

## CHAPTER 5 — Woodpecker and the Theft of Fire

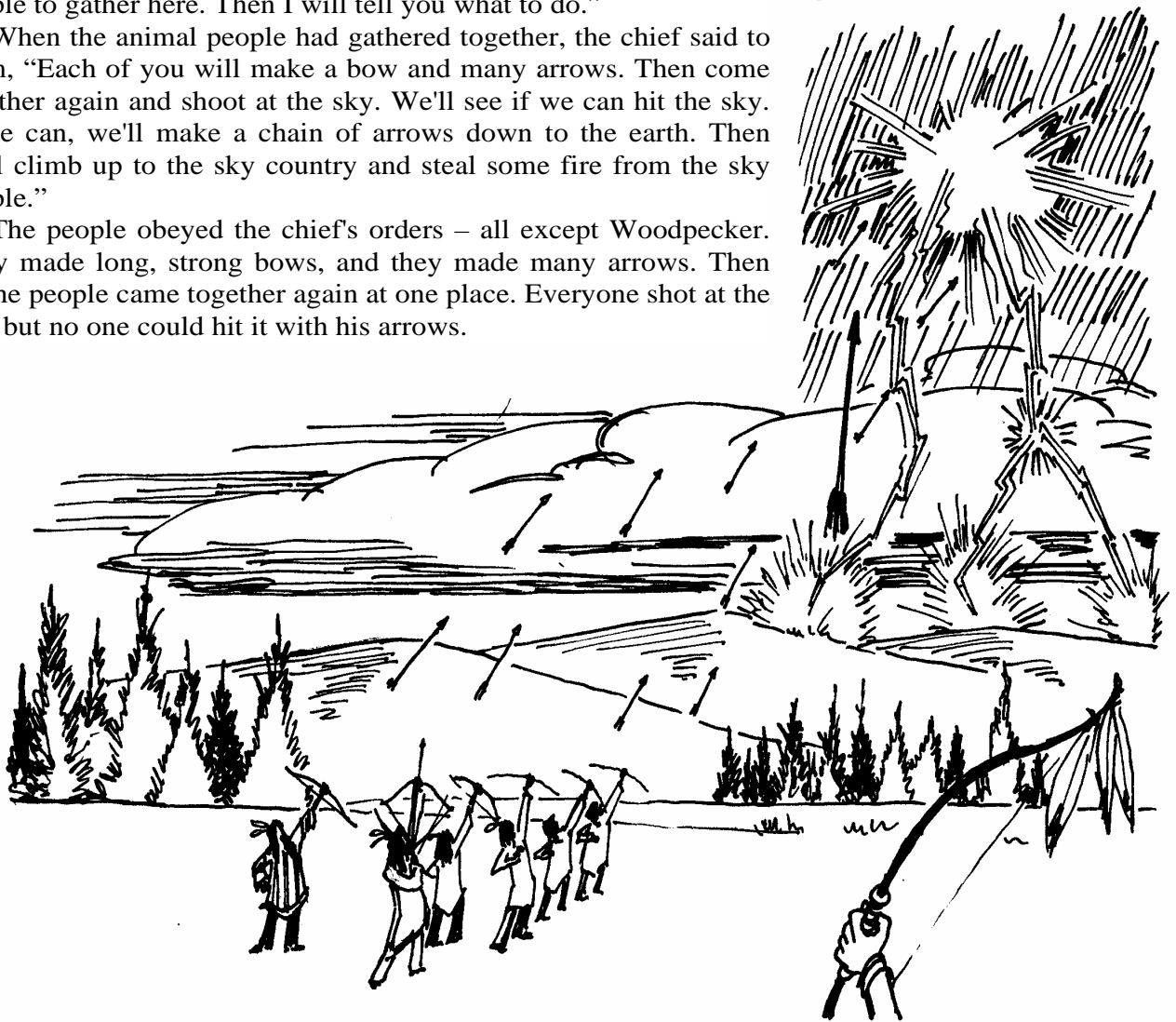
*Probably every North American Indian tribe told a myth about the origin of fire, as did early people in all parts of the world. The following story was a favorite among several tribes of the West. Woodpecker's part in it was sometimes taken by Chickadee, sometimes by Sapsucker, sometimes by Wren.*

**L**ong, long ago, in the days of the animal people, there was no fire on the earth. There was fire in the sky, but none on the earth.

One day the chief of the animal people said to those near him, "Let us go up to the sky country and try to get some fire. Tell all the people to gather here. Then I will tell you what to do."

When the animal people had gathered together, the chief said to them, "Each of you will make a bow and many arrows. Then come together again and shoot at the sky. We'll see if we can hit the sky. If we can, we'll make a chain of arrows down to the earth. Then we'll climb up to the sky country and steal some fire from the sky people."

The people obeyed the chief's orders – all except Woodpecker. They made long, strong bows, and they made many arrows. Then all the people came together again at one place. Everyone shot at the sky, but no one could hit it with his arrows.





Then Woodpecker decided to get busy. First he made a bow from the rib of Elk. Then he made some arrows from the stems of serviceberry bushes.

“Where can I get some feathers for my arrows?” Woodpecker asked himself. He saw Golden Eagle, and then he saw Bald Eagle.

Woodpecker said to Bald Eagle, “Golden Eagle has been saying mean things about you.”

Bald Eagle flew straight at Golden Eagle and began to fight him with his strong bill. That was just what Woodpecker wanted. Soon feathers were dropping from the two eagles fighting high in the air. Many feathers dropped.

Woodpecker spread out a mat and gathered all of them. He took all of the feathers home with him and fastened them to his arrows. Soon he had two big bags full of nice feathered arrows.

“Now, where can I get some points for my arrows?” Woodpecker asked his grandmother.

“Go to see Flint Rock and Hard Rock,” his grandmother told him. Woodpecker went. And he said to Flint Rock, “Hard Rock has been saying mean things about you.”

Then Hard Rock and Flint Rock began to fight. That was just what Woodpecker wanted. Hard Rock broke Flint Rock into little pieces. Woodpecker took all the flint chips home with him and used them as arrowheads.

Woodpecker knew that in two days the animal people were going to have another meeting. They would try again to reach the sky with their arrows. So after two days Woodpecker went toward the shooting place with his two bags of arrows. When he got there, he saw Coyote.

“Why have you come?” asked Coyote. “You can’t shoot.”  
“I came to look on.”

Coyote looked at Woodpecker’s bow and said, “That won’t shoot anywhere.”

All the people laughed at Woodpecker. “You can’t shoot as far as the sky,” they said.

The chief was a wise and kind chief. “Don’t make fun of Woodpecker,” he said. “He may shoot better than you think. I will call him when his time comes.”

Then the chief called on each animal, one at a time, to shoot at the sky. But no one’s arrow reached that far. At last Woodpecker’s turn came. When the chief called him, Woodpecker dropped his two bags of arrows on the ground and put a string in his bow.

“Watch me,” he said, and he shot an arrow toward the sky. It went so high that it disappeared from sight. Everyone watched and waited. The arrow did not come down. Woodpecker shot another arrow. It disappeared from sight and did not come down. He kept on shooting until he had emptied one bag of arrows. By that time the animal people could see the end of the chain of arrows.

Then Woodpecker started to shoot the second bag of arrows. The people could see that each arrow stuck in the neck of the preceding arrow. When Woodpecker had emptied his second bag, the last arrow was still a long distance from the ground.

“Take some of the other people's arrows,” said the chief.

Woodpecker shot from the other animals' bags until the chain reached the ground. Then, one by one, all the animals started up the arrow chain toward the sky. Golden Eagle was the first. The others followed him. Grizzly Bear was the last.

“I'll take some food along with me,” said Grizzly Bear.” We don't know what we are getting into.”

So he filled a large bag with food and fastened it across his back. Then he took hold of the bottom arrow of the chain. He and his bag of food were so heavy that the arrow broke in two. He took hold of the second arrow. It broke in two. He broke the first five arrows that way. He could not reach the sixth one, so Grizzly Bear did not go up to the sky country.

By sunset all the other animal people were in the sky world.

“Let's all look around,” said Woodpecker. “Let's not stay bunched together. If we go one by one, some of us will be sure to find fire.”

So the animals separated, and each one got some fire. As they started back toward the arrow chain, they saw the sky people coming after them. And they found that the chain of arrows was broken.

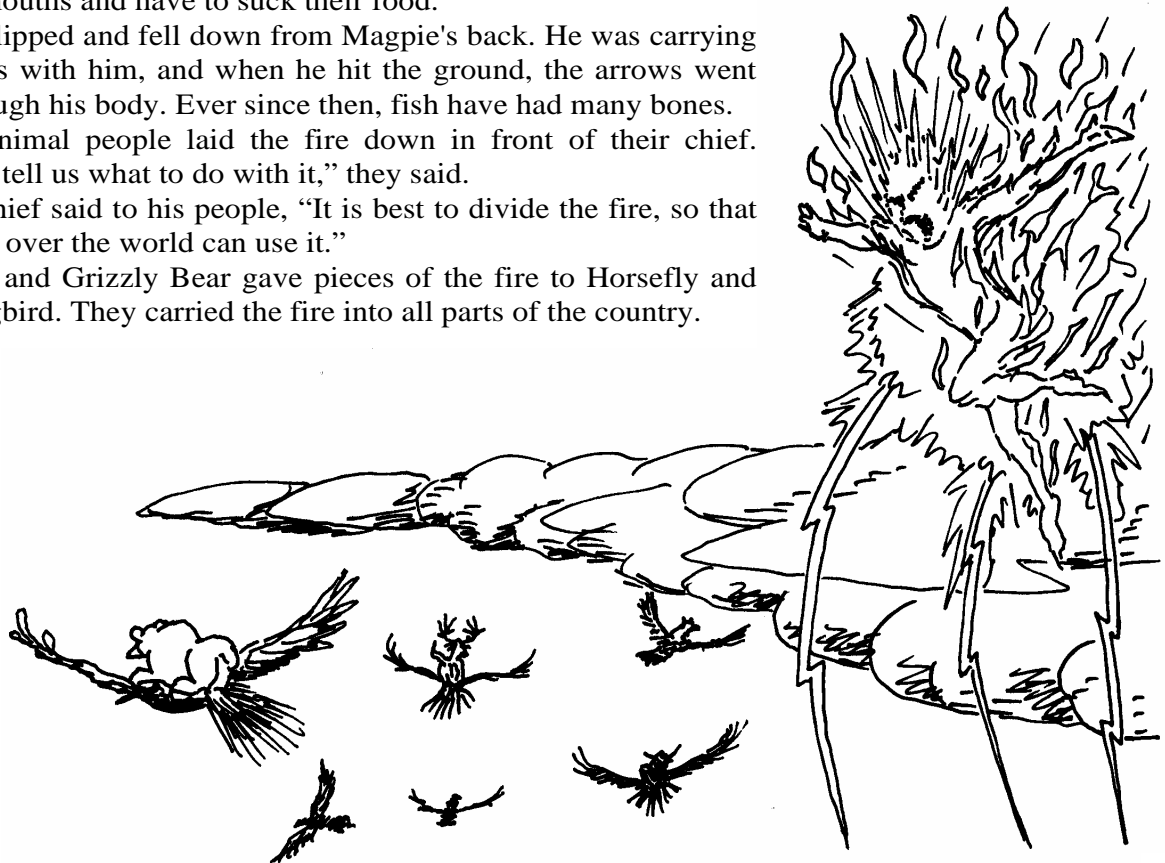
“Quick!” said Eagle. “Each bird will take an animal on his back and fly down to earth with him.” That is the way the animals got down to earth again. Sapsucker was afraid to fly, and so he jumped. He hit the ground with his mouth. Ever since then, sapsuckers have had flat mouths and have to suck their food.

Fish slipped and fell down from Magpie's back. He was carrying his arrows with him, and when he hit the ground, the arrows went right through his body. Ever since then, fish have had many bones.

The animal people laid the fire down in front of their chief. “You can tell us what to do with it,” they said.

The chief said to his people, “It is best to divide the fire, so that people all over the world can use it.”

So he and Grizzly Bear gave pieces of the fire to Horsefly and Hummingbird. They carried the fire into all parts of the country.



### **How Well Did You Read and Understand the Story?**

*Hint: The author can use subtle ways to convince us to like or dislike a character. It is the reader's job to see if the author's descriptions are reliable. Be sure that you have all the facts before you form an opinion!*

1. Where does Woodpecker gather the materials he needed for his bow and arrows?
2. Why do fish have so many bones?
3. Woodpecker tells two lies in the story. What two lies does he tell?
4. Do you think it is ever alright to tell lies in order to help your friends? Why or why not?
5. Who plays the most important role in the legend? Why do you think so?
6. Think of a book, story, or movie where the main character is underestimated. How does he or she prove that he or she can accomplish what others think they can't? (Maybe the main character is you!)
7. How does Woodpecker change throughout the story? Would you rather be like Woodpecker at the beginning of the story or Woodpecker at the end of the story? Why?
8. Did this story end the way you expected it to? If you said yes, list some of the clues the author gave you. If you said no, find the parts the author used to throw you off.
9. When the animal people bring the fire to their chief, he tells them to divide it. Imagine that he decided they would not share it with anybody else, and create your own ending to the story.
10. Imagine that the author of this story is on the phone with you. He wants to know how he could rewrite the introduction to make it more exciting. What would you tell him?