

The Hunt

By Eric Niewoehner

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From *The Missouri Chronicles*

Book #1: *The Tears of Kassakumeh*

Chapter 1: Fathers and Sons

Thank you for taking the time to review this short sample of Tears of Kassakumeh. It is the first book of The Missouri Chronicles, a series of historical fiction novels that will focus on the history of Missouri up to the Civil War. Tears begins with "Fathers and Sons", a chapter devoted to present a tribe that would eventually be called the Missouri. "The Hunt" is the first story, introducing two characters that will play a significant part in the story of the Missouri tribe. The time is c. 1620's.

The purpose of presenting this short story is to gather feedback regarding the story, both in regards to history as well as literary style.

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The Hunt

The broad river meandered through a valley so wide that it would take much of the morning to cross in a dugout and walk to the distant bluffs that lined the northern rim. The river flowed from the west to the east, the forested bluffs to the north, and the south rimmed with peculiar narrow ridges, covered by prairie grass. Beyond those ridges the rolling prairie painted the horizon.

Peshua stood alone at the west end of one of those ridges, gazing over the river valley with wonder. His small, tan body stood almost naked except for a breech cloth and a loose fitting shirt, hanging untied, exposing his smooth, hairless chest. His long, dark, hair gently waved in the soft morning breeze that carried the scent of the river, the prairie and the nearby forests. He was happy because his father was going to take him across the river with Sassashone and his son, Nashota. This was to be his first hunt, a day full of wonder.

For all of his short life he could remember spending his days about the village, walking in the prairie grass, climbing in the brush along the nearby creek, or scaling low-hanging limbs. But the world he gazed upon across the river valley inhabited campfire stories. He looked upon the far shore, covered in a mass of tall hardwood trees, with trunks so large that a man could not reach around them: the oak, hickory, ash and walnut. Peshua wondered what lay hidden beyond the bluffs. Today he would explore that mysterious land.

Eshkoteh walked up to his son. They both looked over the valley. Eshkoteh, slender and strong, dressed like Peshua, except he wrapped about his arms leather bands. His skin was marred with numerous scars, born not from war, but from life: scars from falling against a stone when a youth, a cut from a careless use of a stone knife while skinning an elk, and another gained from a skirmish with a man in the village long ago. He, too, was a happy man for he was going to teach his son how to hunt. This was his purpose in life and he was soon to begin a noble task. He signaled to his son to follow him.

They made their way down a steep path that meandered along the side of a smooth ridge dropping into the river valley, feeling their strength renewed by the fresh breezes of spring. The path wound through the underbrush and swampland forest that lined the river, until they reached the riverbank where their dugout rested. A hollowed out tree, the narrow vessel made a rather sturdy craft. If floods did not carry it away, the dugout could last for many years. Eshkoteh invited Peshua to help him move the boat, knowing that his son would take pride in helping even though he also knew that the craft weighed far too much for the young boy. Eshkoteh scooted the boat near the shore, placed his arrow, spear and a small pouch of gear into the dugout, then eased the dugout into the water.

"Get in, Peshua," he said as he motioned towards the boat with a hint of a smile on his face. Peshua hesitated at first, but then took a cautious step into the boat.

"Stay in the middle," Eshkoteh exhorted his son.

Peshua worked his way over the gear to the bow of the boat. Eshkoteh gave a strong push, waded into the water and climbed into the dugout. The young boy paddled with all his strength, his four strokes matching his father's singular, sweeping motion. The river flowed within its normal banks, but the current ran strong. Eshkoteh paddled hard, pointing the craft slightly upriver so as to keep it going straight. They

progressed halfway across when they could see behind them Sassashone and Nashota climbing into their dugout.

Peshua had been on the river many times, even to the opposite shore. But for some reason his heart quickened, for he knew this was a special journey. His slender arms worked vigorously in anticipation of embarking on a new adventure, to go beyond the opposite shoreline, deep into the forests.

The gentle bluffs now peeked through a dense forest and bottomland, a silent witness to a river unfettered, eternally active. Eshkoteh powered the dugout into a small channel that had carved itself into the bottomland. The dugout easily skirted through the waterway avoiding the trees that grew out of the water and the rotting trunks that had collapsed into the channel. Being early Spring, the greenery had not yet erupted to mask the bottomland. Nonetheless, an impenetrable veil of standing and windblown trees, dogwoods and brush lined the banks. They could not see more than a few yards into the undergrowth. They paddled a short distance before the channel ended. Peshua got out of the boat and steadied it as his father jumped out and waded to shore. Eshkoteh, with a powerful surge, pulled the dugout to dry ground.

"We will sit here and wait."

Peshua, as any boy, found sitting an arduous task. He got a stick and dug into the dirt. Eshkoteh looked down on him and smiled, thinking to himself, "I will have succeeded if I can teach him to sit still."

Sassashone and Nashota soon arrived and Eshkoteh and Peshua helped them unload their weapons and gear and pulled their dugout to dry ground. The two men then proceeded to carry the boats several yards from the water and set them in the brush upside down. They returned to the boys, looking back to see if the dugouts were visible. They looked no different than any other log that lay in the bottomland.

Nashota asked his father, "Why do you hide the dugouts? Will someone steal them?"

Sassashone responded as he loaded his gear onto his back, slinging his bow over his shoulder. "It is the way of our people not to steal the dugouts unless they are needed. I am more concerned about strangers and floods. If the water rises, the dugouts could float away unless we wedge them between trees."

They proceeded up a path, well worn by many human and animal feet. The men easily stepped over fallen trees, while the boys sometimes had to climb over them. The men would turn and laugh, Sassashone teasing his son, "You must keep up little one." But even as the path began to clear, the young boys would take two or three steps for every one step of the grown men. Although identical in height, Nashota was younger and bigger-bone than Peshua. Peshua was actually small for his age. For that reason, his father had delayed his training, allowing him time to grow and gain strength. Strength and endurance were the signs the fathers watched, not the age of the boys. Once embarking on a hunt, there was no turning back.

Peshua scurried up to his father, asking softly, as if he dared not to disrupt the birds singing in the trees. "Sassashone spoke of strangers. Have you seen strange people come by our village?"

Eshkoteh replied, "No. And that is a good thing. We have not had trouble with other tribes in my lifetime. But it was not always so. We must be prepared."

"Is that why you teach us to use our knives and hatchets?"

“Maybe so. But you will find knives, hatchets and mallets of more use fighting bears than men. I can teach you many things, Peshua. Only courage is one thing I cannot teach. That will be the hardest lesson to learn.”

Totally out of view arose shallow bluffs. Peshua was getting his first understanding of the illusion of distance. The bluffs did not seem that far as he looked over the river valley that morning. He glanced up to the sun, surprised at how far it had risen in the sky and yet no bluffs appeared. The sun shone almost straight up when the path came alongside the bluffs, almost surprising him, hardly detectable in the thick underbrush as the path skirted the base. Even then, towering trees emerged along the lower face, leaving only the whitened tops of the ridges exposed to the sun and elements.

Sassashone motioned to the boys to climb up a steep ravine covered by tall trees, carpeted in leaves and moss. The boys could feel, though, that underneath the cushion of debris lay sharp rocks. They stepped carefully, their moccasins wrapping around the larger stones, strengthening their hold on the rocks. They wound their way along the top of the ridge until they reached another ravine.

Standing along the bluffs edge, Peshua could see an eagle and two hawks soaring in the sky above. He turned and looked toward his village and beheld the awesome sight of his home. Small strands of smoke wandered into the sky against a backdrop of blue. In the distance Peshua could see wispy clouds in the southwestern horizon. But the broad, meandering river lay almost hidden, sheltered by a mile wide blanket of forest, swamp, backwater and ponds.

Eshkoteh climbed higher up the ridge. The rest followed him. He pointed to the west.

"We will walk to a place I know there is deer. Sassashone and I will teach you how to hunt the deer. The deer is the prize we bring home. Whatever Manitou grants us we will eat tonight."

Sassashone stood gazing at the horizon, a soft warm breeze slightly moving his long, dark hair. He and Eshkoteh were like all men of the Missouriia. They spoke little, and although he heard what Eshkoteh had said, he did not respond.

As Peshua walked he beheld a land much different than the prairie landscape that surrounded his village across the river. Wandering farther from the river, the steep ravines gave way to gentle slopes, the deep forests occasionally broken by stretches of prairie grass. The boys were glad to be away from the rocky soil as their feet had begun to hurt from the sharp stones. Peshua enjoyed the smells of spring, the scent of moist earth that could almost be heard as life sprung from the soil. The Spring flowers delicately bloomed in the forests, the prairie mostly a mat of dried grasses. Here and there, along the edge of a clearing, Peshua saw the flowering plum.

Later that afternoon the party came to a creek. Peshua beheld a common sight -- a beaver house. Eshkoteh pointed to it and whispered, "We do not hunt the beaver in spring, but wait till early winter when its fur is thickest. Tomorrow we may have the chance to watch the beaver and learn from it. Today, we must find food."

The deer was probably the most susceptible to being the recipient of an arrowhead. While the deer sprinted fast and could bound over logs with ease, it was essentially blind. With poor vision, it had to rely on its hearing and smell for sensing danger. An animal with predictable movements, the herds of deer created clear paths through the forest that the natives often used for trails. Elk were similarly

predictable, but tended to keep to the open prairie. The size of the elk, combined with its preference for open ground, required several men to stalk and surround the majestic animal, and rarely did the beast fall without several arrows and spears. The deer, on the other hand, could be felled with one lethal shot. This animal provided enough to feed a family for some time and its skin made ideal clothing.

The next day, as the mist of dawn gathered from the ravines, Peshua prepared to learn his next lesson. The fathers laughed as they watched their boys struggle to light a fire. Sassashone knelt to the ground, using a small rod, bow and block of wood to generate enough friction to ignite a coal. The boys soon took over the task, adding the right amount of tender to feed the flames, as the fathers stood back and watched, with a hint of pride that their boys were learning a vital skill. After a small breakfast of rabbit left over from the previous meal, Sassashone and Nashota departed in one direction as Eshkoteh and his son headed in the opposite direction. Eshkoteh walked to a part of the forest where he knew he would find a deer trail. They followed it to a brook.

"Taste it," Eshkoteh pointed to the brook upstream from where the hoof marks disappeared into the stream. Peshua cupped his hand into the water and tasted.

"It is salty," as Peshua's face contorted from the bitter taste.

"Yes. And animals love salt. Now come here and help me identify the tracks in the mud."

Peshua walked over to his father and observed the hundreds of track marks in the mud. "I see deer. This is the raccoon. And here is the coyote. And this is the bear!"

"Good. But that is not coyote. It is likely the wolf. There are no elk tracks, so we must wait for another time for you to learn to tell the track of the elk from that of the deer. Now, how long ago was this track made?"

Peshua looked at a track that was still distinct, its cavity still sweating out moisture from the earth. "This morning."

"Good! And this one?"

The imprint appeared not as sharp. While obviously a deer track, its edges were worn. "A few days."

"Probably three days. And this one?"

This track was almost faded, its shape studded with pockmarks made by falling debris and rain. Peshua thought. "It rained about four days ago. At least four days old?"

"I think you are right. It was not a heavy rain, so the track still exists. You are learning well. You will learn to kill the deer and feed your family just like your father. But now we must learn the hardest lesson of all, to be silent, to be a tree in the forest. Where are we to sit and wait for the deer?"

Peshua pointed to a gentle rise. "There. We can see the brook and trail. And there are few trees to block the path of our arrows."

"How does the deer see us?"

"You said with his nose and ears."

"Yes. His nose. Which way is the wind blowing?"

Peshua picked up a fine tuft of grass and tossed it in the air. It blew in the direction opposite from the gentle rise. "The wind is blowing that way."

"So, if we sit on that rise, our scent will travel over the brook and the deer will know we are near. We must sit over there." Eshkoteh pointed in the opposite direction where another rise graced the stream bank.

They picked up their bows and spears and headed up the bank. Eshkoteh pointed to a tree. "The hard part is to sit so that the animals do not see us. We will make the brush our friend. Lean against this tree. Keep low and *listen*. You do not need to stare at the brook. Just rest against the tree and listen."

Peshua watched his father sit and rest against a tree. Next to their trees grew a line of saplings and brush that his father had used to some advantage. His father practiced lining up his bow so that he could get a straight shot. Peshua did the same, but with difficulty. Brush was the hunter's greatest adversary for they deflected the flight of the arrow. But he observed his father using it as an ally to allow him to move closer to his prey. Once they had finished lining up their shots, Eshkoteh motioned his son to rest by his tree. And so they sat and listened. Peshua wanted to toy with the acorns that lay on the ground, but his father sternly looked at him and motioned him to be still and pointed to his ears.

So Peshua did what he did not want to do, but yet what he wished to do. He wished to hunt like his father. It was not easy. While the morning was young, Peshua would learn the sound of the forest in silence: the wind in the branches, the scuttle of the squirrel, the sound of the gentle brook, and a dozen different bird calls. He heard on occasion a different sound, thinking it was a deer. But his father lay still as a rock, either napping or staring into the sky above. He wondered what his father was thinking.

Their lesson had begun in the early morning, the mist clinging to the earth cool and wet. As the sun worked its way above the horizon, the mist faded and the sky above turned blue again. When he least expected it he saw his father's eyes open and slowly peek around the base of the oak tree. Peshua copied his father's every movement. How his father could ever know an animal walked nearby was beyond him. But sure enough, through the gently swaying branches of the brush, Peshua could see a deer wading into the water. His father slowly raised his bow. Peshua did likewise. Eshkoteh fired, so did Peshua. Eshkoteh's arrow penetrated the neck of the animal. Peshua's arrow hit the animal as well, but bounced off the skin. In almost the same motion, Eshkoteh sprung from his hiding place as the startled deer lunged out of the creek and began running downstream. But the animal faltered in shock, a step slower, too slow for the sudden plunge of Eshkoteh's spear. The animal staggered for several yards and then dropped.

Eshkoteh stood over the deer, panting heavily. He gave a great sigh and with his face turned toward heaven, hands outstretched, he gave a joyous yelp that echoed through the forest.

The rest of the morning Eshkoteh spent teaching Peshua how to preserve the deer meat and to utilize the hide to the greatest advantage.

"If we were closer to home, this would be the task of your mother and sister. But we must smoke the meat and form the skin into a pack in which we can carry the meat. In the village your mother would prize the bones, cooking them in soup and using them for needles, spoons and such. But we will use the skin and lay the bones in the woods."

Peshua watched his father begin to separate the skin from the flesh. He had watched his father earlier in the morning prune saplings to construct an elaborate spit. His father took strips of the meat and placed it on the spit.

"Can I try?"

"Yes you may. Take your knife and do as I do for the other side of the deer."

Peshua picked up his knife, a prized gift he had received from his father two years ago. Wedged into the end of deer horn was tied a sharp arrowhead, a tiny, sculpted rock that his father had painstakingly crafted. But despite its sharpness, Peshua learned that it took strength to cut away the meat. His hands became soaked with the blood of the animal, but he pressed on. He grew tired after a period of time and walked over to his father's side. Eshkoteh had filled the spit with strips of meat and had begun the process of weaving other saplings around it, compressing the strips so that they would not fall out. He then placed the spit over the smoking fire.

His father smiled at Peshua.

"Not finished?"

"It is hard."

"Yes, it is. You will become stronger. Let us go out and cut more branches. We will probably end up making about three or four spits before the end of this day."

So Peshua followed his father into the brush and watched him cut the small willow saplings that grew along the creek bottom where they had camped. Eshkoteh utilized his stone ax to cut the saplings and to trim them to length. Peshua was not strong enough to effectively wield the ax, but his father put him to work carrying the strips of wood.

The sun was past mid-afternoon when Eshkoteh had finished trimming the meat. He returned to the original spit and cut out some smoked meat and gave it to Peshua. "Try this, my son."

The meat had a strong taste typical of wild game. The lean meat had dried substantially during the smoking process, but still tender enough to eat. It was delicious to Peshua, with no salt or spices of any kind. Eshkoteh smiled at his son as they chewed the meat.

The two rested for a while before returning to their next task. Eshkoteh had found two strong saplings that sat a few feet from each other. He retrieved from his pack long strips of hide. He supplemented this with additional strips he cut from the skin. With these he tied the hide on four corners to the adjacent saplings, then progressively tightened the strings to stretch the hide.

"We will let the hide dry today. Then we will take this stone and rub it over the inside part of the skin, to soften it. When it is dried it will make a good pack in which we can store the meat. Sassashone and Nashota may bring more meat. We can only take back what two grown men and two little boys can carry." Eshkoteh smiled at this son with a gleam in his eyes. "Want to go fishing?"

"I like that."

"Catch frogs, maybe?"

"Sure".

"What about turtle?"

"That, too."

"We must wait for Sassashone and Nashota. Someone will have to watch the meat. "

To their good fortune their comrades soon appeared with enough fish to feed them all that night. They agreed to watch the campsite. Eshkoteh and Peshua departed after lunching on some venison, reaching a nearby shallow, slow moving stream.

Eshkoteh now taught his son about life around the stream. In their walk down the stream they found the beaver lodge and, from a hiding place, watched the beaver with their young. They laughed when they decided to step in the open and the beaver slapped their tails into the water.

Further down the creek they spied the otter. The otter was not as cautious as the beaver and it viewed the two humans with curiosity while keeping a safe distance. They had disturbed its meal, as it lay on its back breaking open a clam shell.

Along the muddy banks Eshkoteh did not need to teach his son much about how and where to find various animals. Under an overturned rock Peshua located a ringnecked snake, a tiny creature that played in his hand. He found newts and numerous frogs. His father pulled him aside along a deep pool and whispered to him, "Another lesson in waiting. Watch."

As they sat motionless on this pleasantly warm day, Eshkoteh pointed his finger to the opposite bank and softly whispered, "See the big frog?"

Peshua looked for some time before finally locating a pair of eyes peaking over some floating debris in a still pool. Eshkoteh nodded towards Peshua's bow, which the young boy held in his hand. With almost imperceptible motion, Peshua quietly retrieved his arrow and placed it into the bow and carefully aimed. Aiming for the eyes, his arrow suddenly took flight over the narrow creek. The arrow seemed to have hit its mark in an explosion of water and motion. Eshkoteh sprung to his feet and dashed across the creek to find the arrow firmly implanted in the frogs head. He lifted the arrow and the animal in the air as Peshua waded across the creek.

Peshua smiled and laughed, turned his head toward heaven, with his arms outstretched, and gave a hearty yelp. Eshkoteh followed his example.