

# JUNGLE HAWK SERIES

## 5. The Leopard Gang



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# THE LEOPARD GANG

*by*

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## **THE LEOPARD GANG**

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### **THE LEOPARD GANG**

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## SUMMARY

When the Jungle Hawk is tasked with dismantling the feared Leopard Gang by Colonel Fleerackers of the Belgian Security Police, he embarks on a dangerous mission deep into the heart of the Congo jungle. The gang, known for their sinister rituals and deadly tactics, has taken a farm family hostage, abducting their daughter, Rita Leggio, to offer as a sacrifice to their Leopard God.

Determined to save her, the Jungle Hawk faces one peril after another. He narrowly escapes a deadly crocodile, battles the unforgiving elements of a tropical storm, and navigates the treacherous jungle terrain. Rita, meanwhile, must summon all her courage and wits to escape her captors, enduring the horrors of nature and the constant threat of recapture.

As the Hawk pursues the gang, he encounters allies and adversaries, including Rita's brother, who joins him in the relentless chase. But the Leopard Gang proves formidable, drawing the Hawk into their lair, where he faces an old enemy and a deadly trap that could mean his end. Will the Hawk outwit the gang and their feral god, or will their fortress mark his final chapter? The answers lie in this thrilling tale of courage, survival, and justice in the wilds of Africa.

## EXTRACT

His fingers test the grass rope around his wrists. He glances quickly over his shoulder. The nearest native is about six steps behind him.

The Falcon's arm muscles bulge. With brute force, he yanks his arms loose from the ropes. He pulls himself up, dives through the air and grabs a low branch. In a single movement, he swings his body around it, straightens his arms and steps firmly. He immediately dives to a higher branch and repeats the trick again.

Under him, total consternation breaks out. The warriors call out to each other in alarm. Spears follow the Falcon, but he is an extremely difficult target, because he moves so swiftly from one point to the next. He dives to a monkey rope and swings low above the ground to the next tree. Like a monkey, he climbs higher. Thirty feet above the ground, he stops for the first time. Below him, the warriors are scrambling around like bewildered ants. Rokoeroe shouts furiously that they should pursue him, but is himself powerless to do anything.

The Falcon laughs boisterously. "Rokoeroe, you are like children. Did you really think you could keep the Jungle Falcon captive against his will?" The warriors stare at him speechlessly. They feel very humiliated, but also feel admiration for the strange white man who evaded them with so much ease.

## 5. THE LEOPARD GANG

### Chapter 1 KIDNAPPING

Carefully, the Jungle Hawk follows the six strange figures at a distance. It is dark in the jungle, and in his pursuit, he is almost completely dependent on his hearing.

Above him, the tree trunks creak and groan in the wind that weaves gustily through the dense forest growth. Far away, the cough of a lone leopard male is sounding.

High above him, light, feathery clouds speed past under the star-studded firmament and the full moon. The full moon that is spreading its pale silver light over the mighty forest landscape, but never penetrates down to the ground, except in open patches, which one then finds like small islands in the jungle.

In one such open patch, the six figures stop. Quietly, the Hawk sneaks closer in the game path and then quickly ducks behind a tree trunk. The moonlight folds around the animal heads of the six men with their speckled cloaks that reach down to their calves and with claws where their hands should be.

The six converse in whispers for a while and then resume their nightly journey again through the jungle. Like a shadow, the Hawk follows them. He wonders where the lurkers are heading, what makes their mission so important that they even dare to brave the nightly dangers of the jungle now.

At midnight, the six come to a stop again, this time at the bank of a broad-flowing tropical river.

Here the masked figures do not hesitate for long. Two quickly drag a hollowed-out tree trunk boat from somewhere from under the undergrowth, push it into the water, and clamber into the craft. Their comrades follow immediately.

When the Hawk reaches the bank, he only notices the dark shadows on the moonlit water and hears the light noise of oars that are being handled very carefully so as not to attract unnecessary attention.

A frown creases deeply into the Jungle Man's forehead as he follows the dark boat's journey to the other side of the river. Three hundred

paces further, he notices the dark forest growth that indicates the other side of the river. A few miles further, the grotesque outlines of a hill are etched against the lighter dome of the sky.

The Hawk wonders what his next step must be. He has already been following the masked figures for miles through the jungle. If he does not devise a plan soon, they will evade him, at least temporarily.

He steps forward, lingers for a while at the water's edge, and then walks into the water. He does not fear an attack by crocodiles here because he knows from experience that their favorite hunting time is just before sunset and just after sunrise. However, a hungry crocodile will also stalk its prey in the middle of the day, but very seldom at night.

The Jungle Man has to swim almost immediately. The water is fortunately lukewarm and flows fairly strongly. Carefully, to make as little noise as possible, the Hawk moves forward. He can no longer see the boat at all and suspects that it has already reached the other side.

When he finally reaches the place where he saw the boat disappear into the shadows, the Hawk lingers for some time in the dark water while he listens carefully to see if he can perhaps hear the six somewhere. But apart from the usual sounds of the night, it is relatively quiet. Carefully, he swims further towards the edge, wiggles slowly through the reeds and water plants, and then slides-crawls out of the water.

His eyes slide from one dark object to another, but nothing of importance draws his attention. He is just about to move further forward when he stumbles over an object on the ground in front of him and then makes hard contact with the ground. Like lightning, he is back on his feet again, hunting knife ready. With his one hand, he feels quickly in front of him. He finds a rough object, feels further, and decides that it is the masked men's boat. They are therefore in the jungle again. But where to? The Jungle Man realizes that in his careful crossing, he has lost valuable minutes. Even for him, a child of the forest as he is, it is extremely difficult to follow a trail in this Egyptian darkness, or in any other forest for that matter.

His eyes search for a darker patch in the jungle that could possibly indicate a forest path. With his ears pricked, he walks slowly in a half-moon around the boat. Then, he stops. Far in front of him, the snort of a bushbuck sounds and just after that the sound of fleeing paws.

The Hawk smiles quietly. The fleeing buck has just betrayed the masked figures' position. He immediately begins to stride in the direction in question and later ends up on a narrow game path. As quickly as the darkness allows him, he jogs along the path. The terrain later becomes more broken, the vegetation lower and sparser, and in places it goes through large, moonlit patches. Later, the Hawk realizes that he is on a slope. He remembers the dark outlines that he saw earlier in the evening against the firmament and reckons that he is currently on that hill in question. A falling stone makes the Hawk look up hastily, just in time to see the last of the masked figures against the stars before he disappears from his field of vision. There is a slight acceleration in the Jungle Man's heartbeat. He is undoubtedly still on the right track. He quickens his pace slightly, and when he reaches the bend where he saw the man a while ago, he notices them again. This time, closer to the top, but a good hundred paces further. To his right, he notices cultivated fields. Immediately around him and further in front of him, the slope is almost completely free of trees, only low shrubs form darker patches here and there. The Hawk wonders which native tribe would live here. The cultivated fields and the lack of trees are clear proof to him that a native settlement must now be nearby, possibly on the hill where it is cooler and probably also free of mosquitoes. However, this part of the Belgian Congo is strange to him. He came here at the request of his old friend, Colonel Melt Fleerackers, head of the Belgian Security Police, in charge of the vast forest land. The Hawk lingers a while longer. He is convinced that the six masked figures have reached their place of residence. After all, it was clear to him from the beginning that they were moving over familiar terrain. They had even hidden the boat in a place where they could easily find it. After that, they had continued their journey through the dark forest as if they knew the surroundings well. He thinks now again of his and Colonel Fleerackers's latest meeting a few weeks ago in Stanleyville, where bloody tribal wars had broken out among the natives.



“It looks to me like the whole of Africa has become a boiling pot,” the sun-tanned head of the detectives had said to him. “There are explosions everywhere, one of the latest is in the area of Stanleyville.” He had taken a deep drag on his cigar and continued.

“We simply don’t have enough people to do what we have to do.” They had continued chatting in that vein until Colonel Fleerackers had suddenly stopped and looked speculatively at his half-naked friend. “Do you know what I’m thinking now?” he had asked. “I think you are just the right man to go and investigate the rumors of the Leopard Men who have become active again near Lake Leopold. About ten years ago, my predecessor dispersed them with a heavily armed force and captured their leaders...” Just at that moment, a black soldier had knocked on the door and saluted smartly when Fleerackers ordered him to come in. He had handed a piece of paper to the Colonel, saluted, and then stepped out again. Colonel Fleerackers read through the message and then excitedly held it out to the Hawk. “Read that,” he said and lit another cigar.

The Hawk had read the telegram. “Leopard men have struck again, approximately a hundred miles southeast of Lake Leopold. Have murdered tribal chief gruesomely and plundered village. Becoming active over an increasingly large area. Are powerless to take action against them. Regards. Sgt. Jaspers.”

The Hawk and Colonel Fleerackers had looked at each other silently for several seconds before the Jungle Man had remarked. “It looks quite serious, Colonel. I will see what I can do...”

And now, he is here at the hill after following six of the Leopard Men for miles. Actually, he had come across them quite by chance and immediately decided to follow them, hoping that they would unknowingly lead him to their leopard fortress.

The Hawk sighs deeply and was just about to clamber further up the hill when a long drawn-out scream, followed by a gunshot, makes him stop in his tracks. Then he begins to run in the direction of the disturbance. Another gunshot cracks. After that, it is silent for a while, before shouts and an unearthly noise break loose on the hill in front of him.

While the Hawk is racing up the slope with long strides, he realizes with an oppressive feeling that he has made a serious mistake. He had

thought that the Leopard Men had come to a native settlement. But the gunshots make him think that it could possibly be a white farm. And he could have prevented the tragedy that was unfolding up there if he had not been so complacent and had made a wrong deduction. Then, he is on the back of the hill. In front of him, a large dwelling house is visible in the faint moonlight. Shrubs and trees grow around the house. Everywhere, dark figures are running around. In the hands of some, he notices the bright glint of spear blades. Here and there, someone has a torch in his hand. Something is happening at a door, and a moment later he sees light seeping through a window.

The Hawk quickly reaches the front stoep of the house. He pushes his way open through the half-naked natives that are crowding there. In front of him, voices are roaring, and he hears shouts of “The Leopard Men!” It becomes a refrain that is soon repeated by everyone. Eyes roll large in their black eye sockets and look anxiously among the shrubs, for the feared enemy. Small children scurry between their fathers and mothers, while the native men grip their spears more firmly...

The Jungle Man walks through the house and later finds himself in a bedroom. Two native men are in front of him. In the light of the torch, he notices a woman lying in a large pool of blood. Her nightclothes are torn and long streaks of blood lie across her face and chest. She is apparently already dead.

On one side, a white man is sitting in a chair. A piece of his scalp is hanging over his hand, and he is trying to stop the bleeding with it. Next to him lies a rifle. The Hawk pushes the two natives out of his path and rushes to the man. He picks him up in his arms and lays him down on the blood-stained bed.

“Where is the house servant?” asks the Hawk to the natives.

“Here, my master,” comes the frightened voice of a stout native woman.

“Go and make warm water immediately and bring towels and bandages, if there are any here.” The stout native woman obeys immediately. The Hawk doesn’t even hear her weeping. “How far away is the doctor?” asks the Hawk to the native men near him.

They point with gestures, and according to that, he reckons it is half a day on foot.

“Is there a telephone here?” One of the natives nods. He indicates where

it is, and the Hawk runs there. It takes a while before he hears the sleepy voice of the doctor. He quickly indicates in a few words what has happened, calls down the passage to hear what the white man's surname is and provides the information to the doctor, who is now wide awake. In the meantime, the Hawk orders the natives in the house to go outside. "Tell your wives and children that the danger is over and that they can go back to sleep," the Hawk orders the two native men near him. He bends over the white man just as the native woman arrives with the water and towels. Hastily he works. The wound on the man's head looks bad and is still bleeding. The man is unconscious, his face is pale, and his breathing is weak. His sleeping clothes are torn and the Hawk notices light scratches here and there on his body. He has already determined that the woman is dead and has covered her body with a sheet.

"The little miss... she is gone. She was here," the native woman indicates.

"The little miss?" the Hawk looks up hastily.

"The daughter of boss Leggio..."

While the Hawk is disinfecting and cleaning the wounds, he orders. "Look in the other rooms in the meantime to see if she is perhaps there. Tell the men to search outside if you don't find her inside."

"She is not in the house. I have already looked."

"Then look outside," orders the Hawk. The native woman waddles out through the door.

The Jungle Man bandages the wound as best he can. Red blood is still slowly streaming through the bandages. He ties it tighter and lets the man lie comfortably. There is not much more he can do for him at the moment.

Just at that moment, an excited scream sounds up from outside the window. The Hawk runs closer and leans out of the window. In front of him, in a flower bed, two native men are standing with torches. At their feet lies someone shrouded in a leopard skin cloak and with a leopard mask over his head. The Hawk whips through the window and bends over the masked man. He pulls off the leopard skin cloak and notices a powerfully built native. There is a large hole through his chest where the rifle's bullet hit him fatally. The forepaws and claws of a leopard

are attached to his hands. His leopard mask looks frightening in the torchlight.

“He is dead,” says the Hawk. For the first time, he notices the fear in the native men.

“What is it now?” he wants to know.

“My boss, the Leopard Men will be angry when they hear that one of them is dead. We are no longer safe here. We are going to get out of here now.” The native is about to immediately put his words into action, but the Hawk grabs him by the shoulder and jerks him around. “You stay where you are. The Leopard Men have gone too far. Their punishment will be terrible.”

The native wants to resist him, but the Hawk easily lifts him above his head and then shakes him around a few times like a wet rag.

“Do you fear the Leopard Men, the lurkers who walk around like wolves in the night and attack like cowards when others are sleeping? Brave men who do not have the hearts of women and children in them should despise them and loathe them...” He releases the native, from whom the fighting spirit has now completely disappeared.

“Who are you, white man, that can speak of the Leopard Men like that? You, who don’t even wear clothes like the white man and also don’t have a rifle?”

“I am the Hawk God of the jungle. I crush cowards like the Leopard Men. I protect those who want to live in peace against wolves that scavenge in the night and then flee when the lion turns on them.”

The natives are now looking at each other wide-eyed. More of them have now come closer and are now whispering among themselves. “The Hawk God!” Although they have never seen the Jungle Hawk, they have heard of him. In fact, there are few native tribes in the Congo forest who have not heard of the strange white man who swings through the trees like an ape.

From the room, the stout native woman says. “Little Miss Rita is gone. The Leopard Men have probably taken her.” She begins to sob loudly. The Hawk turns to the native men again. “You stay here. The Leopard Men have gotten what they were looking for. They will not come back here again.”

He jumps agilely through the window where a pressure lamp has