

Boneclaw Sister: stories of The People, a couple of generations before the wombat.

The Problems of Status

Chapter one.

Boneclaw Sister sat down as the Childless-female's meeting got to actual business. Finally. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy the rites that were carried out first: they were designed to demonstrate the cunning, strength and status of the participants, and so being a young hyena entering her prime and a lot tougher and brighter than most of her peers, she was *good* at them. She really stood out as something special in them. But, however, they did mean that you had to go through a lot of what was essentially posturing and pointless ritual before you could get down to discussing the business of running hunts and sorting out the other important dealings of the meeting, so she felt a little conflicted about them. She wondered why old Elk-Mother bothered with it, as the ritual did *not* flatter her, making her look even older and stiffer by comparison to the young females sounding her. Then again, what power and status did the elder have, if not from the rituals, mused Boneclaw.

Gods', that'll be me one day unless I die first. She thought.

Staring into space for a few seconds of unfamiliar introspection at that thought, her second, Troll-back, noticed her slightly strained expression and cracked a joke "Bone, you got indigestion or seeming? I told you not to eat those goat-hooves." Everyone in her hunt laughed good naturedly, Elk mother looked to her then sighed in exasperation and Bloodmare and Stalker laughed a little too viciously. Stalker, taking it too far as always added "Watch her after this is over, she'll shift to the Jakes!" Boneclaw glared at Stalker for a second before glancing to the jakes¹. Something glinted in a tree near them and caught her eye. After watching it for a while, she realised she had drifted off and turned her attention back to the meeting

Stalker was being a pain in the arse, about whose job it was to watch the fires set to create clearings for deer-ambush and whose job it was to then build the hides, but Stalker always was a pain in the arse. Boneclaw paid her no attention. She could afford to ignore Stalker for now. Stalker had slightly less status. Bloodmare, now, Bloodmare was a real problem. She was being quiet now, and Boneclaw knew that if Bloodmare was being quiet then it was because she was planning something.

Like me.

Besides, Elk-Mother wearily cut in to Stalkers complaints. It was interesting to watch. Boneclaw had never considered the possibility of using weariness as a weapon, but it worked: her voice made you feel tired just to listen to it, and she wore down Stalkers arguments until when she said "We'll leave it as it is and see." Stalker couldn't argue. How could you? Elk-Mother was dying, and not dying well. Everyone knew it. Defy her now and the other elders would have your teeth. "Let the hunt-leaders sort it out" Elk-Mother added.

¹ Spotted Hyenas demonstrate latrine behaviour, using it to mark the edge of their territories. In The People, the sentient of Cerulean, this manifests in putting the Jakes on the very edge of their camps. This is the same sort of liminal grounds were tribes often carry out hidden rites, such as those required by childless females no longer children, but not yet considered full adults.

Boneclaw and Bloodmare shared a glance. So we're sorting it out, the glance said. How do I blame your inevitable attempt to sabotage this squarely on you then? It said. Two different hunts, because there was a lot of ground to cover, but that was normal enough. Including the familial hunts, there were six hunts of The People in Cerulean at the moment: Times were good, and the tribe was large. But to have two hunts entirely of young females out to prove themselves, with two hunt leaders of equal status, well, that meant completion. Lots of competition.

Trouble.

But less than putting her and Bloodmare together in the same hunting-team to butt heads, that was the idea anyway. She leaned back and shrugged. "I'll deal with it. It seems fine at the moment, but I'll have a look over if that's my sisters' decision." *Take the imitative. Seize control. Do lots, that way if it all fails, it fails spectacularly and by mitigating the possible disaster you're showing leadership and your status can rebound. That's what you've never understood Bloodmare. Do a good job where it matters, and where it does not, look busy. Status is perception.*

"Are you sure you're up to it?" asked Bloodmare meaning "I don't think you're up to it." "After all," she added. "You have been taking on an awful lot of minor duties lately." Meaning "My duties are more important, you glory-hogging bitch."

"I'm sure I'll manage somehow." Said Boneclaw, leaning back and smiling. *Smile, it's not enough just to be confinement, you have to make it look easy. If you act self important about a duty people will think it's a big deal to you and hesitate to give you others, act casually about it and they'll feel safe to give you more important ones. And always, Bloodmare, smile casually at the stuck-up self-important bitch opposite you, especially if you know she hates smiles, casualness, and you. Nothing annoys them more, dearest Bloodmare.*

"After all, I've managed bigger before, Bloodmare. Relax, you worry too much. Have some fun once every while: go fishing, drink some mead, find a nice male and scare his parents as to your intentions..."

Elk-mother cut in with a tactically timed "Ahem." Just as Bloodmare's ears flushed red and Troll-back and Boneclaw's hunt burst out laughing. Boneclaw had no idea how she'd got her entirely undeserved reputatio- her *almost* entirely undeserved reputation, she mentally corrected, but she knew how to play it. You were a poor excuse for a female if you couldn't play a little socially frowned-upon behaviour to your own status-advantage, and to be fair her famed flirting and courtships were eighty per cent entirely innocent, and the other twenty per cent was hardly unwanted as far as its recipients generally went.

Maybe Seventy per cent. Sixty at the worst.

"On that matterrr." Bloodmare growled. "May I remind my beloved hunt-sister that this is the meeting for unmated females and if any sister has any know indiscretions they are harrdly a matter to boast about-"

"Childless females, Bloodmare." Elk-mother corrected before Boneclaw could. *A small distinction, but an important one. Were considered **effectively** adult, but we've not yet paid the sacrifice owed to She-is-Fiercer, and that's what counts. The test of the first-born.* Bloodmare looked stunned to see

Elk-mother cut in. Boneclaw was not: She'd cut in before Boneclaw could because Boneclaw waited just a moment so that if Elk-mother wanted to cut in and make the correction official, she could.

LERN to play a crowd, Blood, it's not that hard really. Its probably the most important thing a young female can learn. Aside from how to count she added in the privacy of her mind. Thank She-is for small distinctions. "Besides, Blood, I think that there might just be one or two things to boast about." Winked Boneclaw. "After all not many people can claim to have outrun Hares-Paws in a flat hundred-and-fifty pace sprint from her son's hut to mine across the compound, and fewer whilst leaping over rooftops and dodging thrown items. No that, I may add, my intentions towards Rabbit's-ear were anything other than honourable." *That's true, at least: I was trying to sneak into Fox-tail's hut. It was an honest mistake anyone could have made in the dark.*

"If you cared more about your status and the status of others-

"Then I'd explode from status. I keep track as much as you do." *Ain't that true.* "And I always consider the status-risk and the consequences of my actions, Hunt-sister." *It wouldn't be fun otherwise, Blood.*

She looked over Broodmare's various cronies, and the few good young hunters who just happened to be in her hunt, and mentally checked her status against all of them. No competition. Her eyes lingered on Eagle-owl. No competition there, poor soul. She'd been slighted, and slighted badly, failed in her duties as a female and been unable to get vengeance. If she didn't recover her status soon, which she wouldn't, she'd be pretty much finished in the tribe. For a start Hare's-tongue's mother had stopped her from courting her son. They'd never be allowed to marry if her status did not recover, and if it didn't soon he'd be married elsewhere and Eagle-Owl would stay at her Brother's hearth. Boneclaw wished she could help, as Eagle was a good hunter who needed help in many ways, but she was in Bloodmare's hunt. She couldn't interfere.

"Any other business?" said Elk-mother, meaning "Unless you have a *good* reason, clear off and bicker over status elsewhere so I can go back to dying in piece". Boneclaw looked to Eagle-Owl, who was looked pleadingly at Bloodmare. She could intervene on Eagle's behalf, but to do so would risk more than a small measure of status. Bloodmare pointedly did not notice her.

Take risks Bloodmare. You need to in order to gain. But no. Nothing. Boneclaw looked away in well hidden disgust, and saw something glint in a tree by the Jakes again. She did not look at it further.

"No other business." Said Bloodmare firmly. Eagle-owl looked down and swallowed. Elk-Mother looked from one to the other, impassively. "Well, in that case we're done here. If any of you young ones can find the strength to help and old cripple to her feet..."

Old cripple my arse. Thought Boneclaw, helping her up for the look of it, and carefully shouldering Bloodmare out of the way in her eagerness to help. *You're dying of a canker to the spine and until you die it'll cut off pain and feeling, making you more willing to push your body than before. Two*

*years ago you were bent over with arthritis, now that you can't feel your knees and lower back any more you **stride**. I'd hesitate to fight with you: You've nothing to lose.*

"Thank you Boneclaw, then we can perform the closing rite." *And what a waste of good mead that will be.* They performed the rite of closing, Bloodmare glowering at Boneclaw throughout. Boneclaw smiled back.

Afterwards, as the others drifted back towards the camp (Bloodmare marching off with her tial high, nose in that air and back so straight you'd think she'd deform her spine, Boneclaw noted) Boneclaw picked up her spear and, watching the others, begun to walk backwards in the direction of the jakes.

"Hey, Hunt sister." Called Troll-back. "Where are you sneaking off to? I've got a bottle of mead hidden by the fishing creak: we're going off to drink it and spend the afternoon failing to catch anything!"

"Sounds good, I'll catch up in a bit. You'll laugh, but I've actually got to stop by the jakes. Don't wait up for me, I'll go check out the hides in clearing Stalker was bitching about after, and then catch up with you latter. Save me some of the mead."

"HA! No promises: save *us* some of the males!"

"No promises." Said Boneclaw resting her spear over her shoulder and waving them off. She was mildly pleased to see they all slouched off rather than marching of woodenly like Bloodmare's hunt. *Honestly the way she **walks**, she thought, If it wasn't for the fact you could see the spear in her paw you'd think that Bloodmare had it lodged up her – ahh, good they're all gone.* She walked backwards for a moment watching for them, then turned and walked off towards the jakes, keeping her eyes down and glancing from side to side, whistling and doing her best impression of someone looking for Burdock, Dock or any other plant with large soft leaves¹. She ducked under one of the trees and sniffed about a bit, inspecting a small clump of burdock and rejecting it before turning around again to face the camp. Quickly trotting backwards under the tree she kept her eyes on the direction of

¹ the nearest Jakes was only for childless females, and since in The People females did housework only under sufferance, it was not quite as nice as those for males or families. Finding that the previous visitor had used the last of the sphagnum moss and not bothered to replace it was far from uncommon*.

*It was however as antiseptically clean as only a hyena latrine could be: Like all spotted hyena's The People considered bones just as edible as any other part of a prey animal and equally desirable as flesh (less so than organ meat, far less than liver). They had so much calcium in their diet that by the time their food exited the hyena it was white and practically fossilised already. Combined with the porous fast-draining alkali soils of the Cerulean foothills and a good shovel full of hearth-ash mixed with roasted freshwater-muscle shells from the seasonal shell-middens for lime, they were as hygienic as anything. However, due to the way hyenas of both sexes are set-up and their instinct to scent-mark territory, many of the local trees developed a distressing amount of personality at a certain height above ground, but no society is perfect.

the camp, scanning for any witnesses, before swiftly and without looking, thrusting the butt of her spear up into the dense lower branches. She was rewarded by the “Ooof.” of expelled air and a furred body, about a head shorter than her own, tipping out of the tree and into a near-by bush. She quickly leapt onto and straddled the body, and clamped both of her paws over its, his, muzzle before moving both her and him deep into the concealing shadows cast by the bush. It took less than three seconds, and was done with the economy of moments and inbuilt stealth of a natural born killer.

“Wotcha. You do know it’s forbidden for any male to witness female rites, don’t you? If Elk-mother had found you she’d have tanned your hide, you realise?” Said Boneclaw Sister conversationally, as if she often discussed the forbidden whilst straddling young males, hidden from prying eyes in the local shrubbery.

Okay, bad example. She thought.

She looked carefully and removed her paws from his muzzle (She didn’t add, “Don’t scream” because it was a stupid thing to add. If he wanted to get caught and dragged before the Elders that was his call.) and spent a reasonably pleasurable few seconds looking her discovery up and down. After a few moments something clicked and she frowned.

“Wait a sec, Aren’t you Eagle-owls brother? What’shecalled.... um...”

“Owl Caller.” Snapped the male. Even by male standards he was not big, nor particularly strongly built, but he certainly had a decisive voice, and good teeth, she noted. Weird one, she remembered. The year younger than her, or maybe two. Never went through that giggling and fawning stage most young males went through (and which, she would freely and gladly admit, some never seemed to grow out of). Quiet, thoughtful, hesitant. She vaguely recalled pushing him into a stream when they were both very young, but then again she had pushed practically everyone into streams: she had been that sort of child. It didn’t exactly form the basis for a deep and insightful relationship. Hell, she pushed Bloodmare into a stream just last week (claiming she had just been reaching over to get her bait and tackle). Sometimes streams just happened.

“Yep, well Owl Caller, the thing is that although the tree by the Jakes was a good choice for a hiding spot, out of site, downwind *and* next to something that would cover your scent if the wind changed, all good, the fact is that if you were female then you’d have been taught and you’d know that trees are never as good as hiding places as everyone thinks. Hard to move from one to another stealthily, unless you’re part squirrel.” she looked him up and down again. “Which going by the nice fur I’d say

might have been a possibility with different parents. But the *Important* thing is, females don't wear polished haematite beads openly on hunt. They glint in the sunlight. Real give away."

"I'll try to remember that. Can you get off me now?"

"Not yet. Besides, this is fun. So... Why were you hiding in the tree watching the female rites?"

"I wasn't watching the rites."

"You were, I mean why else were you... Oh. The meeting, not the rites huh?" It clicked. "You wanted to see if Bloodmare was going to help your sister."

"Help my family, yes." He said, noting that her first thought was "sister" not "family". Boneclaw had the decency to look mildly embarrassed, possibly the first time she ever had in such close proximity to male, he thought. "My father was killed whilst under my sister's protection. How was never determined. That means that it can't be ruled out that my father was killed by another Person. My sister has the sting of failure *and* I live with the whispers that maybe my father died a Trash Person. It's worth the risk to investigate."

"You hoped Bloodmare would help?"

"No, but I had to see anyway." Boneclaw nodded. Owl-caller seemed to have the measure of Bloodmare all right. She thought back to the death of Eagle-Feathers, Eagle-Owl and Owl-Callers father.

It had been a strange affair. Their mother Hunts-Like-Owls had been a respected hunter, and long dead by this point. She'd died giving birth to Eagle-Owl, her Third. That had left Eagle-Feathers to raise Owl-Caller and Eagle-Owl alone, although his sisters had helped. Both had grown up with Boneclaw, and been of average or above-average status: their mother had been a potential Elder in the making, and was to this day well remembered.

Last spring, early, when winters back was not yet broken, Eagle-Owl had been ice-fishing when she noticed that the ice had been broken and partially re-frozen over a large area of the brook. She had followed the trail of re-frozen ice and found a trail: The tracks of a large creature leading out of the water and across the shore into the Deepwood. The trail was new, the ice had not fully re-frozen

since the break, and the trail was...odd. Boneclaw and Eagle-Owl had still been hunt-sisters at that point: neither she nor Bloodmare had been appointed hunt-leader yet so there was only one Childless hunt at that point, not two. The trail looked like something big, Auroch sized at least, dragging itself along hurt after an immersion in the freezing water. So of course, they'd been on it like fleas on a hedgehog, but even then Boneclaw had seen how wrong the trail was. Branches had been snapped, ice in puddles shattered at its passing, but no clear footprints, and grasses under the broken limbs of trees were untouched, standing up without even a pattern in the frost to mark the creatures passing. And no scent. Yes, it was very cold and the thing had recently gone to water, but Boneclaw knew she had the best nose of anyone who went out that day, and she hadn't got even a whiff on anything she would call an animal. It was strange.

'Feathers had worried, as fathers always do when their young daughters are first making their way in the world. He had dithered. And although he knew it was forbidden for him to go after the hunt, a male blundering into things unexpectedly could be dangerous and would almost certainly make them lose whatever they were after, he had gone to wait for his daughter to return at the brook.

He brought some hot tea with him, in a gourd insulated with rabbit-fir and down, because he knew we'd all be cold when we got back from the hunt. She thought. Gods', how details like that stick in the mind.

The creature had doubled back. They never saw it, but it soon became clear from the trail that it was heading back to the brook. Someone, Bloodmare has said, had better go back to warn the camp.

And when she says "someone should do something" she never adds "and that someone is me."

So Eagle-Owl had been sent back. It made sense, She'd run all the way from the brook to the camp to fetch hunters after she'd seen the trail. So she was the most tired. She was slowing the hunt down. She'd gone back to the brook and, according to her account, met with her father there and decided to take him back to the encampment. But first they stopped for a quick drink of tea.

The tea was still warm when they'd found them. Eagle-owl was a mess. She was babbling. She'd heard a noise in the bushes. She'd put her father behind her and investigated. She'd then heard the noise off to one side. Something was circling. She'd taken her spear, stood between danger and the male, stood tall and given a challenge, as a female should, when something had happened. She'd been blindsided. Something had happened. Something had wrenched her spear from her hands. Something had stuck her on the head (although afterwards no-one could say that she hadn't just fallen and hit her head). She needed help, she said, she thought that her father was wounded: he wouldn't get up.

Given he had Eagle-owl's spear lodged right through him, I'd have hoped for this sake he didn't get up. Thought Boneclaw. But his face... he saw something. No-one who goes peacefully ends up having to have his face covered for the funeral to stop him scaring the long-cooks, and they're not exactly

squeamish. And then there was the spear. Boneclaw had speared enough animals to know that if a creature was stabbed right through the heart, there was usually blood in generous amounts. Unless they were already dead. He'd not bled a drop. The cook's had said that all the colour, all the blood, had drained from his extremities as well. And although that could just have been the cold, not fear, he was wrapped up warm when they found him, and still full of tea.

For Eagle-Owls sake, no, for Eagle-Owl and Owl-Callers sake, she corrected, they'd put it down as an accidental death. The creature, whatever it was, must have knocked her down and she lost consciousness. It then knocked him down. He stumbled and landed on her spear: that her spear was sticking up from the river-mud tip-first when they had found them was undeniable. No mention had been made of cowardice, none that to wrench a spear from her hands in the manner described and fling it the distance to the river-bank would require hands, or something like them, but there was no scent to suggest either one of the People other than Eagle-Owl or a human had been there. But the fact was Eagle-owl had failed not only to protect a male of the people, but her own father, and had not taken revenge on whatever it was that killed him. She was there, and yet she was still to this day unable to say exactly what it was she saw. A dark shape. He was quietly given a decent funeral, and Eagle-owl was quietly watched. No-one said it was just-in-case she was crazy and had done it. No one needed to. Hare's-tongue, who she'd be "walking out with", was quietly forbidden by his mother to see her anymore, and that was it. Well, that *had* been it, lately, she had got worse.

And Owl-Caller was there waiting and watching though all of it. And he asked so many questions, and we had answers for none of them. Eagle-Owl was fighting not to cry that day, females don't cry. But he, he just stood. You could feel the grief, it was strong. But stronger still the desire to understand. I thought that now, after a full year, he'd have given up. I guess I was wrong.

Boneclaw looked him up and down one last time, then rolled off him and dropped into a squatting position next to him, he pulled himself up onto his elbows and glared at her briefly, but then said "Thank you."

"No problem. How, er, how are you holding up. You smell like you're eating well."

"Well enough. The share of the hunt Eagle-Owl brings back spreads further now, and my aunts remain kind." He said quietly. *That* was a low blow, she thought. That line deserved to be delivered with a frosty, almost accusing voice. You ought to say something like that as if it was an accusation. Instead he just sounded sad. Plus he didn't pull himself up further than his elbows. That spooked her and she couldn't say why. *Of course* an unmated male didn't raise himself to the same height as a female when talking, and of course he didn't talk back, but that was one of those rules everyone conveniently forgot. It spooked her, but she didn't sit down to be on the same level as him: she wasn't about to *show* she was uncomfortable.

"And how is Eagle owl?"

"She drinks."

-And that was the rest of it. With Hare's-tongue forbidden to her, Eagle-Owl had turned first Inwards, and then to the nearest bottle of mead. She had never been particularly violent, and was gentleness itself to Hare's-tongue. But Hare's-tongue was a long way away from her now, and it wasn't him who had to man-handle her into bed each night, nor he who held her down when the nightmares about her father's death came back and, in her stupor and fear, she lashed out at whatever she saw. Everyone knew she would never lift a finger to a male when fully conscious, but after she started on the mead full-consciousness and Eagle-Owl barely had a nodding acquaintance any more. And that wasn't the worst bit: A mate could walk away; go to his brother's hearth. A brother had no-where to go.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your sorrow I need."

"Have you asked Bloodmare for help?"

"Not yet. I know what would happen if I did." Boneclaw nodded. Bloodmare would listen, and nod, then say, "hummm, Yes. I see." And they say she'd think about it and leave Owl-Caller stewing for a few days whilst she smirked in her power over him. Then she'd see what she could get from him. Then, when finally in desperation he gave her what she wanted, she'd say "No." What was worse, she could see Owl knew this, and would sooner or later try anyway.

"You want Bloodmare to help Eagle-Owl recover her status."

"I want Bloodmare to help Eagle-Owl recover her status."

"So she can be with Hare's-tongue and move away from your hearth and stop drinking."

"So she can be with Hare's-tongue and be happy. But yes."

Boneclaw paused, she detected something else there.

"You want to be free of caring for your sister so *you* can marry?"

"I want to be free of my sister so I can be apprenticed! I can't look after her and learn at the same time!"

Boneclaw looked down, on his necklace as well as the haematite was a Jay's skull. The Jay had a very specific meaning to The People.

"You're training to become a healer?"

"Yes."

“With Cloud-watcher?” Cloud-watcher was a female Elder who taught basic healing to young females: Boneclaw still remembered learning how to set broken bones from her, because her quiet, contemplative interest in how bones fitted together had made her the expert of the most evil-minded wrestling holds of all time, and she demonstrated them on slow or disruptive students. Boneclaw had learnt from her the Straddle of the Fish, which you had to dislocate one of your own shoulders to get out of, but failed to master the Reciprocating-Fox hold, which apparently was only possible if you’d had a lifetime of special pelvic exercises and at least two children, and which Elk-mother had forbidden Cloud-watcher even to demonstrate ever again after That Incident At The Summer Feast. Some lessons stuck in the mind.

“No.”

“Oh.” *Oh* Thought Boneclaw, *the other healer.*

“From Hole-In-the-skull.”

“The He-witch?”

“The male shaman, yes.”

“He’s, well, a bit...”

“He lives in the woods all alone, and sometimes does strange things, yes. But he’s a better healer than Cloud-Watcher. He’s just odd, that’s all.” Boneclaw nodded. Odd. You didn’t have to be a shaman to be a healer, most weren’t, but the two sometimes went together. If you were going to learn the true names of every plant in a two-day radius and have conversations with them, you’d learn their healing natures whether you wanted to or not. But even so, Hole in the Skull was a weird one. Few normal people considered self trepanning a form of modern art. What was he on now, four?

“Surely you can still train, when your sister is out hunting?” she asked. *Or when she’s passed out. Plenty of time there.*

“It’s not enough. Besides, a male healer has to be marriageable, or no-one will go to him for healing.”

That was true: there was no actual rule, but no females and few enough males went to a male healer unless he was eligible for marriage. You didn’t want to be in the process of healing and have his sister walk in on you: a married male could tell his mate not to come in, he’s busy healing, but no law could bar a sister from the family hearth whilst she shared it with a sibling. Not that, she though, there were many married male healers either. They did not make good husbands: waking up to find the familial bed cold because your mate was off six hours before dawn to watch some rare flower open its petals to some rare migratory moth so he could scrape some rare pollen from a different

rare flower of the moth, or coming back to the hearth to find he was so fixated on the colour of the fame under a pot of something that stunk out the hut that he'd not noticed the food gently charring to ash next to it, tended to put off all but the most patient potential mates. That said, she'd never heard of a male healer's mate complaining about "marital problems".

I guess everything has its ups and its downs. Wayhay. Boneclaw considered this all. It was sad, but it was not her problem. Eagle-owl was in Bloodmare's hunt, and if she tried to interfere in Eagle-owls family Bloodmare would see it as trespass into her business and make everyone's life a living hell for it, because she could.

"Well then, in that case I'm sorry that I hit you with a spear and tipped you out of that tree: I can see why you'd want to see if Bloodmare was going to help Eagle-Owl. I won't tell the Elders you were looking in on the meeting. I wish I could help you, but I can't intervene in the running of Bloodmare's hunt." *However much I'd like to punch her out.*

"Can't you?" asked Owl Caller. It was broadly neutral, but still closer to accusation than pleading.

"What does that mean?" She asked. He sighed.

"You're a bright one, Boneclaw. Clever. You'll work it out. Not smart: you don't *think*, but clever. You don't use that intelligence for anything other than getting in and out of trouble as impressively as possible, and one of these days that quickness, that bright, hot, fast intelligence is going to get you into a problem that you need thoughtfulness and carefulness and slowness to get out of, and then you're going to die, unless you learn before then. I'm sorry but it's true. Work it out Boneclaw. I have to go."

Boneclaw looked on blankly as Owl-Caller picked himself up and walked off into the woods. Boneclaw watched him go and then shrugged and went to check on the hides Stalker was complaining about. He was wrong, of course: there was nothing she could do no matter how much she wanted to. Bloodmare would make Eagle-Owl's life a living hell if she even tried, just to spite her for interfering in her hunt. Still, as she checked on the hide and went fishing and got ready for tomorrow's hunt, she couldn't quite get rid of some nagging voice saying that she, somehow, probably could.

Chapter two.

Boneclaw was hunting.

She'd found trace of a wild boar two days ago, seen where it had been snoutting around for truffles and last autumn's squirrel-buried acorns, and then tasted the soil there until she had caught the scent. After that it was easy. Boars stank. They'd caught up with it a few hours later. It was a beaut, a

big male, just entering its prime. Still a little lean from the just-passed winter, but still a hell of a lot of meat. She'd got close enough without being seen or scented to hit it square with her first throw of the spear. It was not a spear designed for throwing far, it was big, heavy, rigid. But that meant that rather than sticking in its side it dragged behind as the boar bolted, and soon fell out. It could be recovered, licked to determine the depth of the wound, and then thrown again. She'd caught the boar in the ribs, and it had ploughed a furrow¹ up to the muscles of its fore-limbs. Troll-back had got a quick throw glancing off the big bugger's arse -cheeks as it had bolted.

They'd been chasing it since then. It was one tough pig, they'd caught it in the night planning to spear it then and, exhausted as it was, it had *turned* on them, and despite giving it a face full of spear wounds as they both swore their tits off and scabbled backwards away from its charge, it had kept coming and it had been their turn to run like blazes. But that happened. Eventually it had gotten tired of chasing them and turned away, at which point Troll-Back stabbed it in the arse again. Then they had resumed worrying it to death as if nothing had happened.

This was how The People are meant to hunt, thought Boneclaw trotting along at the fast, ground-eating lope that came naturally to her species. In pairs, two young females, no one else, all the time in the world, running on a beautifully morning though a big open spring forest (kept open by controlled fires), worrying to death something that could break every bone in your body if it catches you. Which is of course why it's fun: anyone can fish or trap or leap out from a hide and spear some deer feeding on the spring growth in a clearing. This is how it's meant to be done, hunter verses an equal, no, a stronger prey animal. Work in pairs, work together, worry it, and make it expose its back to one of you when it attacks the other. Keep it at bay with stout spears and harass it. Take it in turns to stop for a breather and a drink, but keep it moving, and away from water. And when it finally goes down too tired to move, it'll sit and watch you, and let you come up to it and you're eyes will meet its, and then you just *bite*.

She-is, thank you for this day. Thank you for this hunt. Thank you for the strength of my legs, and the power of my teeth and the keenness of my eyes and my ears and my nose, and the fierceness of my liver. Thank you that I am young and strong, and that this is a perfect day.

She looked over to Troll-back and grinned. She could sense it two. The kill was near. They quickened their pace. It was more than two days since they last slept, and she had been running so long she had lost all feeling in her back, knees and thighs. Her kidneys were also beginning to protest in no uncertain terms. But it had reached the point where the pain made all her scenes hyper acute. The world glowed. She could see the hoof prints floating above the grass and leaf-mould, not a concealed part of the pattern of the world anymore. Shamans did this: exhausted themselves physically in order to see clearly the real world hidden behind all the day-to-day crud of life. She'd danced herself into a trace state by running, but she was still there, on earth. Her spirit wanted to fly

¹ Not that this was the metaphor that Boneclaw used in her own mind: as a hunter-gatherer it wouldn't come to mind. She didn't see ploughing for the first time until two years after this, and so far her only experience of agriculture was sneaking up to the outskirts of one of the human farms near Rath for the mild entertainment of watching a hired Squash-wrangler/vampire hunter and his trained squash-hounds try and fail to bring a rowdy field of rogue-pumpkins under control and shepherded into pens for orderly disposal after a badly delayed harvest.

off and explore like a shamans, but she just let it leak out a little, ready to pull it back. Where it touched the boars she found she could track it by though alone, she knew what it was thinking, were it was going. It was a trick, first try and think like it, latter you'll not need to, you can just put yourself in its place, be it, hurt as much as it does, and you will always find it, always eat well. Like a purple dragon in a flint mine. Like a shadow-deer at dawn.

Dear gods' I'm far gone. Pull it back, Boneclaw. Don't flake now. Pull it back. The world faded a little, from luminous and dreamlike to merely painfully intense. She could track by normal means, so she should: trance-walking without drugs was dangerous, trance-hunting more so. You saw other things not normally seen in the day-to-day world, they said, but the down side was that sometimes they saw you.

A few hundred yards later they jumped over a small depression where it had clearly stumbled. Troll-back took watch with her spear, in case it turned on them again, and Boneclaw checked out the depression its big fat pig carcass had left in the world, before she sat on her haunches for a moment, composing her breathing. Blood, but surface blood. Already clotting before it came off the boar, from the wounds they'd given in last two days. She got down on all four and scented around the edges of the grass. Fear, Pigshit, more fear, rage. Hurt. Lots of hurt. Tiredness. Its giving up. She leapt up from the depression and trotted, a little unsteadily, in the direction of the trail. *Okay, so parts of me want to give up too, but they won't. I won't let them. Your dying, you beautiful hideous boar. Do it now, why don't you?*

She spotted a trickle of urine, a few drops on some tall grass it had crashed though. She quickly checked it out. She sniffed it, then rubbed it between her fingers and sniffed it. Very cautiously, she tasted it. She held it for a second on her tongue and sucked air over it before wrinkling her nose and spiting and holding out her hand for Troll-back's canteen. She rinsed her mouth and spat, and then drank, just a little. She handed back the gourd.

"It's going. Its insides are soured with tiredness¹. Come on. It's not far."

They crested as small rise and burst though a screen of shrubbery into a slight dip, a small gully where rain water drained away from the hills, and just stood and looked, panting and exalted.

¹ Lactic acid build-up from prolonged anaerobic respiration of not just rough muscle, but the smooth muscular tissue of the internal organs of the digestive-system as well, due to the flight-or-fight response re-directing oxygenated blood from them to the muscles used for motion. Whilst it may not be possible to taste this in the old dried blood that would build up on a boars flanks during a hunt, Boneclaw certainly had a keen enough sense of taste and smell to run a compete diagnosis of ever major and minor medical compliant that boar had ever had from a fresh urine sample, and it therefore a great pity that she did not have the medical vocabulary to do so. In a post-industrial society Sentient Spotted Hyenas would in many ways make the ideal lab-techs and medics, partly because of this, but mostly because to them hanging around the dying with mild interest and a slight tendency to drool at all the interesting pathologies' is utterly natural, so they would *excel* in med-school.

The Boar was lying flat out on its side in the muddy leaf-choked trickle that was the bottom of the gully. There was a lot of blood. It was covered in mud, blood and foam, and it utterly stank. It was breathing, in short, shallow for-the-love-of-god-kill-me-now breaths and watching them with one unfocused and bloodshot piggy little eye. Boneclaw walked up to it slowly, carrying her spear. It didn't try to move. About ten paces away, close enough to count the flies already on its wounds, she threw her spear aside and kept coming. *Eye-contact, that's the trick.* About two paces way, close enough to feel the heat coming of it in waves, she squatted down next to it in the filth, and put her head on one side and watched. It made a noise, half way between a groan and a squeal, and twitched. Spasmed. But after that it just went back to waiting. She could already taste salt and the metal taste of adrenaline in her mouth, so much like blood, and some savage dark emotion, mutant first-cousin to arousal and utterly unconnected to hunger flashed though her mind. Oh to rip, oh to kill...

But she was one of The People. A hunt leader. It wasn't all sticking pointy objects into defenceless animals. For two day's she'd been closer to this dumb slab of meat than anything. She let her left hand touch its tusks, ran it over them, marvelling at how perfect a set of weapons they were. You'd have to be good to get this close to a wild boar, to take it on with just eye-contact, with just what nature and the gods gave you and gave it, even with one so nearly dead, or it'd take your hand off. Really good. Bloodmare could do it. She was not without talent. And then she'd gut it alive, which was all fine and good, but she'd enjoy the killing too much. She'd make it all about her, somehow. Boneclaw held her breath. She rested her paw on its snout for a second, and then reached up and closed its eyes. *But can she do this?* It grunted and twitched for a second, but then relaxed and did not fight it. She removed her hand. It kept its eyes closed.

Then she killed it. As politely as possible.

A couple of hours later, maybe longer, when it was getting on towards the early afternoon, she woke up. Everything hurt, but in a good way. She was in a messy tangle with Troll-back, who like her had just crashed from sheer exhaustion after they had eaten, and who was now resting her head on her shoulder and snoring and drooling as if there was no tomorrow. Lovely. Boneclaw pushed Troll-back's head off her with a frown, and half raised her head and looked to where they'd hung the pig. It didn't seem quite so huge now, but it was still a good-sized kill and they'd be the talk of the camp when they got back. A few crows looked guiltily at them from near-by tree. They'd had a go at the viscera after they'd cleaned it and whilst they were sleeping, almost certainly. Boneclaw found she didn't mind that much. They'd already had their fill, and what a hungry young hyena would consider viscera rather than meat would barely fill a crow anyway. She'd drunk her share of the blood straight from the thing's carotids, lying parallel to it in the mud before it was even cooling, and then helped Troll-back to get a sinew rope over its back totters and haul the thing upright so she could get her share. They'd then cleaned the carcass right away before they rested, and ate the liver raw, and then a kidney each for good measure, before removing the lights, heart, spleen, stomach and lungs and hanging them over a green fire Troll-back lit to smoke the stuff and keep flies away. Then they'd neatly flushed the intestines clean of pigshit with their drinking water and rubbed them with fat to keep them supple for sausage skins later on, pulled out and smoked it's tongue, taken its bladder,

washed the things skin rather than themselves with the last of their water, and done the hundred other small, disgusting jobs that you had to do if you really believed in using every part of the kill. But the blood and liver was good: You needed the blood and liver straight away to replenish your sprit with it's after the hunt¹, and besides, they didn't keep. It was a gift from the gods, apparently, that the most desirable parts of a kill spoiled almost immediately after its death. This ensured that only the hunters would get them, as the gods intended. Personally Boneclaw wondered what the hell the gods were thinking making meat as perishable as it was anyway, but that was gods for you.

Cautiously extricating herself from Troll-back: very cautiously since on inspection it appeared that some of the mud Boneclaw had got herself caked in during the kill had dried as she slept and welded her leg fur to Troll-back's, she got up and immediately wished she hadn't. Every part of her body complained. Her knees hated her, the small of the back was both ice cold and burned hot at the same time, her fur ached, and she was willing to bet that no creature in the history of creation had ever needed a piss quite so badly.

After a few minutes of cursing, limping around trying to get her left ankle working again, and a close inspection of as much of a tree-trunk as could be seen through a cloud of vapour (it was still quite cold this time in spring) she wandered back into the gulley and flapped her arms at the crows, who were checking out both the pig carcass and, on the basis she sure as hell looked and smelt dead, Troll-back. Now at least feeling passably like a member of The People, even if the dried-on mud covering her side had started to itch and the smell coming of her own body was getting really quite distracting, Boneclaw went and kicked Troll-back awake on the basis that if she had to smell and ache, there may as well be someone awake she could complain about it at.

"Wstfg!?! Oh *gods* my feet!"

"Really? With me it's mostly my lower back and thighs. Up. We've got a bloody big pig carcass to haul back to camp and I've got to check-in on the other pairs in my hunt. Come on. Spears over shoulders, smoked pig innards dangling from spears, carcass over the top. Usual drill."

"Okay. One sec though." Said Troll-back before staggering in the opposite direction to the one Boneclaw had taken, but almost certainly for the same reason. When she came back they, with an awful lot of low-kea moaning and general complaints but with very little actual fuss, got the pig carcass in order and, with it sitting proud atop the two spears slung between their shoulders, they

¹ And equally importantly to replenish the carbohydrates you will have spent chasing it with the creature's own blood-glucose and liver glycogen. Not so say that getting its spirit isn't important, but even lawyers and some inanimate objects (ships, buildings, standing stones) have spirits, whereas good mono and polysaccharides are hard to come by.

headed off towards camp following their own scent-trail until they could find a landmark to guide them home¹.

Boneclaw, no longer dehydrated, exhausted, in intense pain, and so **not** on the verge of perceiving the hidden, saw nothing untoward. Having reeled in her scenes just as she had begun to perceive dangerously truly the previous day, she had seen nothing untoward then, either. So she did not observe what watched her go. Nor did Troll-back. But it watched. And it waited. And, after some consideration, it followed.

Chapter three.

Boneclaw and Troll-back were singing. Badly.

It was, in a way, a perfectly natural response. They'd run their arses off. They were still sleep deprived, aching, and bone-wearily as hell. But there were at that stage of weirdness and sleep-deprivation where everything was as funny as hell: that combined with the jubilation of a kill was making them both giggle like infants. Going down a steep slope, about half an hour after they had started back towards camp, had been the worst. The slope was way too steep to even attempt to walk down carrying an entire pig slung over your shoulders between two spears, and they'd known that. But they'd done it anyway. The problem about two people walking down a steep slope carrying a long, heavy object was, as anyone who had ever moved a wardrobe down a flight of stairs will know, if the two people don't move at exactly the same speed someone's either going to get the object pulled out of their hands or pushed into their back. Going down the slope, things had gone well until Boneclaw had hit a patch of slippery dead leaves. "Wait a sec Troll, its getting slippy. Stop."

"What?"

"It's getting slippery. Stop. No stop pushing. Troll-back! Stoppit you're pushing me into the slippery patch! **Troll-back!**"

Boneclaw dug her heels, or tried to. Always a mistake. Troll-back had no intention of actually pushing her over, she was just deliberately not stopping pushing her end of the pig-rig when asked to give Boneclaw a momentary scare, for a laugh. But when Boneclaw, at the front and father down the slope, tried to dig her heels and instinctively leant backwards into the pig-rig, the leaves went from under her heels and she went over backwards. With great presence of mind and no consideration for what would happen to Troll-back, she held onto the spears and lifted them up over her head as she fell flat on her arse and begun to slip down the slope: to stop the pig ending up in the mud. This however lowered her end of the rig considerably, and as Boneclaw was now sliding downhill, this removed all resistance to Troll-back, who as she was leaning *into* the rig and pushing forwards onto Boneclaw, fell over forwards onto her face as soon a Boneclaw started to slide. She also had the presence of mind to try and save the pig, which resulted in the only witness... the only *apparent* witness to this scene (a winged messenger-rat of the temple of Ganesh the infinitely companionate

¹ Spotted hyenas have sent-glands between their toes that mark out their footsteps, enabling them to track other members of their group, or backtrack along their own trail, in total darkness. They also use them to show submission in dominance displays by shuffling their feet. So if they ever look like they're shuffling their feet in embarrassment, they really *are* being very embarrassed and apologetic. Nature is cool.

who just happened to be passing and was permanently traumatised by what he saw), observing two female hyenas , one at the front lying flat on her back in the mud holding a pig on two spears above her, and one at the back lying flat on her face in the mud trying to steer her side with her elbows and at the same time keep the pig off the ground with her hands, sliding down a forty-meter length of hill at high speed before eventually coming to a halt in a large patch of stinging nettles. After coming to this halt they wordlessly got up again without upsetting the miraculously untouched pig, found some rocks to prop the improvised carrying rig above the mud, and then after a quiet moment, attacked, laughing uproariously as they tried their best to punch and wrestle each other to the ground¹.

After that, well, after that you just had to laugh.

It was perhaps because of this laughter, or perhaps just the tiredness which was the root source of it, which meant that neither was as alert as they would normally be. Perhaps things would have been different if they had been paying more attention, perhaps not. Either way, this is what happened.

Boneclaw and Troll-back were on the forth verse of the Mantis Boy song, not the real version that fathers taught to their young around the hearth, but the *other* version, that one mothers accidentally taught to their young after a few bottles of mead with their hunt-sisters (to the acute and silent embarrassment of fathers), and which mothers then gave children a clip around the ear for if they found them repeating any of the more complicated words. They were by the shallower brook, near the Deepwood, and neither had anything much on their mind. Boneclaw in particular was thinking of nothing other than getting back, showing of their kill, drinking a lot of mead to celebrate and then staggering off to her bed too tired to even think, to collapse and sleep

¹ This was reported , via an interpreter* , from the rat to one of the minor acolytes of the temple, who dutifully recorded it. The spectacle went on to be described in some detail by a famed anthropologist of the period, who, after several re-readings, years of study into the exact symbolism of pigs, spears, mud and stinging nettles in a dozen different rare sacred texts, and an interview with the now very aged rat in which he asked it to recall exactly which direction the spears were pointing relative to the pig, the relative positions of the hyenas, he interperated it as some form of seasonal fertility rite relating to the spring renewal of the sometimes hostile female spirit (as represented by the uncontrolled slide) and the subjugation of, yet acknowledgment of need for, the male essence (as demonstrated by the pig) with specific regard to the female hyena genitalia (as represented by the spears) and the pitfalls of letting your own base sexual instincts rule you (nettles). Unfortunately, as nearly always happens in these cases, this interpretation became the dominant one used for understanding The People's religious practice in reference works for the next two centuries (not helped by Boneclaw Mother's attempts much later in her life, when asked about the matter by Assistant Librarian Vo, to propagate this interpretation for no reason that can be discerned other than petty mischief). If there is anything to be learned from this, it's not about Hyenas, fertility rites or Pigs, but about the health and safety risks of carrying large items down slopes, and the danger of letting male anthropologists sit indoors with books for too long, instead of getting them out of the house once in a while to play in the sunshine and hopefully meet a nice young female willing to help his categorise his collection of Clovis culture spear-tips, or falling that, one willing to slap the bugger every time he mentions the words "feminine principle".

*The interpreter was St Finnegan the Nice Mover, whose ability to communicate with Rodents, Insectivores, small Mustelidae, Pigeons, and true finches but not tropical finches, was a great asset in his attempts to preach The Gospel of Finnegan to the birds of the air and the beasts of the land, but whose inability to communicate to other human beings in anything other than interpretative dance lead to his brutal martyrdom by a tribe of cannibalistic theatre-critics at the age of just twenty-seven. A cenotaph to him can be seen in Rath temple's Stone Garden.

flat out for sixteen hours, or staggering of to someone else's bed to collapse too tired to do what it was she'd come to that bed for in the first place and sleep for about an hour-and-a-half before she got caught and chased out by an irate parent (if she got really lucky). At this slightly later point in the spring, there was no ice. But it was still recognisable as the place, or near enough the place, where Eagle-feathers had somewhat unexpectedly shed his mortal coil the year before. It was getting on towards early evening, and although the sun was painfully bright, as it was spring in a temperate zone the sun was low in the sky compared to in summer or the same time of year in the tropics.

There were shadows. Deep shadows.

There was of course, Boneclaw would have thought had she thought about it, nothing sinister about it. That was nature. Shadows happened. None of the shadows moved, as none of the trees moved in the still air: no movement meant no threats following them. The only shadows that moved were theirs: passing thought the leaf-shadow, connecting places of darkness that would have otherwise remind islands in the light, making little mobile shadow-bridges. Had Boneclaw a different sort of mind, one she would acquire slowly over the next twenty years, she'd have said that the only thing odd about the scene was them, trailing twilight behind them, letting night move around from the shadows of the glade the big Boar had died to new habitats in the ever-shaded Deepwood. They dragged night behind them, but what off it? Boneclaw had sensed nothing wrong in the glade the boar had died, none since. It was a good day.

She had just won an argument with Troll-back about which obscene verse came first, and was taking a deep berths and closing her eyes in preparation for that long draw-out tortured "Eyyyyyyyyeeeeiiiiii" ¹ that in every world where vocal communication exists starts a verse of sexually suggestive folk-music, in order to warn those of a sensitive disposition to run whilst they still could, when it happened.

Something Huge, and dark and formless bolted out of the shadows from the Deepwood right at them making Troll-back yelp in surprise and Boneclaw exhale her singing-breath and stare in shock, and more worrying, it made something smaller but no less dark and indistinct detach itself from the combined shadow of Boneclaw, Troll-back and the pig, and flee from the larger shape into the stream. It skipped across at high speed like a stone, making a sound like screaming metal, except not a sound at all, and hopping off the bright, light, relative water as if it burnt it. The smaller shape then vanished into the shadows of the undergrowth on the other side of the brook making the shadows of the bushes dance as if something large, deer-sized at least, had hit them. Which was scary and strangely eye-watering to watch since the bushes themselves did not move. The larger shape hit the sunlight and rebounded as if the beams were iron bars with a very loud inaudible hiss, and was gone back into the deep shadows as if it was never there. Boneclaw later swore that, whereas if it hadn't

¹ as in "Eyyyyyyyyeeeeiiiiii was a-walking in the woods one day, a doo-dee-dol-de-dum-de-de, where their I met a maiden fair and gay, A wack-a-fo-fo-please-kill-me" and you just know there's going to be exactly two double-entendres about, I don't know, three-field system crop-rotation or some such, per verse and one huge one (wayhay) in the final verse. At least Morris dancing is as fun for the spectators as the performers, provided both are equally drunk.

been moving so damn fast she *might* have been able to describe the smaller shape, the larger shape, despite moving too fast to see, gave out a certain aura that suggested that *even if it was standing completely still* it would have remained fuzzy and indistinct, if only because the photons themselves, if not your eyeballs as well, wanted nothing to do with it if they could avoid it. Worse still unlike the smaller shape the bigger... thing... broke tree-limbs in its charge, so it certainly seemed to be able to damage solid objects, which was no small thought if you were one of the solid objects so recently in its path.

Troll-Back jerked back, stumbled, trod in the shallows, stumbled a bit more and came to a halt up to her chest in the stream, Boneclaw just stood slack jawed and stared at where the...*thing*... the big one, had been.

After a few moments of rather contemplative silence Troll-back felt moved to speak.

“Bugger! I think an actual bit of wee slipped out there. Wait. Yep. Actually had a minor leakage accident. Sod, and I liked this loin-cloth. Boneclaw?”

“Huh? What?”

“You oaky? Still safe and in one piece and comparatively dry.”

“What, oh, yes. Right. Yes.”

“What should we do, sis?”

“Troll-back, let’s get the pig hanging from a tree quickly so we can get our spears out from under it.” She looked at the snapped tree-limbs. “Let’s do that *right now* and lets pick a tree on the *other* side of the brook.”

“Good idea. Do you think spears will help?”

“Given what we just saw?” asked Boneclaw as she waded across.

“Yep.”

“Given what we just saw and given that this is the exact spot where Eagle-feathers died? I don’t know. But spears would certainly make *me* feel a lot bloody better at this point.”

“Right” said Troll-back throwing a line over a sturdy limb and using adrenaline to haul the boar up at such speed she nearly sawed through the branch with the sinew-rope. She then threw a spear to Boneclaw, complete with dried offal still attached (and it said something that Boneclaw was so on edge she did not notice this until it was altered pointed out to her). “Sod, Bone,” muttered Troll-Back “I didn’t think about that. That thing... you think its... it’s..?”

“What Eagle-owl said she tried to fight off, which made us all think she was crazy?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I thought she *was* crazy, but given this... I’d say I’m not so sure.”

“What do we do, should we tell the elders?”

“Hare’s teeth no! Look at the state we’re in, we’re falling over tired, do you honestly think they’d believe us for a second?”

“All right, I buy that. But it could be dangerous. No way anything that looks like that *isn’t*. They need to know.”

“Yeah, well we need proof, or baring that we need a good reason to investigate.” She paused. “I’ve got an Idea. Leg it most of the way back to camp, it’s not far, and then saunter in and tell everyone about the amazing boar we’ve bagged and get them to come and take it up to the camp quickly, the feast will keep everyone safe, inside the camp. Tell them I’m off recalling the other pairs in my hunt. Go now, I’ve got someone I need to see. “

“Who?”

“Better if you don’t know. This is weird stuff, and I know who to take that to. Go now.”

“Okay, just let me get myself cleaned up.”

“No!”

“Don’t you think” said Troll-back, practically growling with sarcasm “That coming in alone, dishevelled, very slightly urine-stained because it was just a small leak really and could have happened to anyone under those circumstances, and still reeking of fresh fear *might just* cause shock, comment and speculation amongst the tribe?”

“Not as much as either you or me coming back clean and fresh-smelling after a three-day wild-boar hunt!” Troll-back considered this.

“Fair point.” Troll-Back signed, closed her eyes and fixed her face into the resigned expression of someone yet-again taking one for the team, spread her arms wide, and with great precision fell over backwards into the stream. After a few moments she came up spluttering, coughing and spitting out water, river mud, bits of reeds, and one very surprised frog, who for days afterwards couldn’t believe his luck at having been actually in a Hyena’s mouth without getting eaten and who went on to try, sometimes successfully, to use the story to get girls. She then stoically squelched back to shore.

“I’ll say I slipped and fell in the stream.” Boneclaw nodded approvingly. “I’ll imply you pushed me in for a laugh.” Boneclaw frowned, and then nodded again and begun to move off.

“So, where are you off to?” Shouted Troll-back after the now retreating Boneclaw

“I’ve got to see a male about a shadow!”

Chapter four.

Boneclaw soon found Owl-caller near the lean-to in the woods where Hole-in-the-skull spent most of his time, or at least, where his body spent most of its time. You could never tell with shamans. The female shaman, Skin-turner had been even worse¹, but one day she had just up and wandered off. Boneclaw wondered vaguely if she was still alive. No-one of The People would harm a Shaman, the few wild predators capable of taking a Person as prey had soon learnt that doing so resulted in a slow, spearing related death if they made a habit of it, and humans and dwarfs were smart enough to know trouble when they saw it (at least a third of the time). Still, they were less weird than Ghost-eaters: Boneclaw’s tribe did not have a Ghost-eater at the moment, but she’d met another tribe’s once and had no intention of doing so again. But Skin-turner was still a weird one. Apart from channelling the essence of various animals (and the smell, she’d had the largest collation of reeking,

¹ As in many cultures, practising shamans in The People were outside of normal social conventions in regards to such things as gender, economic-rolls and personal hygiene. Living outside of the constrains of time, space, life, death and species, or at least thinking you do after ingesting extremely dangerous local fungi, makes living within the little tiny rules of society tricky at best of times.

badly tanned hides Boneclaw had ever seen), there was the fact that she didn't seem to consider herself female (or a hyena about half of the time, but that was another issue). She'd worn male shaped beads, ignored the duties, rites and rituals of females, and declared ownership of a hearth, something only a male could do. She also decided that as a male, hunting was not her job, and so she had just turned up at other people's doors at dinner time and glared pointedly at people until they gave her the hearth-rite and invited her in, where as if any normal adult female had tried it she'd end up very lucky if she wasn't invited to step outside of the camp and eat fist. But that was the tradition; shamans drew power from being outside of everything. Elk-mother had said that when she was a girl, male shamans had been treated as childless females, even going so far as to be permitted to sleep in the hall of Childless Females¹. Strangely the practice had been ended by the

¹ Housing was a problem amongst The People as by law and custom, males could do two things that females could not: own property, and move to a different tribe within the tribes of the People (whereas females were stuck in the tribe they were born into for life, males could and did leave tribes to marry elsewhere*. This helped stop inbreeding). As for property things got complicated. Females could only own clothing, weaponry, jewellery, ancestor-fetishes, a fire-flint, family heirlooms and a sleeping-roll. They could be *custodians* of other property, but it was either owned by males or by The Tribe itself. This created a problem as to where females lived. Children lived with their parents, married females with their mates, Elders in the ceremonial Dogun's provided for their use (unless they had mates or surviving brothers, which most did: doguns were primarily for receiving guests to hear their complaints, appeals and requests, and so were not built for great comfort on the basis that if they were you'd only encourage people to drop in to complain) but childless females were a loose end. An dangerous, hormonal, status obsessed, heavily-armed loose end, and so one which by custom got given its own dogun-sized and dogun-comfortable hall as far away from the living area of males and families as possible in the camp compound. When a Young couple married, the family of the male would build them a hut and raise them a hearth in the family end of the compound, and the female would, on the wedding night light the fire in the hearth for the first time, and the male would ensure it never went out again and it was all very symbolic and lovey-dovey. And the ownership of the hut would be the male's, unless the two split up, in which case the male would go back to his brothers hearth, and the female to the Hall, and the fire in the hearth would burn out, and the hut, like the marriage, fall into ruin (In practice, because being a hunter-gather builds a certain practicality of mindset, the hut only *symbolically* fell into ruin: in reality it was fairly rapidly and neatly dismantled as other families nicked the building materials to build or repair their own huts, but it's the thought that counts). The only oddities were when the father of a family died, in which case the eldest son inherited everything, including the responsibilities of caring for the entire family, and although the mother would, as soon as all her children were of age, move out and either re-marry or go back to the hall leaving her son free, any sisters would stay with the male until they (the sisters) married, and the male had to care for them before all other duties, including his own marriage, or until they left of their own will. As a result a great many females were crammed into a small, stuffy Hall with no privacy, and Owl-caller was trapped in a lonely place that smelt of his dead parent's life, with a violently drunken wreck for company.

*Provided, of course, that the tribes they wanted to marry into were A, of The People (I.e. they spoke the one language of all true People and could trace their descent from one of She-is-fiercer's seven daughters, rather than just being a sentient hyena who spoke something else, who were not people *really*, just rather bright animals, and not to be considered as husbands unless the inbreeding got truly desperate) and B, the two tribes were not at war. War was, amongst The People, an occupational hazard. Mostly war consisted of a group of warriors escorting one warrior to the camp of a rival tribe so she could do battle in single combat with the enemies of all that was right and good; so in practice it was a nice day out, a chance to meet some distant relatives and catch up, and do a little trading whilst the only females on each side who actually had an argument beat the ever-loving out of each other over such great matters of state as Who Said What About Our Hook-teeth at Tall-Spots Wedding. Things seldom ended in deaths, and if they did then the war would just escalate up to the next level, groups of seven warriors standing twenty paces apart and shouting war-cries and lobbing spears until each side had suffered a fatality, in which case any deaths caused by People were avenged, the score was evened and both sides could have a joint funeral feast. If that failed to result in a definitive result, then the seven would swear to get vengeance or die, even at the expense of dying as Trash-People, in which case the winners won by favour of the gods, and the losers were marked by the gods as trash people and so by definition *no vengeance was required and this whole thing could be put to bed now with no*

elders without explanation in Elk-mother's day, at around the same time a large number of Childless Females suddenly weren't.

She jogged up two Owl-caller, who was holding a large basket of backwards-salt, and pulled him to one side.

"I believe your sister's version of events, and am willing to intervene on her behalf, if I can."

Owl-caller tried to hide his surprise as he put-down the basket. He'd expected her to take longer to figure it out.

"So you worked out that since you and my sister were still hunt-sisters at the time my father died, you are entitled to help her?" then his brain caught up with his ears. "Wait, what do you mean 'if you can'?"

"What, I can do that? Oh. Good. No that's not why I wanted to talk to you about it listen! I-" she paused. Hole-in-the-skull had materialised out of the woods about thirty paces away and was watching with apparent interest.

"What's he doing?" Owl-caller looked. He then sighed.

further deaths thank you very much! The only exceptions to this were when a male or child was killed in malice, in which case rather than the theatrical battles of open war, a spearing party of every female the Tribe could muster would hit the enemy hard and fast at night, kill the perpetrator, wipe out all their adult female relatives to break the back of any possible retaliation, burn the camp to the ground, and steal away either a male or a child to replace the one taken from them and to act as a hostage in the event of retaliation, or, an odd exception to the rules, husband-seeking: as minor, relatively bloodless wars were common males would often find themselves unable to marry their sweetheart, a girl from another tribe due to the two tribes nominally being enemies. In this situation, males would often have a quiet word with the local shaman, who could move freely between tribes even in war, who would then have a word with the tribe's elders, and go over to the rival tribe and have a word with *their* elders, and then a few weeks later a war-party led by the young male's beloved would sneak into the compound and make off with the male in the dead of night whilst all the sentries or females who may have defended him were mysteriously otherwise engaged, and that way no-one died or had to lose face by seeing the raiding party but not fighting it. And the tribe that had their male stolen would shake their heads and say Dear me, those utter utter bastards, what sort of person kidnaps a defenceless male like that? and then do nothing about it because, after all, they were a cute pair, and they wanted to be together after all, it *did* prevent the shame of the male running away like some harlot, and it did help prevent in-breeding. And then in a month, two months, six months time when the two tribes were at peace again, the male would invite all his relatives and friends from his old tribe over for a second wedding feast and everyone would slap him on the back and congratulate him, and then congratulate his Wife/kidnapper and then say to their new in-laws Isn't it *good* to see the old-ways being maintained, I mean call me old fashioned, but I think its *Romanic* to see a nice young female like that make the *effort* to carry out a full-blown kidnapping raid. And then they'd drink a bit too much mead and say something like Mind you, the kids these days, not a patch on the kidnappings you used to get when I was a girl, and no offence to your young Fleet-paw, but in *my* day in *our* tribe, when we kidnapped ourselves a husband we did it *properly*...

“Well he’s too far away to be ease-dropping, but he’s not letting us out of his sight, so I’d guess chaperoning.”

“Chaperoning, why?”

“Because I’m a respectable young male, and you’re Boneclaw. Sorry.” He looked at her and his eyes narrowed slightly. “You take that as a complement, don’t you?”

“Who, me? No.” She lied. “Listen!” she picked him up by his shoulders and propped him up against a tree in a slight hollow in the bark and leaned in so Hole-in-the-skull couldn’t get a look at their faces; she’d heard he could see words as they formed. Owl-caller seemed quite alarmed by this, and to her complete (but not entirely unwelcome surprise) his ears flushed red and he wrinkled his nose in embarrassment. *He’s blushing. Dear god’s is my reputation really that bad? Hey, at least I’ve still, got it.* She thought.

Owl-caller’s thinking however was running more on the lines of *Dear god’s she picked me up! She actually picked me up. What does she think I am, a sack of pemmican she can just move about when it suits her!* He felt himself flush red with anger under his fur. Then he wrinkled his nose and frowned. *And dear GODS what has she been up to? She reeks of boar guts! How the HELL does anyone apparently find her sexually attractive?*

Boneclaw told him, briefly, what had happened by the brook and why it meant she now believed Eagle-Owl’s version of events, as Owl-caller listened and slowly felt his anger slip away. Okay, maybe this was something they couldn’t risk Hole-in-the-skull finding out about, and so perhaps in her excitement he could overlook being man-handled if it, wisely, put them out of line of sight of his word-seeing. He did however continue to breathe only through his mouth and glare angrily at her throughout the explanation, unaware that to Hole-in-the-skull it just made him look like he was panting, which combined with Boneclaw’s whispering and both parties evident air of trying to act casual whilst under the console of intense strong feelings left Hole-in-the-skull in no doubt as the nature of the conversation (ultimately resulting in Owl-caller spending his next few lessons on healing being restricted, to his acute embarrassment, solely to the area of reproductive health).

Unaware of the world-shattering embarrassment and endless mocking from his friends awaiting in his immediate future, he cocked his head on one side and looked deep into Boneclaw’s eyes, trying to guess if she was taking the piss or not (causing Hole-In-The-Skull to make several metal notes about various physical and medical aids he suddenly needed to teach Owl-caller about, but that’s neither here nor there).

“You said that a small dark shape fled from your shadow and the bigger one went after it?”

“As far as we could tell, yes.”

“Interesting, was there anywhere shady you stopped for any time.”

“There was the gully where we killed the boar, yes.”

“Right, well you may have picked up the thing there then.” Said Owl-caller, resisting the temptation to add *So you’ve been boar-hunting? Would never have guessed.* “You said the big one may not be able to move through bright light? In which case these... *things* may find themselves stuck in patches of shadow during the day, and only be able to move around at night, like fish stuck in rock-pools waiting for a tide, or Pikkas, false lemming and mountain tribbles who overheat if they come down from their mountain homes in the day, but can move between them seeking mates during the night.”

“What do you think it is?”

“No idea. I can ask Hole-in-the-skull later. Magical and god-stuff creatures are one of his areas of expertise, and I think I can ask that without making him too suspicious.” Boneclaw looked nonplussed, but then shrugged. “Okay, not much to go on but better than any ideas I have right now. You go to it. I should probably get back to the camp, they’ll be expecting me to saunter in victorious and boast about my kill ‘round about now. I’ll try and tell the elders I saw something big moving in the Deepwood and I don’t think any children of males should go there without escort or at night, but I’ll say I thought it was probably a bear. No wait, I’ll say it was something small and say I thought I smelt a skunk: If I say bear they’ll go and try to hunt it.” She looked down at herself “Although even I’d be hard pressed to smell a skunk over this unless it went off. Good sized boar, but messy bugger, and the dumb things are wiffy at the best of times.” She saw Owl-caller’s tortured expression and then stepped backwards letting him set out from up against the tree, and then after a moments further thought she moved downwind from him.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Not that bad. Making backwards-salt is worse.”

“Really?” As far as she knew, it was just funny salt.

“Yeah, but it really aids food preservation. Thanks for...thanks for believing my sister, Boneclaw, even if it was only after seeing that ... thing.”

“No spit¹. It’s not like I could stand by and pretend nothing happened after seeing that.” *although it would make life so much easier. Too late now. A hunt-leader takes responsibility. “I’ve got to go.”*

“Right. We need to meet again tomorrow, discuss this” He called to her as she turned to go. *Okay so she’s not an utter jerk, but the way some of the males faun over her. I still don’t see what’s so impressive.*

Boneclaw stopped. “Wait a sec, I’ve got something for you.” She said loudly reaching into a pouch at the front of her loin-cloth (making Hole-in-the-skull flush red). “It should still be dry enough.” Owl-Caller hesitated, and then reached out to take the item she offered him quickly before Hole-in-the-skull could see it. He kept it closed tight in his palm as he causally waved her off, and only unfolded his paw when she was gone.

It was a horseshoe fungus. They were not valuable, not really. You couldn’t eat them and they had no hallucinogenic properties, despite all the local shamans had tried. But they did smoulder nicely, burning very slowly over a long time. As males tended the hearths, they were needed by males to carry fire safely, but because every male needed them, the trees near camp were picked bare by this point in spring. *She must have noticed that I wasn’t wearing one when she caught me in the tree the other day, because climbing a tree with a hot ember dangling from your belt is for braver and more foolish hyenas than I, and she must have thought I had run out and fetched one.* It was not the gift a female gave to a male. It was practical, simple, unromantic, ugly even, and she’d made no show of giving it. In fact she’d almost forgotten. It was the sort of thing, however, that one Person gave to another. She’d treated him as a member of The People first, not a male first, he thought. And she didn’t even think about it.

Alright, maybe she has some redeeming features. But she’s still not getting within a spear’s length of me again unless she’s had a bath.

Chapter five.

¹ Hyenas do not perspire, they cool their bodies via panting.

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

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

Dreams happened. She put it out of her mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The Deepwood side or the clear side?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's the second and third?"

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

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

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

“Oh. *That.*” She said. She shrugged. “Noon.” She said, turning away.

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

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!?***”

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 or 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 stop 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.

“No, and *listen*, willya? He’s smart. He’s a trainee healer, so if things do go vole-shaped¹ 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 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 entirre 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-

¹ 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 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.

loving-” Owl-caller disturbed a frog in the reeds, which croaked¹. 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**. 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 now², yanno?”

¹ And later on the tried to use the story of how he narrowly avoided getting trodden on the 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.

² 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 functional 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

“Yeah, be too.” Said Boneclaw. It was a risk of living together with other young females in the close-confines of the Hall. Your violent hormonal spats synced up, and then once per month¹ 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.

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 spleens after a simple misunderstanding over whose turn it was to fetch firewood. And to think that some cultures need to *work at it* in order to get a reputation for fierceness. They are however, as a culture, 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.

¹ 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 Anthropologists need to eat red meat and get out of the house and meet girls once in a while.

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.

“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 jokingly 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 of. 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 sister's 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 hysterical¹, 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.

¹ 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 bugged* 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.

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.

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 it¹. Magic, or gods, or worse.*

¹ 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

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 sarcasm. Or Irony. Or even that thing Elk-mother does. God's and culture-heroes¹ she thought have it easy².

"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 began 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.

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.

¹ 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.

² In this regard she was dead wrong.

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

Oh crap.

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.

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"

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 off the cliff, at which point one would stay to throw rocks at any 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-backs 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 lights 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 you¹ 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 way 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.

¹ 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.

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 perfect¹”, (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.

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

¹ “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.

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 it¹. 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.

¹ 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 is 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.

“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.”

“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 bad¹?”

“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 form², and sometimes salt won’t stop it going *really* bad³, but a mix of normal and backwards salt will stop that¹. So we get

¹ Colonies of bacteria.

² 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.

³ 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.

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 lost 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 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 rock-crystal 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

¹ 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.

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 colour¹ 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.

¹ 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 meat 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!

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?"

"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 happed, 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.”

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 answer for everything.”

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

“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 hot 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 relieved 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 thought their teeth over 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 go in and piss it 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. burn the woods, attack the human temple, the woods border on the temple and that the only place anything strange and new could have come from, make them tell us what it is and then we round them *all* up and..."

"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 send the whole tribe blundering in, because then someone will get hurt, but work in pairs or threes. Keep a healer on stand-by at all times just-in case someone 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, that 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 he's 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 for you 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 it 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 *official!*" said Boneclaw proudly, earning her a disapproving look from a passing female who heard this, who saw Boneclaw and *another* young male and believed, then an there, that 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.” Owl-Caller added. 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 thought. *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 its 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.

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's 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-balder 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 *Guaiacum Diabolica* tree, a close relative to *Guaiacum 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

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.

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 *Guaiacum 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 of an ability to interact with certain supernatural entities than others, or why the rules governing these materials are so arbitrary. For example it has never been adequately explained why Iron is so unpleasant to elves, or 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.

“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!”

“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 thought 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 lit horseshoe-funguses and some torches and then-” There was a noise from the doorway, Bloodmare 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 disdain. 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 began 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 if 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.

"Welllll.. 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 male 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 it 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 farmer’s 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 jaws 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 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 mild 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, daemonic.” 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 around¹) 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 could. 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.

¹ 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.

“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 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 pondering what I’m pondering.”

“I think so, Bone, but what if the stuffed-cockerel gets noticed by the farmer’s sister?”

“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 hut¹ 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.”

¹ 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 through 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.

Boneclaw stood awkwardly for a moment, before putting her hands comfortingly 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?”

“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 tuned on her heal 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 embarrassing 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 than she says she is, so she needs me. I’m the only one here who knows counter-reflexology¹, which doesn’t work well as the reason she can’t feel her feet 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.”

¹ 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.

“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!”

Chapter ten

Boneclaw, Troll-back and Owl-caller walked in silence to the stream. They’d hoped to find Eagle-owl before leaving the compound and tell there had been a change of plan and she and Bloodmare would take their turn searching the woodlands, later, but they’d not found her, and Owl-caller was worried that she may have gone down to the woods already, hoping to meet Bloodmare there. Where ever she was, they couldn’t accomplish anything useful by searching for her: she was a female of The People, if she didn’t want to be found she probably wouldn’t, and if she did, she’d find them. Besides, they had no idea how long it would take to locate the dream-deer, and even if they did, whether or not the creature that attacked it would show up for them, so Boneclaw ruled it best to start as soon as they could to maximise the hours of darkness they had to work with.

First-things first, they found Hole-in-the skull hoping to ask him if he might be able to communicate with it.

This turned out to be harder that they had initially thought.

“What do you mean he won’t come out?” said Troll-back aghast, glaring at Hole-in-the-skulls lean-to “We need his help!”

“He doesn’t get many visits from females, and none after dark, he’s spooked, that’s all! He’s a Shaman, he doesn’t operate on the same system as other people at the best of times, two armed females turning up unexpectedly in the middle of the night is not something he knows how to deal with!” Boneclaw groaned, remembering Hole-in-the-skulls laughable attempt to chaperone her and Owl-caller. He’d not spoken to her then, but she’d just put it down to generic shaman weirdness. Looking back on it, it was clear to see his was a little intimidated by having an armed hunter approach him somewhere that he clearly considered his place: even if you were sick, you sent a male to fetch him. It was hardly surprising that now he was spooked.

“Would it help if we backed of whilst you explained the situation to him?”

“I think it’s a bit late for that frankly, but you can try if you like.”

“No, wait, I’ve got a better idea. Backing of and letting you negotiate male to male is what any female would do, it’s what *Bloodmare* would do. Troll, hang back. I’m going in.”

“You’re going to trespass in his house? He’s scared and upset at us already.”

“Yes, but he’s a shaman: I’ve been treating him like a male and he’s been acting like a terrified one, so now I’m going to treat him like a person, like and *equal*. It can’t back-fire worse than the alternative.”

She turned to Owl-caller “Can it?” He shrugged. She paused a moment and just looked at the entrance to the Lean-to, blue in the moonlight. She took in and then blew out a deep calming breath, and then walked in.

It was warm and pleasantly close in the lean-to, and pitch black after the bright moonlight. She hesitated for a second on the threshold, unable to see. Then she noticed her shadow on the bare earth floor, still clutching its shadow spear. Gently, still watching her shadow, she propped her spear against the lean-to's support posts, and went and sat cross-legged on the floor.

“Look, I know I’m breaking around a hundred different rules by coming in here uninvited like this, and that you’ve got no good reason to like or trust me, but *given* I’m willing to break these rules, and given I feel strongly enough to ask for your help even ‘though you’ve no reason to help me, I hope that’ll show you how *desperate* we are. Now something bad has got loose in these woods, and we’re going to go and try and deal with it, but we have frankly no-clue where to start, so any help you could give us would be swell.”

Silence. As her eyes adjusted she thought she could just, *just*, make out the sheen of his eyes watching her. She licked her lips and desperately tried to think of something else to say.

“This thing, maybe you’ve already seen it? It’s dangerous; we think it’s what killed Owl-Callers father, and maybe hurt another person as well, so if you could help us catch it, then it’s make the woods a lot safer for everyone, perhaps?”

Silence.

“It’s well, it’s something unnatural, but I’m sure you’ve already guessed that from all the questions Owl-caller has been asking you. And dangerous and so we’re not sure what to do.”

Silence. Boneclaw licked her lips nervously again. *It’s not working.*

“Please Hole-in-the-skull, you’re our only hope.”

Silence. Nothing. Boneclaw sighed, and shifted to get up.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you, thank you for your time, Sir.” As she shifted to get up she caught sight of her own shadow, flat and two-dimensional on the hut floor, small and alone in the moonlight, and she knew what to say.

“It’s hunting a dream-deer, you know” she said, pausing half-risen. “Some poor timid creature that’s spent its entire existence acting as a go-between from this world to the world of dreams and visions. And that poor dream-deer will be afraid: I’ve hunted enough to know that fear, I’ve tasted it as I’ve caused it, but I’ve never experienced it truly for myself. But I’ve got a pretty good imagination for a female, and I think I can guess what that must be like: to be somewhere where you never quite fit. To be alone, to be afraid. We’d like you to talk to it, to ask if it could give us any advice on how to deal with the bigger creature that’s hunting it. But you know what? Even if it couldn’t help us, I think I’d still like to talk to it. To tell it that we want to help, even if it is for our own selfish ends. To tell it that not all hunters are uncaring towards their prey to... to tell it it doesn’t need to be afraid of the world all the time. That’s all. Anyway, I’m sorry to disturb you, I have to go now...” She got up and turned away. She gambled a lot on that moment, and wondered, for a second, what would happen if she had gambled foolishly.

She stopped at the entrance to the lean-to. She *was* stopped at the entrance to the lean-to. A very small, wrinkled and care-worn hand had taken a hold of hers as she turned to leave. She turned back.

Hole-in-the-skull appeared timidly out of the shadows for a second, and then attempted a wan smile, but you could tell that it was largely one born out of nervousness. He dropped to all fours on the floor of the hut, keen to beak eye-contract and hide his face in the shadows again, and begun drawing on the floor. Boneclaw watched entranced as a few sweeping lines formed not so much an outline of a deer, as the essence of one, as if you had taken a deer and removed all the muscle and flesh and hide and bone and just left the pure soul of a deer behind. He then applied judicious scribbling to the background, and in a weird way that worked remarkably well.

“Yes, that’s right, the dream deer, we want... we *would like* you to try talk to it sir.”

Hole-in-the-skull shook his head rapidly, put two hands together and rested his head on them, miming sleep.

“Yes, we know people can’t see them fully conscious, Owl-caller thought perhaps some herbal mixtures-”

Hole-in-the-skull held up a finger, halting Boneclaw mid- sentence and got up and snatched his herbalist’s pouch from its peg on the lean-to support, and scattered as dangerous a collection of drugs as Boneclaw had ever seen across the picture.

“Yes, like those-”

Hole-in-the-skull dismissively swept them off the picture, crossed his two hands over it and violently crossed and uncrossed them again in the “No!” gesture, and then held up both hands with the palms facing Boneclaw in the gesturer hunters used to mean “Halt”

“They won’t work?”

Hole-in-the-skull turned this gesture into a shrug with both hand bent outwards and the wrists and smiled apologetically, he then waved a hand around airily to indicate that whilst it *may* work with three days to prepare, at the right time of year when the really interesting mushrooms were fresh and with the best shamans know to the People on standby, it certainly wouldn’t work now, tonight, with two teenage hunters and Owl-callers little bag of herbal supplements.

“Okay what will work then?”

Hole-in-the-skull grabbed Boneclaw’s arms and jiggled them up and down, to mime jogging, then moped his brow and whipped imaginary foam from the corners of his mouth and panted theatrically whilst fanning himself with one paw.

“Acute physical exhaustion, yeah, Owl-caller mentioned that. Anything else? Umm, I don’t understand. Liquid, water? No, not water. Liquid? flowing, rushing, pumping... How many syllables are we looking for here? Ow!”

Hole-in-the-skull stabbed Boneclaw suddenly in the forearm with a long wooden splinter she'd have sworn wasn't there before, he then held her arm as the tiny bead of blood formed, took it delicately on one finger, and held it up to her nose for her to sniff and look at. Then he clasped his hand to his forearm and mimed sudden horror and used the hand previously clamped to his arm to mine spurting arterial spray.

"Oh, severe blood loss. Lovely. Anything else? Ow. Ow! Owch, quit it will you? **Ow! Argg!** Okay! Intense physical pain! I got it! Well, not my preferred option, but my stamina's too good to wear down that quickly, blood loss, no, just no. The same to dehydration or hypothermia or hyperthermia, before you suggest them... pain it will have to be. Yeah, all right, I'm a hunter, I can live with that?" he gave her a funny face and held up one hand palm down and horizontal and see-sawed it up and down in the universal gesture of "even-odds" She glared "I've been through our tribes female puberty rites, and they're designed to give you as close to an accurate experience of how much paying your sacrifice to She-is without medical intervention will hurt, and I personally doubt even the most difficult birthing's involve quite so large a mallet: pain I can deal with. I'd just prefer not having to. Anything else?"

Boneclaw watched for a few moments, and had to struggle not to let her eyes glaze over, she crossed and uncrossed her legs awkwardly at one point, tilted her head on one side as she observed something she was hitherto unaware was anatomically possible, and then came close to looking away, but fascinated horror kept drawing her back.

"We'll *I'd* be okay with that, But I severely doubt we could convince Owl-caller *or* Troll-back to go along with it?" she said eventually " Anything *e/*se. What, oh. A very small lump of extremely elderly cheese. Cheese? Really? Well okay. Do we have enough? No thought not. Okay. Pain it will have to be. Thank you. We'll we'd better head off and-"

He restrained her gently by a shoulder and started to daw again. The mega-scribble behind the deer started to take on some personality. A large dark mass formed, with three strange, nasty looking curved eyes. He then made two very small changes to the drawing of the deer, two little lines who, once tweaked, made it look very, very afraid.

“Oh. That. Yes. Well we’ve got a plan to deal with it, you Owl-caller gave us these pins-” she said fetching one out and giving it to Hole-in-the-skull, who turned it over and over in his hands “And Owl-caller says the wood that they’re made of will probably be able to hurt it.”

Hole-in-the-skull raised an eyebrow at this, and then nodded and gave it back. She looked to him.

“They will be able to hurt it, right?”

He nodded, but then made an adjustment to the picture. It was a little hyena warrior, next to the monster, welding a wooden pin. It was distressingly small.”

“It that to scale?” Hole-in-the-skull nodded. Boneclaw gulped involuntarily: the thing they were up against looked to be the size of a good-sized bear. She looked to her pin again. *Presuming these things do the same sort of damage to magical flesh they would to mundane, I’m taking on a bear I can’t see unless I’m in intense pain armed only with a nine-inch long wooden peg that previously only ever kept Owl-caller’s sister away from his tinctures. Goody.*

“Any advice you can give?” Hole-in-the-skull considered this, and then drew a dead hyena that bore a depressingly good resemble to Boneclaw next to the monster and drew several lines under it, and a cross through it to indicate that ending up dead was a bad idea.

“Thanks.” Said Boneclaw, but he put a hand on her shoulder and made her look again, pointing from the monster, alive, to the hyena, dead several times until she finally got the idea when he attacked the picture of the hyena, and then crossed it out, but attacked the picture of the monster, but didn’t.

“It can’t *die!*?” He shrugged to indicate that perhaps everything dies in its own way, but that this thing certainly couldn’t be convinced to do so by mere physical damage with a wooden pin, no matter how magical. He was a good shrugger. “Then what am I supposed to do?”

He mimed fisty-cuffs, boxing at his own shadow and then at her for a moment.

“Okay it can’t die, but we can still duff it up. What then?”

He stabbed randomly at the floor with the peg for a while, until he saw what he was doing: he was stabbing at her shadow.

“Pin it to the ground? Okay, that makes sense, in some weird sort of way. What then?”

He drew a circle over the little fight scene, and then rays of light and live stretching toward it to the ground, he adjusted the monsters image very slightly, so that now it looked afraid.

“Pin it to the ground so it can’t hide when the Sun comes up? And that kill no sorry, remove it? Permanently? You sure? What if we lose the pins?”

He drew Owl-caller saturation-bombing the area with spit, and a dropped pin lighting up.

“Very funny, what can we do that’s practical?”

He highlighted the picture of Owl-caller and drew on his necklace to make it more clear who it was. And then drew a ring around it.

“Right, I’ll ask him for advice, he knows this stuff from you I guess. But what If we need another weapon?”

He drew a ring of hyenas around the monster, all with flaming torches, he then pointed to the sun again

“Trap it, box it in with light, and wait for the sun? So basically *anything* we can do to leave it unable to hide when the sun-light comes will finish it off?”

He nodded.

“and the deer?”

He drew a deer happily running away, now that there was nothing to chase it. He drew its front half vanishing behind a tree and not coming out again the other side, and then the same deer happy amongst the stars. “Cool, so we just deal with the monster, and once it’s off the scent the deer can get away on its own? Good: to think that if the thing’s been here we since Owl-callers father was killed, then it’s been stuck for almost a year.

“Can you help us find the monster? Or if not it, the dream deer?”

He nodded at the words dream-deer, and got up.

“What happened?” Asked Owl-caller as the got out of the hut.

“Oh, Hole-in-the-skull and I have had a little chat, and he’s going to help us to find our dream-deer, and he’s given me some advice on how to beat out monster when we find it. By the way, your plan of just stabbing it with the pegs? Probably would have gotten us all killed, turns out we have to peg it to the floor and run to safe distance or otherwise trap it and watch as the sunlight destroys it at dawn.”

“Oh.”

“But beating it up with pegs first will help.”

“That’s just as well, Troll-back got bored and hammered hers though a log to make a club with a spike thought it.”

“Just so long as she’s given up on the doomcock, I’ll be grateful... what is Hole-in-the-skull doing?”

“Looking for the dream-deer, I would guess.”

“But, but he’s not tracking. He’s not taken any magical drugs to help him find it, he’s just... what is he doing?”

“Asking for directions.”

“He’s talking to a slug!”

“Slugs see a lot, and besides, apparently this Druid, that’s a kind of human shaman, messed up big time and now the leaves whisper secrets of the future to them and the slugs pass that on to others. We’ll, mostly what the slugs pass on is slime, chewed cabbages and cussing about how rubbish the druid was and how his back looked like the underside of a sheep, but other stuff too.”

“But he’s asking for directions!”

“Oh don’t be so female. Besides, we need to be in a near dream state to see the dream dear, but animals, even quite intelligent ones like the Ocular slugs, can see them all the time. But the way, how are you going to see it? Exhaustion?”

“I don’t exhaust easily: pain.”

“Surely exhaustion is safer?”

“Last time it took nearly fifty hours of solid hunting to get me tired enough to see this thing.”

“Pain it is then. You girls can take it in turns until you spot something, then I Guess we’ll all have to hurt.”

Hole-in-the-skull led them off for some distance, deep into the woods. Eventually he stopped by a thorny-thicket, conferred briefly with a passing winged snail¹ and then beckoned Owl-caller over. They had a brief whispered conversation in which Hole-in-the skull fussed over Owl-callers appearance, especially his necklace. Owl-caller took it off and offered it to Hole in the skull at one point, but he handed it back very quickly: he seemed quite keen Owl-caller keep it with him for some reason, and then Owl-caller returned to Boneclaw and Troll-back. Hole-in-the-skull took Boneclaw’s hands kindly, pated them in the manner of some dealing with a bereavement, and then wandered off without so much as a look a Troll-back.

“The deer is in the glen, but the hunter is close, so we’re to start hurting each-other here, he says, if we want to see it. He’ll take us no further, he says it’s too risky for him to go on or try to talk to the deer, and someone needs to go back and tell Elk-mother what’s happening so people can deal with the monster when we all die.”

“If Owl-caller!”

“I’m just repeating what he said. Well the bits that weren’t about not losing my necklace because it would be terrible to face a monster improperly dressed.” Said Owl, taking a spine from the thorn tree, coating it in one of his herbal mixtures and, eyes crossing with pain jabbing it right should his own right pectoral muscle. He then offered two similar thorn so Troll-back and Boneclaw.

¹ The wings of *Helix pomatia avia* are in fact a symbiotic flying fungi, originally from the Yuggoth mountain range, that bond themselves to various molluscs where, in exchange for a ready supply of nutrients from the mollusc, they permit it to explore an evolutionary niche (and cabbages in high-rise window-boxes) it would never have otherwise reached. The most impressive of these are the flying cuttlefish of the port city of Salt-lake, which frequently take small birds on the wing, provide connoisseurs with the most expensive and hard to obtain calamari on the planet, and, after being blow of course by storms, have been known to crash-land and blast people with sepia ink as far as thirty kilometres in-land, where their wings are often salvaged for re-use, or where the cuttlefish escape and try to inter-bred with the local wildlife, passing on the Fungal spores that form the wings during mating. It was, for example the forbidden love between chenopod and rodent that produced the flying rats of Rath’s temple of Ganesh, along with several hours of study by those scholars bemused and just a little disturbed by just how may barriers and laws of nature this pairing seemed to cross. But then again love finds a way, as do most of the associated activities.

“Herb Robert and mead-spirit, sings like hell, but antiseptic and it slows bleeding.”

“Gee, just what I always wanted. Okay, let’s do this on three, and then do this fast whilst the pain is fresh and we can see best. You ready?” asked Boneclaw to Troll Back.”

“No! This is a stupid idea.”

“Trust your hunt leader and friend even ‘though it’s a stupid idea?”

“Of course. I Didn’t say there was anything *odd* about me going along with your stupid ideas. Got your peg?”

Boneclaw grinned evilly and whirled her peg around, she had taken advantage of the eye in the blunt end to tie it onto a length of creeper and it made a truly frightening sight when swung around at high speed, but left the peg un-encumbered if she needed to pin any monster to the ground with it.

“Got it. Got you club and spear?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, Owl-caller, say behind us and warn us if you see anything sneaking up on us... thorns going in on one... two....” “Boneclaw inserted her thorn. She immediately wished she’d chosen her pectoral as well, but no, she had to be macho, show she could take more pain than a male and up the ante “***Tweee!*** Go go go!”

Boneclaw and Troll-back charged through the screen of thorn-bushes spears first, for the look of the thing, club raised, improvised spike-flail whirring, Battle-cry of the Tribes of the People in the High Places of the World on their lips, that no human has ever heard and lived to describe¹ and even Owl-caller got caught up in the moment and charged through after

¹ Because the phonics are partly outside of the human range of hearing, but let’s not spoil a good warrior’s boast by bringing logic into this.

then, staff raised. They cut a ferocious sight, and one that even the most hardened of shadow-monster-things would have been had-pressed not to respect.

It was there for a pity that all that was on the other side of the bushes was a small gully the rain had carved, which they fell into, and a few more thorn bushes in which a Black-and-white Little creature, not much larger than a small rabbit, lived.

There was an unpleasant and terrified scrabble to get upright again, after all, as far as they knew the monster was still there, including a particularly awkward moment where the thorn that Owl-caller had driven through his pectoral got caught on the thorn that, in a fit of macho idiocy worthy of a million drunken dares, Troll-back had driven through her own lower lip. Boneclaw however was struggling to remove the torn now embedded squarely through her Philtrum¹, when she came face to face with the gully's only other occupant.

The Little Creature contrived, as it stared over its tiny bowl of mint tea, to look as though if it absolutely *had* to make a list of the most unexpected and impressive things it had seen in the last few hours, then three screaming blood-crazed hyenas bursting through a bush into its home, weapons raised, and improvised body-piercings much in evidence, wouldn't even make it into the top ten. A slight tilt of the head indicated it was not entirely uninteresting however. Its pink eyes held up a pair of grudging eights to their suffering, and the line of the eyebrow indicated that it had *just happened* to spit out some of its tea because it was too hot, alright? It was in no way afraid of something as minor as three ferrous predators each more than sixty times its body mass bursting out on it unexpectedly. It went back into its burrow but its very *walk* told the world that it was to make more tea, because this cup was too hot, and not to hide under a blanket its Grandmother had made for it until the hyenas went away.

"What just happened?" asked Troll-back, pulling out the thorn and throwing it away bad-temperedly.

"We must have just missed the deer; We have no clue how fast those things can move, so that's always a possibility. Let's look around."

¹ Admit it, you looked that word up and were slightly disappointed when it wasn't something dirty. I know you.

“What would the Deer be doing in this gods-awful little gully? Visiting the Creature?” said Troll-back sarcastically.

“Well why not! They have dreams too you know! Frankly, Troll-back, I don’t need those comments right now!”

“We could ask the creature if it saw the deer, you said animals can. Right?” Asked Troll-back after a moment’s pause to digest this.

“For a start, talking to the animals is more of a shaman thing that I do: I’m strictly a healer. Secondly you need the right drugs for some of the animals to get into the same metal wavelength: hawks have minds like steal, mice are alternately jittery, horny and terrified, and this will be somewhere in-between, small, scared, but predatory and proud.”

“Proud? It’s the size of my foot!”

““The pride of a small, fierce thing is unbreakable, Troll-back, the lowliest Shrew carries itself like a warrior king.”

“Ahh! What would a dream-deer be doing down here anyway?”

“Hiding. Look.”

Troll-back and Owl-caller turned to Boneclaw, and then scabbled after her as she moved off, already following the shadow-foot-prints. After a few hundred yards, and perhaps ten minutes of careful tracking, she singled them to stop. With great care, Boneclaw buried her bare foot in a clump off stinging nettles

I really Hope this wor-Holly crap! A magic deer!

And there it was. The dream deer turned to Boneclaw, nervously. Its flat eyes glowed, which was very weird, when you thought about it, and it was completely and utterly flat, no matter what direction you looked at it from

This is the weirdest moment of my life, and that's saying something given these last few days.

"Hi there, can you understand me?" No response. She could *feel* Troll-backs jaw drop behind her as she saw her hunt-leader talking to thin air, and heard Owl-Caller frantically preparing more thorns. "I'm, well, I'm here because you're being hunted, and what hunts you has hurt our friends, so we're going to try and stop it, trap it until sunlight comes." She saw the deer glance at the wooden pegs, and then look at Owl-caller, at about neck-height for some reason. Then it, quite deliberately, nodded.

"Do you understand?"

It nodded.

Gods, this is as bad as talking to Hole-in-the-skull "Okay, can you take us to the thing that hunts you? Are you willing to use yourself as bait to draw it to us, so we can fight it?"

It raised one hoof and tilted its head from side to side, uncertain, then stamped once with the sound of gently imploding lullabies and nodded.

"I'm seeing a flat deer nodding at me, Bone." Said Troll-back "This is so weird."

"But you've got to admit, pretty spectacular, worth the pain even. Okay, dream-deer do your stuff. Lead us to it or it to us or whatever." It cocked its head on its side, unsure "Go on, we'll handle it, right?"

"Got the damned thorns in, you couldn't ask for more."

“Okay then dear, go for it.”

The creature flickered slightly, and then slipped sideways a few feet, then stood and stared at Boneclaw.

“Go on” said Boneclaw “Lead the thing to us.”

It just looked at Boneclaw, after a few moments it started to shiver and shake visibly.

“Er, Bone, nothing’s happening. It’s just standing there.”

“It must be nervous, maybe it’s gone tharn. Go on Little fella, go... for... it...” Boneclaw realised it was shaking quite badly now, at about the same time she realised it wasn’t looking *exactly* at her, but more over her shoulder. *Of course with shadow creatures, there’s no reason to believe it would have to move to lead it’s enemy to us...*

“Oh ***crap!***” Yelled Boneclaw as she turned and canon-balled into Owl-caller and bore them to the ground just before the giant tendril of darkness that tried to take them out from behind. She looked up. There was the shadow-creature, slightly fuzzy around the edges, formless, the size of a bear, and with three eyes, and Boneclaw was afraid because in those yes, she could see anger, but also amusement. It was amused by the idea of them as enemies, and that meant that it was intelligent.

*May she-it help us... **what** have I gotten us into now?”*

Boneclaw jumped sideways to avoid the blow she was sure was about to come, and swung her peg-flail wildly at the creature...

... which had in fact taken a step, or something like a step, backwards, and watched with open amusement as Boneclaw hit herself in the face with the wooden peg on the backswing.

Ouch.

Troll-back, meanwhile acted on pure instinct and forgot entirely about her club with the *Lignum Mortem* peg in, instead rolling upright in a smooth and graceful predatory moment and throwing her weapon of choice, her spear, with pinpoint precision and commendable force straight through the centre of the creature, where it slowed slightly without any actual sound but with a distinct impression of **Glomup-**ness, emerging the other side only fractionally slower and with no apparent ill-effect on the creature, and only failing to scalp Boneclaw due to the fact she was already falling down nursing the side of her face and cursing her own bloody-stupid flail weapon.

Oh doomcock, this could have gone better. Thought Boneclaw.

“Quick, Pin it!” yelled Owl-caller scrambling in the dirt trying to find the dropped Club. Troll-back growled, cheated by its spear-swallowing trick, and with a ferrous leap and an noise probably best phonetically rendered as “**YarrrrrrL-geg!**” leapt a good nine feet up onto the things.....

*Back? side? Shoulder-neck? How the hell are you meant to fight if it you can't even **describe** it?* Thought Boneclaw.

“Quick sister! I’ve got it pinned down!” said Troll-back, kicking and pivoting near the top of the shadow edifice and proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that whatever Adrenaline and testosterone fuelled world she was now occupying was one quite different from the one everyone else was in, where the creature had turned its eyes to her and was watching with nothing more than curiosity.

“Stick it whilst I’ve got it trapped like this!” she yelled, sinking her teeth to the thing’s... Something. Possibly cheek.

Boneclaw had never seen a jack-in-the-box, these not being a toy the People made for their children¹, but if she had she’d have known why her brain, in accordance with certain

¹ Who usually had to amuse themselves with other, simpler games like kiss-chase, it, forty-forty, Cerulean Auroch-hounds, whack-a-mole, dead-rat conkers, or the ever popular Find-the-one-child-smaller-and-weaker-than-the-rest-and-torment-them-untill-one-day-they-finally-flip-and-brain-someone-with-a-dead-badger. Owl-caller had always *hated* that game, at least up until the time he’d finally got to hit Bloodmare with the badger.

universal rules, mentally filled in a “Boing!” sound when suddenly a tree-trunk thick arm¹ popped perfectly horizontally out of a patch of the creatures exterior when no arm had been before, hitting Troll-back square in the chest and sending her flying into the upper braches of a near-by Lyme-tree, not a naturally tenable place of a Hyena designed for stamina hunting on the ground, which was why after a short journey involving all too many thin whippy twigs, Troll-back chose to re-join her compatriots on the ground, spitting out ropes of thick, gluey darkness that filled her mouth and were sticking to her teeth.

“That thing. So needs. To die.” Panted Troll-back as the creature begun to make a slow, heavy and unmistakable laughing noise. It was crying moonlike tears with amusement. “But it’s like fighting fog Bone! It’s there, because otherwise it would sink though the ground and be gone, so you can touch it, but it’s like really really thick smoke, or hardened water or something. It feels like that tingly feeling you get before a big electrical storm made solid!”

“Arrg!” screamed Owl-caller, Boneclaw stopped trying to pick up Troll back and whirled around to see Owl-caller being menaced by... nothing. “Dammit! I can’t see it anymore; I’m not in enough pa-”

The world went sideways and suddenly a thorn-bush decided to zoom forwards letting Boneclaw pass right though the big conveniently hyena-shaped hole it had right thought the centre of it. *Good job it had that...* thought a rather winded Boneclaw*otherwise that could have hurt.* Boneclaw got up, shook the remains of the bush off her back, and tottered a little unsteadily in the direction of the creature, unwrapping the peg-on-a-sting that seemed to have tangled itself around her wrist. She could see it again now it had kindly hurt her.

You can see how Eagle-feathers got impaled of Eagle-owls dropped spear, this thing throws people around like ragdolls just for the amusement of seeing how they will land! But Stalker... found with not a scratch on her, but still she won’t wake up. It does something else too. It’s been after that deer for a year, it must be able to feed some other way whilst it’s here...

Owl-caller screamed again.

Boneclaw broke into a run.

¹ Or at least you’d have to hope it was an arm, and not some other form of bodily protrusion. Ewww...

As she arrived the creature had Owl-caller about five-feet off the ground, having picked him up by his throat, and was dragging him towards its eyes using a thinner and disturbingly tongue-like tendril compared to the ones seen previously, when Boneclaw sped up, put one foot on Troll-backs back (she was still on all fours coughing up shadow-effluent) leapt up level with its face and slashed it across one of the eyes with a blow from the peg-flail that was so fast even she didn't see it. It connected just like it would with flesh.

The thing howled at a frequency that did uncomfortable and urgent things to Boneclaw's bowels, and dropped Owl-caller. Hissing like a kettle, like the least-friendly hedgehog in the universe, it turned slowly to face Boneclaw. All three of its eyes were narrowed and the one on the far left she had hit had a thin dark streak across it describing the path the peg had taken, and was flashing on and off at random.

Well at least it's not laughing at us anymore. Now it knows we can hurt it.

Owl-caller chose this point to club the creature across the back with Troll-backs improvised Club –with-nail-though-it. It howled in pain again, and gave Owl-caller a free flight across the clearing for his trouble. He landed heavily on Troll-back, which probably saved his life, and both got up swearing up a storm. It then advanced on Boneclaw. She backed away and circled, grasping the peg like a dagger in front of her. She noticed it was moving even more strangely than before, and seemed less coordinated.

It's hurt. Good.

I'm not... oh sod.

Boneclaw stamped down hard jarring her leg as the creature began to fade *Female puberty rites dammit! My pain tolerance is too high! The adrenaline keeps washing out the pain and I keep losing sight of it.* She fainted right and then swung out left and narrowly missed getting her head taken off by a blow. It had seen that coming, so she swivelled to riposte, and then as she flung out her arm in a stabbing gesture let go of the peg, it flew unguided at the creature making it dodge back as she snatched the last inch of creeper before it could get away from her and reeled it back. Moving in a circle, swinging and lunging, she made it to where Owl-caller and Troll-back were standing with their backs to the Lyme-tree.

“I think I’ve got the measure of it, but I can’t see it all the time because I’m not hurting bad enough Owl. Can you make another one of those, *have-at-you, you shadowy bastard!* – make another one of those pain-needle thorn things?”

“Already on it, look out! Tentacle top left! *My left! The other left!*” Troll-back stepped forwards and smacked the offending member away with her club, and Boneclaw hit it again with a long-range swing of the flail.

“You know, I think we’re winning. If we can keep this up and nothing happens to change the situation, then we should be able to tire it out or hurt it enough for me to get in there with the peg and-”

“Brother!”

“What in the name of She-is tits’?”

Eagle-owl suddenly charged into the clearing and went right at the creature with a spear. Boneclaw groaned: she must have been out here looking for Bloodmare and seen Owl-caller in trouble: she certainly spent most of her time barely conscious, so it would make sense she could see it. The creature swivelled once and caught Eagle a blow to the side of the head that stopped her cold.

“Why do you *say* these things Boneclaw?!” Yelled Troll-back. “*Sister!*” yelled Owl-caller.

Then to her horror, the scene begun to fade. Boneclaw could see Eagle-owl being pulled this way and that, but not what was moving her. She saw her lift up of the ground, and had a mental image of the tonged-like appendage and Stalker, lying unharmed but un-wake-able.

Troll-back ran at the creature and got the club knocked out of her hands by an invisible failing appendage. It whirred of into the complex darkness of the night-time forest and was gone, were as Troll-back herself was spun around and, with a surprising economy of moment, rammed into a tree with a giant paw made of darkness, briefly visible, in a way that left her lying in a heap and breathing very heavily. Eagle-owl was now struggling with increasing franticness, both of her hands clawing at some invincible limb encircling her neck, eyes fixed in terror at nothing

“Owl-caller! Quick, the pain-needle!”

"It's not ready yet!" yelled the distraught voice from over her shoulder.

"Well do something, anything quick!"

-:Scrunch:-

"mmmmppppggg!" Said Boneclaw as the monster and several bright coloured lights unique to her suddenly appeared. She involuntarily convulsed and hunched forwards, but she managed to extend the arm holding the peg and so turn the motion into one of throwing. Her aim was good, and she hit the tongue-thing square, slashing a big chunk of darkness from it and making the creature scream again and drop Eagle-owl, who landed badly on her ankle and passed out with a yelp. She then tried to fall over into a little world of pain, but Owl-caller picked her up and pushed her in the vague direction of the spike "Quick, pin it down! Fight now, suffer later!" he was still holding two large sticks he had picked up, such as you might pick up and then slam together onto something un-expectedly.

"You-"

"It was all I could think to do! Be thankful we're the only mammal species where that works on females 'cause it lets you see it!"

"Thankful?"

"Fight!"

Boneclaw turned to the thing, which also had the surly, murderous enraged look of a creature that has suffered damage to a very *sensitive* area, as she picked up the wooden spike, still riding high on waves of pain. "Oh don't look at me like that." She nodded to Eagle-owl "You started this." A shadow-limb shot past her head, but she arched her back up and sideways, simultaneously dodging it and slashed upwards with the spike with two

hands, piercing the underside of the limb. It recoiled, and fell over onto one side. It looked to be panting. Boneclaw walked up to it, and glared at it. No empathy this time. A pig was at least an honest eating-machine: it didn't laugh at you when you were down.

"Hey, here comes the sun." she said, and stabbed down with one almighty strike.

It rolled out of the way suddenly, and the wooden peg embedded itself into the ground. Boneclaw instinctively tried to pull it away, but the thing flailed at her and she had to roll away to avoid being hit, and that as that. In the mess of sticks and leaves on the dark forest floor, even with her night-vision she'd not be finding it again in a hurry.

"Owl-caller! I lost the peg!"

"What? Okay, you we have any other *Lignum Mortem*... a spear-head of it perhaps? A knife?"

"No! flint."

"No good. An iron one would do at a pinch!"

"Wait! Mine's iron! I inherited it from my grandmother!... *sod* my spear's still propping up Hole-in-the-skulls lean too!" yelled Boneclaw dodging another attack. "Anything else?"

"Any iron or... look around you, can you see any crow, or raven or other member of the cow-family?" asked Owl-caller, running his fingers nervously through his head-fur "Feathers, bone, a live or dead one, it doesn't matter, they should hold it if you can grab it with them!"

"Owl-caller! It's the middle of the night! There are no crows, there not exactly *nocturnal!* Do something!" said Boneclaw, her mind flashing back over the night, thinking of anything else they may have had that could be used as weapons. She recalled the deer, looking from her peg-flail to Troll-back's spike. It could recognise they had weapons that could hurt the thing...

And it looked to Owl-caller too. Why?

Boneclaw thought back to Hole-in-the-skull's drawings *Fire, a light, any way to keep it trapped until dawn, that's not too long now...*

... She-is don't let it be too long now: I've got no fire, Owl-caller's not wearing his horse-hoof fungus, and the iron spear-head I use to strike sparks is gone.

"Wait!" Yelled Owl-caller. "I see the club!" Owl-caller ran out to get the club. Boneclaw saw him in slow-motion. The pain and exhaustion plus the unrealness of fighting something made of nothing but darkness was finally getting to her: she saw every one of his footprints floating above the ground, each in a bright and beautiful colour all of its own.

Oh, pain-induced trace state. Well there you go

Her mind was flashing, connections, Hole-in-the-skull-fussing over Owl-caller's necklace, the Deer looking to owl-caller, not to his face, she realised, but to his neck, something about our choice of weapons, Owl-caller in a tree, trying to spy on the meeting with his necklace glittering...

A tendril of darkness took out Owl-caller before he could get to the club. He went down hard, his necklace spinning of him to land at Boneclaw's feet. She crouched down and pickled it up awkwardly.

The Shadow creature loomed over Owl-caller and begun, unless Boneclaw was mistaken, to sniff at him. It seemed to notice something familiar, it looked again to Eagle-owl.

"Their names are Eagle-owl and Owl-caller, and they are my friends." Said Boneclaw walking up to it. It just stared at her. "You killed their father. Prepare to die."

The thing jolted back and started to scream and she slipped Owl-callers necklace over its head. She pulled down hard, and although it should have snapped the sinew cord the beads were mounted on, it instead cut through the darkness of the creatures flesh until it was wearing the thing at about the level of its waist, or equator or whatever. The Haematite bead and jay's skull glimmered blood red as dawn, rosy fingered, broke around them.

*Iron and the bones of a jay, you monster. I know that this won't really **kill** you, but you're in pain and I'll never see you again and that good enough for me any day.*

None of the People had ever seen a lump of sodium dropped into a pool of water¹, but if they had, then Boneclaw would have been able to describe what this looked like. But nastier. And a lot more noisy. And there was this one horrible moment where the thing sort of *vomited* out little images and memories of all the people it had ever killed. But other than that pretty much the same.

After a while the dream-deer came up to one of the pieces and sniffed at it. It hesitated for a moment and then jumped in the direction of the compound. It re-appeared a moment later out of thin air, and Suddenly Boneclaw was hit with a vision of Stalker waking up, her psyche a lot worse for wear, but still largely intact.

Thank you.” Muttered Boneclaw, feeling honestly quite exhausted despite her claim not to tire easily. Because there didn’t seem to be anything else to do, she went and checked that Owl-caller, Eagle-owl and Troll-back were okay, (Owl-caller diagnosed himself as fine and free from concussion but with a high risk of concision, because if he was concussed then he would probably be unable to diagnose it, and so should be seen to when he got back to the camp, Troll-back had three broken ribs, But Owl-caller saw to them and she had hunted on worse before, and Eagle-owl had a broken ankle, but surprisingly seemed entirely sober: she seemed to able broken her ankle earlier and kept moving on it, which explained how she saw the creature, and why she fainted right out when dropped on that ankle) and got them up to watch as the deer vanished so they could say goodbye.

“That was the weirdest think I’ve ever seen.” Said Eagle-owl.

“That’s nothing, you should have seen when the big thing first grew arms and punched me up a tree.” Said Troll-back.

“Really? Cool.” Owl-caller came over and, to Boneclaw’s slight surprise, hugged his sister.

“Are you okay sis?”

“Yeah. Sorry about this: fine rescue party I made.”

¹ Well Hole-in-the-skull had, but only in a bad mushroom trip.

"It's the thought that counts."

"Was that the thing that killed dad?"

"Yes." Eagle-owls ears fell.

"The I didn't get my chance to get revenge on it. And now there's no body, no one will believe me again."

Boneclaw thought back to her mental flash of stalker waking up, and imagined what she must be saying, plus Hole-in-the-skull going to warn Elk-mother, and Elk-mothers prior suspicious.

"I don't know: Elk-mother knew something was up, She'll believe you."

Eagle owl looked at her for a moment, and then to Boneclaw's embracement started to cry.

"No-one believed me; I didn't kill my father. For so long I didn't know what to believe, everyone thought I was mad, and after a while so did I. I just wanted to die and I drank and I drank and-" she saw Owl-caller and begun to cry again.

"We'll *that's* going to stop." Said Boneclaw firmly, setting her jaw, and Eagle-owl nodded, and cried, and nodded some more. After a while Troll-back, with uncommon tact, offended to take her back to the compound on the basis that between them they made one and a quarter fictional hyenas, and this would give Owl-caller a chance to dress Boneclaw's wounds.

"What wounds?"

Boneclaw realised they were all staring at her and looked down at herself. She was completely covered in blood, and had so many small scratches and bruises she looked like she had been thrown through a thorn bush.

Well, I guess I was. Heh, blood loss did work after all, Hole-in-the-skull.

“Sit down here.” Commanded Owl-caller as the pair began to limp off using their spears as crutches. “I’ll need some fresh dock leaves for dressings, so just wait here. Hold the Club: I doubt any wolf would be stupid enough to pick a fight with you, looking like you’ve just gone to war with the entire universe, but you never know what might get attracted to the scent of blood.”

“Don’t you worry; I’ll doze here with one eye open. I’m sorry, but I lost your memory-box peg Owl-caller.” He shrugged. “it’s just a peg, but don’t worry, I’ll find it. You hit the monster with it, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s one way to find it if all others fail then. Back in a moment.”

Boneclaw say back and relaxed as Owl-caller slipped off alone into the woods, listening to the sounds of Troll-back and Eagle-owl chatting’s they walked away.

“So, what with fighting that thing, did you catch the giant tree-wolverine at all?” asked Eagle-owl.

“Oh, that. That was just a cover story.”

“*What?*”

“It doesn’t exist, we just made it up so no-one would try and fight the monster until after we worked out how to kill it.”

Eagle-owl stopped dead, halting Troll-back in her tracks about fifty paces away from where Boneclaw sat listening.

“You mean you haven’t killed it yet? It’s still out here.”

“We made it up!”

“You may have made *something* up, but it’s out there! Or at least, A giant tree-wolverine is: How do you think I broke my ankle!”

There was a brief scream from the direction Owl-caller had walked of in, and a very short snarl.

“*SKALFING hell!*” yelled Boneclaw as she spirited thought the woodland at top speed, leaping bushes and searching and scenting right and left. She caught the metallic smell of blood, Owl-callers scent and the distinctive odour of a very large male wolverine, and changed direction. In a few moments she caught sight on a mass of brow-grey fur, with weak sights of movement coming from underneath. There was a lot of blood. Without a moment’s thought for her own safety she vaulted over and dealt the thing three extremely hard whacks with the club.

“You overgrown weasel *bastard!* Don’t you kill him! I need him! We’ve been thought too much for me to let you kill him”

“Umm? Boneclaw?”

“You utter utter... Huh?”

“Do you mind lifting this thing of me? *Carefully!*”

Boneclaw hauled the wolverine carcass of to one side, it must have weighed two-hundred pounds, exceptionally large for the type. Owl-caller was underneath, applying pressure to a long, deep-looking gash, a claw wound, to the side of his leg.

“Well the good news is, *Ahhhhahhah this hurts...* is I found the other peg.” He said grimacing and nodding to the wolverine. Boneclaw noticed what looked like the length of creeper she had tied it too dangling out of its mouth, and a good three inches of iron-hard wood protruding from the back of its skull. “The big bugger jumped me whist I was picking it up. Fell twenty feet out of a tree and landed on the one Person in the forest holding a nine-inch wooden spike. They’re never were what you call bright.”

“You’re hurt, what do I do? Do you need a tourniquet?”

“No, the wound has missed any arteries or major veins, but that thing is filthy, and I’m lying in mud, it’ll need to be cleaned out properly or it *will* rot. Can you fetch me the angelica and herb-Robert from my bag?”

“Umm, No.” said Boneclaw, holding up a shredded pouch. “It’s claws must have got this, that’s why it only glanced you.”

“Okay, then could you fetch me woundwort, or Herb-Robert or St James’s wort from the local plants and-”

“I don’t know that any of those things look like.”

“You’re a hunt leader! I thought you got taught how to set bones and stop bleeding and clean out wounds!”

“Set bones and stop bleeding, yes. I can only recall one-sure-fire way to clear out wounds and, well it’s a bit basic...”

“At this point I wouldn’t complain. Do you have the stuff to hand, or do you need to go gather it. What is it, some sort of moss?”

“No, close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes Owl caller!”

“Oh gods, this is going to be what I think it is, isn’t it?”

“Rrriggght nowwww Owl-Callerrr !¹”

Much later once Owl-caller had bandaged everything up, and Boneclaw had helped him find a suitable stick to lean on, and Eagle-owl and Troll-back had blustered in at exactly the wrong moment during Owl-caller’s medical treatment and had to be ordered to look away, Owl-caller was up and mobile again.

“Thank you. Now let’s never mention this again.” He hobbled over to the wolverine, and paused thoughtfully. “You know, if no one does believe the story, we could always show them this.”

“That’s the biggest, most dangerous kill the Tribe has had in years: no-one would believe that a male had killed it, and we can’t claim it because we can’t lie about matters of status.” Said Boneclaw.

Owl-caller shrugged. “Then just say the child of Eagle-feathers killed it, the night that child took partial revenge with the help of Boneclaw and Troll-back. No-one lies, My family still gains, we win back a little dignity, and you get some status.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Yes you do: you’re in Bloodmare’s debt for striking her? Remember?”

Boneclaw groaned.

¹ Although documented in nearly every culture with any concept of healing, and even some without, using ammonia or urea solutions in... whatever form you happen to have to hand.... To sterilise battlefield wounds has never exactly been popular. It works really well, it’s ridiculously easy and unless the ...donor... has some really *nasty* viruses, there is remarkable little chance of cross infection. Seriously: even urine from someone with a full set of the more common UTI’s is still safe because very few of the bacteria from a UTI can survive in an open wound., and most of the ones that *can* will kill off some of the nastier bacteria that would normally colonise and open wound. It’s a great last-ditch method of cleaning wounds. In fact the only reason for the reluctance to use what is a very efficient system for cleaning out wounds seems to be this: Ewwwww. Eww Eww **Ewww**. I mean come *ON!* It’s embarrassing enough seeing a doctor at the best of times without... No. Just no. Just... ewwww.

“Let’s just go back to the compound and sleep it off. We’ll deal with this all some other time.” Said Boneclaw Sister.

“What about our hero’s Welcome?” asked Troll-back. “We got one for the pig.”

“Yes but now were even more tired, dirty, and were all wounded. We all need proper medical treatment and a personally I’d kill for a long, hot *bath*.”

“Me too.” Said Owl-caller, who felt that he may never feel properly clean again. He also felt slightly... hollow. Perhaps it was the blood-loss, but he’d just avenged his father (he didn’t mind not getting the credit for it, he was a practical person, and had never expected to get *thanked* for it) and now he thought: now what?

“Well I was going to try and work Foxtail into my ideal bath fantasy, but if you want in too...”

“No way.” Said Owl-caller

”Spoil sport. See? She what I mean?” said Boneclaw sister. “You only get that sort of perfect hero’s welcome in, well, dreams, and what are the chances of that?”

As they all limped through the quiet woods to the compound, a strange, sad wonderful creature, a flat deer, watched them go. You don’t always get your hero’s welcome in life, but perhaps, if you go out of your way for other people, they help might you when they can.

The dream deer watched them, then nodded, then leapt into the sky.

Epilogue

Time passed. It does that.

Owl-caller was making Pemmican, and as a result up to his elbows in grease again.

“Come to scrounge more food?” he asked as Boneclaw sidled over.

“Ha! Wouldn’t say no. How’s your leg?”

“Better, thank you. You’re looking good today, I see you got cleaned up properly, glad I didn’t have to dress all those cuts. Sleep well? Good dreams?”

“The best. Despite all the mead they gave us when that wolverine was dragged in. Pity Bloodmare woke up and spoiled the party, but she went straight to Stalker to try and work out why she kept taking about giant shadow-monsters she saw when she was out cold, so my the time she reported me striking her, most of the Elders were too drunk to care. So very good dreams”

“Yes our friend the deer seems to have been grateful: the whole tribe had been blessed with good dreams, it won’t last, but it put the elders in a grateful frame of mind: Bloodmare only gets to boss you around of a little bit because you’re a hero and she isn’t, although asking Elk-mother if the dead wolverine had accepted her proposal of marriage or not probably didn’t help your case. Troll-back got a personal commendation from the council of elders, and my sister is now in *your* hunt because you clearly work so well together. And on that subject...” He nodded to the new hut being raised opposite his by a team or workers.

“Hare’s-tongue getting himself a nice little hut. Good location too.”

“Yeah, you think he’ll be, well, happy, married?”

“Safe, you mean? Well, I’ll admit his parents were still reluctant to let him marry my sister, but now that they know that my sister isn’t mad and didn’t kill her father, they said yes on condition that between now and the wedding she don’t touch a drop of mead. And none at the wedding feast. None ever.”

“That’s going to be hard to police.”

“Really? She kept her word last night, and that was a *big* party. Besides; even though hunters find a bee-hive most days this time of year, there’re still not that much honey in the forest, so not much mead, and it’s all either made by the elders under Cloud-watchers

supervision, or by Hole-in-the-skull, who has his own beehive. They can control who gets the mead. They watch things pretty well, and neither is going to give any to my sister any more: we three healers had a little talk about that.”

“Really?” Owl-caller nodded

“I convinced then that her drinking constitutes a disease, so we’re treating the symptoms by removing the cause.”

“Each hunt-leader gets allocated some mead to share amongst her followers and friends...”

“And Blood-mare woke up this morning covered head to toe in the mead she had allocated to my sister in the past: She’ll not be giving her any more, and you control the only other supply. Besides, I’ve spoken to Hare’s-tongue. He’s a sensible boy, although very deeply in love, and he’ll not have it in the house. As husband he can demand things a brother can’t.”

“And he can leave. Would the though? If something happened?”

“If he didn’t I’d drag him out if I had too.”

“You think you could persuade someone to leave the person they love?”

“I don’t know. I hope I never have to find out. But as healer I’d know soon enough if anything did happen. It won’t though: Eagle-owl isn’t a violent person: a violent *drunk* yes, but she’s realised that drink nearly killed her. She saw it was me who went and fought that monster last night, because she was too drunk to do so, at least at first. She came in the end, and sobered up damn quickly when she saw that wolverine, but that knowledge, that knowing that she nearly lost me to her drinking, we’ll, it brought it home to her how much she was hurting me, and herself. She’ll not drink again. I’ll see to that. Besides” He grinned. “Married life changes people. She says she wants to be a mother someday. I might be an uncle one day, so that plus the fact I get the hut to myself now is something to be happy about.”

“Nice. Er, on that subject...”

“On the subject of marriage? What? You and Foxtail?”

“No! I mean, not yet.”

“You’re still doing airtight? No problems?”

“Well, yes and that what’s weird. I mean, we went through so much together, you and I, risked so much and shared so much and, well, nothing happened?”

“Sorry, you *wanted* something to happen?”

“No! I mean, Not exactly: I love Fox-tail, but , well, in all the stories, when a female and a male go on an adventure together, and at the start they don’t know or like each other that much, and they overcome adversity together...”

“... they jump into bed at the end of the story? You would have ruined your chances cleaning out that wound, if you had had any.”

“No! Well, yes, well, I don’t know. But isn’t it, well, weird? That in the stories it always means something more than just friendship, when you go through all that?”

He shrugged. “A little. But life is weird. I have my healing to learn, you have a hunt to lead and you’re in a stable relationship” *possibly because it’s centre of gravity is so low*. “So what do you expect? We’re friends right?”

“Right.”

“Well that’s settled then. Life isn’t always like stories. Friendships a pretty good ending as things go, be happy with it.”

“Boneclaw!” shouted Bloodmare “Get over her at once! We have a full day of hunting ahead of us!”

Boneclaw groaned.

“You know, she’ll have you jumping through hoops, no matter what the Elders say.” Said Owl-caller conversationally.

“Yes, yes she will, but I’ll make her hate every moment of it. Don’t worry about it. It’s the consequences of my little games of status; you have to face up to them eventually.”

“Perhaps. Wait... I have an idea.”

“What’s going on! This *slovenliness* will not stand Sister!” barked Bloodmare as she walked over to Boneclaw, who stated back coolly “Less dallying around with your pet males and more hunting! More providing for the community!”

“Excuse me miss.” Said Owl-caller Boneclaw stared. Bloodmare glanced at him once, then turned back to Boneclaw. “Honestly sister, you ought to have reported to me at dawn!”

“*Excuse me Miss.* “ said Owl-caller. “My sister requests you speak to her now.”

“Your sister, male, is in no position to make demands. If you *are* going to debauch yourself Boneclaw, at least control your little *harem* properly.”

“Excuse me miss.” Said Owl-caller “My sister request you speak to her now about the debt of honour you unfortunately owe to her.”

“What!?”

“She says you entered the hut of as male under her protection without her express permission, and offered harm unto him.”

“I’ll, I’ll deal with it later.”

“This is a problem of status. You are in debt, you will pay to her now.”

“What is she demanding?”

“That, Miss, you surrender any special debts of equal or lesser value that you are currently being paid, unto to her.” He nodded to Boneclaw. “For example any debts you are demanding your hunt-sister to pay to you, you renounce to Eagle-owl, to claim or annul as she pleases.”

Bloodmare narrowed her eyes. “She has said as much?”

“Not yet, Miss. How is your jaw?”

“This is male manipulation! I’ll not stand for it!”

Owl-caller leaned in close. “You’ll pay or I’ll quite legally drag you over by you snout, and if you try and fight back Boneclaw will intervene to protect a male honourably and justly. You’ll be dragged over there in full view of the tribe, by a *male*, miss. Now go away: you’ll get no debts paid to you by Boneclaw, and everyone will know why.”

Bloodmare looked from one to the other. "So you flaunt this *rot* ...this weak treatment of males that threatens our entire society. All I want, all I have *striven* to achieve is to make the tribe strong, and you'll risk it just like that?" to Boneclaw's amazement and horror Bloodmare started to cry "It's this sort of weakness that got my mother killed, that gets good hunters killed, risking their lives just so you lot can flaunt your disrespect for our values in the safety they buy you? Hiding behind the bodies, without a scrap of *respect*? One day this sort of thing will eventually lead to tragedy and then I'll put a stop to this. Well, I'll not stand for this, mark you. I'll not be outmanoeuvred by you two again! I'm going to do what's *right*, Boneclaw, and you'll know the Law when I bring it to you!"

Boneclaw and Owl-caller watched as she stormed off.

"Wow. You just played the law: you just used status law and politics to your *advantage* Owl-caller!"

"Thank you. I had a good tutor."

"She'll really never let this go, you know, she'll try her best to make your life a living hell."

"I'm not married to her, and she's not my kin: she had no power over me, and now Eagle-owl is outside her hunt and has enough status again to fight her, so it's not like she can cause trouble for my relatives. But you're right; we'll have to watch her."

"We?"

"Well, we do make a pretty good team: even if the stores are wrong about the brave female and handsome male walking of hand in hand into the sunset, it is true you can't go through that sort of stuff and not be a team afterwards."

"True, and you never know, if it doesn't work out in the end for me and Fox-tail..."

“Dream on.”

“Well you do have nice fur...”

“Thank you. Dream *on*. Get the deer to help.”

“Oh come on, you can’t say you’re not just a little bit attracted?”

Owl-caller smiled and looked her right in the eye

“Boneclaw, my intentions towards you are and ever will be, unfortunately, entirely, one-hundred per cent honourable.” Said Owl-caller, as he shook the hand of Boneclaw sister.

Well maybe Seventy per cent. He thought. Sixty at the worst