

## Chapter two.

Boneclaw was hunting.

She'd found trace of a wild boar two days ago, seen were it had been snoutting around for truffles and last autumn's squirrel-buried acorns, and then tasted the soil there until she had caught the scent. After that it was easy. Boars stank. They'd caught up with it a few hour later. It was a beaut, a big male, just entering its prime. Still a little lean from the just-passed winter, but still a hell of a lot of meat. She'd got close enough without being seen or scented to hit it square with her first throw of the spear. It was not a spear designed for throwing far, it was big, heavy, rigid. But that meant that rather than sticking in its side it dragged behind as the boar bolted, and soon fell out. It could be recovered, licked to determine the depth of the wound, and then thrown again. She'd caught the boar in the ribs, and it had ploughed a furrow<sup>1</sup> up to the muscles of its fore-limbs. Troll-back had got a quick throw glancing off the big bugger's arse -cheeks as it had bolted.

They'd been chasing it since then. It was one tough pig, they'd caught it in the night planning to spear it then and, exhausted as it was, it had *turned* on them, and despite giving it a face full of spear wounds as they both swore their tits off and scabbled backwards away from its charge, it had kept coming and it had been their turn to run like blazes. But that happened. Eventually it had gotten tired of chasing them and turned away, at which point Troll-Back stabbed it in the arse again. Then they had resumed worrying it to death as if nothing had happened.

This was how The People are meant to hunt, thought Boneclaw trotting along at the fast, ground-eating lope that came naturally to her species. In pairs, two young females, no one else, all the time in the world, running on a beautifully morning though a big open spring forest (kept open by controlled fires), worrying to death something that could break every bone in your body if it catches you. Which is of course why it's fun: anyone can fish or trap or leap out from a hide and spear some deer feeding on the spring growth in a clearing. This is how it's meant to be done, hunter verses an equal, no, a stronger prey animal. Work in pairs, work together, worry it, and make it expose its back to one of you when it attacks the other. Keep it at bay with spears and harass it. Take it in turns to stop for a breather and a drink, but keep it moving, and away from water. And when it finally goes down too tired to move, It'll sit and watch you, and let you come up to it and you're eyes will meet its, and then you just *bite*.

*She-is, thank you for this day. Thank you for this hunt. Thank you for the strength of my legs, and the power of my teeth and the keenness of my eyes and my ears and my nose, and the fierceness of my liver. Thank you that I am young and strong, and that this is a perfect day.*

She looked over to troll back and grinned. She could sense it two. The kill was near. They quickened their pace. It was more than two days since they last slept, and she had been running so long she

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<sup>1</sup> Not that this was the metaphor that Boneclaw used in her own mind: as a hunter-gatherer it wouldn't come to mind. She didn't see ploughing for the first time until two years after this, and so far her only experience of agriculture was sneaking up to the outskirts of one of the human farms near Rath for the mild entertainment of watching a hired Squash-wrangler/vampire hunter and his trained squash-hounds try and fail to bring a rowdy field of rogue-pumpkins under control and shepherded into pens for orderly disposal after a badly delayed harvest.

had lost all feeling in her back, knees and thighs. Her kidneys were also beginning to protest in no uncertain terms. But it had reached the point where the pain made all her scenes hyper acute. The world glowed. She could see the hoof prints floating above the grass and leaf-mould, not a concealed part of the pattern of the world anymore. Shamans did this: exhausted themselves physically in order to see clearly the real world hidden behind all the day-to-day curd of life. She'd danced herself into a trance state by running, but she was still there, on earth. Her spirit wanted to fly off and explore like a shamans, but she just let it leak out a little, ready to pull it back. Where it touched the boars she found she could track it by thought alone, she knew what it was thinking, where it was going. It was a trick, first try and think like it, latter you'll not need to, you can just put yourself in its place, be it, hurt as much as it does, and you will always find it, always eat well. Like a purple dragon in a flint mine. Like a shadow-deer at dawn.

*Dear gods' I'm far gone. Pull it back, Boneclaw. Don't flake now. Pull it back.* The world faded a little, from luminous and dreamlike to merely painfully intense. She could track by normal means, so she should: trance-walking without drugs was dangerous, trance-hunting more so. You saw other things not normally seen in the day-to-day world, they said, but the down side was that sometimes they saw you.

A few hundred yards later they jumped over a small depression where it had clearly stumbled. Troll-back took watch with her spear, in case it turned on them again, and Boneclaw checked out the depression its big fat pig carcass had left in the world, before she sat on her haunches for a moment, composing her breathing. Blood, but surface blood. Already clotting before it came off the boar, from the wounds they'd given in last two days. She got down on all four and scented around the edges of the grass. Fear, Pigshit, more fear, rage. Hurt. Lots of hurt. Tiredness. Its giving up. She leapt up from the depression and trotted, a little unsteadily, in the direction of the trail. *Okay, so parts of me want to give up too, but they won't. I won't let them. Your dying, you beautiful hideous boar. Do it now, why don't you?*

She spotted a trickle of urine, a few drops on some tall grass it had crashed through. She quickly checked it out. She sniffed it, then rubbed it between her fingers and sniffed it. Very cautiously, she tasted it. She held it for a second on her tongue and sucked air over it before wrinkling her nose and spitting and holding out her hand for Troll-back's canteen. She rinsed her mouth and spat, and then drank, just a little.

"It's going. Its insides are soured with tiredness<sup>2</sup>. Come on. It's not far."

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<sup>2</sup> Lactic acid build-up from prolonged anaerobic respiration of not just rough muscle, but the smooth muscular tissue of the internal organs of the digestive-system as well, due to the flight-or-fight response re-directing oxygenated blood from them to the muscles used for motion. Whilst it may not be possible to taste this in the old dried blood that would build up on a boars flanks during a hunt, Boneclaw certainly had a keen enough sense of taste and smell to run a compete diagnosis of ever major and minor medical compliant that boar had ever had from a fresh urine sample, and it therefore a great pity that she did not have the medical vocabulary

They crested as small rise and burst through a screen of shrubbery into a slight dip, a small gully where rain water drained away from the hills, and just stood and looked, panting and exalted.

The Boar was lying flat out on its side in the muddy leaf-choked trickle that was the bottom of the gully. There was a lot of blood. It was covered in mud, blood and foam, and it utterly stank. It was breathing, in short, shallow for-the-love-of-god-kill-me-now breaths and watching them with one unfocused and bloodshot piggy little eye. Boneclaw walked up to it slowly, carrying her spear. It didn't try to move. About ten paces away, close enough to count the flies already on its wounds, she threw her spear aside and kept coming. *Eye-contact, that's the trick.* About two paces way, close enough to feel the heat coming off it in waves, she squatted down next to it in the filth, and put her head on one side and watched. It made a noise, half way between a groan and a squeal, and twitched. Spasmed. But after that it just went back to waiting. She could already taste salt and the metal taste of adrenaline in her mouth, so much like blood, and some savage dark emotion, mutant first-cousin to arousal and utterly unconnected to hunger flashed through her mind. Oh to rip, oh to kill...

But she was one of The People. A hunt leader. It wasn't all sticking pointy objects into defenceless animals. For two days she'd been closer to this dumb slab of meat than anything. She let her left hand touch its tusks, ran it over them, marvelling at how perfect a set of weapons they were. You'd have to be good to get this close to a wild boar, to take it on with just eye-contact, with just what nature and the gods gave you and gave it, even with one so nearly dead, or it'd take your hand off. Really good. Bloodmare could do it. She was not without talent. And then she'd gut it alive, which was all fine and good, but she'd enjoy the killing too much. Boneclaw held her breath. She rested her paw on its snout for a second, and then reached up and closed its eyes. *But can she do this?* It grunted and twitched for a second, but then relaxed and did not fight it. She removed her hand. It kept its eyes closed.

Then she killed it. As politely as possible.

A couple of hours later, maybe longer, when it was getting on towards the early afternoon, she woke up. Everything hurt, but in a good way. She was in a messy tangle with Troll-back, who like her had just crashed from sheer exhaustion after they had eaten, and who was now resting her head on her shoulder and snoring and drooling as if there was no tomorrow. Lovely. Boneclaw pushed Troll-back's head off her with a frown, and half raised her head and looked to where they'd hung the pig. It didn't seem quite so huge now, but it was still a good-sized kill and they'd be the talk of the camp when they got back. A few crows looked guiltily at them from near-by tree. They'd had a go at the viscera after they'd cleaned it and whilst they were sleeping, almost certainly. Boneclaw found she didn't mind that much. They'd already had their fill, and what a hungry young hyena would consider

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to do so. In a post-industrial society Sentient Spotted Hyenas would in many ways make the ideal lab-techs and medics, partly because of this, but mostly because to them hanging around the dying with mild interest and a slight tendency to drool at all the interesting pathologies' is utterly natural, so they would *excel* in med-school.

viscera rather than meat would barely fill a crow anyway. She'd drunk her share of the blood straight from the thing's carotids, lying parallel to it in the mud before it was even cooling, and then helped Troll-back to get a sinew rope over its back totters and haul the thing upright so she could get her share. They'd then cleaned the carcass right away before they rested, and ate the liver raw, and then a kidney each for good measure, before removing the lights, heart, spleen, stomach and lungs and hanging them over a green fire Troll-back lit to smoke the stuff and keep flies away. Then they'd neatly flushed the intestines clean of pigshit with their drinking water and rubbed them with fat to keep them supple for sausages skins later on, pulled out and smoked it's tongue, taken its balder, washed the things skin rather than themselves with the last of their water, and done the hundred other small, disgusting jobs that you had to do if you really believed in using every part of the kill. But the blood and liver was good: You needed the blood and liver straight away to replenish your sprit with it's after the hunt<sup>3</sup>, and besides, they didn't keep. It was a gift from the gods, apparently, that the most desirable parts of a kill spoiled almost immediately after its death. This ensured that only the hunters would get them, as the gods intended. Personally Boneclaw wondered what the hell the gods were thinking making meat as perishable as it was anyway, but that was gods for you.

Cautiously extricating herself from Troll-back: very cautiously since on inspection it appeared that some of the mud Boneclaw had got herself caked in during the kill had dried as she slept and welded her leg fur to Troll-back's, she got up and immediately wished she hadn't. Every part of her body complained. He knees hated her, the small of the back was both ice cold and burned hot at the same time, her fur ached, and she was willing to bet that no creature in the history of creation had ever needed a piss quite so badly.

After a few minutes of cursing, limping around trying to get her left ankle working again, and a close inspection of as much of a tree-trunk as could be seen though a cloud of vapour (it was still quite cold this time in spring) she wandered back into the gulley and flapped her arms at the crows, who were checking out both the pig carcass and, on the basis she sure as hell looked and smelt dead, Troll-back. Now at least feeling passably like a member of The People, even if the dried-on mud covering her side had started to itch and the smell coming of her own body was getting really quite distracting, Boneclaw went and kicked Troll-back awake on the basis that if she had to smell and ache, there may as well be someone awake she could complain about it at.

"Wstfg!?! Oh *gods* my feet!"

"Really? With me it's mostly my lower back and thighs. Up. We've got a bloody big pig carcass to haul back to camp and I've got to check-in on the other pairs in my hunt. Come on. Spears over shoulders, smoked pig innards dangling from spears, carcass over the top. Usual drill."

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<sup>3</sup> And equally importantly to replenish the carbohydrates you will have spent chasing it with the creatures own blood-glucose and liver glycogen. Not so say that getting its spirit isn't important, but even lawyers and some inanimate objects (ships, building, standing stones) have spirits, whereas good mono and polysaccharides are hard to come by.

“Okay. One sec though.” Said Troll-back before staggering in the opposite direction to the one Boneclaw had taken, but almost certainly for the same reason. When she came back they, with an awful lot of low-kea moaning and general complaints but with very little actual fuss, got the pig carcass in order and, with it sitting proud atop the two spears slung between their shoulders, they headed off towards camp following their own scent-trail until they could find a landmark to guide them home<sup>4</sup>.

Boneclaw, no longer dehydrated, exhausted, in intense pain, and so **not** on the verge of perceiving the hidden, saw nothing untoward. Having reeled in her scenes just as she had begun to preserve dangerously truly the previous day, she had seen nothing untoward then, either. So she did not observe what watched her go. Nor did Troll-back. But it watched. And it waited. And, after some consideration, it followed.

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<sup>4</sup> Spotted hyenas have sent-glands between their toes that mark out their footsteps, enabling them to track other members of their group, or backtrack along their own trail, in total darkness. They also use them to show submission in dominance displays by shuffling their feet. So if they ever look like they’re shuffling their feet in embarrassment, they really *are* being very embarrassed and apologetic. Nature is cool.