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**Ah'-oom. Lead hunter in a small group of hunter-gatherers near a river now known as the upper Nile. They are near the present day border of Sudan and Ethiopia 100,000 years ago.**

# Savanna

*Spring, 100,000 BCE. The east African savanna. Ah'-oom, a talented hunter, will lead an expedition along a river toward a herd of beasts; at least one of the beasts must be taken for the meat, fat, bone, hide, and sinew needed by the members of her small clan of hunters and gatherers.*

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Ah'-oom has been headstrong and energetic since her birth many seasons ago. As she seeks to master all of the elements of her environment and her complex relations with other members of her tribe, she has learned many lessons. With the help of her mother, Yah', she learned how to make her own knives out of bone for cutting meat, and her own needles to sew animal hides for warmth. She has made a stone hammer to subdue game needed for food.

As she grows more skilled and aggressive in the use of her tools, and as she begins making spears at the request of the hunters, she grows bold enough to tell Boa, the lead hunter and the father of Ah'-oom, that she wants to go along on a hunt.

Boa' has tried many times to stop her from going on the hunt, but Ah'-oom, as headstrong as he, goes along anyway, though usually at a distance from the main hunting party. Eventually, though, Boa notices her strengths on the hunt – her talents for tracking and striking game; for paying close attention to her surroundings and for her way of calling out the dispositions of her hunting partners.

As Ah'-oom gains trust among the other hunters, she learns that she must adhere closely to the overall goals and purposes of the clan hunters as a group in order to increase their success in bringing meat, bone, hide, and sinew back to the other members of the clan.

Ah'-oom is physically small, but her vision of what must be done on the hunt is strong and clear-eyed. When she comes into conflict with those who resist her decisions, she must prod them, sometimes with one of her weapons: the spear, the bone knife, or the stone hammer. One that she cannot subdue with prodding is Argah', an abandoned child close to Ah'-oom in age who was taken into the group several seasons earlier.

Ah'-oom begins to understand that Ar-gah' is angry when Boa looks to her for some of the fundamental decisions to be made on the hunt. Worse, in the mind of Ar-gah', Boa does not criticize her severely enough when her lack of experience or excess energy puts one or more of the other hunters in danger.

### Part 1.

The scattered, bright stars in the dark sky above the African savannah fade as the horizon in the east lightens. Behind a mound of earth, out of the wind, a small group of hunters huddles. Bodies touching and arms and legs tangled together for warmth. They stir out of their sleep. Yah'-nay, the eldest female of the group, is already up and looking toward the brightening edges of darkness. Her view of the moon and bright stars in their various patterns above fades in the gathering light of morning.

Yah'-nay looks down toward the horizon. She sees that the sun, at the point of rising, moves farther north each day. She remembers that the shadows cast by the sun at midday will continue to shorten until, when the sun is highest in the sky, they will then begin to lengthen.

Yah'-nay knows from this that the spring rains that follow the cold rains of winter are also passing and that the days and nights, even the rain, will be warmer as the sun grows hotter in the days ahead.

Yah'-nay pauses in her remembrance of the sun moving farther south again as the air grows cooler until the shadow grows to its longest extent. She knows there will be changes in the moon from a thin sliver to a full round bright ball and back to darkness, then the sliver again. There will be several of these changes in the moon before the air begins to grow cool again in its continuing cycle of change from sliver to ball to darkness and then back to sliver again; ... a cycle that she has always known as the time between her bleedings when she was younger. A cycle now known to the beautiful first born child of Yah, Ah'-oom. Yah is mated with the first male child born of Yah'-nay's body, Boa. Boa is the oldest male in the group.

As she thinks about the things she sees in the sky and feels in her body, Yah'-nay struggles to make sense of the relationships between the regular movements of the sun, the moon, and the bleeding she felt and saw and touched and tasted when her body was younger.

She is joined by Ah'-oom, now two cycles of the sun past the start of her bleeding. Ah'-oom squats near the older woman and pulls the animal hide away from Yah'-nay's shoulder. A purr deep in her chest begins as she picks the tiny vermin buried deep in Yah'-nay's thick body hair. Several of the hunters have hair over most of their bodies, but Ah'-oom

has large patches of dark, bare skin on her back, chest, and upper arms and legs. She is more prone to discomfort during periods of cold than the other members of her group. She often needs to wrap herself in extra animal hides for warmth. Yah'-nay is careful to make sure that Ah'-oom has enough animal hides around her when the group huddles together at night.

Ah'-oom and Yah'-nay take pleasure each in the company of the other. Yah'-nay exhales sharply through pursed lips and points toward a smudge of stars that show clouds gathering in the northern sky. She lifts her nose and sniffs. Ah'-oom also sniffs, then motions for silence. She becomes alert. She stands and looks toward the source of the gathering breeze.

Ah'-oom points in the direction of the breeze and sniffs again. With hand movements and a guttural sound deep in her chest she indicates that several large animals are perhaps a day's distance away. She turns to grab her spear shaft and the piece of bone she has sharpened, the piece that will be tied to the end of the spear.

She notches the shaft to accept the bone, and she wraps shaft and bone with a strip of hide leaving most of the spear point and cutting edge clear. She returns to the group and kicks some of the others awake. She pulls three larger members away from the other tangled bodies. Those who object or resist, receive another kick or a sharp punch to the head from Ah'-oom.

Boa, her father and the senior male in the group, rouses himself and gives a low bark toward Ah'-oom. She looks up and stares at him. She is not sure if she has drawn his ire. In hopes of explaining herself, she points with jerking motions back to the breeze, so redolent of warm animal flesh. Her fear is unfounded. Boa stands, stretches, and passes his stone ax, the symbol of his leadership, to her. Ah'-oom grips the ax handle with both arms. He motions her and the others toward the source of the fresh-ening breeze, and to the several ravens flying in the same direction. Ah'-oom calls again to three of the group's members, its hunters, and points to the birds. It is an omen.

One of the hunters, Ar-gah', is an adopted member of the group who is thought to be two seasons older than Ah'-oom. He was taken in many cycles of the sun ago as an injured youth who had either been abandoned by his familial hunting group, or they were somehow injured or killed. Boa was impressed that he had found water, had hidden himself from predators, and had survived for several days even though injured and unable to move quickly.

Had Boa not seen value in the foundling, he may have left Ar-gah' on his own. No other member of the hunting group would have argued

against it. As it turns out, Ar-gah' has grown into a good hunter, and his loyalty to Boa and to the welfare of the group is total.

Ar-gah' senses the affection that Boa feels toward him, and as such, this morning, he stares with a deep frown at the ax in Ah'-oom's hands. Has Boa not yet felt confidence in his hunting skills to give him leadership? What more must he do to prove himself worthy?

The other two hunters are Ah'-oom's uncles. Bo-nee' is a skilled tracker, able to find the tiniest and lightest footprints in the loose sand and grasses and in the twisted branches and crushed leaves in shrubbier areas. From the tracks, he can then detect the directions of travel of possible game.

Bo-nah' is the strongest of the group, able to throw a spear a long distance with deadly force and accuracy. He is also very imaginative with the materials used for tools and weapons, which Ah'-oom and Ar-gah' both admire. As he puts a tool or weapon together, Bo-nah' often pauses to look at the materials and think about how they might be reshaped and extended in order to improve his ability to throw with power and accuracy. Bo-nah' knows that his value to the tribe lies in how well he can inflict a crippling injury from a long distance on the animals the group needs for food, warmth, and shelter.

As much as possible, Bo-nah' passes his skills along to Ah'-oom both because Boa has expressed his pleasure in it and because Bo-nah' takes pleasure in passing his skills along to such a bright, attentive, and capable pupil.

Today, at Ah'-oom's call and Boa's urging, Bo-nah' picks up his spear, and, with it, a long piece of thin leg bone he has been working at one end with abrasive stone. He has abraded a pocket in the end of the bone in a way that can hold the back end of a spear shaft. He has not yet tried out his idea in a hunt, but the spear end fits well together in the pocket Bo-nah' has created. It appears it will, with practice, make the force of his throw more powerful and the accuracy more true. He hopes he will have an opportunity to use his spear together with the leg bone pocket in the course of the hunt.

As the tribe readies for the hunters' departure, Ah'-oom's young sister Pe'-dee dashes up. In her small hands, she cups a river rock. Its vivid blue catches the light of the sun and reflects the vibrant sky above.

The group cannot resist. They pause what they are doing to marvel at the stone. When Ar-gah' reaches out for it, Boa bats him away. With care, he gently takes the stone from Pe'-dee and stands fully upright with it protected in his fist. The others understand his meaning. This stone is important and special, and as such, it will only be given to a member who has earned its beautiful blueness.

Before they can leave, Yah'-nay scoops Ah'-oom close and holds her against her chest. The women know the threat of other tribes that encroach on the savanna. Ar-gah' has seen them with his own eyes, from a nearby ridge. He imitated the way they loped across the ground the other night, in front of a fire. The way he jutted his jaw forward and menaced his brow had frightened the little ones. The hunters will not only have to look out for wild animals but will have to protect one another against the fear of these shadowy and possibly violent strangers.

Ah'-oom pulls back and jerks her head confidently at Yah'-nay. She is a skilled hunter. Boa is trusting her to lead his group. She will not let danger befall them.

Ah'-oom and the hunters move down to the creek that runs near their sleeping place. She urges them to drink as much water as they can stand and carry as much as they can in their skin bags. They stop to pick up their clubs, spears, and strips of sharpened bone, then start moving in the direction Boa has indicated. Ah'-oom picks up her father's ax and follows them.

The sky is light now, and only the brightest stars remain visible. The sun has not fully risen, but Ah'-oom, as leader, knows that the day will be hot and the distance to the game long. Travel will be over sandy, windblown desert and grasslands where water may be hard to find. She will have to stay alert for the smell of damp ground if the day turns too hot. Each of the hunters knows that they must call a break from the hunt whenever they find small animals, reptiles, insect mounds, or clumps of edible plants: they must be gathered and shared for food.

Once Bo-nee', the last still slaking his thirst, has had his fill, the hunters begin to jog at a pace that all of its members can maintain through the day. When the sun rises well above the horizon, Ah'-oom runs ahead to the top of a small hill and signals a stop. She shakes her arm in a way that signals her wish for absolute quiet. She sniffs, she twists and turns her body as she tilts her head from side to side, and she nods up and down with her hands cupped to her ears, listening for the normal sounds of birds, animals and rustling foliage. She sniffs for the smells of the game they are hunting. She looks in the direction of their prey for any disturbance among birds, or any animal activity that stirs unusual amounts of dust.

Then she stops, still, and squints to the north. Her shadow falls before her as it is cast by the southern sun. Before leaving the small hill, Ah'-oom looks back in the direction they have come. She has been memorizing significant landmarks by observing them as she approaches, then looking back at them after she has passed.

She looks at the sun's course across the sky, and at the length and direction of the shadows cast by the hunters' bodies. She feels, sniffs, and tastes the wind with her tongue, and looks at the movement of clouds. She looks back into the distance for the shapes around the group's sleeping place, and particularly to the large acacia tree standing near the windbreak that marks it. She will need to find and follow these shapes on their return if she is to find the place where her family sleeps.

Finally, she descends from the mound and jogs to the north. The other hunters follow, matching her pace. As they run within a few yards of each other, Bo-nah's mouth reshapes itself into a wide grin. He vents a high-pitched, warbling cry of enthusiasm for the chase. The others also cry out as they run. Ah'-oom looks into the distance for the next landmark on their way north.

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Ah'-oom has called the hunters to a stop. She has, once again, ascended a small rise to taste the wind. The sun is now past the peak of its travel through the sky, and they have not yet spotted the game that Ah'-oom has said is ahead of them. Ar-gah' is particularly disgruntled and makes it known in the way he noisily sucks on his water skin. All check their weapons and make small adjustments as though getting ready for the hunt itself, rather than just the possibility of a hunt sometime in the future.

Ar-gah' stretches, yawns, and scratches his torso as though he is losing interest in the main purpose of the hunt, and may have a different idea. Bo-nah' recognizes his fading commitment and wonders what it might mean. He knows that Ar-gah' is a summer season or two older than Ah'-oom and somewhat more muscular, though he does not run as fast, cannot throw as accurately, and his trail sense is not nearly as well developed as Ah'-oom's.

More important than that, Boa has given the leadership of the hunt to Ah'-oom. The implied message to Bo-nah' is that he needs to remind Ar-gah' of this simple fact. He reminds the boy of this with a series of high-pitched barks, staccato grunts and yips close to his face followed by a sharp poke to Ar-gah's chest. Ar-gah' backs away and turns to continue checking his weapons in preparation for the continued chase to the north.

Bo-nee' is loyal to Bo-nah' and will support whatever his brother chooses to do. That, he knows, as he stands staring at the two posturing male hunters, is to honor the wishes of Boa. Even so, Bo-nee' likes the impulsive Ar-gah', and the two are often seen together as he teaches Ar-gah' the skills of tracking.



Ah'-oom lets out a low whistle followed by a series of chirps. The others turn toward her. She is mimicking the cry of a bird common in this area, but the three hunters know that this call means that she wants Bo-nee', their expert tracker, to join her on the rise. He jumps up with his spear and trots toward her. Once he joins her, Ah'-oom points to the ground in front of the rise, then to the copse of trees that lies a ways beyond. Bo-nee' sees slight disturbances in the soil in front of them, and a line of shadows in the trees as though something has passed this way and gone into the woods. He nods to Ah'-oom. The game is close by.

She turns to Bo-nah' and Ar-gah', touches her tongue to the roof of her mouth, and gives a series of five clicks, a pause, then five clicks again. It is a message that they need to approach her, but silently. As they gather around her, she motions Bo-nee' to move off the mound, tracking the signs in the dirt and vegetation toward the shadow in the trees. She then motions for Bo-nah' and Ar-gah' to follow him as quietly as they can. All are crouched low. Ah'-oom waits, then moves to the right and upwind of the other hunters. She checks the ax kept in the hide belt around her waist, then makes sure, once again, that she is correctly holding her spear.

None of their spears are perfectly straight. Even so, with practice and Bo-nah's help each has learned how to hold and throw in such a way that they hit their target with as much force as the hunter can bring to the throw. The purpose of the spear in the hunt is to make a killing strike that will cause massive bleeding. Failing that, the hunter needs to be close enough to the animal or bird, to cripple in some way its ability to outrun the hunters and escape. If the animal is close enough to strike without the need to throw a spear, then the hunter may be able to shove his spear into one of the animal's killing zones with great accuracy.

Failing an immediate kill, the hunter may be able to pull his spear out of the animal and try again. Such opportunities are rare, however, as are the hunters with enough calm, skill, and experience to know exactly how to place a killing blow in a particular animal, especially when that animal is charging the hunter, or threatening him or her with a snarling growl and bared teeth.

Such an animal—a very large cat-like animal common on the savanna—though not yet snarling or charging, appears and faces Bo-nee' from the edge of the woods. Bo-nee' stiffens but dares not make his excitement known. The wind is blowing toward the hunters from the woods, so the animal cannot yet smell or hear them, but it can see unusual shapes in the distance. Those shapes, the hunters, have stopped moving on Bo-nee's signal. They are now waiting silently and without movement to see if the animal will move in a direction that gives the hunters a real opportunity to take him.



Ah'-oom, several strides away from the others, has also spotted the animal. She silently takes in the situation. The edge of the woods where the animal now stands is about as far away as any one of the hunters, even Bo-nah', could possibly throw a spear. At such a distance, accuracy would not be much of a consideration. The most likely result of such an attempt would be a scared animal that runs back into the woods. As that thought crosses her mind, Ah'-oom jumps, screeches, and runs toward the other hunters. The animal moves quickly. Just as Ah'-oom has planned, the animal perks up at this disturbance, and leaps for the running girl.

Bo-nah', Bo-nee', and Ar-gah' remain crouched, but they grip their spears more tightly as they estimate the shrinking distance between them and the now charging animal. They know from Bo-nah's training that the distance will have to shrink to less than twenty strides before they can risk throwing a spear. Otherwise, they might lose the spear without diminishing the speed of the animal's charge, and their tools for defense will be gone.

Ah'-oom runs quickly toward the other hunters while carefully watching the closing distance between the animal and the others. Without warning, she jerks to a stop, turns, and runs as fast as she can away from the hunters. The animal is hot on her trail and turns with her, thus presenting the crouching hunters with the full length of its body.

Ar-gah', ever the impulsive one, is first to leap up and throw. His spear hits the animal near its hindquarters but glances off, leaving only a minor cut that will neither slow the animal down nor bleed enough for the hunters to be able to track it. Ah'-oom continues to run; her life, and the lives of her hungry tribe, depends on it. Bo-nah' snarls and chatters at Ar-gah' before throwing next. His spear flies true to the animal's chest but does not pierce the heart. Even so, the spear pierces deeply enough to cause the animal to stumble in its run and fall tumbling and sliding to the ground.

The three hunters run screaming, victorious, with their weapons toward the struggling beast. Ah'-oom, on hearing their yells, looks back, then turns and runs toward the animal with her spear and her ax at the ready. The beast struggles to get up. Still several strides away, Bo-nee' throws his spear in the hopes that he can strike a death blow. The animal only roars in pain.

Bo-nah' runs at top speed with his stone hammer. He literally flies to the beast and brings the hammer down with all the force he can muster on its head. But, in that instant, the animal turns toward the approaching hunters and tries to bat down the object flying toward him. His claws catch Bo-nah's throwing arm and deflect the force of his hammer. Bo-nah' cries out.

There is no time for Ah'-oom to check on her uncle. The three other hunters are on the beast with their sharpened bone knives, tearing into its vital organs through the soft tissue of its belly.

The beast squeals. It tries to bat them away, but its blows are now feeble. Eventually, its life force drains away, and it lays back to die.

All of the hunters scream in pain and agony. All break down in long, sobbing cries at the release of the tension from the killing. In the animism that articulates the hunter's holistic view of the world around them they have killed a member of their immediate family. Their grieving is all the more intense for it. All the others have cuts where the animal's blows caught them in his death struggle, but Bo-nah's arm is injured seriously. Ah'-oom, teary-eyed, bends to the dead animal and places her hand over the animal's still open eyes. After a moment of grieving, Ah'-oom, her- self bleeding from a cut in her scalp and on her hip, attends to the others before applying a poultice, prepared and given to her by Yah-nay, to her own wounds.

Apparently, Bo-nah' has suffered no broken bones, but he is woozy and unfocused from loss of blood.

Ar-gah' is the least injured, a fact that, considering how impulsively he threw then lost his spear putting the other hunters in great danger, aggrieves Ah'-oom. She directs him to retrieve his spear, and then check all their weapons for any damage that needs to be repaired. The beast may have had a mate or been associated with a large pride. Worst of all, the smell of blood might attract any number of curious beasts, like jackals, to them.

Ah'-oom worries her lips with her teeth. Bo-nah' will need some time to recover from his wounds if he is to be any help in defending them from animal attack and getting them all back to their home territory. She knows they will have to spend the night away from the sleeping place. Her mind fills with all the problems that will need to be solved if they are all to get back home safely. Most importantly, she wonders how, without their stron- gest hunter, they will carry the hide, the bones, and the meat of the beast that has caused all this grief, back to the others.

Ah'-oom turns again to the beast and puts her hand on its bloody chest. In a low voice she hums a song of respect to the animal for giving itself to their hunting party. In her mind she promises that all of its parts will be used to help with the important work of the hunting family's survival.

She looks toward the woods and contemplates the possibilities for shelter among the trees. Since she and her family have little experience among the trees, she also wonders about the risks of animals sneaking up on them in the night.

Ar-gah' finishes his work recovering and repairing the weapons. Ah'-oom directs him to go into the woods and tell her if there is a safe place to move into for the night. He needs to find some tall trees, some downed trees, and some binding materials like vines. These can be assembled into barriers to protect them and the salvaged parts of their killed animal, now buried to cover the smell of blood and rent flesh, from the beasts that will be roaming in the night.

She gestures toward the surrounding grasses in a way that tells Ar-gah' to gather bunches of it for bedding and warmth, then motions toward Bo-nah' and his need for restful sleep. They will need to start their journey back to the sleeping place very early in the morning if they are to make it back there by nightfall.

In the gathering dusk, Ah'-oom follows Ar-gah' into the woods to inspect his fortifications in the area where they will try to give Bo-nah' some rest. She is concerned that animals will attack them in the dark, unless they can get off the ground and lodge some sharp sticks pointed outward for defense.

Before she leaves, she goes to Bo-nah's side. He is awake but still groggy from his wound. He assures Ah'-oom that he can do his share of the work. She places a warm hand on his uninjured shoulder, and he turns back to the carving and shaving of the bone he will use to give himself a stronger and more accurate throw.

## **Part 2.**

Ah'-oom walks with Ar-gah' toward the area that he has fortified for the night ahead. Ar-gah' points toward the wood he has piled around a tree big enough to support whatever they decide to build. Ah'-oom frowns at this pile, then looks at Ar-gah' and grunts her displeasure. She points to the sun sinking beneath the horizon as the evening skies darken into night. She motions for him to come with her to plant the larger branches around the base of the tree, leaving enough room between the tree trunk and the branches for each of them to sit with some protection from the animals of the night.

Ah'-oom then points to the smaller sticks scattered around and directs Ar-gah' to gather enough wood for a fire that will burn through the night.

Once she and Ar-gah' have set some of the branches against the tree, she invites Bo-nah' into the shelter to rest. Bo-nah' seems to be recovering quickly, but he is glad that Ah'-oom did not give him any duties. He takes the piece of leg bone into the shelter and uses a small rough stone to continue shaping the spear pocket into a sort of hook at the end of the

leg bone. The hook will hold the spear and leg bone together through the hurl and release. The hurl and release is the most difficult part of his idea.

Though each movement of his wounded arm — his throwing arm — causes intense pain and sweating, he is desperate to test his idea, even if he has to show one of the other hunters how to use it. Of the three hunters in the group, Bo-nah' rejects Ah'-oom. She will have other things to think about. He rejects Bo-nee' because his tracking skills will be needed to find the shortest way back, before his arm becomes a vulnerability, before the meat can spoil.

Ar-gah', he decides with a sigh, is probably his best choice.

He knows that training with him at such a critical time will give Ar-gah' a feeling of superiority over Ah'-oom. With the skill and more effective hunting weapon that Bo-nah' could give to him, Ah'-oom, because of her small size, could never throw farther than he could, given the same tools.

It is too dark to see his work, but Bo-nah's sensitive fingers can feel the imperfections in the pocket he is carving in the bone. He uses the stone to gouge and smooth further. The others had foraged as far into the woods as possible until it had become too dark. Now, Ah'-oom motions to Bo-nee' to build a fire and stack the wood nearby.

Ah'-oom knows that none of the others will fall into a deep sleep while on a dangerous hunt. She always finds it difficult to sleep away from her mother and father, away from the warm and protective huddle of the group. Bo-nah' is a possible exception, she thinks, because of his wounds. Bo-nah' moves to the side away from the fire where the protective branches are thickest. Ar-gah' moves next to him. Ah'-oom and Bo-nee' sit on either side of the opening the better to watch the fire, and to watch for any movements in the woods beyond. Bo-nee' and Ah'-oom fell into a light sleep.

Once it is smoothed to his liking, Bo-nah' puts the leg bone into Ar-gah's hand and then moves his hand over the spear pocket he had been working on. Ar-gah' grunts. He knows immediately what it is. He takes the bone from Bo-nah' and, unable to resist, he waves it in the confines of the protected area. It is as if he cannot wait to try out this newest weapon.

Bo-nah' is pleased. He motions for Ar-gah' to sleep, then motions toward the sun's rising and touches the younger hunter's shoulder. Bo-nah', the effect of his wound catching up to him, falls into a deep sleep. Ar-gah', though, is alert with excitement and anticipation.

He picks up the leg bone and a short branch that lies nearby. He runs his throwing hand over the bone and imagines the release of the spear.

He continues imagining and practicing the throw and release of the spear without letting the bone drop for a long time.

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Night passes without incident. The hunters are able to sleep through the night, mostly undisturbed. As the gray light of morning lightens on the eastern horizon, Ah'-oom rises from her sleeping place and stumbles toward the now nearly dead fire. There are enough coals to get the fire going again, and she does so, hoping to find some berries or leaves suitable for making a warm sweet drink to help them on their way.

Looking toward the path they would take back to the sleeping place, she notices a raven huddled against the morning cold on a tree branch a few paces away. The raven takes note of her, and utters some deep, rumbling vocalizations. Ah'-oom notices, with a smile, that the raven has one white feather on his right wing. She recognizes the bird as one of the many who visit her good friend Yah'-nay most days. It is as though Yah'-nay has sent her this bird to say that all will be well. Ah'-oom takes this to be a very good omen for their return trip.

She goes to wake the others. They begin assembling and organizing the weapons, the meat, and food supplies they will need for their return.

Bo-nee' separates two of the longest branches out of the woodpile. These will be used to carry supplies, and, if necessary, Bo-nah'. When Bo-nah' comes out from among the protective branches around the tree, however, it looks as though he had completely recovered. The others are grateful for this. Bo-nah' gestures that he is ready for the trail ahead, and that they should get started.

### Part 3.

Before they can leave, Bo-nah' wishes to make sure Ar-gah' is trained on the new spear. Ar-gah' appears, smiling and carrying the leg bone that Bo-nah' has been working on for several weeks. Bo-nah' picks up his spear and offers it to Ar-gah'. Ar-gah' turns away from the group and points at a tree about twenty paces away. He turns toward Bo-nah' and takes the offered spear. He holds the leg bone in such a way as to fit the back end of the spear to the notched end of the bone behind his throwing hand. With his free hand he places the spear along the top of the bone, then grasps it with the same hand he uses to hold the leg bone. With one hand he lifts the spear and bone together and cocks his throwing arm back as though preparing to throw.

With one quick move, Ar-gah' launches the spear. It misses the tree he aimed at by a little, but it completely pierces a smaller tree a little farther out and to the right of the target. Ar-gah' turns back to the hunters with

a big smile across his face. Bo-nee' and Bo-nah' whoop and shriek with pleasure. Bo-nee' runs to Ar-gah' and tackles him to the ground in celebration. As they roll around, Bo-nah' wants badly to join them, but holds himself back rather than risk further harm to his throwing arm.

Ah'-oom, though, jumps into the rolling pile of bodies and gives as good as she gets when the punching, kicking, and screaming begin in earnest.

Eventually, out of breath, she gets up, squats on her haunches, and rests with her head down while she catches her breath. Her wound from the beast the day before has begun to hurt. Rather than dwell on the pain she shouts and gestures that it's time to go. The four hunters gather their gear and load the pallet prepared by Bo-nee'. Bo-nee' had assumed that Ah'-oom would direct Ar-gah' and him to carry the pallet, but she moves forward to take one end.

She gestures instead that Ar-gah' should go ahead of them, and practice walking, running, and throwing the spear with the leg bone. She shows how he should always keep the group in sight. She points toward the sun and indicates to Ar-gah' that he should stop and wait for them when the sun has moved a certain distance. She can foresee many possibilities for violence on the trail ahead that might require the use of the new weapon, and she wants Ar-gah', now the strongest thrower among them, to be ready for all possibilities.

She sets a pace that will be best for Bo-nah'. Though he has protested that he feels fully recovered, she walks up to him, puts her hand on his arm, and looks deeply into his eyes, as though seeking the truth. He recognizes her determined look and looks away to the path ahead. Satisfied, Ah'-oom returns to the head of the pallet, picks it up in unison with Bo-nee' and motions for the others to lead the way. With Ar-gah' and Bo-nah' ahead of her, she will be able to assess Ar-gah''s progress with the new weapon and watch Bo-nah' for any signs of fatigue.

They make good progress as the sun breaks away from the horizon. The day before had given them surprisingly good weather, and this day looks good as well. Two days in a row at this rainy time of year are a needed and pleasant surprise.

As Ah'-oom looks up to check the clouds and weather, she sees a raven high above them. She cannot see if it is the raven with the white feather, but she continues to believe that its presence is a very good omen for the success of their return to the main camp. She points out the raven to Bo-nee', gesturing and speaking Yah'-nay's name to indicate that the bird was her friend and was watching out for them.

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By midday, when their body shadows are shortest, Ah'-oom knows she and the others will have to stop. Carrying the pallet is hard work, and the weight of it is cutting into her shoulders. Besides, it is time. The sun has reached the point in the sky that she had indicated to Ar-gah'; he is already walking back toward them with the legbone and practice spear.

As Ar-gah' approaches, he seems very pleased with himself. Ah'-oom grunts, encouraging him to show them his progress in this newfound skill with Bo-nah's weapon. Confidently, Ar-gah' stands and points at a bush at least fifty paces away. He settles the spear into the pocket Bo-nah' had carved in the leg bone, then cocks his arm, ready to throw. With what seems like a flick of his wrist, the spear flies higher and faster than any of the other hunters, even Bo-nah', has ever seen. It flies directly to the bush, pierces the middle of it and plants itself deep into the ground behind it.

A bit of dust stirs up, but the watching hunters think it might be a puff of wind. Ar-gah' walks to retrieve his spear and picks up a rabbit that the spear had penetrated. He does not admit whether he had known the rabbit was behind the bush before he selected his target. Though too tired to join each other in a screaming, shouting wrestling match, the three waiting hunters utter a series of sharp barks and howls to indicate their great pleasure at the progress Ar-gah' has made and particularly in the surprise and welcome gift of fresh meat.

The hunters strip the skin off the rabbit and eat the meat raw. There is no time for the social pleasures of preparing a fire and cooking. Then they covered themselves from the sun with hides so they can take short naps. Bo-nah', once again, offers to take Ah'-oom's place carrying the pallet. She waves him away until she has napped. Before covering her head she notes that the raven has flown away to the west, and has not returned. This concerns her, but she refuses to share her worry with the others.

Some time passes, and Ah'-oom jerks awake. She goes to the other hunters to kick them awake. She barks at them to wake up and get moving. She does not want to lose more daylight and be forced to spend another night away from their sleeping place. All are groggy, but they assemble their gear and begin to move. Bo-nah' blocks Ah'-oom to prevent her from picking up her end of the pallet. She does not complain.

She notes that Bo-nah' seems to have fully recovered, though he does give out a yelp of pain when his wounded arm picks up his end of the pallet. Nevertheless, he motions her ahead to act as Ar-gah''s eyes and ears along the trail. In addition to Bo-nah's leg bone, Ar-gah' has three of Bo-nah's best spears, leaving four for the other hunters. Ah'-oom still carries Boa's ax and her own spear and short bone cutting tool for defense. If they find some spear-size branches along the way, they will stop to make at least a few more spears.



They soon come into some broken country where water sometimes flows after heavy rains. Judging by the dark clouds on the horizon where the sun normally rises, the possibility of flowing water, perhaps a flood of it, becomes very real. There will surely be animals, and there might be other hunting groups to deal with. They keep moving to the south with deliberate speed. Bo-nah' is as good as his word and does not slow the group down. He does not whine about the weight of the pallet, even though it is clearly causing him pain.

Ar-gah' moves quickly, and it is all Ah'-oom can do to keep up with him. After a time, she has to call a halt to wait for the other hunters. Ar-gah' points to a nearby ridge, suggesting that he will keep looking around the area. Ah'-oom continues to be grateful for his energy and enthusiasm in watching out for all of them.

The two hunters with the pallet join her and pause as she turns her body to look toward the horizon ahead of them; to sniff and taste the air; and to listen for noises that seem out of place. She hears the call of a distant raven, and though it calms some of her concern, she does not think it important enough to call attention to it.

Then, from nowhere, a new smell. This one is musky and strong and like nothing she has smelled before. Ah'-oom stiffens. She turns her head and body to the west where the sun sets. Her eyes, ears, and nose focus on something in the distance, and she gestures for absolute silence. She points. The two litter carriers strain to see what she does. Then, there, in the far distance, they see some shapes. Something about the shapes does not sit well with Ah'-oom. They move not like animals, but in the way that she and her fellow hunters do. She remembers the fears of other strange tribes as expressed by Yah'-nay and Ar-gah'. She needs to figure out if they are moving, and in what direction.

After some time, she looks at the other two hunters with a look of concern and questioning. Her uncles both point to the south — the same direction they are traveling. Ah'-oom swallows nervously. Their paths will eventually cross. She gestures that her uncles should stay very low but alert while she and Ar-gah' investigate these moving dots on the horizon. She picks up one of their spears and balances it in her throwing hand. She indicates the other spears and that they should all be checked by the two hunters.

Ah'-oom moves toward Ar-gah'. He has seen the shapes and noted their movements. He is crouched and watchful. Ah'-oom crouches quietly beside him. Once again she moves her head and body to better get a feel for the atmosphere, the weather, and the movements of the figures.

The figures are still moving toward the south, toward the peaceful windbreak and the unsuspecting remainder of Ah'-oom's tribe. Ah'-oom considers the possibilities of interacting with the moving shapes. They might be peaceful hunters, or they might be thieves looking for groups like hers with weapons and meat that can be taken away. Or they might be beasts like the one that had caused her hunting party so much pain and disruption.

If her group does not interact with them in some way, that group might be able to get to the sleeping place before Ah'-oom and the others. There are more of them than of Ah'-oom's group, and they appear to be moving more quickly across the ground. She thinks further. If the strangers are hostile Boa, Yah'-nay, and the others might need all the help they can get.

Ah'-oom hears a soft, warbling call from the raven overhead. She looks up and sees the raven appear to look back at her. The bird then turns west toward the strangers. She stands up and puts her hand on Ar-gah's shoulder. She looks in his eyes and indicates that they will approach the shapes in order to learn more.

Ar-gah' frowns at this. He stays crouched for a moment, as though to disobey her, but Ah'-oom slaps him hard on the head. She moves toward what now looks like a group of people who look like themselves. Ar-gah' growls under his breath and barks at her. He pauses to consider what Boa and the others in the sleeping place might do to him if he has to report that both Bo-nah' and Ah'-oom had been injured on the hunt, and he had not.

The killed animal he is bringing back might not look like much of a reward for their efforts on the hunt and particularly for the injuries they had suffered. There would be no songs of praise.

He then thinks that Ah'-oom could be seriously wounded or killed by the strangers. As it crosses Ar-gah's mind, his body jerks, and he rubs his forehead vigorously to purge the thought. He gets up and runs to catch up with Ah'-oom. On his approach, she motions for him to stay a few paces behind. She points to the leg bone and spear, then indicates that he should hold the spear as a hunter would and keep the leg bone out of sight. Ah'-oom knows that she and Ar-gah' will be outnumbered by the strangers. She hopes they will be seen as peaceful hunters rather than threats.

By the time they are within calling distance, the sun has arced closer to the horizon and night, and the dark clouds to the south grow toward them.

The strangers have stopped and now look toward the approaching hunters. Ar-gah' holds his spear as a hunter would while looking for game.

Ah'-oom has taken the leg bone from him and put it in the strip of hide around her waist next to her father's ax. This way, she hopes it will look less like a weapon. Ar-gah' thinks grimly that he might have to quickly take the bone, fit it to his spear, and throw it with precision if their interaction with the strangers goes bad.

Ah'-oom walks to within a few paces of the strangers and stops. She gives two soft barks of greeting in their direction. She notes that there are less of them than the fingers on her two hands. All carry spears, but they do not seem to be threatening. Two of the strangers, males, carry a piece of hide wrapped around several long pieces of wood. The two males also carry a long, thin piece of wood with a thin strip of hide tied to both ends, forming a bow. She does not know what to make of this.

There are three women in the group. Two carry branches, which she imagines they use to build shelter when necessary. The third woman carries a hide slung over her shoulder that appears to be used to carry food stuffs. One thing about the group of strangers is very peculiar to Ah'-oom. All of them except the oldest have very little hair on their bodies. She touches her own bare arm and feels comforted by this similarity.

Stranger still, when the other group speaks to each other, they move their mouths in ways that Ah'-oom feels she cannot. The others in her group are even less capable of making the sounds the strangers were making. The strangers speak among themselves in very measured, rhythmic ways, almost like they are singing to each other as birds sing to each other. Ah'-oom becomes fascinated with their speaking. She steps forward to more closely watch the way their mouths work as these sounds come out.

As she does, the beautiful sounds stop. She halts and looks up in time to see the two males stretching the bow and hides to aim the sharpened long sticks at her. Ar-gah' is by her in a flash, but she stops him before he can reach for the leg bone. She motions for him to stay behind her. Ar-gah' continues to reach for the leg bone, though, and Ah'-oom grabs her stone hammer from her belt and taps at his foot. He grunts in pain and bends to rub his foot where the hammer had hit.

With Ar-gah' calmed, Ah'-oom turns to the strangers. She puts both hands in the air, palms out, and bows her head to the ground in an act of submission. She kneels, still with her hands in the air, her head bowed. She can hear the bowed hide stretch, and she hopes that this will show the strangers that they mean no harm. She grabs Ar-gah's leg and rubs downward to indicate that he must follow her lead. Ar-gah' understands the need to show submission, but he only bows his head and opens his palms toward the strangers. He suppresses his anger enough to put one of his hands on Ah'-oom's shoulder to show solidarity.

The oldest of the strangers is white-haired. He motions for his men to put down their bows and arrows. He approaches the hunters and invites Ah'-oom and Ar-gah' to rise. They do so and look into the eyes of the old man. He puts his hands on both their upper arms in turn, with Ah'-oom the first to receive his ministrations.

The old stranger motions to one of the women in his party carrying food. He picks some succulents out of her basket and offers them to Ar-gah' and Ah'-oom. The two hunters accept them and eat them hungrily.

The old man then bids them all to sit and share their meager store of food. Ah'-oom tries, by pointing, to convey the existence of Bo-nah' and Bo-nee', and her need to rejoin them. Eventually, together, she and the old man agree that Ar-gah' will rejoin the other hunters, tell them what is going on, then help them get on the way back to the sleeping place. Ah'-oom will stay with the travelers. As a sign of mutual respect two of the men with the travelers' party will go with Ar-gah'. They all know that they must then try to get to the sleeping place where there will be shelter and fire against the coming storm.

With gestures Ah'-oom urges the strangers to prepare for fast travel toward the hills to the south. She will lead them to the sleeping place. Once she has picked up her own tack, she picks up one of the bundles of hide that the others have brought to fend off the cold. Then, as at the beginning of her journey, she moves at the fastest pace that each of the strangers can match to return to her family at the sleeping place.

As the darkening clouds in the south grow more threatening, Ah'-oom hears the call of raven. The bird flies low over the group, appears to glance in her direction, then continues south.

They are on their way.

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In the sleeping place, beyond the windbreak, Boa pulls the hide tighter around his body. A chilly wind has been building up ahead of the storm. He had been looking north and hoped he would not miss the returning hunters as soon as they came within his vision.

Yah'-nay joins Boa. She puts another hide around his shoulders and gestures to the new, partially buried shelter that she and Pe'-dah have built.

Despite his pleasure Boa is growing more concerned as time passes and daylight fades. He fears that the hunters will spend yet another night away from their camp. He indicates to Yah'-nay that the fire needs to be started. He hopes there will be enough wood and kindling to last through the night if that becomes necessary.

As they sit quietly together Yah'-nay's raven with a single white feather on its right wing comes to them and lands a few paces away. The raven hops sideways toward Yah'-nay then vocalize various sounds that she recognizes as sounds of comfort. She smiles to herself and chants softly in a way that gives assurance to Boa that all preparations are as good as they can be.

The fire is lit while there is still an evening glow from the setting sun. Boa can no longer see very far in the direction of the hunters' return. He hopes they can see the fire.

The nature of his worry soon shifts. Shortly after, Ar-gah' appears followed by the other two hunters and two travelers bearing the palette with their weapons, and the animal they had killed the day before. Though he is glad to see three of his hunters return, Boa growls at the newcomers.

Ar-gah' does his best to cheer and bark in confident tones that all is well.

As soon as the hunters and travelers come in sight, the women begin to sing a barking ululation to indicate their great pleasure at their return.

The younger ones run down the hill to greet them. Boa, Yah, and Yah'-nay descend more carefully, being mindful of the hazards on the darkened path. Boa is immediately concerned that Ah'-oom is not with them. When Ar-gah' realizes that she is not among the greeters, he, too, becomes concerned. He and Bo-nah' turn back to the trail to search for the missing girl. Boa puts his hands on both hunters to caution them against going back into the dark, stormy night. He indicates that a better plan would be to pile more wood on the fire to give the missing party a bigger target in the dark.

Ar-gah' looks at the gathering storm and feels the rushing wind. He agrees with the wisdom of Boa. The possibility of the two groups missing each other, and becoming more lost, is very great. The group moves back up the hill to gather more wood for the fire. The women move into the shelter and begin a soft chant to give guidance to the travelers.

The fire spreads warmth throughout the shelter. The men also gather around to discuss the results of the hunt.

Boa notices Bo-nah's wounded arm, and the hide and poultice his daughter has applied to it. He points at the wound with a questioning look. Bo-nah' relates the story by gesture, and by showing Boa the sites of various blows and wounds inflicted on the animal that now lays on the nearby palette. He seeks permission to lay down to rest as he has pushed himself very hard to help bring the animal and their weapons back to the group's sleeping place. He especially praises Ah'-oom's leadership on the hunt.

Ar-gah' shows Boa the leg bone that Bo-nah' had prepared. He picks up a spear from the palette and fits it to the niche. He demonstrates how to hold the two pieces but does not throw the spear. Bo-nee' has sat down, but he is able to express his great pleasure at the skill that Ar-gah' has mastered.

Ar-gah' indicates the two travelers who have remained at the edge of the firelight. He describes the experience he and Ah'-oom had in their meeting with the strangers. He tells them both that Ah'-oom had stayed with them and would be leading them to the sleeping place. Boa looks concerned, but Ar-gah' relays that he and Ah'-oom shared food with them. He believes they are a group of travelers who have their own food and shelter and will cause no harm. He describes their absence of body hair — more like Ah'-oom; less like he, Boa, and other members of their hunting group. He also tries to describe their peculiar way of talking, more like singing than the barks and guttural vocalizations of their own group. When Ar-gah' tries to emulate the singsong voice of the travelers, Boa and Bo-nee' bark in laughter.

Now, Ar-gah' motions the travelers forward. Each lays his spear down, then approaches Boa and extends an open hand in greeting, both touching Boa's upper right arm. Boa responds with a low grunt. He bids the strangers sit with him. He motions toward Yah and Yah'-nay that they be fed.

Rain begins to fall. The roof of the shelter starts to leak, and the men move hides around in the hopes of keeping the inside of the shelter as dry as possible. The fire in front of the shelter is built up strong enough, it is hoped, to persist even through a heavy rain. The women continue their chant in the hopes that Ah'-oom and the travelers will hear their call.

The white-feathered raven flies from his perch on the shelter roof toward the north, in the direction of the returning group. Yah'-nay continues her soft chanting as she watches the bird go.

Ar-gah' motions that he will keep the fires going. After a while most of the members of the group fall into a deep sleep.

Later, while scanning the dark beyond the firelight, Ar-gah' spots Ah'-oom walking alone along a path to the sleeping place. He gets up and moves quickly to her, being careful to avoid the broken ground that could cause serious injury. Ah'-oom indicates that the travelers are coming, but that their burdens had grown heavy. Ar-gah' and Ah'-oom go back to help them. Once they take up the loads, the two hunters and the travelers make their way to the fire and shelter.

Ar-gah' goes to Boa and Bo-nee' to tell them of Ah'-oom's return with the travelers. Ah'-oom wakes Yah, Yah'-nay, Pe'-dee, and Pe'-dah. Once

awake, the women once again ululate with joy at the safe return of all the hunters and the blessing of the meat. Boa and Bo-nee' hug the returning hunters and bid them sit down by the fire.

The women who have been chanting grow quiet now. Yah'-nay approaches Boa and gives him the beautiful blue stone, which she has woven onto a colored hide backing. Boa is momentarily surprised. Then, he calls Ar-gah' and Ah'-oom to his side. He looks into their eyes for a few moments, before putting the decoration on Ah'-oom's chest. She is overwhelmed. She bows her head then hugs her father. She turns to look at Ar-gah'. He has no expression in his downcast eyes.

Ah'-oom frowns. She once thought Ar-gah' impulsive, a showoff, a weak spot in their hunting party. Now, she sees him as valuable, as a friend. She steps toward him and puts the honored decoration she has received from her father on Ar-gah''s chest. His expression changes to one of joy and pride. He tries very hard to suppress his emotion.

Bo-nah', who has woken up, looks at Boa and bows his head toward his older brother to indicate his approval of all that had occurred. He looks at the travelers now joining his family around the fire. He knows they are from the north, but he wonders where. He begins to imagine places there, filled with many wonders. He resolves to go there someday, perhaps with the travelers when they return to their homeland.

The black sky along the eastern horizon turns gray with the emerging sun.

**END**