the place where he had seen the serpent. He knew how they fed. After they had killed their victim, which invariably died on the spot, they opened their jaws and literally crawled around it until the meal was in their belly. But this snake seemed to have sensed the presence of an intruder, and was apparently waiting to see whether or not the trespasser would have to be routed before it fed.

The dog, having sighted the serpent, was stretching his nose forward while at the same time he remained tense, ready to leap aside should the snake slither toward him. Again, like a violently snapping limb of a tree, the serpent rose and struck. The dog jumped, but the strike would have fallen short anyway. Never lacking in good judgment, the dog knew which creatures he could approach closely and which he could not. A grass serpent was one of the latter. The dog began an excited barking.

Hawk walked forward calmly, unafraid because he now knew exactly where the serpent was. It was only when one blundered upon them unaware, as the hare had, that the serpents were dangerous. They could strike with lightning-swift speed, but when they had to move from one place to another they were almost sluggish. A man could easily avoid them if he knew where they were.

From a little rise, Hawk looked down at the serpent and the dead hare. He was mystified. The hare was a small thing, but it was hardy and not too easily killed. There were no marks on it and no blood on the grass, yet the hare had died almost in its tracks. It had given only a few convulsive leaps after the snake had struck it.



Therefore the snake had some mysterious power. Hawk did not know what it was, but it must be as strong a magic as fire, which he could now control, and the flight of birds, which his darts now possessed. His curiosity grew, and he went a step nearer.

The serpent raised its squat, ugly head, its neck bent in a graceful curve, and pounded the earth with a warning tail. When it slithered a few feet forward, Hawk stepped back.

He remembered that he had once seen a bison calf step on such a serpent, and been bitten by it. The calf had been able to take only a few stumbling steps before it, too, had died. At the time he had given the incident only a passing thought because he had been still a member of the tribe and the tribe was strong. Since he had been banished from the tribe, and entirely dependent on his own resources, he had learned that he must neglect nothing which might add to his own strength. Now he wanted to understand the snake's secret.

He threw his stone, deliberately making a false cast so that the stone rolled beside the serpent instead of hitting it. Instantly the snake struck, and a thin liquid streaked the stone.

Hawk shook his head, having learned nothing. He did not know how snakes killed their prey because he had never thought them worth studying; they were merely bad things to be avoided. But obviously they possessed few brains, or this one never would have been teased to strike at a stone. Hawk circled the snake, to examine it more closely.

It was longer than a man, pale green in color, with rough, overlapping scales. But there was little to be learned from examining its body. Plainly the serpent's lethal qualities lay in its head, for it always struck with its head. Just as plainly, it inflicted death by some method other than a serious bite, for the hare had no visible wound.

He sought and found another rock, and when he threw it he did so accurately. It struck and broke the snake's back, and the serpent thrashed its mighty body about. In its struggles it crushed grass and knocked bushes down, then turned over and over. Overhead, a vulture was already soaring.



The dog at his side, Hawk turned away. Snakes could be eaten, but belonged in that category of foods which were to be eaten only if nothing else offered. Hawk did not like the taste of the flesh, and anyway he had all the meat they could possibly use. Replenishing his supply of weapons was the important thing now.

At a frightened, throttled squawk from the vulture, he whirled about. The big scavenging bird was in the air, its ten-foot wings spread wide, the snake clutched in its talons. Even as Hawk watched, the vulture's wings fluttered and it dropped limply to the ground. Hawk turned and trotted back.

Though the serpent was dead, its reflexes remained vital. When the vulture alighted upon it, the snake's head had snapped back and its fangs had penetrated the bird's breast. They were still there, entangled in the feathers. Hawk squatted and looked very closely.

The snake's curved fangs, about an inch and a half long, protruded from its mouth and into the vulture. Hawk looked at them in bewilderment. The fangs were tiny things, no bigger than needles, and within themselves they were surely incapable of inflicting a mortal wound. There was something else here, some secret power which he had not fathomed.

When he touched the snake, its body twitched but the fangs did not loosen themselves. Venom had spilled onto the feathers, and Hawk poked at it with a dart, remembering that the stone the snake had struck had been streaked with the same fluid. It was

colorless, and looked harmless, but surely it had some direct connection with the serpent's magic power to kill. There just was no other answer.

Replacing the dart in his throwing-stick, he left the serpent and vulture still entangled and walked thoughtfully away. There were many things in this world of his that would bear the closest possible inspection. He was increasingly aware of forces and powers which were all about, but which he did not understand. He must learn their secrets, for he and Willow could continue to live only if they remained stronger and shrewder than the many things that would kill them. His thoughts remained with the serpent. It had a marvelous power, a magic ability to strike things dead almost instantly, but just what was the source of such magic and how was it used?

Hawk neared the ledge of rock he wanted, and turned to climb to it. The dog fell in behind him, and while the man selected the stones he desired the dog rested in the sun. Hawk filled his pouch with choice pieces of flint and they started back.

A herd of deer had drifted across their trail and were feeding in one of the many open meadows. When Hawk approached, the deer stared curiously at him, and when he was as near as they thought he should get they skipped away. He glanced disinterestedly at them; there was plenty of meat in the cave and they could not possibly use any more now. But the dog gave enthusiastic chase.

As the deer raced into the forest the dog came to a sudden stop and an angry snarl rippled from him. He gave voice to his battle roar.

A puma-like beast, a short-fanged cat whose size was midway between the saber-tooth and the wild cat, had been lying on a limb of a tree. When the deer herd passed beneath, the puma dropped on one and for a few seconds had a wild, plunging ride. Then the cat's probing teeth met through the deer's spine, and brought the quarry down.

It crouched on its victim, fangs bared and tail jerking angrily. The dog made a furious attack which he halted just short of the crouching cat. When the puma made a short rush at him, the dog dodged warily. He was no match for the puma, but the big cat was unwilling to leave its game and give chase. Meat abandoned, even for a moment, was frequently meat lost.

Hawk sprang into action. Game was none too plentiful as it was, and every meat-eater raiding the stock of game meant less for Hawk and Willow. A puma such as this one might well make a kill every other day, and such a toll mounted terrifically. In many areas there was little or no game solely because a preponderance of meat-eaters had cleaned it out.

The dart in his throwing-stick, Hawk stalked the crouching puma. It was a dangerous antagonist, well able to put up a good fight, but Hawk had fought bigger and more savage creatures. He had killed a saber-tooth and a great cave bear, and he felt sure of his ability to kill the puma. If he did not, he would have to share the game with it.

He came nearer and nearer. The puma, eyes fixed on Hawk, tensed its muscles for the spring that would carry it upon the man. The dog, awaiting this moment, attacked furiously and the puma wheeled to spar with him. Hawk cast his dart.

Instantly he reached for another, for just as he threw the first dart, the puma moved. Instead of piercing the throat, its intended target, the dart had merely skimmed across the big cat's neck and sliced through the skin. It was scarcely more than a scratch, enough to infuriate the cat, and Hawk backed rapidly away. He laid the dart in his throwing-stick, and awaited another opportunity. But the puma was behaving strangely. Instead of attacking the man, it crouched where it was. At last the puma rose, stiffening all four feet and arching its back. Its tail became very stiff. It reared on its hind paws, while it lashed the air with its front ones. Then it fell to the ground, retched convulsively, and was still.

For a moment Hawk remained rooted in his tracks, overcome with amazement. Slowly he walked forward. The dog, as surprised as the man, was stretching his nose as far as he could, snuffling the dead cat.

Still incredulous, Hawk looked down at the slain puma. In his whole memory nothing else like this had ever happened. Even severely wounded pumas were capable of putting up a terrific fight, and this one had been scarcely scratched.

Suddenly Hawk was overcome by a hot surge of excitement. The puma had been killed by the serpent's magic power!

This, then, was the secret. He was master of a new and mighty power, almost unbelievable strength, for he remembered now that he had shot the puma with the same dart which he had dipped into the strange fluid that came from the snake's deadly head. It was the fluid and not any wound that killed the snake's victims. Hawk stood still, shaken to the core by this new thing he had learned. A dart dipped into a serpent's venom was indeed a mighty weapon. Equipped with such a thing, he might well walk safely anywhere at all.

Awed and fearful, trembling with what he had learned, Hawk shouldered the deer and made his way back to the cave. The big grass serpents were scarce and therefore hard to find, but he must hunt some more at the earliest opportunity.

He came in sight of the cave and stopped, while a feeling of alarm rose within him. He had left Willow safe, protected by a fire at the cave's entrance, but now the fire was only smoldering ashes. He tested the winds, which carried nothing except an odor of smoke. But he could see no smoke. Hawk dropped the deer, fixed a dart, and stalked forward.

He peered cautiously into the cave. Inside, a cheerful fire leaped high and beside it was Willow, working on another basket. Hawk followed with his eye the course of the ascending smoke, and saw it rising through the hole Willow had poked in the cave's roof. Thus her mysterious actions with the stick were explained at last. She had been

making an opening where the smoke might escape. With a grunt of admiration, Hawk went back for the deer.

When the deer had been cut up and stored in the cave, Hawk sat down to work on his dart heads. He had practiced so much and made so many that he knew almost by instinct whether or not he could make a good one from any piece of flint. He also knew exactly how the stones were going to split, and often, by striking a good-sized stone in exactly the right place, he could break it into a dozen fragments, all of which were already partly shaped. It was work to which he was so accustomed that he could do it with his hands and part of his mind; the rest of his thoughts wandered elsewhere.

The serpent's venom was very powerful magic; a mere touch of it had killed the puma. If he could transfer the snake-magic to his own dart heads, would it not be possible to use even smaller darts? It would no longer be necessary to inflict a mortal wound, and if he could make his darts smaller he could certainly carry many more of them. The more he could carry, the better he could hunt and defend himself.

But how could he make small darts fly any distance? The heavy darts he was now using depended on their own weight, their feathers, and the power of the throwing-stick. It would be impossible, even with the throwing-stick, to hurl a small dart a long way.

Willow had finished her basket and was stretching sinew which she would later use in sewing skins. She stretched it by tying one end to a slender green stick, bowing the stick, and then tying the sinew to the other end. The stick itself, slowly straightening, kept the sinew taut. Hawk was annoyed because a strip of sinew had broken with a loud snap, and disturbed his thoughts.

"Bring me water," he said.

Willow rose to get the two skin pouches which they used for water containers and started out of the cave with them. Hawk watched her impatiently.

Cave life had positive advantages, but it was not without its disadvantages. When they had lived in the open they had been within a few feet of a clear-flowing spring where they could quench their thirst any time they wished. But there was no water at all in the cave. The nearest spring was across the valley and up the opposite slope. All their water had to be carried from there, and there was never enough of it. Neither of the pouches held more than a thirsty man could drink, and water left in them for any length of time had a bad taste. At night they dared get no water at all.

Willow came back with the two filled pouches and Hawk drank. The dog looked expectantly up, and when no water was forthcoming for him he drifted out of the cave to get his own drink.

Hawk laid down the empty container thoughtfully. Until now it had not occurred to him that lack of water could be a very serious thing. He had wanted the cave largely because it was a safe place, and one he could defend if they were attacked by alien

hunters. But now he realized that if the hunters came, they could block Hawk and Willow from their source of water, and that would be fatal. He turned to Willow.

"You must make more containers, many more, and keep them filled so that we will always have water."

"We do not need them," Willow replied.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me show you."

Willow brought the basket she had woven. It was wide and deep, and so finely woven that when she held it up, no light showed between the supple sticks of which the basket was made.

"It is strong and tight," Hawk said, "but it will not hold water."

"No," Willow admitted, "but if the holes between the sticks were filled in, it might."

"Filled with what?" Hawk asked, his interest aroused.

"The sticky black mud you use to catch little birds," Willow replied. "I watched you the day you made the new spear for Short-Leg. There was a little pool of water on the black mud. If water did not sink through the mud there, it might stay in a basket coated with the mud."

Hawk remembered the tar pit and grinned delightedly. It was an excellent idea and might work. It would be much easier to fill and carry a tar-coated basket than several skin containers, and the basket would hold more water.

"We'll try it," he said, snatching up his spear and throwing-stick. "Bring the basket."

Together they left the cave. The dog, sunning himself in the warm grass, looked lazily up and thumped his tail at them. He rose to follow as they made their way to the tar pit.

Hawk dug into the sticky surface with his fingers. He brought out a handful and examined it closely. The tar formed a firm but pliable ball, and when he squeezed it, it spread out readily. It did not disintegrate as a handful of mud would have done. He handed the tar to Willow, who began pressing it against the inside of the basket. Hawk dug out more tar.

An hour later their work was done. The basket had a smooth, sticky lining of tar, which Willow had carefully worked into each tiny crack. Returning to the spring, they lowered the basket into the icy water, and breathlessly lifted it out again. It was brimful of clear, sweet water, and only a few drops seeped through here and there. Willow patiently began to work the tar in tighter at such places.

As pleased as though it had been his own idea, Hawk squatted beside the spring, watching her.

"Why did the women of the tribe not make these lined baskets before?" he asked.

"I do not know," Willow replied. "Perhaps it was because we were always moving, and skin containers are easier to carry."

As she carefully lifted the basket and carried it back to the cave, Hawk walked beside her, greatly pleased. Back in the cave, he took a long drink. He smacked his lips, while a vast sense of well-being filled him. Nobody else had ever been as well off, he was sure. There was meat in the cave, and dried seeds and berries, and plenty of water, and a good supply of darts. Hawk awakened to the startling fact that he need not devote every waking minute to the grim business of just getting enough to eat or protecting himself and Willow. Luxuriously he stretched out beside the fire and slept while Willow began cooking bear meat.

The dog's low growl brought Hawk back to reality.

Darkness had fallen while he slept, and the dog was lying in the cave's mouth rumbling at a prowling tiger. Hawk felt a sudden little panic.

Again the cave seemed small and close, a prison of a place. The only light was that cast by the fire. Hawk went to the entrance and peered out. He had intended to sleep outside, but there was no way now he could do so, for it was unsafe to go out at night and attempt to build a fire. Disgusted, he ate in silence, then threw himself down on the bearskin and went to sleep again.

He did not sleep heavily, and as usual was ready to awaken in a second, but there were no alarms during the night. With morning's first light, Hawk rose and stretched. He threw wood on the low-burning fire and looked at the basket, which was still nearly full.

It was good, very good, and they should have more of these tar-lined baskets. Willow started weaving one while Hawk went out to gather more dart shafts. He knew where the best ones grew, in a thicket of small trees in a nearby valley. There were so many that they crowded each other, and their limbless trunks were of a uniform size, free of branches. Hawk entered the thicket and started cutting sticks. Suddenly he was aware of the dog's warning growl.

Hawk peered out cautiously, to see the first of a long line of strange hunters swing down a slope and disappear into a gully. A moment later the head and shoulders of a man, with the lower body still concealed by the slope, reappeared. Hawk faded silently into the thicket, the dog beside him.

Beyond any doubt, the hunters were on his trail.





# BESIEGERS

## CHAPTER 10

HAWK quietly faded farther into the thicket. The dog stayed right beside him, making no noise and ready for whatever came. As the dog had fitted his hunting to meet the needs of his master, so he now fitted his other talents. He would do whatever was required, always looking to Hawk as a guide. Born to be part of a pack, the adaptable dog had blended himself perfectly into the life of a human being.

Beyond the thicket, Hawk broke into a swift run. He had no idea how the strange hunters had at last found him. It might have been chance, but more likely they had sought him endlessly, following every tiny clue and as patient as wild beasts while they traced the man and woman who had eluded them once. It mattered little how they had come here. It was important only that they were here, and that they had undoubtedly come to kill.

When he reached the next thicket, a tangle of small trees and brush wherein visibility was limited to a few feet in any direction, Hawk slowed his pace again. He got down to crawl, staying on rock ledges wherever that was possible and leaving no more traces than he could help. The dog left his tracks freely, but Hawk could do nothing about that. He could only hope that the invading hunters would not connect the dog with the quarry they sought. Dogs were common wild creatures, and their tracks might be anywhere.

Deliberately Hawk entangled his trail, crossing and re-crossing the thicket and leaving a maze of signs that would be very difficult to unravel. Still, he had no real hope of baffling his enemies for more than a few hours at the most. They might not be able to see where he had gone, but they could ferret out his tracks. By trying to throw them off at this point, Hawk hoped only to gain time.

When he reached the end of the second thicket, he grasped a trailing vine, climbed to the crotch of a great tree, and walked out on a limb to another vine several feet from the first. He slid down this, struck the ground with running feet, and dodged into the trees ahead of him.

He stopped to reconnoiter, looking over his back trail. But in his haste to escape the men who pursued him, he had run with the wind instead of against it, and now the soft breeze brought him no evidence at all of the enemy. Hawk circled cautiously.

The dog detected the first fresh sign of the invaders. He stopped, bristling. Hawk squatted beside him, trying hard to read the message which was already very plain to the dog. Then he caught it.

The hostile hunters were evidently trying to work out the trail he had left in the thicket. Hawk guessed that there were more than ten of them and not as many as twenty; but certainly they were in formidable strength.

Hawk ran to a clear-flowing stream he knew. He stepped in and, unmindful of the dog, who ran along the bank beside him, waded down the stream. Two hundred yards down he stepped out of the water on the bank opposite the one he had entered.

The hostile hunters had come a long way, and they had worked out a very difficult trail to do so. They were not to be thrown off lightly; even if he got Willow and ran again, the hunters would find them. The battle had to come, and it might as well be at the cave. But first there were things to be done. Hawk stepped out of the stream and gave a precious moment to a long backward look.

The invaders were not in sight; evidently they were still trying to work out the trail he had left in the thicket. It would be some time before they got this far, and he had a little time. The dog loped beside him as he set a direct course for the cave.

He stopped in a clearing where deer usually browsed. The fight was close at hand. During it, he would be a virtual prisoner in the cave, until he had either defeated the hunters or they had killed him and Willow. They would need food to last out the siege that was sure to come, and the only food they had was some bear meat, the deer the puma had killed, and such dried food as Willow had ground. Meat spoiled quickly in weather like this and they should have some fresh-killed game.

The dog cast back and forth, nose to the ground while he sought a scent fresh enough to hunt. Hawk watched anxiously, impatient to find game and be on his way. Willow was alone and should the hunters find the cave they would have little difficulty in killing her.

After the dog had cast for ten minutes, and failed to rouse any game, Hawk abandoned the hunt; they would have to make out the best way they could. At a fast trot, he returned to the cave. Willow met him at the entrance.

"Give me the water basket!" Hawk panted. "The hunters have come, and we will have to fight."

Willow brought him the basket without a word. Hawk ran to the spring, filled the basket, and returned to the cave. During his absence, Willow had been carrying rocks and boulders into the cave, and was now storing them in strategic places. Hawk waited at the entrance. Had there been time, he would have again tried to find game. But there was no way of telling just where the invaders were or what they were doing. They might arrive at any moment, and Hawk had no wish to be caught outside the cave or to have the enemy trap Willow alone. He must stay, and hope they had enough food.

The dog slunk out, padded restlessly back and forth across the meadow, then returned to Hawk's side. He stood still, close to his master, and waited tensely. The dog knew

that something was going to happen without knowing what it might be. He remained in the mouth of the cave, bristled and alert, while Hawk went back to inspect his store of weapons.

He was glad now that he had made additional darts; there were nine in the quiver and sixteen in his reserve stock. In addition there were the two spears and his club, but lately he had seldom used these. They would be useful only in a close-quarter fight, when and if the invaders tried to rush the cave. Hawk laid both spears at the cave's entrance, far enough back so that they could not be seized from the outside, and put his club beside them. Restlessly he prowled outside, and mounted the bluff above the cave to look all around.

There was nothing in sight; evidently he had hidden his trail well and the hunters were having difficulty unraveling it. But they would come. They had come too far already to turn back now. Sooner or later they were sure to find the cave.

Hawk considered their stock of firewood. He had carried much into the cave and Willow had brought more, but fire was their strongest weapon and their stoutest defense against constantly prowling beasts. Without fire, another bear, or a tiger, or a pack of wolves, might try to enter the cave. They needed fire all the time.

The dog padded close to his side as Hawk started across the valley and into the forest on the other side of the clearing. Willow took a stand in the cave's mouth, standing guard and ready to call a warning should anything appear. Hawk found a dead tree, dragged it across the valley, and into the cave. He went back for another, and a third.

About to start a fourth time, he was halted by the dog's warning snarl. Hawk stood quietly in the entrance, testing the winds. They brought no news to his nose, but obviously they had carried a message to the dog's much keener senses. Something was coming. Silently Hawk retreated to the cave, and warned Willow.

Two by two, she was bringing up her store of rocks and placing them near Hawk's spears and club. Fear showed in her eyes, but she said nothing. Hawk appreciated her strength and courage; it was good to have her beside him in this crisis, even though she was only a woman.

A moment later he caught a glimpse of the enemy through the trees.

They were coming fast, on a clear trail. Hawk moved about, assuring himself that he had plenty of room, and fitted a dart into his throwing-stick.

They came out of the forest, sixteen shaggy, hairy men with fur girdles flapping about their waists. The dog rose and stood ready, growling, but at a word from Hawk he subsided. The dog waited, uncertain what his master would do.

The oncoming warriors halted in the clearing, and milled about uncertainly. While they stood still, Hawk appraised them.

They were strange men, he saw, but doubtless of the same tribe as the three he had fought back near the river meadows. Their foreheads receded, and they lacked the firm chins which characterized the people of his own tribe. Their spears were also of a primitive type; a full half of the warriors carried only sharpened sticks that had been hardened by scorching them in a fire.

The leader of the warriors looked directly across the valley and saw Hawk. He stood a moment, as though unable to avert his eyes, then leaped furiously up and down. His bare feet rapped a sharp tattoo on the earth, and he swung his arms wildly. Then an unearthly shriek rolled from his throat. The rest followed his glance and they, too, began a concerted shrieking, and all leaped up and down. Hawk braced himself to meet the attack.

They came in a body, still yelling and waving their spears. Hawk forced himself to remain calm. He had already planned how he would meet such an attack if it came, and he knew the exact range of his darts. He could fling a dart twice as far as they could throw a spear, and certainly could kill some of the hunters before they were able to get within their spear range.

The hunters pressed on, howling at the tops of their voices and brandishing their spears. Inflamed with the lust to kill, they ran recklessly, each inspiring the other.

The dog was tense and ready to spring, but Hawk remained relaxed. He was afraid of this howling mob, but experience had taught him that he could not shoot straight when his muscles were tense. He must be relaxed and easy, and he had faced danger a sufficient number of times so he could force himself to be that way.

The howling was fierce, but Hawk knew that there was nothing in that which was able to hurt him. It was only meant to strike fear into the heart of an enemy. There was no indication that the hunters intended, at once, to press right up to the cave's mouth. Perhaps they would break and run, and launch half a dozen of these screaming attacks before they drove one home.

However, they had ventured into dart range, so Hawk stepped out of the cave and shot. Before the first dart had reached its target, he shot again and reached for another dart.

The foremost hunter stopped, a look of disbelief on his face as the first dart pierced his chest. He grasped it with both hands, tried to pull it out, then collapsed where he stood. The second dart struck another hunter squarely in the neck. He went to his knees, and fell limply backward, blood gushing from his jugular vein. The rest of the hunters turned and ran.

Hawk took his time with his third dart. Carefully he gauged the distance between himself and the leader, knowing that he would have to shoot very well to kill the man at such a distance.

Instead of shrieking, the hunters were now yelling in fear as they scrambled to get out of range. Hawk shot, purposely aiming high because the distance was so great. As the dart flew toward the fleeing men, Hawk caught his breath. He had aimed well, and if the dart kept on course it would strike the leader in the middle of his back.

However, at the last moment, a gust of wind deflected the dart. It curved to one side and went past the leader. A shout of mingled fear and rage broke from the man.

A moment later they were all safely out of range. Hawk did not pursue them. He had killed two and just missed a third in the first mad rush, but one man did not have even a faint chance of overcoming fourteen unless every advantage was on his side. To leave the cave would mean to give up his strong position and his only chance of meeting his enemies on something remotely like even terms.

The enemy tribesmen assembled at the point from which they had launched their charge, and swung to look back. Bewilderment was plain on their faces, and fear. They had come expecting to kill a man armed with a spear and a club, the only weapons they knew. Instead, they had run into something utterly beyond their comprehension. Not one of them should have been in danger at the distance this cave-dwelling man was able to kill. For a few minutes they stared stupidly at the cave. Then the leader spoke to them, gesturing violently.

Presently they came again, shrieking as before but spread in a thin line instead of grouped together. Again Hawk stepped out to meet them.

Instead of rushing forward, in an attempt to overwhelm the cave's defender by sheer weight of numbers, the hunters halted. They danced up and down, yelling, and made little dashes back and forth. Hawk tried desperately to reach them with a dart. He shot again, and again. Each time the dart fell short. Then Hawk stopped shooting, realizing what had happened.

The hunters had once made the mistake of coming within range of his darts, but they could not be tricked a second time. They were dancing and weaving just out of range, knowing that Hawk must have a limited supply of darts and tempting him to shoot what he had. They might be primitive, but they were crafty.

Hawk took stock of the darts remaining in his quiver and turned quickly to speak to Willow. Immediately she was there, handing him six darts to replace the six he had expended. Never taking his eyes from the enemy, Hawk maintained his stand just outside the cave's entrance.

He waited, watching carefully for someone to make a break and come a little farther toward the cave. When an unwary hunter did so, Hawk shot again. But his target was a leaping, writhing one, and he missed. Instantly the hunter bounded out of range, and Hawk resolved not to throw another dart until he was reasonably sure of hitting his target.

Soon after, one of the men went into the forest and returned with wood and tinder. He knelt to arrange his fire, and added wood to it when it began to blaze. Two others busied themselves gathering a great quantity of wood.

Hawk's heart sank. The hunters had been defeated in two initial skirmishes, but obviously they had no intention of leaving. Instead, they were going to besiege the cave.

Three hunters started into the forest, probably to look for game. The rest gathered about the fire, and Hawk watched them closely. There seemed to be no immediate danger of another attack, but neither was there any indication that the enemy intended to leave.

Hawk ventured outside the cave, and all leaped to their feet and stood with spears ready. Hawk understood now why only three had gone hunting. With their quarry cornered, the rest had no intention of permitting it to escape. They would attack again, but next time they would not rush forward foolishly, or give any advantages. As he retreated back into the cave, Willow questioned him.

"What are they doing?"

"Waiting. Either they have some plan, or they wish us to make a foolish move."

"Then they will attack again?"

"I am sure of it."

Hawk sat down at the cave's mouth, patiently waiting for his enemies to make a move. They did not, and an hour before dark the hunters returned with two deer. Their fire leaped higher, brighter, and the smell of roasting meat filled the air. Hawk came back into the cave.

He and Willow were safe, at least until morning. Meat-eating beasts might not attack the hunters lying about their fire, but the odor of cooking meat would attract them to the vicinity. Already one saber-tooth was in evidence. The tiger had come, as usual, to patrol the camp in the hope that somebody would stray from it. In consequence, the hunters would be anchored to their own fire until morning.

Furtive rustlings in the grass told of wild dogs that had come to tear at the slain warriors. Then came the hoarse cough of the saber-tooth, and the sound of the wild dogs disappeared. In the darkness, Hawk heard bones cracking and knew that, with morning, there would be nothing left of the hunters he had killed. Already they were filling the lean belly of the big cat. Hawk lay down to sleep fitfully.

He was awakened by the dog's warning growl, and sprang instantly to his feet. The first faint, wan streaks of daylight filtered dimly through the cave's opening, and the mournful twitter of an early-waking bird was borne to his ears. Snatching up his darts, he went to the opening and looked out.

Morning mists swirled lightly over the clearing, and smoke from the enemy fire curled lazily up through them. Three of the hunters squatted on their haunches, just out of dart range, looking steadily at the cave. Others dawdled about the fire, but not all were accounted for. They could not have gone hunting, for it was too early to hunt. Suspicious, Hawk peered out of the mouth of the cave to see what had happened to the rest.

A pebble fell behind him, and a little chunk of earth dropped to the floor of the cave. The dog snarled fiercely and trotted back into the cave. He stood still, muscles tense and head alert, then nervously padded back to Hawk. Another clod of dirt dropped from the cave's roof, and another. Again the dog returned to the cave, as though he wanted to locate something that should be there. He bristled.

Hawk jerked about, startled. There were faint scrapings and pawings on the roof of the cave, and dirt sifted down steadily. Now he knew where the missing hunters were. They were on top of the cave, trying to dig their way through the smoke hole. After they had an opening through which a man could drop, doubtless they would attack from two sides at once. But until the hole was big enough, there would probably be no further attacks.

Fear touched Hawk's spine with icy fingers. He could defend the door, but this was a situation which he had not anticipated. Obviously it was impossible to be in two places at once, and Willow was no match for even one hunter. She could help little if some came through the door while others dropped through the hole in the roof. Hawk squatted in the entrance, considering this new danger.

Willow brought him a chunk of roasted meat, and Hawk grimaced as he took it. The weather had been warm, and meat did not keep well in warm weather. When it started to spoil it was both distasteful and apt to induce a sick stomach. They should have had fresh meat today, but there would be none until he dared leave the cave.

Gingerly Hawk smelled of the meat, then sniffed again, more deeply. It should be spoiled but certainly it did not smell that way. Rather it had a smoky odor, not unpleasant. Hawk nibbled a bit, then took a bigger portion. It was not spoiled at all, but good, with a smoky taste as pleasant as its odor. Hawk looked up at the ledges where the rest of the meat lay.

Most of the smoke went out the smoke hole, but some always lingered near the top of the cave, so that the stored meat lay constantly in a thin pall of smoke. Evidently the smoke was responsible for keeping the meat from spoiling.

Hawk stored this discovery in his brain with all the others he had made. It was most useful. If meat could be preserved, for even a little while, it meant that they could have that many more meals out of any large game animal, instead of eating just a little and throwing the rest away. That was something for the future—if there was any future.

From overhead came a muffled pounding, and the scraping of rock on rock. The diggers, Hawk guessed, had struck a ledge of rock and were trying to break through it. The scraping and pounding continued. Hawk picked up the water basket, and drank. He put the basket down and listened intently.

The diggers on top of the cave had abandoned their first hole and were starting a new one in a different place. Hawk breathed a little easier; perhaps the entire cave was roofed with rock and could not be broken. The smoke hole might go through a crack in the rock too narrow for a man. Or maybe it was too difficult to dig there; the smoke emerged in a grove of trees, and digging a hole large enough to admit a man, through interlaced roots, could be almost as difficult as digging through rock.

Suddenly a boulder, dislodged from the roof, bounded against the rim of the water basket and tipped it over.

Both Willow and Hawk sprang instantly to right the basket, but they were too late. Their precious water flowed in a spreading, dark stain on the floor of the cave.





# BENT BOW

## CHAPTER 11

THE DOG, padding over, bent his head to the spilled water and licked up as much as he could. Then he ran a pink tongue over his furry upper jaw and sat back on his haunches, looking expectantly up at Hawk.

Hawk brushed a hand across his shaggy mop of hair and dangled the empty water basket while the enormity of this tragedy sank in. They could live, for days if need be, without food. But not without water, and their entire reserve stock had been in the basket.

Almost automatically he swung to look at the cave's entrance. Under no conditions must the enemy learn of this disaster. If they knew, or found it out, they could get both Hawk and Willow with no risk at all to themselves. It would be necessary only to wait until thirst drove the two mad, and kill them when they came out. He must get more water before their situation became desperate, but the only water near the cave lay in the spring across the valley.

Hawk's throat and tongue were dry, and already he felt thirsty. Having water, he had used it sparingly. Now, lacking anything with which to quench his thirst, he had a sudden strong desire for something to drink.

Willow's eyes were haunted, desperate, and she licked her lips. She, too, was suddenly thirsty. Her eyes were riveted on the damp floor of the cave, as the dog scratched inquisitively at the place where the water had spilled.

Dirt and small stones continued to patter into the cave, a monotonous dribble like rain, as the diggers on top strove to enlarge their hole.

Hawk went to the entrance, carefully choosing his way over the tumbled dirt and stones, and looked out. As usual, excepting for those who were trying to dig through the top of the cave, the hunters were merely sitting well out of dart range. Their only purpose seemed to be to prevent the escape of the people trapped in the cave. They apparently had no wish to attack again, or to make any move, until there was all possible chance for success. The digging went on.

Again Hawk licked dry lips. It was cool inside the cave, but outside a hot sun beat mercilessly down and even the birds were not moving. Instead they had sought the forest's shade, and were lingering in it until such time as the sun started to sink so they could move about comfortably.

The panting dog came to sit beside Hawk. In his own way the dog considered the situation, too, although he did not see the complete picture. The people outside the

cave were enemies and must be regarded as such, but the siege had become an accepted thing and nothing special was happening. The besiegers had not broken in, and until they did those inside the cave were in no danger. Therefore there was no use in remaining constantly excited. The dog returned to the cool cave, and lay down facing the entrance. The monotonous thud of the diggers' tools still sounded on top of the cave but that, too, had become a customary thing, almost an accepted part of living.

Suddenly the dog leaped backward. A large crack had opened in the roof, just behind the doorway, and stones and dirt poured in a steady stream through it. The dislodged earth piled unevenly on the cave's floor, so that there were two narrow alleys running to the entrance and a pile of debris in the center. The dog scurried toward an overhanging ledge at one side of the cave, and hovered uncertainly near it.

The two humans looked worriedly at the disturbance. Hawk listened intently to the sound of the diggers, while he tried to think of something he might do. The falling earth had left a thin cloud of dust behind it, so that breathing was difficult. Dust gritted between his teeth, and when he swallowed it added to the torment of thirst.

When the digging finally ceased, so accustomed had they grown to it, both looked questioningly up. Now that the sounds had stopped, they missed them. The fire leaped higher and brighter, painting the inside of the cave with its yellow glow, and they realized that twilight had come again. The diggers had to leave and return to their fire because of the dangers night brought with it. They would be easy prey for any prowling beast if they remained on top of the cave.

Hawk dug thoughtfully in the cave's floor with his bare toes. Tomorrow would be another hot day, from all signs, and already thirst was hard to bear. Before the night ended it would be harder, and by tomorrow it would be torture.

Hawk went again to the mouth of the cave, careful not to stir up any of the piled earth, and peered out. The sun had gone down, and with it the day's heat had gone too. In the valley, the besieging tribesmen were dark shadows beside their leaping fire. There was no smell of roasting meat; evidently the hunters had failed to get any. Tomorrow the enemy camp would be a hungry one.

Dim light still lingered, and familiar things had become night-haunted shadows. Like such a shadow, the same saber-tooth that had been at the enemy camp last night drifted within thirty feet of the cave's entrance. Ordinarily Hawk would have thrown a dart at it, and tried to kill the tiger, but now he welcomed it. It would keep the enemy from attacking at night. There was a chance that one of the hunters would stray from the fire, and that the tiger would kill him. In that happy event, Hawk would have one less to deal with.

The darkness deepened, and as it did the fire across the valley became very bright. Back in the forest a dire wolf sounded its lonesome wail, and at a distant point another

wolf replied. They must have fed recently; wolves never gave away their positions by making noise when they were hungry.

The tiger, again on its regular patrol around the camp fire, came back, and when it passed the cave it stopped to look searchingly at the entrance. It did not come any nearer because the tiger had already investigated the cave thoroughly. It knew there was fire within, and fire it dared not approach. The tiger went on its way around the enemy camp.

Hawk timed its beat, and it was a regular one. The saber-tooth appeared in the same places at about the same time. After a while it failed to pass the cave and Hawk knew it had become discouraged and gone to seek other game.

A night breeze stirred, blowing from the hunter's camp to the cave, and Hawk tested the scents it carried. There were none save those of the usual timid creatures which had found what they hoped were safe places for the night and were staying in them.

Willow was roasting meat, but Hawk had no appetite for it. His lips were dry, his tongue a twisted piece of grass in his mouth, and he felt very warm. His need was for water, not food, and he must drink before he could eat. Hawk walked back to the fire.

Willow's lips were cracked and dry, and her eyes seemed abnormally bright as she looked up at him. Suffering more than he, she wanted nothing to eat either. Hawk came to a sudden decision.

"I am going to get water," he said.

Willow's eyes filled with fear. "It is night."

"We must have water, and I cannot get it by day. I think the saber-tooth has gone, and that I can be back before it returns."

Willow offered no further protest, as Hawk picked up the water basket and a spear and went to the mouth of the cave. When the dog would have followed him, he told Willow to restrain it. For a few moments he remained quietly in the cave's mouth.

It was an unheard-of thing that he was about to do. Night was a time of terror both real and imagined. The darkness was always alive with fierce creatures that did exist and fantastic things that lived only in the mind. No sane person ever voluntarily left the fire's safety at night, but Hawk was desperate. Spear in one hand, water basket in the other, he slipped quietly into the darkness.

He walked fast and erect, making no attempt to hide, but he was careful to stay on soft grass where his padding feet would make no noise. Away from the cave, he broke into a trot. The spring was a long way off, and though the tiger was gone there was no guarantee that it would not return.

When he neared the enemy fire, Hawk slowed to a walk. The hunters were lying about, sleeping, but Hawk knew how lightly they slept. If they suspected his presence,

they could tell as easily as he had that there were no tigers or other dangerous beasts close by, and would be after him.

Past the camp, Hawk breathed more easily. He reached the spring, faintly illuminated by glowing fox fire, and dipped his basket. Hastily he yanked the half-filled basket out, while cold fright made his heart pound. The camp was alert!

He himself had made no noise, but he had forgotten that water gurgled when it poured into the empty basket. Now, every hunter was on his feet, spear and club ready. All were staring toward the spring. They knew that there was plenty of water all around, and no reason to suppose that any beast would drink so close to a camp. Besides, drinking beasts did not make that kind of a noise.

The half-filled basket in one hand, and his spear in the other, Hawk remained rooted in his tracks while he sought some plan of escape. He could not stay here, but the alerted camp was between him and the cave. Pursing his lips, he brought the growl of an angry tiger from the very depths of his chest. Then he started circling away from the fire on a course that would take him back toward the cave.

For a moment the watching hunters were silent. Then the wind veered sharply from Hawk to the fire, and at once the hunters began their insane leaping and their weird, animal screaming. Following their noses, they rushed toward the place where they knew their enemy, and not a saber-tooth, waited.

Clinging to the basket of water, Hawk ran desperately. He had been discovered, and there was no more need for subterfuge. Even as he ran he made ready to hurl his spear, for the enemy was between him and the cave. He would have to fight, but he would do it in his own way. As soon as he could see the first hunter outlined against the glow of the fire, Hawk stopped suddenly and hurled his spear.

He missed; in the dim light he had been unable to see the man clearly. Then, as he turned to run again, there was a sudden interruption.

Another snarl, a real one, sounded in the night, and was followed by a wild shriek. The hunters scrambled desperately to return to their fire and Hawk ran faster. The tiger had come back, and just in time. There was no immediate danger because the tiger had its victim, and would not leave it. Hawk sprinted into the cave, still clutching the basket with its precious contents.

When he and Willow had satisfied their thirst, Hawk lay down to sleep. It was a peaceful sleep; tomorrow would bring its problems but he had solved the most immediate one.

During the night he awakened, and went to the mouth of the cave to test the winds and to listen. The hunters apparently remained about their fire, and anyway the dog was lying close to the cave's entrance. Hawk looked gratefully at him. More and more he was coming to rely on the dog. The animal always alerted him when anything was

about, and never gave a false warning. He would be sure to create some disturbance if the hunters were foolish enough to leave their fire and try to attack the cave by night.

It was most unlikely that they would. They had already gone out once and learned that night was no time to venture away from their fire. But another day was soon to come, and sooner or later the diggers on the roof would find a way to break through. When they did, and if they came through the entrance at the same time, he could not repel them. Even if the dog and Willow helped, there were too many to beat back.

Hawk came back to throw more wood on the fire, and the flames leaped halfway to the cave's roof. Hawk fretfully paced about.

He must do something, but what could it be? The hostile hunters knew how far he could shoot his darts; they would not again come within range. If he went out to meet them he would certainly be killed. Hawk looked at his darts, particularly the special one whose tip carried the mysterious power of the serpent's deadly ability to kill. If he could reach his enemies with it, if he could enlist the serpent's magic in his defense, he might yet win this battle.

The dog got up to sit expectantly beside him, as though he thought something was about to happen. Hawk paid no attention. The dog was valuable in his own way, but Hawk could see no use for him in the present problem.

Hawk looked up at the roof of the cave, where the firelight made dancing shadows. The diggers had tried to break through in half a dozen places, and had as yet succeeded nowhere. But sooner or later they were sure to find a soft place, one that would yield to their efforts. Hawk paced about, looking from the roof to the fire, and back again. If he knew where the enemy would finally enter, and had a great fire underneath that place, the flames might drive them back.

But where was his fire to be built? The cave was roofed with dirt, broken here and there by a layer of stone. Looking at the roof from the inside, there was no way to tell exactly where those digging from the outside might finally gain an entrance. It took time to build up a roaring fire, and if it was even a few feet away from the right spot, the hunters could attack anyway.

His eyes on the roof, Hawk stepped backward, and trod on something that snapped against his foot. He looked down, and saw that he had thrust his foot between the sinew on one of Willow's drying sticks and the stick itself. With an annoyed grunt, he bent down to free himself, but the stick caught on his toe and only bent when he tugged at the sinew. The sinew slipped from his hand and snapped against his foot as the stick tried to straighten itself. Hawk squatted down, looking more closely.

As a spear-maker, he had always been intrigued by the magic life in a supple green stick. That magic was still evident in the drying stick, but now it seemed to be controlled in some way by the sinew tied to it. Fascinated, Hawk carefully disengaged his foot and picked the stick up. Experimentally he pulled at the sinew, and when he

did the stick bent. As soon as he released it, the stick straightened. The quivering sinew seemed to sing softly to him.

Hawk forgot everything else. He took the drying stick in his left hand and, with his right, pulled back the sinew. The stick bent, but when he released the sinew, the stick immediately straightened and the sinew became taut. Again it sang its humming song.

A green stick itself had great power, a mysterious force that belonged to things that grew, but did not move freely by themselves. And animal sinew, Hawk reasoned, so useful to both beasts and men, who could move as they pleased, must contain some magical element of its own. Combined, the two seemed to possess a power greater than either alone. Hawk drew the sinew again, and again, and let the stick snap itself back to its former shape.

The cave, the dog, the hostile hunters, even Willow, who had awakened and was quietly watching him, faded into insignificance. For years he had tried to master the strength and life in the green wood, and now he knew that he was on the verge of finding what he had been seeking. Wood alone was not the answer. He must pair wood with sinew; the strength of trees with the agility of animals.

Sitting beside the fire, he drew the sinew taut and flexed his fingers across it. It sang pleasantly to him, a happy song of triumph, a promise of great strength. With fingers that trembled from excitement, Hawk took one of the darts from its quiver. He fitted it against the sinew, pushed against the bent stick with his feet, and let the sinew go. The dart wobbled weakly across the cave, and bounced against the far wall with scarcely enough force to make a mark.

Hawk looked down at the stick, baffled. He almost had the answer he had been seeking; it was almost in his grasp. But something was lacking; what was it? A moment later he knew what that was. In three great bounds Hawk sprang across the cave.

A spear shaft! It had been a supple spear shaft that had first awakened him to the life in wood! Feverishly he sought among his bundle of shafts, and plucked out the greenest and most limber. He grasped it by both hands and bent it. A happy smile lighted his face.

This was what he needed! Sinew-drying sticks were green, and as such they had strength, but they were not strong enough to propel a dart. The spear shaft was stronger, thicker, and had the needed power. Hawk tied a length of sinew to one end of the shaft, braced that end against the cave's floor, and bowed the shaft. Making a loop in the free end of the sinew, he tied it over the other end of the shaft. Very carefully, a little awed, knowing he held magic in his grasp, he pulled the sinew and bent the shaft more. He released the string and the shaft snapped back.

The breaking sinew snapped with a sharp report, and Hawk winced as one end struck him smartly across the cheek. Unmindful of the sinew's sting, he looked in

bewilderment at his handiwork. The shaft was powerful enough, but the sinew lacked strength to control it.

"Twist several long sinews together," said Willow.

She was on her feet now, gathering lengths of sinew from her longest drying sticks. Tying the ends together, Willow looped three lengths over a stick and swiftly twisted them into one smooth, compact cord. Then she handed the triple-strength sinew to Hawk.

Eagerly Hawk bowed the shaft again and tied the sinew to either end. He drew it back slowly, a little afraid that it might break again when he let it snap forward. But it merely sang to him, a humming, stronger vibration than before. Hawk rested the butt of a dart against the sinew, drew it back, and shot.

The dart struck the cave's wall so hard that its stone head shattered, and the wooden shaft bounced halfway back to him. Exultantly Hawk swooped to pick it up, and shot again, and again. When the wooden shaft itself was broken, he chose another dart.

Dawn was breaking when he knew that, finally, he had made and mastered a satisfactory bow. He could shoot the length of the cave and hit what he aimed at. Hawk looked grimly at the eight darts remaining in his quiver. The rest were shattered, but he had these left, and if that mysterious power in the animal sinew did not betray him, he might yet win this unequal battle. Hawk went to the mouth of the cave and looked out.

Only four hunters remained to guard the prisoners in the cave. The rest had evidently gone hunting. Soon they straggled back, empty-handed, and stood disconsolately around the fire.

For a moment Hawk stood tensely, then forced himself to relax. Experience had taught him that he could not shoot well when his muscles were taut.



Sitting in the mouth of the cave, he fitted a dart into the bow, braced it against his feet, drew the sinew, and took careful aim. As well as he could he calculated the wind, the distance, and what last night had taught him about the bow's strength. When he shot, the dart flew straight and fast, but dug itself into the earth several feet short of the hunters and quivered there.



The hunters stared uncertainly, muttering their astonishment, not sure whether this dart had come from the cave or from some other source. Most of them had paid no attention when Hawk first shot, but now they stood in a close group by the fire, watching his every move.

Now, Hawk decided, was the time to see if the serpent's deadly power would come to his aid. Picking up the one dart with the venom-dipped head, he fitted it against the sinew, and drew with both hands. Slowly, letting no muscle quiver, he drew the sinew as far back as he could, and again took careful note of the wind, the distance, and the trajectory which he thought the dart would assume. He moved the bow very slightly to one side and shot.

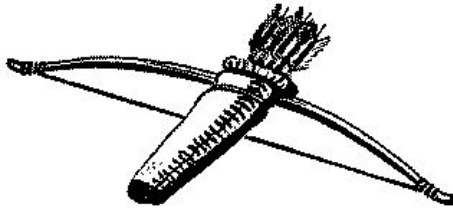
The whistling dart left the bow. Faster than the swiftest bird it traveled, a flashing streak in the dim morning. It rose in its upward curve, and began its descent, down toward the leader of the enemy hunters. But instead of striking him squarely, the dart's head merely nicked his shoulder.



The hunters milled about, confused by fear and awe of the lone man who could send his little spears such an incredible distance. The leader, however, apparently enraged by the slight wound he had received, was dancing up and down, brandishing his spear. From his actions, Hawk concluded that he was trying to overcome the hunters' fears. Had the serpent's power no effect, then? His hopes began to give way to black despair.

Suddenly the leader of the band took two faltering steps, stiffened, tried to take another step, and fell face down, writhing on the ground.

Bereft of their leader, panic-stricken by the mysterious manner of his collapse, the rest of the hunters took one terrified look and fled into the forest as fast as they could run.



# RETURN

## CHAPTER 12

HAWK stood outside the cave, the dog beside him and the bow in his hands. The quiver on his shoulder held a dozen feathered arrows which, together, weighed no more than a few darts. It was an easy burden; the loaded quiver seemed feather-light and the bow was no heavier than his throwing-stick.

It had not been an easy or sudden transformation. Several experimental bows lay behind him, and uncounted arrows. He had learned to shoot the bow by holding it in his hands, standing upright. He could shoot an arrow, accurately, five times as far as he had ever been able to throw a dart. And the arrows were within themselves so powerful that he had no more need of the serpent's venom. That was always in reserve, a deadly addition to his armament should he ever need it.

The bow spelled security. Even the mighty saber-tooths, which could be attacked with a very rain of arrows whenever they came near the cave, now stayed away from it. Two saber-tooth skins served as beds for Willow and himself, and there were deer-skin coverings ready when the weather should turn colder. Now, in reality, Hawk was master of his world.

Willow came from the cave, a new basket in either hand. Hawk and the dog led the way back to the tar pit at their old camp site.

Save for a few tumbled ashes and bits of charred wood, all traces of the fire which they had maintained here, so long ago, were obliterated. The spot had seemed a haven then, but now, accustomed to the shelter of their cave home, they regarded it as a cheerless, exposed place. They had come only to pitch more baskets for Willow's ample supply of storage containers.

Hawk sat down in the sun, the dog at his feet, while Willow began to line her baskets. Hawk's only function was to protect her while she worked.

The first basket was nearly finished when the dog pricked up his ears and growled warningly. Hawk stood up, looking about alertly. Topping a nearby rise he saw a human figure, then another and another. He spoke softly and Willow came to his side.

Hawk was not worried, for his arrows were more powerful than many spears. Besides, the approaching humans had a strangely familiar look. But it was not until they approached nearer that he identified them positively. They were Wolf, Chief Hunter of their old tribe, Kar, the Chief Fire-Maker, two women, one boy child, and two girl children. They were all haggard, worn, and very thin. Obviously they had eaten little more than enough to keep them alive.

"Come no nearer," Hawk called out warningly. "If you do, I will kill you."

Wolf's voice was weak and husky. "We seek food, and only food."

"From us?" Hawk cried angrily.

"We have no right to expect anything from you," Wolf croaked, "for it was we who banished you. That was an evil day for us, for no one else could make spears that flew as true as yours. When we tried to steal some from another tribe, there was a great battle in which half of us were killed."

Hawk remembered that battle ground, back at the scene of the mammoth stampede.

"Where are the rest?" he asked.

"Dead," Wolf said. "Some killed by wild beasts and some by lack of food. All save us are dead."

"And you seek only food?"

"Only that."

As Hawk hesitated, Willow said softly, "They are our people, and they are in great need."

"Come with us, then," Hawk said at last. "We have food in plenty, and we no longer wander to find game." He touched his bow proudly. "There is no need."

**Transcriber's Notes:**

hyphenation, spelling and grammar have been preserved as in the original

Page 26, no knowdedge of ==> no knowledge of

Page 41, had been eated ==> had been eaten

Page 58, but restrained himself ==> but restrained himself

Page 89, Hawk two two quick ==> Hawk took two quick

Page 201, to restrain it ==> to restrain it

[The end of *Fire-Hunter* by Jim Kjelgaard]