

Boneclaw Sister: stories of The People, a couple of generations before the wombat.

The Problems of Status

Chapter one.

Boneclaw Sister sat down as the Childless-female's meeting got to actual business. Finally. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy the rites that were carried out first: they were designed to demonstrate the cunning, strength and status of the participants, and so being a young hyena entering her prime and a lot tougher and brighter than most of her peers, she was *good* at them. She really stood out as something special in them. But, however, they did mean that you had to go through a lot of what was essentially posturing and pointless ritual before you could get down to discussing the business of running hunts and sorting out the other important dealings of the meeting, so she felt a little conflicted about them. She wondered why old Elk-Mother bothered with it, as the ritual did *not* flatter her, making her look even older and stiffer by comparison to the young females sounding her. Then again, what power and status did the elder have, if not from the rituals, mused Boneclaw.

Gods', that'll be me one day unless I die first. She thought.

Staring into space for a few seconds of unfamiliar introspection at that thought, her second, Troll-back, noticed her slightly strained expression and cracked a joke "Bone, you got indigestion or seeming? I told you not to eat those goat-hooves." Everyone in her hunt laughed good naturedly, Elk mother looked to her then sighed in exasperation and Bloodmare and Stalker laughed a little too viciously. Stalker, taking it too far as always added "Watch her after this is over, she'll shift to the Jakes!" Boneclaw glared at Stalker for a second before glancing to the jakes¹. Something glinted in a tree near them and caught her eye. After watching it for a while, she realised she had drifted off and turned her attention back to the meeting

Stalker was being a pain in the arse, about whose job it was to watch the fires set to create clearings for deer-ambush and whose job it was to then build the hides, but Stalker always was a pain in the arse. Boneclaw paid her no attention. She could afford to ignore Stalker for now. Stalker had slightly less status. Bloodmare, now, Bloodmare was a real problem. She was being quiet now, and Boneclaw knew that if Bloodmare was being quiet then it was because she was planning something.

Like me.

Besides, Elk-Mother wearily cut in to Stalkers complaints. It was interesting to watch. Boneclaw had never considered the possibility of using weariness as a weapon, but it worked: her voice made you feel tired just to listen to it, and she wore down Stalkers arguments until when she said "We'll leave it as it is and see." Stalker couldn't argue. How could you? Elk-Mother was dying, and not dying well. Everyone knew it. Deify her now and the other elders would have your teeth. "Let the hunt-leaders sort it out" Elk-Mother added.

¹ Spotted Hyenas demonstrate latrine behaviour, using it to mark the edge of their territories. In The People, the sentient of Cerulean, this manifests in putting the Jakes on the very edge of their camps. This is the same sort of liminal grounds were tribes often carry out hidden rites, such as those required by childless females no longer children, but not yet considered full adults.

Boneclaw and Bloodmare shared a glance. So we're sorting it out, the glance said. How do I blame your inevitable attempt to sabotage this squarely on you then? It said. Two different hunts, because there was a lot of ground to cover, but that was normal enough. Including the familial hunts, there were six hunts of The People in Cerulean at the moment. But to have two hunts entirely of young females out to prove themselves, with two hunt leaders of equal status, well, that meant completion. Lots of competition.

Trouble.

But less than putting her and Bloodmare together in the same hunting-team to butt heads, that was the idea anyway. She leaned back and shrugged. "I'll deal with it. It seems fine at the moment, but I'll have a look over if that's my sisters' decision." *Take the imitative. Seize control. Do lots, that way if it all fails, it fails spectacularly and by mitigating the possible disaster you're showing leadership and your status can rebound. That's what you've never understood Bloodmare. Do a good job where it matters, and where it does not, look busy. Status is perception.*

"Are you sure you're up to it?" asked Bloodmare meaning "I don't think you're up to it." "After all," she added. "You have been taking on an awful lot of minor duties lately." Meaning "My duties are more important, you glory-hogging bitch."

"I'm sure I'll mangle somehow." Said Boneclaw, leaning back and smiling. *Smile, it's not enough just to be confinement, you have to make it look easy. If you act self important about a duty people will think it's a big deal to you and hesitate to give you others, act casually about it and they'll feel safe to give you more important ones. And always, Bloodmare, smile casually at the stuck-up self-important bitch opposite you, especially if you know she hates smiles, casualness, and you. Nothing annoys them more, dearest Bloodmare.*

"After all, I've managed bigger before, Bloodmare. Relax, you worry too much. Have some fun once every while: go fishing, drink some mead, find a nice male and scare his parents as to your intentions..."

Elk-mother cut in with a tactically timed "Ahem." Just as Bloodmare's ears flushed red and Troll-back and Boneclaw's hunt burst out laughing. Boneclaw had no idea how she'd got her entirely undeserved reputatio- her *almost* entirely undeserved reputation, she mentally corrected, but she knew how to play it. You were a poor excuse for a female if you couldn't play a little socially frowned-upon behaviour to your own status-advantage, and to be fair her famed flirting and courtships were eighty per cent entirely innocent, and the other twenty per cent was hardly unwanted as far as its recipients generally went.

Maybe Seventy per cent. Sixty at the worst.

"On that matterrr." Bloodmare growled. "May I remind my beloved hunt-sister that this is the meeting for unmated females and if any sister has any know indiscretions they are harrdly a matter to boast about-"

"Childless females, Bloodmare." Elk-mother corrected before Boneclaw could. *A small distinction, but an important one. Were considered **effectively** adult, but we've not yet paid the sacrifice owed to She-is-Fiercer, and that's what counts. The test of the first-born.* Bloodmare looked stunned to see

Elk-mother cut in. Boneclaw was not: She'd cut in before Boneclaw could because Boneclaw waited just a moment so that if Elk-mother wanted to cut in and make the correction official, she could.

LERN to play a crowd, Blood, it's not that hard really. Its probably the most important thing a young female can learn. Aside from how to count she added in the privacy of her mind. Thank She-is for small distinctions. "Besides, Blood, I think that there might just be one or two things to boast about." Winked Boneclaw. "After all not many people can claim to have outrun Hares-Paws in a flat hundred-and-fifty pace sprint from her son's hut to mine across the compound, and fewer whilst leaping over rooftops and dodging thrown items. No that, I may add, my intentions towards Rabbit's-ear were anything other than honourable." *That's true, at least: I was trying to sneak into Fox-tail's hut. It was an honest mistake anyone could have made in the dark.*

"If you cared more about your status and the status of others-

"Then I'd explode from status. I keep track as much as you do." *Ain't that true.* "And I always consider the status-risk and the consequences of my actions, Hunt-sister." *It wouldn't be fun otherwise, Blood.*

She looked over Broodmare's various cronies, and the few good young hunters who just happened to be in her hunt, and mentally checked her status against all of them. No competition. Her eyes lingered on Eagle-owl. No competition there, poor soul. She'd been slighted, and slighted badly, failed in her duties as a female and been unable to get vengeance. If she didn't recover her status soon, which she wouldn't, she'd be pretty much finished in the tribe. For a start Hare's-tongue's mother had stopped her from courting her son. They'd never be allowed to marry if her status did not recover, and if it didn't soon he'd be married elsewhere and Eagle-Owl would stay at her Brother's hearth. Boneclaw wished she could help, as Eagle was a good hunter who needed help in many ways, but she was in Bloodmare's hunt. She couldn't interfere.

"Any other business?" said Elk-mother, meaning "Unless you have a *good* reason, clear off and bicker over status elsewhere so I can go back to dying in piece". Boneclaw looked to Eagle-Owl, who was looked pleadingly at Bloodmare. She could intervene on Eagle's behalf, but to do so would risk more than a small measure of status. Bloodmare pointedly did not notice her.

Take risks Bloodmare. You need to in order to gain. But no. Nothing. Boneclaw looked away in well hidden disgust, and saw something glint in a tree by the Jakes again. She did not look at it further.

"No other business." Said Bloodmare firmly. Eagle-owl looked down and swallowed. Elk-Mother looked from one to the other, impassively. "Well, in that case we're done here. If any of you young ones can find the strength to help and old cripple to her feet..."

Old cripple my arse. Thought Boneclaw, helping her up for the look of it, and carefully shouldering Bloodmare out of the way in her eagerness to help. *You're dying of a canker to the spine and until you die it'll cut off pain and feeling, making you more willing to push your body than before. Two*

*years ago you were bent over with arthritis, now that you can't feel your knees and lower back any more you **stride**. I'd hesitate to fight with you: You've nothing to lose.*

"Thank you Boneclaw, then we can perform the closing rite." *And what a waste of good mead that will be.* They performed the rite of closing, Bloodmare glowering at Boneclaw throughout. Boneclaw smiled back.

Afterwards, as the others drifted back towards the camp (Bloodmare marching off with her tial high, nose in that air and back so straight you'd think she'd deform her spine, Boneclaw noted) Boneclaw picked up her spear and, watching the others, begun to walk backwards in the direction of the jakes.

"Hey, Hunt sister." Called Troll-back. "Where are you sneaking off to? I've got a bottle of mead hidden by the fishing creak: we're going off to drink it and spend the afternoon failing to catch anything!"

"Sounds good, I'll catch up in a bit. You'll laugh, but I've actually got to stop by the jakes. Don't wait up for me, I'll go check out the hides in clearing Stalker was bitching about after, and then catch up with you latter. Save me some of the mead."

"HA! No promises: save *us* some of the males!"

"No promises." Said Boneclaw resting her spear over her shoulder and waving them off. She was mildly pleased to see they all slouched off rather than marching of woodenly like Bloodmare's hunt. *Honestly the way she **walks**, she thought, If it wasn't for the fact you could see the spear in her paw you'd think that Bloodmare had it lodged up her – ahh, good they're all gone.* She walked backwards for a moment watching for them, then turned and walked off towards the jakes, keeping her eyes down and glancing from side to side, whistling and doing her best impression of someone looking for Burdock, Dock or any other plant with large soft leaves². She ducked under one of the trees and sniffed about a bit, inspecting a small clump of burdock and rejecting it before turning around again to face the camp. Quickly trotting backwards under the tree she kept her eyes on the direction of

² the nearest Jakes was only for childless females, and since in The People females did housework only under sufferance, it was not quite as nice as those for males or families². Finding that the previous visitor had used the last of the sphagnum moss and not bothered to replace it was far from uncommon².

² It was however as antiseptically clean as only a hyena latrine could be: Like all spotted hyena's The People considered bones just as edible as any other part of a prey animal and equally desirable as flesh (less so than organ meat, far less than liver). They had so much calcium in their diet that by the time their food exited the hyena it was white and practically fossilised already. Combined with the porous fast-draining alkali soils of the Cerulean foothills and a good shovel full of hearth-ash mixed with roasted freshwater-muscle shells from the seasonal shell-middens for lime, they were as hygienic as anything. However, due to the way hyenas of both sexes are set-up and their instinct to sent-mark territory, many of the local trees developed a distressing amount of personality at a certain height above ground, but no society is perfect.

the camp, scanning for any witnesses, before swiftly and without looking, thrusting the butt of her spear up into the dense lower branches. She was rewarded by the “Ooof.” of expelled air and a furred body, about a head shorter than her own, tipping out of the tree and into a near-by bush. She quickly leapt onto and straddled the body and clamped both of her paws over its, his, muzzle before moving both her and him deep into the concealing shadows cast by the bush. It took less than three seconds, and was done with the economy of moments and inbuilt stealth of a natural born killer.

“Wotcha. You do know it’s forbidden for any male to witness female rites, don’t you? If Elk-mother had found you she’d have tanned your hide, you realise?” Said Boneclaw Sister conversationally, as if she often discussed the forbidden whilst straddling young males, hidden from prying eyes in the local shrubbery.

Okay, bad example. She thought.

She looked carefully and removed her paws from his muzzle (She didn’t add, “Don’t scream” because it was a stupid thing to add. If he wanted to get caught and dragged before the Elders that was his call.) and spent a reasonably pleasurable few seconds looking her discovery up and down. After a few moments something clicked and she frowned.

“Wait a sec, Aren’t you Eagle-owls brother? What’shecalled.... um...”

“Owl Caller.” Snapped the male. Even by male standards he was not big, nor particularly strongly built, but he certainly had a decisive voice, and good teeth, she noted. Weird one, she remembered. The year younger than her, or maybe two. Never went through that giggling and fawning stage most young males went through (and which, she would freely and gladly admit, some never seemed to grow out of). Quiet, thoughtful, hesitant. She vaguely recalled pushing him into a stream when they were both very young, but then again she had pushed practically everyone into streams: she had been that sort of child. It didn’t exactly form the basis for a deep and insightful relationship. Hell, she pushed Bloodmare into a stream just last week (claiming she had just been reaching over to get her bait and tackle). Sometimes streams just happened.

“Yep, well Owl Caller, the thing is that although the tree by the Jakes was a good choice for a hiding spot, out of site, downwind *and* next to something that would cover your scent if the wind changed, all good, the fact is that if you were female then you’d have been taught and you’d know that trees are never as good as hiding places as everyone thinks. Hard to move from one to another stealthily, unless you’re part squirrel. “she looked him up and down again. “Which going by the nice fur I’d say

might have been a possibility with different parents. But the *Important* thing is, females don't wear polished haematite beads openly on hunt. They glint in the sunlight. Real give away."

"I'll try to remember that. Can you get off me now?"

"Not yet. Besides, this is fun. So... Why were you hiding in the tree watching the female rites?"

"I wasn't watching the rites."

"You were, I mean why else were you... Oh. The meeting, not the rites huh?" It clicked. "You wanted to see if Bloodmare was going to help your sister."

"Help my family, yes." He said, noting that her first thought was "sister" not "family". Boneclaw had the decency to look mildly embarrassed, possibly the first time she ever had in such close proximity to male, he thought. "My father was killed whilst under my sister's protection. How was never determined. That means that it can't be ruled out that my father was killed by another Person. My sister has the sting of failure *and* I live with the whispers that maybe my father died a Trash Person. It's worth the risk to investigate."

"You hoped Bloodmare would help?"

"No, but I had to see anyway." Boneclaw nodded. Owl-caller seemed to have the measure of Bloodmare all right. She thought back to the death of Eagle-Feathers, Eagle-Owl and Owl-Callers father.

It had been a strange affair. Their mother Hunts-Like-Owls had been a respected hunter, and long dead by this point. She'd died giving birth to Eagle-Owl, her Third. That had left Eagle-Feathers to raise Owl-Caller and Eagle-Owl alone, although his sisters had helped. Both had grown up with Boneclaw, and been of average or above-average status: their mother had been a potential Elder in the making, and was to this day well remembered.

Last spring, early, when winters back was not yet broken, Eagle-Owl had been ice-fishing when she noticed that the ice had been broken and partially re-frozen over a large area of the brook. She had followed the trail of re-frozen ice and found a trail: The tracks of a large creature leading out of the water and across the shore into the Deepwood. The trail was new, the ice had not fully re-frozen

since the break, and the trail was...odd. Boneclaw and Eagle-Owl had still been hunt-sisters at that point: neither she nor Bloodmare had been appointed hunt-leader yet so there was only one Childless hunt at that point, not two. The trail looked like something big, Auroch sized at least, dragging itself along hurt after an immersion in the freezing water. So of course, they'd been on it like fleas on a hedgehog, but even then Boneclaw had seen how wrong the trail was. Branches had been snapped, ice in puddles shattered at its passing, but no clear footprints, and grasses under the broken limbs of trees were untouched, standing up without even a pattern in the frost to mark the creatures passing. And no scent. Yes, it was very cold and the thing had recently gone to water, but Boneclaw knew she had the best nose of anyone who went out that day, and she hadn't got even a whiff on anything she would call an animal. It was strange.

'Feathers had worried, as fathers always do when their young daughters are first making their way in the world. He had dithered. And although he knew it was forbidden for him to go after the hunt, a male blundering into things unexpectedly could be dangerous and would almost certainly make them lose whatever they were after, he had gone to wait for his daughter to return at the brook.

He brought some hot tea with him, in a gourd insulated with rabbit-fir and down, because he knew we'd all be cold when we got back from the hunt. She thought. Gods', how details like that stick in the mind.

The creature had doubled back. They never saw it, but it soon became clear from the trail that it was heading back to the brook. Someone, Bloodmare has said, had better go back to warn the camp.

And when she says "someone should do something" she never adds "and that someone is me."

So Eagle-Owl had been sent back. It made sense, She'd run all the way from the brook to the camp to fetch hunters after she'd seen the trail. So she was the most tired. She was slowing the hunt down. She'd gone back to the brook and, according to her account, met with her father there and decided to take him back to the encampment. But first they stopped for a quick drink of tea.

The tea was still warm when they'd found them. Eagle-owl was a mess. She was babbling. She'd heard a noise in the bushes. She'd put her father behind her and investigated. She'd then heard the noise of to one side. Something was circling. She'd taken her spear, stood between danger and the male, stood tall and given a challenge, as a female should, when something had happened. She'd been blindsided. Something had happened. Something had wrenched her spear from her hands. Something had stuck her on the head (although afterwards no-one could say that she hadn't just fallen and hit her head). She needed help, she said, she thought that her father was wounded: he wouldn't get up.

Given he had Eagle-owl's spear lodged right through him, I'd have hoped for this sake he didn't get up. Thought Boneclaw. But his face... he saw something. No-one who goes peacefully ends up having to have his face covered for the funeral to stop him scaring the long-cooks, and they're not exactly

squeamish. And then there was the spear. Boneclaw had speared enough animals to know that if a creature was stabbed right through the heart, there was usually blood in generous amounts. Unless they were already dead. He'd not bled a drop. The cook's had said that all the colour, all the blood, had drained from his extremities as well. And although that could just have been the cold, not fear, he was wrapped up warm when they found him, and still full of tea.

For Eagle-Owls sake, no, for Eagle-Owl and Owl-Callers sake, she corrected, they'd put it down as an accidental death. The creature, whatever it was, must have knocked her down and she lost consciousness. It then knocked him down. He stumbled and landed on her spear: that her spear was sticking up from the river-mud tip first when they had found them was undeniable. No mention had been made of cowardice, none that to wrench a spear from her hands in the manner described and fling it the distance to the river-bank would require hands, or something like them, but there was no scent to suggest either one of the People other than Eagle-Owl or a human had been there. But the fact was Eagle-owl had failed not only to protect a male of the people, but her own father, and had not taken revenge on whatever it was that killed him. She was there, and yet she was still to this day unable to say exactly what it was she saw. A dark shape. He was quietly given a decent funeral, and Eagle-owl was quietly watched. No-one said it was just-in-case she was crazy and had done it. No one needed to. Hare's-tongue, who she'd be "walking out with", was quietly forbidden by his mother to see her anymore, and that was it. Well, that *had* been it, lately, she had got worse.

And Owl-Caller was there waiting and watching though all of it. And he asked so many questions, and we had answers for none of them. Eagle-Owl was fighting not to cry that day, females don't cry. But he, he just stood. You could feel the grief, it was strong. But stronger still the desire to understand. I thought that now, after a full year, he'd have given up. I guess I was wrong.

Boneclaw looked him up and down one last time, then rolled off him and dropped into a squatting position next to him, he pulled himself up onto his elbows and glared at her briefly, but then said "Thank you."

"No problem. How, er, how are you holding up. You smell like you're eating well."

"Well enough. The share of the hunt Eagle-Owl brings back spreads further now, and my aunts remain kind." He said quietly. *That* was a low blow, she thought. That line deserved to be delivered with a frosty, almost accusing voice. You ought to say something like that as if it was an accusation. Instead he just sounded sad. Plus he didn't pull himself up further than his elbows. That spooked her and she couldn't say why. *Of course* an unmated male didn't raise himself to the same height as a female when talking, and of course he didn't talk back, but that was one of those rules everyone conveniently forgot. It spooked her, but she didn't sit down to be on the same level as him: she wasn't about to *show* she was uncomfortable.

"And how is Eagle owl?"

"She drinks."

-And that was the rest of it. With Hare's-tongue forbidden to her, Eagle-Owl had turned first Inwards, and then to the nearest bottle of mead. She had never been particularly violent, and was gentleness itself to Hare's-tongue. But Hare's-tongue was a long way away from her now, and it wasn't him who had to man-handle her into bed each night, nor he who held her down when the nightmares about her father's death came back and, in her stupor and fear, she lashed out at whatever she saw. Everyone knew she would never lift a finger to a male when fully conscious, but after she started on the mead full-consciousness and Eagle-Owl barely had a nodding acquaintance any more. And that wasn't the worst bit: A mate could walk away; go to his brother's hearth. A brother had no-where to go.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not your sorrow I need."

"Have you asked Bloodmare for help?"

"Not yet. I know what would happen if I did." Boneclaw nodded. Bloodmare would listen, and nod, then say, "hummm, Yes. I see." And they say she'd think about it and leave Owl-Caller stewing for a few days whilst she smirked in her power over him. Then she'd see what she could get from him. Then, when finally in desperation he gave her what she wanted, she'd say "No." What was worse, she could see Owl knew this, and would sooner or later try anyway.

"You want Bloodmare to help Eagle-Owl recover her status."

"I want Bloodmare to help Eagle-Owl recover her status."

"So she can be with Hare's-tongue and move away from your hearth and stop drinking."

"So she can be with Hare's-tongue and be happy. But yes."

Boneclaw paused, she detected something else there.

"You want to be free of caring for your sister so *you* can marry?"

"I want to be free of my sister so I can be apprenticed! I can't look after her and learn at the same time!"

Boneclaw looked down, on his necklace as well as the haematite was a Jay's skull. The Jay had a very specific meaning to The People.

"You're training to become a healer?"

"Yes."

“With Cloud-watcher?” Cloud-watcher was a female Elder who taught basic healing to young females: Boneclaw still remembered learning how to set broken bones from her, because her quiet, contemplative interest in how bones fitted together had made her the expert of the most evil-minded wrestling holds of all time, and she demonstrated them on slow or disruptive students. Boneclaw had learnt from her the Straddle of the Fish, which you had to dislocate one of your own shoulders to get out of, but failed to master the Reciprocating-Fox hold, which apparently was only possible if you’d had a lifetime of special pelvic exercises and at least two children, and which Elk-mother had forbidden Cloud-watcher even to demonstrate ever aging after That Incident At The Summer Feast. Some lessons stuck in the mind.

“No.”

“Oh.” *Oh* Thought Boneclaw, *the other healer.*

“From Hole-In-the-skull.”

“The He-witch?”

“The male shaman, yes.”

“He’s, well, a bit...”

“He lives in the woods all alone, and sometimes does strange things, yes. But he’s a better healer than Cloud-Watcher. He’s just odd, that’s all.” Boneclaw nodded. Odd. You didn’t have to be a shaman to be a healer, most weren’t, but the two sometimes went together. If you were going to learn the true names of every plant in a two-day radius and have conversations with them, you’d learn their healing natures whether you wanted too or not. But even so, Hole in the Skull was a weird one. Few normal people considered self trepanning a form of modern art. What was he on now, four?

“Surely you can still train, when your sister is out hunting?” she asked. *Or when she’s passed out. Plenty of time there.*

“It’s not enough. Besides, a male healer has to be marriageable, or no-one will go to him for healing.”

That was true: there was no actual rule, but no females and few enough males went to a male healer unless he was eligible for marriage. You didn’t want to be in the process of healing and have his sister walk in on you: a married male could tell his mate not to come in, he’s busy healing, but no law could bar a sister from the family hearth whilst she shared it with a sibling. Not that, she though, there were many married male healers either. They did not make good husbands: waking up to find the familial bed cold because your mate was off six hours before dawn to watch some rare flower open its petals to some rare migratory moth so he could scrape some rare pollen from a different

rare flower of the moth, or coming back to the hearth to find he was so fixated on the colour of the fame under a pot of something that stunk out the hut that he'd not noticed the food gently charring to ash next to it tended to put off all but the most patient potential mates. That said, she'd never heard of a male healer's mate complaining about "marital problems".

I guess everything has its ups and its downs. Wayhay. Boneclaw considered this all. It was sad, but it was not her problem. Eagle-owl was in Bloodmare's hunt, and if she tried to interfere in Eagle-owls family Bloodmare would see it as trespass into her business and make everyone's life a living hell for it, because she could.

"Well then, in that case I'm sorry that I hit you with a spear and tipped you out of that tree: I can see why you'd want to see if Bloodmare was going to help Eagle-Owl. I won't tell the Elders you were looking in on the meeting. I wish I could help you, but I can't intervene in the running of Bloodmare's hunt." *However much I'd like to punch her out.*

"Can't you?" asked Owl Caller. It was broadly neutral, but still closer to accusation than pleading.

"What does that mean?" She asked. He sighed.

"You're a bright one, Boneclaw. Clever. You'll work it out. Not smart: you don't *think*, but clever. You don't use that intelligence for anything other than getting in and out of trouble as impressively as possible, and one of these days that quickness, that bright, hot, fast intelligence is going to get you into a problem that you need thoughtfulness and carefulness and slowness to get out of, and then you're going to die, unless you learn before then. I'm sorry but it's true. Work it out Boneclaw. I have to go."

Boneclaw looked on blankly as Owl-Caller picked himself up and walked off into the woods. Boneclaw watched him go and then shrugged and went to check on the hides Stalker was complaining about. He was wrong, of course: there was nothing she could do no matter how much she wanted to. Bloodmare would make Eagle-Owl's life a living hell if she even tried, just to spite her for interfering in her hunt. Still, as she checked on the hide and went fishing and got ready for tomorrow's hunt, she couldn't quite get rid of some nagging voice saying that she, somehow, probably could.