

Chapter ten, part two

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 children¹, 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 arm² 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!"

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

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

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

Owl-caller screamed again.

Boneclaw broke into a run.

¹ 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.

² Or at least you'd have to hope it was an arm, and not some other form of bodily protrusion. Ewww...

As she arrived the creature had Owl-caller about five-feet 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 begun to fade *Female puberty rites dammit! My pain tolerance it **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 through his head-fur “Feathers, bone, a live or dead one, it doesn’t matter, they should hold it if you can grab it with them!”

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

And it looked to Owl-caller too. Why?

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

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

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

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

Her mind was flashing, connections, *Hole-in-the-skull-fussing over Owl-caller 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 water³, 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 they 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 have 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.

³ Well Hole-in-the-skull had, but only in a bad mushroom trip.

"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?"

"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 you're memory-box peg Owl-caller." he shrugged. "it's just a peg, but don't worry, I'll find it. You hit the monster with it, right?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

"We made it up!"

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

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

"SKALFING hell!" yelled Boneclaw as she spirited thought the woodland at top speed, leaping bushes and searching and scenting right and left. She caught the metallic smell of blood, Owl-callers scent and the distinctive odour of a very large male wolverine, and changed direction. In a few moments she caught sight on a mass of 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 to 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 off 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 its skull. "The big bugger jumped me whilst 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 through the quiet woods to the compound, a strange, sad wonderful creature, a flat deer, watched them go. You don't always get your hero's welcome in life, but perhaps, if you go out of your way for other people, they help might you when they can.

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

Epilogue

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 of 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 a 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 your 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.