

Bonehunters

Harry Turtledove

Junior and me, we got up into the Black Hills country and the Badlands not far away. Yes, thank you, I know that's not the kind of place where you want to end up. What do you mean, how come I'm looking at you like you're some kind of natural-hatched fool? How else am I supposed to look at somebody who's a natural-hatched fool?

Tell you what you can do, though. You can buy me a drink, and you can buy one for Junior, too. That'll go some ways to makin' amends. Or you can try the two of us out in the alley and see how you fancy that. Maybe you'll have more sense after we bite some chunks out of you so it can get in.

Ah, thank you kindly. Much obliged. See? You ain't a great big fool, anyways.

What d'you mean, do I know Junior's a native? He's my hatchling. I'd cursed well better know. No, I didn't spawn him. We can't breed with the natives. Anybody who tells you we can is a gods-damned liar. Junior's my hatchling anyway. He's been with me since he was tiny. Neither one of us'd know what to do without the other now.

Have I got that straight, Junior, or am I wrong? There! You see, stranger? He feels the same way I do, and as long as he does it's no consarned concern o' yours a-tall.

What d'you mean, he talks all mushy? You ain't been out West real long, have you? He can't help the way he sounds. It comes from the way his mouth is shaped. You can't make proper native noises, neither.

You wouldn't care to? This here's the West, pal. You may need to one fine day, and sooner than you reckon, too. You just never can tell.

And I'd be farther along in my story if you didn't keep bangin' your teeth. You want I should tell it or not? Oh, you do? Well, then, I will—long as you keep your biter shut, I will.

We were by the Black Hills, like I told you. This was in the days when there was still a native kingdom there. No, Junior's not from them parts. We met up years and years ago, a good bit farther south. You got to understand, this was before they found there was gold in them thar hills. Nobody cared about the natives running things there, on account of nobody reckoned the land was worth anything.

Ever see the Badlands? They look the way your hide does after you get over rinderpest, all bumpy and wavy and slaggy. I heard one fella say they look like what would've happened if the gods beat some of the white of the World Egg into peaks and let 'em get hard out there. I mostly don't hold with that kind of language my ownself, but it does get the notion across.

Or it would, except the Black Hills, they're home to different gods. You'll have seen the stereoscopes if you ain't never been there yourself, am I right? Sure I am. Them great big heads, all sharp teeth and eyeballs, carved into the mountainside . . . Shingto and Fferso and Incol and Oo-sev, those're their names. You better learn 'em, too, before you go into that country.

It's impressive work. It'd be impressive for us, and we've got iron and steel and gunpowder. The natives, they used bronze and stones and lots of people and lots of time. Nobody knows how long ago they made 'em. Nobody knows how long it took, neither. The natives don't remember, and we ain't found out.

No, Junior and me, we didn't go up there just to see the sights. You travel for the sake o' sight-seein', you got to be rich. Do I look rich to you? Does Junior? Didn't think so. We were there for whatever work we could find, hunting or herding or playing guide for hornface hunters after a trophy.

Wasn't my first trip there. I'd been in those parts years before. I knew my way around pretty good—for a fella whose scales are green, anyways. The natives, what they can do, you wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it for yourself.

It's like they were hatched there or somethin', you say? Oh, you're a regular cutup, you are. They gods-damned well *were* hatched there. No, don't get your feathers all ruffled. You don't make any more stupid jokes, and I won't sit on 'em. How's that for a bargain?

Suit you? All right, then. I'll go on with my yarnin' . . .

* * *

It was a daytenth before sundown when Junior and me, we came within hailing distance of Fort Ironclaw. Folks who've never been anyway near Fort Ironclaw call it the Gateway to the Black Hills. Anybody who's ever seen it—soldier or traveler, don't matter a pinfeather—calls it that horrible shithole plumb in the middle of nowhere.

Which it is. Soldiers don't get sent to Fort Ironclaw on account of they've won a promotion. They get sent there to work off their sins from somewhere else.

Somebody in the fort winded a horn while we were still a long ways off. I couldn't spy anyone on the stockade yet. Hells, I could hardly see the gods-damned stockade. The sentry, he must've had hisself a spyglass with some juice in the tube.

We kept walking. Heads popped up on the stockade when I got close enough to make 'em out. You may have been a busted egg to get exiled to Fort Ironclaw, but you don't dare stay sleepy once you wash up there. The natives would've liked nothing better than to swarm over the fort, and everybody in there knew it.

One of the sergeants bellowed at us through a big leather loudhailer: "Who comes?"

I didn't have a loudhailer. What kind of use'd I have for one? I cupped my hands in front of my snout and hollered back: "Rekek and Junior. Don't you recognize us, Snegor? I sure know your voice."

"Keep on comin'. We won't shoot you yet," Snegor said, as full of himself as any sergeant ever hatched.

"They're itchy about me," Junior said quietly. You can follow him fine once you get used to how he talks. Wasn't anybody ever gonna be more used to it than me.

"You hush. Long as you're with me, everything's jake," I told him. He's a native, of course. Anybody can see that, and hear it. But, like I say, he's been with me since he was fresh out of the egg. No matter that his hide's brown and he's got feathers in funny places. No matter that he talks a little strange. He makes better people than most ordinary folks I know.

If you don't know him, though, he just looks like a native. At the edge of the Badlands, that's plenty to make soldiers hop and scratch.

We were inside easy rifle range when Sergeant Snegor picked up the loudhailer again. By then, I could spot the soldier with the spyglass. Reckon he could count my feathers, and Junior's, if he was so inclined.

"You are who you say you are," Snegor allowed. He sounded as if admitting it pained him, but admit it he did. Somebody else up there said something to him; I couldn't make out what. Snegor went on, "Feel like hiring out for some guiding?"

"Mebbe," I answered. You never want to sound eager, especially when you are. Lean times lately. "Might depend on who wants to pay me to do it. Will depend on where he wants me to guide him to."

"His name's Otnil. He's a perffesser, from one o' them fancy schools back East," Snegor said.

“He’s after old bones, if you can believe it. Anybody wants to know what I think, he’s crazy as a bedtick, but who the hells wants to know what I think?”

He was shouting this, y’understand, through that big old loudhailer of his. I could hear him. Junior could hear him. If any natives were close by in the Badlands, they could hear him. And for sure everybody inside Fort Ironclaw could hear him, including Professor Otnil. Well, Snegor never was the brightest candle in the chandelier.

“I’ll talk with him. See what he wants. See what he pays,” I said. I’d heard of these bonehunters before, but I’d never met up with one. They get as excited about the old skulls and teeth and things that weather out of the sides of bluffs and creekbeds as regular folks would over gold and silver. Maybe *crazy as a bedtick* wasn’t so far wrong after all.

By then, Junior and me had come up to the ditch around the fort. It was dry; you don’t get a whole bunch of rain in those parts. But it was deep, and it was full of pikes pointing straight up. Natives attacking the fort couldn’t jump down in there and commence to undermining the stockade.

I sat back on my tail and looked up at Snegor. “Well? You gonna let us in so’s we can palaver with your pefesser?”

“Oh. Right.” Yeah, Snegor was dim. He started bawling orders. The drawbridge creaked down. Inside the fort, a squad of riflemen stood ready in case a swarm of riled-up natives tried following Junior and me. But it was just the two of us. Our toeclaws clicked on the sun-faded planks when we walked over the bridge. Soon as we got inside, more soldiers started hauling it up again.

Of course the flag flew over the fort. Soon as we got inside, Junior and me, we both set our left hands on our snouts for a heartbeat or two to show our respect. Wasn’t any breeze to speak of; the red and green stripes hung limp against the pole. But that flag flew everywhere from sea to salty sea, except for a few little places where the natives still hung on. It deserved respect, by the gods.

I looked at things that way, anyhow. If Junior felt any different, he kept his trap shut about it.

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Sergeant Snegor took me to Lieutenant Diffi. Diffi also knew me; he took me to Captain Jawj. Jawj kinda hissed when he saw me. He knew me, too; he did that with everybody. He hated the whole gods-damned world, Jawj did. He’d been a colonel in charge of a couple of brigades in the big war back East. When the war ended, so did his fancy rank. He was lucky to wind up in charge of a dusty little fort at the edge of the Badlands instead o’ counting cannon balls and coils of rope somewhere.

He understood that as well as anybody could. Only he didn’t reckon it was the good kind of luck.

“You’ll show crazy Otnil where the bones are at?” He sounded sour as an esrog. He mostly did. A lot of officers, if that happened to them, they’d drink and drink and never stop. Not Jawj. He never touched the stuff. I got to say, stayin’ sober didn’t improve him none.

“That’s right, Longfeather,” I said. Longfeather was what the natives called him in their language. His crest really did stand up when he was in a temper, and he was most of the time. I went on, “I will if he pays me decent, anyways, and if he treats Junior good.”

Jawj looked at Junior like he was measuring him for a pyre. He had no use for natives, Jawj. Junior could see that. He looked back at Jawj the same way. Junior don’t back away from nobody; it ain’t in him.

Jawj snarled something under his breath. He gestured to Lieutenant Diffi. “Take him to the crazy huzzard,” he said. “Take ’em both. Get ’em the hells out of my sight.”

“I’ll do it, Captain.” Diffi saluted. Being a soldier means taking guff no freeman’d ever put up with if the fella dealing it out didn’t outrank him. I don’t know what a lieutenant’s pay is. Not as much as Diffi deserved—you can bet on that.

He took us to the officers’ quarters. That’s where they’d stashed Otnil and the rest of the diggers. One of the junior smart boys looked up from the dice game they had going and said, “He isn’t here. He’s over in the stables, checkin’ on that drosaw with the sore arm.”

“Over to the stables, then,” Diffi said, and over to the stables we went.

Along the way, I asked him, “This here Otnil—he’s a drosaw doc, too?”

“He fancies that he is,” Diffi answered, and bit down on whatever he was going to say after that.

Stables smell funny, like drosaws and like drosaw shit, which smells a bit like the critters it comes out of but more like moldy, rotten grass and leaves. Not near so sharp a stink as from what comes out of my cloaca. But people eat meat, mostly. Our droppings smell like what raptors and rannos leave behind. I am glad we use flags instead of piles of poop to mark our territory, I will say.

First time I set eyes on him, Otnil was poking and prodding at a cut on a drosaw’s arm. The duckbill didn’t like it much. They’re skittish around people; they can smell that we eat ’em. If this one lashed out with its tail, it could send Otnil into the planks of the stall wall, or maybe through ’em.

The perfesser wasn’t tall or strong, but he had hisself a big, round head. Folks who say they can tell what you are by the bumps on your skull would’ve had a tough time with him, on account of he had no bumps to speak of. A lot of brains, though, leastways if you went by what was wrapped around ’em.

“Professor Otnil? . . . Professor Otnil?” Diffi sounded more respectful than he did talking with Captain Jawj. Otnil went on poking at the drosaw till he finally noticed somebody was trying to get through to him. When he did, Diffi went on, “Professor, this here is Rekek. He knows his way around these parts, Rekek does. If you’re after bones, he can point you at ’em.”

Otnil focused on me. It was almost like being looked at through a magnifying glass, he stared so hard. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Master Rekek,” he said and held out his left hand. It had drosaw blood and maybe pus on it, but I ain’t fussy. I clasped with him. He had a fair grip for a little fella, he did. Then he dipped his head toward Junior and asked, “Who’s your colleague?”

A lot of ordinary people, they pretend not to notice natives unless they can’t help it. I liked Otnil better on account of he wasn’t like that. “This here’s Junior. He’s my stepson. Been with me near as long as he’s been out of the egg,” I said, and I bet I sounded as proud as if he was my own spawn.

“Rekek Junior, I am pleased to meet you, too,” Otnil said, and crack my shell if he didn’t clasp with him same as he did with me. I didn’t know then that Otnil made a point of getting on with the natives. *They aren’t our kind*, he’d say, *but that doesn’t make them knaves or hatchlings*. He’s right, too. If only more people believed it.

“Pleased to meet you, Professor,” Junior said. I raised him to be polite.

The perfesser had no trouble with how he talked; he must’ve heard the like often enough before to get used to it. He asked, “How much do you know about the paleontological past of this part of the country?”

“About the what?” Junior and me, we said it in chorus, like. You asked me, I would’ve guessed Otnil stole a word from some native language nobody talks any more. I would’ve been wrong, but I didn’t know that then.

“About its ancient past, as revealed in fossils and other traces,” Otnil said grandly. He had a way of talking, all right, the perfesser did.

“I can find you old bones, where they weather out of bluffs and banks and things,” I said. “This is about the first time I ever heard they was worth even as much as a crap on the ocean, though.”

“Is it? *Is it?*” The perfesser swung my way. When he stared at me, his pupils went from slits to circles so big and black that they filled up his eyeballs and swallowed all the yellow there. I set myself, on account of I was afeared he’d jump on me and commence to chawing. But he didn’t—quite. In a low, deadly voice, he asked me, “You haven’t been hanging around with that scoundrel of a Trinkka, have you?”

“Don’t reckon I ever met or even heard of anybody by that name,” I answered. Junior dipped his head to show he hadn’t, either. “Who is the nasty little son of a mammal, anyways?”

Well, I made Otnil laugh, gods damn me if I didn't. I didn't know then how hard that was. He answered, "Trinka fancies himself a paleontologist, too, the ignorant, arrogant . . . son of a mammal's a good name for him, Rekek. He's so sneaky, he'd grow hair if only he could. He and his band of bone thieves prowl around spots where I've been digging, looking to steal what they can and describe it in print before I'm able to. But he doesn't know as much as he thinks he does, and you can count on that."

Wonder what Trinka'd say about you, I thought, but I had too much sense to come out with it. Instead, I said, "What do you know?" That's safe enough most any time.

Not in that stable. Straightaway, Otnil answered, "I know for a fact that he mounted an ancient plesky skull at the end of the creature's tail instead of on its neck. I know because I saw him do it with my own two eyes."

"How about that?" I tried for another safe play. Still plessies in the ocean to this day. They look like snakes that swallowed a giant dinner plate and then grew paddles on it. People hunt 'em same as they hunt mossies, for the fine oil and meat they yield. But they're dangerous critters. Sometimes folks kill them, and sometimes they kill folks.

"So you see he is a blowhard, an ignoramus, a fraud who does not deserve to come within miles of important fossils," Otnil said.

I wondered what Trinka'd say about that, too. But Trinka wouldn't be paying the freight for Junior and me. Otnil would. Which reminded me . . . "What kind of wages you aim to give us, Professor?"

He named a number. It wasn't a great big number. Otnil, he had money. He just didn't fancy parting with it. I must've looked unhappy, 'cause he said, "And a bonus for every fossiliferous site you and Junior lead us to. If you find me fine fossils, I shall be generous. By the World Egg, I shall!"

Junior and me, we were Eggers, too. But Eggers can cheat just like anybody else. I oughta know. Still, I believed Otnil here. He sounded as crazy as a feller who falls tail over snout for some chorus girl with a fine rump and fancy feathers.

"Reckon we got ourselves a deal," I said. "Only what's that long word you used mean? Fossiliferous?" No, I wasn't sure I was sayin' it right.

"It means 'fossil-bearing,'" he answered. "Take me where my associates and I can do some proper excavating."

"The best places I know, they're on native land. Will the king and his people be all right with you comin' in?" I asked. The natives don't like what you do, they'll try their best to kill you and eat you. They ain't cannibals; they never eat their own kind. They like the taste of us, though, when they can get it. We've made the price of that meat pretty gods-damned expensive.

Professor Otnil waved my worries off to one side. "Don't you fret," he said. "I don't steal from natives, I don't cheat them or rob them, and I'm not after gold. King Red Cloud knows that about me. He's let me know he'll let me work on his land."

Our mouths don't work for native words any better than theirs do for our lingo. Mostly, we just translate their names into regular talk, the way the pefesser did. Sometimes they sound funny, but at least you can wrap your tongue and teeth around 'em.

"Here's hoping you're right," I said. "Junior and me'll be puttin' our necks on the block along with yours." We clasped hands again. The deal was done. I hoped I wouldn't be too sorry it was.

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The pefesser, the other fellas who knew about fossils, the drivers, the diggers, and Junior and me, we all left Fort Ironclaw two mornings after I got there. Sergeant Snegor was cheerful as ever when he gave his men the order to let down the drawbridge. "Hope the natives don't throw you and your bright boys back at us in chunks," he told Professor Otnil.

The natives don't make many cannon. They don't work iron, and copper's harder to come by and costs way more. Plenty of traders'll sell 'em rifles—you'll always find folk who put silver ahead of their own kind—but not artillery. Still and all, they do know how to build catapults, ones that'll trouble even forts for a few shots. So they could fling us back that way if they decided to go to war.

Snegor didn't faze Otnil so much as a claw paring. The perfesser, he kinda looked at him and said, "If you were half as funny as you think you are, you'd be twice as funny as you really are." Snegor ain't the hottest pepper in the sauce; reckon I said that already. He needed a few heartbeats to work out what Otnil was drivin' at. Once he finally got it, didn't his tail lash back and forth! Oh, you bet it did! He was that mad, Snegor was.

Down thumped the drawbridge. Over we went. When it started getting raised again, Snegor hollered through the noise of rattling chains: "I hope they eat you up bones and all, every last one of you!"

Then Lieutenant Diffi started giving him hells. It just wasn't Snegor's day, not even a little bit.

Junior nudged me and said, low, "Hope he doesn't turn the soldiers against us if we do need help."

"You and me both," I told him. You'll hear folks say natives aren't as smart as we are. Most of the fools who come out with that never set eyes on a native in their lives, and'd turn tail and run if they ever did. The rest are nasty rogues, raptors that sleep in beds and tell lies for all the world as though they was people. Sure as sure, Junior understood how things worked.

Fort Ironclaw shrank behind us till a swell of ground swallowed it. A raven let out a froggy croak. They're right clever birds. If they had thumbs and fingers 'stead of beaks, they'd start cheating each other like one more set of people.

Much higher up, huzzards wheeled in the sky. They didn't care about us, not while we were alive and moving. If the natives did kill us and their feast had leftovers, the huzzards'd come down and clean up. Meanwhile, they circled. They had to be a good ways up, on account of they looked small. A huzzard's wingspan is as wide as a drosaw is long—say, five or six people lying nose to tailtip with each other.

People say it ain't good luck if a huzzard's shadow slides over you. I've had it happen a few times. I'm still here. But I ain't exactly handsome and I ain't exactly rich, so people may know what they're talking about after all. Or they may not. With people, you never can tell.

Sometimes you can't even tell if they *are* people. *Something* was moving on a ridgeline ahead of us and off to one side. I could make that out, but only just barely. Might've been some of Red Cloud's natives, keeping a sly eye on us whilst we moved into their country. Or it might've been a pack of droms or other middle raptors, sizing us up to see whether we were prey or something too scary to mess with.

If they were raptors, I hoped they decided not to bother with us. We'd drive 'em off, but some of us'd wind up hurt or dead. Supposing they were natives, we'd wind up dead soon as Red Cloud said the word. So would some of them, but fat lot of good that'd do us. And the soldiers would make 'em sorer yet, which also wouldn't help us none. It was hot, and getting hotter. I started to pant. I wasn't the only one, either. We had a couple of water barrels along, but they were for drinking, not for splashing over our hides to cool us down. Water's hard to come by in the Badlands. Only a few good drinking and watering holes that don't go dry. Most streams do in summertime. 'Course, when a thunderboomer blows in, you get too much water all at once. You can drown in what was just a gully a tenth of a daytenth earlier.

After a bit, Professor Otnil pointed over to that ridgeline. Things had been so quiet over there, I'd almost decided that was a raptor pack and they didn't care to take us on.

Shows what I know. Puffs of smoke were going up into the sky: big ones, little ones, then big ones again. "It's the natives' fire code," Otnil said. "They're telling Red Cloud we're in their country."

"Reckon you're right," I said. "Can you read what it says?"

"I've never studied that." By the way Otnil said it, he felt he was admitting a lack in himself. "How about you or Junior?"

"I can't. I don't expect Junior can. He pretty much knows what I've learned him." But I asked him anyway. He's grown up a lot lately, and he picks things up on his own. He tossed his head to show he didn't savvy either, though.

"All right." Plain as the snout in front of my eyes, Professor Otnil didn't reckon it was. After a bit, he asked me, "How far is the fort from the first fossiliferous outcropping, Master Rekek?"

“Just Rekek is fine, thanks,” I said. They talk fancier back East than we mostly do out here. “If the natives don’t give us trouble, if the wagons don’t bust a wheel or an axle, we should get there a daytenth or so before sundown.”

“All right,” Otnil said again.

He sounded happier this time, so I asked him a question of my own: “What gets you and your pals here so all-fired excited about bones old enough to turn to rock?”

The feathers in his crest stood straight up. I must’ve surprised him good—maybe he’d reckoned I already knew. Maybe he reckoned everybody knew, and got all hot and bothered same way he did. He said, “Why, to trace how the extinct animals of the vanished past developed into those we know today. If we’re very lucky, to find some specimens that help us trace the evolution of the natives of this continent from the raptors that were their ancestors—raptors not far removed on the tree of life from those that were our own forebears.”

That there was a mighty big egg of thought to lay all at once. I figured I’d better nibble at it a little bit at a time. “Evolved?” I said. “That’s a word I’ve heard a time or two, but hang me if I know just what it means.”

His crest feathers popped up again. “Have you never read or even heard of Dinwass’ great book, *A Rationale for the Development and Change of Living Forms through Time?*”

“Perfesser, you got to bear with me. I ain’t no scholar. Ain’t nothin’ but an ordinary son of an egg, gettin’ by as best I can.”

“I suppose so.” Otnil’s sigh wasn’t just that he was disappointed in me. He was disappointed in the gods for letting dullards like me scramble out of the shell to begin with.

Then he started talking—and talking, and talking. I got mebbe one word in three. If I followed him straight—don’t count on it, on account of I still ain’t sure—it went like this. The critters that were better suited to living where and how they were living had more hatchlings that lived, and those hatchlings had more hatchlings, too, and on and on till what had been good enough wasn’t any more and the looks of critters changed.

“Where are the gods in all this?” I asked when Otnil slowed down to take a breath. Let me tell you, I had to wait a spell.

“Why, wherever you want them to be,” he answered. “You are an Egger, I believe, as I am?”

“That’s right.” I dipped my head. So did Junior, who was listening to the perfesser an’ me going back and forth.

“Well, can you not imagine the gods cracking the Great Egg and then standing aside to let it grow as it would? . . . to let it grow as they’d willed beforehand, if you like that better?” Otnil said. “Those who believe life and light came Down from the Sky may believe they came down in the Beginning, and then developed as they did—or as the gods willed. There is no fight between faith on the one claw and evolution and natural selection on the other. None!”

The perfesser, he sounded certain sure. Whether he was or not, I can’t begin to tell you, and I won’t try. I asked, “But wouldn’t your old evolution and—what did you call it?—natural selection, that’s the moniker you used, work just as well with no gods at all to start off?”

“Some people will say that.” Now Professor Otnil talked slow. I could hear how careful he was, picking his words. “I do not happen to be one of them. The discoveries of science have nothing to do with whether the gods and what people feel about them are real.”

“No, huh?” I wanted to think he was right about that. I wanted to, from my snout all the way back to my tailtip. It wasn’t so easy, though. I kept my big mouth shut about that. You don’t go out of your way to squabble with the fella who’s payin’ you, not unless you’re a natural-hatched idjit you don’t.

* * *

We didn’t get to the bluff with the bones till the sun was less than half a daytenth from setting. You never go as fast as you hope you will. Otnil, he’d been out bonehunting often enough to know that as well as I did. He didn’t get riled at me, the way I was kind of afeared he might.

“Yes,” he said, sweeping up and down the bluffside with a spyglass. “Oh, yes.” I’ve seen gents watchin’ dancing girls who didn’t sound so excited. Hells, I’ve been one o’ them gents.

A middle raptor skittered away from us. In a brawl, likely it could’ve torn any one of us to bits.

But it had the wit to see it couldn't kill us all, not by its lonesome it couldn't.

"Is that a rock it's got in its fist?" I asked the perffesser.

He swung the spyglass toward the critter. "I do believe it is," he said. "It comes from a line related to that which led to the natives here. No surprise it can use primitive tools."

"They go after drosaws or hornfaces with rocks and sticks, the critters get a surprise, I bet. Only they don't laugh for long," I said, and I kinda retooled the thought I'd had about ravens: "Hells, give them raptors a little time and they'll start cheating their way through quarrels 'stead o' bitin'."

Professor Otnil dipped his head. "It could happen, though the natives and we ourselves have already filled that niche pretty well."

"Niche?" I'd heard that word before, too, but not the way he used it. "You mean like a space dug out of a wall where you can set a lamp or a pretty?"

"A space on the tree of life that's already filled," Otnil said. "On the plains here, rannos fill the large-carnivore niche, while huzzards are the large scavengers. Do you follow?"

"Reckon so," I answered. Junior's eyes went all big with thought. We were nothing but a couple of ordinary fellas, him and me. Otnil treated us like we could come with his ideas if he gave us half a chance, though. And you know what? When he treated us like that, we *could*, at least partways.

He and a couple of the younger brainy folks with him, they went over to the bluffside and started scouting it. One of them bent down and scratched at the crumbling rock. He held something in the soft-scaled palm of his hand.

Some of the other folks were unloading digging tools and camp gear and whatnot from the wagons. Junior and me, we lent a hand. Wouldn't've felt right, standing around while they worked. One of them patted Junior on the shoulder in place of saying thanks. Junior, he hopped up in the air—he was *that* happy about getting treated like anybody else.

That same fellow who'd patted him called over to the one who'd found whatever the devils he'd found: "What you got there?"

"Chunk of mammal jaw from the days when there are a few modern forms," answered the scraper. "Looks to be a gnawing beast."

"Mammals." If I sounded disgusted, it was only because I was. Thinking about mammals disgusts just about everybody. They're little; the biggest ones aren't even the size of a lesser raptor, and most of 'em are a lot smaller than that. They come out at night and gnaw things and steal things and creep over you when you're asleep. *Creep* is right; like lizards and salamanders, they go on four legs, not two. And they don't have feathers. They're all covered in nasty fur instead. Beady little eyes. Twitchy little noses. Horrible!

"They tell us how the world developed and changed, same as our own ancestral forms do," the young educated fellow by me said. "For a while, it was touch and go whether their kind or ours would fill the large-creature niches in the world."

I tried to imagine a world full of big, four-legged critters, all covered with matted, smelly hair. The gravel in my gizzard ground, let me tell you. I'd never've dreamt of anything so all-fired revolting on my own. What good are smart fellas if all they do is give you more reasons not to sleep at night?

"Bring the digging tools!" Otnil yelled from the bluffside. They had shovels and picks like you'd expect, but they also had trowels and scrapers and little tiny pointy tools like the ones dentists use when your tooth goes bad and the new one hasn't grown in yet, and even little brushes. The brushes were made from mammal hair, so that is something the horrid little sneakers are good for, anyways.

But with the sun just about ready to disappear under that jagged Badlands horizon, Otnil and his friends came back before they did a whole bunch of digging. We went on setting up camp.

The perffesser, he walked over to me and said, "Looks like you'll get your bonus, Rekek. Didn't get to excavate as much as I would have liked, but this is plainly a rich area."

"Glad it makes you happy," I said, on account of *Glad I'll get my claws on some extra silver* is rude.

We ate dried meat plain and dried meat stewed and dried meat soaked and fried in hornface fat and dried meat every other way the cook knew how to fix it. We'd have to do some hunting pretty soon if we wanted anything better. For the first night, we ate what we'd brought. Everybody gabbled about the fossils, all excited, till people started winding down. Then we wrapped ourselves in padded leather blankets, got as close to the fires as we cared to, and fell asleep.

And when we woke up next morning, there were natives all around us. They must have snuck up during the darkness, sly as mammals. We had watchers out, but we might as well not have bothered. They were better at that stuff than we were.

If they wanted to kill us and eat us, they could. There were enough of 'em, our guns wouldn't stop 'em. Captain Jawj might make 'em sorry later, but how much good would that do us now? Not enough, I reckoned. Not near enough.

* * *

Some of the natives had crossbows. Some had old-fashioned muskets or blunderbusses. Quite a few carried rifles as good as the ones the soldiers in Fort Ironclaw used. Yeah, they could have done for us, all right.

"Phew!" one of the drivers said. "We might not've heard 'em skulking around, but shouldn't we have smelled 'em?"

Natives do have a different odor. A lot of people don't care for it. Me, I was used to it, from spending so long with Junior. Junior didn't mind me, either, but a lot of natives don't care for the way we smell. That's why we don't jump on their women, or they on ours. Who wants to screw something that smells more like a wild animal than a person?

Professor Otnil stood up so the natives could see him and recognize him. "I come in peace!" he said loudly, holding out his hands to show he held no weapon. "I come with King Red Cloud's permission. I come not to steal, but to increase knowledge of the world."

He used our language. We make as much of their tongues as they do with ours. But, just because their mouths are different from ours, their earholes aren't. A lot of them have learned to understand what we say just fine.

One of the natives raised his left hand. That could have been the signal for the lot of them to swarm down on us. It could have been, but it wasn't. When I noticed the brownskin had a couple-three gold bracelets on his arms and a fat gold collar round his neck, I realized who he was pretty likely to be.

Otnil raised his left hand the same way. He had no bracelets or bangles, just one o' them new-fangled smallclocks on a drosaw-leather strap. But he spoke as one equal to another: "Welcome, King Red Cloud!"

"Welcome to my land," Red Cloud answered. He didn't talk our lingo even as well as Junior did. Along with his native's mouth, he had an accent from his own language, where Junior'd learned our words from the time he was big enough to use any at all. But you could make out what Red Cloud said, and when you get right down to it who needs more than that?

"It *is* your land," Otnil agreed. "Will you come down and break your fast with my men and me?"

"I do that," the king said. Then he spoke in his own language. Some of his warriors shouted at him. He shouted back. I got the drift—*What are you doing arguing with me?*—without understanding a word.

We couldn't hope to feed all the fighters, not without runnin' out o' grub ourselves. He seen that, Red Cloud did. He brought a few a his big wheels with him, and left the rest to shift for themselves. He spotted Junior right away—natural enough. He said something to him in his talk.

Junior spread his hands to show he didn't follow. In the only language he really knew, he answered, "I speak this tongue. No others well."

Red Cloud's feathers jumped in surprise. "How does this happen, when you are not a green-skin?" he asked in our lingo.

"Here is my stepfather, from when I was tiny." Junior curled his tail around mine. "I have learned from his mouth."

That made the native king give me a long, measuring stare. "Tell me your name," he said. "Tell

me how you came by a hatchling of ours.”

“I’m Rekek, your Kingship.” I told him the story. Junior already knew it; no harm in that. Junior’s mother would’ve killed me and eaten me if she didn’t get shot herself. I finished, “I brung him up best way I know how.”

“You could have killed him,” Red Cloud said. “No one would have thought you wrong. But you let him live. You helped him live.”

I kinda shrugged. “He was little and helpless. He didn’t do me no harm. I didn’t want to do him none, neither.”

The king must’ve translated for his chieftains. They all looked my way. One of them held a hand over his eyes for a heartbeat. I understood. It meant the same as when we dip our heads deeper than usual: a sort of salute. I did dip my head to him. Junior looked proud of me. That felt good.

After breakfast, Red Cloud asked Otnil what kind of bones he’d found. Sounding embarrassed, the perfesser said, “We only just began yesterday. But I can show you this.” He had the half a mammal jaw in a little pasteboard box, wrapped in cloth so it wouldn’t break any more than it was already.

Red Cloud held it up close to his snout for a good look. “Something like a rat,” he judged, and Otnil dipped his head in agreement. The native went on, “This is more rock than bone, though. How does that happen? I have seen it before, but I do not understand it.”

Otnil talked about fossils, and went right on talkin’. I learned a good bit myself. I didn’t know how bone turned into rock, neither. But I commenced to get bored. Red Cloud didn’t. He was ready to listen as long as Otnil was ready to talk.

Finally, Otnil said, “If you want to come and see where we’re working and what we dig up there, we’d be pleased to have you along.”

Speak for yourself, I thought. Then I decided that, if it was a choice between Red Cloud watching and Red Cloud fighting, watching seemed the better bet.

He must have felt the same way, on account of he said, “I will do that for a while, yes.” He didn’t need long to notice Junior and me weren’t heading out to the dig. He included us in. Otnil didn’t say boo. We turned into bonehunters for the day.

“Maybe we’ll even find something,” Junior said while we tramped over to the bluff.

“Never can tell,” I answered. Anybody might spot bones there—there were that many of ’em. I’d noticed ’em before, going through the Badlands.

Which came back to claw me, because Red Cloud asked, “How did you pass through this land before?” When I didn’t say anything right away, he kind of laughed and said, “On my honor, no harm to you for your answer.”

“Wasn’t anything much, really,” I said. “Junior and me, we was just takin’ a little shortcut across the edge of your kingdom.” I’ve hatched plenty of lies bigger’n that one. Hells, it even had some truth in it, though I didn’t tell all there was to tell about the rotten eggs on our trail then.

When we got to the bluff, the real fossil fellas showed what they could do. They saw old-time bones where Red Cloud and Junior and me, we just saw pebbles. Otnil took half a daytenth chipping a chunk of skull out of the rock around it—the matrix, that was the word he used.

Red Cloud held the bones and gave ’em the once-over. “Something like a middle raptor, only not just like that,” he said.

“No, not just like that,” Otnil agreed. “This form has been extinct for many, many years. From the shape of the back of the braincase, it may be part of the line that leads to your folk.”

“What do you mean? Shingto and Fferso and Incol and Oosev, they made us from thunder and tornadoes,” Red Cloud said. “Other gods, or it could be demons, who did not know so well what they were about, they made your kind.”

Junior chuckled, all soft-like, when he heard that. I thought it was pretty blamed funny, too. So *there* ran through my head. Otnil didn’t stir a feather. “All religions tell different stories,” he said. “Nature gives true answers—if we ask the right questions and if we understand what we find.”

“How do you know what is true? How do you judge?” Red Cloud was no one’s fool.

“The same as you do with anything else.” Otnil did him the courtesy of taking him serious. “You fit each new piece in with what you already know. Do your hatchlings play with puzzles?”

“They do,” Red Cloud said.

“Well, think of the past as the biggest puzzle anyone can imagine. We fit pieces together as well as we can. We know there will always be more pieces missing than ones we find. We know we will sometimes make mistakes and put a piece where it shouldn’t really go. Sometimes other bones later show us how we’ve done it wrong. Sometimes mistakes stay in place a long time. Science isn’t perfect. It can’t be. We aren’t perfect. But it’s a better thinking tool than any other we’ve found.”

The native king, he pondered that for a bit. Then he said, “This science, it is what gives you spyglasses and rifles and steam engines and the like, yes?”

“That’s right.” Otnil dipped his head.

“Then it is worth having.” Red Cloud spoke in his own language to the native tallfeathers who’d come with him. Maybe not all of them followed our lingo real well. Some of the brown-skins seemed as interested as the king. Others looked bored. Then Red Cloud came back to talk we could understand: “One day, we shall do science for ourselves and know as much as you do.”

“Maybe you will. I hope you do.” Otnil really meant it, I reckon. He did everything he knew how to do to give natives a fair shake. He did a lot more’n most folks, for sure.

Some of the fellas he worked with were making certain that busted chunk of bone they found didn’t get busted any worse. They wrapped it in wet burlap and plaster. When the plaster dried, it’d be like the armor clubtails have to give rannos a tough time killing ’em.

Otnil didn’t expect to turn Red Cloud into a bone collector himself. The king stayed around a little longer. Then he said, “May your work go well,” and took himself and his nobles back to the fighters. They all decamped and headed back to whatever they had that needed doin’ when they weren’t bothering bonehunters.

I felt happier after that. I know they could come back and stir up the hells any time they chose, but they weren’t there and panting to do it, anyways.

Otnil and his pals showed Junior and me how to put on the burlap and plaster, so we wouldn’t be all useless while they worked—just mostly useless. And they tried to show us how to spot at a glance whether something small on the bluffside was a bit of bone sticking out or just a gods-damned rock. Junior was better at it than me. Well, his eyes were younger.

If I’d had the money and the time and the smarts, I wouldn’t’ve half minded bonehunting full-time myself. Since I didn’t, I was glad Otnil did, and even gladder he paid me some little part of what I reckoned I was worth.

* * *

So the perffesser’d pay me more of what I thought I ought to get, I went out scouting for more bluffs and banks with bones coming out of ’em. Sometimes I’d travel with Junior, sometimes by my lonesome. I saw natives every now and then. Well, why not? It was their country.

They saw me, too. You bet they did. Odds are they saw me before I saw them most of the time. Ain’t nobody like the natives for doin’ a sneak and popping out where you had no notion they was around. Like how they showed up around the camp, for instance.

Reckon they could’ve killed me an’ roasted me a time or three if they’d had a mind to. They didn’t have a mind to, though, proof of which is, I’m here leanin’ back on my tail all nice an’ easy an’ tellin’ you this story. They knew Otnil and his friends were in good with Red Cloud. They might not’ve like me for maggots, but if I was all right with their king they wouldn’t drygulch me for the fun of it.

Did I feel safer when Junior was with me? Maybe a bit; for sure not a lot. Junior might’ve had scales and feathers that matched theirs, but he was gods-damned near as foreign in the Badlands as I was.

He knew it, too. It itched him considerable. “I don’t reckon I’ll ever have a place where I fit in right,” he said one afternoon.

I didn't care to hear him talking that way. "Of course you do. Of course you will," I said. "You always got a place with me."

He dipped his head, but he answered, "It ain't big enough." I just kept quiet. I didn't know what I could say to that.

* * *

I was out by myself one day, heading down toward an undercut creekbank, when something moved off in the distance. Faster'n I know how to tell you, I was behind a sagebrush with my eight-shooter in my hand. I figured it for a middle raptor—it was about my size. Not a native; a native wouldn't have let me see him that way.

Come to that, I was surprised a middle raptor would. I eased up a couple of fingers' breadth higher for a better peek. Try as I would not to, I let out a startled hiss. I purely couldn't help it. Last thing I expected to see there was another fella like me.

And when I say like me, I mean just like me. He had hisself a pistol in a holster, and he had a short-handled spade slung over his back. If he wasn't another bonehunter, you can call me a mammal's hatchling. (Only mammals don't have hatchlings. The little varmints come straight out of their mothers' cloacas without even a shell around 'em. Can you imagine anything more revoltin'?)

He was poking the ground here with a fingerclaw and prodding at it there with his shovel. He'd pick up a rock and chuck it away when he saw it was only a rock. Sure as hells, after them fossils.

I hadn't hardly given that Trinka fella any thought a-tall, not once I signed on with Otnil. I figured the perfesser, he had hisself a tick bitin' at him between his scales, and Trinka wasn't really anybody to worry about. Now it seemed like maybe I was wrong.

That other bonehunter, he didn't have the faintest notion I was anywhere around. The sagebrush hid me pretty good, I will say. No, he didn't reckon there were any other people for days and days around him. He would've been more careful if he'd worried. He couldn't hardly've been any *less* careful.

Finally, he got close enough so I could've gods-damned near spit on him, never mind plugging him with the pistol. I clicked back the eight-shooter's hammer. That little noise drilled into his earholes, all right. You hear it once, you don't ever mistake it for anything else.

He jumped so hard, I thought he was gonna shed his tail like a lizard. He started to grab for his own equalizer, then realized that wasn't such a hot idea when I had the drop on him. His left hand jerked away from the grip like it'd all of a sudden gone red-hot.

"Who—who in blazes are you?" he asked, tryin' to sound tough instead o' scared. He didn't have much luck.

"Mebbe you should tell me who *you* are, friend," I said. "I'm here by Red Cloud's leave. Bet you can't say the same."

All the feathers along his back, maybe even the down on his armbones, they flattened out. That's how much I scared him. But he kept putting a bold snout on things. "Likely tell," he said. "Way I hear it is, the natives don't let anybody onto their land."

"Then you hear it wrong," I said. "Who the hells are you, anyways?"

"My names Sterba," he said. "I work with Professor Trinka. He's the grandest bonehunter in the whole wide world, Trinka is."

"He's the fella who mounted the plessey with its head wrong way to?" I said.

"He never did!" Sterba hissed, but the way he did it made you know he knew he was lying.

"Professor Otnil says he did. I believe him. You go on back and tell Master Backward Head he better clear out of Red Cloud's kingdom, or else he won't live to regret it."

"We've got clearance from Fort Ironclaw to dig here," Sterba said. "You can't run us off that easy."

He rocked me back some when he threw the fort at me. A lot of folks reckon they can push natives around any old way they please. Down through the years, a lot of folks have. It's harder now, though. The natives, they've got better at pushing back.

"Fort has no say-so in the Badlands," I told Sterba, hoping I was right. "You better let Trinka

know it, or he's liable to start hisself a nasty little war over bones a huzzard wouldn't touch."

"I'll tell him," Sterba said. "He's not what you'd call good at listening, though. Not Trinka!"

That made Trinka sound like Otnil. Did you have to be crazy to be a bonehunter? Mebbe not, but I bet it helped. "Git!" I said. He got. I would've banged a shot off to one side if he hadn't. Saved myself a bullet and some powder.

* * *

Otnil, he was spittin' mad by the time I finished spinning him my yarn. "Trinka! That stinking, scavenging mammal's hatchling!" he shouted. "He's out to steal my specimens! He's out to steal my publication rights! He's nothing but a thief, and you know what thieves deserve! I'll turn Red Cloud loose on him. By the gods, Rekek, and by the Egg they hatched, I may even sit in at the feast afterward!"

You can say a thing like that and sound like you're joking. You can, but Otnil didn't. He sounded like he wanted to use a little twig to pick bits of Trinka and Sterba and the rest of those bonehunters out from between his teeth.

"What are you going to do about it?" I asked. "You really gonna tell Red Cloud and his fighters about 'em?"

He snapped his teeth, he was so steamed. "I'm tempted. I truly am. It would serve Trinka right for poaching on me. I'd like to poach him, I would—poach him like an egg!" He spat again.

"But—" I kept trying to calm him down. I didn't have much luck. I was just a stupid guide. He didn't have to listen to me. Big shots never have to listen to folks like me. Not needing to listen to folks like me is part of what makes 'em big shots. Then I said, "Slaughtering 'em'll just land Red Cloud and his natives in trouble."

That got into his earholes. He didn't want it to, but it did. "You have something there," he said in a voice sour as vinegar. "The soldiers want an excuse to fight them and push them out, never mind that they've been pushed too far already. That Jawj back at Fort Ironclaw hates them worse than he hates raptors or rannos. He hates them the way I hate Trinka and his crew of robbers."

"How come Trinka sticks in your gizzard so much, Pefesser?" I said. "Just on account of the head he stuck on the wrong end of the critter? Don't seem reason enough, you ask me."

"Oh, there's more," Otnil said grimly. "Specimens I had on a railroad siding waiting to get shipped home wound up going to *his* college instead. Who paid off the shipping agent to change the invoices? Who else but him? And so he got to publish them first. I curse his name on account of it!"

One of his junior diggers came running up then. "Professor!" he said. "Professor, Red Cloud's here. Says he's got to talk to you right away!"

"Of course I'll talk to him," Otnil said, and then, to me, "I'll bet you anything you care to stake that he knows Trinka and his thieving crew are sneaking around on his land."

"No bet." I spoke up quick, since the very same thing was goin' through my own head.

Red Cloud came up to the fire all by his lonesome. This was his country, not ours; he reckoned he didn't need to have guards in it. Oh, sometimes he brought them along to make people thoughtful, you might say. But he didn't *need* them, not on his own lands.

I never dreamt anybody could have as much dignity as he showed that night. I don't mean any native. I mean anybody. Not all natives are dignified, any more'n all of us are. Look at Junior. Dignified? Nah, he's as much like me as anyone's ever likely to be, poor old egg. Not his fault—I'm the one who raised him, so I get the blame.

"The smell of other greenskins spreads across our land," Red Cloud said to Otnil.

"I just heard about this myself," the pefesser said. "Rekek here brought me the word. He ran across one of those other bonehunters himself this afternoon."

Red Cloud's head swung my way. His eyes surveyed me like he had tripods and spyglasses all set up. He didn't just look me over, either. He looked inside me. You wouldn't want Red Cloud eyeing you if you had a bad conscience, not even a little you wouldn't. But then he dipped his head. I'd passed the test. I have me a few things I'm less proud of. Yeah, just a few.

"You are the one who fostered a True Person," he said, like he was reminding himself. We

aren't quite people to the natives. Well, too much of the time they aren't to us, either. Red Cloud, he went on, "Tell me what passed between you and the thief who wants to rob us of the bones of our ancestors."

He'd listened when Professor Otnil told him about how critters—how life—changed through time, all right. And that one bone we found *might've* come from his umpty-great-grandsire, or at least from his umpty-great-uncle. I set out what had happened with me and Sterba for him, same as I had for the peffesser.

When I got done, Red Cloud didn't say anything for a little bit. He just stood there leanin' back on his tail, thinkin' hard. Then his head swung toward Otnil. "Speak to me of this Sterba, of this Trinka."

I got to give Otnil credit. He could've cussed 'em up one side and down the other. He could've, but he didn't. He told how they were doing the same kind of work he was, only not so well. And he finished, "Before I looked for ancient bones on your land, King Red Cloud, I asked you if I might. Trinka and his followers don't care whether you mind or not. They aim to get bones any way they can. I have seen that before." And he told the native king how Trinka and his pals made those bones on the railroad siding all of a sudden end up where he could study 'em 'stead o' Otnil, who'd found 'em to begin with.

Red Cloud listened. He thought some more. You couldn't guess what was goin' through his noggin. Not the kind o' fella you'd care to gamble against, not even a little bit.

Finally his mouth opened so wide, you could count all of his teeth. He had hisself a hells of a set, too. He said, "I will show this Trinka what coming on my land without my leaves costs." His eyes swung toward me. "You, Rekek, you and your fosterling will come, too. The stupid officer at Fort Ironclaw will believe what you tell him. I am a native. Never will he hear a word I say."

I reckoned that was part of why he wanted me along, but only part. He liked me better'n he liked a lot of folks with green scales just on account of I'd raised Junior from the egg, or near enough. Maybe he even trusted me a little, the way he trusted Otnil: as much as he *could* trust somebody with green scales. That was funny, if you like, since I was the leastest, the lowliest, the ignorantest greenskin in the camp.

Red Cloud, he didn't care nothin' about that. He cared about me and Junior. That carried the weight for him.

Professor Otnil said, "I will come with you, too, if you think it will help. I wouldn't mind seeing Trinka off your land, not in the slightest."

But the native king tossed his head. "No. Let it be Rekek and his son of my kind. I will come for them tomorrow at dawn with my fighters." He didn't let Otnil try and argue. He just turned tail and walked away. Otnil stared after him. Have to tell you, so did I.

* * *

"What's he gonna have us do?" Junior asked me while we were both waiting for the new day to bust out of its eggshell.

"Be witnesses, like," I said, and then, "I think." Have to say I wasn't what you'd call sure myself. "But if it's anything that would fuss your gizzard, don't do it, that's all."

"What if he tries to make me?"

"Tell him no. He'll let you get by with it." I thought I was right. I hoped like anything I was, for Junior's sake and for mine.

Otnil had sentries out, the way he always did. A native came through 'em for Junior and me, and they never noticed. He wasn't there; then he was. They have the knack, I got to tell you. But he pointed at himself and then out into the night. It was still dark enough for mammals to prowl around, but you knew it wouldn't be for long. Sure enough, dawn was on the way.

We went out right past a sentry. He looked stupid-surprised, seeing us come out of the murk that way, but he kinda waved when we walked by.

I could see tolerable good by the time the native got us to Red Cloud. I could see how many fighters the king had with him, too, and the rifles and such they had with 'em. If Trinka's expedition was anything like Otnil's, it wouldn't stand a chance. Red Cloud, he maybe could've took Fort Ironclaw with that many fighters. But he never would've won the war that came afterward, and he had sense

enough to know it.

He even had a bunch of half-tamed drosaws along. The handlers kept 'em on long leads, not that it did 'em a whole bunch of good. The smell of meat-eaters made 'em all spooky. If you're a drosaw, you know a person—brownskin or greenskin, don't matter—eats things like you. We smell like raptors. By what Otnil says, we *are* raptors, raptors with brains.

"Good," Red Cloud said when he set eyes on Junior and me. "Now we go. Now we make this Trinka thing sorry it came to sneak and steal in places where it does not belong."

People—ordinary greenskins, I mean—will sometimes talk about natives like they're nothin' but raptors without brains. Vermin, in other words, near as bad as mammals. Hells, I did it myself back before I started fostering Junior. And here was Red Cloud goin' on about Trinka like *he* was just a critter. It made you think. We're every bit as strange to them as they are to us.

Off we went. Red Cloud and his band, they knew where Trinka was denning, all right. All Junior and me had to do was keep up and try not to make too big a racket while we were about it. The natives hardly said anything when we were on the move. Didn't matter to me one way or the other—I didn't know a word of their palaver.

The eastern sky went from no-color gray to salmon and fire and gold to morning. Birds commenced to chirp. Up on top of a tall bluff you'd need to be a spider to climb, a huzzard sentry looked around, making sure everything was safe. It saw us farther down and ducked away. They know a bunch of us can mean trouble. The big scavengers wouldn't start flying till we were safely gone.

A little raptor—one of the kind that's maybe half as tall as a person—spied us, too. It lit out fast as it could go, nose low, tail stretched out behind it. It held its arms out to either side. It couldn't fly or anything, but it had more in the way of feathers on those arms than most do. Maybe it got some glide from them.

Red Cloud pushed as hard as he could. I'm in pretty fair shape, but I know I started panting real soon. Junior, too, and he ain't even half my age. Then, from up ahead, somebody let out a shout: "By the Holy Eggshell, it's all the natives in the gods-damned world!"

It wasn't, of course, but it was a lot of natives—plenty to take care of a band of bonehunters. Now that they'd been spotted, Red Cloud strode forward. Unlike most of his fighters, he talked our lingo about as well as a brownskin could. "Go back," he told the sentry. "Tell Trinka and the one called Sterba to come here straightaway. No harm will find them if they hurry. But if they choose to fight or flee, they will bring doom down on all your heads. Go!"

I could hear him, but I was still a ways behind. I made out a little flicker of movement that had to be Trinka's watcher hightailin' it back to the camp. I didn't know how far away the camp was, but I reckon Red Cloud did. He knew how long he intended to wait, too.

He didn't have to wait that long. One of his people brought Junior and me right on up to him. We didn't even have time to lean back on our tails before two greenskins came up at a right good clip. "King," I said to Red Cloud, "the skinnier one, that's Sterba."

"I thank you," he said. "The other one, then, is Trinka?"

"Professor Otnil could tell you," I answered. "Sorry, but I can't. I never set eyes on him before."

"It will be as it is," Red Cloud said with a kind of shrug.

It was Trinka, all right. He was the kind of feller who was used to running things. You could tell right away just by looking. And he was as mad as though a hornet'd stung him in the cloaca, where it hurts worst. He ran straight on up to Red Cloud and shouted into his face: "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Red Cloud, he didn't answer in words, not right away he didn't. He raised his left hand a couple o' digits instead. All of a sudden, maybe a hundred rifles and muskets and blunderbusses was aimed at Trinka. One peep and he'd be all chopped up for stew. He took a step back. I reckon he couldn't hardly help hisself.

Once he got Trinka's attention, like, Red Cloud said, "This land's not your land. This land is my land. From the Badlands bluffs here to the Black Hills carvings, this land was made for me and mine. You have no business hunting bones on it without asking me first if you might. The

wise man Otnil has my let. You do not. You never will.”

Trinka did have feathers on his spine. They all stood up straight to show how mad he was. He called Otnil every name in the book, and some the book hadn't even heard of yet. He looked like he wanted to call Red Cloud every name in the book, too, but he didn't quite try that. A bunch of gun muzzles lookin' at you will give you some sense no matter how riled you get.

Finally, he said, “The government soldiers at Fort Ironclaw said I could excavate on these lands. I have a paper from them that proves it.”

“They are not my fighters. This is not their land. That is not my government,” Red Cloud said. “If they come on my land without my consent, I will fight them all.”

“You'll lose,” Trinka said in a hard, flat voice.

Red Cloud only shrugged again. “Better to die fighting to be free than to roll over and be a slave.” Plenty of greenskins would've said the same thing, but with Red Cloud, you knew he wasn't just talking to hear himself talk. He went on, “Take me to your camp. Take us all to your camp. We will see these bones you have stolen.”

“I haven't stolen a gods-damned thing,” Trinka said hotly. “These bones are important to science.” He didn't quite tack on *you stupid savage*, but he might as well have.

“Take us to your camp,” Red Cloud repeated.

“I will.” Trinka was still ticked off. “You can see for yourself. We aren't taking anything that's worth anything to you off your land. No gold, no silver, no jewels, nothing like that. Just old bones. Aren't I right, Sterba?”

“Sure are, boss,” the other bonehunter said. He'd spotted me by then. He'd spotted Junior next to me, too. I wondered what he made of that, but not enough to care to the extent of a fart in a tornado.

By how long it took Trinka's sentry to get back to their camp and fetch him and Sterba, I could cipher out about how far away it was. When we got there, Trinka's fellas looked about half ready to fight. They thought twice about that when they saw how much muscle Red Cloud had behind him, though, let me tell you.

The natives fanned out and surrounded the campsite. Trinka said, “No worries, boys. The big chief here, he's just making sure we aren't taking out anything that matters to the natives.”

“Show me these bones you have,” Red Cloud said.

“I'll be glad to do that.” Trinka sounded like somebody who reckoned he had a handle on things. He showed Red Cloud bones wrapped in burlap and plaster—same way of keeping 'em safe Otnil used. Others were in crates. Trinka offered Red Cloud a prybar. “Open whichever ones you please. You'll see they're the same kinds of things we've got out in the open here.”

Red Cloud did jimmy one or two. Sure enough, they held fossil bones. He dipped his head. One of Trinka's assistants nailed the crates shut again. Trinka looked as happy as an eggstealer in a hornface nest.

Then Red Cloud said something to his fighters in their own language. Some of the natives kept Trinka and his bonehunters covered. Others started loading bones—the ones that were just out there and the ones in crates—onto the backs of the drosaws they'd brought along. The drosaws grunted and hooted and squirmed like they always do. They purely hate workin', drosaws. I've known people like that, too.

When Trinka saw what the brownskins were up to . . . Well, if he was gunpowder, he woulda blown up. “What do you think you're doing?” he screamed. “What? Tell me, gods damn it!”

“We will take these bones to the wise greenskin named Otnil,” Red Cloud answered, calm as you please.

“*What t?*” This time, Trinka bellowed like a ranno in rutting season. “You can't do that!”

The native king gestured. Quick as you can flick your nictitating membrane across your eye, Trinka was staring down all them gun barrels again. “You do not tell me what I cannot do on my land,” Red Cloud said. “Do you understand me?”

“But it's robbery, nothing else but!” Trinka had nerve, or maybe he was just so riled he didn't care any more. “You're taking away the bones my helpers and I worked hard to dig out and preserve. You're handing them to my . . . rival.” I'm pretty sure he wanted to say *enemy*, but he saw

that'd only make things worse.

"They are not your bones. You stole them from our land," the native answered in a voice as stony as the gods carved into the Black Hills, and never mind the way he talked our lingo. "I could have you put them back and cover them over again, but I know your kind. You would only return to steal them once more. So I will give them to the wise greenskin Otnil. He is here with my consent. Let him have the benefit from them and show the world what they mean. And I will do you one more favor."

"If it's anything like robbing me of all my work, don't bother," Trinkka hissed.

He got lucky. Red Cloud didn't care to listen to him. "You will want this one," the native king said. "I will let you and your bonehunters leave my land alive and unharmed instead of cutting you all up and throwing you in the stewpot. And tell the officer Jawj at Fort Ironclaw that he may not say who comes and goes here."

Trinka and his crew were out of there and heading back to the fort inside of another daytent. The natives kept all their rifles and ammunition, too. Well, almost all—they let Trinkka's gang hang on to a couple of rifles so they could fight off a ranno or raptors or whatever other critters they ran into along the way. Even a herd of hornfaces could mean trouble if the big males got spooked.

Then Red Cloud turned back to Junior and me. "Well, Rekek, you and your fosterling have seen what I did here. By the lights of your folk, is it fair? Is it just?"

"I'm not a judge or anything," I said. "You got to know that, your Kingship. I'm about as ordinary a feller as ever made it out of the eggshell."

"You are not." Red Cloud tossed his head. "Few greenskins would have brought up one of ours as if it were his own. You did, though, and I see the bonds of affection and duty between the two of you."

I kinda eyed Junior. He was kinda eyein' me, too. The way the king talked, I reckon it embarrassed the both of us.

* * *

By the time we got back to Otnil's camp, most of the native fighters, they'd gone on their merry way. Red Cloud didn't need 'em any more. He had no squabble with Otnil. He went all the way to the camp himself, along with the brownskins herding the drosaws that way.

Otnil and his bonehunters hadn't gone out to dig. They were all back lollygagging around by their tents, shooting dice or reading or just sitting back on their tails. A couple of 'em, the go-getters, were chipping bones out of the rock that confined them.

When Otnil spied the dust the drosaws kicked up (not the natives; you'll never know natives are close by unless they want you to), he came running out to meet us. He had nerve, Otnil did. "What's all this?" he called to Red Cloud when he saw the crates that all the drosaws were hauling. "What have you got there?"

"Egg from my own nest, I bring you what is rightfully yours," Red Cloud answered. Junior and me, we looked at each other again, this time on account of we were both so surprised. Maybe half the natives leading the drosaws—the half who could follow our kind of talk—acted just as startled as we were.

Egg from my own nest is a big thing, maybe even bigger with the brownskins than it is with us. Junior was an egg from my own nest, you might say. You can be friends with a fella for thirty years and never once call him that. Sometimes you don't treat folks who are eggs from your own nest by actual hatching as well as you treat someone you freely give the name to.

Otnil understood that as well as I did. He leaned forward so his tail came way off the ground, showing Red Cloud proper respect. "Your Majesty, you do me too much honor," he said.

Red Cloud tossed his head. "I think not. You deal with us as fairly as though we are of your own kind. We can do no less for you. And so I present to you the bones Trinkka and those with him stole from my land. I know these things are important to you, so you should have them. Let the world know we respect knowledge and we respect honesty."

"You . . . took all the bones Trinkka excavated away from him?" Otnil sounded like he couldn't believe what just came in through his earholes.

"It is so," Red Cloud said gravely.

And when Otnil really got that it was so, he laughed and laughed and laughed. By the Great Eggshell, *how* he laughed! When he cut loose, it wasn't halfway. I never seen nobody laugh like that before, and I ain't never seen nobody laugh like that since, neither. I was half afeared he'd kill hisself. More than half afeared.

After a good long while, he got where he could finally talk again. "Oh, my!" he said. "I will describe and publish every single bone from your gift, Red Cloud, I promise you that. And I will give you credit for passing the bones on to me. I also promise that."

"No need," the native king said. "They belong by right to you, not to the thief, Trinkka."

"You are gracious," Otnil told him. "But I want the whole world to know you gave me the bones. I want it to know Trinkka tried to take them from you without your leave. I want to shame him—do you understand? I want everyone to laugh at him when he comes to bonehunters' gatherings, and I want everyone to think his papers must be foolish just because he wrote them."

Red Cloud didn't say anything for a few heartbeats. Then he turned to the natives who were taking the plastery bones and the crates off the drosaws. He talked to them in their language. Of course I didn't follow one single word of it, but by the way he kept pointing at Otnil I got the notion he was translating what the perfesser'd said. And by the way the other natives looked at Otnil, they were more impressed with him than they expected to be with anybody from our kind of people.

Then Red Cloud, he went back to talkin' so's I could understand: "I did not know greenskins also played the game of revenge. By the way you talk, you play it well. These bones will let you make this Trinkka mammal look the proper idiot, then?"

"King Red Cloud, they will. You may rely on it," Otnil said. He bowed low again, same way as he had before. This time, you can boil me in a natives' pot if Red Cloud didn't bow back—not quite so deep, but almost. *That* got the other natives' notice, too, let me tell you it did.

Once all the drosaws were unloaded, the natives made ready to go back to where they lived. Before they took off, though, Red Cloud came over to Junior and me. Junior looked like him, but acted like me. He'd been with me since he was little enough for me to hold in one hand. How could he act any other way, no matter what he looked like?

"It is well with you? Truly well?" Red Cloud asked him.

"As well as it can be when I look like one thing and act like another," Junior said. "Rekek tries hard to keep that from being any more trouble than it has to be."

"Good." The native kinda touched my arm, just for a heartbeat. Then he looked back to Junior. "I would invite you to join us here, but I fear you would fit no better."

Junior dipped his head. "Afraid you're right, your Kingship. Out in the big world, I look wrong but act right. Here, I'd look right but act wrong. I'm not yolk or white. I just have to get along as best I can." He took half a step closer to me. "Got me some fine help."

"I also think you do," Red Cloud said, and he walked away.

Not far off, Otnil was chuckling over the bones he'd got from the natives like they were eggs he'd laid his very own self. I don't expect a mother hen could've been prouder of what she had in her nest. But I'll tell you somethin', yes I will. Standin' there with Junior, I reckoned I had me a hells of a lot more to be proud of than the perfesser ever would.