

Migratory Birds
Chapter 2

RUNNER



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It was almost completely hidden between all the huge firs and other trees which had overgrown the broad valley. From above, for a bird, it was almost invisible, but any wanderer who walked through the forest could not miss it because it occupied such a prominent place in the middle of the valley, although it was anything but large. On the contrary it was a rather small settlement, just big enough for the families which tried to make a living down there, in the middle of the forest.

It seemed to be yet another ordinary clearing and just when one was getting closer one would be able to realize that there were houses in between the smaller trees of this area. Just a few houses were big enough to attract any attention at all, the others were hardly more than hovels which could one day be overgrown by the forest and would not leave behind any trace at all. But there were at least three very impressive buildings around a square, right in the middle of the town and in the middle of this square was growing a not very huge, but nevertheless impressive, old, gnarled oak which hardly had any leaves left but somehow the tree was still surviving as the small, wrinkled leaves rustled in the faint wind which let the dust of the paths in between the houses fly high for a few moments, just before it would settle again like nothing ever happened.

Around this oak a few stands had gathered and quite some people (for such a small town) had gathered there, talking in high voices, some bubbling because of too much ale although the sun was still high up in the sky. But mainly they were just talking, joking and trying to make a deal with the three traders which displayed their goods at their stands. No one seemed to care much about one another, just like one was just accidentally talking to another and that was why they quickly separated and strode further on. It was rather quiet, there was no commotion as if the whole town had just exhaled and was now about to inhale but this had not happened yet and thus every inhabitant was calmly waiting for what was yet to come, maybe awaiting it with secret anxiousness.

There was one stand every single one was at least going past once: An old, grumpy stag sat there and the only thing he had was ink, paper and a quill. Nevertheless he seemed to attract the interest of even the youngest child which was playing around on the place. Every time somebody addressed him, he answered lowly and without much enthusiasm but he did it and he seemed to answer every questions politely. But most of the time he had nothing to do and either motionlessly observed the other people or noted something on his sheets. After a certain time he stood up clumsily and as if quite some people had waited for this, they walked over to the stand and suddenly it was encircled by curious people who tried to get a look at the lists the stag had put on display there. Nobody was paying attention to the stag anymore who walked over to a large stone brick building. Everyone stared at the lists.

A wolf broke away from the crowd, carrying away one of the sheets, ran over the place and hopped up the stairs to the sawmill as he really felt light-hearted in this moment, pushed open the door and stepped into the office, holding the scroll like they had already won the trophy which was to be gained. "Here's the



Big Wheel

list!" he shouted so that his voice sounded throughout the small room, but thus he was able to drown out the noise of the steam engines which kept the saws working.

The woman looked up instantly and let the bandage go which she had used on the boy who quickly grabbed it before it fell to the ground and went on to wrap his hands, holding one end between his teeth while winding the bandage around his palm.

He hurled the scroll onto the table. "We've got as good as won. No dangerous outsiders this year!"

"Sounds good!" the woman agreed and picked up the scroll which had been rolling around on the table in front of her and unrolled it. Her nervous eyes studied the paper, motionlessly she just laughed dryly sometimes. "That's a joke!"

The man raised his eyebrows with a broad smile. "I can assure you: It's not! Avalanche has just finished registration!"

The woman studied the paper once again as she was barely able to believe what she was reading and then she threw it into the boy's lap. "Take a look, Wheel! This time there'll be no excuse for you!"

Carefully the wolf boy fixed the bandage around his hand before he picked up the scroll, pulled a face and started reading.

The two other wolves watched him.

"Who's Tzerska?"

From his chair where he was now rather lying than sitting in, his legs stretched out, the wolf answered: "He's an old hunter from the Blue Ridge, a damn rabbit but he should be no match for you. Guess he's just running because of some kind of tradition, although he didn't participate last year."

"And MacLezt?" He hesitated due to the strange name.

The wolf shrugged his shoulders so that his leather jacket was slightly creaking. He had taken out a short hunting knife and sharpened his claws. "Haven't seen him before. As far as I know he's some trader from Kastania. He's just passing through... A ram." He rose his paw and scrutinized his sharpened claws. "Rams are sometimes real toughies but he should be no threat!" he said while he studied his work.

"You know or you guess?" the woman, leaning on the table, intervened.

"I guess!"

"You should better check that. Grampa won't be happy about that kind of information..."

"Oh, screw him!" He spread his arms and stared at her. "Where should I get something about a complete stranger, hu?"

She turned her eyes away and faintly shook her head. "You don't have to tell me that."

"Screw him!" The man repeated and went on with sharpening the claws of his other hand.

The boy swallowed. "Who's Grand Leaf?" he asked.

"Don't you remember?" the woman asked him. "He's Ol' Dune's nephew, the pony who was right behind you last year when..."

"I remember!" The boy quickly cut short her explanation.

"Seems like the wound is still bleeding..." The man laughed.

"Better this way!" the woman agreed.

The boy gave them a harsh look before he stared at the scroll again. "Pendulum?"

"A boar boy from Amalkin. Stalker said that he's got a good stamina, but he's quite slow so I guess you'll shake him off during the first mile and will never see him again..." He stretched the last few words while carefully cutting of some of his index' nail.

"And this last one? Jid?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "A roamer, a lynx, guess he's just trying although he looks quite well trained. But first of all he's got to settle with Mlala who of them runs in the end and after all he's nothing but a feline... So forget about him!"

The boy pulled a face again and laid the scroll aside. "Eleven? That's all?" he asked.

"Ten! You know there won't be two cats¹ running," the man corrected him and suddenly put the knife away, stood up and went over to him. Ironically he pat on the boy's shoulder. "Come on, my dear brother. You'll just run and dishonor your clan, so why bother anyway, hm?"

"Don't rib him, Searcher. We need this damn victory!"

The wolf pushed himself off the chair of his younger brother where he had been leaning on. "Yeah, yeah! As he didn't already shame us last year!" He had walked away and suddenly spun around, pointing his knife at his younger brother. "This time there's no excuse, Wheel. There's no one in between you, Fistle and Thunder." He screwed up his eyes while he observed the boy's reaction.

For a moment it got silent inside the office, at least as silent as it was able to get inside a sawmill where the steam engines hammered almost constantly, at least the saws had nothing to work on and so they evaded their screaming sound. The sawdust danced in the sunlight which was falling brightly through the windows.

"Well, you don't want to disgrace your newborn children, do you?" The woman had approached his seat from behind and now stood right in his back. She was speaking very lowly, just like she wanted to tell him some secret. "Do you?" she repeated, almost whispering into his ear.

"No!" he mumbled.

"What did he say, Blade? I couldn't hear him over here!" Searcher said.

"NO!" the boy yelled as loud as he could. The veins of his bare chest poked out of his fur as he tensed the fine lines of his muscles.

"Oh,... that's good!" Searcher grinned.

The woman pat on the boy's shoulder. "That's a good wolf! The real fighting spirit for our clan."

Once again the sound of the sawmill took over although this time the shrill cry of wood being torn apart drowned out anything else. But the three wolves in the small office couldn't care less. Behind the wooden windows the noon sun was

shining brightly onto the wooden houses, build around the small piece of lawn which had remained around the huge crippled oak which formed the center of the lumberjack outpost. The strangely twisted branches of the huge tree hang all over the three largest building which occupied the space around this place.

There was the long drawn-out functional building of the sawmill, the large and especially high dormitory of the lumberjacks whose outside was completely covered by carvings of strange beasts and there was the strange interwoven buildings of the saloon and the shop which could also been called one building as the houses had been build one against the other so that they rather formed a heap of houses than anything else. Behind these gathered some more houses, much smaller and less pompous than the main buildings of the three dominant clans, houses to the members of those and a few other families. Through the branches of the redwoods which made up most of the surrounding forest shone a greenish sun which illuminated the swirling dust with useless accuracy. Few people could be seen as the dryness and the heat of the sun had created a rather unpleasant cover of sudorific motionless air.

The crying of the treated wood suddenly subsided and there was nothing left but the metallic shriek of the saws' blades, the low hammering of the steam engines and the resinous scent of freshly cut wood.

Blade had gone to the window, looking out onto the place and now she pushed herself off the window frame where she had leaned (her dress rustled) and turned around to her brothers. Searcher had balanced his knife on his finger, but now he threw it upwards, grabbed it in midair and hurled it onto the table where it stuck deeply into the wood. Thus he attracted Wheel's attention who seemed to have forgotten about his surroundings. He raised his head and perceived that his brother's knife had just pinned the contest list to the table.

"That should do it," Blade mumbled. "That should do it."

Exhaling the lynx dropped down on the straw. One arm rested on his forehead while he stared at the wood of the roof which was just an arm's length from him. Nevertheless it was pretty bright in there due to the small hatches in the wall to his right. There was just enough space for two persons if there had been no straw but at least this way he had a soft underlay.

"OK?" The voice barely reached him as- because of this sudden relaxation- the tiredness of the last days' journey had come back and had almost instantly put him to sleep.

With an unpleasant groan he sat up again. "Yeah, fine!" He looked down from behind the pillar, the only separation between him and the gap which was the main room underneath him.

"You're sure?" The pointed ears of the older lynx twitched, maybe due to some never-ending nervousness.

"Yeah, thanks. It's OK with me!" The lynx above reassured the older one. The one below nodded slowly. "I'm sorry that I can't offer you anything better. I'd

really like to get a fellow lynx something better, but well..." He shrugged his shoulders. "By the way, my son'd like to meet you. He's just come back."

The one above sighed quietly and closed his eyes for a moment without answering. But then he raised his head again. "I'll come down!"

The older one nodded while the newcomer picked some straw out of his straggly brown hair and then quickly moved closer to the ladder which stood at the store, the only connection to the main room. Clumsily the young lynx descended while his host scrutinized him once again: He was quite small for his age although well trained and certainly a valuable worker with these muscles of his which stretched underneath his light brown fur. His small, very fluffy tail wagged nervously while he climbed down the ladder. He just wore an old ragged leather shirt and old denim shorts. He had come down and turned around to his host, thus showed his straight lined face which had just some few smoothness of youth. Some strange silver pendant hang around his neck. His slanting eyes shimmered.

"Well..." The older lynx was slightly embarrassed as he had stared so overtly at his guest. "He's outside," he said and tried to direct the younger lynx outside while taking the lead.

They walked across the small room which was cramped full with the furniture, the beds, the food, the tools and all the other stuff this family seemed to need. They stepped outside, onto the small verandah where an old table and some fragile stools stood. A young lynx instantly jumped up from his seat when they came closer.

"Hello!" he welcomed them. "I'm Mlala."

"Hi!" The newcomer from the inside blinked due to the brightness of the sunlight, after a short instant he was able to see the other one: Another lynx, slightly younger than him but a little bit larger, wearing thick leather clothes tied up to his body with countless leather straps. He seemed to be rather the wiry kind of lynx without any useless trace of fat or muscle. His short hair had exactly the same light brown color as his fur. He smiled friendly with all his juvenile features.

"Name's Jid!"

"Yeah, my father already told me that!" Mlala said, smiled and lowered his head. "So you're here to attend the race?"

"Nah!" Jid shook his head. "Just passin' through and I thought it'd be a good chance to get some money."

The other boy raised his head and stared at him with absolute disbelief.

The older lynx had observed the two youngsters with curiosity. "I'll leave you alone. Got some work to do!" he said quickly after some time and disappeared inside the house again.

Mlala finally found his speech again. "You're just attending it because of the money?" he asked highly exaggerated.

Jid had looked into the wood which grew just next to the house as it stood at the absolute edge of the town and he nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"Eh..." The other one was speechless. "Eh..." He waved his hands. "Let's sit down!" he invited his guest and they went over to the table and while Mlala sat



Mlala

down on a chair Jid simply sat down on the edge of the table, obviously not caring about manners. They were silent for a moment.

Sudden joyful cries of a young child broke through their silence and with waving hair a girl was running around the house, her thin blue dress fluttered as she hopped onto the veranda.

With a loud "Mlala!" she welcomed her brother and without stopping she ran over to him.

"Enja!" He grabbed her quickly, turned her around in midair and sat her down on his knee with such an incredible speed as he must have done many times before.

With big eyes the lynx girl studied the newcomer. She was very young, almost still a cub. Her hair was short as it had not grown that much yet and she looked rather skinny and tiny, especially in this poor dress she wore.

"Say hello, Enja! That's Jid, he's our guest for a while," Mlala introduced the other boy.

The girl raised her head and looked at the newcomer. There was a strange expression flickering over her face for a moment: Her eyes wide open she stared at him with a mixture of shyness and fear. "Did you really have to come so soon?" the girl asked.

Before Mlala could intervene Jid had already answered to the strange impolite question: "Ehrrr,... guess so!"

"Ooooh!" The girl blinked several times, gulped and fell silent for a moment. "So you won't leave us any more time, will you?"

Jid was absolutely confused for a moment. "What?" he blurred out.

"I'm sorry for her but she... Em! You know: Sometimes she is having some kind of visions or so," Mlala tried to excuse his sister who was already distracted by some butterfly which was flying over the verandah. "Actually I've no idea what she's talking about."

Jid was still tense, he stared at the girl with amazement and he screwed up his eyes while he tried to judge this innocent girl who was looking like she did not even know what she had been talking about. Slowly he relaxed as he observed like she tried to catch the peacock butterfly which danced around her head. He exchanged a short look with Mlala. "I've no idea either," he said to the boy.

"Oooh, you should have told after you came out of the cave!" the girl mumbled. She had caught the butterfly and was now busy with tearing the miserable insect apart.

"Uh?" Jid stared wildly at the girl which showed no interest for the distraught boy.

"But you shall have prevented to flee from the bar!" she advised him. "Or to let him take your shirt off..."

Carefully Mlala grabbed the girl and sat her down on her feet again while she was chewing on the butterfly, his colorful wings poking out of her small muzzle. "Maybe you should help Daddy!" he said to her and pat her on her backside.

"Yeah!" she cried, dashed off and disappeared inside.

Jid's eyes followed her.

"I'm sorry," Mlala apologized once more. "She always saying that kind of things and no one knows how to make any sense of it. Maybe she is just making it all up, but.... Well.... Since her mother's death she's like that..." He fell silent.

Motionlessly Jid was staring at the door where she had disappeared. He was still much too surprised by what the girl had mentioned and he wished that he had been unable to make any sense of what she had said. But the first part made sense and that was maybe the worst of it all, although he couldn't say what she had wanted to express with her last advise, for better or worse.

"So you want to attend the race?" the other lynx boy asked once more and thus caught Jid's attention.

First Jid stared at Mlala with wide opened eyes until he seemed to remember who that guy sitting there actually was. "Yeah,... right!"

Mlala nodded. He rocked his chair backwards and forwards, holding on to the table so that he wouldn't fall down. "I want to run too!"

"Yeah, I know!"

"And you do it just because of the money?" Mlala looked at him with slightly lowered head.

Jid supported himself on the table so that his straggly hair covered most of his face but then suddenly he raised it and thus the strands were flying backwards as he looked straight into Mlala's eyes. "Yeah, sort of!"

For a short moment Mlala stared at the lynx: The sunlight was right in his back so that his shape was sharply distinguishable although his features were partly hidden by shadows, but the light shimmered through his hair and the fur of his shoulders and thus emphasized the curves of his muscled body. "Well..." His tongue had suddenly gotten very dry. "We can't run both, you know?"

The newcomer blinked in surprise. Then he screwed up his slanting eyes so that they mere slits in his face. Very carefully he eyed every inch of the other one, every single line of muscle, every trace of a bone. "What d'you mean..." His voice was toneless.

Mlala blinked too, but because of the sunlight which did blind him partly. He smiled in embarrassment. "See! There's just one member of every species allowed to run."

The reaction of the other one was as true as surprising: He seemed to be totally flabbergasted. "What...?" he breathed.

"Like I said..." The younger lynx blushed slightly. "Just one member of every species is allowed to run: One horse, one wolf, one fox, one deer, one beaver, one... lynx!" He waited for a reaction but Jid was totally motionless. "See! It's about who'll represent the village in front of the Spirits. So there's just one runner, originally the heir, allowed per family and thus one member per species. I mean: You do not belong to my family but you're lynx, so..."

Jid was motionless for another moment, then he gulped and turned his face away. He stared at the forest close by although he did not seem to notice the wall of trunks and leaves. "I get it," he mumbled.

Mlala watched him for a while like he had folded his large paws and how his short tail wagged like in slow-motion: If he had not lost the typical lighter fur of

youth, one might have considered him to be younger than Mlala because of his small size. But his muscles proved that he could not be so young at all, although he seemed to be surprisingly strong for his age nevertheless and for a moment Mlala wondered how one could get such muscles in such a short life. "So...?"

Jid looked at him again.

"Who'll run?" He leaned in his chair, almost relaxing.

"I need the money," Jid stated shortly.

Shortly Mlala pulled a face. "I see..." He felt silent. "Actually..."

Jid did not take his eyes off the lynx.

"Actually I do represent a local family and you don't." He looked at the other lynx who did turn away. For a moment they glared at each other then Mlala turned away because of the sunlight. "But you're lynx, that's what's important... So I suggest that we'll run for it." He waited for a reaction. "OK?"

His ears twitched then he nodded slowly. "OK!"

"Good! The better one runs for the lynx." He smiled. "As long a lynx wins the Spirit's Race, both of us can be proud, right?"

Jid just screwed up the corner of his mouth. "Guess so..."

Mlala looked at him again but he screwed up his eyes as he tried to perceive Jid's features.

"Sure, the race is not that important anymore but the Big Three are still taking it quite seriously."

"Big Three?"

"The three clans: Storm's End, the deer clan; Nighthunters, the wolf clan and Nickel, the vulpine clan. But after all it isn't about the rule of the town anymore. Different stuff matters today."

Jid nodded.

"Nevertheless the Big Three are still into it and last year there was a real turmoil and some outsider who seemed to have been engaged by the foxes had won it and this year the others want to pay them back. So it will be real tough this year."

"Sort of a feud!?"

Mlala laughed shortly. "Yeah, blood feud! After all they can't support the disgrace, being dishonored in front of the Spirits and such stuff. Last year hell broke almost loose..."

The other boy nodded thoughtfully. "I bet!" He rose to full size and went over to the edge of the veranda, leaned against a pillar which supported the roof and there he stood while he looked out into the wood close by. As the sun was moving on, a strange mixture of a greenish and reddish light had taken over the forest. Long drawn slanting rays of light shone through the branches and the foliage, illuminating the floor. A three-eyed squirrel² was jumping at a trunk, it looked nervously into their directions while it had clawed at the bark in a moderate height. It blinked shortly and then suddenly, although they hadn't even moved a bit, the squirrel run up the tree as fast as it could and disappeared between the branches.

Jid had raised one hand and was gnawing at the claw of his thumb which was hidden underneath its furry sheath. "Ten red stones," he mumbled. "It's ten red stones..."

With every last trace of power his body still hold he buried his fist in the punching bag so that it swung backwards with a inert movement. His hand hurt almost instantly after he had retired it, a dull pain was extending into the limb, gnawed at the bones of his entire arm. Unconsciously he rubbed his hand while he stared at the swinging sandbag. The hammering sound of the steam engines was almost insupportable in the backyard where he stood but he was much too used to it to even noticed it.

Slowly he went over to heap of trunks which leaned against the wall of the sawmill and let himself drop down onto them with a sigh. He breathed heavily and looked up into the sky where he could see some birds which flew around like they had not anything better to do. Leaning against the wood he sighed once more.

He could feel like his sweat dried due to the faint wind and the day's heat. The sweat dried and left behind an unpleasant crust of salt which covered almost all of his skin which was so itchy underneath his sticky fur that he wished he could tear it off. But in this very moment he didn't care after all. The last drops flowed dropped down from his gray hair and onto his black muzzle.

Suddenly a loud hiss broke through the rhythm of the steam engines and then the hammering of the engines slowly subsided, they got slower and finally they stopped completely and left behind nothing but the strange humming noise of silence in his ears.

With another sigh he started to undo the bandages which had been wrapped around his hands and had almost cut off their blood cycle so that they had felt cold like numb stumps at the end of his arms, feeling neither touch nor pain. Now as the blood rushed back into his fingers the usually pleasant warmth of it almost hurt. He crumpled up the pieces of cloth and hurled them away so that they landed in between the heap of sawdust which occupied the space at the other wall which formed this small backyard. As his eyes had followed them he suddenly noticed that the wooden door there was opened and that a vixen stood in the door frame, smiling at him and carefully holding her two cubs in her arm.

"Hi, there," she said.

He stared into her gray-blue eyes for a moment and then the blood shot through his entire body again, instinctively he stretched himself, sat up straight and tried to reply the smile.

"Hi!" he said to her, slightly blushing.

She smiled even more compassionately than she had already done. She stepped outside and carefully carrying the two small bundles on her left arm she went over to him and sat down right beside him.

They were silent for a moment. The two still very young, lupine cubs ³ were both sleeping just their muzzles twitched a little bit sometimes.

With a strange mixture of happiness, pride, love and tiredness he looked at the two babies and he raised his finger as he intended to stroke them.

But she quickly grabbed his fingers with her free hand and with a smile she put them back where they belonged. "Don't disturb them!" she said carefully. "I'm just happy they are finally sleeping."

He noticed the bags under her eyes. "They kept you busy?"

"Oh, yes! All day long!" she assured him and while she said that he had already approached her and kissed the fluffy fur of her neck. His lips gently caressed the skin before he playfully gnawed at it. "Don't!" She was laughing faintly and bowed her head to get away but instead she brushed her cheek against his and he gave in to her caress and for a moment they let the furs intertwine, enjoyed the other ones closeness. He raised his hand and gently stroke her other cheek, let his fingers brush through her short gray vulpine fur. "Don't!" she repeated. "Your mother could see us!"

"What if?" he asked quietly and she answered with a giggle.

A short growl brought them back and they were startled for an instant. Instantly they separated and sat up straight. A much older wolf woman had appeared in the door frame and was glaring at the two. From below her long plaits she was staring at them. "Just because you're married, doesn't mean that I'd allow any kind of foolishness!" she said so that the boy and the girl could clearly understand her.

"Sorry, mum!" the young man apologized. The girl was shyly looking at him. "Please, just a moment, we just wanted to talk."

"Talking is alright!" the woman said and her glare made sure that there could be no kind of misunderstanding.

"Yes, mum! Thank you, mum!"

The woman gave them a last glare, eyed them carefully, first the boy with the bare chest and then especially carefully the vulpine girl in her rather unfamiliar leather clothes which had been cut, although widely, in a manner which emphasized her female curves and her rather short hair she was still wearing openly. The woman wrinkled her nose and finally, much to the relief of her son and his wife, disappeared inside the house again.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled after a moment.

"You don't have to," she assured him. "We both knew that it wouldn't be easy."

"Yes,..." He hesitated. "We knew..." He fell silent.

One of the babies opened his muzzle wide and something like a yawn escaped his small throat, a faint but likeable sound. Slowly he closed his mouth again and snuggled up (or at least moved) inside his coat which protected him, so that he lay silently against his sister's or brother's side. Shannanah and Wheel were completely absorbed by him and they watched everyone of his movements as carefully as possible and while Shannanah tried to hold her cub as comfortable as possible, Wheel stretched out his little finger and he was beaming with joy, happiness and pride as his child grabbed his finger in its small hands. Shannanah

smiled happily at him although he did not notice as he was still looking at the baby.

“Forgive me, Shannanah, but...” He blushed. “But I still can’t tell them apart.”

For a short moment a broad smile flitted over Shannanah’s face. “You should spend more time with them,” she said without the slightest trace of an accusation.

“I will,” he promised. “I will!” He pressed his lips together until there was nothing but a thin line left. “As soon as this damn...” This last word was nothing but a hiss in between his teeth. “...race is over I’ll spend all of my time with them. And with you, of course!” He still stared at his child.

She lowered her face and watched his finger which was still held captive by Shade, his daughter, although he did not know that. “Look!” she said quietly. “The small dark spot between her eyes...”

“You’re right!” he said instantly and smiled again. “I’m sorry, Shade!” he apologized towards his slumbering daughter. He leaned over to the absolutely motionless second baby. “I’m sorry too, Rush!” he whispered carefully to his son.

Shannanah carefully rocked their cubs on her arm. They were still so young that she could carry them on one arm. She was startled for a moment as she felt like he was carefully pushing the hair from her neck and then his soft lips gently lowered onto her fur. It tickled first but then she could feel the warmth of his mouth which sparkled underneath her skin.

Instinctively she leaned her head against his.

“That’s enough!”

The sudden yell paralyzed them as it hit them out of the blue and then she already stood in front of them, had grabbed Shannanah’s arm and had pulled her away from her husband. Although every fiber in the girl’s body was disobedient she had already been forced onto her feet, meanwhile Wheel stared at his mother with a total bewilderment.

“What...?” The boy mumbled while his mother pulled his wife behind herself and so forced herself in between the two.

“That’s enough!” His mother glared down onto him. “We won’t start with such foolishness now!”

He jumped up onto his feet and glared at her with all of his juvenile fury. “We have not done anything!” he blurt out.

Despite her gender she was still much bigger than him and so she eyed him carefully from above. After a short meaningful pause she said: “I won’t discuss that with you!”

Every fiber in his body was stretched up to the brink of being torn apart by his anger. He saw his mother through a red haze of blood but then he perceived Shannanah behind his mother and he could see like she was mumbling “Please!” although she remained silent. He swallowed it all down.

“Your grandfather wants to see you,” his mother said.

Some droning sound was still humming in his ears and he still tried to restrain himself. “Yes, mum!” he said.

It was silent for a moment. The sun was no longer shining into the backyard. It had disappeared behind the surrounding walls and the trees behind these and so the shadowy twilight of the evening was now occupying this place. The wooden walls had darkened and seemed to be thicker and even more impenetrable than they already were and now the small tree, the only plant there, was the only thing which still reached out high enough to get some light. Its highest branches slowly moved in the remains of the reddish sunlight and their rustle filled out the silence which occupied the entire backyard.

“Good!” the woman said. Her plaits swirled about when she turned around and she grabbed the lupine girl’s arm and forced her to follow her back into the house. Shannanah instinctively tried to resist but the wolf woman was much too strong for her and so she had to follow her, after she had been looking after Wheel.

Their eyes met for a moment and they exchanged a look of love and helplessness which mixed with the boy’s hardly restraint anger. But then Shannanah had already disappeared inside the house and Wheel stood alone in the backyard, his fist cramping painfully.

During afternoon clouds gathered in the sky, like they had dated up there they showed up all at once and very quickly they had filled the sky with white scraps which offered- at least sometimes- a reminiscence of a shadow which covered the burning sun for a short moment and thus offered a short moment of release from the sunlight. According to the clouds a faint wind had come too and the leaves rustled calmly and the shimmering spots of sunlight on the forest ground danced around.

Even though he had somehow noticed the slight change of the weather he was quite happy about the easing of the warmth but on the other hand he had already been happy when they had penetrated deeper and deeper into the forest as its coolness accumulated around them and made every breath a little bit easier. Except for the heavy undergrowth and the unstable, moist ground which hid lots of stones and trunks and boughs beneath the densely growing moss it seemed to him like almost any forest he had seen before and thus he did not feel particularly sorry about not being able to appreciate his surroundings. But after quite some time he got that chance nevertheless because he had to slow down as his guide was not able to catch up with him anymore.

“Dear Spirit of wind,” Mlala gasped and inhaled deeply. “You’re so good...” He left the rest up to the other lynx’ imagination as he was already much too occupied with running. His feline legs, rather adapted for sprint than long distance running, hurt and his chest felt like a bowl of burning coal.

Jid had slightly slowed down so that he could run at Mlala’s side. He did not know the way to the Tacolar Tree even though there was something like a small beaten path, but this one disappeared very often in between the moss and the fern or behind some stones or so and thus it was not very easy to follow and as

he followed it for the very first time he rather invested some time in observing his surroundings so that he might find it all on his own again.

“OK! OK!” Mlala hissed and stopped suddenly.

Jid stopped at a certain distance too and eyed the panting boy who supported himself on a tree.

“I give up...” Mlala gasped. “You run!” He took a deep breath. “I got no chance against you, nor against any other.” He coughed. “You run tomorrow...” He tried to overcome his panting but instead he coughed even more violently. His chest burned like hell and now his feet felt like being made out of lead which yanked at his limbs. “You run tomorrow...” he repeated.

There was no trace of triumph on Jid’s face, nor any other proof that he had understood the meaning of that statement.

“That’s what you wanted...?!” A smile flitted over Mlala’s face. “Now you’ll get your chance to win the money...”

The other lynx nodded slowly. “Thanks,” he said shortly. Except for the sweat on his forehead he did not seem to be exhausted.

“It’s OK!” Mlala waved his hand. “Guess I never had a real chance at all.”

The slanted eyes narrowed. “What d’you mean?”

“For all the others I have always been a push-over and I have just run to represent our kind, so... I guess you’re a much more serious opponent for Fistle, Thunder, Big Wheel and all the others...”

For a moment they were both silent, just the sounds of the forest surrounded them and Jid raised his head and watched up into the branches of the trees where a small ray of light was getting through and shone almost directly on his face so that he had to close his eyes. “Who’re they?” he asked.

“Hm?” Mlala had just lowered his head for a moment. “Who? Fistle, Thunder and Big Wheel?”

Jid nodded.

“Fistle runs for Nickel, the fox clan. He is a young man, certainly the best of his entire family, although you hardly see him very often because- just like the rest of his family- he’s a trader. He’s a very good runner, very fast. Thunder is the runner of the deer clan, Storm’s End. Being a stag and maybe the oldest of us he’s very steady, has got lots of stamina and is very stubborn as well. He can be really mean and he’s not known to care about fairness or such. As anyone did! But Thunder is really bad, trust me! Two years ago he attacked me from behind and broke my leg, so... Well, I hope you know how to deal with such guys. And there’s Big Wheel, of course. He’s a wolf and runs for his clan, the Nighthunters. I’d say that he’s maybe the best of all but...” Suddenly he stopped and raised his head. His light brown hair shimmered with a strange greenish shade. “Last year he really mucked it up, so I guess he’s very eager to get it this year. That’s why I’d pay attention. And who else? There’s Grand Leaf, a pony, who isn’t bad either; there’s Tzerska, an old rabbit hunter from the Blue Ridge Mountains, a real toughie; Gynes, a beaver, a friend of mine, he knows that he’s got no chance but he doesn’t want to disappoint his family; there’s some boar from Amalkin I do not

know and... There some more I do not remember. But these should be the most important ones.”

Jid observed Mlala, his slanting eyes were merely open while he eyed the exhausted lynx.

Mlala noticed the strange glare of the other lynx and was a little bit startled for a moment but as Jid noticed his reaction he quickly turned his head away. There was a strange, embarrassing silence for a moment, hardly filled up by the forest's sound and thus Mlala quickly went on: “Some time ago, the Big Three settled this always among themselves and they're still very serious about this, so I guess Fistle, Thunder and Big Wheel will lead the race.”

Thoughtfully the other lynx nodded. “Can you show me the way to this tree?” he asked.

Mlala had already forgotten about this. “Yes, of course.”

They started anew, but much more slowly this time as Mlala was still much to exhausted to be able to run at Jid's usual speed. The small path they followed led them deeper into the forest and their surroundings became wilder with every step they made. Jid knew these kinds of forest pretty well but he had to admit that he would have been completely lost if Mlala did not guide him because the likeness of this area was easily fooling everyone who did not know it pretty well. Even though the sun was still burning brightly in the sky the air beneath the treetops was still somehow cool, the moist scents of it swirled around their muzzles like a fading *deja-vu* and soon they both did not pay any attention anymore as they slowly accelerated their pace as the undergrowth became less dense, instead the ground beneath their bare feet was getting much more wet and they jumped over small rivulets and green heaps of thick moss. The smell changed slightly, filled with the strange, bitter scent of fern crushed beneath their soles.

With every step he made he felt like the joy mounted inside him until it seemed to him like his entire chest would burst, his feet moved all by themselves and thus he was fully absorbed by the feeling of the air rushing by his face, the shades of green shooting past, the gentle, ephemeral touch of fern and moss, brushing his fur. His dark brown hair and pointed ears fluttered in the wind and he accelerated more and more, simply because it felt so good to let it all behind and very quickly his guide was no longer able to keep up with him. But he did no longer pay any attention to it anymore as the path he believed to follow seemed to be totally straight now. He wanted to cry with joy because it felt so good.

His stop was as hard as violent. He had expected this clearing long before but when he had stepped out of the forest he was- at first- blinded by the sunlight but he noticed the strange, unfamiliar scent and thus, before he had even seen them, he had already stopped and stood motionlessly at the edge of the wood and stared at the three figures while his eyes slowly adapted to the brightness his feline eyes were hardly able to support. With narrowed, slanting eyes he glared at them.

“Who the fuck is that?” There was a short pause. “Who the fuck are you?”

He swallowed the saliva which had gathered in his mouth and slowly he scrutinized the three stags which stood beneath the tree: There were quite large,

much bigger than him (like almost every deer), their scanty clothing displayed freely their impressive muscles beneath their smooth, shiny dark brown fur which let the whiter fur on their chest shimmer with even greater intensity. The light brown hair and their antlers shook slightly when they scrutinized the lynx just like he did scrutinize them.

“Anybody knows that cat¹?” one of them, sitting on a small rock close by the trunk, asked.

He had almost blond hair and wore a necklace with a silver bell as a pendant around his neck. Every time he moved the bell rung with a clear, high sound.

The two others shook their heads “Nope!”

“Hey, cat! Swallowed your tongue?” the first one asked. The two other grinned. “Are you deaf? I am talking to you...!”

The lynx did not move, just his tail wagged frantically.

Slowly the stag with the bell stood up, at full height he was at least three heads bigger than the feline even though he could not be that old at all. Slowly he made some steps into the direction of the lynx.

“You’re supposed to answer, cat,” the stag at the leader’s right side said.

Meanwhile the leader with the long blond hair was five steps away from the feline. He returned the lynx’ glare.

For a moment there was total silence except for the droning of the dragonflies and the other insects which flew all over the wet ground.

“I don’t like disobedient cats,” the leader said slowly.

Very slowly the lynx bared his gritted predator teeth. “Don’t call me a cat!” he hissed.

The leader smiled scornfully. “So you are what?” His antlers shook. “Or do *you* want to tell *me* that I am not allowed to call a fucking cat a fucking cat..., eh?”

The cat hissed shortly and then a violent smile flitted over his face. “At least I got all I need unlike any bullock such as you!”

For a moment the three stags were unable to react because they were so surprised by that offense. First their faces just displayed disbelief then their features hardened again until there was nothing but anger and hatred left. “Just repeat that...” the stag at the left growled.

Suddenly the noise of someone staggering through the wood got closer and within a very short time Mlala entered the clearing in a rush. He was panting, hardly able to breathe properly, sweat dropped from his forehead and he seemed to be so miserable because of his exhaustion that nobody expected him to grasp the situation so quickly. But within an instant the lynx had perfectly understood what was going on and before anyone was able to react to his appearance he was already standing in between Jid and the huge stag. “Sorry, we did not mean to disturb you, Thunder!”

The stag in lead slowly raised his head, his eyes would have reduced the boy to cinders if they had could. “Mlala!? I should have known that this turd belongs to you...” He glared at Jid. “Unfortunately that won’t save him either...,” he hissed and stepped forward.

“Look, Thunder! He’s a newcomer, OK? He doesn’t know about you or anyone else in town...”

“I won’t let myself be insulted by some *cat!*”

“Please, Thunder, don’t take it seriously, OK? He was just training with me...”

“What?” The stag raised his head and glared at them from above. “This looser runs instead of you?”

Mlala blushed. “Well..., yes!”

Suddenly the stag started to smile, a devious, sadistic grin in his face. He pointed his index at the lynx behind Mlala. “I will save myself that for tomorrow. It will be a pleasure to me...”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” the light furred lynx replied coldly.

Thunder nodded so that the bell around his neck ringed brightly then he turned around and went back to his companions who still stood beneath the huge silver leaved Tacolar Tree. As he walked back he displayed once more his impressive muscles, he was almost double the size of the felines and most certainly double their combined weight, his muscles showed a gracious play of smooth movements beneath his thick, furry skin and his powerful hind legs sunk deeply into the soft, wet ground.

Jid stared after him.

Mlala carefully grabbed his shoulder. “Come!” he said simply and very slowly and unwillingly the other lynx turned around as well and followed his guide back into the wood.

They walked in silence back to the small village. Mlala kept his head low, he was still feeling ill at ease because of this meeting with Thunder and he was sure that it meant trouble for Jid, but he had to know by himself and did not seem to worry half as much as Mlala did. Meanwhile Jid carefully studied their surroundings, to memorize as much of this area as possible. Unlike all other contestants he was a total foreigner and he had to follow the path even though it was anything but used to be straight. But in between these high firs and the large boulders which laid all around the hilly landscape he was sure that he would quickly get lost if he did not take good care. In the hollows in between the boulders gathered water so that the ground was a reminiscent of a swamp rather than a forest as the ground was so yielding that the only plants (except of trees with large roots) which were able to grow there were fern, moss and the strange plants of swamps which partly fed on small insects. The path led all around these so it was hardly surprising that it was pretty winding, searching its way upon elevated ground, especially in between the boulders which stood erect on hard ground, most of them larger than three bears standing one upon another, unmistakable landmarks, some small hills in their own right, half covered by earth and overgrown by small trees.

The way was much longer than Jid would have expected: This Race of the Spirits (or whatever it was called) was anything but a stroll and it needed a lot of endurance to get through with it. Being a cross-country race as well meant even more difficulties and as far as Mlala had given him hints about the race’s *customs*, half of it was rather a battle among the contestants than a running contest.

The smaller lynx was completely lost in his thoughts, just absent-mindedly eyeing his surroundings when Mlala grabbed his arm. For an infinitely short moment he had to fight back his instincts, being touched by some stranger. But as the other lynx was pointing at something he had no time thinking about that. Instead he looked into the direction Mlala had pointed at: On the boulder they were just walking by, an especially large and long drawn one, were two figures running along its ridge.

Before Jid was able to react Mlala had already been jumping aside, hiding himself behind a trunk. "Hey," he hissed at his companion and gave him a sign to hide himself too.

Instead of replying Jid screwed up his eyes and turned towards the two runners again who were approaching quickly and got fully into his view: They were apparently two wolves, the first one was a rather large and slender man with lots of muscles and a dark gray fur which shimmered whenever he ran across a beam of sunlight which had gotten through the foliage of the forest. The second one was smaller and most certainly younger than the first, but equally muscled. His fur was rather tan and strangely it did not shimmer at all just like he did not take care of it. But when he ran into the sunlight his companion had just left something strange happened to his fur: For a short moment it shimmered like perfect silver, before he dived into the shadow again and his fur got this common tan color again. The straps of his leather clothes fluttered around him while he jumped over stones and cracks in the rock, his brown hair waved around his head and the two lupine men were now right above the two lynx.

Jid did not take his eyes off the second wolf.

And just when he was about to run past them the wolf turned his head around and looked directly into the lynx' direction. Their eyes met, the dark brown, feline ones met the yellow ones of the lupine and in this instant it felt like they were touching each other, feeling the softness of their furs, the litheness of their muscles and the hardness of their will which was just about to swirl around the other one, trying to judge him, uncertain about what to do they circled around and everything else was cast aside until the running wolf had to turn his head away again, leaving the lynx behind who looked after the lupine with his harsh, slanted eyes, his tail wagging anxiously.

"Fortunate you are!" Mlala blurred out, coming out from behind the tree. "If Searcher had seen you..." He whistled.

The two figures and now disappeared behind the slope of this boulder but Jid was still staring into their direction. "Who's been this one?" he asked.

"Who? The second? That's been Big Wheel, the runner of the Nighthunters!"

Jid screwed up his eyes. "So we're opponents..."

The so called dining hall was the main room of the inhabited part of the sawmill. The bedrooms and such were all on the second floor, only the kitchen and the dining hall could be found on the first floor besides the storage rooms, the office, the workshops, the engine room and most of all the huge hall with the

saws which occupied the biggest part of the entire house. There was a small, dark windowless corridor which connected them all where Wheel walked through. Compared to the heat of the sun outside the somber coolness inside almost made him shiver. But he hardly noticed that as he headed directly for the dining hall where dinner would be served soon.

The huge portal of the hall was opened widely so that at least a little bit of light shone into the dimness inside this room with its small windows. It had been the largest workshop once (besides the saws' hall, of course) but his clan had transformed it into a dining hall where the whole family could easily gather, although just men were allowed to dine here.

The scent of roasted meat welcomed him although dinner had not been served yet. But some people had already gathered: Blade, his sister, sat with Steel and Sheen at the end of the huge table closest to him; Shakira sat all by himself, as usual; Terror, the second oldest man of the clan, had fallen asleep and did not seem to be troubled by the noisily talking men close by who had gathered there at the very end of the huge table. There sat Boulder, Wheel's father, Uncle Giant Net, Uncle Trunk, Cascade, Steady Vane and in between these, easily to go unnoticed because of his emaciated old body, grandpa whose economical movements proved that anyone who expected this old wolf to be weak was most certainly wrong. When they noticed Wheel's arrival they all raised their heads and observed like he approached them.

Wheel felt rather uncomfortable being observed like that but nevertheless he headed directly for them. He stopped at a certain polite distance of them, anticipating an invitation or such but instead the men just scrutinized the young wolf who felt worse every second he had to carry the burden of their unpronounced judgement.

After some time which seemed to Wheel almost like an eternity his father finally spoke.

"How's the training going?"

Wheel had expected anything but such a trivial matter. "Pardon?" he asked stupidly.

"How's your training?" Boulder repeated.

He opened and shut the mouth several times and finally said nothing but: "Fine!" He could feel the sweat on his forehead.

His father nodded thoughtfully. "Very well!" Another silence followed that statement. "Do you feel up to run?"

"Of course," the young wolf instantly blurred out and unconsciously stretched himself a bit.

Once again Boulder nodded and there was another silence, just the faint whisper of Blade's, Steel's and Sheen's conversation filled the room and the dulled noise of the steam engines running at half speed in the cellar. Some few rays of sunlight fell through the windows and lost themselves in the large room, hardly illuminating the decorated shields on the walls.

"As it could get any better!" Grandpa said coldly and uttered something like a short laughter. "Of course, you run!" With an explosive movement he had raised

his stick and pointed it right onto Wheel. "That's the least you can do after all you have done! I would not accept any further disgrace. If you don't do your damn duty I would put you where you got with this whore of yours, once and for all." He mumbled something which no one could understand, then he flared up again. His yellow eyes shimmered like gold in the brightest sunlight. "But your children are Nighthunters although I would have drowned these crossbred bastards⁴ right from the start. There's no doubt that you run for us! As you had any choice..."

There was deathly silence for a moment even Blade and her companions did not speak anymore, everybody stared at the old man whose paw which hold the stick trembled with anger, his breath hissed in between his sharp carnivorous teeth. Very slowly they turned the heads towards Wheel and there was no doubt that the young wolf was hardly able to restrain himself, despite his gray fur everyone could see that he had gotten pale with anger, his hands had formed fists and his tail was as stiff as a metal blade.

"Shannanah is my wife," Wheel hissed. "And I will do my duty even..."

"SHUT UP!" The old wolf cried as loud as he could. The words echoed throughout the entire hall and ringed in the sensible lupine ears.

Some other members of the clan had arrived, anticipating dinner but now that they witnessed this they stood still and did not even dare to move while they eyed the old wolf and Wheel.

Carefully Vane pat on the old man's shoulder. "Please, I know that..."

"As you ever had won the race!" Grandpa flared up again. "You disappointed us twice! No wonder you support this disgrace of our family!" His stick still pointed on Wheel. "Just go and join him!"

For a moment Steady Vane supported the old man's glare but then he lowered his head and turned away.

"Please, Tracker," Trunk said carefully. "There's no need to upset you."

"Don't tell me what I got to do," the old man hissed and turned towards the thin, lupine at his side.

"We have discussed this matter, haven't we?" Trunk went on in as soothing as possible.

"We have found a solution, haven't we? And I guess we should just let this boy run his race and deal with the rest all by ourselves."

Everybody in the dining hall watched the old man and waited for an answer of his.

"Somebody get this *woman* out of here!" Grandpa suddenly yelled, pointing at Blade at the other end of the room.

For a moment the she-wolf was surprised but then she screwed up her eyes and very slowly she stood up, not taking an eye of the old man. Her tail was stiff.

"Just because your husband was stupid enough to get himself killed does not mean that you can do what you want! Get into the kitchen where you belong," he cried after her who did not even waste a look on him anymore, just walked out of the dinning hall as proudly as she was still able to.

It was quiet again. Someone had stopped the steam engines and so there was no sound left. Even the breath of the gathered men seemed to have vanished.

“Alright?” Trunk asked carefully, breaking the silence.

The jaw of the old wolf moved for a moment, then he growled shortly which seemed to be some kind of an approval.

Instantly everyone seemed to relax except Wheel who was a tense as he had been before. His jaw ached because of his gritted teeth.

“You may go, Wheel!” he heard his father say and without raising his head he turned around on the spot and walked down the hall to get to his place at the very end of the huge table.

With a sigh he let himself drop down onto the hay and instantly he felt his muscles relaxing as a gentle lightness swayed through his limbs. The training had been exhausting enough to remind him of any fiber he had successfully ignored for a long time. But now he could feel them all and he had to remind himself that he was not as trained a runner as he had wanted to be.

His arm rested on his forehead while he stared upon the low wooden ceiling right above his face.

Mlala was anything but an opponent and Mlala knew that himself. He was much too feline to be any threat to all the others: He was a good short distance runner but lacked endurance to complete this race successfully. He had been panting terribly just after they had just finished one way. There was no chance of winning for him. But after all he had said that he has just been participating because one lynx had to be present at least.

His nose twitched slightly when he inaudibly whispered something. He raised his hand and started gnawing at his claw.

He gave a damn about this racism in this town, although Mlala seemed to be proud of him because there was now a lynx who could be a serious opponent for all the others. And during dinner Mlala’s father had not been any better but had kept on babbling about how it would be if a lynx really won. And Enja had stared at him the whole time like she was sure that he was going to make it and that had worried him most. As far as Mlala had informed him, the others were anything but pushovers. Especially the one from the stag clan seemed to be a real toughie, just like some pony who was going to attend the race and the wolves seemed to risk anything to win this year because of their rather shameful defeat last year. But all the others could still play some dirty game, after all there were no rules, except: Run alone and come back first with a branch of this holy Tacolar tree or whatever it was called.

He sighed silently.

He did not give a damn about this damn religious stuff, nor about this town and all its racist inhabitants but this race was worth ten red stones and he really needed that. Up to now he would hardly be able to pay the toll of the Tide Cruise Ferries. So he had to get through this damn race somehow. There was no different option he wanted to think about...

For a short moment the lynx was painfully reminded of his gender but he cast that aside as he really did not want to confuse himself with this disguise as long as he needed it.

He really had to get away from this damn place as fast as he could. But tomorrow there was the race and if everything went right he could be out the next morning. No, he would be out anyway.

The hay warmed him up and although his lynx eyes he could hardly see anything anymore. It had gotten completely silent in the house, now that Mlala, Enja and their father had retired to their small sleeping room, the only other room in this house. And now he was all alone in this one, laying in the hayloft and watching an invisible ceiling above him. He could be lucky that he had a dry sleeping place all for himself this night but he was really not in the mood to take pleasure in that.

Slowly he rose, exhaling deeply. He blinked while he tried to adapt to all the blackness around him and after a moment he was able to see a little bit more. There was Tezu's reddish moonlight shining brightly outside and some of it shone through the window and illuminated the small room with its dim gleam, so that after a moment he was able to perceived the outlines of his surroundings.

The hay had been comfortably warm and soft so that leaving it was anything but easy to him but nevertheless he rose slowly and carefully approached the place where the ladder which led down had to be. When his hands had found it he hold it tightly and slowly started to climb it down. Cautiously he sat his feet onto the ladder steps as he tried to suppress any possible creak of the wood. Very slowly he climbed down and finally met the ground.

He rubbed his nose and buried one hand in his pocket where he could feel the round shapes of some blue stones he had left.

He sneaked throughout the room, avoiding the different tools of leather cutting, the table, the stools and all the other stuff which lay around and reached the door which he opened with care. Thankfully they did not lock it.

Silently he slipped outside and closed the door behind him and then stepped down from the veranda and into the reddish moonlight.

Tezu had risen high above the horizon while Heya was still hidden behind the dark curtain of the forest and would not raise until much later. But Koda was there as well, although he did not radiate any light at all, on the contrary the black moon seemed to consume any light in its surroundings and thus it was nothing but a black circle in the sky where no stars where looking through. The other stars were almost clearly visible because there was nothing in the sky except some very few, very thin, high floating clouds which did not really count. So Tezu ruled the sky, its blood red circle displayed a strange, checked pattern of interwoven lines.

While inhaling the much cooler night air he lowered his head. There was no wind at all and the forest had not given away all of the day's heat so that it was anything but unpleasant. There were just some grasshoppers chirping somewhere and some invisible frogs croaked as well but except for these, there was no other sound except for his own heartbeat.

He turned away from his hosts' house and went off towards the town center. Beneath his feline feet the small stones of the *street* cracked and rustled despite his natural stealth. But he did not give a damn about stealth right now and so it did not really matter.

It was anything but difficult to recognize the bar. There was just one sole building which was so brightly illuminated and where so many voices were coming from. With long, steady steps he approached the house which seemed to have merged with those around it. Without hesitating he walked inside.

The smoke had gotten so thick that one's eyes instantly started watering after having penetrated the dense fumes, unless one was used to such conditions. But the noises were almost equally awful because the bar was so overcrowded by people who wished to see the race and thus had gathered in this small settlement and now had been looking for a little bit of entertainment in its only bar. It was maintained by the foxes but even these had agreed that it should be neutral ground because this was much better for their earnings after all, so it was no surprise that many wolves, deer and other inhabitants had come there too. So this place was not dominated by one of the three clans.

The wooden room was quite large, despite a low ceiling and some pillars which supported it. It was separated by some steps and a handrail so that there was the bar and a free space on one side and tables on the other. Almost every stool or chair was occupied, so the people even thronged around the bar and no one noticed the lynx who came in.

Other people might have been overcome by the intensity of impressions, the smoke, the noise and the heat but the lynx just needed a deep breath, inhaling the odors of so many different species (as well as drinks and meals) and he had adapted to this breathtaking overcrowding even though the sensibility of his kind. After all he was used to this pretty well.

He pushed himself through the much bigger, older customers (all male he noticed by the way) closer to the bar. Some gave him a curious look but nobody gave him any specific attention and finally he reached the bar.

"What 'ya want?" a vulpine barman shouted while running by, carrying five huge glasses of beer in one hand, five empty ones in the other. Sweat had wet his forehead's fur.

"Beer!" the lynx cried, trying to reach the fox who was already busy serving some guests at the other end of the bar.

"Normal, strong or spiced?" the fox shouted, running by with some emptied glasses.

"Spiced," the lynx replied, wondering what that could actually mean. Before he had been able to blink the barman slammed a huge glass on the bar right in front of the feline's muzzle.

"That's two blue stones," he said, watching his guest with cold vulpine eyes.

"Errrh..., yes!" Jid answered and started rummaging around in his pockets, to get the required money. He took out what he found and counted the two small jewels.

The barman watched him with unexpected patience. "OK!" He grabbed the jewels, glared at the feline, then the vulpine disappeared almost instantly and left the feline alone with the huge glass.

For another moment the lynx stared at what was left of his money, the few glittering jewels in his furless palm. His fingers played the smooth round jewels around and he tried to figure where he would get with that. Not very far, that was certain, it would not even be enough to take him across Lake Moonfire. He gulped, put them back into his pocket and took a cautious sip at his drink and discovered- much to his relief- that it was no particularly strong draft, instead it tasted a little bit of cinnamon and aniseed. The taste was strange but not unpleasant.

His attempts to look around were pretty futile because so many people tried to reach the bar and thus he was obliged to push his way through the crowd to be able to take a proper breath again. Using all strength necessary to protect himself from being crushed and his beer from being completely spilled he forced himself through.

Finally he got through and suddenly found himself in the only free space in the whole bar, in between the tables and the bar.

"That's him!" somebody said loud enough so that the lynx' sensible ears could hear it.

"That's that roamer!"

"Who?" somebody different asked.

"The lynx who wants to run," the first voice answered.

"Bloody stranger!" a third voice added.

The lynx spied at the talkers from the corner of his eyes without turning around and noticed three wolves at a table close by, a larger, older one in leather hunting clothes, one who seemed to be a young woman (maybe the only one in the bar) in simple hunting clothes, wide enough to hide away most indications of her femininity (except for her long hair, of course) and a smaller one in a simple blue shirt. It was the wolf they had met in the forest, the lynx instantly recognized him again.

He tried not to pay any attention to them and instead to find a free place which he found finally on a narrow staircase leading to another part of the house. There he sat down, sipped at the spiced beer and motionlessly observed the other customers: Of course there were pretty many red furred foxes, but many wolves and stags as well. There were only few members of different species, the lynx noticed a ram, some horses, three boars and a couple of squirrels (who kept to themselves in a dark corner at the end of the room). Maybe there were others as well, but he did not notice these in between the many other guests. But most of all he realized that he seemed to be the only feline.

After some time the taste of the beer got stale and he could slightly feel the effects of the alcohol. Maybe it had not been such a good idea to waste his last money just for such a drink. But when had he last visited a bar?

He had been somehow lost in his thoughts so that he did not notice the fox before he was already standing right in front of him. And before he had been able

to react the muscled vulpine, dressed in clothes just as red as his fur, had already sat down right by his side.

"You're that lynx roamer, aren't cha?" His breath was heavy with alcohol.

"Yeah," the lynx replied, cautiously eyeing the fox with screwed up, slanted eyes.

"Tell me why're you running, huh?" The fox' hair was hanging right into his face, hiding away his half closed, bloodshot eyes. "It's not your town, eh?"

The lynx hesitated for a moment. "None of your business!" he replied after a while.

"Not my business?" The fox flared up. "Who do you think you're running against, eh?" He leaned over, closer to the lynx face so that the bitter stench of his breath was blown right into those face. "We ain't no losers such as you! *Cats!*" It sounded like an insult and it was certainly meant as such. "We damn know what's right and wrong! This is our town and you, damn bastards, have no damn right to run! I tell ya!"

The lynx stood up without a reply and left the fox behind.

"Hey, what 'cha think?" he shouted after the feline. "I wuzz talking to ya! Damn, bloody outsider! You're a pussy or what?"

The lynx was not getting forward as fast as he wished to because of the many other people.

"Pussy, I say! Damn pussy running! You just stand there and let this feline bastard go? Don't do anything, eh? Could as well let some slut run? Damn cowards! Cowards like Big Wheel!"

The wolf named Big Wheel flared up from his chair while his older companion tried to keep him down. "Damn say that again and I crush your jaw!" the wolf yelled.

The whole bar was instantly quiet. All of the people stared motionlessly at the two who glared at each other.

"Coward!" the fox hissed.

The wolf wanted to go for it but was held back by the older wolf who had grabbed his shoulders. "Stay quiet, Wheel. You can settle this score during the race."

"Yeah, might even have some chance if he cheats again!" the fox shouted and laughed hysterically.

The wolf tried to shake off his companion's hold but now even the woman hold him back while whispering something into his ear.

"Yeah! Wheel! A cheating coward!" The fox got completely unrestrained now that there seemed to be no resistance. "We should have damn done you before you got another chance. But you run away, didn't ya? Too much a coward, right? Like that fucking cat, eh? Come back with your damn outsider slut! Breed some bastards, eh! Will be a pleasure to me to cut their throats next time. Damn..."

The glass hit the fox so hard that he lost consciousness even before he was pushed over, flew through the air and hit the staircase behind him. With a bleeding wound at his forehead the fox collapsed to the ground. The partly filled glass of beer shattered right next to him.

Every single pair of eyes rested upon the lynx who did not even blink. His throw had been so fast and accurate that nobody had noticed his movement before it had fulfilled its purpose.

"Nobody pisses on me!" the small feline hissed. His short tail wagged agitatedly.

Everything was silent.

With his narrowed eyes the lynx stood in the middle of the bar, everyone had retired from him so that the dim light illuminated his silhouette sharply. Beneath his leather shirt the outlines of his muscles had gotten strongly visible. It seemed like the sound of his heavy breathing drowned out every other noise.

"What did you do?" the bartender stammered.

"Fucking cat!" a vulpine voice cried out.

The lynx did not move.

The wolves at the table the unconscious fox had insulted last stared at their unexpected helper with equally wide opened eyes as mouths.

Suddenly a younger fox broke the momentum of motionlessness and jumped across the banisters which separated the bar and kneeled down next to his unconscious comrade, investigating the hurt figure.

"You..." another fox behind the lynx hissed. "You..." He pushed himself through the immobile spectators. "You!" he almost cried out when he reached out for the smaller feline. He wanted to grab one of the lynx' shoulders from behind.

Before the bigger and older fox had even been able to raise his hand, Jid's knee already hit.

"You'll pay for that!" the young fox at the side of his hurt comrade cried and in the very same instant the fox at the lynx side rolled his eyes, moaned long drawn-out and collapsed to his knees, holding his sex.

"Hell!" With a high jump another fox separated from the immobile crowd. A second one cried out, violently pushed the people around him over and pounced on the lynx who jumped up, supported himself on his second attacker's back and spun around on it, his flying legs slamming right into the first one's muzzle. Then Jid pushed himself off and landed on the ground while the first fox fell directly on the second so that they collapsed both. Before he had even been able to look around a fox' fist already hit him, knocked him over and the light feline was swept aside until he fell down onto a table.

With a violent cry the attacker ran over to him but surprisingly the lynx was still conscious and the feline's foot kicked right into the fox' chest who gasped and stumbled backwards but was suddenly hold by some comrades of his who were just about to join the fight.

They helped him back onto his feet before they turned towards the lynx again.

He had stood up on the table, a small stream of blood flowed from his mouth's corner and unconsciously he tried to push it aside with his forearm but instead the blood was smeared all over his muzzle. Heavily panting he anticipated the foxes.

"Make your last prayers!" one of the foxes hissed. There were about ten of them, of different age, fur color and size but everyone of them glared at him with the very same fury.

The other guests had retired and observed what was going to happen. The young wolf was still held by his older companions as he still struggled sometimes to get free from their hold as he saw that the feline would have no chance against the vulpines who had armed themselves with glasses, stools and bottles. Some knives glistened here and there.

Slowly they closed in on the lynx, encircling the table he stood on. Jid hissed with feral breath. His muscles poked out from underneath his fur, his tail wagged frantically and Wheel suddenly noticed a shimmer at his finger tips and his eyes opened wide with amazement when he noticed the long sharp claws at the end of Jid's fingers.

The foxes growled, whispering insults and curses, slowly moving the weapons. Their predatory teeth were gritted.

The lynx stretched.

"Cut your throat..." "Roast your innards..." "Teach you a last lesson..." "Fuck you, cat!" "Damn slit-eyed dago..."

The insults barely reached his mind anymore. There was just the rush of his blood and the hammering of his heart left.

The foxes' eyes shimmered in the dark.

"Now!" And they rushed forward, all at once, reaching out their weapons and fists to hit the feline.

The lynx pushed off the table so powerfully that it was thrown over and hit some foxes who had tried to attack from behind while the small, light body was thrown forwards and his entire surroundings suddenly transformed into a rush of fleeing pictures in the corner of his eyes, there was just the door as his focus. He stretched out his arms when he slammed into the foxes and his claws cut into their flesh, blood was sprayed upon his light brown fur, cries echoed in his ears but he was too fast. He broke through them without meeting any resistance, swept them away without slowing down. An almost inaudible hoarse cry escaped his throat when the door came closer and...

The door was pushed open right in front of him and a shadow got visible in the door frame. He could not stop and the last thing he saw was a paw which closed around his face.

A cold, scaled hand grabbed the feline's head and in the very same instant the lynx could feel like it tore him apart and sucked the momentum out of him, it broke through his body like the chilling cold of freezing to death, it cracked him and swallowed all heat, every light, any perception and every memory. His mind seemed to shatter like a frozen leaf and then the night closed in and the feline body collapsed in the stranger's hold.

This absolutely unexpected turn of events made the guests of the bar, who had already hardly been able to grasp what had happened when the lynx had tried to flee, totally speechless. Except for the moaning foxes on the floor who held their wounds and clumsily got back on their feet, everyone stared at the newcomer in the door, who had stopped the lynx just with one of his paws which still held the lifeless figure.

“Now what’s this?” The voice which came out from below a cloak sounded like the crackle of dry wood in a fire. And finally the shadow came into the bar and so that his identity was finally revealed to the present people. A heavy, old, ragged cloak almost completely hid the body underneath. Uncountable wooden and bony pendants clicked at the end of uncountable leather bracelets and necklaces which shook whenever he moved. A twisted, strangely carved staff, equally overloaded with pendants, leather straps and feathers was held in one hand which barely poked from below the brown cloth, as hidden as the face which was also almost completely covered by cloak’s hood, except for a long, pointed, scaled muzzle. “Now, anyone wants to explain it to me?”

No one answered.

“Do I conclude that nothing happened at all?”

There was an abashed silence. Even the foxes on the floor did not say a thing, nor moved now that they had noticed the new arrival.

“Good!” He made another step forward. “Then this lynx shall be my guest for tonight!” He let the feline’s face go and dragged the powerless figure to his feet.

Jid moaned, totally helpless and barely conscious.

“Now, come with me, my feline friend. We shall have a decent drink in this dive, just like everybody else.” He hold the lynx by his shoulder and dragged him along to a table in the darkest corner of the bar while everyone observed the strange couple.

There were still three stags sitting at the table.

“Would you excuse us?”

Instantly the deer stood up and let the two take their places.

“Thank you!” He let the moaning lynx drop down in a chair. “Bartender, a beer for me and my young friend.”

The fox bartender just nodded.

Then the strange figure sat down, right opposite the lynx who still tried to focus and most of all tried to overcome the dizziness of his mind, he was still feeling like recovering from drowning.

“Don’t worry! It will pass!”

The bartender brought two huge glasses of beer and put them down on the table.

“Thank you!”

As quickly as possible the bartender vanished again.

For a moment the other guests were still staring at the newcomer and the lynx, among those the foxes who had fought with the lynx and who still held their wounds. It took quite some time for them to get their senses back but very slowly conversations started again, although very lowly while some guests cautiously left the bar. It seemed like the dim light of the bar had even been diminished furthermore. The few lamps barely illuminated the room anymore and long drawn shadows danced on the walls to the faint music of whispered conversations. The lynx blinked and clumsily raised his head, but except for a brown shadow he hardly saw anything more of his host but a smile seemed to flit over the strange muzzle.

"I confess: It's not very polite to hide myself that way," the newcomer said and pushed his hood aside and thus revealed the scaled head of an armadillo.

Jid stared at the scaled one with total amazement. He had already heard of this species but never ever seen one. After all they were supposed to be creatures of legends or something like that, extinct long time ago.

"Surprised? I bet!" the armadillo said as friendly as his voice could be. "You are new here, right? No wonder you have never seen me before." With his scaled hand he raised his glass to his mouth and took a good swig of his beer. Sighing with satisfaction he sat it down on the table again.

Still somewhat dizzy the lynx was not really able to say anything at all. But it did not seem to bother the armadillo.

"I am supposed to be this town's priest. As you might already know there is a race taking place tomorrow and as it is one of the most important religious events of the year it is my duty to attend it and most of all: To name the winner!" He smiled for some incomprehensible reason. "Drink something!" he encouraged the lynx "That might help a little bit."

His hand still shook slightly when he reached out for the huge glass of beer and slowly he put it at his mouth and took a sip.

"There was a brawl, right?" the armadillo asked, supporting his head on his elbow.

The lynx just nodded while he put down his glass.

"I was sure about that," the priest said thoughtfully while observing the remaining guests which had gathered around the bar. He leaned over the table. "Take a good look at them! What do you see? Predators? Or herbivores?"

Jid was a little bit startled but then did as he was told (as best as he could as dizzy as he still was). He cleared his throat. "Both," he answered with this hoarse voice of his.

"Yes, one might believe. Deer, mouses, a rabbit, a boar on one side and foxes and wolves on the other. But if I ever learned something in this town it is that it does not know anything but predators," he almost whispered, his black eyes shimmered in between the scales.

The people talked lowly, drank their beer, someone even laughed shortly. There were no wolves left now, just some deer and other except for the particularly large group of foxes who could not resist eyeing the two strangers sometimes.

"Let me tell you a story..." The armadillo leaned back in his chair. His dark scales were the only sign of his advanced age. "Since the Spirits had gathered in the void and had merged to create this place we call our home, my kind has always been their humble servants, priests one might say. Any armadillo had dedicated his life to help the people to unite with the Spirits. There were never many of my kind, we had always been a few among the other species, but despite our duty we never considered ourselves something special: The Spirits had not chosen us, but we had chosen to serve the Spirits and our fellows as best as we could."

“At this place had always been a settlement, even though there are no remains of this past left now. Places like Amalkin or the trade posts at the Silver Coast might be bigger. But this place here is much older than all these. The legends tell that it already existed during the Age of Dawn before the Spirits decided to cover the terrible secrets of the Silver Coast underneath the waves of what we call today Lake Moonfire. It might have been a peaceful place at this time, a place for simple craftsmen and hunters. But most of all it had a huge community of armadillo...” He paused to drink some of his beer.

“Now one must know that my kind has always been humble servants of the Spirits. We have not been chosen as we are nothing special. We dedicated our lives to the service of the Spirits and we do not expect any special reward of doing so, except maybe of a good life in accordance with the land, the plants and all things living. Thus most of us, men and women, are priests and we are caring about settlement like this one to lead their inhabitants to a joyous life alongside the Spirits which inhabited everything around us. Because of our huge number in this town, it has always been considered to be something special and many families of armadillo have lived happily here alongside the many other families. It might never have been an easy life, but there was nothing amiss. But, of course, it would not stay that way forever, it never does...”

“A young boar, named Sars, a lively and ambitious young man decided one day that this town would be a little bit too small for him. He might have become a roamer like many other young ones of this town had been before him or- so as you are- today. But he was not satisfied by this perspective and he exclaimed his will to uncover the secrets of Lake Moonfire. This was already foolish enough one might say but he said that he wanted to do this for the good of all, every single inhabitant should have a better life afterwards. No wonder, the people hailed him and many had gathered when he finally left the town for good.” Once more the priest drank some of his beer. “They expected him to be back almost every day, but soon the days became moon periods, the moon periods seasons, the seasons years and Sars did not return. So the people forgot about him and only few wondered if he had been swallowed by the depths of Lake Moonfire or simply vanished into the nothingness of the outside world.”

“But one day he was back. He was no longer a young man as he had been used to be and he had not uncovered the secrets of Lake Moonfire but instead he had brought some people along he called his associates and an enormously huge machine. But he said that he had not forgotten about his promise to get the people a better life and that there were towns, cities which longed for the wood of the surrounding forests and that they would pay a lot to get it and then his *associates* explained that everyone in town could get a better living by working for Sars and that they would get more machines like the one Sars had brought along. The only thing they had to do was to work for the sawmill Sars build up around his machine. Of course the simple people were overjoyed by these promises of an easy future but...”

“From that day on the town was no longer the same, Sars build up the sawmill and that it is no longer owned by boars today tells you more about this town than

I could ever hope to. However! My ancestors warned their fellows not to fall for that old trick, as old as the fall of the lost Spirits. Sars build up the sawmill and the people started to work for him, cutting down the trees, operating the saws and transporting the wood down to the Silver Coast. But soon they realized that they did not work for their own good but for Sars' and then the first storm broke loose and the first victim it claimed was the benefactor himself."

"My ancestors kept on warning their fellows about the danger of their greed but nobody seemed to listen or to care. Certainly they all still attended the rituals asking for fertility and the blessing of the Spirits. But my kind was wrong. They did listen! Everyone was listening! That's when our destiny was sealed. One by one the armadillos were slaughtered! Certainly there was no massacre taking place, they did not dare that. Instead there were series of strange accidents that claimed victims among the armadillo community, sad events everybody could mourn over. But when they realized that they did not have to expect any real resistance from my kind, they did no longer hide away. Some were found stabbed, some clubbed to death." The armadillo paused for a moment, taking a good swing of his drink. "When I was young there had still been five left, my mother, me, a couple with a daughter who was supposed to be my spouse one day." He felt silent once more. "She was the last one. Her murderers did not even hide, I met them when they leaned over her corpse but before I had reached them, they had fled and had left me alone with her... And now there's just one armadillo left who could still remind them of the endless fights, the uncountable victims of their greed. There is just me who still recalls the names of the families who had to die because they had been unfortunate enough to attract the jealousy of the others." He looked at the few remaining people in the bar. "There they are, just waiting for setting upon one another. Yesterday there have been the bears, the pumas and the beavers, today there are the foxes, the wolves and the deer. And me, of course! I am taking my place and I will use all that is left to me to ensure that it will not go on like that anymore... And there are you, naturally, who will do her share too..."

The armadillo looked at the lynx who was hardly awake anymore and another strange smile flitted over his scaled face. "You are sleepy, I understand that. It is late and you have to attend the race tomorrow and thus much better than listening to some fool like me."

Never having really recovered from the priest's enchantment the lynx was hardly able to keep his eyes opened. Now that he had also drunken most of the strong beer the alcohol had done its share too and it already was late at night. Clumsily he got to his feet and started to stumble towards the door, observed by the smiling armadillo.

The few remaining guests, all foxes except for a solitary ram, observed the feline carefully when he went down the few steps which separated the room and approached the door, completely exhausted and absolutely tired.

"I'll open the door!" the bartender said suddenly with exaggerated helpfulness, rushing to the door and opening it wide when the lynx past by. He took the feline by the shoulder and guided him outside.

The pain almost instantly woke Jid up again. The fox' fist was buried deep in his stomach.

"That's just an advance. The score will be settled tomorrow," the fox whispered into the pointed ear and then let the lynx drop down to the ground.

Gasping for breath he sat on the ground and held his belly. All the tiredness had been drowned in a rush of adrenaline which made him painfully aware of the fox' strength. A silent curse passed his lips, a curse for having been inattentive.

The stars in the sky above the town observed it coldly from afar.

"What the hell did you think?"

"Let me go!" Wheel cried and pushed his brother's arm aside with all the power necessary to do so.

"He's right! That was damn stupid, Wheel," his sister agreed.

"Satchas was drunk, okay? He tried to provoke you, alright! But you should not loose control so easily."

They left the cone of light which surrounded the bar and headed for the plaza with the oak. The moons had risen high into the sky and a gentle wind brushed through their lupine fur.

Suddenly Blade laughed shortly. "The lynx saved your sorry butt, Wheel!" she said.

"Yes," her older brother agreed. "You were damn lucky that this nitwit interfered. But tomorrow..." Meaningfully he laid his paw onto Wheel's shoulder. "You can't rely on that!"

Blade leaned over to him. "All your problems will be dealt with, that's what we promise you to do. But you must run and you must win..."

Violently Wheel shook himself, thus pushed his brother's hand aside and walked faster.

"What's wrong, Wheel?" Searcher asked.

"Damn, I'll run and I'll win for sure. You don't have to tell me every damn minute. I am not a kid anymore..." he replied angrily.

"Running away as you did last year wasn't very grown up, Wheel," Blade noticed.

Her younger brother gritted his teeth but did not say anything.

"Look, Wheel. We just do want to help you, OK? And as Blade has said we'll deal with that. The only thing you have to do is running." Once more Searcher laid his hand on Wheel's shoulder but this time he made sure that his brother could not free himself that easily anymore and so he leaned over to him and spoke quietly directly into the wolf ear in between the dark gray hair. "Think of Rush and Shade and you know what you have to do!"

"Yes!" Their sister agreed who had approached him as well. "Think of what they did to you last year and just prove that they can't push you over that easily. You're a Nighthunter, after all!"

Wheel growled while they walked on through the cool night air. They were not the only wolves to have left the bar, Steel, a cousin of theirs, Wage, Cloud and

Sheen, other member of their clan had went with them, but walked at a certain distance of the three but they all headed for the sawmill, crossing the place with the old crippled oak which was supposed to be the center of this town, the buildings of the three clans around it.

Suddenly they got aware of cheers and instinctively the wolves turned their heads around and noticed the brightly illuminated windows of the lumberjack dormitory. One of the windows on the second floor was wide open and several deer, just recognizable because of their antlers, seemed to have noticed them as well. They waved their arms and hands and cried something which was hardly understandable because their tongues were heavy from drinking too much but they way they cried, laughed, cheered left no possibility to misunderstand their intentions.

“Look at theses bastards.” Searcher gritted his teeth. “Promise me to show them all tomorrow, Wheel. I can’t stand their damn grins anymore. Next is payback time...”

Wheel nodded while still observing the five deer who were just laughing about another good joke. Although the darkness he was able to imagine what kind of gestures they were just about to make.

“You owe that to your cubs, Wheel,” the woman at his side said to him.

Wheel just nodded once more. “Yes,” he hissed. “Tomorrow’s payback time.”

“Jid!”

The lynx turned around and covered his face deeper in the hay.

“Jid!”

He tried to open his encrusted eyes and very slowly he raised his head to see who was addressing him. Blurred spots of color danced in front of his eyes.

“Jid, I felt obliged to wake you up. You must already hurry a bit if you really want to run.”

His eyes opened wide and Mlala was startled when he noticed that Jid was completely dressed and his clothes were covered by hay as if he had been dressed all night.

“I’m sorry, Jid, but it’s already pretty late in the morning and if we do not want to get into a hurry...” Mlala stopped and eyed the other lynx who rubbed his eyes, blinked, then rubbed his eyes again. “Everything alright?”

Jid nodded. “Just...” His voice was nothing then a rattle, deep inside his chest. He cleared his throat and started anew. “Just a minute,” he mumbled and suddenly he noticed that the first button of his shirt was open and as quickly as he could he covered the small bit of fluffy fur which poked out with his arm.

Mlala screwed up his eyes. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jid answered. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

The boy nodded slowly, observed the other feline in the hay for a second and then slowly he climbed down the stairs he had been standing on.

A short sigh of relief was uttered unwillingly by Jid when he heard that Mlala had left the single room of the small house, then as quickly as his sleepy fingers

were able to, he closed the button of his shirt. Slowly he rose in the hay and sighed once more, closed his eyes and inhaled profoundly to vanquish his dizziness. He brushed through his tousled hair as he noticed how felted it was he reached out for his backpack, looked around for a second to assure himself that there was no one observing him and then he took out a small comb he had kept in one of the side pockets. With fast, wild movements he started to comb his short hair, silently growling in anger whenever he met a resistance. Afterwards he brushed through it once more and noticed with satisfaction that it was certainly not perfect but much better than before. As quickly as he had got the comb, it disappeared again while he started to lap his paw just to run the moistened fur over his face. He purred instinctively. But then as soon as he had finished with *washing* he rose fully and approached the ladder to get down.

Bright sunlight shone through the windows and the opened door, the green of the forest outside shimmered promisingly, birds chirped and the faint sound of an active settlement reached Jid's pointed ears when he noticed the table where something to eat had been prepared for him: Some milk, bread, some fruits. As his grumbling stomach required it he quickly sat down, purred some of the milk into a dish, broke off a piece of the bread to dunk it deeply into the milk so that it soaked as much of the fluid as possible. Greedily his mouth closed about the soggy bread and he devoured the biggest part of it with a single gulp. Still chewing he groaned with true satisfaction.

"A scaled coin breaks the saw but you take the sawteeth with you just like the branch of the Tacolar Tree..."

Jid almost spit out everything but then instead he swallowed, choked and started coughing painfully until he finally got his breath again and was able to turn around.

With wide opened eyes Enja was staring at him like she had never seen him before. Her blue dress was absolutely dirty with mud and green stains of grass, her light brown hair was tousled and was standing up in every possible direction. There was a small wound on her forehead, blood had flown down from it into her face.

"You're hurt," Jid mumbled.

Suddenly she sniffed, her entire face cramped, her eyes filled with tears and then she cried out with a miserable tone which did not sound like the mourning of a small child but rather like the helpless cry of a deadly hurt animal. She grabbed the muscled leg of the boy and held onto it.

Completely startled Jid needed a moment to understand then he quickly kneeled down and took her in his arms. "Shhhhh, don't worry, it'll heal again."

The girl returned his embrace and pressed her face against his chest. "I don't want to die, I don't want to die..." she mumbled in between her sobbing.

"You don't have to die 'cos of such a small wound," he tried to reassure her, rocking her slowly in his arms. "Nobody's to die."

But she just shook her small head and kept on crying and he did his best to temper the troubled girl.

"Now I do understand why she said that you remind her of her mother..."



Enja

Jid turned his face around and stared at the old lynx in the door with wide opened mouth. His heart raced.

The older lynx nodded slowly and stepped inside. "It's no shame, I can assure you," he said slowly while he walked in and put the leather aside he had been carrying. "My wife was very much like you: Very self-confident, very strong and sometimes I was myself convinced that she was much a better man than me. She took care of everything and was ready to accept any burden. But in the end..." He hesitated, being covered by the shadows of the small room, he showed the younger one his back. "She died shortly after Enja's birth." The old man sighed like he was reminded of an old wound which had never healed entirely. Slowly he turned around, the old brown hair of his covered his face but very slowly a faint smile flit over his face. "Be proud of what you are," he said. "One day you might become a much better father than I could have ever been."

For a moment Jid just closed his eyes.

"What's about Enja?"

He had almost completely forgotten about the silently crying girl in his arms. "I... She's hurt herself," he stammered.

The old lynx went over to them and kneeled down at their side. "Now, what's wrong with you, hm?" he asked her gently. "Maybe you should leave Jid alone now, he's got a race to win today. Come here, to me." Carefully he took her out of Jid's arms and upon his own, stroking her messy hair.

Jid stood up again and kicked the ground with his foot.

"There's something I want you to have," the man said while walking over to one of his workbenches, the girl on his arms. He pushed the many different leather cloth, in different states of processing, aside which had gathered there and finally pulled out something from down under all the different stuff. "Originally I intended Mlala to have this one but it turned out to be a little bit too small for him, but if I am not mistaken it should fit you pretty well." He held out a pair of black leather shorts and an equally black skirt.

Jid was overcome by surprise. "For me?" he stammered.

"Of course," the old man answered. "You might be no member of my family, but you are lynx. So I cannot let you run in these poor clothes of yours... I am sorry that it's just a loan, but I hope you will wear it nevertheless."

"Sure," the young one stammered and went over to the man who hold the clothes out to him.

"Seems to fit," he stated. "Better you dress now, Mlala will be back in a moment and then we should go." He took his daughter who rubbed her eyes by her hand and left the lynx behind who still stared at the leather clothes in his hands: Soft, smooth leather, simply crafted but skilfully nevertheless, black like the night sky.

"Wheel?"

He turned around, his hand dropped down from his lover it had hold. Clumsily he

pushed the quilt aside and sat up. "Yes," he replied as loud as he could without waking the one at his side.

"It's time!"

He blinked, startled for a moment because his sleepy mind did not get it so quickly. But then he realized that the race was mentioned. "I am up in a minute," he replied, even though he did not know if the one who had waken him was still waiting in front of the door.

Very slowly he tried to get down from the bed without moving the mattress too much.

"You don't need to be so careful," a sleepy, gentle voice said.

He sighed happily. "You don't have to stand up so early," he said, turned around and leaned over the bed and approached Shannanah with a smile.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked lowly, looking straight into his yellow eyes.

"Yes," he breathed so that the airflow of it flowed around the beautiful outline of her muzzle and then they joined in kiss. Carefully Shannanah wrapped her arms around his neck and hold him tightly while they felt each other's warm affection.

"WHEEL!" Somebody hammered against the door.

The wolf broke the kiss, sighed and cried: "Just a minute!" He exchanged a look with his vulpine wife and she answered with an understanding smile. Although it was difficult for him he freed himself from her tender embrace and fully left the bed to get dressed. The clothes for this special day lay on the chest at the end of their bed: They was a light brown leather shirt with gilded buckles, similar shorts with a heavy belt whose ornaments shimmered brightly in the early sunlight, heavy boots with gilded buckles as well and vambraces as well as greaves out of hard leather to protect his arms and legs as well as possible. As he took up the clothes he noticed this very special odor of theirs, the scent of cloth which had rested in a chest for little bit too much time and it reminded him painfully of what had happened when he had dressed in these clothes for the last time.

Shannanah observed him quietly from in between the sheets and quilts of the bed.

Finally when he was fully dressed he turned around to show her.

She just answered with a smile.

"I guess I look like the most terrible boaster," he noticed.

"You look gorgeous," she replied shortly, but suddenly she sighed. "I just wished it wasn't for this damn race."

He lowered his head. "I understand but tonight it will all be over, once and forever. This is the last time I have to run, next year Airy Dart will do it. So..."

She had lowered her head to, turned it to the quilt which covered her naked body so that he could not see her face behind the curtain of her black hair. "I just hope so, I just hope so..." she mumbled weakly but although she tried to hide away this distinctive tone of febleness in her voice he understood that she was close to crying.

"Hey!" He sat down on the bed, next to her. "It will be over tonight, I promise! One way or another. Then I do no longer owe them anything at all..." He hesitated for a second. "If you want to, we can even go back to your family..."

The vixen raised her head and although silent tears flowed from her eyes she smiled and he took her in his arms. "I can hardly estimate what you are going through but trust me: I love you, you are my wife and one day they will just have to accept that."

"I just hope so," she said lowly. "They have acted so strangely these last days, always eager to separate me from you and Shade and Rush..."

"That's just because of the race," he interrupted her.

"I hope so, I just hope so," she breathed.

"WHEEL! Damn! Come out now!"

Wheel sighed again. "I am sorry, love. You see: It's no better for me." He gave her a kiss on her cheek and she gently stroked his paw which he pulled back to release her from his embrace. Then he went to the door.

"Wheel?"

He had just opened the door, but now he turned around to her again.

"Take good care of you, please." Her gray-blue eyes glistened.

"I will," he assured her and then he went out of the door and closed it carefully behind him, while she quickly hid her eyes behind her hand, hiding away the tears which had suddenly welled up without any reason she knew of.

Half-heartedly he walked down the creaking stairs to the first floor, headed for the door to the backyard and stepped out into the cool, moist air of an early morning.

"Finally!" Searcher glared at him. He had put on a old ragged clothes for the training. Next to him stood Chimes and Steel, cousins of theirs, with arms akimbo. "Let's get started," Searcher said. "We'll start right off with some easy kicks and punches and get to your legs later."

Wheel blinked. "What?"

"Ready?" Steel, a massive, gray wolf with short cut hair asked. But before Wheel had even been able to ask, Chimes was already attacking with a low punch and Wheel was just able to dodge clumsily. There was no time for complaining left as Searcher attacked next, then Steel and so on and before he was able to understand what happened with him, Wheel was already in the middle of practice with the three wolves constantly punching and kicking him while he tried to evade their attacks. After very short time he was already wet with sweat, running down his fur. Then Searcher ordered him to start some easy exercises for his legs, jumping against the wall, pushing himself off it, accelerating and stopping as fast as he could and so on while the three other wolves watched him.

"That's enough!" Searcher said after a while. "You don't have to be exhausted. Let's go!" And he ordered Wheel to follow him inside the sawmill. Steel and Chimes walked after them.

They walked straight through the dark corridors of the building, heading for the meeting hall, whose huge door was opened by Searcher so that Wheel could walk in first. Dim twilight anticipated them and the scent of many men who had gathered. Motionlessly they observed how the young wolf walked in. Everyone was there, every man of the clan, from Finder, Searcher's young son, to Uncle Gem who rarely left his cottage in the Blue Ridge Mountains and who was the

only man as old as Grampa who sat at the very end of the table, overshadowing everything else although his old, bent body. His deep-set, yellow lupine eyes gleamed when he raised his tumbler.

"There he is," the old man said. His voice sounded like the creaking of metal on metal but he was perfectly audible nevertheless. "Big Wheel..." He paused like there was some special meaning to this name. "The one who will run for the Nighthunters this year. Everybody cheer the one who will guide the Spirits into our house!"

"May the Spirits guide him!" The many voice of the men had become one when they had risen from their seat to raise their glasses to him.

Wheel bowed down in reply.

Searcher pat on his shoulder. "Now the only thing left to do for you is to win that damn race," he whispered into his ear.

Wheel rose again. "There's one thing I want to say," he said, much to the surprise of the assembled men who had not anticipated any kind of speech of his. They observed him with screwed up eyes. "I..." He wet his lips. "What happened last year will never happen again, I swear. I will not allow that the name of our clan will ever be besmirched again and even if it means that is has to be the last thing I have to do."

There was silence for a moment.

"Well said, young wolf, well said..." Grandpa had risen too and supported himself on his rod and glared at Wheel from below his cap. "But let me swear something as well..." The old man's voice sounded like the dry, breaking wood. "I will not allow anyone to water down our bloodline, whoever that might be. So..." Every single eye was resting upon him. "...come here, my son. I know that you do understand that better than anyone else in here because you will do us honor more than in just one way..." His old wrinkled paw pointed onto the seat at his side. "Come here, Wheel. Take your seat next to where you might sit one day if you will be as reasonable as I do know that you are..."

Another silence followed and then someone of the man started to cheer and all the other joined him and when Wheel went towards his grandfather he was encouraged by the many men who pat on his shoulder and congratulated him when he walked by. "I know I can rely on you, son," his father mumbled when he pat on Wheel's shoulder who walked by and so the young wolf felt much more at ease when he sat down next to the old wolf.

Then some of the woman, among these was Blade who did not look very happy to have been designed for that deed, served the food, game and strong beer for everyone except Wheel who got the traditional dried meat, fresh bread and cold spring water. Blade served it to him and before she went away again she whispered into his ear: "Tonight everything will be alright again."

He looked inquiringly after her but she left so quickly that he could not reply anything and in the very same moment Uncle Gem started to interview him about his training and offered him some good advices as well. But Flash just cracked some jokes about Uncle Gem who was still thinking about the race like some

promenade among friends. The old wolf instantly shut up in annoyance which made the men laugh even more and so the meal went on.

Finally Searcher rose. "I am sorry to interrupt this happy gathering but it's time...," he said as loud as necessary to drown out the conversations around him.

Instantly the men cheered as loud as they could and Wheel rose from his seat. It seemed to him like there was some voice inside his head who constantly told him "It's time, it's time, it's time..." The men followed him when he left the hall and so they did when he headed for the main door. Some few women joined them as well while they walked through the huge workshop along the enormously big, steam powered saws which had been shut down, just for this special day. Sawmill dust swirled around the clan members and then Wheel reached the grand swing door which was usually used to get the trunks inside. With all his strength he braced against the wood and pushed it open.

Sunlight broke into the darkness, overcame them with its purifying brightness and blinded them as the entire clan left the family seat and walked into the anticipating void.

End of Chapter 2



Annotation 1: As there are no domesticated animals in this world, the term *cat* substitutes for a very vulgar expression for felines in general. The equivalent term for canines would be *dog* of course.

Annotation 2: A three-eyed squirrel is an entirely different creature than the squirrel we know. It resembles a crossing of a lemur and a shrew with three eyes.

Annotation 3: A child of two furs belonging to different species is a full member of either species. Thus Shannanah's and Wheel's children- Rush and Shade- are both wolves. Most clans consider relationships with a member of a different species to be impure and dishonoring.

Annotation 4: The term *crossbreed* is a grave insult for children of parents belonging to different species. Crossbreeds (and very often their parents too) are usually outcasts and/or suffer from discrimination.