

Chapter nine

Owl-caller hurried back from meeting with Hole-In-The-Skull, abuzz with knowledge. *How was it, he thought, that I didn't see it before?* He rounded a corner as he hurried back into the compound, nearly knocking into Elk-mother, who was returning with the other elders after their fruitless search of the woods. *If there' coming back then Bloodmare and my sister should already have headed out. Good, best not to bump into her at the hut. Dreams! That's the secret of this all. Well, Hole-in-the skull taught me enough about herbalism to test that: Shaman's sage should do it. Or another mild hallucinogen, try and induce a dream state whilst still conscious, and try and **communicate**.*

Safe in the knowledge that his sister was out, Owl-caller popped the tent-flap door to his hut and hurried in. It wasn't locked down; the weather wasn't harsh enough to justify that. Leaving the flap open behind him to let the light from the adjacent hut's fire shine in, he ran across to his father's memory-chest, where he kept anything that was personal to him, as well as the mead-spirit¹ based herbal tinctures he couldn't leave lying around since his sister had started drinking badly, threw down his staff, and started to fumble with the knot in the near darkness. It would take a moment to open the chest: it was a particularly good one, his mother had helped his grandfather make it to show to him that she was a good and considerate person and suitable to marry, and so it was quite elaborate: held shut not with the usual combination of a sewn-hinge at the back and identity-knot at the front, but having a proper hinge with teeth cut into the chest fitting into recesses on the lid and then a pin made from *Lignum Mortem*² holding them together at the back, and two knots and two

¹ It may seem odd that a largely a-metallic culture would have the means to distil alcohol to spirit, as in most sedentary societies this is done with copper pot-stills, but the People did have a surprisingly good knowledge of metalwork (although being hunter-gatherers they didn't mine ore as it was too labour intensive to do that and hunt, and so had a limited supply of traded metal items) but in fact they did fairly well by using freeze-distillation of mead to concentrate it to a mix of sugars, ethanol and sometimes, unfortunately, nasty dangerous toxins that could turn you blind. In summer they placed mead in an animal-balders and heated gently to force out the water and then which then gave over to shamans who could weed-out the meth's and other toxins with a single carefully temperature-controlled double-bladder distillation or hot distillation in an earthenware Alembic to leave a very strong and only faintly mead-like spirit behind. This was useful for preserving herbs or extracting from them and concentrating those active ingredients such as herbal oils that were not readily soluble in water, such as extracting the *salvinorin A* from Shaman's-sage in order to better try and communicate with the divine when mushrooms weren't in season and dancing until you entered a trace via exhaustion alone seemed like far too much trouble.

² The wood of the *Guaiaicum Diabolica* tree, a close relative to *Guaiaicum Officinale* which only grows in areas with higher than normal supernatural activity, such as the Cerulean foothills. Identical to *G. Officinale* in all ways, except for the fact that its resin rather than turning blue in the presence of substances that have peroxidase activity and which are then exposed to hydrogen peroxide, thus being useful for determining if a stool sample contains blood (via the peroxidase activity action of haemoglobin), it's resin instead glows bright white in the presence of demonic activity if then exposed to the spittle of a male virgin, and so it can be used to determine from a stool sample if someone is possessed (Or, if you have a daemon on standby, to determine from a salvia sample if your son's have been fooling around, one reason why Boneclaw was more than commonly thankful for the lack of demonic activity in Cerulean in this period: so long as she could still count, it gave her plausible deniability when walking out). The wood also interacts far more strongly with demonic flesh than is the norm for mundane materials, partly because of its resin and partly its very high density, and so it is traditionally used for the coffins of those who die possessed when the traditional thrice-consecrated lead smelted in cupules made from the bones of a saint is unavailable, for making holding cells for captured daemons, and other similar works. In fact the swords of the local Veiled are made of steel vessel-hardened by roasting it with charcoal derived from *Guaiaicum Diabolica* twigs and bark (larger chunks are too resilient to burning to make good charcoal) and iron derived from the local haematite, which also shows a greater than average ability to affect daemons and their kin. It is not known why some substances show more

Lignum Mortem pins fastening it at the front. Eventually he got it open and began to rummage around inside. *Yes... shaman's sage. Or perhaps a very small dose of nightshade would do the trick...*

He didn't get any warning: whatever else she was, Bloodmare was a commendably good stealth hunter. She didn't hit him either. Perhaps, he mused later, it would have been better if she had. But then again she'd never have acknowledged that a male could be a legitimate threat. Not at that point in her life.

She was suddenly just there, blocking the light of the door, her scent suddenly everywhere, when there'd been no trace of her before, growling. Not shouting, she didn't think she needed to with a mere male, and she didn't want to be heard. Not yet.

"Poison now?" Purred Blood-mare as she snatched the nightshade from Owl-caller's hand. He gasped slightly as she moved behind him and, with commendable skill, twisted his arm into a position that did no permanent damage, but made it clear that a broken Humerus was always a distinct possibility if he tried to move without her say so, and then pushed him face-down against the door of his own memory-chest. He could just about see, in the small section of his vision that wasn't full of woodwork or fur, her put the tincture down. As soon as she did he felt her other hand applied to the back of his neck. He was now fairly comprehensively trapped.

"What *has* Boneclaw got you into?"

"I'm a healer! I need that! There's nothing wrong with my having that nightsha-"

"There is *everything* wrong with what's been going on here, and you're going to tell me what that *is*, male! What is Boneclaw up to! What's going on in the woods, why the secret meetings!"

of an ability to interact with certain supernatural entities that others, or why the rules concerning these materials are so arbitrary. For example it has never been adequately explained why Iron is so unpleasant to elves, of why the flesh, blood, bone or feathers of birds from the family *Corvidae* also can repel daemons or cure possession depending on the phase of the moon (hence why a live crow can, in certain circumstances, be as useful as, say, a crowbar when fighting daemons).

It is extremely unlikely that Hunts-Like-Owls knew this when building the chest, although as he worked with a shaman Owl-caller must have been aware of it, but she almost certainly knew the value of extremely hard, self-lubricating wood when she saw it and wanted to make hinges: the People used the wood often for spear or other projectile points due to its hardness and due to the fact that if you get a respectable* unmarried male to spit on the point, and if you then throw it into an animal when hunting and get a flash of light, you know that the animal is *not* safe to eat.

*One Boneclaw Hasn't been walking out with.

"You're hurting my arm!"

"If you don't keep quiet I'll drag you before the Elders by it and then we'll see what gets hurt! What's going on in the woods? Tell me quickly now."

"Arrg! Something's loose in them. Some sort of creature of darkness!"

"Talk sense! What creature?"

"Surely you saw it when it attacked Stalker?"

"I saw nothing, there was just *movement* and then she was unconscious and I couldn't wake her! She sleeps still, despite the efforts of Hole-in-the-skull! Why can't he heal her, is he on it? Did you set this thing on her!"

"No! what do you mean, you didn't ... didn't see it- Of course! Arrrg! It can only be seen by those close to sleep, the exhausted or dreaming or drugged! That's why I'm getting out the nightshade!"

"Nonsense. What does Boneclaw what with poison? Quick now or I'll have you before Elk-mother!"

"She already knows, Boneclaw said we had her permission to do what we wanted to deal with the creature!"

"Deal with it? Permission, I see..." Blood-mare let Owl-caller up, but kept a hold of his hand with the wrist at a painful angle as she let him turn to face her. "Yes, that makes more sense. Boneclaw has, clearly, taken advantage of your male naiveté, no doubt seduced you as well, and has told you some poppycock about acting with Elk-mother permission."

"That's not true!"

“Where you present when Boneclaw was given this permission, or are you just going on what Boneclaw has told you about her dealings with Elk-mother? Yes, I thought so. And as for this... creature of darkness... playing on your poor damaged sisters delusions. Incorporating her story into it all. How *cynical*... I’d not have though Boneclaw had the brains to try that. Clever, it’s what I would have done. Now, you mentioned a *deal* Boneclaw is cutting a deal with some? Is it the humans from the temple?”

“No, you’re getting it wrong, it’s not like that!”

“Listen , male, it’s not for you to tell me what it’s like or isn’t. Your job is to keep a respectful tongue in your head and follow in the traditions and duties expected of you as a male of the People! Now I can see how being a *weak* male Boneclaw could have sold you this story, but it stops now. I’m going to go and find your sister: I have no legal authority over you, but *she* is your guardian and lawful protector, that makes it official. You are then going to take me and you’re sister into the woods, and then you are going to take us to whoever it was that Boneclaw was meant to be meeting and then you’ll keep quiet and when the fighting’s finished then we’ll come back to the can and we’ll all see what is what.” Bloodmare’s voice dropped to a very menacing purr as she bent his hand further back and leaned into him. He could feel her breath and little bits of spittle crept landing on his face, but he couldn’t see her: the pain in his arm was making purple light flash in front of his eyes. He felt faint, and bit down on his lip until it bled so not to yelp in pain: he didn’t need to be told it would go worse for him if he did. “And if for whatever reason you can’t locate them, were going to take a trip to that dammed snoutgod temple with a few light horseshoe-funguses and some torches and then-” There was a noise from the doorway, Blood-mare let go of Owl-caller’s hand and half turned, snarling.

“What the fu-?”

KerrClonk!

Boneclaw stood and regarded Bloodmare’s unconscious body with an odd mix of surprise and marvellous distain. Then she turned to Owl-caller. He was panting heavily, on the verge of hyperventilating, and his tongue was hanging out. He was bleeding from the mouth, but seemed unaware of it. He just looked at Bloodmare.

After a while Boneclaw felt she had to speak.

“Owl-caller? You can probably put that staff down now.”

He put the staff down and, to her undying shame, cringed inwards on himself and begun to cry.

“No! Owl-caller No! you’ve done nothing wrong!”

“I Hit her! I struck a female, that’s not allowed! It’s against the law, it practically *is* the *basis* of the law. He-is and She-is-”

“Are not here, for pity’s sakes! She was in your home! She broke the law first; a female can’t enter a home of another family’s male uninvited!” *Admittedly I just did, but if I hadn’t things could have turned out **really** badly.*

“That’s not important! This is the crime of He-is! Prior and provocation don’t apply. Even if you’re responding to a prior crime, a Male doesn’t strike a female, he summons his female relatives for protection!”

“You’re only living relative is Eagle-owl and she gets so drunk she attacks everything in sight! She once attacked a goddammed tree and broke her wrist! She practically uses you as a punching-bag! And she’s terrified of Bloodmare, she’d never side with you against her!”

“The law doesn’t know that! I hit a female!”

“Then the law is an ass! The law needs to be led by people who can *think!* You need to know how to play the law!”

“Play the law!? I struck a female! She can demand any recompense she wants’ from me-”

“Only in proportion to the injury done!”

“So she could legally hit me in the head with a staff, do you think I’d have any teeth left after that? Or she’d be well within her rights to demand my hand in marriage of my sister, by way of compensation, take me from my home against my will, bed me once and then dump me ineligible to ever marry again and so stuck in the care of my sister *for ever!*”

“Why?”

“She’s entitled to demand satisfaction for the physical harm and injury to her status. If she were permanently injured, she’d be entitled to ask the elders for my life!”

“Why!”

“Because I hit her!”

“**Prove it!**”

Owl-caller paused. “Come again?”

“The law can’t judge what it can’t see. It’d be her word against yours.”

“I’m male and she’s a hunt leader.”

“Who was in your hunt without your or your sister’s permission. That counts for a lot. At the very least, you could make the argument that she was indecently propositioning you, you said no, and she made the story of you striking her up to get back at her. Elk-mother might not buy that, but the facts would be she was in your hut when she had no decent reason to be. Plus who could picture you hitting her? What proof does she have you struck her?”

“Her Jaw’s broken.”

“Really? Wow, good hit! Okay... you blind-sided her because she turned to look at the doorway when I came in? Right?”

“Don’t remind me, a dishonourable blow on top of everything else.”

“Honour is where you find it. So she never actually *saw* you hit her?”

“No...”

“And if you had told her an hour ago that a male, a meek little healer at that, would pole-axe her, knock-her out, and break her jaw, would *she* have believed it?”

“Not it the grass and trees themselves told her in the voice of she-is. But the fact is I did.”

“She doesn’t know that, and even if she did, she’ll be a little, confused when she wakes up. We’ll drag her out to the woods, say the creature attacked her and say I bravely rescued her at great risk to myself.”

“Nice Idea, except for the facts no-one but us and Elk-mother believes there is a creature at this point, she will remember being here in this hut before she got hit, she got a good look at you before I hit her so she’ll remember we were both here in the hut with her, and finally *no one* would believe you would piss her out if she caught fire. Then there is the problem of status: if you involve yourself you’re going to have to convince them not only that I acted properly, but that you did. Or at least that you acted in a way consistent with your status in the tribe.”

“... Good point, We’ll say she was aggressively propositioning you for sex, I came round, also to proposition you for sex but in a harmless slight-possibility-of-future marriage way, discovered her in your hut, was overcome with jealousy and alarmed to find her twisting your arm and punched her in the face with my spear-haft.”

Owl-caller considered this.

“Wellll.. You’ve got to admit, that sounds a lot more like what would actually happen than what just actually happened.”

“- And even if she gets all self-righteous and says she was here at your hut demanding to know if I was involved in some sort of evil conspiracy, as I walked in and found her twisting your arm and

breathing down your neck, it's still plausible that I *thought* she was aggressively demanding sex from you. You're the innocent made rescued from unwarranted aggression, Bloodmare is the righteous warrior who was the victim of an unfortunate misunderstanding, and I'm the oversexed, udder-brained clod that wanders into the situation and acts instinctively to defend a male and retaliate to a supposed treat to my honour."

"You'd still be the one in the wrong thought, If you found her threatening someone you wanted as a lover, you should have called her out to fight openly and honourable. You'd lose status, a lot of it, and have to pay it back to Bloodmare. She'd put the price as high as she could, she'd have you jumping through hoops for *weeks*."

Boneclaw considered this. "I can take that, I suppose. Besides, I'd aggressively be cheerful at her. If someone tries to make you do an unpleasant and demining job, they get really pissed off if you seem to be enjoying it. And because I'd know I was pissing her off, I *would* enjoy it. Status isn't a game, if it could condemn someone like you for doing the right thing, but it is *like* a game: you're a poor player if you can't rebound from anything and come out of it ahead."

"No: she'd demand you take this before the Elders *now*, or at least as soon as she wakes up, and then we'd not be able to deal with the creature. I need to take the blame for this, you need to go now and deal with the creature before it hurts someone else. If you took the blame, you couldn't do that: what's worse, with you under her obligation, she'd make you help her with her plan to blame this on the human temple: frankly, I think she's either gone utterly paranoid."

"Or she sees a status gain: everyone likes a war-hero. If successfully, it would be the biggest raid in generations."

"Surely no-one would be mad enough to start a war with the humans just to advance their own status?"

"Why not? The humans do it all the time. Good point 'though, we'd need to make sure she doesn't wake up until after we've finished this..." Boneclaw looked around; she spotted the clay tincture bottle. "What's that?"

"Tincture of deadly nightshade."

“Hummm, that may be a *tad* extreme for what I’m thinking.” Boneclaw looked at the memory-chest, and the various dried plants, fungi and extremely unlucky animals hanging from the roof of the hut so any children that wandered in couldn’t reach them and poison themselves. “What else have you got?”

“What the hell” asked Troll-back from the doorway “Is going on here?”

“Let me explain... No, there is too much, let me sum up. Bloodmare came in and started threatening Owl, Owl knocked her out, and now we have to keep her unconscious until we can go into the woods and confront the creature, and make it look like I’ve knocked out Blood and do it so well even Blood believes it. After we help him get revenge on the thing that killed his father.”

“That doesn't leave much time for dilly-dallying.”

“No.”

Troll-back considered this. “Is there any point in my trying to understand this anymore?”

“Probably not. I don’t” Said Owl “I can deal with the monsters, but the games of status are a bit beyond me.”

“And I’m fine with the status, but I’d rather not have the magic and monsters.”

“Fair enough then, what can I do to help?”

“You can hold onto the bottom of this ladder so I can reach the really nasty herbs right in the top of the thatch without falling off.”

“Wait, I’ll do it.” Said Troll-back “It’s not right, yanno, a male having to go climbing up ladders when there’s two females to do it for him.”

“Do you know what jasmine, arrowroot, and Nipponese Aconite look like?”

“Umm, No?”

“Then I’ll climb the ladder, thank you Troll.”

“But it’s not proper, I mean, the etiquette!” Owl-caller sighed.

“Yes, and we all know why that rule exists, don’t we? If I climb the ladder and you stay at the bottom, will either of you try and look up my loin-cloth.”

“No”

“Maybe. Joke Joke! Of course not” said Boneclaw. Owl-caller narrowed his eyes at Boneclaw as he mounted the bottom step of the ladder, but he climbed anyway and started rooting around in the roof.

“Nice cock.” Said Boneclaw after a while.

“Thank you, here hold it a sec’ for me will you? I had Skin-Turner stuff it for me-” said Owl-caller, passing down a large stuffed chicken to Boneclaw. “Years and years ago, you know, as a reminder of that time we were all cubs and we got into that human farmers hen-house. Remember that?”

“Remember it? I’ve still got the scars!”

“Ah yes, the joys of childhood. Ah, here we go.” Said Owl-caller climbing down. “Arrowroot, jasmine, Nipponese Aconite, and I’ve got tincture or poppy and the rest in my memory chest. This should keep Bloodmare under for a while. You hold her still in-case she wakes up while I’m mixing it, and I’ll fill you in on what I learned from Hole-in-the-skull.”

“You found out what we’re facing?”

“Nope.” Said Owl-caller cheerfully. “But you remember there are two creatures? A larger and a smaller one? I found out what the smaller one is. That tells us a little about the sort of thing that may be hunting it.”

“What’s the smaller thing?” asked Boneclaw, feeling a vague stirring of excitement as she passed Owl-callers massive cock to Troll-back and wedged Blood-mares laws open so Owl could insert a large wooden funnel into her throat. She wanted to know. He grinned and held up a dried foxglove flower.

“A dream-deer.”

“What?” said Troll-back “Those are just an old legend!”

“Yes. Strange that they happen to be real as well, but there you go.”

“A what?” asked Boneclaw.

“A Dream-deer. Surely you’ve heard of them?”

Boneclaw shook her head. Owl-caller frowned. “What did your father used to tell you brought you dreams when you were sleeping them?”

“I dunno. He just used to say that dreams were your sleeping mind sorting and storing all the experiences of your waking mind had had throughout the day, and that’s why people with disrupted twitchy-eye-dream-sleep often have problems turning short-term into long term memories compared to those who sleep well.”

“Oh, that old chestnut. How do these superstitions form? No: dreams are delivered by weird flat shadowy deer-like creatures that People can’t see but some animals can. You can see them if you’re suitably close to a dream state, in a trace, exhausted, drugged and so on. They bring dreams to you when you are sleeping, and leave no trace of themselves, save for footprints that melt in the light of dawn,. And the scent of frost and-“

“-foxgloves. I see. That reminds me, the day after I saw the thing by the river, I this weird dream...” Boneclaw told Owl-caller about the dream, the feeling of being flat, and scared and hunted and desperate to communicate. He listened with interest, at least until the point Bloodmare started to

wake come around and Boneclaw had to hold her down whilst Owl pored his completed potion into her nose, ear and finally mouth and Troll-back tried valiantly to bludgeon her into submission with the stuffed cockerel. When this was done, and the patient was covered in feathers mind beak-wounds but otherwise sleeping peacefully, someone asked the important question.

“You know,” said Troll-back panting and blowing feathers off her muzzle. “A stuffed cockerel makes a pretty good weapon. Why hasn’t anyone tried using one of these as a weapon before?”

“Because it’s a retarded idea.” Said Boneclaw “I mean okay, seeing someone administer a judicious beating with giant chicken is surprisingly intimidating, but it’s still mostly just silly. I mean, what would you call it? The battle chicken? The war rooster?”

“The doomcock?” volunteered Owl-caller, tidying up his herbs and tinctures. “You know, for a second I thought one of you girls was about to ask an important question.”

“I’ve got one.” Said Boneclaw. “If the prey is a Dream-deer, what’s the hunter, and how do we stop it?”

“No idea: here deer are prey to wolves, and bears, and tree-wolverine, and us. Presumably if there are shadow-deer, there are shadow-predators. The dream-deer are technically angelic, in that they are messengers or delivery agents for the supernatural, or technically fairies.”

“Vicious little bastards fairies.” Said Troll-back. “Especially those little buggers that live in flowers. I remember this one time I was out hunting and I stopped to pi-, err, make water, and the tree I chose had some woodbine growing up against it that I didn’t notice, and suddenly there’s these little winged psychopaths, all dripping wet and armed with spears made of little thorns and daggers of stinging nettle spikes and they’re all flying right at my-“

“As a the term fairy can be used for any magical creature whose job it to bring things or take them away, such as the tooth-fairy, which is actually a small goblin with a really weird trophy fetish, but on balance I’d argue that their predators would be, technically, demonic.” Said Owl-caller, graciously ignoring this interruption “We should be prepared for daemon-stuff.” He reached over and took up the two pins of *lignum mortem* that held his memory-chest shut, and handed on to each of the two hunters, They were about nine-inches long, with an eye in one end so that the rope of the

memory Knot (which he had in fact cut to get it open: he'd not had the time to dally around³) could pass through them making it impossible to remove them without undoing the knot, and they tapered to a surprisingly sharp point. They looked like giant sewing needles. "These should be able to hurt it if it is made of daemon-stuff or any similar shadow-flesh."

"Cool." Said Boneclaw, tossing one up and down in her hand in a casual, devil may care manner and nearly crippling herself when Troll-back's casually swung doomcock forced her to duck and made her fumble and drop the wooden peg point first into the floor an inch from her foot.

"For pity's sake stop that Troll! Okay: we know what we're up against, we think we can hurt it. Anything else we should know?"

"When did you last sleep?"

"This morning, why?"

"Too recently: you won't be able to see it properly unless exhausted or drugged. I would give you a very small dose of tincture of Shaman's sage, except that that may render you unable to move, let alone fight if you had. I'll try mixing up something, but it's probably best if one of you can physically exhaust yourself, and the other takes the drugs, that way if I get the dose wrong one of you can still do something useful. First things first" said Owl-caller "we may not have to fight it: If we can find the dream deer and get it far away from here, the other creature may give up and leave this area or follow it or something. First, we meet with Hole-in-the-skull, see if he can negotiate with it, then if that doesn't work, we find the deer, and when the hunter comes for it, we try and fight the hunter. Which of you is most physically tired?" both looked at each other and shrugged. "Okay then, have either of you done anything physically exerting in the last hour or so."

"I might have." Said Boneclaw. Troll-back grinned nastily and Owl-caller rolled his eyes.

"What a surprise. Okay, try and tire yourself out as much as possible. Jog on the spot or something. Right, I've got all the herbs I need, no wait... pass me that measuring-cup will you?" asked Owl-caller, pointing to a small cup. Boneclaw passed it, turning it over in her hands before handing it over. It

³ Many memory-knots in use by the people had in fact evolved in complexity to the stage one person could not tie them and this was the only way to get them open. Their value as a theft-deterrent was that no females knew this.

was very small, made of a very fine smooth white pottery unlike anything the People made, and had a tiny handle on one side, too small for her to even get a claw though. "Weird cup. Did you make it?"

"No, they're, well, kind of naturally occurring. There are these little creatures, I don't think they have a name, they're quite rare, which live in little burrows, but are tool using. They drink a lot of herbal tea, Mint, chamomile, that sort of thing. Vicious little things if you rouse them, but they always have these cheerful little cups in their holes, plus big stockpiles of herbal teas, some of them medical useful, and art supplies, for some reason, so if you find an abandoned burrow it's well worth it." He shrugged "It's just a nice little cup I use for measuring small amounts of medicine. Don't worry about it, Little Creatures do not, as a rule, come into stories about warriors and daemons and dream-deer."

"Be a weird story if they did. Okay, lets' go."

Boneclaw and Troll-back nodded to each other. It looked like time for action, and they were creatures of action. They both thrust the sharp wooden pegs into their belts, picked up their spears and went out into the world, ready for trouble. After a few moments they came back in again.

"Are you coming or what?" asked Troll-back.

"Ahem." Said Owl-caller, hands on hips, after being treated to two blank stares, he made a sweeping gesture to Bloodmare, snoring loudly on his floor.

"Oh right. We can't leave her there. We'll have to move her."

"Stream would be a favourite. Or if we could find a stag's wallow... Oh well Troll, come on, you get her feet. Ah, I recognise that grin Troll, I can tell you're thinking what I'm thinking."

"I think so, Bone, but what if the stuffed-cockerel gets noticed by the farmer?"

"I... wasn't thinking that, I was thinking we do what we did to Dances-on-wolves at Three-claws and cousin Long-mane's wedding."

“Oh, even better.”

“Where are you putting her? People will notice if you carry an unconscious person around the compound.” Said Owl-caller.

“Relax: we’re young females; we’ve done this before. No-one notices an unconscious person if they don’t want to.” Said Boneclaw propping Blood-mare up along the wall to the hut. She stepped in again for a moment, and went over to Eagle-owls’ side of the hut⁴ and grabbed a ragged blanket that despite Owl-callers best efforts to keep the entire hut respectable smelt none-to-good. She wrapped this around Bloodmare.

“Where does your sister keep her stash of mead?” Owl-caller looked at his feet in embracement.

“In the firewood heap, she thinks I don’t know. I tried watering it once, but she re-stocks so often, and drinks so much elsewhere, it does no good.”

Boneclaw stood awkwardly for a moment, before putting her hands comfortably on Owl-callers shoulders, and moving over to the wood-heap. They then all went outside.

“What are you doing?”

“Pouring mead all over her. That plus the blanket, people will mutter and look away, where as if they just found her unconscious with no props they’d’ want to know why. If only we had a bowl of warm water.”

“To clean her up?”

“To stick her hand in now she’s unconscious, ages since I’ve used that trick. How does she look?”

⁴ As doorways to People’s huts were always un the south east to let in sunlight and keep out the prevailing westerly winds, Females always slept to the left of the door in the south-west quadrant of the hut where it was warmer, and so the light coming in thought the door at dawn would shine on the males sleeping area in the North-west and wake the male in time to see to the fire and make the females breakfast. The darkest corner of the hut, to the right of the door in the south-east, was used by the male to store firewood for the central hearth.

"You need more mead, Bone."

"Shut up Troll. And put that damn chicken down will you? Owl?"

"Maybe we should have used more poppy milk and less valerian, you can smell the valerian from here even though the mead, and for the Gods' sakes clear up some of the feathers."

"What's going on here?"

All three of them suddenly turned around.

Elk-Mother and Cloud-watcher were standing right behind them. Elk Mother looked at them all, from right to left. Boneclaw, still pouring in mead over Bloodmare's head and grimacing in shock at being caught, Bloodmare, out cold and covered in feathers, Owl-caller looking down at this feat and blushing with acute embarrassment, holding a bag of extremely dangerous hallucinogenic herbs, and finally Troll-back, trying to hide an enormous stuffed chicken behind her back and grinning with maniacal innocence. Elk-mother opened and closed her mouth a few times, and then just gave up.

"Carry on." She said in extremely strangled tones, before she turned on her heel and walked off back to her dogun.

"Nice cock." Said Cloud-watcher cheerfully before heading off after her.

"Thanks, its Owl-callers." Said Troll-back.

After a while Boneclaw started breathing again. "I thought for a second we were in trouble there."

"I doubt it." Said Owl-caller. "For a start, there are crimes just too embracing for you to want to have to judge as leader, and on top of that, Elk-mother is not going to get us into trouble unless we do something really stupid."

“Yes, because she put her faith in me as a leader when spoke to her earlier today.”

“Maybe, I was thinking that it’s because although Cloud-watcher is a dammed good healer when it comes to setting bones and birthing, she can’t mix a potion to save her life, and getting treated by Hole-in-the-skull would mean admitting she’s in worse shape that she says she is, so she needs me. I’m the only one here who knows counter-reflexology⁵, which doesn’t work well as the reason she can’t feel her feat is a canker in her spine, and besides, I’m a young male: I have no status, so she can speak her mind to me without consequence, and well... sometimes I think she just likes to be the object of attention from a young male, even if I *am* applying the Pain-needles.”

“Pain needles?”

“Cactus spines tipped with hogweed sap pricked into the gaps between her toes, and then exposed to strong sunlight so the burring effect of hogweed sap on flesh comes into its own for full effect. She’s so far gone she only feels a little tinge in her toes, but without it she wouldn’t be able to tell where her feet *are* without looking she’s that numb, so she needs it to walk, and even then, I don’t know how long it will work for.” Boneclaw and Troll-back stared. Owl caller sighed. “I’m sorry, I’ve upset you, I forget sometimes that you’re hunters, you only usually deal with quick deaths.”

“It sometimes takes prey *days* to die after we start attacking it.”

“Exactly. Now let’s never speak of this again. Besides, don’t you girls have a monster to hunt, things to fight, dangerous drugs to take, and all that other female stuff?”

Troll-back looked to Boneclaw who shrugged. “He’s got a point. Let’s go and play with the dream-deer, troll-back. Let’s hunt the night!”

⁵ A system of healing were, as certain zones on the feet correspond to certain internal organs, the spleen, the liver, the pancreas, stomach and heart etc., that by applying a massage to the regions of these organs, you can heal diseases of the feet. Developed by the same school of medicine that pioneered the deadly art of Hetropathy favoured by the best and most subtle assassins, whereby substances that in large amounts are beneficial to the health, vitamin C, essential minerals and the like, become deadly poisons if diluted in sufficiently large amounts of distilled water.