

Chapter Seven.

Boneclaw Sister was bored.

She'd needed to act normally after her and Troll-back's little trip to the brook, and so she'd sent Troll-back to check on the Sisters who were in her hunt, hunting to the North of the camp, and gone to check on those to the south herself. They'd planned to meet up at the encampment after they'd both finished and then go hunting. The process was fairly simple. You'd follow the scent or tracks of a hunt-sister or pair of hunt-sisters until you found a nice conspicuous place to stand where you'd be seen or smelt or send up a birds alarm call. If they were free to report, they'd come and tell you how their hunting was going, and if they were actually busy stalking or perusing something they'd not bother. You didn't actually try and *find* them. There was nothing like people popping up unexpectedly trying to find you to put you off or spook your prey when you were mid hunt. If you were hunting and really wanted your superior hunt sisters to come to you, you sent up a call or you went and found *them*. If not you expected them to leave you the hell alone.

They'd finished doing their rounds as Hunt-leader and Second checking on the others depressingly quickly (everyone was having a surprisingly lousy day catching nothing, except for Rindge-tooth and Sallow-fur where were not responding, so were either mid hunt for something good, or, as sometimes happened in woods that contained Bears, Giant Shrew, Leaping Tree Wolverine¹, Swarms of carnivorous land-crabs, enraged Aurochs and the occasional supernatural nasty, having a *terminally* lousy day). So having nothing else to do they'd gone hunting in the hope of spending the rest of the day far away from anyone who might have noticed their meeting with Owl-Caller and want to ask questions.

It was therefore unfair of the universe, Boneclaw thought, that they'd made a good if unremarkable kill almost immediately after setting out.

They caught the scent of a feral Billy-goat (not exactly difficult, as anyone who's ever got downwind of a feral goat will know) and moved off quickly, finding it and cornering it half-way up a small cliff. They were at the top, and it was stuck on a tiny little ledge half-way up that no creature other than a goat or a troll would dream of balancing on, let alone running backwards and forwards along it at an appreciable fraction of the local light-speed dodging lobbed rocks as it had done. They couldn't get down to it, and it couldn't jump down to the bottom of the cliff, and they were sitting on it's only way up to the top again. Normally this could provide them with a good days healthy exercise and mild amusement running up and down lobbing slabs of shale at it two-handed and shouting, until it dropped dead of stress and fell of the cliff, at which point one would stay to throw rocks at any

¹ Also known as the Mustelidae Leopard, The Non-marsupial Drop-bear, The Arboreal Skunk-bear, The Übergulon, Those-damn-geat-furry-things-thing-that-drop-out-of-trees-when-you-least-suspect-it-and-claw-your-face-clean-off and, more commonly thought their natural range, "Arrrrggggg! Arrrrggg getitoffgetitoffOhSweetGodsitseatingmyfaceit smellslikeaskunkanditsactualyeatingmyFACE! Arrrrggg! Scratch-Squolorp-squithud!crunch crunch crunch"

scavengers, and one would go back to the encampment for a rope to go down a nab the body themselves. But the darn thing had spotted another ledge near-by that, if it could make the jump to, it might just be able to get to the bottom off the cliff from. It was a big jump, Boneclaw could see the thing bracing itself for it, then backing up as far as it could for the run up. The ledge it was trying to jump to was less than four inches wide, but it was a goat and the ledge it was on at the moment was barely five inches at that. If it failed, I'd fall about fifteen or twenty feet. Not far, but possibly far enough to end up with a broken leg, and that's not what you wanted with two drooling hyenas on your tail.

They both saw it start its run up. Troll-back and Boneclaw, seeing it possibly getting away, both threw their spears at the same time: they'd been using rocks because no-one wanted to climb down a thirty-five or forty foot cliff-face just to get their spear back. Their aims were both good, and so as they were both aiming for the same point on the goat, their spears collided mid-air and neither hit. Boneclaw's however ricocheted into the ledge inches in front of the goat, and stopped its run up. It belated, and backed up to try again. Troll-back's blood was up, and Boneclaw could see her tensing to jump. That was really, really stupid: you just did not jump head first off a thirty foot cliff in the hope of hitting a goat half-way down and then hoping it'd break your fall at the bottom. It was stupid, and no responsible Hunt-Leader would let a member of their hunt take such a risk.

So she did it herself, before Troll-back could.

Hitting the goat half way down was actually the worst part. It was partly that the goat was bracing for the jump, and so all her force went into the narrow cliff-face via it, but in exchange it jarred every bone in her body and made light pop up in front of their eyes. It was partly the pain, partly the smell (which personally she'd pass on in exchange for more pain) and partly the sound (which even to a hardened obligate-carnivore was worrying, as for a moment she'd not been sure that all the distressing *scrunch-SKpeeeeeee-Pop!* noises from ribs disintegrating and bursting into lungs were from the goat and not *her* lungs), but mostly, it was the knowledge that she was hanging of a half-dead goat twenty-feet of the ground, and its legs were going to buckle and it was going to roll off the cliff, with her on top of it and she'd have next to no control over who was on top and who was on bottom when they landed.

She landed on top, of course, as next to no control it still *some* control. Landed in a holly-bush, to be precise. And then she tore its throat out as fast as she could.

They'd got their spears back and got back to the encampment to find they'd been gone for less than half an hour after they finished checking on the others (it felt a lot longer) and that had been it. No mead this time, too small a kill, but a pat on the back each, a 'well, good try girls, they're not all giant Boars, hey?' and just like that they were at loose ends again, generously gifted the rest of the afternoon off by a minor elder who could hardly have prevented them for spending all day lazing about if they felt like it, and worrying about the big creature made of night that only they'd seen.

Boneclaw also kept finding her mind wandering back to the noise the goat had made as it died. It was curiously upsetting. She was well used to resignation, fear, hate, mad panic and utter, utter insane taking-you-down-with-me fury (often the animals you least expected she'd still got a scar on her thumb from a terminally indignant mole, and Troll-back could never look a ferret square in the eye again). She'd even experienced the almost religious moment of perfect empathy before a kill, the boar wasn't the first time that had happened to her. But it was just the goats *surprise* that got to her. One moment, a mundane, every day problem like jumping from one rock to another, and then suddenly that remote danger you barely understood anyway had dropped down on you from out of the sky and that was it, bar some rather pathetic, messy kicking. It was, she hoped, in no way a metaphor for what she was going through.

And besides, it was an inelegant kill. Like many who would quite cheerfully kill you² without thinking twice, Boneclaw had *standards*. She didn't like making a fuss. She was prepared to put up with a *great* deal of mess, you couldn't be finicky if you wanted to be a good hunter, and as a stamina hunter if she couldn't kill something outright she'd worry it to death over hours or days, but she disliked there being any more mess or pain *than there had to be*. She'd killed by disembowelling with her teeth before, it was the way Hyenas were built to make kills, but she didn't like doing it unless she *had* to. Sometimes you did, an Auroch or a large Elk would kill you with your horns if you tried to get on its back, kick you to death if you went for its throat or hindquarters with your teeth, and the one spot where it couldn't fight back meant chewing through its belly in a singularly unpleasant way, unless you were lucky enough to tire it to death and finish it with a throat-bite when it fell. She used it when she had to, but she didn't like disembowelling kills: they left a bad taste in the mouth in more ways than one. Interestingly, Bloodmare also had a curious aversion to them, but Boneclaw dismissed this similarity.

I don't like to do it because I have standards, I don't like to see undue suffering. She thought *Bloodmare doesn't like it because she's a prissy stuffed-up wuss who won't get too messy if there is an underling to do it. She enjoys the killing and ripping and tearing, oh yes, but she enjoys making someone else do it on her orders and staying clean herself more. Honestly, you'd think with the rubbish she talks she'd not mind ending up with a mouth full of crap. She'll do it if she has to, but first she'll try to make someone else, or even the lore, do it for her.* Boneclaw shrugged to herself. For good people or bad, sometimes the only way out was the messy one.

Still, he was wondering to herself if she could have dealt with the goat better. She knew that "Looking over your shoulder, your view is always perfect³", (as The People's saying went) and so it was easy to judge yourself, but she found it hard to move on from her past. She tended to re-analyse her decisions, wondering if she could have done better.

² Not "Kill anyone without a second thought" she was quite hesitant to harm other People. Just willing to harm you without a second thought. Unless I've seriously miss-judged my audience, you don't count as one of The People.

³ "Scenting back along your own trail, you always smell everything properly" but once again, no need to be overly literal if it'll confuse those who can't think olfactorily.

It was a habit she hoped to loose. *Keep that up*, she thought, *and you'll end up old and bitter and cynical. Besides, you can't blame all your problems on goats.*

Mooching around the compound, she smelt none-too-fresh hog-fat being crudely and messily rendered. Being a hyena, and thus programed to respond to this in the same way humans respond to the smell of baking bread, she wandered over.

Owl-caller was in the early stages of making Pemmican. It kept forever, no doubt about that, but it was a lot of hard, bloody (and bony, and marrowy, and bone-grease-y) work.

He was at the stage of boiling down and crushing and re-boiling the epiphyseal ends of long-bones to get the bone-grease out. Normally hyenas got the bone-grease out the easy way, you ate then entire bone cooked or raw with a look of almost obscene joy on your features, but, as the saying goes, you can't make pemmican without breaking a few bones. The reason it kept so well was the dried meat flakes, which kept well enough on their own, were mixed with a very pure, very stable saturated animal fat. This was resistant to letting in moisture and although the surface molecules of fat might go rancid, that would form a protective layer around the main body of the foodstuff, like adipocire around the body of a Saint. However if you wanted good pemmican, you needed pure fat. Adipose fat from under the skin would just not cut it. Fortunately, the bodies of all mammals contained very, very pure long-life grease in good-ish quantities. Unfortunately, it was stored in the honeycomb of bone at the epiphyseal ends of long-bones. So to get it out you needed to eat the flesh off the bone, roast it and then crack it open to get out the nourishing high-fat marrow, boil away the last of the flesh, cartilage and blood until he bone was clean, and then repeatedly boil and crush the ends of the bones with crushing stones until you got all the tiny bubbles of high-quality grease out from the ends of the long-bones. Then it was just a matter of skimming off the floating grease, putting it aside to cool, and then relatedly rendering it and boiling it down until you got a pure white tallow that looked like soap or candle wax (because that's basically what soap and candle wax *are* unless you live in a post-industrial society). If you were patient and diligent and thorough and very hard working, you could get as much as a hundred grams of rendered fat per kilogram of prime epiphyseal long-bone after a mere four-to-six hours of back-breaking work. Then you just needed to dry your meat, pound the dried meat to the individual fibres of muscle tissue with a big rock, mix it with the fat in exactly the right ratio, and add the berries that would help preserve it but looked almost identical to twenty utterly lethal berries (the *very* best pemmican used the lethal ones but *in an amount that would kill the germs but not the person*), and you'd have enough for one meal for one person in some future winter. As a way of making food, it was worse than useless, you burnt more calories in the preparation than the food contained, not counting the effort of the hunting, but as a way of making something that would do as food in a pinch but kept *forever* it was perfect. But you had to crush a lot of bones. This is why many pemmican-making human cultures are identified archaeologically by huge middens of crushed bone, in a similar way to coastal hunter-gatherers building up shell middies.

Fortunately, The People didn't have this problem.

"Want some bone bits?" asked Owl-caller as Boneclaw wandered up, gesturing to the pile of crushed, de-greased bone bits he'd accumulated. She nodded in thanks and took a handful, which she proceeded to eat like popcorn. It tasted of nothing at all once the grease was gone from it, but she lived in a culture where you did not refuse food. Besides, it was pleasantly crunchy, and she'd only eaten about a kilogram of bone so far today. She stood around watching for a bit. She was mildly fascinated by how males preserved meat. She'd never done it. Females didn't except for the big meat-ponds, where they dunked a cleaned carcass or big cut of flesh under water and let it sour and pickle itself. The meat tasted of soured milk afterwards, but it kept well for up to one winter, and the smell was so strong wolves, cave-bears and even humans would think twice about trying to eat it⁴. They'd all starve over winter and now in early spring if it wasn't for this male work, she realised, and she had no clue how it worked. So she asked about the biggest secret of perfect food preservation.

"Owl-caller, how do you make backwards salt?"

He glanced up briefly, a flick of his eyes hinting that someone else had appeared behind her and was listening in.

"It's male work, and nasty at that. You wouldn't want to know."

She shrugged. "I like to know where my food comes from, even if it's just the salt." He shrugged.

"Technically it's a male secret, but a few females know anyway, so no harm. If you like, some other time when I'm not busy I could take you and show you the salt-heaps."

"Where are they?"

"In the woods by the shallow brook."

"Ah."

⁴ Lactobacillus can and has been used to preserve meat in temperate climates by deliberately inoculating it with lactobacillus and placing it somewhere to, err... culture... anaerobically, usually at the bottom of a specially dug clay-lined or slightly acidic pond. You know that joke about the thing found in the back of a fridge that either really old meat or really new cheese? Well it's basically like that. It's edible for up to nine months, provided it doesn't break loose and float to the surface, and it's very unlikely to give you food poisoning as the Lactobacillus poison most other bacteria, but it's fair to say it's something of an acquired taste, looking as it does like a bog body and tasting of a bog-body stewed in soured milk with a delicate hint of rotting flesh. Still, if it's that or a cheap hotdog, I know what I'd go for.

“Tomorrow good? Early before you go hunting?”

“Okay?”

Owl-Caller glanced up and whispered, but Boneclaw could have told him not to bother. She already knew that whoever had been there was gone.

“Nice work. That gives you a plausible excuse to be there at dawn. How did you know the heaps were near there?”

“I didn’t. I was actually genuinely interested in how you make backwards salt.”

He looked at her with his head cocked on one side, without stopping in his work. “You were?”

“Sure. I eat the stuff all the time, it’s in most of the food here. I was curious, is all.”

He shrugged. “Given were not likely to have time spare tomorrow to actually look at the heaps, then okay. You know those spots of... stuff you get on meat when it goes bad⁵?”

“Sure. Salt stops it going bad, and they never form on salted meat.”

“Normal salt usually stops it going bad, but it can go bad, some spots can form⁶, and sometimes salt won’t stop it going *really* bad⁷, but a mix of normal and backwards salt will stop that⁸. So we get normal salt from the old mine, and make backwards salt to supplement the small amounts of real salt we get. You know the old mine?” She nodded, they were a fair way from the sea here, and following a few small, ugly wars with humans and other tribes of the people in the last few generations, they no longer had access. Fortunately it was just as long a distance for humans too, and following a lot of longer, *nastier* wars between different groups of humans, some had dug a rock-salt mine locally after they loss access and then abandoned it and moved onto a better deposit when it became economically unviable for them to run. The People, on the other hand had no words for “economically unviable”, but had a pressing need to preserve meat over the winter and so

⁵ Colonies of bacteria.

⁶ The Staphylococcus Genus is very tolerant to Sodium Chloride (will grow quite happily in a 6.5% solution) in their culture medium, whatever it is.

⁷ As is *Clostridium botulinum* which is as close to a motif of physical destruction as you can get without magic, in that although it’s can’t actually kill you just by your looking at it, its toxin is so deadly that it is certainly *thinking* about doing so.

⁸ Nitrates of sodium and potassium, however, will kill both of the above, but other bacterium can be nitrate tolerant so a mix of nitrates and chlorides is safest for preserving meat.

regularly looted the old spoil heaps or brought down new sections of the cliff-face the human drift-mine had left in order to get the rock-salt they needed. Technically pemmican didn't need it, but it did help and besides, after even a short time living on pemmican and lake-preserved sour-milk-meat, you wished you had something else. Survival is all well and good, but survival plus bacon trumps it every time.

"So how is it different from normal salt?"

"It stops the going bad that normal salt doesn't."

"How? Why?"

Owl-caller gave her a *look* "I don't know, maybe it just wants to be helpful? Do you know how ordinary salt stops meat going bad?"

"No."

"Me neither. Shut up and listen. It just does, Hole-In-the-skull jokes it kills invisible little creature that live in the meat, he said he saw it happening by looking at meat through a very small glass bead during a vision, but he sees *lots* of things when he'd walking in his visions, Most of them involving invisible lobsters or huge hairy things with teeth for eyes and eyes for teeth. Anyway, a shaman, long ago, discovered the secret of making backwards salt when he..."

Owl-Caller stopped "You know the wallows Stags dig before a rut? The big puddles that they ... fill up and then roll in?" Boneclaw nodded Stags at rut looked majestic right up until you saw them rolling in a soured soup of their own liquid excrement to beef up the potency of their scent. There was nothing, no matter how stupid, she thought, that some creature wouldn't do in order to have sex.

"I know them. If you're stalking deer they're useful to cover your scent with. Deer aren't smart, if it smells like a stag and it moves like a stag, they won't notice it's carrying a spear until too late." Owl-caller's face took on a very worried expression. "I *really* didn't need to know that Boneclaw."

"Sorry. Hunting it less glamorous that it seems.

“But still...”

“I’ve never heard anyone complain whilst they’re eating the venison.” She said firmly. “People appreciate the hard work and pain that goes into acquiring their food, in an abstract sort of way, but noting will make them appreciate the icky bits. It’s just part of life. You do it, watch them eat your kill and go and get yourself cleaned up afterwards: They may not be grateful that you to the disgusting bits for them, but they are grateful for the food.”

“Yes. I can see.” Said Owl-caller, up to his elbows in rendered hog-fat. It was several hours before Boneclaw registered the irony. “Well, one day time and time ago, a male shaman came across one of those wallows and decided to dump the ash from his camp-fire in it.”

“Why?” Asked Boneclaw. Owl-caller gave her a look.

“Because he was a shaman and it was mushroom season. Do you expect this to make sense?”

“Oh, no. Carry one.”

“Well *anyway*.” Said Owl-caller “He came back a few days later to find that some heavy rains had made the wallow overflow.” Boneclaw nodded, you didn’t get really good shamanic mushrooms unless it was at that stage of either spring or autumn when it pissed it down every other day. Plus stag’s only rutted in the autumn mushroom season.

“And he noticed that where the wallow had overflowed and the sun dried-out the overflow the... water... had dried to leave a white powder behind. It looked a bit like salt, so, curious, he stuck his finger in and licked it...”

Boneclaw opened her mouth, then she closed it again. There was no point trying to work out why someone would do something like that if shamanism was involved: Do not meddle in the affairs of Shamans, for they are weird and quick to eat unsuitable mushrooms.

“...And hey presto,” she muttered, supplying the ending to the tale herself “Backwards salt was discovered.”

“Basically, yes. It is, however, a *lot* harder to make in usable amounts, but given we’ve got very little other salt, we need to. The proses for making it in bulk are... complex.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Umm... probably not. Not in dental anyway. It involves quite a lot of following large herbivores, and it has to be herbivores, around and ... cleaning up after them. Then once you’re built a big heap-”

“A big heap.” Said Boneclaw a little hollowly.

“- and mixed in a little soil, ash, straw, dried grasses, reed stems or something similar because of course you got to keep it properly aerated-”

“Of course.” Her eyes had started to glaze over.

“-then it’s just a matter of keeping it damped down.” He paused. “You know the pots?”

“Pots?” she said, worried by the sudden change in direction.

“The ones the older males put out, for when it’s a rainy night.” She nodded, with a sinking feeling. When it was a rainy night and the tribe had been hitting the mead, no-one wanted to have to stagger the suddenly very long distance to the jakes in the pouring rain. So there were pots. They filled up, and Hole-in-the-skull patently and without complaint carried them off and replaced them with empty ones the next morning. Other than a few minutes frantically searching for one when her bladder just wouldn’t wait she’d never really thought about them before. Owl-caller clearly knew more about the matter, and she was suddenly powerless to stop him talking about it.

“Well you need to keep the heap damped down or the salt won’t form. If the... donor has been drinking heavily the night before, then that’s when you get the best salt yields. You keep the heap

damp, turn it occasionally and when its ready, and you *don't* want to know how you find *that* out, then you mix it with wood-ash and flush water through it. When the water dries out, you get backwards salt.”

“Owl?”

“Yes?”

“That’s disgusting beyond all reckoning. “

“Really? I’ve never heard anyone complain when they’re eating the Bacon. Or pemmican. Or anything else.” He said smugly. “Besides, it does give the meat that nice pink colour that never fades.” He added.

“True. It’s jus I apprenticed the nice pink colour⁹ more before I knew it was thanks to a salt made from my own urine, was all. Not to mention the rest.”

“Not-hunting is less glamorous than people think.” He said.

Boneclaw pulled a face, but she couldn’t really argue. Experience with cleaning animal carcasses most days had long ago enabled her to look at food and not see the nasty process that went into it.

“You males really do have to put up with a lot, don’t you?”

“Speaking of which, Fox-tail had a word with me this morning while you were out hunting?”

⁹ If you’ve ever eaten processed meat, including most supermarket packaged meat, the reason it looks nice and red when raw and pink when cooked, as opposed to its natural muddy-red-brown and grey, it’s because the meaty is stuffed full of nitrates, like Owl-caller’s backwards salt, our old friend Potassium nitrate (also known as Saltpetre, KNO₃ and E No.243) to keep it looking good and keep it Botulinum free. However unlike this backwards salt, no potassium nitrate used in food preparation today is made the traditional mediaeval way from horse or deer dung, urine and wood ash anymore: it’s far cheaper in a post-industrial society to mine it from large deposits of bat-guano instead. Enjoy your bacon!

“Fox-Tail?” asked Boneclaw, worried by the second sudden change in direction of the conversation.

“Yes, you know, Fox-tail” said Owl-caller. “The male you’re walking out with?” *or at least doing something within ninety-degrees of walking out with* He thought.

“Oh, yes. Walking out with” *when no other, more interesting, alternative presents itself* she mentally added. “What about Fox Tail?”

“He’s noticed that you’ve been paying *me* quite a lot of attention, and I think he’s got the wrong end of the stick.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Is, he angry?”

“Not with me, surprisingly.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he specifically said he didn’t attach any blame to me at all.” Owl-caller sounded less sure on this point. He wasn’t sure what Fox-tail had meant exactly by that, and was unsure as to whether to take it as sympathy or, in a perverse way, as an insult.

“Oh *gawds*.”

“Yes. I think you’d better have a word with him.”

“And say what exactly?”

Owl-caller shrugged. “You could always try the truth.”

“Oh thanks a *lot*.”

“Sorry. It’s a terrible thing when the truth is so ridiculous no-one will believe it.”

“Aint that so. If only some other females had seen it. Your sister was in such a state when she was found no-one sane would believe her story, present company exempted, you’re her brother, you’re expected to give her the benefit of the doubt, and me and Troll-back were falling-over tired-and-dirty when we saw it, which doesn’t help you’re case if you’re telling people you saw some big nasty monster no-one else has seen. If only a few other hunters had seen it then perhaps the truth would be believable... what’s happening?” Asked Boneclaw, turning to the camp gateway. There was quite a lot of commotion. Owl-caller stood up from his pemmican-making to get a better look.

“Probably Blood-mare coming back, she’s been out trying to best that giant boar you brought in. She must have got something good if people are making so much fuss.”

“No something’s wrong: they’re frightened, you can see it in the way they move, even if they’re downwind and you can’t smell it. Excuse me, I’ve got to go check this out.” Said Boneclaw, walking away with the confidence of a female of The People. After a few seconds when the chatter of voices started to get more frantic, she broke into a run. This was turning into a mob, she could see it. Something was very wrong, and as a hunt-leader that made it her job to help fix it.”

“Troll! She yelled as she got closer and saw her second running alongside her. “What’s happening?” Troll grabbed a passing male and asked, then her face fell and she ran up to Boneclaw, clearly disturbed. “Blood-mare and Stalker were out hunting in the Deep-woods. Bloodmare’s just come back carrying her. She says she’s been attacked by something *strange*. Elders are calling a meeting: all of-age females, right now. Elk-mother *specifically* want’s to talk to us about ‘skunk’ we reported seeing in there.”

Boneclaw and Troll-back stared at each other for a moment, before trying to look at Blood-mare who had just come into view. She looked like hell, and she was refusing to put Stalker down. And she

was raving. As they watched one of the females in Bloodmare's hunt tried to take Stalker off her. She got punched to the floor before her mouth had even begun to form whatever calming and reasonable words she had been about to try, and got a damn good kicking for her trouble before a group of elders and married females could restrain Blood-mare. Boneclaw had seen People like this once or twice before, but never Blood-mare: she was actually snarling and had little tiny bits of foam forming at the corners of her mouth. Females of the People famously did not take well to getting the hell frightened out of them, and whatever had happened, the fact Stalker was hurt reflected badly on Blood-mares ability as a hunt-leader to protect her own. It was a threat you her authority, a challenge to her honour, and she didn't understand any of what was happening to her and more dangerously, didn't care. She was *Pissed*.

Oh crap thought Boneclaw. *Before it was just the monster posing a threat. Now Blood-mare's enraged, and because of it, if she gets her way, one way or another, someone's going to die.*

"I think, Troll, that we're going to need a damn good explanation."

"The truth?"

"What do you think?"

"I think we should see if Owl-caller knows any herbs or potions we could take that could cover the scent of *serious* lying from Elk-mother's inquisitive nose, because if the truth gets out and Blood-mare doesn't like it, she's going to kill, mutilate and then gratuitously urinate all over the truth just to prove to herself she's not to be messed with."

"My thoughts exactly, Troll-back, my thoughts exactly."