

The Inferior

[SAMPLE CHAPTERS]

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In that people the most natural and honest of
virtues and abilities are alive and vigorous;
those same virtues that we have warped and
adapted to our own twisted tastes.

Michel de Montaigne: On Cannibals

And they said: Father, it would hurt less
if you would eat us: you dressed us
in this miserable flesh, take it off.

Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto xxxiii, 60

1. BROTHERS

The rule was to keep running - Don't stop, don't die. The Tribe needed its strongest to survive. So Stopmouth fled for his life through the streets of Hairbeast territory, while its non-human inhabitants looked on with indifference. Already the cries of his brother were fading behind him.

'Please, Stopmouth!'

The Armourbacks preferred living prey. When they caught Wallbreaker, they'd drive him home with spears to feed their young. The screams of such captives lasted for days, echoing down streets and over rooftops.

Stopmouth tried not to think about it. 'K-keep running,' he told himself. He leaped barrels of flesh and sprinted into an alley narrow enough to give the pursuers some trouble if they were still on his tail.

Stopmouth realized he couldn't hear his brother any more. He skidded to a halt. The hot air of mid-afternoon stank of blood and rang with the booming howls of fighting or mating Hairbeasts. He could feel his heart battering against his ribs and he leaned his tall frame for support against a crumbling wall. Don't stop. Don't think. Keep running. He wiped his stinging eyes and whispered the name, 'Wallbreaker.' Humanity might survive without his brother, but Stopmouth knew he could not. Wallbreaker had always been the darling of the Tribe. He'd been a sweet child, grown up to be a great hunter, and people would forgive him anything, even a half-idiot brother. And they had forgiven always, smiling indulgently through the younger boy's stammers in order to please his handsome sibling.

And yet, if Wallbreaker failed to make it back, Mossheart would have to marry somebody else and that would mean . . . Stopmouth pushed the thought away with a shiver of self-disgust. He forced himself to turn round. He tried to spot his brother, but crowds of burly

Hairbeasts blocked his way. The creatures filled the market place with the sharp stink of their fur. They bartered for flesh in high gabbling voices and sometimes the larger males would push against each other, chest to chest, until one gave way.

He shoved sweaty brown hair out of his eyes and marched back the way he'd come. The councillors would be angry if they knew what he was doing. 'Suicide!' they'd cry. 'Waste!' He didn't even have a spear to defend himself, having abandoned it in his flight.

He reached the last place he'd heard his brother's voice: an alley flanked by tall buildings where light from the great Roof struggled to penetrate. He found some traces of blood here, but they were old. Stopmouth tiptoed to the far end, his muscles trembling with exhaustion, his body and loincloth dripping with sweat. Here at last he heard the tones of human speech: a whimpering, pleading voice so unlike that of the great hunter Wallbreaker was becoming.

This can't be my brother, Stopmouth thought.

The alley opened onto a small square, where incomprehensible murals covered the walls with swirls of dried blood. A few Hairbeasts watched curiously as Wallbreaker, his fair hair streaked with filth, retreated before the spears of the Armourbacks. He made no effort to take one of his attackers into death with him. Instead, tears flowed freely down his handsome face, shaming him and his family.

Even as his heart swelled with pity, Stopmouth began having second thoughts about a rescue. How could two humans hope to defeat five Armourbacks? The adults reached chest height on a man, but they were broader, and a rock-hard shell made them tough to kill.

Stopmouth gritted his teeth. He wasn't ready to die, but he refused to let these beasts keep his brother. And he still had time - they preferred live prisoners to quick kills.

He swallowed his fear and jogged back to the mouth of the alley. Then he took a quiet lane running parallel to the one the Armourbacks would probably follow to their territory. He'd need to find a place where he could come out ahead of them. And a plan - he'd need one of those too. He'd have to think one up as he ran.

He passed open doorways where lonely Hairbeast females boomed with

song. He leaped old drains and clattered over wider stretches of water on metal bridges. All around him the ancient buildings of the city echoed his footfalls or muffled them in carpets of ragged moss.

Far enough, he thought.

A shaky tower stood nearby with a grey-furred Hairbeast snoozing in its doorway. The creatures were larger than humans and he clipped this one slightly as he jumped over it. He pounded up the stairs, ignoring its bellows. He had no idea what it was saying. All he knew was that the creature was unlikely to break treaty to hunt him.

Three floors later he reached the roof. The surface creaked underfoot and cracks snaked all over it. The whole building looked ready to collapse. Maybe that was a good thing - he might be able to turn the bricks and loose lumps of concrete to his advantage.

Stopmouth walked over the rattling roof to the waist-high wall that bordered it and looked down. Almost immediately he saw his brother's blond head. The Armourbacks pushed him in front of them with jabs of their spears. Humans would have surrounded their prey, but Armourbacks preferred to drive theirs. Perhaps they feared to leave a desperate enemy within striking distance of their backs.

As the pack moved up the street towards his position, Stopmouth carefully pried rocks away from the wall of the tower. He heaved and strained until a few of the larger ones were balanced on the edge. He wiped sweat from his eyes and tried to ignore the thumping of his heart, which had started up again at the sight of the enemy.

'Come on! Come on!' he whispered. He rarely stuttered when talking to himself.

Wallbreaker passed beneath him. Stopmouth held his breath, waiting for the first Armourback. The moments stretched, measured in beads of sweat and a frantic hammering in his ribcage.

Suddenly a flash of light blazed in the sky above him. Heartbeats later a boom followed that shook Stopmouth's tower and rattled the roof beneath his feet.

The Armourbacks lowered their spears and stared up in what might have been astonishment. But they weren't watching Stopmouth - their eyes, and even the eyes of their prisoner, were fixed on the great Roof

above. Stopmouth didn't dare follow their gaze. Whatever was happening up there, he wouldn't let it cost him his brother.

He leaned against the largest of his rocks and sent it plummeting towards the Armourbacks. Before it reached its target he grabbed another and flung it after the first. Just as well: the early attempt missed, but the second smashed an Armourback to the ground and snapped the hind legs of another.

'R-run, Wallbreaker!' he shouted. 'R-r-run!' And Wallbreaker did, finding the energy somewhere. Stopmouth had expected the remaining Armourbacks to pursue his brother or tend to their injured. Instead, he saw them dart into an alley flanking his tower. He knew that they were heading for the ground-floor entrance and that they'd reach it before he did. He paced around the roof, looking for a way down, for another building to jump to. Too far! At best he'd end up in an alley with a broken leg, and treaty or no treaty, any Hairbeast would be well within its rights to claim him for the pot. No, he'd have to make a last stand right here. He grabbed stones for his sling while something clattered up the stairwell towards him. Death was coming. He backed away from the doorway, knowing he couldn't hold them there without a spear.

Moments later the creatures burst onto the roof of the tower. They didn't shout as men might have: if the Armourbacks had speech, the human ear couldn't hear it. They advanced through a hail of slingstones with no apparent discomfort and spread out. Stopmouth had never seen living Armourbacks so close. They had flat faces, mostly made of earth-brown shell with gaps for a pair of red eyes.

'C-come on!' he shouted at them, terrified now. 'W-what are you af-fraid of?' He flung another stone and unsheathed his bone knife. If he could get past one of their spears, he might be able to cut an Armourback between the plates of its shell before they killed him.

One of the creatures charged. The spear-tip tore through Stopmouth's loincloth as he dodged to one side. Another spear flew towards his ribcage and drew a red line there before clattering into the wall. Stopmouth lunged after the weapon, but two Armourbacks herded him off as the third retrieved it.

He backed away until he felt the parapet behind him. He could

throw himself over: better a Hairbeast should have him than the Armourbacks.

Suddenly a roaring sound filled the air. Something huge and blazing flew over the heads of the combatants and streaked through the sky to crash into some distant part of the city. The ground shook. The wall behind Stopmouth's back groaned and a hole opened in the tower's roof. Two of his opponents disappeared into it, leaving only a rising cloud of dust to show they'd ever existed. Stopmouth and the last Armourback shared a moment of shock and silence. The human recovered first. He screamed and charged his enemy. The creature dropped its spear and ran back the way it had come.

Stopmouth gave chase. Rubble covered the stairs, and rocks large enough to kill hurtled past with every step. He charged into daylight and found his enemy already dead beneath fallen masonry.

In the distance a column of flame and dust was rising into the air. Stopmouth looked up. There was nothing to be seen but the Roof of the world and the fading light.

2. THE VOLUNTEERS

Stopmouth reached Man-Ways just as Roofglow faded to the weaker light of evening. 'Hey!' Rockface was on guard in the tower, a big hunter with a bigger voice. 'Heard you were dead! Wallbreaker says he saw them get you!'

The young hunter's spirits lifted with the thought that his brother had made it. But why had Wallbreaker said that he was dead? Had he seen the Armourbacks heading for the tower and kept running instead of attempting a rescue?

'That can't be true,' Stopmouth said to himself. 'It can't.'

He was too tired to think about it now. So he hefted the limbs he'd cut from his kill onto his shoulders and stumbled into friendly territory.

But Rockface hadn't finished with him yet: 'You know, Armourback flesh is a lot lighter if you take the shell off.' Stopmouth felt stupid as the older man laughed, but at least he could use the armour as a plate. Nothing would be wasted.

People murmured greetings as he passed into the dozen criss-crossing streets that made up human territory. 'Man-Ways', it was called; or more often just 'the Ways'. Everyone looked surprised to see him except for a small boy too young to know better and eager to help with the kill. Gratefully Stopmouth passed over an arm crusted at one end with dried blood, and the pair trudged together to Centre Square, where fires burned and voices rose in song.

The wedding, of course. He'd forgotten. The singing died at his approach. Most of the crowd knew Stopmouth and an excited whispering rose among them. However, no one addressed him until his mother burst from their midst and ran towards him.

'Dearest Stopmouth!' she cried. 'Oh, my Stopmouth!'

He dropped the Armourback flesh and put his arms around her thin frame. He pressed his face into her hair as he'd done as a child and felt warm tears against his neck.

'Wallbreaker said they'd killed you,' she said. 'He himself got three of them. Says he crushed them with rocks, but then the others

trapped you in a house and he couldn't get to you.'

Uncles and aunties and cousins now felt able to approach. He tried to smile at them, but his eyes caught on Wallbreaker emerging from the crowd. He broke away from his mother. He'd never felt so betrayed in all his life.

'Y-y-you . . .' he said. His tongue refused to co-operate and Wallbreaker had all the time in the world to step up to him and hug him close as their mother had done. He whispered directly into Stopmouth's ear. 'Later,' he said. 'Please, brother. I told them what I had to.'

Then Wallbreaker turned to the crowd. His blond hair had been cleaned and threaded with carved bones for the wedding. 'My brother is alive! He's alive!'

The celebrations must have been muted until then, but now everybody cheered. Wallbreaker showed the crowd his fine teeth and a pair of dimples. 'Tonight I marry!' He held up one finger to forestall another cheer. He'd always been good at winning hearts. Many thought he'd be chief some day. But to Stopmouth's eyes, he was sweating more than usual. He saw a slight shake in his brother's arms that had never been there before. Wallbreaker kept talking. 'You won't be seeing me or my wife tomorrow' - laughter - 'or the day after, or the day after that! But from the fourth day on, I will devote what little energy I have left' - more laughter - 'to finding a bride price for dear Stopmouth!'

The cheers were deafening this time, and now everybody surged forward to hug Stopmouth and kiss him. Even Chief Speareye approached and threw heavily tattooed arms around the young hunter. 'Glad you made it,' he said. 'We can't afford to lose the likes of you! Now, for the love of the ancestors, do as your brother says and find a woman to count your days for you!'

His mother took over and sat him down by a fire. She brought him steaming broth in a Flim-skull bowl.

'Your favourite,' she said.

The smell made his head spin and his mouth fill with saliva. He found his strength barely sufficient to lift the bowl high enough to drink, but the first slurp was delicious and he buried himself in it.

Afterwards, when his belly was full and warm, his mother came and took his head onto her lap and the whole world seemed to darken around him.

He woke hours later to the sound of drums. Here and there little drops of roof sweat plinked onto the ground or fell hissing into the fires. Nobody noticed; it happened every night when the air grew cooler. He felt a frigid droplet rolling off his face and realized it must have woken him. He'd slept through most of the wedding ceremony.

Delicious smells filled the air. Men from nearby streets were dancing and leaping over cook fires and he knew he should have been with them. Beside him, Uncle Flimnose alternated between rubbing his joints and licking Stopmouth's empty bowl. Flimnose's dancing days were over, the scratches on his Tally - one for every day since his naming - almost beyond counting. The younger man shuddered and looked away. Instead, his eyes wandered over to another fire where his new sister-in-law, Mossheart, held court for the last time among the unmarried girls. Their eyes met and she smiled. He smiled back, his heart a stone in his chest.

'How did you get out of the tower?' asked Flimnose.

'The w-w-walls f-f-f-'

'The walls fell,' said Flimnose.

'The fl-fl-'

'Ah! The flash? You saw that? And something crashed to earth! The Tribe talks of nothing else. Somebody said it was a Globe that fell out of the sky.'

Stopmouth stared at his uncle in astonishment, but the old man grinned, as if to say he didn't believe it either.

The drum beat came to an end and men wandered back from the dance, laughing and wiping sweat from their brows. High above, the Roof lay in darkness except for lines of tiny lights that covered it and allowed a man to see maybe fifty steps around him without a torch.

Uncle Flimnose pointed up at them. 'That's where the spirits have their streets,' he said, 'until room is made for them to come down again as a new species.'

Stopmouth nodded politely and clenched his jaw against the stink of his uncle's rotting teeth. Flimnose had helped teach him and

Wallbreaker to be men, but lately hunting parties were reluctant to take him on lest he slow them up. Stopmouth felt sorry for him. There was no fate more cruel than to live beyond usefulness without even realizing it. The younger man remembered all those stories of the Traveller's adventurers they used to share after Father had died. Nobody told them like Uncle Flimnose, and who knew how many tales would be lost when he left to join his ancestors? Stopmouth found he had to turn away. He looked over to where married women toured fires with baskets of sizzling flesh. They chanted in time to the music about how the bride would provide many children, how the groom would feed them, how the children would live. Stopmouth buried his face in a hank of Hairbeast pup so he wouldn't have to look at his uncle and think about the man's fate. But Flimnose wouldn't leave him alone. 'Will you chew some of that flesh for me, young man?' he asked. 'Otherwise I'll be sticking to broth and roof sweat at my own nephew's wedding!' Stopmouth obliged, feeling ashamed for not offering.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the drums took up again. This time it was the turn of the unmarried women to dance. A murmur of anticipation ran through the men, but Stopmouth turned away. He knew his eyes would only be drawn to his new sister-in-law and he didn't want the others to catch him staring.

Instead, he lay back to watch the lights glittering on the Roof. He imagined the lonely spirits there looking back at him, eager to take his place among the living. As he watched, a Globe floated by overhead, its metal shell glittering with lights of its own. Stopmouth wondered idly if it was a living creature and what its flesh might taste like if he could get close enough to crack it open. Men had harboured such vain hopes for all the generations. And yet, if the rumours were true, at least one of them had fallen today. If it hadn't . . . He shivered. The miracle had saved his life - balance for the betrayal of a brother who'd not only abandoned him, but had even claimed Stopmouth's kills as his own. He ground his teeth. He'd expected sorrow for the day of Mossheart and Wallbreaker's wedding. He hadn't expected to be so angry.

'Keep it to yourself, son,' said Mother from where she sat nearby, although he hadn't said a word.

He nodded to reassure her. He was nothing without Wallbreaker. Who else would take him seriously with his lazy tongue? No, he'd find his brother soon after the wedding and tell him he wasn't angry, even if it still burned. And so for the rest of the feast he did his best to join in the laughter and the dancing, clapping to the songs he couldn't sing.

At the end of the night Mother handed Wallbreaker's Tally stick over to Mossheart, who would count his days from now on. Then Wallbreaker took his bride's other hand and led her off to bed in the Wedding Tower. Stopmouth tried to cheer with all the rest and forced a smile when other men slapped him on the back and said, 'Your turn next, boy!'

Mother understood. After the festivities she took him home and put him to bed as if he were still a babe.

Stopmouth shielded his eyes and stared out towards the horizon. There was little to see beyond the human streets as morning mists still rose from the trees in the no-man's-land beyond. Then his gaze was drawn to the Roof as eight Globes swept past, for all the world like a hunting party. He heard shouts from others who were watching too. Old-timers couldn't remember such behaviour from their youth, nor from any legend of the Tribe. Globes were supposed to hang in the sky, or to drift slowly by. Their new speed stirred fear into people's hearts like an augury of disaster.

On the ground, life went on much as it always had. Beasts of various kinds who kept treaty with humans walked the streets. Sometimes they hunted each other or traded for flesh and weapons. Wallbreaker said these creatures should be observed, even the friendly ones.

'S-so m-m-many kinds,' Stopmouth had said the first time they'd talked about it. Back then he'd been barely old enough to have a name.

'Yes, little brother, and I can see it's confusing. But you can never know them well enough. Father would have told you that. Friend or foe, their smells, their strengths, their habits. Study them right and they'll all meet your spear in the end.'

So now Stopmouth watched a pod of Clawfolk skitter down the road

on bunches of skinny legs while a multi-coloured Flyer surveyed them greedily from a tower, chewing on flaps of its own dry skin.

Human children played at stalking in the bright light of noon. Their mothers looked on, some anxious, some smiling, while others scolded any child too close to supposedly friendly beasts. Women only carried knives, but their ululations of alarm could pass from street to street over the flat roofs of the buildings until hunters came running from every direction.

Stopmouth was relaxing on the roof of his house while Mother scraped moss away from the parapet with an old shoulder-blade. Scratch, scratch, scratch. 'It grows so quickly,' she muttered. Scratch, scratch. And nobody liked the way it smelled when the juice hadn't been pounded out of it. 'What a nuisance.' She stopped abruptly at the sight of Uncle Flimnose limping by below.

'I heard he hasn't h-hunted in f-fifty days,' said Stopmouth.

'No,' said Mother, her face formed into that mix of affection and sadness she mostly saved for her younger son. 'Even then, he went with a large party and his spear stayed dry. It won't be long now for him.'

As Flimnose's only surviving female relative and marker of his Tally, Mother alone knew exactly how old he was. She rested a hand on Stopmouth's waist. 'When his time comes, I want you to go with him. For the family. Will you do that?'

'W-what about W-Wallbreaker?'

'Wallbreaker won't go.'

'B-but—'

'Hush,' she said.

Stopmouth hadn't seen his brother in a few days. As promised, Wallbreaker had been spending all his time with his new bride. Stopmouth passed his own nights staring at the ceiling, trying his best not to think about that. During the day he distracted himself with foolish efforts to make spear points from the Armourback shell he'd brought home with him. Mother's visitors laughed at him for this - bone was so plentiful, so easy to shape, that none could understand why he bothered. 'If it's such good material for a spear,' scoffed Uncle Flimnose, 'why don't the Armourbacks themselves make weapons of it?'

Stopmouth had no answer to this. After an entire quarter day he'd succeeded in rubbing a dent no bigger than a finger-joint into a piece of shell. The rock he'd been using came off worse. Still he worked at it, using the rhythm to send himself into a painless trance where Mossheart and Wallbreaker had never married and his brother hadn't abandoned him.

Mother took her gaze from the street and sighed. 'You'll have to speak to him sooner or later,' she said, and Stopmouth knew she didn't mean Uncle Flimnose.

He looked into her pale eyes and saw how the skin crinkled with worry at the corners. She must have hated to see her sons at odds. How old was she now? How long before he and Wallbreaker must lose her for ever? He could deny her nothing.

He nodded and left her alone on the roof. He collected a spear and his old bone knife and set out for the rooms Wallbreaker and his bride had taken after they'd left the Wedding Tower. On his way across Centre Square he smelled the sharp stink of Hairbeasts, like a mix of metal and human sweat. Five of the creatures strode by, dressed in what might have passed for finery among them: coloured shells, necklaces of human bones (in honour of their visit?) and their clawed hands dyed red. He knew what it meant and felt a moment's fear for his mother, although she still had many days left, being useful and healthy.

Chief Speareye had turned up to meet the Hairbeast delegation. In spite of the heat radiating from the Roof he wore a fur mantle made from a patchwork of the hides of every creature humans hunted. Four wives accompanied him. See what a provider I am! he seemed to say. I can feed them all and their children too!

The Tribe's fiercest hunters guarded the chief's party. Wallbreaker stood with them, as did the brute, Crunchfist. Rockface waited nearby, healed of the wound that had kept him on guard duty. A crowd was gathering to witness the trade and Stopmouth tried to edge through it to the front.

The head of the Hairbeast delegation boomed something at Chief Speareye. Humans couldn't speak Hairbeast, or any language other than their own. Every generation or so, somebody would try to learn some

non-human tongue, but of all the ancestors only poor Treatymaker had ever succeeded. However, one word of Hairbeast understood by all was the coughing grunt that signified 'flesh'.

The Hairbeasts made that sound now, one after another. Then their leader placed ten human fingerbones on the ground before Speareye.

'Ten!' shouted Speareye. 'They'll give us ten pups!'

'Yes, and they'll take ten of us in exchange!' yelled a woman in the crowd.

Speareye glared in her direction.

'Anybody who doesn't like to eat can say so now.' He waited, but nobody else objected.

'Do we agree?' shouted Speareye. 'Do we agree to ten?'

The people muttered in assent, even the woman who'd complained. Ten was an unusually large number for the Hairbeasts to ask. Stopmouth wondered if they'd begun a war with one of the species that bordered them - the Armourbacks perhaps. Absurd rumours were flying around that Armourbacks and Hoppers had been seen hunting together. Stopmouth shook his head. Of course that couldn't happen. Creatures would need a common language to co-operate in something as complex as a hunt.

The chief accepted the ten fingerbones, and the Hairbeast delegation turned round and left immediately. The crowd began to disperse, muttering in excitement and fear.

Stopmouth took his chance.

'Wallbreaker!'

'Stopmouth!' His brother seemed uncomfortable. He kept scratching his ribs as if they itched terribly. 'It's good to see you. Don't think I've been avoiding you - you'll know what I mean when you're wed yourself someday!' He winked, but the lie hurt anyway. Besides, what Wallbreaker and Mossheart got up to was the last thing Stopmouth wanted to think about.

'We need to talk.'

'You're angry at me,' said Wallbreaker. He was still keeping the palm of his left hand over his ribs. 'You forget to stutter when you want to kill me.'

'I d-don't!'

'Look' - Wallbreaker gripped him by the arm - 'I really thought you were dead, all right?' At last, the truth. 'I saw them follow you into the tower and I hadn't a scrap of strength left in me. I'd have been worse than useless to you. But I've big plans to make it up to you, all right?'

'N-no n-need! I f-forgive-'

Just at that moment a careless group of people departing the gathering bumped into the brothers. They knocked Wallbreaker's left hand away from his ribs, revealing the new tattoo that had been placed there. Only the chief could award tattoos, and only for outstanding bravery. This one showed three Armourbacks being crushed by a rock. Wallbreaker caught Stopmouth staring and folded his arms again to cover the tattoo.

'I'll make it up to you,' he whispered. Quickly he turned away, and Stopmouth saw scars from Armourback spear-points dotted around his spine. He was headed for the chief's house, where the tattooed warriors would be holding the flesh meeting. They'd never let Stopmouth in. So he wandered home, angry all over again, and set to work at more mindless rubbing of the Armourback shell. He kept working after dark, unable to sleep, with only the cook fire for company. But his hands were tired now, even if his mind was not. The shell slipped from his fingers and into the flames. He cursed and poked it out again with a stick. But his cursing changed to laughter as soon as he got back to work. He laughed so loudly, he woke his mother with it. 'What's wrong, son?' she asked. 'I see you smile for the first time in days!'

'F-fire!' he said. He held up a piece of brown shell as large as his hand. One end of it had been worn away to a perfect point.

Most people got nervous on the night of a flesh meeting. They tossed in their sleep and in waking hours regretted enmities made with the tattooed hunters who could vote. Stopmouth was no different. He worried for Mother in spite of her obvious vigour. He'd heard from some of the women who'd seen her Tally stick that she wasn't that old. But youth was never sufficient protection. All must be able to serve the Tribe, either in life or death. So, knowing he wouldn't sleep anyway, he

decided to keep working on his new spear-tips. He finally had the knack of it and made good progress.

By now, frequent handling of the blades had cut a grid of streets into his palms. He cursed as the larger piece of shell caught him again and again. However, eventually he succeeded in melting the tips onto a pair of straight shafts that Wallbreaker had given him for his first hunt. He still didn't understand why the Armourbacks wouldn't use their own shell for tools. But they were known for a fear of fire, so perhaps it wasn't so strange after all.

At last Stopmouth fell asleep gazing at the finished product, overcome by the beauty of the leaf-shaped blades. All thoughts of the flesh meeting, his fears for his mother, sank with him into the darkness.

Thousands of charcoal drawings blackened the houses on Centre Square in the spaces between skulls and other trophies. And there was soot too, from the fires where people came to cook and tell the stories of the Tribe. These twelve buildings, three-storeyed and spacious, had seen John Spearmaker lift the first weapon. The sounds of the Traveller's farewell speech had passed through their curtained doorways, soaking into the very walls that yet other Heroes had given their lives to defend. The Tribe, whose heart this place was, had come again to fill it with life. Children watched from every rooftop or squabbled for a spot on the ancient fountain at the very centre.

Chief Speareye's wives had spread word of a Choosing. Extra guards manned the towers, but almost all the rest of the Tribe - perhaps as many as three thousand human beings, had turned up. Some people wouldn't come, of course; would prefer to bring shame on their families by hiding. Sweat beaded many a brow, and tense speculations passed from mouth to mouth. People jostled and hugged their families close. Speareye climbed onto a platform made of hide and bones that had been set up outside his home. He swept back the patched mantle to reveal a torso of wild tattoos. Each represented an act of greatness in the story of his life. Speareye still hunted better than any of his rivals, but men whispered that his arm was slowing. They said he was grooming

his son Waterjumper to take over. The boy, born a few hundred days after Stopmouth, stood awkwardly at his father's side. He had yet to make a first kill, but his frame was filling out and already he had begun to take on the look of his father.

Nearby, tattooed hunters waited in case of need, all standing close to the platform. As Stopmouth pressed forward, he spotted Wallbreaker among them as well as the frightening Crunchfist, who was said to love Choosings and looked forward to them eagerly.

'My people,' cried Speareye. He recited the meaningless ritual, as every chief had before him, winning instant silence. 'I need ten of you to come forward now so that the rest of us can make it Home. Who will act to spare the Tribe?'

'I will.' Stopmouth knew the speaker. Everyone had said Bonfire would volunteer this time. She no longer had a husband and her last son had disappeared during a recent hunt. Her daughter's man had been feeding her, but with another baby on the way . . . People applauded and here and there muttered the formula: 'How brave! She still had a thousand days in her!'

Bonfire stepped through the crowd and climbed onto the platform. She accepted Speareye's kiss and the kisses of others who would miss her. Two more widows followed her into honour, along with a hunter whose broken leg had never healed properly. His young wife tried to stop him, screaming all the while. But the man limped onwards while others kept her back until she lapsed into helpless sobs.

'We need six more, my people!' shouted the chief. No one offered themselves. He seemed disappointed. The crowd grew restless. Some people looked around, others kept their heads down. Here and there, little groups hissed and argued. Stopmouth saw one frail woman being pulled in two directions by a family tug-of-war which ended with her staying put. Finally Speareye snapped his fingers. Hunters pushed into the crowd and grabbed several people. All were old or injured and all had been chosen at the flesh meeting the evening before.

'I can still hunt!' screamed one old man. It was Uncle Flimnose. Tears poured down his face, shaming the whole family. Stopmouth winced. The old man shouldn't be crying, he should have known; Mother would

have told him. The Tribe didn't care how old a hunter was so long as his spear drank often. But the women who counted a man's days knew by his Tally when his arms would start to weaken. It was their duty to help him leave the world with dignity and honour.

Some of those who knew Flimnose patted him in sympathy, but most looked away in disgust. Crunchfist barged through the crowd, a big smile on his face. He grabbed the wailing Flimnose by the hair and dragged him to the front.

Now there were ten 'volunteers' whose Tally sticks would be stored in the House of Honour.

'Let's pick the escort,' cried Speareye.

It was an easy mission, though a grave one: a simple exchange of loved ones for food. Stopmouth stepped forward as his mother had asked. Four other hunters joined him: Waterjumper, son of the chief and not much older than himself; Linebrow and Burnthouse, two men of middle age and experience; and Rockface, who would lead.

The volunteers and escorts ate a meal together of dried Clawfolk flesh. Stopmouth offered to chew Uncle Flimnose's for him but the old man refused to eat. Then, with those who could walk supporting the others, they set out for the Hairbeast district while the rest of the Tribe looked on in relieved, respectful silence.

Stopmouth spotted his mother at the edge of the crowd. He cut his thumb and carefully flicked a drop of blood towards her. She smiled. 'Your blood has come back to me,' she said, her face proud, 'and so will you.' People nearby nodded approvingly at the old ritual.

The first leg of the journey took the party to the perimeter of the Man-Ways. They trudged down one of the four great streets leading from the square, past crumbling houses that leaned one against the other for support. Most were empty, their only visitors patrols and naughty children searching for ancient spearheads and scraps of rotted hides.

When the group passed the towers, guards peered down to see who'd volunteered.

And others were watching too. In many areas of the city the streets were made of water - Wetlanes, people called them. Blurred

shapes waited beneath the surface, shapes that lived in a world every bit as competitive as the one above, and would pull a human under, given the chance. Beyond a metal bridge lay no-man's-land. This was a wilderness between territories. Roads and knee-high walls slept here under blankets of thick moss, while fast-growing saplings defied human efforts to keep the area free of cover for hungry enemies.

Stopmouth's heart beat faster. He'd come back this way less than ten days before when the Armourbacks had almost caught him. He had to work hard to control his terror, wondering if more experienced hunters ever felt the same or were just better at covering it.

Soon, red and purple branches arched overhead to block the light and a thousand tiny mossbeasts buzzed around every member of the party.

As they approached the Hairbeast district, Uncle Flimnose began to wail again and tried to hang back. Rockface frowned and shook his big head.

'P-p-please, Uncle!' Stopmouth whispered.

'You just pray to the ancestors you never get old! So proud with your Armourback spear. Just you wait! I held you on my knee, I fed you and—'

'Oh, hush!' said Bonfire, the first volunteer. She was a tall, spindly woman and didn't have much flesh on her. But the Hairbeasts wouldn't mind: they prized human marrow above all other delicacies and would swap pups to get it. Sometimes they would even trade the flesh of rare and distant beasts that humans had never seen living.

'That boy can't be more than five thousand days old,' Bonfire continued. 'We had our chance. Let the young have theirs.'

The party stopped within sight of the first Hairbeast guard tower. 'Strange,' said Rockface. He shielded his eyes with one heavily tattooed hand. 'I don't see any sentinels.'

They advanced more cautiously. No Hairbeast walked in the first laneways of the district, but in the distance, great booming cries could be heard.

'Never seen this before,' said Linebrow, one of the other hunters. He was perhaps two thousand days older than Stopmouth. He had few tattoos, but a scar ran the length of his face, driving a wedge across

the bridge of his nose. Rockface waved his spear at Stopmouth and Waterjumper, the youngest members of the party. 'You two, move to the front! Use those sharp eyes of yours, hey? Waterjumper, if you see anything, call out. Stopmouth can't always get his voice working.'

The streets stayed empty and the party's nervousness grew. Everywhere, barrels lay overturned; pots of blood waited under half-finished murals. In one house they spotted a few mewling pups, without adults to look after them. The younger ones lacked fur entirely and still walked on all fours.

'We should take those pups now and run for it,' said Waterjumper.

Rockface laughed at him. 'And what if one of the Hairbeasts saw us, Little Chief? Are you going to put the treaty back together when nobody can even speak to them?' The hunter with the scarred nose sniggered too. Waterjumper blushed.

The booming sounds of Hairbeasts drew closer. Two large males ran past them. One of the creatures had blood streaming from its fur. They ignored the humans completely.

A few minutes later the hunters entered one side of a small square at about the same time as four brown-shelled Armourbacks entered the other, their red eyes glittering. Both parties came to a halt. Five human warriors versus four Armourbacks put the odds only slightly in the beasts' favour. Normally two well-matched groups would leave each other alone. Better to hunt weaker prey than risk heavy casualties, only to end up with more flesh than they could carry home.

However, something strange was happening in the Hairbeast district that day, and all the hunters knew it.

Fear grew in Stopmouth's belly. Only luck had saved him in his last encounter with these creatures and he didn't want to fight them again. But it shouldn't come to that. The Armourbacks probably wouldn't recognize the volunteers as non-combatants and would think themselves heavily outnumbered. They might run away. But, to Stopmouth's dismay, Rockface lacked the ability to see things from a beast's point of view.

'Volunteers!' he said. 'Stay back, hey? Go into the laneway we just left. Stopmouth and Waterjumper, take the edges. Linebrow, Burnthouse, keep with me. Aim for the joints. If you get behind one,

strike at the base of the neck. They hate that.'

The hunters formed themselves into a line and stepped across to the middle of the square, where their longer reach could be used to best advantage. The four beasts got their backs to a wall, but instead of edging away, as Stopmouth had hoped, they gripped their spears and charged, concentrating their attack on the centre of the human formation.

Linebrow's spear snapped against Armourback shell. He had no such defence of his own and he cried out in terror and then pain, folding onto the ground like a dropped blanket. Rockface's weapon broke too, but he swayed aside at the last moment and used his knife to slice his attacker's throat.

At the edges of the line Stopmouth and Waterjumper escaped the charge by leaping away and keeping their distance. But when the three surviving enemies pulled back, Linebrow was beyond help and Burnthouse's right arm dangled at his side. He fell onto his behind, staring at his useless limb.

Rockface patted him on the back and took his spear for himself. 'We can win, boys,' he said. He had a manic grin on his face. He knelt next to the Armourback he'd killed and popped an eyeball free. He waved it at the enemy before eating it. 'I'll eat you too!' he shouted, and to Stopmouth's amazement, he laughed. The pause in the fighting had given the young man's terror a chance to grow. His palms sweated on the shaft of his spear. He knew that if they stayed here, they'd die, and that he himself could escape only if he ran.

Too late. The Armourbacks were charging again. Stopmouth braced his spear against the ground and tried to aim the tip towards the neck joint of his attacker. His weapon hit armour instead. To his surprise, it crunched straight through the beast's shell and stopped it dead. The creature's arms twitched so fast they seemed to blur. And then it dropped, taking his spear with it. He tried to pull it free and panicked when the shaft came loose without the tip. But the other beasts seemed to have forgotten about him. Nearby, Waterjumper sat with bloody hands over his stomach and a look of surprise on his face. Only Rockface was still fighting. The two remaining Armourbacks had backed

him into a corner and jabbed at him almost playfully.

With shaking hands, Stopmouth unhooked his sling and grabbed a few stones. He aimed for the base of the neck. *Crack!* A perfect hit! One of the creatures dropped soundlessly. His next missile hit shell instead, but now the last Armourback knew he was there, and when it half turned towards him, Rockface shoved a dagger deep into its neck.

'Good boy!' he shouted. 'They hate someone at their backs! They hate it!' Then he saw the first Armourback, which Stopmouth had killed by punching straight through its armour.

'How?' he asked.

'Th-the s-spear-p-p-point. Sh-sh-shell.'

'Speak plainly, boy.'

'Ar-Armourback sh-shell. I m-made it f-f-from—'

'Never mind,' said Rockface. 'You can tell me later.'

Rockface walked over to the wall where Waterjumper and Burnthouse sat side by side in the dust. Waterjumper groaned and held his hands over his belly.

'Let's have a look there, Little Chief,' said Rockface. He tried to pry Waterjumper's hands away from the wound. The boy resisted but had no strength. 'It's not as bad as you think, Little Chief. Don't look at it, hey? I want you to watch the Roof while I bind it. Tell us if you see any Globes.'

Without warning Rockface plunged his knife into Waterjumper's left eye. The boy twitched once and relaxed.

'I don't need any help like that,' said Burnthouse weakly. He'd pulled moss from the wall of the building behind him to stem the bleeding in his arm.

'You'll hunt again, Burnthouse. Your wife will keep marking your Tally so long as we can get you home. What are you doing, Stopmouth? Get over here, boy.'

'A m-minute.' Stopmouth had been slicing fragments of shell from dead Armourbacks. He wrapped all he could carry in Linebrow's loincloth. The poor man wouldn't be needing it now.

Just then the hunters heard sounds of running feet. Before they could react, a dozen Hairbeasts loped into the square. They carried

clubs with rocks tied to the ends - a good weapon for fighting Armourbacks if you were as large as they. Blood matted their fur. They boomed and hooted at the humans. One of them approached Rockface, bellowing their word for flesh. It butted him out of the way with its chest. Then it threw Waterjumper's body over its shoulder and loped off. Others stepped forward to claim Linebrow and, shockingly, the Armourback corpses too. Then they were gone again, running down the alleyway from which the humans had emerged.

'It seems,' said Burnthouse, 'the Hairbeasts are no longer at peace with the Armourbacks.'

'Or with us,' said Rockface. 'They took our kills too. Let's get out of here.'

'Wait,' said Burnthouse as Stopmouth helped him to his feet. 'We need to know what's going on. The Hairbeasts didn't seem too worried about the treaty. That's not like them.'

'S-scared,' said Stopmouth.

'What are you scared of, boy?' asked Rockface. 'We won, didn't we?'

'N-n-no, th-th-'

'He means the Hairbeasts,' said Burnthouse. His arm seemed to be causing him great pain. 'Those big hairies were terrified. And so am I! I've changed my mind about finding the cause. Just get me home.'

They went back to the alleyway where they'd left the volunteers, but found only blood and signs of a struggle. They could easily have tracked the trail leading away from the scene but knew that it was too late for the volunteers now anyway. The Tribe had to be told what was going on.

In the distance the men could hear a roar, as if giant hunting parties were clashing with each other. They ran until they came to a crossroads less than five hundred paces from the empty zone between human and Hairbeast territory. At the end of one of the roads they saw a group of Armourbacks and grey-furred Hoppers surround some Hairbeasts and spear them to death. The three men had heard rumours of this. But who could believe such a thing? It was as if two distinct races, Armourbacks and Hoppers, had found a way to talk to one another and had

planned an invasion of the district together. Impossible and shocking.

The humans hurried on, hoping they hadn't been seen. They reached no-man's-land near the crossing over the Wetlane. A guard waved frantically at them from the first tower. Stopmouth turned to look. Two hundred paces behind them, a troop of Hoppers burst from between buildings and approached at great speed. Powerful hind legs drove the creatures forward at twice the length of a man with every leap. Grey fur streamed behind them and long arms were constantly moving to keep them balanced. They were not strong, these beasts, but no faster creature lived in the city and few were more dangerous on open ground. Frantically Stopmouth and Rockface reached for weapons while the injured Burnthouse stumbled on alone. 'Sling first!' said Rockface over the high, excited cries of their enemies. 'We'll get a shot in!' And they did, both stones finding their mark on the lead Hopper, which fell back. Its fall tripped two others while the rest leaped over the pile-up and came on at speed. Their human-like hands held short stabbing spears; their little eyes glinted.

Stopmouth heard a horn blowing back at the guard tower. Shouts told him his people were coming. Too late, too late! Rockface flung his spear when the Hoppers were no more than twenty paces away. He wounded one and knocked another off balance so that its next hop took it into the Wetlane. It screamed in a high voice as the water around it thrashed and turned red. Another Hopper leaped at Stopmouth. He managed to push its spear aside with one hand while the creature's momentum carried it onto his dagger. The impact knocked him from his feet and pinned him under his enemy. He felt its hot breath wet against his face and heard thuds as more of its companions landed on the bridge.

I'm dead, thought Stopmouth. This time I'm dead. Nearby he heard laughter, then shouts and running feet.

The Hopper's corpse was lifted away. He blinked up at the face of Chief Speareye.

'Where's Waterjumper?' said the chief. 'Where's my son?'