

**Barnabas
Bigfoot**
THE BONE EATER

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CHAPTER ONE

“**W**e have to get out before they come back!” I said, my back hair bristling as I scanned the woods for movement. Something massive had crashed through the site, destroyed the camp and chased off the hunters. But if I knew anything about bald-faces, they wouldn’t be gone for long.

Hannah chewed on the braided rat-tail of hair hanging from her neck. She glanced at her sister, trapped under the debris of what used to be a truck. Ruth’s arm bent at an odd angle, and her full brown beard stuck straight out, a sign she was in pain.

“Hannah! Did you hear me? We have to free her before the baldfaces come back.”

She snapped out of her daze and spat out her blond rat-tail. “Sour berries. Yes, I heard you. Ruth, can you move?”

Her sister groaned, “My arm is broken, but I think I can walk.”

Hannah and I set to work, freeing Ruth from the wreckage. The baldface camp was a hairy tangle, much like my life. Many moons ago I was a sasquatch gathering nuts, roots, and berries for winter, but that changed when the baldfaces showed up.

These two-legged beasts rode smoky machines that choked out the air with what Grandma Bertha called “pull-ution,” because the burning feeling the smoke created made her want to pull her throat out. The hunters trampled the forest’s shrubs and flowers in their search for sasquatches. A group of them had captured me and took me away from my mountain home. A cruel baldface wanted to rip out my hair to cure baldness in his kind. I would have been lost forever if not for a baldface girl who helped me return home.

When I got back, I learned my troubles had only begun. More baldfaces were crashing around the woods in search of my tribe, and

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they had nabbed Hannah Hairyson. I followed her to a faraway island and, with the help of a baldface named Lysander, I rescued Hannah from a creature collector named Mr. Roland. Now that we had returned to the mountains, we were in a hairy tangle: all because of a traitor sasquatch named Dogger Dogwood. But as I looked at the wreckage around us, I realized we faced an even knottier tangle.

Broken perma-ice and twisted bars were scattered across the ground like autumn leaves after a windstorm. The only thing left standing was a giant perma-ice cage big enough to house at least six sasquatches. The giant box loomed over the flattened debris. This cage must have been well built to have survived the furious attack that had levelled the rest of the camp.

“You’re going to be fine, Ruth,” Hannah said. “Groom your hair. We’ll have you out in a squirrel-tail shake. Barnabas, don’t just stand there.”

I helped Hannah. Together, we hefted a heavy panel of white wood off her sister. It crashed on the ground, setting off a round of twitter-chirps from chickadees in a nearby tree. My brown-haired friend rolled to one side and

wincing, clutching her broken arm. She shook her head, gritting her yellow teeth as her beard flared out again.

“Great mossy rock, my arm hurts,” Ruth said, moaning.

Hannah rushed to her sister’s side. Her moustache pointed straight out from both sides of her nose, a sign she was frazzled. She nervously stroked her moustache, trying not to let Ruth see how much the hair stood out.

“I’ll take care of you. I’m here now. I’m here.”

“Ow! Hannah. Stop touching my arm.”

“We have to keep her arm steady,” I said, recalling how Mom had tied branches on either side of Dad’s leg when he had broken it many moons ago. “We need vines and something straight and stiff.”

She backed off from her sister and stood up, her blond beard catching the afternoon sunlight, and headed off to the woods. Ruth nodded thanks to me. I smiled at her, then combed the nearby area for anything to help splint her arm. A few strides over, I found some yellow vines, which the baldfaces often used to tie things down. Hannah returned a few breaths later carrying two straight branches

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in one hand and a bright green bag in her other hand.

“What’s that?” I asked.

She sheepishly held the bag up so I could smell. Inside was the dried soil we called delicious dirt but the baldfaces called coffee. They poured the stuff into hot water to make a drink. On one of the sisters’ treks to the camps, they had discovered the delicious dirt. They loved the taste, comparing it to the bittersweet cedar bark they sometimes found in the valley. This coffee gave the sisters endless energy.

“I thought this might cheer her up,” Hannah said.

“Delicious dirt! You are the best sister,” Ruth said.

Hannah poured a handful of the loose soil into her hand and fed her sister. I knelt on the other side of Ruth as she closed her eyes and let out a happy sigh.

“This might hurt a little,” I said as I placed the branches on either side of her arm.

“Do it fast,” she said.

I wrapped the yellow vine around her arm, using the two splints to keep her arm straight.

She howled when I tightened the vine around her wrist.

“Great mossy rock, that *hurts!*” she yelped.

Hannah stroked her sister’s brown beard. “You’re going to be all right. Shh, shh. Do you want more delicious dirt?”

Even the promise of the treat did nothing to distract Ruth, who yowled and pulled away from me. I held her still and wrapped the vine around her splinted arm. Hannah hummed a sasquatch song to calm her down: “Winds blow strong, but not for long. The sun will rise and brighten your skies.”

“Ow! Ow! Great mossy rock.” Ruth’s groans drowned out her sister’s soothing song.

“Tell us what happened,” I said, trying to take her mind off the pain.

She gritted her teeth and explained, “I’m not sure what happened exactly. I was heading up the mountain, sniffing for the tribe. I hoped to get to them before Dogger Dogwood and his clan did. I should have been paying closer attention to where I was walking, but I wasn’t. The baldfaces had set a trap.”

“Like the web that got me?” Hannah asked.

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Hannah had been the first to land in a baldface snare, but Ruth and I had saved her. We learned later to watch out for vines tied around trees and for huge webs on the ground.

Ruth shook her head. “No, they shot me with these tiny arrows. Before I could run four or five strides, my head felt like a heavy stone and my legs became ice. I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“Hairy armpits. I have,” I said, remembering the time the baldfaces shot me with a sleeping arrow.

“Me, too.” Hannah added. “Did you get really tired?”

“Yes; I couldn’t take another step without yawning. I took two, maybe three steps before I fell to the ground and went to sleep. When I woke up, my tongue felt like I had licked an anthill, and I was strapped down to a table in a chamber. A baldface had a silver circle attached to what looked like a black snake that split in two and nested in both his ears. He pressed the silver circle on my chest. It was so cold I wanted to scream.”

“You didn’t say anything, did you?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I was too scared. The baldface kept moving the circle around my chest. He talked to himself about how I was worth a big reward.”

Hannah and I glanced at each other. “It has to be one of Mr. Roland’s hunters,” I said.

She nodded, then turned to her sister. “What else did he say?”

“Nothing. The next things I heard were shouts from outside. The baldface ran out of the chamber. Through the opening I could see, not much, but some things, like baldfaces running around. Then I smelled something powerful; like a sasquatch and a wolf, but much stronger. The baldfaces yelled at each other to shoot. At first, I thought our tribe was attacking the camp, but I didn’t think Dogger Dogwood had the chest hair to lead a charge.”

Hannah said, “If he ate pine cones, he’d be a squirrel.”

“What else did you see?” I asked.

“There wasn’t much light outside, except from the full moon, but I thought I saw a giant machine tossed through the air like a pebble thrown in a pond. The baldfaces yelled at each other to run away.”

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“Did you see the attacker?” Hannah asked.

She nodded. “A creature walked past the opening. The beast was covered in black hair, but it was no sasquatch. I’ve never seen anything so big. As big as eight black bears standing on each other’s backs. The creature shredded one of the rolling caves faster than Mom strips leaves off a branch. The attack reminded me of the stories Dad used to tell about the Bone Eater. I thought they were stories, but last night I knew they were true. I could hear the beast pounding on something.”

“It must have been trying to smash the cage,” I nodded to the giant box that was still standing. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Everything turned upside down. I hit my head and passed out. Then I woke up and you two were standing over me.”

Hannah nibbled on the rat-tail of her blond hair. “Sour berries, if the Bone Eater is here, it won’t be long before she finds the tribe.”

I nodded. “We have to warn them.”

“But that thing is in the woods. How are we going to get around it?” Ruth asked.

“We’ll be safe during the day,” I said. I finished tying the last knot in the vine. Her arm was set. “Done. How does that feel?”

She glanced down at her arm, set between the two branches. She gingerly moved it to one side, wincing in pain. Hannah helped her hold her arm steady while stroking the hair on her sister’s back.

“Ow, ow.”

“Easy, sister. Groom your hair.”

Ruth eased her arm up and down. “It hurts whenever I move my arm.”

“Then don’t move your arm,” I said.

“Don’t be such a wise owl,” she replied, narrowing her eyes.

Hannah, on the other hand, chuckled at my joke. She covered her mouth when her sister glared at her.

On the ground nearby, I noticed one of the baldface hides, a red and black top. I picked it up and tied the arms together. Then I wrapped the hide around Ruth’s neck and made a sling for her broken arm.

“Better?” Hannah asked.

She nodded. “It’ll do.”

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Her sister's moustache finally drooped as she relaxed. Still, Hannah hovered near Ruth like a bee looking for pollen in a flower.

"Tell me more about the Bone Eater. What is it?" Ruth asked as she adjusted the hide around her neck.

Hannah shook her head. "It's not an it. It's a *she*, and we met someone who knew her."

"What? Who? How? Where have you two been?" Ruth buzzed us with questions like a black fly.

"We'll explain on the way. Right now, we have to find the tribe," I said.

"If we're going to come across the Bone Eater, I don't want to be caught with my hair down," Hannah said, stooping over to pick up a metal bar.

"Not a bad idea," Ruth said, grabbing the bar with her good arm.

"Sour berries, I saw it first," Hannah said.

"You'd make me look for another weapon when I'm hurt? Ow, ow, ow," Ruth said, as she played up her injured arm.

"Fine, fine. You can keep it," Hannah grumbled. She went in search of another weapon. Meanwhile, I glanced down and noticed

my foot-hides. Most of my body had filled out the way a growing sasquatch's body should. Most. My feet remained small, too small to belong to a member of the Bigfoot clan and too tiny to bear my weight. My parents said I was a late bloomer and my feet would eventually grow, but Grandma Bertha worried this might be a bad sign. She was right.

With a name like Bigfoot, the tribe members expected me to not only have the largest feet, but to also follow in the footsteps of my mother, her mother, and her mother's father, who were all tribe leaders. While sasquatches chose their leader, the responsibility always seemed to fall on the sasquatch with the largest feet, who usually happened to be a Bigfoot. The other tribe members expected me to take over when my mother stepped down. Worried about how I'd be treated by the other sasquatches, my parents made a pair of fake feet out of sasquatch hair and baldface foot-hides to disguise my secret. Now the white foot-hides were wearing out and the fake hair was falling off.

The sisters knew about my small feet — they were the only ones outside my family who knew — but I still felt like a bald patch when

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anyone looked at my real feet. As I backed away, I stepped on the butt of one of the baldface rifles. I picked it up by the barrel. It would make a good club, I thought.

“Let’s go,” I said. “Which way do you think the tribe went, Ruth?”

She grunted and led the way toward the edge of camp. I fell in line behind Hannah and followed Ruth into the woods. I took one last look at the wreckage. The perma-ice cage that stood in the middle of the debris looked like the snowcap on a mountain — a mountain that had suffered the Bone Eater’s avalanche. I turned around and followed the sisters.

As we trekked through the firs and hemlocks, Hannah told her sister about how the creature collector Mr. Roland and his hunters had nabbed her. He gathered different creatures on his island and boasted he would add her to his collection. She was trapped in a cage like the giant one we’d left behind in the camp.

“How did you escape?” Ruth asked.

“Barnabas followed me.”

I interrupted, “But I wasn’t the one who saved her. Lysander figured out where the key to the cage was kept.”

“Who’s Lysander?” Ruth asked.

Hannah explained, “A baldface who helped us get off the island.”

“Why would a baldface do that?”

I jumped in. “He owed our tribe for helping him.”

Ruth’s eyebrows knitted together like two rams locking horns. “Did you smack your head on a low-hanging branch? You expect me to believe that a baldface helped you?”

“Do you remember the story of the baldface who taught us how to speak the baldface language?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Well, Lysander is that baldface.”

“You’re yanking my hair. That story is older than great grandmother Laurel. This is like when Dad tried to tell us the strange whistle chirps from the mountains were from creatures trapped under the rock.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Hannah said. “Our tribe rescued Lysander from baldfaces trying to kill him.”

“How can he still be alive now?”

Hannah started to explain, but I shushed her. Off to the right, a few hundred strides

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away, I had heard a loud snap. We ducked. Silence. I lifted my head and sniffed the air. I detected the unmistakable scent of rotten lilacs and smoke. Baldfaces!

I pointed to the right. “Hunters. Fifty strides ahead of us,” I whispered.

Ruth shook her head and pointed to the left. “They’re thirty strides that way.”

Hannah shook her head. “No, I’m picking up their scent to the right about twenty strides.”

The truth dawned on me. We turned to each other, our back hair bristling with fear. We were surrounded.