

## Part One

# The Great Flood

## Chapter One

(this is straight from my manuscript, as Clan won't be published until August, 2020. If you find any mistakes, no worries, it's part of the writing process!)

Atlatl's first warning of the sabertooth was a snarl that echoed down the stone walls on each side of him. Atlatl whirled toward the sound of the snarl and froze at the sight of the horrible beast.

Sabertooth. It was the distance of the throw of a spear away. Atlatl did not have his spear. He'd set it against a tree, just down the hill.

At this distance, a spear would not have helped anyway. Since a childhood tumble down a cliff, Atlatl's left leg was permanently twisted at the knee, and he was unable to put weight on it to throw with any strength.

The sabertooth snarled again and took another step.

Even if he was capable of running—which, because of his knee, he was not—Atlatl was trapped by rock walls. This beast, then, was in no hurry.

Sabertooths were heavy and broad, low to the ground. Shoulders wide and chest broad. Haunches bulky with muscle. Sabertooths did not chase with a burst of speed like a cheetah. Sabertooths needed to pounce from ambush, then sink the spears of their

front teeth into the necks of startled victims or into the soft bellies of larger prey like a mammoth or camel.

Its orange-brown fur rippled as it lifted and set down each of its massive paws. Too soon, it would be close enough for a ferocious leap with terrifying jaws opened wide.

“I’m not worth your effort,” Atlatl told the sabertooth. He’d needed to swallow a few times just to work moisture into his throat. “I’m skinny. My bones will get stuck in your throat and choke you.”

It was either force himself to speak in a calm manner that hid his terror, or shriek and limp away as fast as possible. He really wanted to shriek and try to run.

He knew, however, that movement would make the sabertooth chase and pounce. Life both as hunters and hunted taught children the ways of survival early. Those who paid the price for inattention — if their bodies could be retrieved — were wrapped in animal skins and returned to the earth beneath the tears of the women of the Clan, who would sing wordless tunes of mourning until the sun left the sky, their faces painted red with ochre. Stories of the person would be told around the fires so that no one would forget them.

What Atlatl wanted to do most was listen to the tremble in his belly and flee, knowing that any second those great claws could dig deep into the flesh of his shoulders and back. But he refused to allow himself to die with those marks. If his body

was ever found, he did not want anyone in the Clan to know he'd been a coward. Especially Takhi, beautiful Takhi. He wanted Takhi to cry over his death, not be ashamed of him. After all, he was up in these hills hunting birds to bring her back a gift of bright feathers.

"Go away," Atlatl told the sabertooth. "I'm a shaman. I can cast a spell on you. I will turn you into a mouse and squeeze you until your eyes pop out."

It was an idle threat. Atlatl was not the Clan's Shaman. That honor belonged to Banti, Atlatl's uncle. Atlatl was just a boy almost a man, with a crippled left leg.

"I saw a giant sloth," Atlatl said to the sabertooth. "A little ways down the hill. Much bigger than me. You can take your time. It will still be there. You do know that sloths move slowly, yes?"

The beast ignored Atlatl's promise of a giant sloth and continued to creep forward. Too soon, it would be close enough for a ferocious leap with terrifying jaws opened wide.

Atlatl knew he'd been careless, and doubted he'd survive to learn from his mistake.

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This was afternoon, not long before The Great Flood.

Atlatl was near the edge of a high rock wall that overlooked the rounded grasslands and scattered clumps of trees of the Valley of the Turtle. It was a vast valley; the low set of mountains on the western side, purpled by haze, were at least a day's walk away. Far to the north was Ghost Mountain, where the Clan never traveled. Beyond Ghost Mountain was the land of the gods, where the Turtle god had been bound by the others to save the peoples from his anger: not a place for mere mortals to tread.

Atlatl had climbed this high into the hills because he'd wanted a private place to experiment with a new weapon for hunting birds.

The idea had occurred to him the day before. Atlatl had been prodding clumps of grass with a long stick, hoping to force mice to scamper where he could swat them. A small snake had twisted toward him, climbing the stick. By instinct, Atlatl gave a flick of his wrist to fling the snake away, sending the snake end over end through the air so far that when it landed, the impact stunned it.

Snake meat was a delicacy, so Atlatl ran the snake down before it could move. He raised his foot to smash the snake's head with his heel, but it came to life again. So he scraped the end of his stick along the ground, catching the snake mid body, and flung it harder than the first time, once again amazed at the distance he was able to throw it with the help of his stick. This time, the snake landed and did not move. He'd taken it back to camp to be skinned, but his mind had been on the power of the stick, not the

delicious cooked snake.

What if, he wondered, he could find a way to fling a stone in the same way, far enough to hit a bird at a distance?

He didn't want any of the women or children asking him questions as he worked. It was bad enough that he limped past those women and children every day. To try and fail with this idea would make him look even more pitiful. But if he succeeded, he could hunt for birds with bright feathers, and bring those feathers back for Takhi.

Alone then up in the hills, Atlatl had spent the first few hours using a specially flaked rock, called a burin, to cut and scrape a stout branch he'd broken from a tree.

The backside of the burin was a rounded half circle that fit perfectly into his palm. The upper end of it was a large notch that stuck out like a sharpened beak. By holding the burin snugly, he could push the beak along bone or antler or wood to carve with precision.

Eventually, Atlatl had reduced the branch to the length of his arm. At the end of it, he left two short forked branches. He sewed a small pouch of hide into between the forks. This, too, took time. He learned sewing from his grandmother Wawatseka, but did not have her skills.

The results, he felt, had been well worth his time and efforts. The pouch formed a small cup between the forks, secure enough to hold a rock. By using the stick as an extension of his right arm, he was able to fling the rock with force despite his crippled

knee.

Armed with the new weapon and a stone, Atlatl had gone looking for birds and other small prey. Before long, screeching from jays had drawn his attention. These distress signals were to warn other jays of a small predator. If he could get close enough, he'd be able to hunt the jays and maybe even the small predator.

His stealthy approach had taken him up and into the gorge that led to the edge of the valley wall, lined on both sides with broken ledges of sandstone. Bushes had found toeholds among those ledges, and they sprouted outward in tufts of various sizes. The jays hopped among them, squawking in fury at something among the leaves.

Atlatl had been unable to see what was making the leaves quiver with movement. He had crept closer and closer, ready to fling his stone.

Until he had heard the snarl of the saber tooth.

Now, as it approached in a low slink, Atlatl realized he should not have allowed himself to get distracted by his own hunt. He should have been on the lookout for the danger that came in a land filled with predators like wolf and lion and cheetah and short-face bear and sabertooth; animals that would also be drawn by the distress calls of the jays.

This realization did him little good, because it was too late. Far too late.

