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Opening extract from
The First Hunter

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*For Martin and Sinead Kromer, without
whose tireless work with the Federation of
Children's Book Groups, countless young
people might never have encountered a
great number of brilliant books.*

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Chapter 1

Prints in the Dew

My name is Tan. I snatch meat. I'm Tan the snatcher and I'm fast.

I have to be.

Our hide-out under the cliff is deep and dry. We sleep here, behind our fire. Dip works with me. He has the fire that scares off the cats. He scares them off their kills, so I can snatch the meat. I'm fast, but he's brave.

I'm the Snatcher.

And Dip is the Brand-man. The stick with the fire is a brand and Dip waves it to scare the big cats.

So that's Dip and me. Then there's Gak and Lom who carry the meat home and Sil and Mab who are the mothers. Dol is the Old One and there are four Little Ones. Last of all is Wid, the Fool. We live together in our shelter under the cliff.

Wid the Fool looks after the Little Ones so that Sil and Mab can hunt for mice and frogs, eggs and honey. Wid's head is full of feathers and fur, but he's my friend. Dol is Mother to us both.

It is morning. The grass is wet, but the sun is coming. I get up from under the cliff and look down to the grass-land. In the night we heard a lion kill an animal. Now the lion has the meat of that animal, his kill. He's watching it somewhere safe and secret. Maybe under a

clump of trees. I can't see the kill, but my nose can smell it.

“Tan,” Dip calls. He comes out from under the cliff and stretches. “Are you ready?”

I nod. “Ready and hungry, Dip. Is Gak awake?”

“He’s coming now. Have you got your knife?”

“Of course.” I show him the sharp blade of flint. “And you – have you got the brand?”

Dip stoops and pulls a stick from the fire. I can see its smoke. It’s still hot. “Right here,” Dip says, and holds the smoking stick up.

A Little One gets up and comes over, rubbing his eyes. His name is Bub. “Can I come with you, Tan? I’m fast and strong.”

“Fast and strong!” I laugh. “You’ll be a Brand-man *and* a Snatcher, Bub.” I muss his hair. “But not today, eh? One more winter, then we’ll see.”

Bub goes grumbling back to the shelter as Gak comes out. The three of us start downhill, leaving our foot prints in the wet grass.

The grass is long and yellow, like the lion’s mane. “There.” I point. “In the tree-shadow,” I whisper.

Dip nods. “I see him. I see his kill too, four steps to his left.” The kill has stripes, like the shadow. “It’s a zebra,” Dip says.

Dip bends down and pulls up some long dry grass. Gak and I watch the lion, who is sleeping, full of meat. Dip winds the grass round and round the smoking stick.

“Ready?” he whispers.

I nod. Gak nods.

Dip puts his mouth near to the brand and blows. The stick glows. The grass crackles. Flames leap. Dip runs at the lion. He screams and waves the brand over his head. The lion wakes, lifts his head and snarls. His mane is like the flames. The lion stands, ready to charge, but then he sees the fire. He backs off, growling, and stands over his kill.

Dip is brave. He runs at the great cat. The stick is high over his head and ablaze with fire. The lion roars. This is the worst part. Sometimes a lion will charge the fire, kill the Brand-man with one slash of its terrible claws.

This lion turns, trots into the thorn bush and looks back at us. It wants its kill. Dip follows the lion to drive it a little further away. Now it's my turn. I run to the zebra, slash open its skin with my knife and cut deep.



“Quick!” warns Dip. “Soon he’ll charge the flames.”

I’m working as fast as I can. Zebra flesh is tough, stringy. The meat won’t come away. Then Gak is beside me. He grips the hoof and pulls. He’s strong. He tears the leg from the zebra’s body, heaves it onto his back and trots away as if it’s the leg of a mouse – not the heavy leg of a zebra.

“All clear, Dip!”

I leap up, run after Gak the Carrier. I know Dip will back off slowly. He’ll keep on waving his brand until he’s with us. And when the lion sees what’s left of the kill, still under the trees, it will lose interest in Dip. If he’s lucky. Brandmen need luck and courage. Dip has both.

Gak walks uphill like a man carrying nothing. The others have seen him coming, seen the meat, seen Dip and me and no lion. They dance in front of the cliff where we can

see them. They're laughing and singing. We're all hungry, our mouths water as we think of the feast ahead.

This time, it's only the zebra that's died.