

Season
of the
Mammoth
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Nomad (*noun*)

A person who travels from place to place and has
no permanent home.

Homecoming

"I can see them!" Tannash cried, standing on a rock and pointing into the grey-green valley far below.

Her brother, Geb, rose from beside the campfire where he'd been sitting with the other two, and bounded onto the rock beside her, his wolfskin cloak shrouding his lanky frame. Geb, who was older and taller than Tannash, bent his knees in order for his eyes to be at the same level as hers. He made a big show of peering into the haze, shading his eyes with his hand, even though the sky was gloomy. He stared for several long moments, and Tannash held her breath awaiting his confirmation.

"Well, if you can see them, little sister, you must have eyes like an eagle," Geb said at last, and ruffled Tannash's scruffy mop of hair. She pushed his hand away, and in return he gave her that grin which made her feel annoyed with him, and want to laugh, both at the same time.

"Well if you can't see them," Tannash said, "that's because you've got eyes like a..." She couldn't think of anything.

"Like a what?" Geb taunted, stepping down from the rock. Tannash was clenching her fists now, and

he knew it would be wise to keep out of her reach. "What's the matter?" he asked, stroking the wisps of hair on his chin which he hoped would one day become a bushy beard, like his father's and his uncle's. "Has your tongue fallen out?" He gave her an expression of grave concern. "Ooh, is this it?" he said suddenly, picking a bit of discarded fish fin from the frosty grass, a remnant of this morning's meal.

Tannash was forcing her mouth into a ferocious grimace, but she knew she couldn't make it last, no matter how hard she bit her lower lip. As she stepped down from the rock, her smile escaped and her fists swung. Geb laughed as the first blow caught him in the shoulder. "Like a fish!" Tannash said. "You've got eyes like a fish! They're practically blind, like you!"

Geb laughed as he dodged the second and third swings. "I've got eyes like a fish, and you punch like one!" he said, goading her. Tannash's fist thumped into his chest. She certainly did not punch like a fish. But Geb was swift on his feet, and he whirled round her, stuck his foot out and pushed her so she tripped backwards over his leg. He caught her arm to break her fall, just like their father would, and the playfulness ended there because, both at the same time, they noticed their two companions beside the fire were now on their feet.

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"She was right," said the old woman in her cracked and croaky voice. This was Rass, their father's sister. With the help of the crooked staff which was almost as tall as she was, Rass stepped onto the rock on which Tannash had been standing. Always clad in heavy layers of ragged furs which hung from her in fronds, Rass was small and haggard. Even so, she was surprisingly nimble, and they all knew she had eyes better than any of them. She pointed into the distance of the wide, misty valley below them. "I see them too."

Scrim, who was muscular and hairy and didn't need a cloak even in this cold weather, was following Rass's gaze and nodding his big, leathery head. Scrim was not good with words, and usually he only spoke in short, clipped phrases, if he spoke at all. But he showed his excitement by clapping his huge hands, and the noise was like drum beats.

"Hah!" Tannash barked at Geb. "Looks like you're the only one who can't see them, brother, with those weak old fish-eyes of yours!"

Even as Tannash spoke, Geb saw what she had seen: a thin, dark line in the hazy distance on the valley floor, moving almost imperceptibly towards them. He smiled.

Scrim, who always stooped like an old man even though he wasn't old at all, drew a long in-breath through his wide nose, smelling the air, and turned to Geb, his dark eyes glinting in the morning light. He smiled, but Geb knew that Scrim was not as pleased as he appeared.

"Can Geb and I go and meet them at the village?" Tannash asked Rass.

"When they're a bit closer," Rass replied.

The four of them sat on the edge of the ridge and watched the procession of returning hunters winding its way towards them. Tannash leaned against Scrim's warm body. Partly, she wished that she and Geb could stay up here in this isolated spot with Rass and Scrim all the time. There was something inviting and cosy about their big hut built of mammoth tusks and skins, all alone among the peaks. But also she couldn't wait to see her uncle, and hear his tales of adventure, and she was keen to see her father too.

"Can we go hunting with them next time?" Geb asked. Both he and Tannash longed to join their uncle's hunting party, to see what lay beyond the valley, to spend each day hunting and each night singing songs of victory with the hunters and warriors.

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"Soon," Rass said. "But you have much to learn first."

Tannash gave a groan. "Still, Rass? But you've already taught us about the trees and animals and the weather and the seasons..." she rolled her eyes to show how long and dull the list was, "...and how seeds turn into plants and all that stuff. And Father and Uncle Gagba have already taught us how to do all the things hunters need to know about. What else is there to learn?"

"Tannash, my child," Rass said, and Geb winced slightly, knowing that Tannash hated to be called "child". "Your father – my brother – is a wise man. That's what makes him a good leader of the tribe. He sends you to me because he sees the value of knowledge. The fathers of our fathers, and mothers of our mothers spent their whole lives moving from place to place to find food. But they learned things that made life better, like how to make ice-pits, to keep meat fresh in the winter. And so now we don't have to roam the land like mammoth herds all year round." They'd heard all this before, many times. It was more Tannash than Geb who needed convincing. Tannash loved the rough and tumble games, like wrestling and tracking, climbing and

throwing, but she was less interested than Geb in knowing about the world.

"I think I can see Uncle Gagba!" Tannash said suddenly, pointing at the line of hunters, snaking its way along the valley. They could indeed see individual people now, and could begin to work out who was who. Their Uncle Gagba was the mighty figure at the front. He usually led the hunting expeditions these days while their father, the tribal leader, stayed behind in the village.

On his feet again, Geb said, "I'll bet they've seen some far-off places. I'll bet they've fought beasts we can't even imagine!" He grabbed his spear and jabbed at imaginary enemies. Tannash grabbed her spear too and stood beside him. Together, they imagined themselves bringing down a mammoth. Scrim rose and became the mammoth, making his huge arms swing like the angry beast's tusks. "Kill it!" Geb shouted, and he pointed his spear at Scrim.

Tannash switched sides. "I'll defend you, Scrim!" she cried, and stood beside him, her spear pointed at Geb.

"Oh, it's like that is it, sister?" Geb said, and scowled in mock anger. "Well, I'll take you both on!" And so the pretend battle raged, until Rass stepped in and skilfully knocked the spears from their hands

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with her staff. Laughing as she retrieved her weapon, Tannash said, "How *do* you do that, Rass?" But Rass just gave her a mysterious smile.

Geb, who was secretly a little cross with himself whenever Rass bested him, said, "One day, I'm going to be a great hunter, like Uncle Gagba!"

Rass scratched her chin and said, "I hope you'll be a great leader, like your father."

Scrim poked the fire with a stick, and sat down beside it again.

"Can we go now, Rass?" Geb pleaded, excited to see his uncle; the hunters had been away for many days, and so had he and Tannash. "If we set off now, we might beat them back to the village."

"Yes," Rass said at last. "Go to the village. I will come too, to see my brothers and hear the news, but don't wait for me. My old legs don't go as fast as yours."

"Scrim could carry you," Geb said, only half joking. Scrim was shorter than all of them, but frighteningly strong. But they all knew Scrim would not be coming with her; he was not welcome in the village. Scrim shifted his feet and said nothing. "Go on," Rass commanded, "off you go."

"Thank you," Tannash grinned, and hugged Rass. She gave Scrim a kiss on his wrinkled forehead and

his strange, chinless face gave its own version of a smile. "Sorry you can't come with us, Scrim," she said. "We'll be back soon though," she assured him.

"See you soon, friend," Geb said, patting Scrim's mighty shoulders. "Rass will be back by nightfall. You can have a day of peace and quiet, all by yourself." But he knew Scrim would prefer to be coming with them. He lingered awkwardly, trying to think of something better to say, until Scrim said, "Go," and grinned his toothy grin.

Geb laughed, and he and Tannash headed off, away from this tranquil little bowl of grassland half way up the mountainside where Scrim and Rass spent their days.

"Bring meat," Scrim called after them.

Trouble

Running along the hilltop ridge, they could see the hunting party on the valley floor, far below. The hunting party would be weighed down with deer and elk, and maybe even sabre-toothed cat, so Geb and Tannash had no difficulty outpacing them. Winter was approaching, so the migrating mammoth herds would be arriving in the valley soon, and Geb was hopeful that some might be in the area already. Perhaps the hunters would be bringing mammoth meat home with them.

"Come on, little sister," Geb called over his shoulder. "Keep up! Or should I carry you?"

In reality, Tannash was having no trouble keeping up with him. She was right on his heels. "I'd like to see you try," she said. "It's me who should be carrying you!" And to prove it, she barged past him, and sped off in front.

They entertained themselves with cheerful rivalry for the rest of the journey, first one leading, then the other, taking it in turns to shove each other and deliver a jibe.

The sun was high and the clouds breaking when they reached the village. High in the hills, the village

was partly surrounded by steep cliffs. There were caves under the crags, and huts on the grassy plateaux. A stream tumbled down over the rocks and rested in a pool, providing the hill-folk with water. From there, a stream meandered lazily through the village, then continued on its way down the forested slopes, into the valley.

Smoke rose from cooking fires and cave mouths, and people were gathering to welcome home the hunters who were already arriving. Exhausted from their own journey, Geb and Tannash entered the village red-faced and gasping. They were the children of the tribal leader, and their return did not go unnoticed: villagers bowed their heads in respect, and called their names in welcome. Geb and Tannash always enjoyed the attention. They hurried to the stream and quenched their thirst with a couple of handfuls of painfully cold water, wiped their faces and headed for their father's hut.

The hut was a large, sturdy structure of wood and hides, and their father, Balimar, was not in it.

"Let's wait," said Geb, settling on a pile of furs beside the fire. "We can surprise them!"

"Good idea," Tannash agreed. They made themselves comfortable on the wolf hides and beaver pelts. Their eyes adjusted to the smoky gloom, and

outside they could hear singing and drumming. Geb placed a bundle of sticks on the fire and watched the sparks spiral upwards. "I want to join the dancing," Tannash said after a while. "Are you coming?"

Geb's expression suggested he'd rather eat his own foot.

"Suit yourself," Tannash said, and nipped out through the wolf-hide flap. A moment later she popped her head back inside and said, "Don't tell them I'm here."

"Where else would you be?" Geb asked.

"Um... Say I'm sick, and have had to stay with Rass and Scrim."

"Alright," Geb said, amused. Tannash disappeared and Geb waited, alone. Reclining in the soft furs beside the warmth of the fire, his eyes began to close and his head lolled.

He almost leapt up from his soft seat as the angry voice of his Uncle Gagba erupted into the hut.

"By the clouds and the sun," Gagba was already roaring as he threw back the flap, "the nomads have to go!" The flickering fire seemed to flinch at his arrival, and a cold blast of air billowed round the dark interior. Geb watched Gagba and his father enter, knowing they'd have spotted the fire, but it would be a moment before their eyes had adjusted

enough to spot him in the shadows. Gagba was younger than Balimar, yet stronger and more powerful in almost every way. He was a man Geb admired.

"Hah! Look who's here!" Gagba said through his thick beard of grey and brown, breaking off his rant about the nomads as his eyes finally fell on Geb. "It is good to see you, boy!"

"Hello, Uncle," Geb said, standing. Gagba opened his arms and welcomed Geb into an embrace. Geb tried to make it a crushing one, to show how strong he was becoming. Gagba laughed when he realised what Geb was trying, and Geb felt himself lifted up and spun around, his hair brushing the wooden staves of the hut's sloping sides. "Trying to crush me, eh?" laughed Gagba, and Geb felt his uncle's thick arms tightening round him, crushing him in return. At last Geb was forced to cry out, and his uncle released him. Geb dropped to the ground, laughing, red faced and defeated. His father, Balimar, hoisted him to his feet, grinning too. "Gagba, be careful with my son," laughed Balimar. He was tall, like Geb. His hair was long and his beard was grey and full. "He's growing strong like his uncle," Balimar said, "but he's not there yet." Geb hugged his father.

"Where's that pesky sister of yours?" Gagba asked.

"Oh yes, um... She's not well," he began, but, as if she'd been magically summoned, the flap across the hut's entrance flew back and in burst Tannash. Her tousled hair was now tied into lots of little sprigs all over her head – the work of one of her friends, Geb assumed – and she beamed at the sight of her uncle.

"Tannash!" Gagba grinned. "It seems we just have to mention your name and you appear!"

"I was listening outside," she confessed cheekily, "waiting to hear what you said about me. 'Pesky' am I?"

"Exceedingly so," Gagba laughed, and they threw their arms around each other. Gagba suddenly began making choking noises, and fell to the ground, pretending to struggle for breath. "She crushes me like a bear!" he said to Geb. "Like a bear, I tell you!" They laughed, but Geb felt a spike of jealousy in his gut.

"Father," Tannash said, and hugged Balimar. It occurred to Geb that they had both greeted their uncle before greeting their father. Guiltily, he wondered if Balimar had minded that.

"Sit, Gagba," said Balimar, "and tell us about your expedition." They all sat, Geb's ribs aching from his

uncle's grip, but he felt cheered. Things were always much more fun when Uncle Gagba was around.

But the anger was back in Gagba's expression now. "The nomads are back," he said, prodding the fire's embers with a charred stick. "They attacked us."

"They attacked you?" Tannash gasped.

"Yes. No lives were lost; none of ours anyway. But this cannot go on, Balimar. They attack us; they hunt on our land. And when they are around, the deer and the elk go elsewhere."

"Hah!" Balimar laughed. "You like to blame them when your hunting expeditions don't go well!"

"No!" Gagba snapped back. "I like to blame them for hunting on our lands and attacking our hunters!" This was what happened every mammoth season: the nomads arrived, and Gagba flew into a fury. The nomads spent the whole season here, living in the caves on the opposite side of the valley, across the river. The mammoth herd would arrive soon and graze on the grass of the surrounding valleys, and the nomads, as well as Balimar's hill-folk, would hunt them. Soon, Gagba would be leading his hunters out and bringing back great quantities of mammoth meat, if the nomads didn't get to the mammoth herds first.

Chapter 2: Trouble

"Brother," said Balimar, taking a tone of appeasement with Gagba as he always did when Gagba was in a rage. "Tell me you did not cross the river. When the nomads are here, the land beyond the river is theirs, as we agreed."

"Don't talk to me about rivers, and boundaries, and agreements, Balimar," Gagba growled. "If the nomads want to hunt in this valley, they need to live in it all year round like we do. Until then, I will no longer respect the boundaries. The valley is ours, and I will take my hunters wherever I like."

Balimar looked exasperated at this. "So you *were* on their land?"

"Do you not listen to a word I say, brother?" Gagba retaliated. "If the nomads want to make it their permanent home, and help us tend the forest and drive away the dangerous beasts, then they must stay, and we can work together with them. But they do not. So I will hunt where I like, and if they attack us, they will suffer."

Balimar shook his head. His brother infuriated him.

"I don't know what to do with you," Balimar said, his voice becoming quiet and soft as it always did when he was angered. "You seem to love to be at war. We have lived in peace since we made agreements

with the nomads and other tribes several years ago. Do you miss the thrill of battle? Is that why you pick fights with the nomads, and blame them? Leave them be, Gagba. We have made an agreement with them. They only want to hunt the mammoth."

Gagba looked at Balimar and a flicker of fury made his lip curl for an instant.

"They only *want* the mammoth," Gagba said, "but the mammoth herds are thinning so they hunt our deer instead. And attack us!" Geb could see his uncle's point. No wonder he was so angry. "Each time we go out, we come back with less," Gagba said, "and yet Rass tells us the nomads are decreasing in number just like the mammoth. It doesn't make sense. I see no reason to tolerate them. If they are a dying breed, let's just finish them off and make it quick."

"So you'd have us go out and kill them all? In cold blood?"

"*They* attacked us!" Gagba spat back.

"You were on their land. I will not have you starting a war," Balimar said.

Geb watched the exchange. He knew what people were saying about Balimar: Balimar was a good man, yes, but he placed too much value on peace. Sometimes war was necessary, and some people said

Balimar had grown too weak to see that. Geb watched his Uncle Gagba admiringly. Gagba had fought in wars against other tribes. He had been a great hero and now he was a hunter upon whom the village depended.

"But Uncle," said Tannash, who was never afraid to say what she thought. "Rass says that the tribes must work together. She says we should hunt *with* the nomads, and share the spoils. If we both keep hunting the mammoth, the mammoth will all die, and then we'll have nothing to hunt."

"You've been spending too much time with Rass," Gagba interrupted, "and her little pet." He was referring to Scrim. Scrim was one of the nomads. Rass was rearing him as if he was her own. That appalled many of the hill-folk, including Gagba. "Rass thinks she has all the answers, but she doesn't. You can't work with the nomads. They are not like us." He said that with disgust, as if his own words tasted nasty. "Let's not forget what we hear from other tribes, about the nomads taking their children, and *eating* them." Geb and Tannash shared a glance: the stories were frightening, but Rass had always said they were untrue.

"Are you afraid of peace, Uncle?" Tannash chided with a sudden ferocity which almost made Geb jump.

"Are you worried the village won't need you anymore if there are no more wars?" Their uncle loved them both, but somehow, arguing with him seemed a bad idea to Geb.

Gagba turned his wild eyes towards Tannash. "Rass knows nothing, Tannash. Do not listen to her."

"Rass knows about peace, Uncle," Tannash said softly. Geb found himself envying his sister's firm mind. He'd heard this argument many times before, and couldn't decide what he thought. He didn't want the hill-folk to fight the nomads, but if the nomads were attacking the hunters and taking the animals, maybe that's what would have to happen.

"Enough," Balimar said sharply. "I will not have my own family fighting each other. The truth is, there are too many of us, both hill-folk *and* nomads. There are too many people in the valley, and not enough animals to hunt. Change is what is needed, not war. All our forefathers did was hunt, forage and *fight*, until people like Rass began to learn the ways of peace and co-operation."

At that moment, Gagba glanced at Geb and gave him a wink, as if the two of them had an understanding. Maybe Gagba had taken Geb's silence to mean he didn't agree with his father and Tannash. Geb had not made his mind up either way,

but his uncle's gesture warmed him. However, that was not the reason for his silence. The sound of the crowd outside had caught his attention. He was used to rowdy celebrations when the hunters came home. But he had suddenly realised that today the sounds were different from usual: there was a sinister portent in the voices. There was some singing, but there was also shouting and anger in the air.

"What's that noise?" Gagba said, holding up his hand to halt the argument. They could hear the drums beating out angry rhythms, and voices chanting and shouting. Gagba stood and went outside, and the others followed. The homecoming celebrations were continuing, but no longer were the people singing and chanting about the hunters' arrival. Now they were chanting about the nomads: "Drive the nomads out! Drive the nomads out!"

Geb and Tannash looked at each other.

"This is wrong," Tannash said, looking up at her brother. "The nomads do not deserve this." But Geb did not respond.