

Chapter three.

Boneclaw and Troll-back were singing. Badly.

It was, in a way, a perfectly natural response. They'd run their arses off. They were still sleep deprived, aching, and bone-wearily as hell. But there were at that stage of weirdness and sleep-depravation where everything was as funny as hell: that combined with the jubilation of a kill was making them both giggle like infants. Going down a steep slope, about half an hour after they had started back towards camp, had been the worst. The slope was way too steep to even attempt to walk down carrying an entire pig slung over your shoulders between two spears, and they'd known that. But they'd done it anyway. The problem about two people walking down a steep slope carrying a long, heavy object was, as anyone who had ever moved a wardrobe down a flight of stairs will know, if the two people don't move at exactly the same speed someone's either going to get the object pulled out of their hands or pushed into their back. Going down the slope, things had gone well until Boneclaw had hit a patch of slippery dead leaves. "Wait a sec Troll, its getting slippy. Stop."

"What?"

"It's getting slippery. Stop. No stop pushing. Troll-back! Stoppit you're pushing me into the slippery patch! **Troll-back!**"

Boneclaw dug her heels, or tried to. Always a mistake. Troll-back had no intention of actually pushing her over, she was just deliberately not stopping pushing her end of the pig-rig when asked to give Boneclaw a momentary scare, for a laugh. But when Boneclaw, at the front and father down the slope, tried to dig her heels and instinctively leant backwards into the pig-rig, the leaves went from under her heels and she went over backwards. With great presence of mind and no consideration for what would happen to Troll-back, she held onto the spears and lifted them up over her head as she fell flat on her arse and begun to slip down the slope: to stop the pig ending up in the mud. This however lowered her end of the rig considerably, and as Boneclaw was now sliding downhill, this removed all resistance to Troll-back, who as she was leaning *into* the rig and pushing forwards onto Boneclaw, fell over forwards onto her face as soon a Boneclaw started to slide. She also had the presence of mind to try and save the pig, which resulted in the only witness... the only *apparent* witness to this scene (a winged messenger-rat of the temple of Ganesh the infinitely companionate who just happened to be passing and was permanently traumatised by what he saw), observing two female hyenas , one at the front lying flat on her back in the mud holding a pig on two spears above her, and one at the back lying flat on her face in the mud trying to steer her side with her elbows and at the same time keep the pig of the ground with her hands, sliding down a forty-meter length of hill at high speed before eventually coming o a halt in a large patch of stinging nettles. After coming to this halt they wordlessly got up again without upsetting the miraculously untouched pig, found some rocks to prop the improvised carrying rig above the mud, and then after a quiet moment, attacked, laughing uproariously as they tried their best to punch and wrestle each other to the ground¹.

¹ This was reported , via an interpreter* , from the rat to one of the minor acolytes of the temple, who dutifully recorded it. The spectacle went on to be described in some detail by a famed anthropologist of the period, who, after several re-readings, years of study into the exact symbolism of pigs, spears, mud and stinging nettles in a dozen different rare sacred texts, and an interview with the now very aged rat in which he asked it

After that, well, after that you just had to laugh.

It was perhaps because of this laughter, or perhaps just the tiredness which was the root source of it, which meant that neither was as alert as they would normally be. Perhaps things would have been different if they had been paying more attention, perhaps not. Either way, this is what happened.

Boneclaw and Troll-back were on the forth verse of the Mantis Boy song, not the real version that fathers taught to their young around the hearth, but the *other* version, that one mothers accidentally taught to their young after a few bottles of mead with their hunt-sisters (to the acute and silent embarrassment of fathers), and which mothers then gave children a clip around the ear for if they found them repeating any of the more complicated words. They were by the shallower brook, near the Deepwood, and neither had anything much on their mind. Boneclaw in particular was thinking of nothing other than getting back, showing of their kill, drinking a lot of mead to celebrate and then staggering of to her bed too tired to even think, to collapse and sleep flat out for sixteen hours, or staggering of to someone else's bed to collapse too tired to do what it was she'd come to that bed for in the first place and sleep for about an hour-and-a-half before she got caught and chased out by an irate parent (if she got really lucky). At this slightly later point in the spring, there was no ice. But it was still recognisable as the place, or near enough the place, where Eagle-feathers had somewhat unexpectedly shed his mortal coil the year before. It was getting on towards early evening, and although the sun was painfully bright, as it was spring in a temperate zone the sun was low in the sky compared to in summer or the same time of year in the tropics.

There were shadows. Deep shadows.

to recall exactly which direction the spears were pointing relative to the pig, the relative positions of the hyenas, he interperated it as some form of seasonal fertility rite relating to the spring renewal of the sometimes hostile female spirit (as represented by the uncontrolled slide) and the subjugation of, yet acknowledgment of need for, the male essence (as demonstrated by the pig) with specific regard to the female hyena genitals (as represented by the spears) and the pitfalls of letting your own base sexual instincts rule you (nettles). Unfortunately, as nearly always happens in these cases, this interpretation became the dominant one used for understanding The People's religious practice in reference works for the next two centuries (not helped by Boneclaw Mother's attempts much later in her life, when asked about the matter by Assistant Librarian Vo, to propagate this interpretation for no reason that can be discerned other than petty mischief). If there is anything to be learned from this, it's not about Hyenas, fertility rites or Pigs, but about the health and safety risks of carrying large items down slopes, and the danger of letting male anthropologists sit indoors with books for too long, instead of getting them out of the house once in a while to play in the sunshine and hopefully meet a nice young female willing to help his categorise his collection of Clovis culture spear-tips, or falling that, one willing to slap the buggler every time he mentions the words "feminine principle".

*The interpreter was St Finnegan the Nice Mover, whose ability to communicate with Rodents, Insectivores, small Mustelidae, Pigeons, and true finches but not tropical finches, was a great asset in his attempts to preach The Gospel of Finnegan to the birds of the air and the beasts of the land, but whose inability to communicate to other human beings in anything other than interpretative dance lead to his brutal martyrdom by a tribe of cannibalistic theatre-critics at the age of just twenty-seven. A cenotaph to him can be seen in Rath temple's Stone Garden.

There was of course, Boneclaw would have thought had she thought about it, nothing sinister about it. That was nature. Shadows happened. None of the shadows moved, as none of the trees moved in the still air: no movement meant no threats following them. The only shadows that moved were theirs: passing thought the leaf-shadow, connecting places of darkness that would have otherwise remind islands in the light, making little mobile shadow-bridges. Had Boneclaw a different sort of mind, one she would acquire slowly over the next twenty years, she'd have said that the only thing odd about the scene was them, trailing twilight behind them, letting night move around from the shadows of the glade the big Boar had died to new habitats in the ever-shaded Deepwood. They dragged night behind them, but what off it? Boneclaw had sensed nothing wrong in the glade the boar had died, none since. It was a good day.

She had just won an argument with Troll-back about which obscene verse came first, and was taking a deep berths and closing her eyes in preparation for that long draw-out tortured "Eyyyyyyyyyyyyeeeeiiiiii"² that in every world where vocal communication exists starts a verse of sexually suggestive folk-music, in order to warn those of a sensitive disposition to run whilst they still could, when it happened.

Something Huge, and dark and formless bolted out of the shadows from the Deepwood right at them making troll-back yelp in surprise and Boneclaw exhale her singing-breath and stare in shock, and more worrying, it made something smaller but no less dark and indistinct detach itself from the combined shadow of Boneclaw, Troll-back and the pig, and flee from the larger shape into the stream. It skipped across at high speed like a stone, making a sound like screaming metal, except not a sound at all, and hopping off the bright, light, relative water as if it burnt it. The smaller shape then vanished into the shadows of the undergrowth on the other side of the brook making the shadows of the bushes dance as if something large, deer-sized at least, had hit them. Which was scary and strangely eye-watering to watch since the bushes themselves did not move. The larger shape hit the sunlight and rebounded as if the beams were iron bars with a very loud inaudible hiss, and was gone back into the deep shadows as if it was never there. Boneclaw later swore that, whereas if it hadn't been moving so damn fast she *might* have been able to describe the smaller shape, the larger shape, despite moving too fast to see, gave out a certain aura that suggested that *even if it was standing completely still* it would have remained fuzzy and indistinct, if only because the photons themselves, if not your eyeballs as well, wanted nothing to do with it if they could avoid it. Worse still unlike the smaller shape the bigger... thing... broke tree-limbs in its charge, so it certainly seemed to be able to damage solid objects, which was no small thing if you were one of the solid objects so recently in its path.

Troll-Back jerked back, stumbled, trod in the shallows, stumbled a bit more and came to a halt up to her chest in the stream, Boneclaw just stood slack jawed and stared at where the...*thing*... the big one, had been.

² as in "Eyyyyyyyyyyyyeeeeiiiiii was a-walking in the woods one day, a doo-dee-dol-de-dum-de-de, where their I met a maiden fair and gay, A wack-a-fol-a-please-kill-me" and you just know there's going to be exactly two double-entendres about, I don't know, three-field system crop-rotation or some such, per verse and one huge one (wehay) in the final verse. At least Morris dancing is as fun for the spectators as the performers, provided both are equally drunk.

After a few moments of rather contemplative silence Troll-back felt moved to speak.

“Bugger! I think an actual bit of wee slipped out there. Wait. Yep. Actually had a minor leakage accident. Sod, and I liked this loin-cloth. Boneclaw?”

“Huh? What?”

“You oaky? Still safe and in one piece and comparatively dry.”

“What, oh, yes. Right. Yes.”

“What should we do, sis?”

“ Troll-back, let’s get the pig hanging from a tree quickly so we can get our spears out from under it.” She looked at the snapped tree-limbs. “Let’s do that *right now* and lets pick a tree on the *other* side of the brook.”

“Good idea. Do you think spears will help?”

“Given what we just saw?” asked Boneclaw as she waded across.

“Yep.”

“Given what we just saw and given that this is the exact spot where eagle-feathers died? I don’t know. But spears would certainly make *me* feel a lot bloody better at this point.”

“Right” said Troll-back throwing a line over a sturdy limb and using adrenaline to haul the boar up at such speed she nearly sawed through the branch with the sinew-rope. She then threw a spear to Boneclaw, complete with dried offal still attached (and it said something that Boneclaw was so on edge she did not notice this until it was later pointed out to her). “Sod, Bone,” muttered Troll-Back “I didn’t think about that. That thing... you think its... it’s..?”

“What Eagle-owl said she tried to fight of, which made us all think she was crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“well, I though she *was* crazy, but given this... I’d say I’m not so sure.”

“What do we do, should we tell the elders?”

“Hare’s teeth no! Look at the state we’re in, we’re falling over tired, do you honestly think they’d believe us for a second?”

“All right, I buy that. But it could be dangerous. No way anything that looks like that *isn’t*. They need to know.”

“Yeah, well we need proof, or baring that we need a good reason to investigate.” She paused. “I’ve got an Idea. Leg it most of the way back to camp, it’s not far, and then saunter in and tell everyone about the amazing boar we’ve bagged and get them to come at take it up to the camp quickly, the feast will keep everyone safe, inside the camp. Tell them I’m off recalling the other pairs in my hunt. Go now, I’ve got someone I need to see. “

“Who?”

“Better if you don’t know. This is weird stuff, and I know who to take that to. Go now.”

“Okay, just let me get myself cleaned up.”

“No!”

“Don’t you think” said Troll-back, practically growling with sarcasm “That coming in alone, dishevelled, very slightly urine-stained because it was just a small leak really and could have happened to anyone under those circumstances, and still reeking of fresh fear *might just* cause shock, comment and speculation amongst the tribe?”

“Not as much as either you or me coming back clean and fresh-smelling after a three-day wild-boar hunt!” Troll-back considered this.

“Fair point.” Troll-Back signed, closed her eyes and fixed her face into the resigned expression of someone yet-again taking one for the team, spread her arms wide, and with great precision fell over backwards into the stream. After a few moments she came up spluttering, coughing and spitting out water, river mud, bits of reeds, and one very surprised frog, who for days afterwards couldn’t believe his luck at having been actually in a Hyena’s mouth without getting eaten and who went on to try, sometimes successfully, to use the story to get girls. She then stoical squelched back to shore.

“I’ll say I slipped and fell in the stream.” Boneclaw nodded approvingly. “I’ll imply you pushed me in for a laugh.” Boneclaw frowned, and then nodded again and begun to move off.

“So, where are you off to?” Shouted Troll-back after the now retreating Boneclaw

“I’ve got to see a male about a shadow!”