

Luck

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Thumb sat on a rock, soothing his sore feet in the river, in no hurry to get home. The stories the shell people had told filled him with foreboding. Meanwhile, he was certain that the spirits had taken Onion's soul down into the belly of the earth while he'd been gone. The sun was still two hands from the edge of the sky. There was plenty of time before dark. Before he reached the summer camp of the people. Before they would tell him his lover was dead. While he tried not to think of her, a dream found him.

In his dream, a great herd of mammoths tracked down from the stony northern hills through the pine forest all the way to the river. There were five and five and five *and five* mammoths...and then more, more than Thumb could have ever counted, even if he used the fingers and toes of all of the people. They were huge, almost too big to fit in the eye of his mind. They trampled trees like tall grass, dropped turds the size of boulders.

Old Owl told a story about the spirit who became a mammoth. He called the beast *a furry mountain of meat*. Owl had been the last to see a mammoth, years ago when he was just a boy. The rest of the people knew mammoths only from the drawings in the long cave.

An animal the size of a mountain-how could that be?

When Thumb's herd of mammoths reached the river, they dipped their trunks into the water. In a dream moment, they drank the river dry. Turtles scrambled into the reeds for shelter. Fish flopped in the mud and died.

After her last baby had been born dead, Onion flopped on her mat like a fish.

Ruc-ruc-ruc-ruc-rud

The dream turned to smoke at the sound. Thumb leapt up and almost fell into the river. His feet had gone numb in the cold water and he couldn't feel the ground beneath them. He pulled on his boots, snatched his spear, fit it to his throwing stick.

Ruc-ruc-rucl

The rambling came from upriver, around the bend. Thumb had never heard anything like it. An earth sound, like the crack of a falling tree or a boulder crashing off a cliff, except it was wet and hot and alive. A sound that only an animal could make.

He crept deeper into the thicket before he started upriver. Hunting courage pounded in his chest. He strained ear and eye and nose after the quarry. He was ready to jump over the sky. It was hard to make himself go quietly but he parted branches and slid through the leaves.

Man. Come out, man.

The whisper rasped inside his head. He felt it on the tip of his nose, on the hair of his scalp, at the root of his cock and on the bottoms of his tingling feet. It had to be the whisper of a spirit. This was his luck then, whether good or bad. He had no choice. He must obey. Thumb rose up and pushed through the undergrowth toward the water. He knew that he might be about to have his soul stripped from his body. The thought did not much bother him. If Onion were really dead, he would be with her in the belly of the earth.

I am, man.

Thumb was not surprised to see a mammoth standing on the opposite bank. It must have sent the dream and whispered to him in a spirit voice. The surprise was what he felt as he gazed into its round, black eyes. This was no monster that could break trees and drain rivers. It wasn't much taller than he was. Yes, the trunk snaked like a nightmare and the tusks were long and curved and dangerous, but as Thumb took its measure, his confidence surged. The people had no weapon that could wound a mountain or strike at a spirit. But this was an animal that men might dare to hunt and bring down. Thumb let a laugh bubble out of his chest.

"I am Thumb," he shouted across the river at it, "keeper of the caves!" Then he danced, five hops on the spongy bank. He finished by striking the butt of his spear against an alder.

The mammoth raised its trunk and trumpeted in reply. The piercing cry sent a shiver through Thumb. But he was not cowed. He had heard the death scream of a bison and a cave bear's roar.

This is the valley of the people." He struck the alder again.

At that moment, something at the far edge of his vision jumped. A blur that might have been a deer, or a man in deerskin, plunged into the woods. Was it the spirit? Then why had it run away from him? The mammoth didn't seem to care. It turned away from Thumb, curled its trunk around a willow branch, stripped it from the tree and stuffed it into its mouth. Thumb studied the mammoth as it ate, knowing that he would have to report everything he saw to Owl, the storyteller, and Blue, who spoke for the people. Besides, someday he might paint it on the wall of the cleft, if such was his luck.

It had to be the hairiest animal he had ever seen. The coarse fur was the color of bloodstone. It had thinned along the slope of the backbone but was matted and thick at the flanks. When the mammoth brushed against a low hanging branch, a swarm of flies buzzed out of its mangy coat. Thumb decided that it must be a full-grown animal because of the size of its tusks. The tip of the left one was broken off. The top of its skull was a round bump, like half of an onion.

Suddenly Thumb went very still. He knew why the mammoth had appeared to him, of all people. It was a sign. A turn of luck.

"Is that it, great one?" he said. "Is that why you called me?"

The mammoth dipped its trunk into the river, sucked up water and then squirted it into its mouth. Thumb could see the tongue, gray in the middle, pink on the sides. Then he turned and ran hard for home. For the first time since the thin moon rose, he thought he might see his lover again.

The people made their main summer camp near the top of a low cliff overlooking the river. A rock outcrop sheltered the ledge where they chipped their knives and cooked their meals and laid their mats. When rain came, they ducked into a long lean-to covered with bison hides. The main hearth was at the center of the ledge. In the summer camp, the smoke of their fires could become sky and not sting the eyes and settle in the chest as it did in the winter lodge.

Five and five and five and three of the people gathered close around the hearth that night. Ash and Quick and Spear and Robin and Moon and Bone were away, trading chert with the horse people and waiting with them for the arrival of the reindeer herd. It was the Moon of the Falling Leaves. Thumb's breath made clouds in the cool air.

"Are you warm yet?" he said.

"My heart is," said Onion. He had his arm around her waist and they snuggled beneath a bearskin blanket. She was thin as grass. He could feel her ribs beneath his moist hands. Even when she was pregnant, she was never as big as the other women. Now her breasts were like those of a girl. Thumb had not known Onion when she was young. She had come to them from the horse people five and three summers ago, a round and beautiful woman. Since then she had given birth to three babies, all dead, and had gotten thinner and thinner. Thumb kissed her pale face. The last had almost killed her. But she was still beautiful. He could wait until she was stronger before they would lie together as lovers. That would be soon, he hoped. Her breath tickled his neck.

Bead finished whispering to Owl. The storyteller got up painfully, carrying his years like a skin filled with stones. He hobbled around to the back of the hearth and turned so that the flames were between him and the people. Firelight caught in the creases on his face. Just before he spoke, he straightened and squared his shoulders. Then his voice boomed as it had for all the summers Thumb could remember.

"This is a story of Thumb," he said, "who is the son of my sister and who walks both in the light of the sun and the darkness of the two caves. He gave his story to me so that I could give it to you. It has become a story of the people. I will tell it to you now, even though it doesn't have an ending."

The people yipped and grunted with unease. A story without an ending was bad luck.

Actually, Thumb had told his story mostly to Bead, Owl's lover, and Blue, who spoke for the people. Owl had listened for a while but then had dozed off, as he often did late in the day.

"We know," said Owl, "that Thumb loves Onion and Onion loves Thumb. They have slept nose to nose, belly to belly for five and three winters. She eats the meat he brings her. He eats the roots she digs for him."

"When you find time to hunt," whispered Onion.

"When you dig something besides stones." Thumb gave her a gentle nudge.

"Thumb needed to make paint for the new cave, which some call the cleft. For the red, he had to collect blood stones from the shell people's land. But after bearing a baby that never breathed, his lover became sick with a fever. He had a hard choice. No one ever wants such a choice. Thumb loves Onion, but because he loves the people too, he left her and went to the shell people's land."

Quail gave a low whistle of approval. Thumb was pleased when everyone joined in. Even Owl. Even Onion. Thumb's cheeks were warm.

"While Thumb was gone, a stranger came to us. He brought food gifts of two eels and a badger skin filled with apples, so we welcomed him. He told us his name was Singer. He was an old man, with white and gray and not much brown in his beard. He wore a headdress of the feather people and the deerskins of our people. But he didn't say where he came from and we didn't ask. Although we are a curious people, we are also polite."

Owl paused and waited for the laugh.

"When Singer saw Onion bundled by the fire, he told us that she was going to die. We all thought that he was right. Singer said that he could use his luck to turn hers, but that we must let him do whatever he wanted with her. We talked about what he said. It seemed strange that a man could turn his own luck or anyone else's. But none of us could help Onion. Finally we let Blue speak for us. He told Singer to use his luck.

"Singer crashed herbs from his pouch in a wooden bowl, mixed them with water and gave them to Onion to drink. She went limp but her eyes stayed open. It was as if her soul had left her body. Then he picked her up in his arms and carried her to the river. He laid her on the bank and took off her deerskin shirt and pants. With his two hands he scooped mud onto her naked body, covering her until all we could see was her mouth and her nose. There were some of us who thought this was bad luck." Owl struck his chest with his fist. "Or at least crazy luck. But we said nothing. When Singer finished with the mud, he began to sing."

Owl paused, gathered himself. His voice quavered under and around and sometimes on the notes.

"Spirits, look at this woman!

I have buried her for you.

She has learned what it is like in the belly of the earth.

Now you won't have to teach her.

Leave her in the world awhile.

Let her wake with her people."

Onion had gone stiff as a tree stump beside him. "Are you all right?" said Thumb. She nodded and squeezed his hand. With a feeling of dread, Thumb understood that even though she seemed better, his lover was still tangled in the stranger's luck.

The effort of singing Onion back to life, even though it was just part of the story, left Owl exhausted. He sat down abruptly and fell silent. Bead dipped a dried gourd into a water skin and scabbled across the ledge to him. As he drank, she whispered to him. The old man's eyes were as distant as the ice mountains. The people sat in polite silence for several moments, waiting for him to begin again. Bead's talk grew more heated; Thumb could make out words. *Lose... Foolish... Let me!* Finally Owl grunted and pushed her away.

"A fly is buzzing in my ear," he said. "It asks if a woman can tell a man's story." A few people laughed. Bead's smile was tight. She scooted backward but did not rejoin those around the fire. Instead she crouched a few paces away from Owl and waited.

Then Singer finished his luck song." The storyteller spoke from where he sat, which made everyone nervous. But it was better that he tell the story sitting down rather than stop. It was very bad luck to stop in the middle of a story, especially a story that had no end. "He took off his own clothes, picked Onion up and waded into the water. When the river had rinsed her of the mud, he climbed out of the river and dressed her. Then he kissed her as if she were his lover. She was asleep now, with her eyes closed. A deep sleep, yes, but not the almost-death that had squeezed her before. We could see her breathing. She didn't wake up until the next day. By then, Singer had left us." Owl lowered his voice so that everyone had to lean forward to hear him. "Nobody saw him go. Did he melt like snow? Blow away like smoke?"

He paused, even though he knew no one would answer.

"He was gone." Owl stared into the fire. "All he left was his luck."

The people waited again.

"And this story," he muttered finally, as if speaking to himself.

Silence.

"Is that all?" said little Flamesgirl, who had just lost her baby teeth and still didn't have her name. She had been squirming on her mother's lap during Owl's story. "What about Thumb? What about the big beastie?"

Flame pinched the girl's cheek hard. Everyone knew that she talked more than her mother ought to allow.

"The mammoth, old man," Bead called to Owl, loud enough for everyone to hear. "I think you haven't told about the mammoth."

Owl grunted. "Old man." He struggled to his feet. "She calls me old man." He shook his head in disbelief. "But when I was young, just five and four summers old, I saw a mammoth. Maybe the last one. I will never forget it. Such a fearsome creature... a nose like a great snake and tusks that curved to the clouds. It was covered with shaggy brown fur. When it roared, birds fell out of the sky. It was so huge that the earth shook when it walked... and its foot, one foot could crush three men... because it was bigger than the trees, I saw it... a furry mountain of meat... What?"

As Owl was speaking, Blue rose and approached him. "I would like to finish this story, Owl." Blue touched his arm; he looked very embarrassed. Thumb was embarrassed too. "Will you let me?"

Owl puffed himself up. "Are you the storyteller now?"

"Thumb saw a mammoth today," said Blue gently. "Remember?"

Owl snorted and then glanced over at Bead. Her head was down, as if she were counting her toes. Owl's jaw muscles worked but he made no sound. Blue waited. Then Owl said, "Tell them whatever you want." He turned away, brushed past Bead and stalked into the darkness. Thumb could hear him climb the path to the top of the cliff. A few heartbeats later, Bead went after him.

"He has seen many summers," said Blue, "They have filled him up, I think. Still, it is luck to have him with us."

Then Blue reported to the people what had happened between Thumb and the mammoth. His words didn't sing like Owl's did and his voice never touched the moon, but the story was finished. Afterward there was not much discussion of what had happened that day. A sadness had fallen on the people like a cold rain. The mothers huddled briefly, no doubt talking about whether it was time to change storytellers. Most of the people lay down on their sleeping mats, glad to let the day pass into story.

Onion curled next to Thumb under their bearskin. They were so excited to see each other that they couldn't get to sleep. They talked in lovers' whispers, so as not to disturb the others.

"Owl was right to tie the luck of the mammoth to the stranger's luck," said Thumb, "even if he did forget what he was trying to say. I feel like I'm still bound to it." He sifted her hair through his hands. "And you to this Singer?"

"Maybe. I don't know." She shifted around to face him. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember much about him. They told me what he did but I heard the story as if it had happened to someone else. All I know is that I am better now. And that you're here with me."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember my baby was dead. It was a boy," she said.

"I know. I was with you." Thumb rested his hand on her hip. "But then I had to leave."

"After that all I remember are faces and lots of talk that I couldn't quite understand. And just a bit of a dream." Onion stroked his cheek, as if to assure herself that he was still there. "I was in a cave. I had no lamp and it was dark but I could see a tiny light, far off, like a star and the light called my name. I think it might have been Singer. I tried to crawl toward the light but my arms and legs wouldn't move. Then I heard a wind sound, but it wasn't wind. It was the cave, breathing." She shivered. "That's all."

"It was the long cave," said Thumb, although he didn't believe this, "and it was me, looking for you."

Someone was playing a bone flute. Probably Oak, who usually had trouble sleeping. The notes were soft and drowsy and a little downcast. It was a song of leaves dropping from trees and birds flying south, a song of the end of summer.

The next morning, Blue asked Thumb and Oak to walk with him to the river for a hunting council. Although Oak was Thumb's half-brother, they had never been close. Oak was younger than Thumb. Their mother had died giving birth to him and their luck had been tangled ever since. But with Quick and the others tracking the reindeer herd, Oak was the best hunter in camp.

He was a simple man, better with his hands than his head. He could throw a spear farther than any of the people, but he could scarcely tell a story straight through. He had no lover and so was always restless. The mothers said that he would leave the valley some day.

The three men carried water skins down the path to the river. Since Blue had called the council, Oak and Thumb waited for him to begin it. At the river, instead of filling his skin, he hung it on a branch. The others did the same and then the three sat facing each other.

"So, do we hunt it?" said Blue.

Oak snorted in disgust. The question answers itself."

"We could," said Thumb, "if it's just an animal."

"What else would it be?"

"A spirit."

Blue frowned. "You think it is?"

"My thoughts are thick as mud," said Thumb. "I heard a voice *in* my head. But as soon as I saw the beast, I knew that we could kill it." He shrugged. "You can't kill a spirit."

Oak touched Thumb's knee. "How many men would it take, brother?"

"Five and five, at least. It was feeding, so I'm not sure how fast it charges. More would be better. It'll be dangerous."

"So we had better wait for Quick to come back," said Blue.

Oak made a sour face. "And let it wander off? Blue, this is a mammoth. Think of what people will say of the ones who bring it down. You want to give those stories to the shell people? The horse people?"

Blue shook his head. "Men may die unless we hunt at full strength."

"You could die on the way back to camp if you trip over a stone. I'm not afraid."

"I'm not afraid, either. I'm just not stupid."

Thumb's attention drifted. Their argument was like the chitter of magpies. There was something that he needed to understand about the mammoth. Something that he couldn't talk or think his way to, something that hid underneath words. He began to clear the ground in front of him, pulling grass, sweeping away rotted leaves.

"We've got Horn and Quail and Bright and Rabbit," said Oak. "And you two, if you both agree."

"Bright is still a boy."

"He has his name."

"He was born the summer before Onion came to us!"

Thumb fluffed the exposed dirt and then began to work with his drawing thumb. The lines were swift and sure. Round head, sloping back, trunk, long tusks.

"What is it?" Oak's voice came from a great distance.

Thumb opened himself and a dream found him.

"Quiet!" said Blue. Thumb could barely hear him over the blood pounding in his ears.

In his dream, the mammoth was already dead. It was lying on its side in a clearing. Flies buzzed the wounds on its neck. Two spears stuck out of its broad chest. The blood was dry.

Thumb was alone with the mammoth. There were no other hunters, no one to thank the mammoth for giving its life to the people and to speed its soul. He knelt beside the mammoth and put his hand on its flank. "I thank you, great one, for the sacrifice you have made. Your death is as precious to us as your life was to you. We needed you and so we killed you. We will use your flesh and bones to make our lives better. Someday when the spirits come to take us from our bodies, we will see you again in the belly of the earth." Then he got up, his nose full of the stink of the mammoth. It was already beginning to rot.

He walked around it once, then walked around it in the opposite direction. In his dream, Thumb was uneasy. It was bad luck to waste any Mil, and this was a *mammoth*. Where was everyone?

An elm tree stirred at the edge of the clearing. In a dream moment, its roots gathered into two legs and its branches became the arms of a man. Leaves grew into long gray hair and a beard. The tree man was wearing a deerskin shirt and leggings. He did not speak but held out open hands to show he meant no harm. Thumb thought this might be the stranger who had saved Onion.

Man, I am. It was the voice Thumb had heard by the river.

Singer approached the mammoth. He touched one of the dark eyes and the lid closed. He whispered to the mammoth and its trunk twitched. When he shouted, the sound staggered Thumb and he fell backward.

The mammoth shivered, rolled over, and got to its knees. Thumb let out a strangled cry of joy and surprise and fear. No animal had ever come back from the dead. The mammoth stood and shook the spears out of its side. Thumb's eyes burned.

Singer loomed over Thumb and started kicking at the ground. He bent to uproot grass, clear leaves. The mammoth trumpeted and lumbered into the forest as Singer squatted. He began to draw in the dirt.

The lines were swift and sure. Round head, sloping back, trunk, long tusks.

"Thumb, are you all right?" Oak was trying to sit him up.

"You shouldn't touch him," said Blue, but he didn't interfere.

Thumb's ears still rang with Singer's shout. He tried to focus on Blue and Oak. They shimmered like they were under water.

"He's crying," said Oak. "Brother, what's wrong?"

Thumb wiped at the wetness under his eye and touched the fingertip to his tongue. In the taste of his tears he saw mammoths flickering on the walls of the long cave. The vision shook him. It was dream knowledge, but the dream was over. The spirits must be very close. They had come to push him to his luck.

Thumb struggled up and pulled his water skin from the tree. "No more talking." He dipped the skin into the current and let it fill. "I'm going to the long cave." He slung it over his shoulder and started toward the camp at a trot. "I'll know what we should do when I get back."

Owl liked to call the cleft *the new cave*, but then he liked to stretch words. Actually it was a place where two huge rocks had fallen against one another, and it was mostly open to the sky. All the paintings and marks on the walls of the cleft had been made either by Thumb, or his teacher, Looker, or Looker's teacher Thorn. They had painted reindeer and red deer and ibex and horses and bison and the secret names of spirits.

But no mammoths. The mammoths were in the long cave.

The long cave was a mystery. Nobody knew who had put their dreams on its walls. Nobody knew how big it was. Owl told a story about the time old Thorn had found a tunnel that led from the long cave to the belly of the earth. The keeper had blocked it with stones to keep the dead from coming back to life. The women told stories about souls without bodies, who wandered the earth, forever alone, but none of the people had ever seen one. Thumb had looked many times for Thorn's tunnel. He had never found it. But even though he knew the long cave better than any of the people, there were still parts of it that he had yet to see. He had never quite gotten the courage to lower himself into the well in the Lodge of Mother Mammoth. And he was too wide in the shoulders to wriggle through the narrows past the abandoned bear nests.

"I don't care," said Onion. "I'm coming with you." Two mothers who were chipping new stone scrapers covered smiles with their hands. Thumb wrapped a lump of boar fat in a maple leaf and bound it with braided grass. "But I don't want you to." He put it with his lamp. Onion didn't bother to answer. She was already packing food for the trip, a handful of hazel nuts, a parsnip, salsify root, and a dried fish.

"You're not strong enough." Thumb didn't like to quarrel in front of other people.

Onion liked nothing better, especially since his shyness gave her an advantage. "I'm strong enough to sit and tend fire." She stooped to tie the sinew laces of her boots. "And that's all I'll do if I stay here."

Thumb made his best argument. "It's too far." The long cave was a good day's hike from the river. Its mouth was set into the stony ridge that divided the river valley from the lands of the horse people. "Besides, I might be gone all night. Maybe longer." Thumb continued to wrap leaves around pale chunks of fat for the lamp. "I don't know where the dreams will take me."

When he glanced up, Onion was standing with her hips cocked to support the bulging skin she had slung

over her shoulder. She smiled at him and he shrugged. He knew that smile. The argument was over.

It was not yet midday when they started out. They talked at first. He told her about his trip to the country of the shell people. They were telling stories about a new people who had come down from the ice mountains. The shell people had not yet seen these strangers themselves, but had heard about them from their distant neighbors, the sky people. The newcomers were said to have four arms. Dogs followed them and obeyed their orders.

Then we'll call them the dog people," said Onion.

"That wouldn't be very polite." Dogs were scavengers, like crows and rats. The only thing they were good for was eating, and they were often too stringy for that.

Then call them the ice people." Onion laughed.

"Maybe they melt in the summer and their dogs drink them."

Thumb was pleased to see Onion keep good pace and good conversation. She was definitely getting better.

Onion told him that the mothers had decided to ask Owl's son Bone to become the storyteller, even though he was still learning stories. He had only begun training with his father four summers ago but he had a big voice and an easy laugh. His words didn't always light the stars, but he was still young and he would have Owl to teach him.

As they climbed farther away from the river, they dropped into hunting order. Game was scarce near the summer camp, but here they might surprise a hare or a squirrel or even a deer. Thumb moved ahead, stepping quietly, spear at the ready. Onion trailed behind, picking mushrooms and stopping to roll logs over in search of grubs and salamanders.

That night they lay together as lovers. Afterward Thumb wept for their dead baby boy.

The sun was three hands from the dawn edge of the sky when they reached the cave the next day. Onion gathered tinder and kindling while Thumb pulled dead branches from trees and dragged them into a pile. The people visited the long cave regularly and had built a good hearth just inside the entrance. Thumb watched Onion take the smoldering coal she had brought from the hearthfire and set it on the tinder.

"I thank the first mother for this fire," she said. "She makes the warmth of the world." She blew on the coal until it smoked and the tinder caught fire.

When the pile of firewood reached Thumb's waist, he went out to gather birch bark. He peeled what he could and cut the rest with his chert knife. He was careful not to cut a complete circle of bark, which would girdle a tree and kill it. Thumb folded the bark again and again into a wad and then wedged it into the cleft of a green stick. When he had made three of these birch torches he returned to the cave. He was surprised to find Bead, Owl's lover, sitting at the fire next to Onion. She was rocking back and forth, as if in mourning.

"I tried to talk to Owl last night, but he wouldn't hear me," she told them. She looked as if she had slept on a sharp rock. "This morning I followed him here. He walked into the cave without fire or food, with empty hands. When I called for him to stop, he ran from me. I tried to find him but I have no light. I've been looking...! don't know. Most of the day." Her hands and face were dirty and her doeskin shirt was smeared with chalky mud. "He's gone, I think."

"I'll find him." Thumb gestured at the torches he had made. "And I have a lamp."

"What if he doesn't want to be found?" said Bead. "He is ashamed, Thumb. And afraid." She tugged at her hair hard enough to pull a few gray strands out. "And he is an old fool."

"He wants to die in there?" said Onion.

"I think," she said. "Where no one can see him. Where he can't even see himself."

"The spirits will see him," said Thumb. "They are thick in this cave. It will make bad luck for the people."

"If he thinks his own luck has run," said Onion, "maybe he doesn't care."

They sat for a minute in silence, listening to the fire, watching sparks fly up to become sky. In his mind's eye, Thumb tried to see Owl as someone who would knowingly make bad luck for all of them. He couldn't. It wasn't the kind of story Owl would want people to tell about him.

"He isn't like that," he said. "He's gone to the cave as any of us would. To open himself to a dream. To find his luck, not to be done with it."

"Maybe," said Bead.

Was this why he had been brought to the cave? To save Owl? Thumb stood and touched one of the birch bark torches to the fire. "I'll find him." He tucked the other two torches into his belt. "I'll bring him out." The way the two women were looking up at him almost made him believe what he was saying. "And then we'll tell him his own story, again and again, until he understands why we need him."

Some of the people were afraid of the long cave. Most thought it a cold, forbidding place. Thumb didn't understand this. Yes, it was crushingly dark. But the cave was ever untouched by the outside. It was always the same, always itself. In the heat of the summer, it was cool and free of bugs. When wind screamed off the ice mountains in the winter, it was the warmest place in the world. Time slowed in its never-ending night. Dreams lurked at every turn.

The mouth of the long cave was wide and welcoming. It opened onto a huge, damp room, with a ceiling too high for torchlight to reach. The mud on the floor was as sticky as pinesap. Before long, black silence closed around Thumb and all he could hear was the hiss of the torch and mud squishing beneath his boots.

He walked for some time, picking his way down the path trod by countless feet. On his right he passed the Empty Ways, a deep and complicated branch that, for some reason, had never been decorated. He had once asked Looker why they couldn't paint their dreams in this untouched section. Looker had cuffed him with the back of his hand. "This cave belongs to the dead now," said Looker. "Paint here when you're ready to visit the belly of the earth."

Was Owl hiding in one of the Empty Ways? Thumb called to him but got no reply. Owl had been to the cave many times. He would find his way to the Mother's Lodge. To the place of dreams.

Thumb's first torch began to gutter and he lit the second as he came to the underground river, where the main passage veered sharply to the right. This was not a true river like that of the people, more like a stream, but it filled the cave with its gurgle. The ceiling was low here, and the chalk walls were moist and yielding. After a while, Thumb came to First Mammoth.

First Mammoth had been scratched in the soft surface of the wall with a stick, or maybe even a finger. It was about as long as a marmot. Thumb could have carved it himself in a few minutes, if such had been his luck. First Mammoth had to be very old. Its lines weren't as sharp as most of the other carvings. The moisture in the cave had blurred them over countless summers. A long dead cave bear had once

sharpened its claws on top of First Mammoth, and even its marks had begun to fade.

Thumb switched the torch to his left hand and with his thumb traced First Mammoth's lines just above the soft surface of the wall.

"I honor you and the one who carved you," he said. "May I meet both of your souls someday when I leave my body." He tugged the last torch out of his belt and leaned it against the wall. "Keep my torch safe and dry, First Mammoth, so I can use it to find my way back to the sun."

A little further on he entered the Council Room, where the cave branched in two directions. The walls of the Council Room were covered with wonders. To one side was the chiseled profile of Father Mammoth, whose eye saw all that happened in the cave. To the other were three wooly rhinoceros, one so fat that its belly scraped the ground. Next to them was the Council of Mammoths.

A line of five mammoths marched left. Five more marched right, as if to cut them off. The two leaders faced each other, eye to eye, their trunks touching. They had been drawn by rubbing soot stone right onto the rock, the surface of which was smooth but not flat. Whoever had created these mammoths had used dips and bulges in the rock to make them leap from the wall into the mind's eye. As Thumb passed his torch from one line to the other, the play of light made the mammoths stir.

The first time he'd seen the Council of the Mammoths, Thumb thought that the two herds were about to fight. Then Looker had explained. Each of the herds walked its own land. Where the leaders met was the boundary. The mammoths touched trunks as brothers might touch fists or sisters hug. This was a dream of friendship, not of rancor, and it was meant to speak to the people who kept the cave. The spirits commanded them, said Looker, to live at peace with their neighbors. It was their luck to take lovers from the shell people and send their children to live with the horse people and to welcome all strangers.

Man, whispered a voice in Thumb's head.

Thumb whirled, but he saw no one. "Who are you?" He felt as if he were standing on the sky and gazing up at the ground. Tell me!" The walls swallowed his anger. This was the place of true dreams and he was its keeper. This is the cave of the people! You don't belong here!"

Man, I am.

Thumb staggered across the Council Room and fell to his knees before Father Mammoth. "Father, I've come looking for Owl, the storyteller. Now something in your cave calls me. I don't understand what is happening. Show me what I must do." And then he opened himself.

No dream found him.

Thumb didn't know what to do. Shocked, he knelt there waiting. Waiting. This had never happened before. Father Mammoth stared down at him but sent no dream. The spirits had forsaken him.

The torch began to gutter.

Man. Come to me.

Thumb fumbled for his lamp. Still on his knees, he flattened a wad of boar fat into the bowl, pinched some moss for a wick and pressed it into the fat. He lit the lamp from the failing torch.

Man.

"What?" he muttered as he stood. His knees creaked. How long had he been kneeling on the cold stone?

He left the torch behind and started down the passage toward the Lodge of the Mother Mammoth. The world shrank as he left the Council Room. The torch had cast a strong light, but the lamp burned with a single flame. When he held it at eye level, the floor of the cave disappeared. Thumb groped forward, his free hand brushing the wall. He saw more with his feet than with his eyes. Soon he came to one of the narrows. He stooped, and then crawled on hands and knees. He picked his way slowly, holding the lamp level so as not to spill melting fat or snuff the flame.

The ceiling in the Mother's Lodge was low enough that he could reach up and press his palm flat against it. It was decorated with mammoths and bison and ibex and horses and rhinoceros, outlined in black soot stone. Some stood on top of one another. Upside down jostled right side up. Here was a many to make a man's head swim. Thumb could as soon count the leaves on a tree or the hairs of Onion's head. Ordinarily the spirits of the cave were most present in this great gathering of animals. When Thumb guided people to this room, dreams spun from the ceiling like snow from the winter sky. But now he gazed up in vain. He felt as if his soul had turned to stone.

"Why am I here?" He began by searching the edges of the room, carrying the lamp low so he could see the floor. Nothing. "Talk to me!" Then he struck out for the opposite wall, crisscrossing back and forth. On his fourth traverse, his foot nudged the body.

Thumb rolled Owl over and felt his throat for the beat of blood. He was alive. Thumb squatted, thinking of how to get the old man out of the cave. If he slung Owl over his back and tried to carry him, he'd probably douse the lamp. Besides, how would they wriggle through the narrows? He decided that if he couldn't wake Owl up, he would have to leave the cave, build a litter and bring Bead back to help.

"Owl." Thumb chucked the old man's chin. "Can you hear me?" He leaned close and blew on his eyelids. "Uncle?"

"Hmm."

"It's me, Thumb."

Owl stirred and put his hand to his forehead. Then he opened his eyes. Spears of light, brighter than any fire Thumb had ever seen, shot from Owl's eyes and then winked out. Thumb screamed and sprawled backward, spilling hot fat on himself and snuffing the lamp's puny flame.

Darkness closed around him. He felt it press against his skin, stop his nose, slither down his throat. He tried to scream again but the darkness was smothering him. Terrified, he scuttled across the floor until his back was against a wall. He heard a wind sound, but it wasn't the wind. It was the cave, breathing. Then the room erupted with light. The thing that was Owl but wasn't stood before him. He held his hand above his head. It was on fire and his fingers were bright, flickering flames. Thumb looked up and saw something he had never seen before. All the animals of the Mother's Lodge stared down at him. All, all at once. The wonder of it was almost enough to make him forget what was happening. Owl seemed impressed too. For a moment, he paid no attention to Thumb. Instead he strode around the room, taking in the drawings as if they were old friends. Finally he approached Thumb, who tried to press himself into the rock.

Man, this is not a dream.

Thumb couldn't speak. He could barely nod.

The story of Thumb.

The light from Owl's fist was painful. It stabbed through Thumb's head into mind's eye.

He is great, father to many peoples. He lives many summers.

Thumb had no children. All Onion's babies died. Owl's skin began to shift like smoke. Thumb could see his bones glowing.

But he kills the last mammoth. This tangles his luck. When he dies, his soul never gets to the belly of the earth.

Fear gave way to rage. "How do you know this? Who are you?"

Owl lowered the shining fist toward Thumb. Thumb couldn't move, couldn't protect himself.

Man, I am.

Thumb had grown roots. His arms were heavy as logs.

But once I was...

All he could do is look up as Owl touched him.

Thumb.

The light filled his head, driving out all thought.

The next thing Thumb knew, he was kneeling in front of Father Mammoth in the Council Room. The spent torch was on the floor beside the lamp, which was lit. Owl curled nearby, snoring noisily.

"It wasn't a dream," Thumb muttered and sat back on his heels. "Then what was it?" He picked up the lamp absently. Had he just talked to his soul, come back from the dead? Did that mean he had had lost his own soul? He shook the thought from his head and wondered what he should do. Probably rouse Owl. Get him out of the cave. "What about it, old man?" Thumb said softly. "Are you going to catch fire again and say crazy things?"

Owl snuffled. He slept with his mouth open so that Thumb could count the teeth he had lost. Thumb stretched his foot across the floor of the cave and gave

Owl a nudge. "Owl." He gave Owl a second, firmer nudge. "Wake up." And then he slid back to watch what would happen.

Owl's mouth closed and then opened again "Am not," he said. His voice was thick.

"Owl!"

"What?" When he opened his eyes, it was clear that no spirit lurked behind them. They were the dim, watery eyes of an old man. "Who is that?"

"Thumb."

He thought for a moment and then nodded. "And the woman?"

"Bead is waiting outside."

He grunted as he propped himself up on an elbow. "I think she would follow me to the belly of the earth." He licked his lips. "If only to tell me I was wrong about something."

Thumb laughed politely. "What do you remember?"

"Remember? I came to the cave to find a guiding dream. Instead I got lost. Then I fell asleep."

"But no dream?"

He shook his head. "Not everyone finds dreams as easily as Thumb."

"Where did you fall asleep? Here? In the Lodge of the Mother Mammoth?"

"Thumb, it was dark." Owl sat up. "The mothers want the new storyteller, yes?"

"Yes."

"I thought so." He stretched and then yipped in pain. "I'm getting too old for a bed of stones." He kneaded the muscles of his back.

"I'm taking the lamp," said Thumb. "I left a fresh torch back at First Mammoth. I'll get it and then we should go."

Owl had gotten to his feet by the time Thumb re-turned. He steadied himself with a hand to the wall of the cave. "Bone," he said. In the torchlight, the old man's face was pale as the moon. "Bone will take my place."

"We expect you to teach him all the stories you know."

"I have tried all these summers." Owl showed Thumb his teeth. "The son won't make anyone forget the father."

The two men stood at the mouth of the cave, blinking in the afternoon sun. Something was wrong. Thumb dropped the spent torch into the hearth. They were hungry and thirsty but there was no fire and the women were gone.

"Where is she? Owl brushed past Thumb into the open air. "*Beadr*

"Quiet." Thumb clamped his hand over Owl's mouth to keep him from calling out again. "Look at the coals. That fire didn't burn itself out. Somebody put it out. And I left a spear and a throwing stick."

"Why would they leave us?"

"Wait back in the cave. I'll see what I can find."

Thumb drew his knife and ran across the clearing in front of the cave to the cover of the forest. He moved silently through the trees, parallel to the trail but many paces away. After a while he gave the call of a nuthatch, a high two-note whistle repeated three times. The reply came from his left, a three-note whistle repeated twice. He found Onion and Bead waiting in a dry stream bed. They told him quickly what had happened. Part of Thumb was grateful to hear the dreadful story. It meant that he didn't have to think anymore about what had happened in the cave. He ran to fetch Owl. As they hurried back to the summer camp, the two women tried to remember everything they had heard. And when Thumb got home, he heard the story again, this time from Quick himself.

.Quick's party had joined the hunters from the horse people and together they had tracked the reindeer herd. As was their custom, they split the herd and had driven part of it into the Killdeer, a steep-walled gorge blocked off with boulders and felled trees at one end. There they had slaughtered the reindeer. There was enough meat to get both peoples through the coming winter. Fresh skins to make clothes and blankets, antlers and bones for tools. It was a good harvest.

But while the hunters were butchering and skinning the reindeer, they were attacked. Bone thought they might have been spirits, but Quick was certain that they were just men. The attackers fought with "feather slicks"—short straight spears with a flint point at one end and feathers at the other. They threw these sticks from a distance and at great speed. They used a throwing stick unlike anything the hunters had seen before. Spears were useless against the attackers. When the hunters tried to charge them, they were turned back by a pack of fierce dogs.

Of the hunting party, Moon was killed and both Quick and Ash were wounded. The horse people had suffered greater losses. Another party of the strangers had sacked their summer camp and carried off some of the women. After they had escaped the Killdeer, Quick and his men had run for home. The attackers might be on their way to the valley of the people next.

As they passed the long cave, Quick had seen the smoke of Onion's fire and had stopped to warn the women.

"I think these must be the people of the ice mountains," said Thumb as he ran his finger down the feather stick that Quick had brought back. "The shell people told me about the dogs." The point was stained with Quick's own blood. He had worked it out of his thigh after the attack.

"You knew about these strangers?" said Blue.

"It was a story told by the sky people to the shell people," said Thumb, "who told it to me. I thought the truth of it might be a little thin."

People stared as if he had betrayed them. Thumb felt the blood rush to his face.

"In the story I heard," he said, "these people had four arms. Did they?"

"No," said Quick.

Bone spat. "Two were more than enough."

"And there was nothing about these." Thumb gave the feather stick back to Quick. "Or about anyone attacking anyone."

Owl held up his hand. "We should send a runner to the shell people to hear their story again," he said, "and to tell ours. Maybe he should visit the sky people too."

Everyone thought this was a good idea. Blue asked young Bright to start the next morning. Quick said that they should think about striking the summer camp early. The winter lodge, a day's walk upriver, was in a natural terrace that the people walled up with stones. It would be easier to defend. This idea caused a stir among the women. Flame held up her hand.

"The mothers have asked me to speak for them," she said. "We're still taking in the harvest. The winter camp is a long way from the best gathering places. That's why we make the summer camp here."

There was no answer to this argument and the men all knew it. They also knew what was coming next.

"There's plenty to harvest this summer," said Flame. "We can fill many skins with good things to eat—if we're here at the summer camp. But now Quick tells us that there will be no reindeer. We'll do our best, but unless there's meat, there will come a time this winter when we'll all go hungry."

Quick drew himself up. "The hunters will bring in meat enough for all." Normally, when Quick said something would be done, everyone stopped worrying about it. But dark blood soaked through the

deerskin bandage around his thigh and he looked haggard. He had lost the winter's meat supply. A man was dead.

Oak raised his hand. "I am sure that the mothers can make some delicious rat stews and roasted squirrels, but there is bigger game to hunt. While Thumb was in the cave, I looked for his mammoth. It must like our valley, because I found it just last night. It's less than a day's walk away, on the dawn shore by the sandbar."

"But you can't." Thumb's voice was sharp. "I mean, maybe we should wait."

Everyone was watching him again. Even Onion seemed troubled by his outburst.

"You asked us to wait once already," said Blue carefully. "We did, because you are keeper of the caves. You went to the long cave and now you're back. What happened? Did you have a dream about the mammoth?"

"I..." Thumb didn't know what to say, in part because he wasn't sure what had happened to him. "It wasn't a dream."

Owl raised his hand again. "He saved me, is what happened." The old man probably thought he was helping Thumb. Paying him back. "I was lost and he found me." He reached over to hug Thumb. "And now I know why. Let me tell you a story of long ago, before we were a people. A story about how my greatgrandfather hunted mammoths."

The strength of the people would be tested. Blue had sent a party of scouts to watch for the strangers at the far edges of the valley. That meant that the women would have to help with the hunt. Thumb had doubts about Owl's scheme, especially since Quick could take no part in it. The day after the council, a fever took him. He sprawled on his mat at the camp, senseless, sometimes thrashing in pain. His lover Cloud packed mustard leaves on his wound but it continued to ooze. Oak would take charge of the hunt.

In Owl's story, the old ones had hunted mammoths at night. The beasts were scared of fire, Owl claimed, and could easily be driven with torches. The surest kill would have been to chase the mammoth off a cliff. But the mammoth was finding good forage along the banks of the river. Oak saw the risk in trying to drive it all the way into the hills. Owl's story had the answer. They would dig a pit, force the mammoth into it and slaughter it while it struggled to get out.

Thumb had his own plan. He would stay as far away from the mammoth as he could. Let this story be about Oak, or one of the other men. If he didn't kill it, none of what had happened in the cave would matter.

Oak was calling for a fan of hunters to get the mammoth moving. Two lines of women were to move toward each other, closing its path off with their torches. They would force it into the pit, where the main party of hunters would be waiting to finish it. Thumb asked to be one of the hunters who walked the flanks to protect the women. Everyone thought that this was because he was worried about Onion.

Although she would not let anyone see it, he knew that she was distraught. The horse people were her first people. She had a mother, a sister and cousins who she had kept up with, even after she had come to the valley. The two peoples traded and hunted together and they told each other's stories. Now her birth family might be hurt or dead or taken. There were dark circles under Onion's eyes and she rarely spoke unless spoken to.

It took three days to dig the pit. Owl said it must be covered with brush, or the prey would see its danger. Meanwhile a pair of hunters tracked the mammoth. When it strayed too far from the killing

ground, they would show themselves and turn it back. By the night of the third day the trap was set. The people left camp just before dusk.

Thumb had strapped his two best spears and his throwing stick to his back. He offered to help Onion carry her three birch bark torches but she refused. Her eyes were wide and the line of her mouth was straight. She and the other women were jittery walking through the forest in the dark. Thumb didn't blame them. Everyone knew that luck turned at night, often for the bad. When the fat moon rose, everyone felt a little safer.

"Stop!"

Some of the women jumped. Even Thumb gave a yip of surprise. Oak came out of the darkness looking as if he had rolled around in the coals of a dead fire. His face was black and his deerskins filthy.

"This is where Thumb's group builds their fire. A small fire, yes?"

"We know this," said Thumb. "You've told us enough times."

Then form your line running in that direction." Oak pointed. "Five and five paces apart. Don't light the torches until you get the call. Robin's group, come with me."

Thumb thought Oak must be unsure of himself. That was why he was treating everyone as if they were children.

The women built the fire, thanking the first mother for the light of the world. Then Thumb helped them take their places. He put Onion farthest from the pit and waited with her.

"Are you afraid?" she said.

He was taken aback. Fear was not something men talked about, certainly not just before a hunt. "A little," he said. "Yes."

"Why have you closed yourself off from me?" She took his hand.

"Me? You're the silent one. Are you worried about your family?"

"You are my family, Thumb, and I *am* worried. Something happened in the cave. Something you haven't told me."

He felt his throat tighten. "I've tried not to think about it."

She waited for him to continue.

"It wasn't a dream. It wasn't." He sighed. "It was like we are speaking now, except I was talking to a spirit. A crazy spirit."

"Can spirits *be* crazy?"

"People can be crazy, so why can't spirits? I don't know. That's why I'm scared, Onion. Because I don't know what to think."

"So what did it say?"

He laughed. "That I am great."

"That wasn't crazy."

He leaned over to kiss her in the darkness. "That I will be father to many peoples," he said softly.

She shrank away from him momentarily, as if he had said something wrong. Then she closed her eyes and kissed him back.

They heard the call of a nuthatch, a high two-note whistle repeated three times. Thumb replied, a three-note whistle repeated twice.

"I'll come back," he said. He lit a torch from the fire and dashed down the line of women, lighting theirs. As he peered into the night, he could just make out the shimmer of the second line. Now Thumb could hear the chants of the fan of hunters driving the mammoth toward them. He threw his torch into the fire and fitted a spear into his throwing stick.

"*We are the people,*" the hunters cried, "*We need you, great one.*"

"Let's go," Thumb called, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Walk slowly toward the other lights."

The mammoth trumpeted. It was caught between the lines and headed toward the pit.

"It's working," Thumb called. "The mammoth will pass, then the hunters will be right behind. Close in after them."

"*We are the people.*"

Thumb saw a mammoth-sized shadow lope close by. It was breathing in great, ragged *chuffs*. He could almost taste its fear.

"*We need you, great one,*" called the hunters. Smaller shadows rippled through the trees.

"Follow them," he called. "Not too close."

The two lines of lights came together and Thumb saw Robin wave. Ahead of them the mammoth shrieked and the main group of hunters roared in triumph. Thumb flew down the line to find Onion.

"Are you all right?" he said.

Her eyes shone in the torchlight. "We did it." She was excited.

Man.

The mammoth trumpeted again and Thumb heard a different note in the voices of the hunters. Later, he would learn that the pit wasn't wide enough. That the mammoth had skirted it without falling in. But that moment, all Thumb knew was that something was wrong.

A man screamed in agony. The shouts filled with fear. The luck of the people had turned.

"It's coming back," said Thumb. Hunting courage hammered through his body. "It can't get past Oak and the others but it can break through the chase group." He felt as if his legs were growing longer.

"But our torches," said Onion. "It's afraid of fire."

Man.

"Not if it's wounded." The muscles in his arms bunched and swelled. "It's probably crazy with fear." His

hair rose straight from his head.

"Robin!" he called. "It's coming."

Robin pumped his spear to show he was ready.

"Thumb, what are you going to do?"

You are.

"I can't die, Onion," said Thumb. The spirit told me." He gulped air as if he were drowning. "Not until I'm old."

Then he saw it bearing down on him. On Onion. He realized that Owl had been right after all. It was a furry mountain, a mountain that galloped.

"Thumb!" cried Onion.

But she was behind him now. He took three effortless steps toward the mammoth. It was as if he were going down to the river for water. He couldn't die tonight. His old life was behind him too, what he had been before he had met himself in the long cave. The new Thumb had great things to do. *The last*. Oh, the stories they would tell about him! *But his soul would never*. The mammoth loomed. *Never*. He planted himself, drew back his throwing stick and screamed at it.

"I am!"

This is the story of Thumb the Great. He killed a mammoth with a single thrust of his spear. He gave his people the bow and arrow and taught them the ways of war. When the battle madness took him, there was no one so fierce. He led the people of the valley against the dog people and drove them back to the ice mountains. He lived a long life, fathered many children and mourned two lovers. The spirits treated him as if he were one of their own. One night they came and took him from the people. We believe he still watches over us. He was a man filled with luck.