

Chapter five.

Boneclaw awoke to the unlovely after-effects of drinking mead on an empty stomach, and managed, on her third try, to roll over onto her back. That was the problem with being the hero of the hour, she though somewhat muzziely. Everyone wants' to have a quick drink with the hero of the hour, even if they won't stand downwind of them and said hero can't stand unaided. And a wise hero of the hour knows that an hour is a very short time, and knows that being able to say "Remember that time when I got that giant boar? We all had a good drink and laugh about that, didn't we Sister." might come in useful at some future hour when the hero is not you. So she'd had as much as she could stand, and then a bit more besides because you don't say no to elders when they are trying to praise you, especially not if you can see it turning Bloodmare and the little mountain goat she bagged green with envy (she'd had a lot of mead by that point, which might explain why the goat really did look quite envious: It had worried her somewhat), and then she'd grabbed Troll-back (who was putting it away even faster, for the slightly less sophisticated reason that free-mead was not a thing childless females saw often and she was damn well going to make the most of it) , and together they'd made a very untidy three legged creature and stumbled into the hall for childless females, and collapsed in a corner. They still hadn't found time to wash, which was just as well as it had ensured they got a truly luxurious amount of floor space to sprawl in whilst everyone else, working on unspoken agreement, moved to the other end of the structure to sleep. It wasn't as if it mattered that much, she thought. The Childless Females' Hall smelt like feet anyway.

She tried to recall her dream of the previous night and failed. It was odd: she'd felt... stretched out, weird. Flat. Had her language had a word for "Two-dimensional" she may have used it. She was this thing, there but not there, trying to flee something perusing her. Chasing her. Hunting her, and in the end when she realised she could not get back home, it was blocking her way *again*, she had had to hide, lay low for another night, avoid it. And every second she felt weaker, and so in the end she tried to reach out, tell someone, *anyone*, any living creature about her plight...

Dreams happened. She put it out of her mind.

Peeling herself away from what she severely hoped was a puddle of her own saliva and not Troll-backs, she made it as far as the door before utterly losing coordination. Bits of her still hurt from the hunt, and the entire hall was deserted, as people chose the nippy spring early morning air and bracing winds to her company. Even Troll-back was gone, but working by scent, (and that was no picnic) she sensed her trail heading off towards the deeper brook. It was colder than the shallow one, but you could swim in it, and if had the distinct advantage of having a complete absence of possibly lethal giant shadow monsters.

Feeling confident enough to stop hugging the doorframe, she staggered of in the direction of the brook. She took her spear with her. Partly she was still a little paranoid about brooks in general after the events of the previous day, partly if was just because she was one of the People and a female at that, if you had a spear you flaunted it, but mostly it gave her something to lean on. It was far too

bright to see anything after the darkness of the hall, and she swore then and there that she was going to hunt down and kill absolutely *every* bird in the universe just as soon as she felt up to it, but her nose still worked and it was downhill all the way, so her feet remembered the way to the brook. So working blind she actually found her way there relatively easily. After all, she thought, anyone can work blind reasonably well provided it's only for a little bit: Admittedly several people walking along stopped and decided to walk along on the other side of the way, removing the main obstacles from her path, but she chose to see this as a mark of respect at her hunting skills, and ignore the fact that it also put them upwind of her.

Having arrived just in time to find Troll-back had just finished drying herself off (and subsequently having pushed her in again, for the principle of the thing) she had a decent wash and swim and, twenty minutes later having got a breakfast of leftover wild boar , she felt passably tribal¹ for the first time in two days. Thus fortified and at last feeling properly clean, she grabbed Troll-back and told her to keep her mouth shut about what they'd seen the other day and to meet her at the shallow brook at high noon, when there would be least shadows. She then went off, to try and find Owl-caller.

She found him at his hut, at the hearth he shared with his sister. She'd not been at breakfast that morning, which given the freeness with which mead had been flowing the previous night was not necessarily a surprise: Childless females, unless they had brothers, had no-one to look after them, no hearth of their own. Even those with brothers, until they married and had a husband to look after them, were effectively expected to do all the same work as females with families, but for a lesser share², as the child-rearing females were the tribes prosperity-priority and needed to be supported. Being unmarried also meant they did not enjoy, in *theory* they did not enjoy, she mentally corrected, the major stress relief enjoyed by most females in the tribe. Mead was one of the few acceptable releases that Childless females had, and Eagle-owl made the most of it. Unfortunately, she also made a mess of it.

¹ It goes without saying she would have been disgusted by the idea of feeling "passably civilised" since, as far as she could discern, feeling civilised seemed to mostly entail being ordered around by some distant authority figure, worrying about money, and catching a nasty water-borne illness, only two of which she had any concept of: Amongst The People authority figures had to be seen and smelt of a daily basis if they wanted to remain as such.

² Females with families hunted to feed them, supported by the trapping and shellfish-gathering of husbands and older children. Childless adult females, who had no young to support and nothing to do with their time but hunt did so near-constantly, and after taking a share of the organ meat and other prestige parts of the kill, brought the rest back, where it went into a communal pot (a big soot-blackened earthenware one by the enders fire-pit to be precise). From this pot the elders took their share in addition to the proceeds of any hunting they did, before divvying up shares to childless females and families who had failed to bring in a kill recently, then distributed the rest amongst the sick, the wounded, the pregnant, the less well off, visitors and shamans, and any orphans and widowers (who were also supported by bounds of obligation to any surviving adult females). The system worked well enough, and even provided a small storable surplus, but there was a constant, low-ke a grumbling about who was bringing it what share of the food relative to what they were getting which elders sorted out with patience, reasonable debate and when that failed, a big stick swung quite hard at any hands found dipping into the communal supplies without their say-so.

*She needs to get back with Hares-tongue. She could cope with the wild hormonal swings, the continual hard physical labour, the constant pressure to keep up appearances of respect and status, having to prove yourself again and again **and** the sexual frustration that's a part and parcel of being a young female in The Tribe, when she had something to aim for, someone to **talk** too who wasn't thinking "how do I turn this to my status advantage" all the time. But now that's gone and she's turning nasty, and she's a better person than that really.*

Owl-caller met her at the door. He did not invite her in. He could not: as long as his sister was unmarried he couldn't invite other unmarried females in without her blessing. He did not look as though he had slept, there were tears in his eyes that he was hiding well, but not well enough, and he kept his arms folded over his chest throughout: He did not what that seen.

"Greetings, Hunt-leader Boneclaw." He said formally. Here in the compound there was always sure to be someone watching. "My sister sleeps yet, I'm afraid she cannot see you right now." He said, meaning *I'm not allowed to speak to you alone in the compound without a chaperon, so let's pretend it's her you need to see.* "If you have a message for her, I will give it to her when she awakens." *Tell me what you're planning.*

"I was just wondering if she would care to go fishing with me this afternoon, her duties with Sister Bloodmare's hunt permitting. The shallow brook? Just before noon?"

"The Deepwood side or the clear side?"

"The clear side." Owl-caller-nodded.

"You're after the little fish then, not the big one: are you trying to identify the hunter by its prey?"

"I was just thinking that the Deepwood side might be... slippery. Dangerous underfoot, but now that you mention it, want an excellent idea. Have you, has your *sister* been able to ask her friend for anything that may help us identify this most slippery fish? "

"Not yet, but she may have by noon." He bowed formally, showing proper respect. "I have your message. I will give it to her when she awakes."

And I'm sure she deserves it for kicking you in the chest, but she's not herself, so for now the message will suffice Boneclaw said in every way save words. She instead bowed too. Their heads came briefly together.

"Not subtle enough! People will suspect something!" hissed Owl-caller.

"Yes, they'll suspect I'm either sleeping with you or trying to. Bloodmare left before dawn, trying to get something to top my kill. Others may talk, but with her out of the way no one will actually follow us there. Don't worry; I'm not just a pretty face. We'll have a good sniff around: whatever else may be, I've got the finest nose of my generation."

"Yes, that's the forth of fifth thing everyone says about you."

"What's the second and third?"

"Third: That despite being built like an Auroch and having a times the smell and interpersonal skills of a irregular cave bear, you've actually got a good brain in that grinning skull of yours when you choose to use it, and the second thing is that your amorous reputation is both well founded and, strangely enough, base on a genuinely decent treatment of males, if not necessarily a consideration or how any... liaison... will affect their standing or their parent's state of mind." Owl-Caller was not on entirely firm ground with this statement, not knowing much about Boneclaw or the general subject area for that matter, but he'd asked a few other young males about her over breakfast (the sniggering was endless, He'd wanted to throttle Hole-in-skull for telling everyone they'd met yesterday) and the general opinion was that although she was a rouge and not to be trusted, she was a "safe bet." He was not quite sure what the other males meant by this, but apparently she was also a decent person.

"What? That should be...what's first?" asked Boneclaw with the tone of some probing a hole where they were pretty certain there had been a strong tooth before. "What's the first thing that people say about me, if *that's* the second?" Owl-caller raised his eyebrows.

"The first thing? Usually some variation of 'Oh well, the problem is she and Bloodmare do *not* get on, at all. Such a pity... bad blood there...'"

"Oh. *That*." She said. She shrugged. "Noon." She said, turning away.

"Noon, replied Owl-caller, stepping, perhaps a tad reluctantly, back into the darkness of his family home. Despite herself, despite the need for secrecy and to play it normal, Boneclaw Sister almost went to stop him.