

Chapter ten

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think it's a bit late for that frankly, but you can try if you like."

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

"You're going to trespass in his house? He's scared and upset at us already."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Silence.

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

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

"Please Hole-in-the-skull, you our only hope."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, that's right, the dream dear, we want... we *would like* you to try talk to it sir."

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

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

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

“Yes, like those-”

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

“They won’t work?”

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

“Okay what will work then?”

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

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

Hole-in-the-skull stabbed Boneclaw suddenly in the forearm with a long wooden splinter she'd have sworn was there before, he then held her arm as the tiny bead of blood formed, took it delicately on one finger, and held it up to her nose for her to sniff and look at. Then he clasped his hand to his forearm and mimed sudden horror and used the hand previously clamped to his arm to mine spurting arterial spray.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He highlighted the picture of Owl-caller and drew on his necklace to make it more clear who it was.”

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

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

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

He nodded.

“and the deer?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Asking for directions.”

“He’s talking to a slug!”

“Slugs see a lot, and besides, apparently this Druid, that’s a kind of human shaman, messed up big time and not the leaves whisper secrets of the future to them and the slugs pass that on to others. We’ll, mostly what the slugs pass on is slime, chewed cabbages and cussing about how rubbish the druid was and how his back looked like the underside of a sheep, but other stuff too.”

“But he’s asking for directions!”

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

“I don’t exhaust easily: pain.”

“Surely exhaustion is safer?”

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

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

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

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

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

"If Owl-caller!"

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

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

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

"No! This is a stupid idea."

"Trust your hunt leader and friend even 'though it's a stupid idea?"

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

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

"Got it and my spear. Got you club and spear?"

"Yep."

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

Boneclaw and Troll-back charged through the screen of thorn-bushes spears first, for the look of the thing, club raised, improvised spike-flail whirring, Battle-cry of the Tribes of the People in the High Places of the World on their lips, that no human has ever heard and lived to describe² and even Owl-caller got caught up in the moment and charged through after then, staff raised. They cut a ferocious sight, and one that even the most hardened of shadow-monster-things would have been had-pressed not to respect.

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

There was an unpleasant and terrified scrabble to get upright again, after all, as far as they knew the monster was still there, including a particularly awkward moment where the thorn that Owl-caller had driven through his pectoral got caught on the thorn that, in a fit of macho idiocy worthy of a million drunken dares, Troll-back had driven through her own lower lip. Boneclaw however was struggling to remove the torn now embedded squarely through her Philtrum³, when she came face to face with the gully's only other occupant.

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

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

² Because the phonics are partly outside of the human range of hearing, but let's not spoil a good warrior's boast by bringing logic into this.

³ Admit it, you looked that word up and were slightly disappointed when it wasn't something dirty. I know you.

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

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

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

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

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

“Proud? It’s the size of my foot!”

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

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

“Hiding. Look.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you understand?"

It nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay then dear, go for it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ouch.

Troll-back, meanwhile acted on pure instinct and forgot entirely about her club with the *Lignum Mortem* peg in, instead rolling upright in a smooth and graceful predatory moment and throwing her weapon of chose, her spear, with pinpoint prediction and commendable force straight though the centre of the creature, where it slowed slightly without any actual sound but with a distinct impression of **Glomup-**ness, emerging the other side only fractionally slower and with no apparent

ill-effect on the creature, and only failing to scalp Boneclaw due to the fact she was already falling down nursing the side of her face and cursing her own bloody-stupid flail weapon.

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

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

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

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

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

Boneclaw had never seen a jack-in-the-box, these not being a toy the People made for their children⁴, but if she had she’d have known why her brain, in accordance with certain universal rules, mentally filled in a “Boing!” sound when suddenly a tree-trunk thick arm⁵ popped perfectly horizontally out of a patch of the creatures exterior when no arm had been before, hitting Troll-back square in the chest and sending her flying into the upper braches of a near-by Lyme-tree, not a naturally tenable place of a Hyena designed for stamina hunting on the ground, which was why after a short journey involving all too many thin whippy twigs, Troll-back chose to re-join her compatriots on the ground, spitting out ropes of thick, gluey darkness that filled her mouth and were sticking to her teeth.

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

⁴ Who usually had to amuse themselves with other, simpler games like kiss-chase, it, forty-forty, Cerulean Auroch-hounds, whack-a-mole, dead-rat conkers, or the ever popular Find-the-one-child-smaller-and-weaker-than-the-rest-and-torment-them-untill-one-day-they-finally-flip-and-brain-someone-with-a-dead-badger. Owl-caller had always *hated* that game, at least up until the time he’d finally got to hit Bloodmare with the badger.

⁵ Or at least you’d have to hope it was an arm, and not some other form of bodily protrusion. Ewww...

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

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

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

Owl-caller screamed again.

Boneclaw broke into a run.

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

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

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

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

It's hurt. Good.

I'm not... oh sod.

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

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

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

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

"Brother!"

"What in the name of she-is tits?"

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

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

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

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

“Owl-caller! Quick, the pain-needed!”

“It’s not ready yet!” yelled the distraught voice from over her shoulder.

“Well do something, anything quick!”

-:Scrunch:-

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

“You-”

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

“Thankful?”

“Fight!”

Boneclaw turned to the thing, which also had the surly, murderous enraged look of a creature that has suffered damage to a very *sensitive* area, as she picked up the wooden spike, still riding high on waves of pain. “Oh don’t look at me like that.” She nodded to Eagle-owl “You started this.” A shadow-limb shot past her head, but she arched her back up and sideways, simultaneously dodging it and slashed upwards with the spike with two hands, piercing the underside of the limb. It recoiled, and fell over onto one side. It looked to be panting. Boneclaw walked up to it, and glared at it. No empathy this time. A pig was at least an honest eating-machine: it didn’t laugh at you when you were down.

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

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

“Owl-caller! I lost the peg!”

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

“No! flint.”

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

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

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

“Owl-caller! It’s the middle of the night! There are no crows, there not exactly *nocturnal*! Do something!” said Boneclaw, her mind flashing back over the night, thinking of anything else they

may have had that could be used as weapons. She recalled the deer, looking from her peg-flail to Troll-back's spike. It could recognise they had weapons that could hurt the thing...

And it looked to Owl-caller too. Why?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

None of the people had ever seen a lump of sodium dropped into a pool of water ⁶, but if they had, then Boneclaw would have been able to describe what this looked like. But nastier. And a lot more noisy. And there was this one horrible moment where the thing sort of *vomited* out little images and memories of all the people it had ever killed. But other than that pretty much the same.

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you okay sis?”

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

“It’s the thought that counts.”

“Was that the thing that killed dad?”

⁶ Well Hole-in-the-skull had, but only in a bad mushroom trip.

“Yes.” Eagle-owls ears fell.

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

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

“I don’t know: Elk-mother knew something was up, She’ll believe you.”

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

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

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

“What wounds?”

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

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

“Sit down here.” Commanded Owl-caller as the pair begun to limp off using their spears as crutches. “I’ll need some fresh dock leaves for dressings, so just wait here. hold the Club: I doubt and wolf

would be stupid enough to pick a fight with you looking like you've just gone to war with the entire universe, but you never know what might get attracted to the scent of blood."

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

"Yes."

"Well that's one way to find it if all others fail then. Back in a moment."

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

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

"Oh, that. That was just a cover story."

"What?"

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

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

"You mean you haven't killed it yet? It's still out here."

"We made it up!"

"You may have made *something* up, but it's out there! How do you think I broke my ankle!"

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

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

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

“Umm? Boneclaw?”

“You utter utter... Huh?”

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

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

“Well the good news is, *Ahhhhahhah this hurts...* is I found the other peg.” He said grimacing and nodding to the wolverine. Boneclaw noticed what looked like the length of creeper she had tied it too dangling out of its mouth, and a good three inches of iron-hard wood protruding from the back of it’s skull. “The big bugger jumped me whist I was picking it up.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes Owl caller!”

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

“Rrrigght nowwww!”

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

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

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

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

“I don’t need it.”

“Yes you do: you’re in Bloodmare’s debt f0or striking her? Remember?”

Boneclaw groaned.

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

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

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

“Me too.” Said Owl-caller.

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

“No way.”

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

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

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

Epilogue

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes our friend the deer seems to have been grateful: the whole tribe had been blessed with good dreams, it won’t last, but it put the elders in a grateful frame of mind: Bloodmare only gets to boss you around of a little bit because you’re a hero and she isn’t, Troll-back got a personal commendation from the council of elders, and my sister is now in your hunt because you clearly work so well together” He nodded to the new hut being raised opposite his by a team or workers.

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

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

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

“That’s going to be hard to police.”

“Really? She kept her word last night, and that was a *big* party. Besides; even though hunters find a bee-hive most days this time of year, there’re still not that much honey in the forest, so not much mead, and it’s all either made by the elders under Cloud-watchers supervision, or by Hole-in-the-skull, who has his own beehive. They can control who gets the mead. Pretty well, and neither is going to give any to my sister any more, we three healers had a little talk about that.”

“Really?” Owl-caller nodded

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

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

“And Blood-mare woke up this morning covered head to toe in the mead she had allocated to my sister in the past: She’ll not be giving her any more, and you control the only other supply. Besides,

I've spoken to Hare's-tongue. He's a sensible boy, although very deeply in love, and he'll not have it in the house. As husband he can demand things a brother can't."

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

"If he didn't I'd drag him out if I had too."

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

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

"Nice. Er, on that subject..."

"On the subject of marriage? What? You and Foxtail?"

"No! I mean, not yet."

"You're still doing airtight? No problems?"

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

"Sorry, you *wanted* something to happen?"

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

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

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

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

“Right.”

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

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

Boneclaw groaned.

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

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

“Perhaps. Wait... I have an idea.”

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

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

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

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

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

“what!?”

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

“I’ll, I’ll deal with it later.”

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

“What is she demanding?”

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

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

“Not yet, Miss. How is your jaw?”

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

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

Bloodmare looked from one to the other. “So you flaunt this *rot* this weak treatment of males that threatens our entire society. All I want, all I have *striven* to achieve is to make the tribe strong, and you’ll risk it just like that?” to Boneclaw’s amazement and horror Bloodmare started to cry “It’s this sort of weakness that got my mother killed, that gets good hunters killed, risking their lives just so you lot can flaunt your disrespect for our values in the safety they buy you? One day this sort of thing will eventually lead to tragedy and then I’ll put a stop to this. Well, I’ll not stand for this, mark you. I’ll not be outmanoeuvred by you two again!”

Boneclaw and Owl-caller watched as she stormed off.

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

“Thank you. I had a good tutor.”

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

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

“We?”

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

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

“Dream on.”

“Well you do have nice fur...”

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

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

Owl-caller smiled and looked her right in the eye

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

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