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Chapter 3 - The Fight for the Balu

TEEKA HAD BECOME a mother. Tarzan of the Apes was intensely interested, much more so, in fact, than Taug, the father. Tarzan was very fond of Teeka. Even the cares of prospective motherhood had not entirely quenched the fires of carefree youth, and Teeka had remained a good-natured playmate even at an age when other shes of the tribe of Kerchak had assumed the sullen dignity of maturity. She yet retained her childish delight in the primitive games of tag and hide-and-go-seek which Tarzan's fertile man-mind had evolved.

To play tag through the tree tops is an exciting and inspiring pastime. Tarzan delighted in it, but the bulls of his childhood had long since abandoned such childish practices. Teeka, though, had been keen for it always until shortly before the baby came; but with the advent of her first-born, even Teeka changed.

The evidence of the change surprised and hurt Tarzan immeasurably. One morning he saw Teeka squatted upon a low branch hugging something very close to her hairy breast-- a wee something which squirmed and wriggled. Tarzan approached filled with the curiosity which is common to all creatures endowed with brains which have progressed beyond the microscopic stage.

Teeka rolled her eyes in his direction and strained the squirming mite still closer to her. Tarzan came nearer. Teeka drew away and bared her fangs. Tarzan was nonplussed. In all his experiences with Teeka, never before had she bared fangs at him other than in play; but today she did not look playful. Tarzan ran his brown fingers through his thick, black hair, cocked his head upon one side, and stared. Then he edged a bit nearer, craning his neck to have a better look at the thing which Teeka cuddled.

Again Teeka drew back her upper lip in a warning snarl. Tarzan reached forth a hand, cautiously, to touch the thing which Teeka held, and Teeka, with a hideous growl, turned suddenly upon him. Her teeth sank into the flesh of his forearm before the ape-man could snatch it away, and she pursued him for a short distance as he retreated inconspicuously through the trees; but Teeka, carrying her baby, could not overtake him. At a safe distance Tarzan stopped and turned to regard his erstwhile play-fellow in unconcealed astonishment. What had happened to so alter the gentle Teeka? She had so covered the thing in her arms that Tarzan had not yet been able to recognize it for what it was; but now, as she turned from the pursuit of him, he saw it. Through his pain and chagrin he smiled, for Tarzan had seen young ape mothers before. In a few days she would be less suspicious. Still Tarzan was hurt; it was not right that Teeka, of all others, should fear him. Why, not for the world would he harm her, or her balu, which is the ape word for baby.

And now, above the pain of his injured arm and the hurt to his pride, rose a still stronger desire to come close and inspect the new-born son of Taug. Possibly you will wonder that Tarzan of the Apes, mighty fighter that he was, should have fled before the irritable attack of a she, or that he should hesitate to return for the satisfaction of his curiosity when with ease he might have vanquished the weakened mother of the new-born cub; but you need not wonder. Were you an ape, you would know that only a bull in the throes of madness will turn upon a female other than to gently chastise her, with the occasional exception of the individual whom we find exemplified among our own kind, and who delights in beating up his better half because she happens to be smaller and weaker than he.

Tarzan again came toward the young mother--warily and with his line of retreat safely open. Again Teeka growled ferociously. Tarzan expostulated.

"Tarzan of the Apes will not harm Teeka's balu," he said. "Let me see it."

"Go away!" commanded Teeka. "Go away, or I will kill you."

"Let me see it," urged Tarzan.

"Go away," reiterated the she-ape. "Here comes Taug. He will make you go away. Taug will kill you. This is Taug's balu."

A savage growl close behind him apprised Tarzan of the nearness of Taug, and the fact that the bull had heard the warnings and threats of his mate and was coming to her succor.

Now Taug, as well as Teeka, had been Tarzan's play-fellow while the bull was still young enough to wish to play. Once Tarzan had saved Taug's life; but the memory of an ape is not overlong, nor would gratitude rise above the parental instinct. Tarzan and Taug had once measured strength, and Tarzan had been victorious. That fact Taug could be depended upon still to remember; but even so, he might readily face another defeat for his first-born--if he chanced to be in the proper mood.

From his hideous growls, which now rose in strength and volume, he seemed to be in quite the mood. Now Tarzan felt no fear of Taug, nor did the unwritten law of the jungle demand that he should flee from battle with any male, unless he cared to from purely personal reasons. But Tarzan liked Taug. He had no grudge against him, and his man-mind told him what the mind of an ape would never have deduced-- that Taug's attitude in no sense indicated hatred. It was but the instinctive urge of the male to protect its offspring and its mate.

Tarzan had no desire to battle with Taug, nor did the blood of his English ancestors relish the thought of flight, yet when the bull charged, Tarzan leaped nimbly to one side, and thus encouraged, Taug wheeled and rushed again madly to the attack. Perhaps the memory of a past defeat at Tarzan's hands goaded him. Perhaps the fact that Teeka sat there watching him aroused a desire to vanquish the ape-man before her eyes, for in the breast of every jungle male lurks a vast egotism which finds expression in the performance of deeds of derring-do before an audience of the opposite sex.

At the ape-man's side swung his long grass rope--the play-thing of yesterday, the weapon of today--and as Taug charged the second time, Tarzan slipped the coils over his head and deftly shook out the sliding noose as he again nimbly eluded the ungainly beast. Before the ape could turn again, Tarzan had fled far aloft among the branches of the upper terrace.

Taug, now wrought to a frenzy of real rage, followed him. Teeka peered upward at them. It was difficult to say whether she was interested. Taug could not climb as rapidly as Tarzan, so the latter reached the high levels to which the heavy ape dared not follow before the former overtook him. There he halted and looked down upon his pursuer, making faces at him and calling him such choice names as occurred to the fertile man-brain. Then, when he had worked Taug to such a pitch of foaming rage that the great bull fairly danced upon the bending limb beneath him, Tarzan's hand shot suddenly outward, a widening noose dropped swiftly through the air, there was a quick

jerk as it settled about Taug, falling to his knees, a jerk that tightened it securely about the hairy legs of the anthropoid.

Taug, slow of wit, realized too late the intention of his tormentor. He scrambled to escape, but the ape-man gave the rope a tremendous jerk that pulled Taug from his perch, and a moment later, growling hideously, the ape hung head downward thirty feet above the ground.

Tarzan secured the rope to a stout limb and descended to a point close to Taug.

"Taug," he said, "you are as stupid as Buto, the rhinoceros. Now you may hang here until you get a little sense in your thick head. You may hang here and watch while I go and talk with Teeka."

Taug blustered and threatened, but Tarzan only grinned at him as he dropped lightly to the lower levels. Here he again approached Teeka only to be again greeted with bared fangs and menacing growls. He sought to placate her; he urged his friendly intentions, and craned his neck to have a look at Teeka's balu; but the she-ape was not to be persuaded that he meant other than harm to her little one. Her motherhood was still so new that reason was yet subservient to instinct.

Realizing the futility of attempting to catch and chastise Tarzan, Teeka sought to escape him. She dropped to the ground and lumbered across the little clearing about which the apes of the tribe were disposed in rest or in the search of food, and presently Tarzan abandoned his attempts to persuade her to permit a close examination of the balu. The ape-man would have liked to handle the tiny thing. The very sight of it awakened in his breast a strange yearning. He wished to cuddle and fondle the grotesque little ape-thing. It was Teeka's balu and Tarzan had once lavished his young affections upon Teeka.

But now his attention was diverted by the voice of Taug. The threats that had filled the ape's mouth had turned to pleas. The tightening noose was stopping the circulation of the blood in his legs--he was beginning to suffer. Several apes sat near him highly interested in his predicament. They made uncomplimentary remarks about him, for each of them had felt the weight of Taug's mighty hands and the strength of his great jaws. They were enjoying revenge.

Teeka, seeing that Tarzan had turned back toward the trees, had halted in the center of the clearing, and there she sat hugging her balu and casting suspicious glances here and there. With the coming of the balu, Teeka's care-free world had suddenly become peopled with innumerable enemies. She saw an implacable foe in Tarzan, always heretofore her best friend. Even poor old Mumga, half blind and almost entirely toothless, searching patiently for grubworms beneath a fallen log, represented to her a malignant spirit thirsting for the blood of little balus.

And while Teeka guarded suspiciously against harm, where there was no harm, she failed to note two baleful, yellow-green eyes staring fixedly at her from behind a clump of bushes at the opposite side of the clearing.

Hollow from hunger, Sheeta, the panther, glared greedily at the tempting meat so close at hand, but the sight of the great bulls beyond gave him pause.

Ah, if the she-ape with her balu would but come just a trifle nearer! A quick spring and he would be upon them and away again with his meat before the bulls could prevent.

The tip of his tawny tail moved in spasmodic little jerks; his lower jaw hung low, exposing a red tongue and yellow fangs. But all this Teeka did not see, nor did any other of the apes who were feeding or resting about her. Nor did Tarzan or the apes in the trees.

Hearing the abuse which the bulls were pouring upon the helpless Taug, Tarzan clambered quickly among them. One was edging closer and leaning far out in an effort to reach the dangling ape. He had worked himself into quite a fury through recollection of the last occasion upon which Taug had mauled him, and now he was bent upon revenge. Once he had grasped the swinging ape, he would quickly have drawn him within reach of his jaws. Tarzan saw and was wroth. He loved a fair fight, but the thing which this ape contemplated revolted him. Already a hairy hand had clutched the helpless Taug when, with an angry growl of protest, Tarzan leaped to the branch at the attacking ape's side, and with a single mighty cuff, swept him from his perch.

Surprised and enraged, the bull clutched madly for support as he toppled sidewise, and then with an agile movement succeeded in projecting himself toward another limb a few feet below. Here he found a hand-hold, quickly righted himself, and as quickly clambered upward to be revenged upon Tarzan, but the ape-man was otherwise engaged and did not wish to be interrupted. He was explaining again to Taug the depths of the latter's abysmal ignorance, and pointing out how much greater and mightier was Tarzan of the Apes than Taug or any other ape.

In the end he would release Taug, but not until Taug was fully acquainted with his own inferiority. And then the maddened bull came from beneath, and instantly Tarzan was transformed from a good-natured, teasing youth into a snarling, savage beast. Along his scalp the hair bristled: his upper lip drew back that his fighting fangs might be uncovered and ready. He did not wait for the bull to reach him, for something in the appearance or the voice of the attacker aroused within the ape-man a feeling of belligerent antagonism that would not be denied. With a scream that carried no human note, Tarzan leaped straight at the throat of the attacker.

The impetuosity of this act and the weight and momentum of his body carried the bull backward, clutching and clawing for support, down through the leafy branches of the tree. For fifteen feet the two fell, Tarzan's teeth buried in the jugular of his opponent, when a stout branch stopped their descent. The bull struck full upon the small of his back across the limb, hung there for a moment with the ape-man still upon his breast, and then toppled over toward the ground.

Tarzan had felt the instantaneous relaxation of the body beneath him after the heavy impact with the tree limb, and as the other turned completely over and started again upon its fall toward the ground, he reached forth a hand and caught the branch in time to stay his own descent, while the ape dropped like a plummet to the foot of the tree.

Tarzan looked downward for a moment upon the still form of his late antagonist, then he rose to his full height, swelled his deep chest, smote upon it with his clenched fist, and roared out the uncanny challenge of the victorious bull ape.

Even Sheeta, the panther, crouched for a spring at the edge of the little clearing, moved uneasily as the mighty voice sent its weird cry reverberating through the jungle. To right and left, nervously, glanced Sheeta, as though assuring himself that the way of escape lay ready at hand.

"I am Tarzan of the Apes," boasted the ape-man; "mighty hunter, mighty fighter! None in all the jungle so great as Tarzan."

Then he made his way back in the direction of Taug. Teeka had watched the happenings in the tree. She had even placed her precious balu upon the soft grasses and come a little nearer that she might better witness all that was passing in the branches above her. In her heart of hearts did she still esteem the smooth-skinned Tarzan? Did her savage breast swell with pride as she witnessed his victory over the ape? You will have to ask Teeka.

And Sheeta, the panther, saw that the she-ape had left her cub alone among the grasses. He moved his tail again, as though this closest approximation of lashing in which he dared indulge might stimulate his momentarily waned courage. The cry of the victorious ape-man still held his nerves beneath its spell. It would be several minutes before he again could bring himself to the point of charging into view of the giant anthropoids.

And as he regathered his forces, Tarzan reached Taug's side, and then clambering higher up to the point where the end of the grass rope was made fast, he unloosed it and lowered the ape slowly downward, swinging him in until the clutching hands fastened upon a limb.

Quickly Taug drew himself to a position of safety and shook off the noose. In his rage-maddened heart was no room for gratitude to the ape-man. He recalled only the fact that Tarzan had laid this painful indignity upon him. He would be revenged, but just at present his legs were so numb and his head so dizzy that he must postpone the gratification of his vengeance.

Tarzan was coiling his rope the while he lectured Taug on the futility of pitting his poor powers, physical and intellectual, against those of his betters. Teeka had come close beneath the tree and was peering upward. Sheeta was worming his way stealthily forward, his belly close to the ground. In another moment he would be clear of the underbrush and ready for the rapid charge and the quick retreat that would end the brief existence of Teeka's balu.

Then Tarzan chanced to look up and across the clearing. Instantly his attitude of good-natured bantering and pompous boastfulness dropped from him. Silently and swiftly he shot downward toward the ground. Teeka, seeing him coming, and thinking that he was after her or her balu, bristled and prepared to fight. But Tarzan sped by her, and as he went, her eyes followed him and she saw the cause of his sudden descent and his rapid charge across the clearing. There in full sight now was Sheeta, the panther, stalking slowly toward the tiny, wriggling balu which lay among the grasses many yards away.

Teeka gave voice to a shrill scream of terror and of warning as she dashed after the ape-man. Sheeta saw Tarzan coming. He saw the she-ape's cub before him, and he thought that this other was bent upon robbing him of his prey. With an angry growl, he charged.

Taug, warned by Teeka's cry, came lumbering down to her assistance. Several other bulls, growling and barking, closed in toward the clearing, but they were all much farther from the balu and the panther than was Tarzan of the Apes, so it was that Sheeta and the ape-man reached Teeka's little one almost simultaneously; and there they stood, one upon either side of it, baring their fangs and snarling at each other over the little creature.

Sheeta was afraid to seize the balu, for thus he would give the ape-man an opening for attack; and for the same reason Tarzan hesitated to snatch the panther's prey out of harm's way, for had he stooped to accomplish this, the great beast would have been upon him in an instant. Thus they stood while Teeka came across the clearing, going more slowly as she neared the panther, for even her mother love could scarce overcome her instinctive terror of this natural enemy of her kind.

Behind her came Taug, warily and with many pauses and much bluster, and still behind him came other bulls, snarling ferociously and uttering their uncanny challenges. Sheeta's yellow-green eyes glared terribly at Tarzan, and past Tarzan they shot brief glances at the apes of Kerchak advancing upon him. Discretion prompted him to turn and flee, but hunger and the close proximity of the tempting morsel in the grass before him urged him to remain. He reached forth a paw toward Teeka's balu, and as he did so, with a savage guttural, Tarzan of the Apes was upon him.

The panther reared to meet the ape-man's attack. He swung a frightful raking blow for Tarzan that would have wiped his face away had it landed, but it did not land, for Tarzan ducked beneath it and closed, his long knife ready in one strong hand--the knife of his dead father, of the father he never had known.

Instantly the balu was forgotten by Sheeta, the panther. He now thought only of tearing to ribbons with his powerful talons the flesh of his antagonist, of burying his long, yellow fangs in the soft, smooth hide of the ape-man, but Tarzan had fought before with clawed creatures of the jungle. Before now he had battled with fanged monsters, nor always had he come away unscathed. He knew the risk that he ran, but Tarzan of the Apes, inured to the sight of suffering and death, shrank from neither, for he feared neither.

The instant that he dodged beneath Sheeta's blow, he leaped to the beast's rear and then full upon the tawny back, burying his teeth in Sheeta's neck and the fingers of one hand in the fur at the throat, and with the other hand he drove his blade into Sheeta's side.

Over and over upon the grass rolled Sheeta, growling and screaming, clawing and biting, in a mad effort to dislodge his antagonist or get some portion of his body within range of teeth or talons.

As Tarzan leaped to close quarters with the panther, Teeka had run quickly in and snatched up her balu. Now she sat upon a high branch, safe out of harm's way, cuddling the little thing close to her hairy breast, the while her savage little eyes bored down upon the contestants in the clearing, and her ferocious voice urged Taug and the other bulls to leap into the melee.

Thus goaded the bulls came closer, redoubling their hideous clamor; but Sheeta was already sufficiently engaged-- he did not even hear them. Once he succeeded in partially dislodging the ape-man from his back, so that Tarzan swung for an instant in front of those awful talons, and in the brief instant before he could regain his former hold, a raking blow from a hind paw laid open one leg from hip to knee.

It was the sight and smell of this blood, possibly, which wrought upon the encircling apes; but it was Taug who really was responsible for the thing they did.

Taug, but a moment before filled with rage toward Tarzan of the Apes, stood close to the battling pair, his red-rimmed, wicked little eyes glaring at them. What was passing in his savage brain? Did he gloat over the unenviable position of his recent tormentor? Did he long to see Sheeta's great fangs sink into the soft throat of the ape-man? Or did he realize the courageous unselfishness that had prompted Tarzan to rush to the rescue and imperil his life for Teeka's balu--for Taug's little balu? Is gratitude a possession of man only, or do the lower orders know it also?

With the spilling of Tarzan's blood, Taug answered these questions. With all the weight of his great body he leaped, hideously growling, upon Sheeta. His long fighting fangs buried themselves in the white throat. His powerful arms beat and clawed at the soft fur until it flew upward in the jungle breeze.

And with Taug's example before them the other bulls charged, burying Sheeta beneath rending fangs and filling all the forest with the wild din of their battle cries.

Ah! but it was a wondrous and inspiring sight--this battle of the primordial apes and the great, white ape-man with their ancestral foe, Sheeta, the panther.

In frenzied excitement, Teeka fairly danced upon the limb which swayed beneath her great weight as she urged on the males of her people, and Thaka, and Mumga, and Kamma, with the other shes of the tribe of Kerchak, added their shrill cries or fierce barkings to the pandemonium which now reigned within the jungle.

Bitten and biting, tearing and torn, Sheeta battled for his life; but the odds were against him. Even Numa, the lion, would have hesitated to have attacked an equal number of the great bulls of the tribe of Kerchak, and now, a half mile away, hearing the sounds of the terrific battle, the king of beasts rose uneasily from his midday slumber and slunk off farther into the jungle.

Presently Sheeta's torn and bloody body ceased its titanic struggles. It stiffened spasmodically, twitched and was still, yet the bulls continued to lacerate it until the beautiful coat was torn to shreds. At last they desisted from sheer physical weariness, and then from the tangle of bloody bodies rose a crimson giant, straight as an arrow.

He placed a foot upon the dead body of the panther, and lifting his blood-stained face to the blue of the equatorial heavens, gave voice to the horrid victory cry of the bull ape.

One by one his hairy fellows of the tribe of Kerchak followed his example. The shes came down from their perches of safety and struck and reviled the dead body of Sheeta. The young apes refought the battle in mimicry of their mighty elders.

Teeka was quite close to Tarzan. He turned and saw her with the balu hugged close to her hairy breast, and put out his hands to take the little one, expecting that Teeka would bare her fangs and spring upon him; but instead she placed the balu in his arms, and coming nearer, licked his frightful wounds.

And presently Taug, who had escaped with only a few scratches, came and squatted beside Tarzan and watched him as he played with the little balu, and at last he too leaned over and helped Teeka with the cleansing and the healing of the ape-man's hurts.