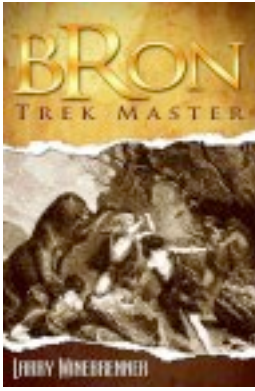


BRON

TREK MASTER



LARRY WINEBRENNER



This novel is a record of one pre-civilized tribe intent on finding new resources while a dominant tribe tries to prevent them from leaving their present area.

The group overcomes every obstacle, yet suffers the frustrations and fatalism of daily living faced by any group in any time or place. Yet they discover face-to-face love making, fire-making, and the value of compromise-making in one short novel covering the actual time frame for such adventure of several centuries. All in one entertaining story.

Bron Trek Master

by Larry Winebrenner

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BRON—TREK MASTER
**FROM THE VALLEY OF DARKNESS
TO THE VALLEY OF LIGHT**

By

Larry Winebrenner

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 <i>The Cave of Darkness</i>	1
Chapter 2 <i>In the Cave of Darkness</i>	13
Chapter 3 <i>Escape!</i>	23
Chapter 4 <i>Pursuit</i>	37
Chapter 5 <i>Rock Slides and Fire</i>	46
Chapter 6 <i>The Cave Bear</i>	61
Chapter 7 <i>Mutiny in the Ranks</i>	67
Chapter 8 <i>Struggles Lying Ahead</i>	80
Chapter 9 <i>Ice and Snow</i>	92
Chapter 10 <i>Lost!</i>	102
Chapter 11 <i>The Lake</i>	114
Chapter 12 <i>Wolf Pack</i>	126
Chapter 13 <i>Lure of the Lesser</i>	140
Chapter 14 <i>The Young Cave Bear</i>	149
Chapter 15 <i>The Curse of Overabundance</i>	159
Chapter 16 <i>Lions</i>	168
Chapter 17 <i>The Great River</i>	177
Chapter 18 <i>The Valley of Light</i>	189
Chapter 19 <i>Establishing the Covenant Community</i>	198
Chapter 20 <i>Exploring</i>	210
Chapter 21 <i>The Waterfall</i>	217
Chapter 22 <i>Ila's Secret</i>	224
Chapter 23 <i>Sky Bird</i>	234
Chapter 24 <i>Bron's Secret</i>	244
Chapter 25 <i>The End of Ssss</i>	254
Chapter 26 <i>"Song of the Valley of Darkness and the Valley of Light"—Starzz the Singer</i>	266

Chapter 1

The Cave of Darkness

“Then lead us to the Valley of Light!” shouted a voice.

The mantra was picked up: “The Valley of Light! The Valley of Light!”

Artax looked at Bron. Hatred flashed in his black eyes.

Artax had organized this clandestine gathering. He had done it. Not Bron.

“The Hormeets have dominated the Himeets long enough,” Artax thundered.

“Did not all of the clans have the same ancestor?”

“Did not Our Ancestor find this valley for all his children?”

He paused to glare at the gathering, some twenty-six of them, daring them to disagree.

Twenty-six. Not all thirty-seven Himeets. Some of the elderly were missing. Some babies, small children.

“Is it the Himeets’ fault that game is scarce? Are the Himeets to blame that Ila must lead the women farther and farther from Home to gather plants and fruit?”

Heads turned toward the moon-illuminated valley in the distance. But Artax had the attention of the people.

The area where the clan built semipermanent dwellings was called Home. Home had been moved as many as four times in this valley during the lives of many in the group. There was no place left to move.

Each time less game was available. Their numbers grew. Fewer plants, fewer roots, fewer luscious fruits could be found.

Nods and grunts of agreement filtered through the crowd. The scent of battle was in the

air. More than half the Himeets, the subordinate clan, in the valley had come. Clearly, they were ready for change.

Light from the fire glistened on Artax's bearded face. His biceps bulged when he bent his elbows in gestures. Now Artax, like some fire god, laid his plan before the people.

"They are stronger than us.

"They force us to hunt for them.

"They compel Ila and the women to gather for them.

"They store excess food in the Cave of Coldness. For them.

"I say raid the Cave of Coldness! Take the food for ourselves.

"We will grow strong—as they are strong.

"We will have strength to oppose them.

"Then let them try to command us to do their bidding."

The gathering was clearly in his hands. Insect bites mattered not. Smoke and ash burned uncaring eyes. Jostling went unnoticed.

Except by one ancient man. He turned to Bron, standing to one side. Bron was listening intently to what Artax was saying.

"What say you, Bron?" the old man rasped.

Artax's head swiveled in their direction. His thought about this interruption was obvious. Bron? Why ask Bron? He had not been back from exile a full moon.

"You want Bron's advice," laughed Artax.

"Bron, the Foolish One?

"Bron, the one who dared speak against the Hormeets?

“Bron, the one who accused Hors of cruelty to his face?

“Bron, the one”—he paused for dramatic effect; the pitch of his voice rose in crescendo—“sent into exile?”

Each accusation dripped with venom.

Exile!

Exile was certain death. Exiled from the valley, one was forced to go up into the mountains. Up above plant-growing range. Up into the ice and snow. Ice and snow on the mountains almost year round.

Hunger ate away at the entrails. Ate the fat from the body. Caused stomach pains. Muscle cramps. Until a person died.

Cold seeped in. It crept under the cloak. It ran its icy fingers up the spine. It froze toes. It froze fingers. It turned skin into ice. Until a person froze.

Bron. The first exile ever to return. Ever.

He told a tale of another valley. A valley beyond the mountains. A valley flowing with game. A valley with ripe fruit on every tree.

Starzz, the singer, had dubbed it the Valley of Light. He called their valley the Valley of Darkness.

But Bron was not welcomed as a hero.

“You’re crazy,” the Hormeet leaders said. “Search for some imaginary valley?”

Nor would the Himeets listen. They were afraid. They feared to speak openly to him.

“The Hormeets will punish us,” they said.

Bron still had the stench of exile on him.

The old man Artax had challenged struggled to his feet. His beard was as white as the snow-capped mountains. It was scraggly. His eyes were rheumy. His garment sagged, great gaps in seams.

Ila, his daughter, immediately supported him at his side. Her bare, protruding breasts pointed like accusing fingers from her slender body. She stretched out strong arms to support the frail old man.

“Yes.” Oogie’s gravelly voice was strong and clear. “I want to hear what Bron has to say. He did stand up to the Hormeets. He is the only person sent into exile ever to return.”

He cast a withering glare at Artax a moment. Ila gently lowered him into his seated position.

Oogie’s declaration struck a responsive chord.

“Let Bron speak. Let Bron speak,” began the chorus.

Bron walked up and stood next to Artax. They bracketed the flickering flames.

He held up a hand for silence. Fire reflections glinted from his dark eyes. Bron did not argue. His voice was level, well projected.

“Our clans will not grow strong overnight,” he noted. “Attacks on the Cave of Coldness will result in swift retaliation. Life will be harder. Replacement of raided stores more burdensome. Consider this if you follow Artax into battle.”

“Then lead us to the Valley of Light!” shouted a voice. The mantra was picked up: “The Valley of Light! The Valley of Light!”

Artax looked at Bron. Hatred flashed in his black eyes.

Suddenly, the shouts were replaced by whispers. The smell of fear permeated the

meeting. Members of the clan melted into the darkness. The last Himeet vanished into the darkness. A Hormeet Gang arrived. The Gangs, squads that enforced Chief Hors's will.

Yes, thought Bron. We have learned to survive by avoiding the Hormeets.

It was not an indictment. He, too, had avoided the Hormeets. Before exile.

Then, Hors had smashed a small child's hand. Needless punishment. Excessive punishment. So said Bron. Thus, exile.

"We heard there was a meeting here," said Frish, the Hormeet Gang leader. "Where are the slaves?"

While Himeets were not chattel, they were used as slave labor. Labor without a master's succor.

Artax indicated Bron with a nod.

"Ask him."

Bron said, "Look around you. Whom do you see?"

Frish did not like that answer. He came at Bron with lifted club. It was thick, heavy. One blow would crack a skull.

Before Frish could swing it, Bron snatched it. He threw it into the darkness.

Frish sized up this Himeet. No one from the Himeet clan ever challenged a Hormeet.

And lived to tell about it.

But he had felt this Himeet's strength. Who was he? This rebel was as large as Chief Hors.

Frish had not heard of Bron's return. Bron had only approached the Hormeet elders. Once rejected, he sank back into the anonymity of Himeet community.

Frish dared not risk the shame of defeat in a battle with a Himeet. Without the club, he was no match.

He kicked a rock to one side with his bare foot.

“Grab him. We will take him to Hors for judgment.”

There was the slightest hesitation in the Gang. It, too, had noted his strength.

“You will not drag me to Hors like a dead stag,” he told them. “I will walk. I will stand before the Hormeet chief.”

He walked toward them. Their glances showed they were uncertain.

Attack?

Allow him to walk to the council circle?

He reached them.

They parted.

He walked through them. They fell in behind him, as if he were their leader.

Meanwhile, Frish went into the darkness to retrieve his club.

It was not there.

A mortified Gang leader ran and caught up with his group. He dispatched a runner to the council circle. The runner announced the capture of a rebel.

Hormeet elders emerged from their animal-skin shelters. Shelters made of skins that should have been used for Himeet garments.

Some rubbed sleep from their eyes.

Some wiped hands, greasy from eating, on their rough skin clothing.

All stood, looking at the Judgment Rock.

As Bron and his captors entered the Circle area, Hors emerged from his cave. He was a large man. Muscular and heavy. Scars on one arm showed his close call with death in an encounter with a wild boar. An encounter he won by strangling the beast with his bare hands.

His teeth shone white in the full moon brilliance. He wore a necklace of the teeth from the boar he slew. His midriff was girded with a belt made from a large serpent. On his head was a hat with horns of a wild beast, the sign of his station.

He took his stance on the Judgment Rock.

Bron walked alone across the Sacred Circle against all mores. The Gang with him halted. The men stumbled around the Circle to make sure he did not escape.

Bron took his stance before the Judgment Rock.

Frish hurriedly took his place beside Bron.

Hors looked directly at Frish.

“Who is this who dares violate the sanctity of the Circle?”

“Who is this who walks to the Judgment Rock? Walks unaccompanied by his captors?”

“Who is this who stands before me? Not on his knees?”

Himeets gradually slipped into the Circle area. They were required by custom and by Hors to watch the judgment. They must be present for all sentencing.

One stood in the far section of the viewing area. He was not expected to have a club concealed in a ragged, cast-off skin robe.

Swallowing hard, Frish announced, “This rebel called together a large company of Himeets to rebel against your greatness, O Hors. We heard the voices of a great multitude crying, ‘The Valley of Light! The Valley of Light!’”

The Gang leader tried to swallow. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Nervous sweat dripped freely from his face. Ran across his beard. Dripped and splattered and formed tiny puddles on the hard, dry stone. He wheezed in a lungful of breath and continued.

“When we arrived, he had already dispersed them.”

Bron realized Artax was noticeably absent from the group that brought him here. He glanced around. Then he saw Artax at one edge of the crowd. So he too had slipped away into the darkness during the confrontation with Frish. Frish continued.

“I stepped forward to smash his head. He grabbed my club. He threw it out into the darkness. We approached to grab him. He resisted. He insisted on walking to your presence. We have brought him to your Judgment Rock.”

Hors did not interrupt the Gang leader. He peered intently at the Gang leader throughout his recital.

“The Valley of Light!” cried a woman’s voice off to one side of the entrance to Hors’s cave. Every eye peered in that direction. All but one pair. Hors’s eyes glared at Bron.

“He took your club?”

Hors was looking at Bron. He was talking to Frish.

Frish wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He said, “Yes, mighty Hors, but I—”

Hors interrupted with a low, hard, cold growl. “He took your club?”

The Gang leader stood tall, ready for Hors’s judgment. It was a mortal sin to allow one’s club to be taken. But for a Himeet!

“Yes, mighty Hors.”

“And where is it now?”

“I don’t know, mighty Hors.”

“Is that it lying just inside the Sacred Circle?”

He took one look. The Gang leader fell on his knees. The smell of sweat and fear permeated the air.

“Mercy, mighty Hors!”

Hors stood tall on the Judgment Rock.

“This is my judgment. So that no Hormeet will ever allow his club to be taken. You are to be taken to the Cave of Women. You will dwell there for one moon.”

To be treated as a woman. In every way.

It was more than Frish could stand. He turned and grabbed Bron by the throat. Bron was startled. He tried to break the grip. It was impossible. Frish’s fingers dug into Bron’s skin, into the tendons, into the windpipe.

Bron placed the heel of his hand on Frish’s receding chin. He shoved mightily. Frish stumbled back a step. He charged forward. Forcefully. Into Bron’s plowing fist.

Bron felt Frish’s nose crush. He felt facial bones crack. He felt teeth come out of their sockets. He felt the hot blood flow past his fist. Over his wrist. Down his arm.

The red, thick fluid dripped off his elbow.

All in an instant.

It happened so rapidly, no one moved. Even Hors’s head hardly moved. He considered the Himeet before him, wiping blood from his arm and hand.

“Where is this Valley of Light?” he asked Bron.

“I told your council.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s a poetic name. It was given to a valley beyond the mountains by Starzz. I visited it while in exile.”

“You make it sound like a simple stroll,” said Hors.

Bron considered where this was leading.

“It is a dangerous, hard journey,” he said.

“But you made it.”

“See the teeth of the mountain lion in my necklace? I faced the mountain lion.

“Note the bearskin robe I wear. It is the skin of the cave bear. I conquered the cave bear.

“Look at the wolf paws and tails I wear as talismans around my waist. I overcame the wolf pack.

“Yes. I made it.”

Hors stared at him.

“I once sent you into exile. You have returned. It will do me no good to exile you again.

“You are far too dangerous to remain alive. Even in exile. You returned once. Who’s to say you won’t return again? With a pack of wolves. With an army of cave bears.”

Hors stood straight and tall on the Judgment Rock.

“This is my judgment. So that no Himeet will rebel again. You are to be placed in an empty cave. That cave is to be tightly sealed.”

“No!” screamed Ila. “He will starve. He will—”

Hors looked at his gatherers’ leader. It was whispered that not only could she find adequate foods from the land. She could even make certain plants grow at will. He cut her off

midsentence.

“And would you like to join him, my little rebel? Yes. I recognized your voice just now. Well, you can’t join him. Your services are too valuable.”

Council members smirked. They were sure the services of which he spoke were not restricted to gathering fruit, vegetables, berries, and roots.

“I know one root she gathers,” snickered one of them.

Hors told the guards, “Take him away.”

Bron suddenly grasped the consequences of this sentence. Not only would he have no food, no water. He would have . . . no light.

No light.

Darkness. His most intense fear. A sour taste rose in his mouth.

Fear of darkness once saved his life. That time when the mountain lion lurked in the cave’s blackness.

He could not allow it. Be sealed in a dark cave? Death would be better.

The guards were taking him to the cave. He would not go. He thrust the guards aside.

He jumped into the Sacred Circle. The guards dared not follow. He raced toward the club lying on the other side of the Circle.

They had to run around the perimeter. He was well ahead of them.

He reached for the club.

Then everything went black.

“If you don’t have a club, use a rock,” said the guard who had thrown it.

“Lucky shot,” commented his buddy.

Each grabbed a leg. They started toward the cave.

“Wait,” said Brut, the guard who had thrown the rock. “I guess if I downed him, that club is mine.”

“Guess again,” said a voice next to him. Brut looked up.

It was Hors. The clan chief continued. “He took it from a Gang leader. It is his until someone takes it from him in battle. Throw it into the cave with him. If he breaks out of the cave, Brut, you can fight him for it.”

That was not a prospect that appealed to Brut. But he didn’t argue. Not with Hors.

He and the other guard delivered Bron to the cave. With the club. And instructions. Man and club were thrown into the cave.

As the enclosure neared completion, one of the workers threw some rocks into the cave.

“If you get hungry, perhaps you can chew on these.”

It was a fateful move.

Bron never heard him.

In the Cave of Darkness

Bron awoke. Water dripped on his head. Water dripping from the ceiling had doused him. He was soaked. And he was cold.

Unaware of where he was, he thought, *I'm blind!*

Then he remembered.

Then reality gripped him.

Then fear.

Then screams.

He screamed until he was hoarse. He shivered violently.

Not from cold.

From fear.

When he could no longer scream, he whimpered like a lost child.

He wrapped his arms about himself. He scooted back on his backside. He became aware that the floor was not wet where he scooted. A little farther and he backed up against the cave wall.

He was in a cave whose roof sweated constantly. The musty smell of stale wetness assailed his nostrils. He had been in many such caves. But with open mouths.

Mountain lions did not like such caves. Cave bears did not like such caves. They never made their lairs in them.

He had found comfort in such caves. Fire kept out the cold. It provided light. Predators avoided fire.

Two facts dawned on Bron simultaneously.

If his mind was active about his surroundings, the fear was less intense.

And, he was not in total darkness.

Where was the light coming from?

He stared ahead. Left. Right. Up.

Up. Bron looked all over the ceiling of the cave. He could not see the ceiling. Yet, one spot was almost visible. That must be where the light was coming from.

He tried to stand. Wooziness swept over him.

He placed his hand against the cave wall behind him. He tried again. He was still a bit dizzy. He stood leaning against the wall until his head cleared.

The darkness still terrorized him. The promise of even the slightest glow of light drove him. He slowly circled the cave by feel. The rocks that sealed the entrance were there. He moved on around. The walls were smooth, almost slick.

The water, he thought. Without thinking it through, he realized the erosion of the walls by water made them slick.

He found two shallow recesses in the walls he was exploring. Another opening he came to was much deeper. Too deep for him to touch the back. Except for these three nooks, and the rocks sealing the entrance, the cave was a smooth, sealed tomb.

Throughout his circuit of the cave, Bron looked up. He fruitlessly searched for the source of light. By the time he had circled the cave twice, he had some notion of its size. He also had his balance back.

The cave was basically circular. The distance across the cave was that of three tall-man lengths. He had no notion how high the ceiling of the cave was. He had no way of measuring it.

Looking up for the source of the small glow, he started across the cave again. His foot hit something and he fell. His big toe hurt. Maybe it was broken. His knee was scraped. The slickness of the floor kept it from scratching the skin. It did not keep the pain from coming.

He reached for the offending item that tripped him. What he found could only be a club.

A club in here? How? Why would they seal a valuable weapon like a club in a cave that would never be opened?

It was a puzzle he would have to work out another time. He realized the danger of tripping in the dark. He continued his search, gradually shuffling his feet. He found two stones.

He had laid the club in the dry spot he had found. Now he tossed the stones in that direction.

Once, as he looked up, searching for light, he thought he saw a star. Carefully, he sought that spot. *Yes! There was a star.* Was his cave being lighted by starlight? If so, perhaps that spot was a way out.

A drop of water fell into his eye. He moved away from that glimmer of hope. Obviously, it was night. Perhaps sun would provide more light. He dozed fitfully as he shivered from cold. And quivers of fear.

As Bron was trying to get some sleep, Artax was once again arranging a meeting of the Himeets. With Bron out of the way, he would have a free hand.

Artax felt his strategy was well planned. A sudden raid on the Cave of Coldness. Cart off as much as the attacking force could carry. Go to the far end of the valley. Hide there and eat the food to become strong.

Then return and defeat the Hormeets. Make them the slaves of the Himeets. He would be

the new chief. He would live in Hors's cave. He would stand on the Judgment Rock. He would hand out sentences.

Of course, he wouldn't tell the people his whole plan. First raid the food stores. Flee to the other end of the valley.

When he came to Ila's shelter he hesitated. Unlike other unmated women, Ila did not stay in the Cave of Women. To be subject to any male's desire for a mate for a night. She was allowed to live with and care for her father. That old fool might scramble up Artax's plans.

A wicked thought crossed his mind. What if he could get Oogie sentenced to the Cave of Women like Frish? Not for one moon. For life.

He wondered about Frish. What if some brutish Hormeet decided to use him for a mate tonight? It would serve him right. He was always bullying the Himeets.

Enough of that. He had work to do. The Hormeets would not expect the Himeets to meet them again so soon. Not after the sentence handed down on Bron.

But what about Ila? She was sure to hear of his contacts with Himeets. The women she took out gathering would tell her.

Still, he preferred not to get into an argument with her. Or with Oogie. They were well aware that he was responsible for Bron's death sentence. A sentence of slow death from starvation. It served the interfering troublemaker right, believed Artax.

He moved on to the next shelter as he wondered how long it would take the exile to starve to death.

Early in the morning, Bron was fully awake. There was a bit more light. He could make out the shape of the club beside him. Now to find the source of the light.

Still shuffling over the wet floor of the cave, he went and stood directly where he had stood to see the star. There was no longer any star.

But there was sunlight. It reflected on the drop of water heading for his eye. He closed his eye in time to avoid it.

He suddenly realized that he was thirsty. And hungry.

But he was thirstier for light.

That light came through a fracture in the rock. Bron could see that the ceiling was about as high as one tall man standing on the shoulders of another.

The light came through an opening about as far up as the top of a tree of needles. It was not a way of escape.

Bron went to work holding his hand where the water dripped fastest. The water was cold and fresh. Several hands full slaked his thirst. But what would assuage his hunger?

Why did the cave not fill with water? He used his bare feet to mark the boundaries of wetness. Two sides of the cave were dry. One side wet, right to the cave wall. He ran his fingers around the edge of the wall. A small crack permitted the water to escape. But unless Bron could transform himself into water, there was no escape in that direction.

He used the club to search for the back of the deeper niche. The back was less than a full arm length plus the club. And it was solid. So were the floor and both sides of the niche.

Bron settled down to a schedule of glorying in the dim light during the sun and shivering with fear at night. He caught sufficient water to meet his needs, but suffered more and more from hunger.

On the third sun he began chewing on his skin garment. This gave him no satisfaction. Or

nutrition. The fourth sun he stopped. It became apparent that he would die of starvation.

When he realized that, the darkness became his friend. Perhaps he could hide from death in the darkness. He knew everything in the cave. There was nothing there to fear. The darkness did not hide sudden dangers. There was no need to fear it. In fact, the darkness hid him from death. Darkness was his friend.

On the sixth sun, Bron awoke to find a beam of sunlight shining right through the crack in the rock all the way to the floor. He also saw a sight that caused the hairs on his neck to stand.

A serpent rising as high as a man, ready to strike, swayed across the cave. There was plenty of light to see the threat.

Suddenly the sunbeam was gone. It was as if the light had come and gone only to show Bron that he would not die of starvation. He would die a more painful death.

Bron picked up one of the stones. He kept them beside him, along with the club. He threw the stone with all his strength. It missed the serpent. It banged against the wall in a shower of sparks.

Bron caught up the other stone. He took more careful aim. No desperation in this throw. He had thrown many a stone at small game. He learned that if he missed, there would be no supper. He learned not to miss. That training placed him in good stead now. The stone he threw hit the serpent in the head.

Bron grabbed the club. He made certain the creature was dead. He placed one of his stones under it, just behind the head. He struck the serpent again and again with the club until the head was severed.

Taking up the body of the snake, he grasped the skin with his teeth and pulled it back.

Soon, enough of the flesh was exposed to assure that Bron would not die of starvation that sun.

He chewed the stringy flesh with delight. He ground the meat slowly, extracting all moisture. Then he swallowed the pulp that remained in his mouth. He bit off another piece. He repeated the process.

Once his hunger was satisfied, Bron placed the head in one of the shallow niches so he would not step on it. Then he dragged the body across the cave. It had the girth of a man's leg and reached completely across the cave. If the meat did not spoil, there would be sufficient food for one complete moon.

Could he preserve it? Probably not. He had no tools to remove the serpent's entrails. They would cause the meat to quickly putrefy.

He ate from the body throughout the sun, storing as much of it in his own body as possible. It was the only solution.

As was his custom, Bron went to sleep before the meager glow of light vanished. He was not exactly afraid of the dark anymore. He didn't enjoy it either.

The serpent came in his dream. It spoke like a spirit.

"You have eaten my flessssh. Now we are one. I will go with you to guide your people into your valley. I will sssshow you the way. You musssst follow my directionssss. I will take you there ssssafely."

"How can I take them anywhere sealed in this cave?" Bron argued in his dream.

"Did I not come in?" asked the serpent. "If I can get in, you can get out."

"I am not a serpent," said Bron.

"You are now," said the serpent. "We are one."

“How am I going to get out?” asked Bron.

“I will sssshow you. But firssst there is ssssomething you mussst do. You mussst take my sssskin off my body. Take it with you.”

“What for?” asked Bron.

“I will tell you what to do with it onccce you are out.”

Bron awoke before he could ask any more questions. It was still dark, but that didn’t bother him.

He found the body of the serpent and began tearing the skin down the length with his teeth. Before long he could grasp the skin with his hands and pull. He made better headway than when he could only use his teeth.

Outside the cave Artax had almost finished making his contacts. When next the moon had been swallowed by the sky beast, he was ready to strike. One meeting to call his people to action. That was all he needed.

It took Bron two suns to skin the enormous snake. The flesh tasted a little putrid, so he didn’t eat much of it. That night the serpent came to him.

“Get up,” it said. “You must go tonight. You must get out, for something dreadful is about to happen.”

Bron awoke from a deep sleep.

“How?” he asked before he realized he was no longer dreaming.

But the serpent no longer had to speak in dreams.

“Go to the hole in the sssside of the cave.”

“I’ve poked the club into that hole. It is solid an arm’s length back,” said Bron.

“Do as I ssssay,” directed the serpent. “You musssst lie on your back. Sssslither to the end of that hole. Ssssit up assss you get to the end. Take my sssskin, your club, and your two rockssss with you. Thissss will be a hard journey for you. You are now a sssserpent. You can do it.”

Indeed it was a hard journey. Completely in the dark. Several times Bron became stuck in tight turns. Just when he thought the serpent had lured him into an impossible passage, the serpent would remind him he was a serpent. He would twist just a little harder and would break free.

What surprised Bron as much as anything was the ease with which his burden was transported. There was always a shelf or a crevice, in which he could lay the objects until he was through the tight squeeze.

All at once the serpent spoke with urgency.

“Hurry. It is almost sunup. No one must see you.”

And with that he emerged into the open air. He breathed in its sweet perfume. He recognized the place. Recognized it in the dark! But there was some moonlight. Barely. Perhaps that was why.

He was in an area behind the Himeets’ dwellings. He knew where there was a clump of bushes. He hid there from the Hormeets as a boy. He headed for his boyhood hiding place.

“Wait until Ila takessss the women out gathering. Sssslip into her dwelling. Make an opening in the back. Go in that way. Tell Oogie that you found a way to esssscape the cave. Don’t tell him of me. Assssk him what happened while you were in the cave. Only you can prevent a great tragedy. Oncccce you know the detailssss.”

There was sudden silence. Like that in the cave those first few suns. Before the coming of the serpent. Was all this a dream? Would he awake in darkness?

Then he heard the twittering of the birds greeting the first false dawn.

Escape!

Oogie showed no surprise seeing Bron.

“Hello, Bron,” he said. “You look like you crawled through a wormhole.” Then added, “I thought you were sealed in a cave.”

Bron was startled at his description. He knew it was a common saying about one whose beard and hair were caked with dirt, and whose body was covered with scrapes and scratches. But for Oogie to say it after his recent experience was quite startling. He ignored that and responded to the second comment.

“I was, but I found a way to escape.”

Oogie looked at him.

“That’s what I told Ila. Anyone who can come back alive from three summers in exile won’t let a little thing like a sealed cave hold him.”

So Ila and her father had discussed him.

Bron looked around the sparse homesite. He had never been in this one, but it was like so many others. Walls of brush and mud on a wood framework supporting a low ceiling. Bron could not stand upright. On one side of the shelter was Oogie’s meager bedsite—straw and a worn skin. On the opposite wall, Ila’s bedsite, much the same. The only pantry was a bag of nuts in Oogie’s lap, covered partly by his garment. Food was eaten as it was gathered. Horneets permitted no surplus.

Bron smiled. He looked hungrily at several nuts at Oogie’s feet.

“Well, it wasn’t all that easy,” Bron said. “But tell me, what’s been happening while I was sealed in that cave?”

The old man pulled a bag of nuts from under the garment covering his crossed legs.

“I’m having trouble cracking these nuts. You crack ’em. I’ll share ’em with you. And I’ll bring you up to the present on what’s happened while you were, uh, away.”

Bron quickly reached for the bag. He cracked two and handed them to Oogie. He cracked a third and greedily crunched the oily nut meats between his teeth. He savored the rich taste of the resulting paste as he lolled it around in his mouth before swallowing. He grabbed two more nuts.

Oogie told Bron that while he was sealed in the cave, the Himeets acted like rabbits. They avoided the Hormeets. If one came too close, they ran.

The Himeets were especially jittery when Hors demanded to know who placed the club in the Sacred Circle. Violating the sanctity meant a sentence of certain death. The only question was the method of execution. No one was found and Hors was furious.

No one knew who placed the club there. Almost everyone knew who shouted, “The Valley of Light!” It was Ila.

Bron cracked another nut and smiled. The old man paused long enough to sort out the nut meats and eat them. There had been no intensity in his reporting so far. But now his voice took on the strain of urgency.

“Artax is building on the Himeets’ new fears. He has been forming another meeting of the Himeets. He has not announced the purpose of the meeting.”

“But you know,” said Bron.

“Yes.”

Bron did not press him. He allowed Oogie to continue his discourse.

Bron cracked two more nuts, one for Oogie and one for himself.

“Artax organized a meeting for when the sky beast has completely swallowed the moon,” said Oogie. “It is a good time. There will be no bonfire this time. The meeting is at dry rock stream.”

“Is? Now?”

“Yes. It’s a long trek from Home. As you know, ordinarily no one walks that far from Home. Especially when there is no moon in the sky.”

Everyone knew spirits haunted the darkness when no moon hung in the sky, “when the sky beast had completely swallowed it.”

“Artax asked that all men, their mates, and their children come to the meeting. Men are to bring their spears. ‘Who knows what dangers lurk in the dark?’ Artax told them.”

“They’re meeting right now?” Bron couldn’t believe it. “Why aren’t you there? Is that where Ila went?”

“I wasn’t invited,” commented Oogie drily. “Women are to take their collecting bags. There will be an announcement seriously affecting the lives of everyone at the meeting.”

Oogie paused to enjoy another nut. More were being cracked now than he was able to crack in a sun.

“Perhaps I shall take my nuts with me to the meeting tonight. If you will go with me. To crack the nuts.”

“The meeting is tonight?” Bron said more than asked.

“Yes,” said the old man. “Artax is going to lead an attack on the Cave of Coldness. He is

going to tell the Himeets that things can get no worse. At every moment, they are afraid one of the Hormeets will take them before the Judgment Rock. They will be accused of holding back some small game from a hunt. A few roots from a gathering trip. A harsh judgment will be handed down by Hors. Sometimes death.”

“If it has come to this, then he may be right to attack the Hormeets at their weakest point. If things can get no—”

“But they can,” interrupted Oogie. “The old people used to tell why Our Ancestor brought his family to this valley. In his old Home, game became scarce. People died from hunger.”

A shiver went up Bron’s spine. As he listened to the old man, he remembered his own recent hunger. His own fear of dying from hunger. And a voice said, “Lisssten to the old man.” Bron glanced over to see if Oogie had heard the voice. Evidently not. He urgently continued.

“People began eating people. At first they ate their dead. Then victims chosen for sacrifice. Then, people became the game that was hunted. No one could walk through the forest without fear of hunters.”

“I have never heard of this,” Bron said.

“The old people stopped talking about the past. This valley was vast. The forests were alive with game. The streams were teeming with fish. You could almost reach up and pluck a bird from the air, they were so plentiful.”

“It’s an image of what Starzz calls the Valley of Light,” muttered Bron.

Oogie ignored him. He went on.

“People didn’t want to dwell on the past. Everything was good now. They buried the past.

They never talked of people-eating again.”

“You say we are moving into that way again? That if the food stores are eaten, the Hormeets will become people-eaters?”

“And the Himeets.”

Bron was taken aback. Then he remembered grasping the snake’s skin so he could expose enough flesh to eat. He had never eaten serpent before. There was a serpent hunter among the Hormeets. Bron did not know him. Didn’t know if he ate serpent. But he knew no one personally who had.

Except himself.

“You must warn them,” Bron insisted.

“No. You must do it. Stand before them as you now look. You have the appearance of a buried man who has risen from the grave.”

“Lissssten to him,” came the voice of Ssss.

“You must do more,” said Oogie. “You must lead them to your valley. Tonight.”

“They will not follow me,” said Bron.

“They will follow Artax.”

Bron considered the old man’s statement. Did he want to be a leader of the Himeets? No. Did Artax want to? Absolutely. Would Artax listen to him?

“Sssshow him my sssskin,” said Ssss.

Bron asked Oogie, “What do we do until tonight?”

The old man smiled. “You will crack nuts until Ila returns. Then we shall see.”

“You musssst take him with you to the Valley of Light,” said Ssss.

Ila returned at high sun. The women were not interested in gathering. The meeting scheduled for this evening dominated their attention.

The harvest she took to the Keeper at the Cave of Coldness was meager. He looked at her suspiciously, but said nothing. Hors had given orders that no one was to molest her or insult her in any way. One did not risk the wrath of Hors.

Oogie told Bron to stand to one side of the entrance so Ila would not see him as she entered. Bron stood next to the entrance as Ila came in the door.

The first thing she saw as she entered was the nutshells.

“Bron has been here,” she calmly observed. “We must be very careful with him. Cooo told me he’s under the powerful influence of an evil spirit in the form of a snake.”

“Who’s Cooo?” asked a bemused Bron. “And how did she know about Ssss?”

Ila stiffened. Then she relaxed. She turned. She walked over to him. She slapped him in the face.

“Why did you get yourself sealed in the cave?” she scolded. “You’ve made it worse for all of us.”

She swung to slap him again. He grabbed her arm.

“Wait,” he said. “I didn’t choose to be sealed in the cave.”

“You walked across the Sacred Circle. You tormented Hors with disrespect.”

“That was after I was already a condemned man for taking Frish’s club.”

“Then why did you take his club?” she demanded.

“He was about to knock my head off with it.” He released her arm. “Anything I did was death. If Frish hit me, I was dead. If I took his club, it was death.”

Why was he explaining himself to this woman who was suspicious of him and hated him? He did not owe this woman anything. He deliberately cracked two nuts in his hand and continued.

“My only hope was to escape and go back to the Valley of Light. I did not expect to be sealed in a cave.”

“Then why haven’t you gone? You are no longer in the cave.” Her manner was less aggressive.

“Tell her you didn’t want to go back alone,” said Ssss.

Bron tensed. He noticed a puzzled look on Ila’s face. But he spoke as the serpent had directed.

“I didn’t want to go back alone.”

“Your evil spirit spoke to you,” Ila challenged.

Oogie had been watching in silence. Now he spoke.

“You must not fight. There is much to do.”

“You are not going to the meeting.” It was not a question. It was a command.

“Don’t argue, Ila. Everyone will be accused whether they are at the meeting or not,” Oogie told his daughter.

“Accused of what? It’s just a meeting. Hors will enforce a minor penalty. That’s all. He needs our efforts to keep the Cave of Coldness supplied.”

“Artax plans to raid the Cave of Coldness,” Oogie said.

“Raid? It’s just a meeting.”

“He’s planning a raid.”

“You can’t stop him,” Ila said, panic in her voice. The scent of fear was in the air.

“Bron can.”

Ila turned to look at Bron again.

She said, “They will not listen to him. He has caused us too much misery”

“Artax will listen.”

“Artax hates him,” she said.

“Artax will listen to him if he will guide the people to the Valley of Light and let Artax be the leader,” said Oogie.

Ila turned to Bron. She searched his eyes. Oogie picked up a nut and tried to crack it.

“You would do that? You would lead our people to the Valley of Light and let Artax be the leader?”

“I have no desire to be a leader,” said Bron. “But I do want to help my people.”

Ila noticed the slight emphasis on *my*.

“That’s all the more reason why you don’t need to go,” she said to Oogie.

Oogie was still trying to crack the nut. He held the cracker, a small stone about the size of a nut, in his hand. He squeezed the two together. Nothing happened. Bron reached over and grabbed two nuts. He squeezed them together. There was a cracking sound. He poured the contents into Oogie’s hand.

“You notice how I decide the action. Bron performs it.”

Ila realized the futility of arguing. She sat down with the men and began to plan.

Later, it was dark. The gathering was large. Larger than any other Himeet meeting Ila had seen. Everyone who could walk had come. And Oogie.

The moonless sky created vast darkness. Starlight was hardly sufficient to provide vision. Bron marveled at his absence of fear. As he thought back, he realized he had never been afraid of the dark in the out-of-doors. It was only inside darkness that triggered fear in him.

Artax had provided two small torches to light his figure.

“My family,” he addressed the gathering when he sensed it was complete. “Too long have we permitted the Hormeets to dominate us and make us their slaves. Tonight I propose we change all that.”

“How are we going to do that?” cried a voice out of the darkness.

Ila could not tell whether it was one of Artax’s lackeys or whether Artax did not have the complete confidence he thought he had.

Artax continued.

“Tonight we will make a long trek. We will go to the far end of the valley. We will set up our own Home.”

His voice rose.

“The Hormeets will no longer use our labor.

“The Hormeets will no longer deprive us of the fruit of our labor!

“The Hormeets will no longer lord it over us.”

He ended, pounding each final word into the air with his fist.

A murmur of approval swept through the crowd. Then Artax delivered his climax. In barely more than a whisper.

“We will raid the Cave of Coldness tonight. We will have provisions for our journey.”

There was a mixture of cries of disbelief, approval, and dismay. Artax called for silence.

A voice nearby calmly, but audibly, spoke.

“Perhaps I can shed some light on the proposal.”

Artax recognized the voice. He looked for Oogie. This was no time for division.

“Artax has clearly defined our situation,” Oogie said. He painfully made his way into the light, grasping a long walking staff. “But he has not gone far enough. Artax, if you will permit a short tale, I will explain what I mean.”

“Make it short, old man. The night is wearing on.”

“Faster than you think. But here is my tale.

“Once long ago, in a far place, a clan existed in a valley. It was very much like ours. Game grew scarce. Gathering grew more and more difficult. Very much the way we now are. People began to starve. To die. Eventually they became man-eaters.”

Absolute silence prevailed. Artax listened to his own heart pound. He didn’t like where this was going.

“There was a wise man. A man very much like Artax. A man who made a wise decision. He took his family from that valley. They went in search of a new valley. A valley of plenty. A valley where they needed not fear. And they found such a valley. They settled there.

“The wise man was Our Ancestor. The valley they found was this valley.

“Now we are coming to such a time in our valley. A time like the one Our Ancestor faced in his original valley.”

There was shocked silence. There had been whispered rumors of man-eating in the community. Could it be true?

Finally, Artax announced, “We have no valley but this. We must act decisively. We must

act now.”

“I would hear what Bron has to say.”

It was Ila.

“Bron is sealed in a cave and now dead,” Artax said.

“Not so dead,” said Bron as he stepped from behind a tree nearby.

Sounds of surprise and fear of seeing a ghost wafted through the unseen crowd.

“This is my meeting,” said Artax, fearing he was about to lose control.

“Nor do I want to usurp your leadership,” Bron told him. “But one asked to hear from me. If you will permit me, I will speak. I will leave at your command.”

“Speak, then,” said Artax, now confident of his control.

“What Oogie says is true. There is no hope in this valley. You have only fear and tragedy. If you, Artax, will lead your people, I will show you the way to my valley.”

“How do I know you can take us there?” demanded Artax.

“Look at my robe. It is the skin of the cave bear. Observe the necklace I wear. These are the teeth of the mountain lion. Consider the talisman I wear on my waist. It is the paw of the timber wolf.”

“That was long ago. How do I know you still can do it?”

“Sssshow him my sssskin,” said Ssss.

Bron lifted his robe. Ssss’s skin was wound about his body like a girdle. Oogie sent up a lad sitting next to him. Bron gave one end of the skin to the lad and ordered him to pull. As the lad pulled, Bron whirled about, unwinding it from his body. The skin stretched farther and farther away. At the end of Bron’s demonstration it lay stretched on the ground. It was as long as

four men lying down in a line. Bron indicated the skin.

“I give this to you. It is evidence of my ability. And my pledge to accept you as leader.”

He handed over the end of the skin. “I killed this serpent while I was sealed in the cave. Artax, that was not ‘long ago.’”

Artax was astounded at the size of the serpent represented by the skin. He was even more amazed at Bron’s offer of allegiance.

“Fine. We will raid the Cave of Coldness. Then we will go to our shelters. We will gather our goods for the trek.”

“No,” said Oogie. “We must go from this place. Where we are standing. We must go now. The Hormeets must not know where we have gone until it is too late.”

“We need food for the journey,” said Artax, unhappy his authority had been challenged. “We need clothing and tools.”

“You will be food if you delay. While the Hormeets have food in the Cave of Coldness, they will make only a half-hearted attempt to find you. They will search the valley to find where you are hiding. Only after many suns will they conclude you have left the valley. You will have a good head start. You will need it.”

Silence prevailed for a moment. Then a shout of “Take us to the Valley of Light!” came out of the darkness.

“Quiet!” shouted Bron before a chant could be started. He bowed his head to Artax and said, “With your permission, Chief Artax. We must leave immediately. We must *all* go so the Hormeets are deceived. Later, if any want to turn back, they may do so. This is a hard journey. It is not for the faint of heart. But it is a journey worthy of the hardships. It is a trek worth the perils

you will face.”

Stars shone brightly in the moonless sky. They seemed nearer than Bron’s mythical valley. They were real. Yet, no one could reach the stars. Bron claimed he had reached the promised valley.

Artax was not pleased his plan had been thwarted. Yet he was wise enough to recognize the truth of what had been said. Besides, his future plans, after the raid on the Cave of Coldness, were vague.

But now.

Now he was the leader of a trek. A trek to rival the trek of Our Ancestor. He had a guide, an expert gatherer, and a fearless advisor. He would make Oogie his grand advisor and Ila his chief food gatherer.

Oogie was choosing a different role.

“I cannot go with you,” he told Ila. “I could not keep up. I would hold the whole group back.”

“Then I’m not going,” said Ila.

Bron stood nearby.

“You both are going,” Bron told them. “I will carry Oogie on my back.”

“We will both carry him. We will take turns,” Ila told him.

Bron looked at Ila. Yes. She could bear so light a burden. He would seem even lighter, seeing he was her father.

“Trek master,” said Artax, walking up. “Show us the way.”

Bron smiled. So now he had a title. Artax wasn’t so dumb after all.

“I’ll take the first turn,” Ila told him.

Yes. He had to get the group organized and moving. Before anyone had second thoughts.

Bron began to lead the people out of the Valley of Darkness.

Artax walked tall and straight next to him.

Pursuit

The band of Himeets were into the forest by the time dawn was splashing sprinkles of light on the path before them. It had been a hard trek. There were no complaints. There were tired faces.

Not the least of which was Ila's. Her "turn" had lasted through the night.

The group reached the trees of needles. The redolent odor of loamy soil permeated the air. The sweet smell of the needles was refreshing. They were well out of sight in the forest.

Bron called a halt to rest.

"We can keep going," suggested one of the group. There were comments of assent.

"We need to save our strength. The path ahead is very difficult. You will need all your strength and courage to continue," Bron said. He turned to Artax. "It would be wise for women to gather anything they can find. Do not leave anything to grow or ripen. Gather everything. We will not be back this way."

"What will the Hormeets gather for their food?" Ila asked.

"They will gather somewhere else. We are talking about our lives here."

Ila acquiesced.

Artax said, "The hunters must also go out. Capture and kill anything you can find. From ground squirrel to stag."

The hunters laughed. No stag had been seen in the valley in many seasons.

"Do not get out of the trees," warned Bron. "Do not chase even the mythical stag into the open where one of Hors's Gangs will see you and give chase. We have three suns' journey before we can stop worrying about pursuit. Then we will have other things to worry about."

"Come back before the shadow of the rock is halfway to the base of the rock. It will be

better to travel in the sunlight and sleep in the darkness,” Artax commanded.

Bron thought, *For the first few suns we shall do both.*

Oogie told Artax, “You need a way to talk about time.”

“You are my grand advisor,” Artax told Oogie. “I can talk about time. What more do you advise?”

“When the sun is overhead, dividing the sun into the time after sunup and before sundown, you call that high sun.”

“Yes. We do that.”

“Then call the time before high sun light-comes. The time after high sun, darkness-comes,” explained Oogie.

“To what purpose?”

“You can divide light-comes into two periods—before-middle light-comes and after-middle light-comes—”

“Wait,” said Artax. “This is all too confusing. Why should I be confused?”

“You would be more exact in your commands. You could specify the exact time you want something done,” explained Oogie.

“I can do that now,” sputtered Artax. He walked away.

Some grand advisor I am, thought Oogie.

The hunters returned to camp before midmorning. They were exhilarated. They dragged a stag into camp. Several of the younger Himeets who had never seen such a creature huddled around it, full of curiosity and wonder. The smell of fresh blood made stomachs growl.

“So where did you find such a magnificent beast?” Bron asked with trepidation.

Starzz began a ballad.

“Later, Starzz,” Bron interrupted. “Just exactly what happened.”

Hoig spoke. “We startled the beast in its lair. We chased it until it was in the open. Then three spears downed it.”

“In the open? Out of the trees?”

“Yes.”

“And you shouted in triumph,” suggested Bron.

“That was our right,” stated Hoig.

An exasperated Bron turned to Artax.

“We must leave immediately. It may already be too late.”

“First we must butcher the deer. And we must wait for the women,” Artax said.

“You don’t understand,” said Bron. “The Hormeets have been alerted. Already Hors has dispatched a Gang to take you back.”

“It was our right,” insisted Hoig.

“What’s done is done,” said Bron. “Now we must act in haste.” Turning to Artax, he said, “Dispatch a runner for the women. Eviscerate the stag. I’ll make a drag.”

“I make the decisions,” said Artax. “I am the leader.”

“Fine,” said Bron.

He picked Oogie up like some bunch of garments and placed the old man on his back.

“Tell Ila we’ve gone on. She can catch up with us.”

“You’ll leave us here to die?” asked Artax incredulously.

“I’ve tried to get you to come. Look at the time you have already wasted. We all still may

die, but I am not going to stay here and wait for death.”

About half the people who had come were up and ready to follow Bron.

“You are right,” said Artax. “You are my trek master. I shall listen to your advice on the path.” He emphasized the word *advice*. Turning to Hoig he said, “Go find the women. Tell them what has happened. If we are gone when they get here, tell them to hurry and catch up.” He grabbed an obsidian knife and began to slit the stag’s belly. “What’s this drag you mentioned?”

“I’ll show you,” Bron said as he lowered Oogie to the ground. “It’s a device I thought of one time when I killed the cave bear and needed to take it to my Home.”

Bron walked to the nearby saplings. He bent one over until it snapped near the ground. He twisted it until he could tear it loose from the stump. The second sapling would not snap. He went back to his belongings. He grabbed his club and lifted Oogie from the ground by the arm. Back at the stubborn sapling, he bent it and said to Oogie, “Here. Hold this down.” With a mighty swing, he struck the sapling near the roots. It cracked in two.

He stripped the branches and suckers and broke off a section of each top. When finished, he had two poles perhaps twice a man’s height. He lashed them together near the top. He opened them at the lower end. He grabbed one of the broken-off tops. He lashed it in place to hold the poles apart. Spying another, shorter top, he grabbed it and lashed it to the poles about halfway up.

The stag had been gutted and lay on the ground near the entrails. Bron pulled it over. He laid it on his drag toward the bottom. He lashed the head and feet to the drag so it would not fall off.

“Here, old father,” said Bron, lifting Oogie and setting him on the deer. “A seat fit for a

chief.” Looking at Artax, he said, “A light chief.”

For the first time ever, Bron saw Artax smile.

Bron picked up the pointed end of the drag, held it on his shoulder, and said, “And so we go.”

About half the group fell in behind him. The rest scurried to pick up their meager belongings and followed.

Bron set a killing pace. The drag was not nearly so heavy as the one with the cave bear on it. They were far ahead when the women finally caught up.

“So, you’d leave me behind to become stew for the Hormeets,” Ila accused.

“I was only trying to save your father,” he replied.

“What good is a father without a daughter to care for him?”

“I would be a daughter to him.”

He was so serious that Ila stopped and just looked at him.

“Keep the line moving,” panted Artax.

Ila broke out laughing.

Artax gave her a dirty look.

She shook her head and pointed at Bron.

Artax forged ahead next to Bron.

“Where is this place we will be free from the Hormeets?” he asked.

“It may be farther than I thought if the Hormeets are already in pursuit,” Bron said.

The impact of what he said gradually seeped in.

“If?”

“When you are faced with potential danger, you don’t wait until it appears to take action.”

“But—”

“If you want to be certain, send two of your best scouts. Send them back to see if there is a pursuit. If so, how far back it is.”

“Then rest until they return?”

“No! Let them catch up!”

“You’re right,” admitted Artax. “I’m beginning to get so tired I can’t think straight.”

The weather was cool. Clouds hid the sun. But streams of sweat poured down the faces of men and women. Down their necks and bodies. The smell of sour sweat would be strong tonight.

“The trees stop growing just a little farther. Then there is a short trek through tall grass. The seeds of this grass are good to eat,” Bron explained. “But we must gather as we go. We cannot stop until we reach a small plateau. We can watch for pursuers there. It is a good place to rest.”

“I’ll send a scout back,” Artax said.

Ila came up next to Bron. “Do you want me to drag that thing for a while, little sister?”

“‘Big sister,’” said Bron. “And don’t you forget it.”

“It’s hard to remember,” said Ila. “Especially after seeing you unwrap that snakeskin. Your ‘snake’ is not as long as the one you killed. But it is no earthworm either.”

“Here. You pull this drag for a while. You make me tired.”

“Oh I could do that,” said Ila as she lifted the drag to her shoulder. She thought, *This is not as bad as carrying Papa on my back. He’s a clever person, that Bron.*

It was fully moon when the group arrived at the plateau. Ila was disappointed her women had been unable to harvest the seeds in sunlight. Some had been harvested by feel in the dark. Not many, though, for the women's fear of becoming lost in the tall grass. The seeds tasted very good. They had a nutty flavor. Ila chewed some of the seeds as she spoke.

"Why haven't people harvested these grasses?" Ila wanted to know.

"No one knew they were here," pointed out Bron. "Remember, anything beyond the trees was considered exile territory."

"But why would anyone die with all this food here?" She rubbed the husks off another handful of seeds and popped them into her mouth.

"What season is it?" asked Bron. "How long do you suppose this would last into winter? When it is easy living, people don't think of the winter ahead."

Ila thought about it. "The winter comes. The seeds rot. Those unprepared die."

"Also consider who got exiled."

"People like you," laughed Ila.

Their conversation was interrupted by Artax.

"My scout has not returned. Maybe we had better move on," he said.

Bron was immediately on his feet.

"You're right. We'd better assemble the people and move ahead in the dark. They don't know this mountain. I do. I spent two moons here before I crossed it."

Just then, Hoig came running up, panting like a tired wolf.

"No one is following," he rasped.

"He'ssss lying," said Ssss.

“How far back did you go?” asked Bron.

“To the edge of the forest. I waited until nightfall. No one appeared. I came to tell you.”

“He’ssss lying,” repeated Ssss.

“I think we should move on a bit farther,” said Bron. “We are too near the tall grass. It makes ambush too easy.”

“The people are tired,” said Artax. “Hoig has scouted our back trail. We shall rest here until morning.”

“Yes,” said Ila. “And the women will have a chance for more gathering when sunlight comes.”

“When sunlight comes, you may be on your way back Home. Dragged by your hair. At least set up a guard, Artax.”

“I’m tired. The people are tired. You stay up and guard camp,” Artax said. And he walked away.

“I’ll stand guard with you,” Ila said.

“I’m afraid I’d drop my guard if you were with me,” said Bron. “What if my snake became a staff instead?”

“Then you might find a snake hole to make it limber again,” suggested Ila.

“Go tend to your father,” Bron said with a laugh. It would be a wonderful distraction. But Bron needed no distractions tonight.

“Take your sssstones with you,” said Ssss.

Bron took his stones in a bag tied to his waist. He picked up his club. He went to a spot near the tall grass. He lay back against a rock and waited. He was deathly tired, almost as tired as

he was when he waited for the mountain lion. He had almost gone to sleep that time.

He imagined he heard something stir in the grass. Was it his imagination?

He tried to keep his mind at work. Things that had happened. The stag had been butchered and distributed. He had warned the people to save some for the trip. Roast it well over the fire. It would keep longer.

There was that rustling sound again. He did not stand to hear better. He was invisible against the rock. Besides, it might only be a rabbit or other small animal.

His thoughts turned again to what he would be doing on the morrow. Besides walking in his sleep. Oogie would be much easier to drag, now that the stag was gone. Maybe he could parcel out the task among—

There was a woman's scream from the tall grass. Vava came crashing out of the grass.

“There's a man in there. I was gathering. My foot hit against him. He grabbed for—”

Rock Slides and Fire

Bron hardly had time to realize what the woman was saying.

“Sssstrike the sssstones together,” commanded Ssss.

Bron grabbed the stones. He struck. Sparks flew. He remembered the cave. Throwing the stone. Flying sparks. He had forgotten them. He stooped. He struck the stones. Near the dry grass. Near the dry leaves. A blaze sprang up. Suddenly. He grabbed a handful of burning dry grass stalks. He threw them into the field. Then another handful. And another.

The fire spread rapidly. A figure ran out of the blazes. His face met Bron’s club. Full force. He grabbed more clumps of blazing dry grass.

“No. Noooooohh!” screamed Vava, clutching at him. “Kyla. My baby! She is in there.”

Bron heard the screams. Distress. Fear.

“Leave the child alone. Kill the Hormeetssss,” said Ssss.

The Hormeets were in full flight. Their burning garments spread the fire more rapidly. Bron saw figure after figure leap to his feet. Run through the field. Arms flailing.

Bron ran into the flames. Toward the sounds of the screaming child. He swept burning grass to one side. Then the other. He located the small child. Finally. Her hair ablaze. Clothing aflame. He quickly patted out the flames on her head. He tore the burning clothing from her. He retreated. The way he came. Most of the fire had burned out at that place. Still, he thrust the child under his cave bear robe.

He emerged. Vava gave a cry of despair. She fell to the ground.

By this time the whole camp was aroused. They ran up.

“What happened?” asked Artax.

“This creature burned up my baby,” sobbed Vava.

“A Gang was lurking in the grass. Ready to attack. Vava was doing some harvesting. She stumbled on a waiting Hormeet. She came screaming out of the grass. I set the grass afire to rout them. I didn’t know this baby was in the tall grass.”

Bron pulled the child from under his robe. He handed her to Puah, one of the old women standing there.

“So, I went in and fetched her out.”

Vava jumped to her feet.

“My baby! Is my baby alive?” she cried.

“Your baby is fine. No thanks to you,” said Puah. “What were you thinking of? Taking an infant into the tall grass. At night, of all times. She might have been lost. Would you have the entire community wait? Search? While pursuers were at our heels? What if she had gotten snakebit?”

“All I know is that this man tried to burn up my baby,” insisted Vava.

“I told you sssso,” said Ssss.

“Shut up,” said Puah. “If Bron had not risked his life, you would have no baby. Every hair on his body has been burned off. Just to save your baby, you ungrateful wretch.”

“Pubic hairs too?” whispered Ila in Bron’s ear.

Bron ignored her and asked Artax, “Where’s Hoig? He betrayed us. We were almost captured.”

Hoig was nowhere to be found.

“Are you sure it was a Gang?” asked Artax. “Maybe it was just one scout. Spying to go

back and report.”

The light of the grass fire was now gone. Bron knew just where the man who charged out of the grass lay.

“It was more than one Gang. I saw many burning figures fleeing the grass fire. If it was just one scout,” Bron said as he walked over to the fallen foe, “then this is him.” He kicked the figure with a thud.

Artax had a torch brought to look at the figure.

“Hors really wants us bad,” he said. “This is Allan. Hors’s chief of Gang leaders.”

Bron moved a little to one side. He quietly called Artax over to him.

“This is twice you have endangered your people by failing to listen to my advice. I cannot be your trek master if you choose to ignore me.”

“You swore fealty,” Artax said.

“I did not swear to be a trek master in name only.”

“You have always hated me,” said Artax bitterly.

“No. It is you who have always hated me.”

Bron walked away.

Ila came to Bron a little later.

“What are you going to do?” she asked him.

“About my singed pubic hairs?”

“Be serious,” she said.

“I cannot be trek master if he will not listen to me. We haven’t even gotten into dangers ahead yet. What if he ignored a warning about thin ice? Our whole group perished? What if I

wanted to go around the Home of Vipers? He wanted to take a shortcut through their Home? Every man, woman, and child bitten? Died a horribly painful death?”

Ila suddenly changed the subject.

“Wasn’t that a wonderful talking-to Puah gave Vava?”

“Puah was the woman who took the child?”

“Yes.”

“I was terribly puzzled at her attitude,” said Bron. “First I saved her. From one of the pursuing Hormeets. Then I saved her child. From the fire. What was wrong with that woman?”

“She was frightened. Confused. She wants to tell you she is sorry. Try to understand. Her mate left her after her child was born. It is whispered her mate tried to hurt the baby. She almost killed him by putting poison mushrooms in his stew. She trusts no man. It is a credit to you that she wants to say she’s sorry.”

“Who are you? The official peacemaker, that everyone comes to you?”

“No one came to me,” said Ila.

“Then how do you know?”

“Cooo tells me.”

“You mentioned Cooo one other time,” said Bron. “Who is this Cooo?”

“You have your evil spirit. I have my holy spirit.”

“Ssss is not evil!”

“Didn’t your spirit of the snake tell you not to save Vava’s infant?”

“How do you know that? Never mind. Cooo, right? Ssss told me that to protect me. You saw how Vava turned on me.”

“And now she’s coming to thank you?”

“And to feed me poison mushrooms,” said Bron.

“To see if your pubic hairs were burned,” said Ila.

“Did Cooo tell you that?”

Ila smiled and gave him a few nuts. “From Papa.”

She started to leave, then turned. “No. Cooo didn’t tell me. That’s just woman wisdom.”

There was a note of jealousy in her voice.

Artax approached Bron’s bedsite as Vava was leaving. He had heard Ila’s whispered comment earlier in the night. Did Vava come over to check on Bron’s pubic hairs? He put the thought aside. Once Vava had calmed down, she confirmed Bron’s story. He was correct about several burning figures fleeing the field.

He approached Bron carefully. He did not want to offend this man. He could disappear at any moment and leave Artax and his people in the jaws of the beast. One jaw a now-enraged clan of Hormeets. The other jaw completely unknown dangers ahead.

A small fire burned an unknown substance. It provided a flickering light. A pleasant scent arose from it. He noted a bed of a thick layer of grass. It looked exceedingly comfortable. Bron sat upright on the bed.

“I came to make peace,” Artax began.

“I’m not at war with you,” Bron replied.

“No. But I have been with you. You were right. I have hated you.

“I hated you for returning from exile.

“I hated you for breaking up my meeting when Frish came to capture us.

“I even hated you when you accepted the blame I laid on you.

“I hated you for being sealed in the cave. And I hated you for escaping.

“Everything I ever dreamed or hoped of being, you were. Or doing, you did.”

He stared intently at Bron. It was not a stare of hatred.

“Now I come confessing my hatred. I still hate you. If you can work with that, I still want you to be my trek master.”

Bron stared back at Artax for a long time. For so long Artax thought the offer had been rejected. He was in the act of turning away and leaving.

“I do not hate you for hating me,” Bron said.

Artax paused.

“How could I?” Bron continued. “Your hatred is a strange sort of praise.” He paused and made sure Artax was attending his words. “But hear this. I can only be your trek master if you follow my advice.”

He stood up.

“I will never order you to do anything,” he assured Artax. “You are the chief. But I have knowledge. It is useful to you. Only if you listen to me.”

“You are my trek master. I will listen to your advice.”

“Without fail?” asked Bron.

“Without fail.” They clasped wrists in agreement. Artax continued, “Tell me two things, trek master.”

“Yes?”

“What are you burning?”

“It is sap from a certain needle tree,” Bron said. “I found some dripping from a wound in the tree as we came through the forest. I collected it. I carry it in the bark of another tree.” Bron held it out for Artax to see. Artax smelled it. The aroma was pleasing.

Bron continued, “I do not have enough for the whole journey. I burned some tonight because you were coming.”

“How did you know I was coming?” Artax asked.

“Woman wisdom,” said Bron with a smile. “And your second question?”

“Should we move on tonight?”

“Normally I would say yes. But, unless Hors came along with his Gangs, it will take the Gangs a sun’s travel to get to Home. They may even nurse their wounds for a sun. Then another sun to get here. A sun to reach us.”

“Then they will eventually catch us,” observed Artax.

“Unless we do something to stop them.”

Artax considered this statement. “And do you have something to stop them?”

“If we can reach the destination I have in mind,” said Bron.

“And if not?”

“Then I’ll have to do something else.”

“You know,” observed Artax, “if we had followed your advice and moved on, you would not have had that field to burn.”

“The trek master is not perfect,” said Bron. “But if there’s not one thing, there’s another.”

Early morning revealed the trek master was not perfect. He was not right about Hors. The chief had followed his minions. The alarm was quietly given. Hormeets were sighted gathering at

the edge of the forest.

Artax and Bron rushed to the brow of the plateau. Before they reached the brow, Bron said, “Careful. Stand back. They cannot see us on this plateau if we do not stand. They don’t know whether we are here or not. Stay low. Carefully peep around a rock so they don’t see you.”

They spied down the hill from behind rocks. It was obvious the entire Hormeet clan was gathering. There were a hundred or more Gangers below. They were at the edge of the trees, clustered into five Gangs.

“I discovered another path,” said Artax. “It goes up the other side of the mountain. Maybe we could get to it without the Hormeets seeing. Perhaps they would follow this path. The one on this side of the mountain. We could escape up the other.”

“That won’t work,” replied Bron. “When I was exiled, I climbed that path. It comes to a sudden end at a cliff’s edge.”

Artax was not pleased with this report. He pulled on his bearded chin. He glared through black, black eyes set beneath bushy eyebrows. It was as if Bron were responsible for the dead end on the other path. Artax offered another solution.

“There is some grass to the west not burned. Perhaps we could burn it. It might distract them long enough to escape up this path,” said Artax.

“No. That would only alert them to our presence. But that gives me an idea. I’ll explain it as we get our people on the path.”

Bron explained as they went.

“But who will lead us if you do this?” asked Artax.

“You will,” said Bron. “See that peak? The one that looks like a finger? Keep heading

toward it. Until you reach the slope going up toward the peak. Do not climb the slope. Now hurry.”

With that, Bron was gone.

He went to the tall grass. It was far to the west of the Hormeet clan gathering. Bron used the tall grass to conceal his movements. He sped through the grass, bowing low. Blades from the stalks stung his cheeks. One blade struck his eye socket, scratching the back of the eyelid he had closed just in time. He squelched a little cry of pain.

Overhead no clouds drifted in the sky. The air was a bit cool, but the naked sun warmed all below.

He went through the grass, down the hill to the forest. It was mostly needle trees. Here and there he saw sap bleeding from wounds on the needle trees. Bron collected sap as he went.

There were also clumps of underbrush. Except as cover, they seemed useless. Once in the forest, he used them to cover his movement. He flitted from one cluster of brush to another.

Bron headed east of the Hormeets. Some distance to the east was the game path up the other side of the mountain. The one Artax had mentioned. The one terminating in a dead end.

The two paths were like a giant V. The path Artax took led up the left side of the mountain. It rose to a pass over Finger Mountain. Bron had planned to cross it into the Valley of Light.

The other led up the right side of the mountain. It abruptly came to a dead end, the one Bron told Artax about.

Bron had explained his plan to Artax. Bron would lead Hors up the dead-end path. Then the only way to reach Artax would be to retrace the path to the point of the V and take the other

leg. Hopefully that would provide a full sun's delay. Especially if Artax pushed hard the way Bron advised.

No wonder Artax had asked nervously who then would lead the clan to the Valley of Light.

The trick was to get the Hormeets to take the wrong leg.

At the forest edge of the tall grass, Bron gathered a large armful of stalks. They were important to the deception Bron planned. He also needed a distraction to get up the hill unseen.

He gathered as much of the special tree sap as he could find along the way. He set a small fire before he reached the spot in the forest behind the Hormeets' gathering. He fed it a little sap to keep it going.

Some of the Hormeets' supplies were left in the forest behind the group. They were completely unguarded. Bron succumbed to the temptation to snatch a bag of nuts left in the cache. In one pile was a beautiful obsidian knife. He took it and its sheath.

He lit a small piece of dry sap. It was a terrible chance. He needed the distraction though. He dropped the burning sap into the largest pile of food he could find. Then he ran as fast as he could. He ran to the place he had selected at the foot of the hill east of the Hormeets.

A few trees and bushes hid him. From that spot was the shortest path up the hill to the right leg of the V. Already Hors was cautiously leading his band toward the plateau, taking the left side of the V.

Unless Bron distracted the Hormeets, his plan would fail. Why didn't they notice their supply cache burning? Bron was tempted to give an animal cry. If anyone looked back, even in his direction—

Suddenly there was the cry, “Fire!”

Gang members who had suffered burns the previous night fled down the hill. When they saw supplies burning, they screamed and ran past.

In the confusion, Bron easily made the brow of the hill on his side. Now to attract their attention toward his path.

Once away from the brow, he began imitating voices.

“All right, you people,” Artax’s voice said. “Quickly. On the path.”

“Where’s my baby?” the high-pitched voice of Vava cried.

“The Valley of Light,” sang Starzz’s voice.

“You strumpet!” accused Puah, Bron hoped.

He made three flimsy bedsites with tall grass. He built one small fire with a piece of dry sap. He cracked a couple of nuts and carelessly scattered the shells as he had seen Oogie do.

He crawled carefully to a rock near the brow of the plain. Very carefully Bron peeped around the base of the rock. He almost swallowed his heart. Hors was purposefully striding up the hill. He was halfway up. With the entire Hormeet clan.

Bron backed off. He ran. He had to make the next curve. Get around the mountain. Before Hors’s Gangs came over the brow of the hill.

He might be trapped. There was no place to hide. Anywhere. From the steep mountainside to the very edge of the trail he was exposed. The edge of the trail was a cliff that dropped straight down into craggy rock surfaces. The only places to hide were around curves in the trail around mountain ridges.

He rounded the next curve. He heard a cry.

“There’s a straggler. Let’s get him.”

Not good. At least they didn’t recognize him. He began to regret letting Oogie care for his club.

“Wait,” commanded Hors. “It may be a trap. Remember the fire last sun.”

That gave Bron an idea. Could he devise several little traps? Almost pretend traps? Until they became used to them. That would delay them a bit. Then he would create another simple-looking trap. One that seemed to be like those they had become used to. One that would do real damage. Real harm when least expected.

All right. What traps? He pondered as he ran.

The curves now were shorter distances from each other. That helped.

He thought.

At the next curve around the mountain he hit a wet spot. He almost slid over the edge of the cliff. He managed to get control. Just before he reached the edge.

Carefully, oh so carefully, he walked ahead. The path was slick for many paces. Perhaps three man lengths. On the mountainside a small trickle seeped from the rocks. It was this moisture that had made the path slippery.

He inserted the point of his stolen knife into the crack. A larger stream flowed. How far back were they?

He pushed harder. He feared that he would break the knife. He feared more the pursuers. A stream the breadth of his little finger poured out. That would have to be enough. The water spread quickly.

He worked rapidly. He hoped he could complete his work on time. Before the enemy

appeared. He took half his precious sap. He set it afire. Above the wet area. At the edge of the path. Away from the mountain. Where they could see it. As soon as they rounded the curve.

Would they avoid it? Move on to the slick path?

He did not wait to see if his trap would work. He carefully pulled his knife from the rocks. He ran his finger along the side of the blade. It was slick. Like the path. He slipped the knife into its sheath and fled.

He had passed two curves when he heard three distinct screams. Had his trap worked? The sound of the screams diminished. They stopped suddenly.

He rushed on. There was a sudden rise of the path. He vaguely remembered this place. Yes. There was a plateau at the top. And a fallen nest of the great sky bird. A nest large enough for a man's bedsite.

It was made of sticks and leaves and long grass stems. Some natural disaster, perhaps an earthquake, had dislodged it from the crevice on the side of the mountain that held it. He peered nervously into the sky, checking to see if any of the sky birds had returned to this area. None were sighted.

Could he hide in this enormous nest? They would find him. He was running out of time. He was halfway up the path to the cliff's drop-off and the view of a vast, rocky valley. Bare rock. No trees. No plant life. Only a death jump.

Several large stones had fallen down the mountainside since last he came this way. They rested on the plateau. Their position gave him an idea.

They stretched across the path like guards. Guards that could roll. The great sky bird's nest was still there. In the way of his idea. He pushed it to get it out of the way. It rolled like a

round stone when he pushed it.

Yes. Another trap. He placed the stones close to the brow of the hill. The Hormeets had no way of retreat when they started up the hill. Except back down the hill. The mountain was on one side. The drop-off on the other. If he timed this just right . . .

This was his last chance. Then what? At the cliff's edge he had to jump to his death. He dared not allow himself to fall into Hors's hands another time.

One more stone to move. As he moved it he found a deep hole beneath. It was a hole made by water. How deep was it? Where did it lead? He dropped one of his nuts into the hole. There was a rattling sound. Then a sudden silence. The silence of falling. Like a body through space.

The hole was large enough for him to slide down into. How far would he slide? Into the empty space after the nut? Could he climb out again? Would they find him?

He peeped over the brow to see how much time he had. No one was in sight. His last trap had made Hors more cautious than ever.

Bron slid down in the hole to his armpits. The hole was slick, but he could control how far he sank. Could he climb back out? No. He could not get enough purchase with his feet to push himself back up. He could lift himself easily enough with his arms. Probably with hands too. But if he were holding to the edge of the hole by his hands, surely someone would see him.

Suddenly he heard hushed voices.

He climbed quickly from the hole. He crawled to the brow of the hill. Hors had his men staggered across the path. They advanced slowly. Stopping. Advancing. Half the Hormeets would be scattered along the path by the time the first of them arrived at the brow.

Bron had to judge correctly. Or all would be over.

He thought, *I am not a brave man. I cried in the darkness of the cave. If Hors captures me, I will not be able to stand the pain.*

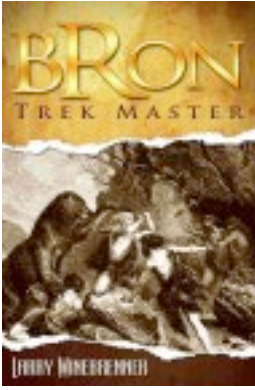
He heard the scrape of a club on the ground nearby. Time to act. He struck his fire rocks. He set the great nest afire. As it blazed up, he rolled it over the edge of the plateau. He heard startled screams. Those caught in the burning tall grass would never get over their fear of fire. He could hear it in their voices. Then he began rolling the stones over the brow. More screams as two Hormeets went over the edge. He kept rolling until all the stones were gone.

All except the one that had covered the drain hole. As he started to roll it, he stopped. Why another stone? If they were pursuing the Himeets, one more stone would be easy to ignore.

Bron slithered into the hole. Artax's voice came from Bron's throat, screaming. "Run! Run on up the hill while they are confused!"

He pulled the stone over the hole, where he was hiding. It did not stop over him as he hoped. It kept on rolling. He had the satisfaction of hearing one more scream of pain before waiting to see if he would be discovered.

He decided he would let go of the hole's edge if he were discovered.



This novel is a record of one pre-civilized tribe intent on finding new resources while a dominant tribe tries to prevent them from leaving their present area.

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