

HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

## 1

## He Lost His Head

Gar generally did not count himself among those men who paid undue attention to women, but this one was pretty hard to ignore. For one thing, she was quite comely, with golden orange-brown skin and the squared-off form--broad hips, broad shoulders--of a classic beauty. For another, she hovered over the lax body of a decapitated man, a bloodied skinning blade in one hand and a flint bone-adze in the other.

As Gar stepped out into the clearing by this creek, she snapped erect and stared at him a moment, her anthracite eyes crackling. Before he could speak or even assay her mood, she wheeled and bounded down the boulders of the streamside hard beside her. With an admirable leap she sprang out across the open water and managed to alight firmly enough on a rock at the other side that another strong stride carried her safely clear of the stream and up the far bank.

He expected her to race across the open meadow beyond and lose herself in the larch grove on its far side. Instead, she turned downstream abruptly and crashed into the willow thicket on the bank. Pity. Picture a woman that pretty, her pendant breasts bobbing as she cavorted out across the meadow all a-spangle with summer flowers. It would have been a lovely view to savour.

He listened, expecting to follow by ear as she crunched her way through the willows. Silence. Either she was cowering in the thicket right close by, or she was a far better woodsman than he, able to make way through dense cover without a sound.

Heart cried, *Follow her! There is adventure here!*

Head counseled, *Investigate! Were you a headless victim, you wouldn't want to be ignored, would you?*

This time at least, he heeded Head. No need to rush, though. Gar squatted beside the trail here, where the wooded copse behind him opened out into this streamside clearing. Neither malevolent spirits nor benign spoke to his heart. With his head, he listened, watched, sniffed.

The sun slipped behind a fir top and out the other side. Apparently no lions or bears had smelt the free-flowing blood and were coming to claim a meal. Good. Gar didn't like disputing with carnivores bigger than he. Now and then his protective magic worked well; occasionally it didn't. Why tempt fate?

The body sprawled on its back, shoulders-downhill on the sloping shore, the severed neck only inches from the water. It almost appeared as if it had been stretched thus to bleed out properly. Very little blood trickled out now, and that nearly black. Gar could see the blood's route as the body had drained; it coated the short grass and moss between the luckless fellow and the stream, and disappeared among the rocks. *Fortunate*, Head mused, *that the women draw our drinking water from upstream.* The victim's head had rolled a short distance and lodged down in the boulders at water's edge. Its face wedged among the rocks; Gar couldn't see it.

## HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

The fellow's thatch of dark pubic hair curled in an interesting wave. The palms of his hands, a paler brown by far than most of his skin, looked soft and smooth. And what was this? Gar frowned.

He stood erect, listening, watching for one more moment, and stepped over to the body. He lifted the fellow's stiffening hand for a closer look. Where fingernails met skin ran thin lines of colour. Blue. Yellow. When Gar butchered meat, blood dried in the same places on his hands. This obviously wasn't blood.

The willow thicket rustled. So she indeed lurked near. Was she at all curious? Gar might do better luring than chasing just now.

Casually, he stretched out his arm and grasped the head by its topknot. He pulled it to himself, surprised at how heavy a severed head is, and cupped it in both hands to study the face. The jaw fell open, so he propped it shut with a thumb. Not of his moiety, not of his clan, not even of his tribe. A stranger, an interloper. But then, so was the woman. He didn't recognise her either.

From the shoebark shaman's pouch hanging from his neck, he took a pinch of dried blood and marked the fellow's brow. He began the cant for the dying and dead, keening it softly so as to avoid attracting any of these strangers' relatives who might be passing near.

This was the first time he'd ever sung the cant to a bodiless head before. Usually, most parts were still attached, save the rare occasion when the victim fell to hyaenas. He laid a hand on the shoulder as well, to make certain the complete fellow was accounted for. You wouldn't want the head being ushered into the Beyond without the rest going along.

His own Head praised him. *Exactly what you would want done, were you the unfortunate. Don't forget about the woman,* Heart reminded him. *Fine figure of a woman.*

From the thicket, rustling told him she was moving. He followed by ear, hastening the cant a bit toward the end. He laid the head down at almost its normal position on the neck, shimming it with stones to make it stay put. He tipped the flaccid penis up so that it lay on the pubic bone, lest in the Beyond the fellow have trouble rising to a romantic occasion.

Then he stood up and looked around to ascertain the woman's location.

She perched on the far creek bank, watching him intently. She was a mother. For beside her, gripping her hand, huddled the ugliest, scrawniest, most pitiful-looking little boy that Gar had ever seen. Only a mother could have anything to do with that one.

The child must have been gravely ill recently, for his colour top to bottom was waxen. Yellowish. His hair, longer by far than any normal person's and not dressed in any way, tangled in back, as wisps blew around his cheeks. Strange cheeks they were, puffing out to either side of the ridiculously short nose. The forehead bulged high as well, throwing his whole face off balance.

She pronounced her words so oddly that Gar had trouble understanding her. "Death song." She gestured *I*, "Small, like Hare, hear death song then."

## HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

*This is a trap!* roared Head. *She's bait in a trap, good fellow! And you without a spear. Heart cooed, You don't smell anyone else around, do you? Except No-Head there, of course. Look at her! Broad and solid as a bison, yet as light on her feet as a rabbit. Aren't you glad it's summer and that magnificent body isn't all wrapped up in furs?*

He gestured, *friend*. "Gar."

"Mouse." She nodded toward her spindly child. "Hare." No *friend* gesture.

He pointed to No-head. *That one*.

"Kelp."

Kelp. So. Named for marine plants, No-head would therefore be part of a seaside clan. The most powerful People lived farthest south, along the broad sand seashores and saltmarshes. The warmest, sunniest land with plenty of fine caves. Gar's clan was nowhere near powerful enough to be living in prime territory by the sea.

Then she confirmed it. "Tribe of Seashore. Elk Clan."

Since Mouse knew Kelp's name and ancestry, she was probably a person with powerful connections as well. She wasn't running off. So far, so good.

*Quit mooning and get the introductions out of the way so you can talk about other things,* Heart chided.

Gar ambled down to the water. "Mammoth clan, Dusk moiety." Dusk, his mother's half of the clan. When declaring bloodline, why did Real People always mention the half of the clan in which they lived, Dusk or Dawn? Everyone inside the clan already knew that, and no one outside the clan gave a hoot.

She didn't approach, but she didn't retreat, either. "Horse clan, Dusk moiety." She nodded toward that misbegotten child. "Mine, Horse. Baboon on father's."

"Baboon." Gar frowned.

She dropped to a squat, scratched her side as if her ribs itched, and made a hooting sound. Gar recognized that behaviour, and from the motions he remembered the word. His uncle had once made those same gestures, giving the animal the name *baboon*. "Eh." He bobbed his head. "Beyond the sea to the south, baboons. Very far away."

She stood erect and nodded. "Hare's father far away too. Good."

Heart chortled, *She likes you, you lucky fellow! She just told you that no jealous mate is going to come roaring down on you.*

Gar eyed the distance across the stream, gauging the likelihood that he could leap it from a standing start without embarrassing himself by falling in. Not bloody likely. "Tribe of Scarp Country."

"Tribe of Cold Lakes."

*No direct relation! This is getting better and better, good fellow! Now lure her to this side of the creek before you decide to jump it and make an ass of yourself.*

"Welcome. Come, stay with us tonight. You. Hare. Tell us your story."

## HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

She studied him a few moments as her spindly child pressed against her. Obviously, if it were the boy's choice, they'd be running away across the meadow now. Gar hoped she wasn't one of these foolish mothers who lets the child make the choices.

"You see baboons ever?" Her speech bounced and bumped.

Gar wagged his head *no*. "Uncle travelled to the sea once, with Rat. Didn't see baboons; they're across the sea, he said; he told about them. Went to see elephants. Didn't see them either."

She was thinking about something, he could tell, but there was no guessing what from the impassivity of her face. Suddenly she blurted an order in a strange language, stepped backward a few steps and took a running leap at the stream. Gar was there for her as she came flying to this side, his arm out and his legs braced. She grabbed his hand and allowed him to pull her up to good balance again. He let his grip linger; she broke it by withdrawing her hand, and he accepted that.

That ludicrous child simply plopped into the stream and swooshed his way across, wading waist deep with his elbows held high. He came trudging up the bank as the cold water cascaded off him.

Of course! *Why didn't you think of it immediately?* Head chided. Because Heart was distracting him, that was why. Gar saw clearly now. This child was half Water People. That explained the unnaturally long hair, the ashen skin colour, the misshapen face and limbs.

The strangely peripatetic Water People, the Hairies, were the ones who had usurped most of the south, the ones who would range near enough to the sea that their ancestral lines might include animals that did not even live on this side of the water.

And the thought made him half ill. In his mind's eye he pictured one of those hairy-faced, pallid, long-legged people inserting himself into a Real Woman. Into this splendid woman. Gar knew it happened on rare occasion, but he'd never known a child to result from the encounter--not until now. Poor, benighted Mouse.

No need to push with questions. He'd find out all about her when she told her story tonight.

The main trail would take them over the copse directly to Larch Cave, but you have to thread it single file amidst the trees. Instead, therefore, he led her out into the open bog where they could walk side by side, except when they had to skirt deep holes. Besides, out here away from trees, he could keep a good eye out for dangers, not the least of which might be, despite her possible connections, Water People.

She moved with the fluid grace of a stoat. He enjoyed immensely watching her move. Her child had received that grace and to spare. Hare bounded from tussock to tussock without once slipping or wavering. He alternately ranged out and moved in close, investigating some little thing over there, then gamboled again at his mother's side. Where did he get all that energy? Gar realised belatedly that this Hare, half-grown though he might be, was protecting his mother. Laughable, in a way, and admirably noble.

## HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

By custom, of course, children are the foragers, and adults may claim two of any three food morsels the children bring in, simply by asking for them. Gar wondered about this child; either he was very good as a forager, being so active, or a terrible provider by not staying in any one spot long enough to find something.

His mother seemed fairly well kept, but that didn't mean much, since women forage also. She wasn't fat enough to be called pleasantly plump. Some men might hold out for a thicker woman. But she wasn't skinny at all, the way old women become. And look at her colour! Her skin glowed golden red-orange like a sunset, silky smooth, absolutely lustrous.

When they angled northeast back into trees, she had not yet said a thing about herself or even Hare. Gar felt somehow cheated. She dropped behind him to single file and he could not so much as look at her, however surreptitiously.

He stopped so suddenly, she almost ran into him. In the virtually still air he detected a vague smell from up ahead. It whispered to the dimmest, most distant caverns of his memories. What...? Rather, Who...? For it was human smell, a gossamer shred of a woman's essence.

Behind him the half-grown half-breed's mother barked a few startled words. Even as Gar turned on his heel toward them, Mouse and Hare bolted back the way they had come. In moments, the silent firs and hemlocks blotted out their footfalls and their forms. They were gone.

He wheeled back to face the trail ahead.

"Gar." She didn't have to sign *friend*. Gar knew an old friend when he saw one. She stood in the bend of the forest track, dark and sleek as an otter, and laughing.

"Kohl." The puzzle of why the skittery Mouse woman should flee so precipitately dismissed itself. Gar sniffed and listened for a moment to assure himself Kohl was alone, then hastened to her.

She opened her arms, and he his, and as they embraced, clouds of fragrant memories swirled in close to make them the only two people in the world. For years as they were entering adulthood, Gar and Kohl had practiced on each other, determined to develop the sophisticated sex techniques they heard about from others but never actually witnessed. Can such pleasure be recaptured? An hour ago Gar would have said, "Probably not." Now, as the soft embers of arousal began to warm his depths, he could say, "Quite possibly."

He loosened and drew back enough to look at her smooth, dark face, those familiar dancing eyes. "Long time. We are now seven winters here at the Larch Cave. We were still up in the Long Cave when you left."

"I went off a-mating. You didn't hear?"

"I heard you found a powerful warlord. But when a woman leaves, rumour always claims, 'She pledged to power.'"

"Who leaves to look for a dirt-grabber? The rumour is true. He is double power. Both shaman and warlord."

Absently on purpose, he massaged her back, her shoulders. She pressed in against him, an

HYAENA by Sandy Dengler (sample)

invitation. Arousal was fast making his secret hopes vividly obvious. Heart sang, *You lucky grouse! She knew delightful little tricks ten winters ago. Imagine what she must know now!*

Head sulked. *Are you certain you want to take this up again? What if the twice-powerful fellow who feeds her happens to be the jealous type?*

He ran his hands down her back to those beautiful round buttocks and kneaded them. "Do I know him?"

"No. South. Down by the sea."

"Name."

"Kelp."