

# PART I

## Chapter One

### STRONG ARMS

The hunter stood in the cold water, his eyes watching for the telltale ripple. In his hand was a sharpened wood spear. On his arm, a deep scar — but one the hunter was proud of. Around his neck hung a bear claw. It was fastened with sinew to a thin ribbon of leather.

The hunter was a stout man with a thick black beard, hard, shrewd eyes and an air of blunt authority. His hands were strong, with broad fingertips. Powerful muscles ran down the length of his arms, from the shoulders to the wrists.

The place where he stood, the hunter had chosen with care. The lake narrowed at this point. Farther along it flowed through a short set of rapids that led to a cliff and a waterfall. On all sides of the man were the greens of summer: flowing fields of grass and wild flowers, oaks and evergreens, snowcapped mountains in the distance. Times were good — they had trapped a large number of furry groundcreatures this summer, plus beaver, two wolves, several antler-animals, and as much fish as they could possibly eat. It was a shame, really, as the clan had no good way of preserving any excess meat for the coming winter. His sister had always said that as head of the clan he really ought to put his mind to it and figure out a way. But somehow he had never found the time.

Suddenly, there was a ripple in the copper-blue water and the hunter struck. The spear flashed in the water in a single swift motion. He jerked it back and dangling from the sharpened point was a fish,

three hands long and still wriggling. It was the first catch of the day; he would need several more before returning to the others.

Strong Arms was a skilled hunter, and when the clan hunted as a team, they were capable of bringing down quite large animals. They had to — they were big people and required enormous numbers of calories to subsist. In a way, they were like wolves with knives. Highly carnivorous, with a diet similar to the hyenas and wolves whose lives they mimicked.

Strong Arms stepped from the water. He pulled the fish off his spear and stowed his catch a few paces from shore under a big rock beside his sandals. Though the sandals were worn and in need of repair, they were one of the nicest pairs his mate had ever made him.

Strong Arms had acute hearing, and now he heard the sounds of his mate and their two youngest children laughing. Clan members, even young ones, were capable of quite sophisticated communications, with both vocal and gestural elements. The three of them were a few hundred paces away, playing a game of stick and fetch. Near them, on a patch of high ground, was a grove of oak trees. The oak was the clan's sacred tree, and they always camped among them. His sister's family lived there too. Her mate had died three moons ago, after a bad fall hunting. Which left Strong Arms in charge of the clan.

The hunter sensed, without really knowing why, that his clan was in trouble. Ever since the breakup, when Firm Jaw and his closest kin left the clan to go on their own, the clan had been too small. Not enough females, not enough males, too many little ones. Strong Arms could not protect them all, not alone anyway. His son, nearly 11 suns old, wasn't big enough yet to fight. His daughter, 14 suns old, was fully ripened and in need of a male from another clan. None were nearby, though. It had been 3 suns, in fact, since the last time they had seen another clan. That worried Strong Arms, especially at night. Or when it rained. Or when the wind blew and the oak leaves rustled menacingly overhead. His mate, Brown Curls, sensed his unease. But if she knew what was

wrong, she didn't say. Not to him, not to their daughter Wide Smiles, or to their son Fast Foot. Certainly not to the two little ones. And least of all to the Godwoman, who lived nearby, but separate from the rest, in her own open-air hut. Females like Brown Curls were smart that way; they knew when to interfere and when to keep their opinions to themselves.

Yet, despite their problems, Strong Arms was proud of his clan. Their summer home, two open-air huts sharing a single wall, housed the two families. Branches and limbs, arranged in a lean-to fashion and covered on top with a lumpy paste of grass and mud, shielded the inhabitants from all but the worst winds and kept them warm, even on the coldest nights. A thick hide taken from an antler-animal hung down over each doorway. A row of sharpened pikes and a string of clamshells were strung around the perimeter of the camp as an early warning device to alert them to the presence of intruders. Antlers, some stuck in the ground, some lashed together with sinew, formed a sort of barbed wire fence on three sides of the camp, also for protection, mainly from wolves. A herd of mountain goat provided meat and furs, along with beaver, wolf, and antler-animals. Most of the really big animals, like the wooly rhino, were in terribly short supply. A mix of grasses and weeds provided a supplement to their diet in the form of simple grains and tasty tubers, though the former required tedious effort to collect.

As he stood there on the shore of the fish-lake, the hunter noticed a small bird. He watched it closely. It flitted from plant to plant, collecting seeds.

Strong Arms went over the steps in his mind. He had thought about the process once or twice before, but had never quite been able to put it all together. A bird would eat seeds from a certain plant, then later drop them out on the ground in its spoor. Later still, new plants of the same type would sprout from beneath the droppings. Big Shoulder, his sister's mate before he died, was the first to have the idea — take a

handful of seeds, intentionally mix them with fresh dung from a cave-bear or an antler-animal, and shove them both together into wet ground. It made sense to Strong Arms, but somehow he had never found the time yet to try it out — maybe next season.

Strong Arms moved back towards the fish-lake. His job was not done; he had more fish to catch for the big midday meal. At the water's edge, the hunter stopped and looked at his reflection in the pool. He was a big, muscular man with dark eyes, a black beard, and dark, shoulder-length hair. In fact, he had hair, thick hair, everywhere — on his legs, his arms, his chest, everywhere. His hands were large and calloused, his skin ruddy, his teeth worn but surprisingly healthy. By every measure of the time, this was one very good-looking man.

The hunter stepped back into the water. It was cold — but the cold did not bother him. Strong Arms was robust. He was used to the cold; he was built for it. In fact, the entire clan was large-bodied and cold-adapted, with a receding forehead, a broad nose, and swept-back cheeks. Their body proportions allowed them to retain heat more effectively in the extreme cold they sometimes faced. None of which mattered just now. For the moment anyway, it was high summer, splendid and green. Real cold was several moons down the road, although by then they would have retreated to the caves. It was a hike of several days' duration. They would leave when the leaves turned, not a day before. In the meantime, there were fish to catch, antler-animals to hunt, and babies to make. They lived too close to the edge for much of anything else.