

Chapter Six.

Troll-back was less pleased about the plan.

“So let me get this straight, we’re going to investigate a bowel-looseningly scary creature or creatures that we may not even be able to see or stop, that we know nothing about, that Females of The People may have failed to prevent from killing our males before, and your plan is to invite along a weird, undersized little male who is the *son of the male it’s already killed, to go **looking for the damn thing at the very same point where his father was killed, as near as makes no difference exactly one year on to the day from the killing?*** Boneclaw, what I say now I say as your best friend, **ARE YOU UTTERLY UTTERLY SKALFING¹ INSANE!?**”

“No, and *listen*, willya? He’s smart. He’s a trainee healer, so if things do go vole-shaped² in a hurry we’ll have a healer on standby *and* because he’s a healer he can ask the he-witch, Hole-in-the-skull

¹ A popular strong insult in use amongst certain groups of The People, that to this day resists all exact attempts at translation by reputable peer-reviewed linguists. This is due in the most part to the failure of reputable peer-reviewed linguists to be able to find anyone who knows exactly what it feels like to get... something that only female spotted hyenas have... accidentally caught in something when it slams shut unexpectedly*. Apparently this is not what the word *means*, but a knowledge of the sensation is a required starting point, otherwise the translator has no frame of reference from which to work. Proof, if ever any was needed, that the world needs more disreputable peer-reviewed linguists.

*It might seem that a culture with no books and no hinged doors** might not have many things that could slam shut unexpectedly, but frankly it only takes one, and you’ll not forget the experience again in a hurry. They do however have hinged anti-theft chests, made from hollowed out larch-trunks with a lid fitted by rope hinges, sealed with a complex knot (sometimes itself encased in wax of clay with a design scratched on it). The knots are complex and each male would have his own passed down from father to son (or from elder to elder: normal females have too few possessions to lock up), and although they are easily cut and so do not *prevent* theft, they do *let you know* if someone had opened the chest, and scent then lets you find out who, which in a world of less than an hundred and fifty people is not that hard. Usually used for a male’s family heirlooms and trinkets, secrets ect. What a female would be doing opening it, let alone opening it whilst in any position to get something caught in the hinge is not clear, but if caught they could expect a strong reaction from the owner up-to-and-including them calling in the Elders to administer the sorts of fairly creative and arbitrary punishments required by tribal law, in which case the sneaking female is probably lucky to get away with just getting the lid slammed shut on them unexpectedly.

** Doors were essentially tent-flaps of water-proofed*** dressed hide, weighted or pegged down to stop them blowing open in inclement weather, with or without a wind-break of shaped wicker-work to give it structure and act like a mesh “Bug-door” in the summer. Doors were “locked” with identity-knots as described above.

*** You may ask “waterproofed with what exactly?” Don’t. At best the answer is going to be Bone-grease of adipose fat from a kill and worst, and more typically... no, I just can’t mention it, it’s too horrid. Even Dis-embodied narrators with a flair for anthropology have standards! Sorry. Frankly, and it’s a sad thing to admit, there comes a time where as an anthropologist you just need to spot discovering new facts about a culture and start drinking to forget the ones you already know. Especially if the culture you’re looking at is in fact your own.

² Boneclaw had no concept of “pear shaped” as to her pretty much all fruit was just pretty ornaments that hung from trees at certain times of the year and could, perhaps, if you were feeling posh, be used as bait to lure herbivores into ambushes. Now a nice tasty vole-head, *that* she understood. Although they did tend to go from crunchy to rotten very fast after you picked them. Besides, the local pears were far too vicious to

all sorts of questions about weird shadow creatures that will help us find out what it is and how we kill it. Cool it!"

"He's male" growled Troll back, rising from the position she had been squatting in opposite Boneclaw at about the same point her hackles rose. "He'll flake on us and it will end *baddly!* *You* of all people should be able to understand my *feelings* on this!"

Boneclaw got up from her squatting position in the rushes by the shallow brook. It was almost noon. She noticed that Troll-back's hand had strayed to her spear automatically, so she left hers on the ground. She really didn't need this right now. She stood to her full height, a little above Troll-back and just looked. She was her friend, and that friendship was strong enough to bend horseshoes on (or would have been had the People seen horses as anything other than a major meal opportunity), but stronger, stronger still, was her pride. She may play with status like a toy, but it was because she could afford to. She watched her status well, and she was not about to have her dominance or her decision-making changed by her own Second. *It's been a good few days, by and large, Troll'*. She thought, as loudly as possible. *A good kill yesterday. But it's been a couple of very long days for the both of us.* Her body said. *You really want to try this now? You really want to have a go, Troll-back? It's a long way back to the Childless Female's Hall crawling on your back and showing your throat, Troll-back, and that's **with** a full set of Skalfing teeth!*

"No, Troll-back I don't know how you feel about it because I'm not a mind-reader? There's no magic thing I can do to see your innermost secrets so why don't you tell me? Or even better, why don't you *shut up* and obey your hunt-leader's *orders!*"

At which point, the universe turning on certain irrefutable rules, Owl-caller arrived and walked into the middle of this.

"You rreally, want to trust this entirrre thing on *that?!* Rrrest it all on his shoulders? He doesn't even look like he'd last a night with you without something breaking!"

"What we do we do with him, it's my decision. He's my decision, my responsibility, Mine! Now are you going to show proper *Respect* to me, or am I going to throw you to the ground and kick the ever-loving-" Owl-caller disturbed a frog in the reeds, which croaked³. Both females spun around, becoming aware of his presence for the first time.

By She-is-fiercer! He thought. *I walk in on two young, strong, high-status females and they're standing on a muddy-riverbank getting ready to start fighting over me. And dear Gods' it's **awkward.***

consider eating or making into Perry even by the hardest humans: one should never try to make a fizzy cider-derivative from something which has more teeth than the entire Osmond family.

³ And later on he tried to use the story of how he narrowly avoided getting trodden on by the "Hyena-foot of Doom!" to get girls but it wasn't quite the same as his previous survival story and didn't work as well.

*Really really **awkward**. Thank you again, real life, for ruining another one of the standard set of male juvenile fantasies’.*

He coughed. “Um, am I interrupting you ladies?”

Boneclaw looked to Troll-back.” I dunno. Is he?” She asked a little coolly.

Troll-back looked strained for a moment, as if she had a sudden attack of trapped wind (having gotten drunk on mead on an empty stomach that was possible) and then looked down at her feet and shuffled them in embarrassment and made other, small gestures of submission Boneclaw hoped Owl-Caller would not notice. This was female business. “Not as such.” She said meekly, and stepped over and, for the look of the thing, gestured Boneclaw to one side. They spoke quietly, quite close to each other whilst Owl-caller pointedly pretended not to be listening in, again for the look of the thing.

“Sorry Bone, I honestly don’t know what came over me. It’s just these last couple of days...”

“Yeah.”

“And the hunt, and the dark creature, and I woke up this morning with a raging, thirst hung-over with my cheek stuck to the floor in a puddle of drool, I’m just not felling quite in control. Plus I’m feeling a bit *Scolt* with overtones of *Kret*, *Yest* and *Skart* right now⁴, yanno?”

⁴ One of the major weaknesses of all Indo-European languages is that they tend to lack words for how things make you *feel* compared to their wide selections of words for how things *work*. One of the possible reasons for this functionalist rather than emotive bias put forwards by Anthropologists is that as most Indo-European societies are traditionally Patriarchal, and so conform more to a function male perspective linguistically, rather than to a more touchy-feely female bias. It’s an argument I’ve never quite bought, but it is interesting to note that The People’s language had more than thirty times as many adjectives to describe mood as it did to describe the physical world. However, when you look at their society you see that this too is utterly functional and pragmatic: Given that females, especially young childless females of The People, are generally obsessed with status and not losing face in front of each other, at all times have more testosterone in their system than a dozen fifteen-year-old boys *on top of* the normal hormonal stresses and strains of a female mammal undergoing puberty, are all put under intense social pressure to be the best hunter possible, find a good husband, and raise a good family and are never, ever allowed to show any weakness of distress in public without severe consequences to their status, and as they are hunters are all *armed*, the ability for a young female in Troll-Back’s position to explain her mood *precisely accurately* is a functional necessity unless you want to find the entire un-married females hall in need to having spears fished out of their spears after a simple misunderstanding over whose turn it was to fetch firewood. And to think that some cultures need to

“Yeah, be too.” Said Boneclaw. It was a risk of living together with other young females in the close-confiner of the Hall. Your violent hormonal spats synced up, and then once per month⁵ everyone’s hackles rose, and people just rose to the challenge and tried their best to piss each other off. It was also liked into the hard-wired dominance behaviours of all hyenas. Some days the pack-mentality just went bad. Fortunately, hyenas being what they were, they had long ago found a socially acceptable outlet for hormone-driven dominance behaviours: randomly verbally attacking another female so you had a legitimate excuse to go out into the woods and beat seven shades of brightly-coloured hell out of each other until you both felt better and were best of friends again.

Thank you she-is-fiercer, that we all live in a society where overt directionless rage is socially acceptable and, no-matter the problem, all the nastiness can be got out of your systems in one horrifically violent five-minute go like that, as nature intended. She thought.

work at it in order to get a reputation for fierceness. They are however unfailingly kind and polite to strangers, albeit sometimes very, very briefly.

Her exact wording here is a little hard to translate, The best you could manage in English is “I was in a good mood and something unexpectedly spoiled it (*Kret*) I’m feeling a little hormonal right now” where *Yest* and *Skart* are specific terms relating to the mood altering effects of specific ratios of testosterone, PSH and oestrogen. True, no one in the People knew what testosterone, PSH or oestrogen *were* because their medical knowledge had not yet advanced to the point where they had discovered hormones, but you don’t need to know the cause to document the effects and name them, especially if failing to do so is going to result in someone repeatedly bashing someone else’s head against the doorpost over who’s turn it was make sure the bloody kindling was dry.

⁵ As only primates externally menstruate, there was no word in the language of The People for menstruation. The lining of the uterus was re-absorbed by their bodies internally without wasting hard-to-come-by body-building material if they did not become pregnant*, but that fact was that they still knew exactly what was happening and still felt some effects in terms of mood alterations.

*Embarrassingly, some human anthropologists hoping to study The People were not aware of this basic biological fact for nearly two-hundred years after Boneclaw’s death, anthropologists being as prone as anyone else when it comes to imposing their own understanding of “normal” and “universal” realities on others, if not more so. When Anthropologist were told by The People that they did not menstruate, the anthropologists presumed that they had hit upon an interesting taboo subject and immediately set out to find the “secret” of why The People never spoke of this and how they in fact deal with menstruation as a society. Their stubborn refusal to tell anyone this “secret” lead to some awfully fanciful theories being formed about Female Secrets, the Role of the Great Mother In A Matriarchal Society and, most anthropologists of this period being male, theories about Hyena matriarchs dancing around in secret rituals without any clothes on (something that only ever happened once about thirty years after this tale when Boneclaw had had a bit too much to drink and figured Screw It I’m Old Enough To Get Away With Anything). The first work to confront this misconception was that of Theladius Blackbeard: Pirate, Explorer, Anthropologist-adventurer, and purveyor of Rugged Feminine Aids, who returned from his third overland voyage/sales-trip to the Cerulean mountains minus a hand, eye and a leg, and wearing his entire sample box of his patent Rugged yet Hygienic Aids for those of a Hyenaish-persuasion lodged about his person pretty much where you’d expect (still in the box) to inform human society, or at least those parts of it who were able to hear the story without giggling, that The People managed very well as it was, thank you very much. This is exactly why corporate-interests and Anthropology should never meet: It seems that being able to sell refrigerators to indigenous arctic dwellers may be a damn good boast, but it makes for piss-poor research,. This is also further proof of why male Anthologists need to eat red meat and get out of the house and meet girls once in a while.

“Ummm, are you done?” asked Owl-caller, wondering if it was too late to just run for it as they briefly and rather gruffly hugged, before turning to him with a couple of suspiciously husky coughs and a chorus of

“yeah, fine, fine.”

“Fine, good. Dandy, thanks.”

“Need a moment?” Asked Owl-caller rotating on the spot internally with acute embarrassment. Boneclaw suddenly pitied him. Females always had the bond of their hunt-sisters, the continual surrounding of others whom it was acceptable for them to show some degree of feeling too, whether affection or the aforementioned undirected rage. Females could, gruffly and joking admittedly, hug each other in public, playfully (or not) try to wrestle or punch each other, and perfectly acceptably get dead drunk and fight, sing or just collapse one each other in a heap. It was common for females of the People to sleep side to side as nature intended of hunt-sisters. Comradery was important and encouraged, because given how aggressive female Hyenas were, the alternative to friendly comradery was not to be thought off. Males on the other hand, by custom and practice, barely touched hands in public. Unmarried Males had to show proper behaviour or ruin their marriage prospects, and that meant no raised voices, no emotional displays or physical contact with non-family in public. They *could* acceptably seek comfort in a spouse or a sisters arms and open up to them emotionally, but even then it had to be in private, never in front of young females from outside of their family, never in front of other males. He was visibly embarrassed to see Boneclaw and Troll-back make even this half-arsed display of affection. It was part of another world to his own. Decorum effectively prevented males from being emotional in front of other males unless at weddings or funerals. Letting males get too emotional was also forbidden on the grounds that it could spread and then there’d be no stopping it, and the Tribes Hunters would find themselves up to their armpits in hysterical⁶, excitable males. They also never socialised together, no, she corrected, they never *just* socialised together; you always saw groups of males doing some thankless, hard, dirty chore and nattering away to each other, but never saw them at their leisure as a group. Females relaxed as a group, males relaxed alone, with their spouse and the children. If they wanted to socialise with other males, they did so whilst working on something.

That was why when we’re out fishing or drinking or at female rites, thought Boneclaw, they are always so enthusiastically throwing themselves into some boring hard task, I dunno, cleaning the jakes, tanning hides, sitting in long rows sewing leathers and chatting whilst drinking tea: that the closest to leisure time with other males they get, eyes on their work, whilst friendships are made and battles are fought, all with words, never even getting with a half-pace each other.

⁶ Technically It’s not possible for a male to be hysterical, for obvious reasons if you know the root of the word “Hysterical”, but I’ll be buggered* before I use the phrase “up to their armpits testicular, excitable males.” Even Disembodied narrators have standards.

*I’d like to retract that statement, following repeated deliberate and malicious miss-readings from other disembodied narrators who chose to see the wording as an invitation, and thus a chance to cast aspersions and make improper suggestions. You all have filthy minds, and I honestly don’t know where you get it from.

And he doesn't even get that. Between a drunken sister and the hard life of a healer, he's got nothing at all but his drive to find out what happened to his father. I wonder what he'll do if we solve this and take that away from him.

Boneclaw realised she was staring and Owl-Caller was staring back. *She-is! You'd think he could read your mind at times* she thought. Troll-back however was looking from one to the other.

"Do *you* two need some time? Only I thought we were here to hunt a monster."

"No." Said Owl-Caller bowing, on the grounds that being a little too formal and making people uncomfortable with it was always a good thing. "We're here to find out what it is, then we see if it's hunt-able. Boneclaw said there was a bigger thing and a smaller thing. I humbly suggest we spend our time looking for the smaller of the two."

"That makes sense." Said Troll-back. "The smaller one's got to be less dangerous, Right?" Owl-caller snorted and muttered something that sounded like *typical female* under his breath, but raised no objection and gave no other explanation. As they started poking around the area, Boneclaw became increasingly concerned that as far as this thing went, small size was no guarantee of lesser danger.

But it was the larger one that attacked she thought. *That's got to be something to go on.*

After a few minutes poking around in an expanding circle, moving out from the point where the thing had crossed the river (In which time Troll-back increasingly asked questions to Owl-caller, who increasingly answered them with "I don't know Miss") Boneclaw started to feel that this was pointless. There were no broken plants, no scent. No footprints. She yawned. She was still tired. She shut her eyes for a moment, leaning on her spear and letting her mind unwind. It was an old trick Elk-mother had taught her: sometimes a hunter could be too alert, and it paid to just go blank for a second and then take a deep breath and look again with fresh eyes, smell again with a new nose.

She almost nodded off, but that was good. You had to let yourself relax. She opened her eyes, and took a deep breath.

She saw trampled reeds (trampled by them), footprints (Hyena, them again) , fallen leaves, a few snapped blades of grass (them), evidence of rabbits coming down to the brook to drink, a half-burred acorns, abandoned mid-concealment by some jay or squirrel (Not of itself odd, lots of things could startle a jay or Squirrel) and she smelt water, aquatic pants, pond-mud, reed pollen, fresh squirrel-shit, Frost, foxgloves, and of course, three hyenas. Nothing unusual.

Frost? Foxgloves?

She looked around again, closely. It was noon, and although it was still nippy this time of year, there was no frost. It had boiled away hours ago. Foxgloves would not be in bloom for a while yet, either,

and even so, there were no foxglove pants around near here: they didn't grow well in soil this wet, and even if they had tried, Elk-mother had a well-founded dislike of letting poisonous plants shed their petals into The Tribe's drinking water. She sniffed again. It had been very faint before, and now with Owl-caller and Troll-back stirring up new scents with their movement it was gone entirely, but it had been there. Boneclaw new better than to doubt her nose. There was defiantly a scent that did not belong. She called to the others, and explained as much.

"Foxgloves?" asked Troll-back, sniffing around a bit herself." If you say so Bone, but I'm getting nothing." Owl-caller however seemed to be thinking. Eventually he spoke.

"We should have come to check right after dawn, possibly before."

"And risk meeting that thing in the night? Are you mental?" asked Troll-back. Owl-caller looked confused for a moment and shrugged.

"I would hope not, but it's just... I don't know. Frost, a shadowy thing that leaves the scent of frost behind it where no frost is. That fact, it sends up a howl, but I can't for the life of me remember from where. I've heard about that in a story, I'm sure of it. It's connected with footprints."

"Footprints?"

"Footprints that start to fade when the light of dawn hits them."

Troll-back and Boneclaw looked to each other. Troll-back made the quick "His liver's overheating" gesture, but Boneclaw shook her head. He sounded sane, but that made it worse. *Frost, Foxgloves, and Footprints that evaporate like dew. Well that just puts the tin-lid on it⁷. Magic, or gods, or worse. Fine for heroes in old stories, but they didn't have to worry about getting glared at by Elk-mother. She thought. She-is might have fought and banished demons and gods, but she didn't resort to*

⁷ The exact Hyena homily is rather more complex and involves the finality of not sealing something with a lid, but the finality of disembowelling a creature and then finding yourself somehow unable to get all the innards packaged away neatly in the same space they originally came from, but it conveys broadly the same sentiment. And don't ask for their equivalent of "The Die is cast" unless you have a strong stomach and a complete absence of a graphic imagination. Had Cesar used that version he'd have been fined three aureus for public profanity and dis-owned by at least one maiden aunt before he'd have made it to the other side of the Rubicon.

sarcasm. Or Irony. Or even that thing Elk-mother does. God's and culture-heroes⁸ she thought have it easy⁹.

"Well, Bone, what do we do?" asked Troll-back. She was a good second in command, but that was the problem. Boneclaw looked to Owl-caller, who looked at his feet. He was bright and he sure as hell seemed to speak his mind, but he was still brought up in the belief that in these sorts of circumstances, the senior female took charge, and he'd argue and advise, but he'd not take the lead for her. *He's not afraid of responsibility, but he knows he's not as **good** as me at it. He wants to avoid glory, sort it all out sensibly without using the situation to advance his status, and then try to get on with his life, the selfish little bugger.*

It's gone all mythic, and suddenly I'm in charge. To think all I was worried about yesterday morning was catching a damn pig. She took a deep breath and squared her jaw. She may have no clue what was happening, or how to go about things, but she was a hunt-leader dammit, not a prey-creature, and she'd be buggered sideways before she'd lose the initiative in front of her second in command or a male. She didn't say as much, she didn't even think as much, but she didn't need to: it was built in at a fundamental level far below mere thought.

"We come back tomorrow, before dawn." She declared. "Owl, you try to find out from Hole-in-the-skull as much about this story of the disappearing footprints as you can. Troll, we're going hunting, we'll act normal for now, and tell Elk-mother tomorrow after we've had a better look, maybe if we can tell her something that makes sense mythologically she'll not think we've lost it. In the meantime, we'll play it safe and be sensible and we'll hope like hell nothing else happens."

Troll-back wrinkled her brow. "Like what? It's scary, but the shadow doesn't seem to have *done* anything..." Owl-caller, who had been gazing sadly at the spot his father was killed and his sister disgraced suddenly stiffened, then bowed slightly to Boneclaw and bowed very formally to Troll-back and stalked off. Troll-back watched him go and then very slowly curled one paw into a fist, put it in her mouth, and begun to hammer herself with the other fist in acute embarrassment. "Dammit, sis," She said. "He's right, you know, we need to work out what's going on, or someone else could get killed." Boneclaw stared, as what she'd just decided caught up with her.

*It's gone all mythic, someone's dead, and I think, yep, I think I just formally made it **my** sole responsibility.*

Oh crap.

⁸ It might seem odd that a hunter-gatherer would have an equivalent for the term "Culture hero" as its normally used by people from urbanised cultures when studying hunter-gatherers, but although The People may be simple hunter-gatherers, but you don't live around the Cerulean foothills without a good understanding of divinity and a way of analysing myth. At least not for long.

⁹ In this regard she was dead wrong.

