

Chapter Eight

“A unusually aggressive tree wolverine ” said Boneclaw Sister. “that’s the only rational explanation.”

“Is it indeed?” said Elk-mother, meaning “I don’t believe you but by all means keep digging.”

“Or some sort of exceptionally large Shrew” added Troll-back. “Some form of Rodent of Unusual size.”

“Rodents of Unusual size?” Growled a member of Blood-mare’s hunt? “I don’t think they exist!”

“Actually shrews are insectivores, not rodents.” Said Cloud-watcher cheerfully. “Their dental structure is actually quite different-”

“Shut up Cloud.” Said Elk-mother. “No-one cares about shrew’s dental structure at the moment. We’re trying to work out what attacked Stalker and what to do about it.”

“We could always wrestle it to death.”

Elk-mother sighed. “Cloud, that’s your answered for everything.”

“It’d work if you tried it for once. Besides, that’s not my answered to *everything*.” she said, winking and making a hand gesture which, Boneclaw noted, was at the same times utterly indecipherable and yet totally suggestive.

“You’re a vile old baggage, Cloud. No, what I am looking for is some suggested course of action from our young hunt leaders.” Said Elk Mother meaningfully. Boneclaw very emphatically did not squirm under her gaze, because a hunt-leader had to set an example and could not show fear, but she was slightly grateful that Owl-caller had happened to have about his person some herbs which, when infused in how water, made you smell more confident and aggressive, and therefore honest. That he’d just happened to have them with him was a fact that Boneclaw was unsure whether to feel relived or suspicious about, but any tree in a flood.

“Any ideas? Anything either of you would like to get off you’re chests?” asked Elk-mother. That was a low blow: females of The People had the right to lie though their teeth on any matter other than Status. It was a basic right. It was necessary in order to get things done without the rules getting in the way too much: *everyone* had enough secrets on their chest to cause, metaphorically speaking, major pneumatic problems.

“Ask *her*.” Growled Blood-mare. “Make her *tell* you whatever it is that she has *done!*”

“Me?” said Boneclaw genuinely surprised. She’d expected Blood-mare to be a world of problems, yes, but she had no reason to focus specifically at her: she didn’t *know* anything.

“You said you saw something strange in the Deepwood. You said you smelt a skunk and no-one should go in there...” *Oh crap, Bloodmare’s putting two and two-together* Boneclaw thought “You said you saw all these things the day you brought in that boar.” *oh crap* “Because you *knew* I’d think it was you trying to keep secret where you found that boar and would go hunting their myself! That wood borders onto that human-settlement, those humans and that snout-god temple of theirs have put something dangerous there, and you sent me walking straight into it”

Oh crap- wait? What!?

“What? That’s ridiculous!”

“You as good as *told* me to go in there!”

“I told everyone I saw something odd and smelt a nasty little bugger no-one in their right mind would want to piss off! I specifically told everyone not to go there!”

“Exactly! You *KNEW*-”

“*Ladies!*” yelled Elk-Mother.

“*Enough!* Boneclaw has done nothing but act honourably, *yes she has blood-mare!* In this matter, and I for one feel that if you’re specifically told not to go somewhere and you do, you shouldn’t try to shift blame onto the person who told you not to go there. So let’s have no more wild accusations,

and let's suggest some ideas to deal with the situation, shall we? Preferably ones that won't start a war."

"Kill it. Kill bunt the woods, attack the human temple, the woods border on the temple and that the only place anything stage and new could have come from, make them tell us what it is and them *all*."

"yes yes, we know you're opinion Bloodmare, thank you. Boneclaw?"

"Find out what the hell's going on, ma'am. "

"How exactly?"

Boneclaw seemed to consider this for some time. "Take people in in small numbers in shifts to investigate. Don't sent the whole tribe blundering in, because then someone will get hurt, but work in pairs of threes. Keep a healer on stand-by at all times just-in case some gets hurt, and probe the woods systematically at different times of day, see if we can find anything unusual. Then once we know what it is, we deal with it."

Elk-mother gave her a long, slow stare.

"Ye-es. All right, I'll buy that. Unless anyone has any better ideas? No? thought not. Obviously, as chief elder I should Go and investigate it with my sister elders first" All the elders Nodded. "Including Cloud-watcher in case someone does get hurt. Then well need someone brave to investigate it during the night.

"I'll do it. " growled Blood-mare. "Me and Eagle-owl."

"You'll need a healer." Boneclaw added.

"Don't worry, this time *we'll* not be the ones hurt, sister."

“You’ll take a healer if you like it or not.” Said Elk-mother. “Hole-in-the skull lives near there: he knows those woods well, too, take him-”

“And my hunt-sister Troll-back and I will take over just before dawn.” Said Boneclaw, her heart palpitating slightly at the fact it was all working out so well. “We’ll take Hole-in-the-skulls assistant, tat young male, whatsherecalled-”

“Owl-caller.” Elk mother said flatly, looking directly at Boneclaw. “Yes, a good plan. Meeting over. Clear off everyone.” She said without taking her eyes of Boneclaw. Not daring to look she got up, as slowly as she could, and turned to leave. Because she wasn’t stupid she started counting.

“Boneclaw, could I see you for a moment please?”

“Three.”

“I’m sorry Boneclaw?”

“Nothing, Elk-mother, just thinking out-loud. Catch up with you in a moment, Troll.” Boneclaw turned to face her Chief elder. Elk-mother raised an eyebrow.

“Mead, Boneclaw?”

“No thank you Ma’am.”

“Don’t you Ma’am me. Sit down and drink your damn mead.”

Boneclaw sat down and drunk her damn mead. Elk-mother stared.

“Good of you to volunteer to take Hole-in-the-skulls assistant. I’d have thought you’d have wanted Cloud-watcher or another, more experienced healer with you.”

“I’m given to understand his very good Ma’am.”

“Yes, especially at herbalism.” Said Elk-mother, sniffing far more dramatically than was strictly necessary. “Funny you couldn’t recall his name though... you both having grown up together, and all.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Elk-mother stared. After a while she started tapping her claws on the log-arm-rests of the chair she was sitting on rather annoyingly.

“Do you mind if I speak frankly, Boneclaw?”

“I would be privileged to hear you do so Ma’am.”

“Ha! You and Troll-back turn up at a meeting reeking of guilt, pemmican-fat in your case, and a very old recipe for what we used to call warrior herbs, one I haven’t seen since I was your age, that only a healer could make, and the profess not to be able to remember the name of the healer you and Troll-back have spent that last couple of days hanging around with. Hanging around with ever since you came to see me with a giant boar you could only have hunted beyond the Deepwood to tell me not to let anyone pass through them because you thought there was a skunk there. Came to tell me this after meeting with Owl-caller. ”

“Ma’am?”

“Came to tell me this *minutes* after Troll-back claimed to have seen a *bear* there, and advised me to keep people out of the Deepwood.”

Damn! “Ma’am?”

“Was it a skunk, or was it a bear, Boneclaw? Hopefully the education us poor and flawed elders have laboured to give you was sufficient to tell the difference?”

“It could be a tree-wolverine Ma’am, a *skunk-bear* if you will-”

“Boneclaw?”

“Ma’am?”

“Lie, by all means, but make sure your accomplice can remember which version of the story they’re meant to tell, will you? It embarrasses us all to have bad liars in the tribe. Now, if I were to ask you what in the name of She-is’ tits is going on, would you suddenly and mysteriously have become inexplicably deferential and stupid?”

Boneclaw wrinkled her brow in honest, simple-minded incomprehension “Ma’am?”

“Thought so. I’m old and half-crippled, Boneclaw. I can’t feel my feet most mornings now, Did you know that? And now this comes along... I don’t what to know, Boneclaw. Sort it out: I don’t want Blood-mare blaming you, or that human temple, we’d be better of my far leaving them alone, just as I’m sure they know they’d be better of leaving us the hell alone. Let’s keep it that way. I don’t believe they had anything to do with... whatever happened, but something scared the crap out of Blood-mare and rendered Stalker unconscious without leaving a *scratch* on her, and I’ll if it was really A tree-wolverine I’d *marry* It and let id bed me *publically* I’m that sure it’s something supernatural. I could feel *that* in my dreams even before Stalker got hurt. Owl-caller listens to that shaman of his, and I’m sure between him and you you’ve got some plan to deal with it, whatever *it* is and if you do then it’s all fine by me, no more questions asked. So just four words of friendly advice and then you can go on your way and do whatever you were planning to do at dawn: *really* don’t bugger this up.”

“That’s five words Ma’am.” Elk-mother sighed.

“Finish you’re mead and sod off, will you? I’ve got to go and poke around this wood with the other Elders for the look of the thing, thank you very much, and its twice as much walking as it would be

as they'll want to rush in to find something to kill and I'll have to lead them away from the centre of the wood, just in case, and at my age it's no fun. Leadership never is, remember that!"

"Yes Ma'am. Thank you for the mead Ma'am."

"Really remember that" said Elk-mother, for reasons Boneclaw didn't get for a long time afterwards. "You'll miss my sage advice when I'm dead you know!"

Owl-caller was waiting outside.

"Well, did the herbs work?"

"They made me want to fight everything in existence and then try to take it to bed afterwards."

"They're supposed to. Did they stop Elk-mother from smelling lies?"

"Sure, she spotted them all anyway, because she'd not stupid, but smell? No. what's *in* that stuff? I feel a bit... olfactorily forthright, if you know that I mean. "

"Wait until you need to urinate, that stuff is designed to, amongst other things, help people mark territory more... unambiguously."

"Lovely. Any other side effects?"

"You'll be sexually attractive to certain forms of moths for six to eight weeks, but other than that? No. So how did things go?"

"Elk-mother approved You, Me and Troll-back checking out this thing just before dawn. We're *officially!*" said Boneclaw proudly, earning her a disapproving look from a passing female who heard this, saw Boneclaw and another young male and believed there was walking out and then again

there was just taking the piss. Boneclaw watched the other female walk away, and then, very slowly, raised her palm to her face.

“Arrrg. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go and explain all this to Fox-tail.”

“If you like, but there’s no need: I already told him the truth, and he’s okay with it. He even added that I found the idea of you solving a mystery and fighting a monster quite... exiting, and I’m sure if have *no* idea what he meant by that.” Boneclaw stared.

“You told him the truth?”

“Yes.”

“And he believed you, just like that?”

“Yes. I’m his friend He trusts me.”

“If I had told him the truth, he’d have called me a bad liar and a two-timer and chased me out of his hut.”

“Yes, but you’re female.”

“...”

“Yes.”

“Boys!”

“Yes. So you refrained from telling Elk-mother the truth?”

“Yes?”

“And she trusted you, just like that?”

“Yes.”

“Were as even if I’d given her every detail she needed, she’d not a believed me for a moment. She’d have thought I’d gone mad.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, funny world, isn’t it?”

“I had help getting her to trust me. Apparently she’s been getting some strange hint of something supernatural in her dreams. Go figure: I guess it’s just some elder thing.” Boneclaw realised that Owl-caller had stopped walking and was standing, starting open mouthed.

“Dreams!?”

“Yes, why? What does that signify?”

“Frost and foxgloves, and footprints that fade in the light, and the bringers of dreams! Why the *hell* didn’t I see that before!? Sorry, I’ve got to go and check things with Hole-in-the-skull, don’t ask me yet, I could be wrong but I think... yes I *think* that I *may* have just worked all this out. I’ve got to run meet you there, at the place before dawn if I’m wrong, but if I’m right, we should head out earlier, in the night. Meet me at my hut latter, say in an hour? I’ve got to go! I’ll not be long!”

“But, wait!” Boneclaw watched as he raced of, but did not go after him. “Well you could have just told me what you suspect now, instead of running off to confirm it and leaving me in the dark. It’s not like this situation needs any more dramatic tension!” she yelled after him, then she shrugged.

Males. With that thought in mind, she realised that she had an hour to kill, she was apparently back in Fox-tails good books, and that as his mother was an elder and his father on cooking detail today, he would be all by himself and possibly in need of some company. She grinned slightly at this though. *Perhaps things are looking up after all.*

A few moments after Boneclaw had gone and that corner of the compound was quiet one more, a shadow detached itself from the wall of Elk-mothers dogun and stood there for a moment, clenching and unclenching it's fists. Then Blood-mare staked off, following the scent-trail Owl-caller had left and growling to herself. Only then was everything quiet once more.