

Migratory Birds
Chapter 3

CONTEST



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It was still early morning, the sun was lingering close to the horizon like it could not decide itself to raise fully into the sky. Its warmth was nothing but a promise yet which might never be fulfilled but at least it had gotten bright enough to illuminate the forest. Mist was still everywhere, whitish scraps of cold moisture floating in between the trunks like the Spirits might have done when the world had still been young. But now these rather seemed to be the restless ghosts of men and women long forgotten who had been visiting the surface for the night, now desperately trying to find back to their graves. However the strange vapors did not seem to disappear and as there was no wind at all, which would had hardly reached the inside of the wood anyway, there was no chance the mist would vanish soon. It drifted about and covered the plants and the trees with tiny drops of water which would gather slowly and finally fall down, creating a faint but noticeable shower whose sound was like the chimes of small silver bells muffled by a thick, soft cloth. This was just rarely interrupted by some bird who chirped unknowingly that a war was about to take place, right beneath the foliage, between the undergrowth of fern, bushes and young trees and the rocks, fallen trunks and small rivulets of dew which formed everywhere.

And they came...

The hard sound of many feet on the ground chased away even the smallest crawler¹. Breaking wood, jumping into puddles, over fallen trunks, the rustle of leaves being pushed aside by the contestants until the weak branches were torn off and the slower ones could pass by much more easily while the leading ones were running almost side by side, hardly caring about the path they were supposed to follow and suddenly the group split apart, ran different ways, everyone searching for his own way that should offer him better conditions. They were still running along the path but now they were jumping over the rocks at its side, dashed around the trunks and through the undergrowth like a powerful wave that crushed everything in its way.

Grand Leaf was first, his powerful, noisy steps pushed him forward faster than any of his competitors and with stunning agility he was jumping over all the obstacles in his way so that he barely touched the ground anymore, he rather flew than ran at all and there was a broad grin on his face because he was certain that his advance would separate him from most of his opponents long before these would become dangerous to him. He was so certain about his victory that he almost did think about the race as a contest anymore: It was just fun!

Thunder was almost right behind him, but unlike the smaller pony who was rushing through the undergrowth he had chosen the path. His long, slender legs were taking him much further than the pony's did but on the other hand he had to take care of falling because it would mean a serious injury for sure. The knowledge about this fuelled the anger he already felt for the smaller pony. He hated him for being first, for being in front of him right now, but there was no way Grand Leaf would win. He would take care of that.

MacLezt and Pendulum ran side by side like a couple of strange twins. The ram proved to be very agile as everyone had expected him to be, there was never any

doubt about where he would put his feet and even when he placed it onto a loose stone he was already off again before the stone had had any chance to move. He had screwed up his eyes and constantly eyed his surroundings, looking out for Thunder who got visible sometimes in between the trees, Grand Leaf whose tail fluttered in the wind before them and most especially for the boar at his side who was surprisingly able to keep up with him despite his youth. In an attempt to shake off the boar, MacLezt accelerated and the boar really did fall back but although he tried to get rid of him, the boar kept up his surprising speed and followed close behind, the noise of his heaving feet echoing in the ram's ears. Jumping through some bushes the ram decided that this pig would lack the endurance if he already possessed so much stunning speed for a pig. But something inside him doubted that possibility and he gritted his teeth and tried his luck again.

Pendulum noticed the ram's attempt to get rid of him and although he was already running at the limit of his possibilities, he had to keep up with this damn bastard of a goat if he wanted to have any chance at all. Maybe he should have had taken this more seriously, maybe he should have trained more, but most certainly he should have explored this damn way. Why did they have to run through this damn forest at all? Why not around the village?

Big Wheel was next. He had chosen a way rather far above the path, a crest of rocks alongside the path down below. Thus he had the total overview of the other runners while his legs and feet almost ran on by themselves. There was no way he would loose, he just could not.

Fistle, Tzerska and Gynes were running as a group with the fox as their leader. They were simply following the path which Fistle used in a stunning manner, he slipped on the wet earth like he would stumble in the very next moment but he never did. He swirled around the curves of the path like gliding upon ice, sometimes even stabilizing himself with his paws but he never fell because he used the momentum to drive himself forward. The small bells on his clothes chimed constantly with a bright, high sound. He grinned. It felt good to finally do what he had been training for weeks. He saw the wolf running on the crest and a smile flickered over his face as he knew what this meant for him but he had no chance at all, just like all the others. Maybe he was not such a good runner like those but he still had a card up his sleeve and most importantly it was running right behind him.

Gynes did not feel well at all. From the very first moment he had known that he had no chance. As a beaver his legs were much too short and much too weak to compete with the natural born runners such as Thunder and Big Wheel. As the Big Three would have accepted a winner from another family...! He grunted while he panted for breath. He was still in the race, he was still doing it and his family could still be proud about that and most of all he would be a winner anyway. If they knew that he'd bring home some money no matter the result of this damn race, they would be happy. He jumped, almost fell down when Fistle in front of him slipped around yet another trunk and for an instant he cursed himself for being so stupid to follow the fox.



A crawler

Tzerska observed the two youngsters almost with amusement. His chest was already burning due to the lack of air and his legs hurt but the rabbit did not feel anything different than grim satisfaction. It felt good to run again, even though he had no chance to win. Most certainly every furr in the village would crack jokes about him. But did they understand anyway? Did they understand that this was all about to honor the Spirits? Even the priest did not seem to be very enthusiastic when he had prayed for the blessing of the race and the contestants of whom one would become the next *Jurnea*, humble servant of the Spirits in the village, did they value that anymore? Didn't they value that the last member of a clan who had been one of the most important in town once, still ran? It was foolishness to believe they cared about him and he ran on smiling because he knew that the Spirits would once value his enthusiasm differently.

It hurt to run, it hurt to be alive and it hurt to sat his foot onto the ground. The vole was tired, he wanted to sleep, just to rest for a moment. But instead he was running through the bushes and the fern which were constant slaps into his face and maybe because he was used to these he didn't care much about this, unlike the ache in his sore limbs. He had no chance to win but he could not give up. The unfamiliar expression of pride in the eyes of his father, mother, brothers and sisters when he had declared that he would run was all he needed to keep on moving. With every step he made they had a reason to be proud of him and for a moment he was distracted by the thought of being the first runner of his family in years. Achasta the first in a row of voles who dared to challenge the Big Three...! This short moment was all it needed to miss the large, gnarled root in between his legs. With a cry he fell down.

He was so surprised by the shadow suddenly jumping up from behind him that he cried once more and was still busy doing that when the panting lynx was already kneeling in front of him.

"Y'alrite?" the feline asked, trying to catch his breath.

Somehow instinctively the vole nodded. "Just... sprained," he mumbled, holding his left ankle.

"kay!" the lynx stated shortly, trying to catch his breath. "Can y'tell me where the fuckin' path is?"

Achasta just pointed into the direction of it and then the lynx was already back on his feet, yelled a hoarse "Thanks!" and then he had already disappeared in between the bushes and there was nothing but the rustle of the leaves left which closed behind him.

He gulped, blinked, staring at the bushes where the feline had gone through because he was still somehow overcome by the sudden appearance of him. He sat on the ground, neither caring about the race anymore nor noticing the pain in his ankle. Instead his mind raced as he tried to figure where he had seen that one before. Did he attend the race? Was he one of the contestants? He had been there during the start, right? Hadn't this lynx even been in front of him for a while? So he did attend the race! But why did he ask for the path? Had he lost himself? That could not be! This had to be some kind of a joke! But he had been there, right? Or hadn't he? Was some lynx running? Wasn't Mlala running? What was going on...?

Thoughtfully he shook his head and then clumsily got back onto his feet, rising from the dirty ground. His feet hurt terribly when he tried to put his weight on it. Slowly he started to limp back to the town. The race had claimed its first victim.

At the top the battle had begun.

Grand Leaf dashed forward as fast as he could when he heard the powerful steps of the stag approaching. The pony knew damn well what this meant and now all of his self-confidence was swept away by this potential threat. Thunder accelerated and when he noticed the pony accelerating as well a grin flitted over his face for a moment as he was sure to be in control of the speed now, the pony would do anything to outrun him and thus Thunder would soon be able to drive him to exhaustion. It was a hunt and it was starting to be fun.

MacLezt did not notice the disappearance of his rivals at once. For a while he was convinced that they were just hidden somewhere behind the bushes and trunks but then there was a small piece of straight way and then he had to realize that they had accelerated. But he would not do that. It would exhaust him much too soon.

Pendulum noticed it too. But he had to keep to MacLezt, even though he wanted to catch up with the two leading racers.

With a crash Big Wheel broke through the branches of a tree right in front of the ram and the boar. With the jump he had left the crest as it was about to end and now he chose the path as well. He had leaped forward and when he attained the ground his legs were already driving him forward again. Mud splashed all around when he hit the ground and then he already dashed on and this was just the opportunity Pendulum had been waiting for and he ran past the ram, trying to catch up with the wolf, leaving the ram behind.

Fistle slipped around a boulder, his feet hit against the ground and threw him out of the momentum so that his slender vulpine body was hurled forwards again so that he could just see like Big Wheel disappeared in front of him, the panting boar following him as well as he could, leaving the ram behind. This was maybe the first chance for him and he was certain about to use it. He accelerated and just waved his hand at the beaver when he went past him.

This was all that Gynes needed. He hesitated for a moment as there was still this damn rabbit behind him and he slowed down a little bit to let the old man get past him. Then he ran after him.

The fox was much too fast and Tzerska knew that. They would be exhausted even before they would reach the Tacolar Tree. As if he cared. Maybe he was not the best runner himself but he knew how to use his energy and in the end he knew that such foolishness did not pay off. Even the old rabbit ran past him but he did not mind, he was totally concentrated and his chance would come as soon as they would start the spurt.

MacLezt did not even realize what happened when he was suddenly taken off his feet. The blow had been powerful enough to kick him out of his boots and he flew through the air and hit the muddy ground with a cry which he was not meant

to finish as yet another kick knocked him down and this time it had been hard enough to slam his head against the earth and he dropped unconscious even before he had realized what was going on.

Unlike the ram Grand Leaf had noticed the attack right from the start and with a jump he escaped Thunder's arms closing in on him. He was accelerating even more and he could feel the hiss of the bigger stag right behind him. Thunder breathed hard but now he was taking advantage of his size and with every step he got closer to the pony. Grand Leaf could feel the fear crawling up his neck, fuelling him with greater strength. The exhaustion he had started to feel earlier wore off instantly and he dashed off just to get out of the stag's range who followed him, not even accelerating a bit, patiently waiting for the pony to get tired. The small bell around his neck chimed lightly.

His chest hurt like it withheld hell itself and now he had to realize that he had no chance keeping up with the wolf while Pendulum fell behind bit by bit. But he just had to follow the path, didn't he? He gritted his teeth and slowed down a little bit. He was not vanquished yet. That was for sure! He still had his capacities.

All of a sudden Fistle left the path, surprising Tzerska when he jumped over a fallen trunk and dashed off, splashing mud all over the rabbit who just ran by on the path. Tzerska could not help but wonder what the fox was up to. Was there a short-cut? He had never heard about any. The ground got swampy deeper inside the wood so even though the path was making a large turn it was the only way to get past these areas. Or wasn't it?

Gynes' legs were as heavy as lead and he was panting like a broken steam engine but he was still running despite feeling like a ship swaying in a storm. But he had to go on, there was still something he had to do... Just one more thing and although his blurred vision, the blood pounding his ears, the ache in his lungs and all the other pains he suffered from he tried to run on as fast as he was able to. There was just one more, just one more...

Big Wheel had been running all by himself, steadily and well controlled but when the fox suddenly broke through the bushes right in front of him he was not just startled for a moment. That fucking vulpine had just gotten past a swampy area without even wetting his feet which could just mean that he had taken precautions, that he was just about... Fury flashed through the darkness of his mind and with a growl the wolf accelerated. This won't be a repeat of last year! With all his strength he tried to catch up with the fox.

Fistle could feel Big Wheel behind him and he wished he had had the option not to reappear right in front of the wolf but now that the growl of the bigger canine was getting through to him, he had just one chance left: Running faster!

Meanwhile the contest at the top was about to climax. Just as Thunder had expected Grand Leaf had fled much too instinctively and had exhausted himself despite his equine stamina. But the panic had been too much and now the chime of Thunder's small bell got closer and closer while Grand Leaf got less and less air into his nostrils, he felt like suffocating and he breathed so hard that it hurt much more than anything he could remember in this moment. But still the chime was driving him on while the forest around him seemed to narrow, concentrating to a

single vanishing point in front of him where the Tacolar Tree was supposed to be. It could not be very far anymore.

Gynes' approach had been very clumsy and even though the ram was not that attentive there had been no chance he could not have noticed the beaver trying to assault him from behind. But the punch was misdirected and the beaver was rather stumbling forward than attacking seriously. With a growl Tzerska rammed his elbow backwards and hit the beaver's belly.

"Not with me, lad!"

With a casual kick in the crotch the beaver was sent to the ground, moaning in pain while the ram ran on, whispering a curse.

Gynes coughed, tried to catch his breath while holding his sex which hurt like it had been crushed. He writhed on the ground, moaning and equally trying to fight the pain as well as the feeling of his failure.

The bell was gone and the wood got lighter. The Tacolar Tree had to be right in front of him. His eyes widened in relief and he wanted to run a little bit faster again but he was not meant to do that.

He cried out when the stag joined in on him. Thunder had silenced the bell around his neck and thus the pony had had no chance to hear his approach. With a jump the stag was above the equine and Grand Leaf did just percept the shadow above him when Thunder was attacking. The boot hit him right in his face and the impact was so hard that it threw him backwards while Thunder landed and instantly spun around with a kick and before Grand Leaf reached the ground the heavy boot hit him once more, threw his head around, blood shot from his muzzle and a desperate neigh escaped his throat. Then Grand Leaf slammed onto the ground. Thunder kicked the writhing pony several times until he showed nothing but instinctive twitching anymore and then, heavily panting, the stag turned around and ran on. The Tacolar Tree was close by, he had no time to loose.

Fistle was running at maximum speed and so did Big Wheel right behind him. The trees and bushes shot past them, they broke through the undergrowth with such a speed that they did not even feel the branches slapping them anymore. Their breaths were nothing but hiss in between their gritted teeth. Sweat dropped from their foreheads and they could feel like their limbs started to ache but no one would give in now and with a howl the fox accelerated even more and the wolf followed behind. The forest was clearing and they would not give up now.

The path in front of him was like a blurred pattern which danced in front of his eyes but even though he had worn himself out earlier he had still enough power to go on. There was something kicking in and his clumsy, big feet seemed to loose all of their weight and even though he could hardly think straight anymore, he was running on like he had done before. His paws had closed to fists: He was a boar and he would not give in that easily. Especially now that he got closer to the tree.

They broke through the last line of trees, blinded by the sunlight for a moment but they did not stop and just ran on although they did not see anything but blurred green spots. But they knew that the large one in the middle had to be the Tacolar Tree and that was what they were heading for, no matter what it looked

like. But soon they noticed the smaller brown spot in front of the tree and they could not help but wonder what it was until they had gotten close enough (their eyes getting back to normal as well) to recognize Thunder who desperately tried to climb the trunk.

“What...?” Fistle blurred out and hit the brakes. Big Wheel stopped right next to him and they looked at the tree whose lower branches had all been cut off.

“Who did this?” Fistle cried out, not able to believe that the branches which had been there the day before were all gone.

With an angry grunt the stag was desperately trying to climb the tree but although the tree was pretty gnarled, the moist and slick bark offered absolutely no handhold at all. So the small bough they were expected to carry to the village seemed to be beyond their reach.

With a howl the fox suddenly jumped at the bark, tried to find a hold but then instantly fell down again.

“This is no use!” Wheel yelled, observing the attempts of Fistle and Thunder but the two did not stop.

Heavily panting Pendulum reached the tree as well and dropped to the ground, not caring for the tree or all the other contestants assembled there. He was just trying to catch his breath and the others did not notice him as well.

“We got to work together!” Wheel said aloud but the stag just glared at him (he had not even been able to find a single foothold for one of his large feet) while Fistle went on, jumping at the tree like he had not even heard Wheel’s proposal.

Meanwhile Tzerska reached the tree too and the old rabbit eyed the four young men carefully. “Who did that pony?” he cried out, glaring at his competitors.

“Me!” Thunder suddenly stopped his senseless attempts to climb the tree, turned towards the rabbit and stepped closer.

“Aren’t you ashamed?” Tzerska yelled. “To injure a competitor in such a manner! The Spirits will never accept such a behavior!”

“What do you want to say, dirtbag?” Thunder stepped even closer, glaring at the much smaller rabbit.

But Tzerska did not seem to be impressed at all. He just glared at the stag too who was now nothing but a foot from the older man. “I want to say you do not even deserve running at all,” Tzerska replied coldly.

Thunder put on a pitiful, cynical grin. “As you had to say anything about this.”

“Oh, yes! I’ll take care that you will not win this race for sure,” the rabbit hissed.

“I want to see that.” And he clenched his fist and motionlessly they stared at one another.

The three other ones had stopped and observed them, knowing that an outburst was at hand.

The small shape dashed past them with such speed that it almost threw them to the ground but then he was already jumping at the tree, his hands slipped from the moist surface for a moment but then his claws dug deeply into the bark and he got a hold and he seemed to run up the tree on all fours, jumping at the lowest branch, getting a hold at it. It broke and he let go of it, landed, rolled over.

The branch fell down where he had been an instant before but he was already on his feet again, tore off a small bough and then he dashed away without even looking up at anyone of them.

The five men stared after the lynx.

“What the fuck was that...?” Pendulum mumbled.

Fistle was the first one to get back to normal: He jumped at the broken branch, tore off a small bough as well and then ran off as well, running after the lynx as fast as he could.

This had been the sign for the others to do the same and they all got their branch of the Tacolar Tree within no time and joined the race again, heading for the village with all their power.

Now they were all close together, the hammering of their feet on the hollow ground was like distant thunder getting closer.

They jumped over, passed one another just for an instant until the rest caught them again. Like an avalanche they rushed through the forest, that blurred around them. Thunder jumped as powerfully as he could, hindered by the others; Wheel was right beside him, running as steadily as ever; Fistle, sometimes in front of, sometimes between them, slipped over the ground, using his smaller size as his biggest advantages against his bigger rivals, slipping through them whenever he could; Pendulum tried to find a way to push himself through this wall of bodies, to get his teeth into the wolf or the stag, to hold onto that one until the goal, while Tzerska run after them, his eyes narrowed and suddenly very eager no to let them get away, to show them all. But despite their differences they all had one thing in mind: To catch up with this damn lynx!

And there he was: He was not as fast as they would have expected, he was not running as fast as the others did.

Thunder was the first one to reach him and the much bigger stag was jumping at the feline with a broad grin.

But this one just jumped up and Thunder was jumping into nothingness. In the very last moment he was able to prevent his fall, but he stumbled and almost ran into a bush, taking him precious time as Wheel accelerated in the very same instant and passed by him, trying to cover some distance before the stag was up again. But this one gritted his teeth and dashed away, no longer caring about the lynx. His major opponent was Wheel and he could not waste his time with such a looser as the feline.

Fistle accelerated too, trying to get past the deer but he was inattentive for a moment, distracted by the sudden disappearance of the lynx. He could just feel like someone grabbed his belt and tore at it and before he was able to react he lay on the ground, his muzzle hurting, his entire body covered with mud and the boar jumped over him, as did the old rabbit while he was just busy trying to understand what had happened. But then he gritted his teeth and the adrenaline kicked in and he was up in no time and dashed away, his teeth gritted and cursing the boar.

He did not notice the lynx swinging down from a branch again and running after the rest.

With a cry the fox ran forward and the boar turned around just to see Fistle getting closer and closer. He tried to accelerated but his heavy feet were no longer able to carry him much faster. Fear crept into his mind while he tried to activate the last bits of strength that remained to him but he was exhausted and he could not deny the ache in his chest. But he did run faster, he ran as fast as he could but it was not sufficient as he could hear the cry when the fox jumped forward.

Wheel could feel Thunder in his back, he was like a large boulder that rolled down the path and would crush him when he would slow down. But he could hear the stag whose heavy body let the ground drone beneath his feet unlike his own steps who were light and silent. And the stag was still accelerating! And so did Wheel.

It was almost too easy: A simple kick in the back and the boar was on the ground. With a cry the boar went down and Fistle made sure that he stomped onto his head when running over him. But the fox also noticed that Thunder and Wheel had disappeared and that there was no time to loose with revenge.

Meanwhile Pendulum stumbled to his feet and with wavering steps he started to walk again. His head was spinning and his brain hammered painfully against the shell of his skull but he was standing and he was running and he stumbled forward. He did not even notice how Tzerska passed by. He was busy to reach the goal as fast as he could.

It was like a stitch in Wheel's right leg, it was not very painful at all but it was all that he needed to feel: He was asking for too much. But he could not allow himself to slow down. Breathing was getting more and more difficult and slowly he started to realize that the stag right behind him was not the one he had to overcome.

Thunder was hardly caring about his exhaustion. He was snorting and puffing, his jaw ached because he gritted his teeth so powerfully, sweat flowed down his chest like a river that carried his power along but the only thing he was able to see was the stiff tail of the wolf in front of him. There was so little space in between it and his hand, it was almost within reach.

Tzerska inhaled and the stream of air cut into lungs like a knife. He was already running slower and although he tried to ignore the voice in his head that shouted at him that the race was lost he did not give up. Maybe he would not be able to show the youngsters what this was all about, maybe he could not have won anyway, but he was finishing this in pride. That was for sure!

Like a brown flash the small feline passed by the rabbit and the old man noticed that he had already forgotten about this one. Maybe this race would not end as expected!? A smile flickered round his lips.

Every breath of the stag sounded like a growl and sweat dropped from the wolf's frowns and it was not only sweat from his exhaustion.

Fistle glided around yet another corner and hissed in anger as neither the deer, nor the wolf had gotten visible. He was trembling, his limbs feeling like being about to consume themselves but then he pushed himself off the ground again and for a short moment he even enjoyed the power of the momentum driving

him forward, the air rushing by his head, drying his sweat but just until he noticed the brown figure in the corner of his eyes and before he had even properly seen him he knew that it had to be the lynx.

The echo of Thunder's bell was driving Wheel crazy, it sounded in his ears like the cry of a bird of prey whose claws were scratching at his skull. His legs were getting heavier and heavier and this stag behind him was still where he had been all the time.

When the bell suddenly subsided Wheel was almost grateful for a moment.

Fistle feigned a punch and the lynx had almost instantly jumped to the side as if he had not even been at the fox' side at all. But the feline suddenly found himself on the edge of the path, on insecure ground and he was falling behind the fox for a moment and had to catch up again.

The stag attired right in front of him, pushing himself off a trunk and spinning around to kick. The wolf ducked and with a growl jumped forward, his elbow heading for the deer's chest.

His vulpine blood ran instantly cold when he heard the hoarse snarl from behind and he jumped forward to escape the lynx' arms, grabbing for him. Despite his own agility the feline was slightly faster and got hold of his tail and with a yelp the fox was pulled to the ground where the lynx already lay.

His elbow hit the chest and the stag stumbled against the trunk behind him but it stopped him and instinctively Wheel lowered his head and dashed forward.

The lynx held onto the fox' legs and this one tried to get hold on a root to get away. But the feline was much stronger than he would ever had imagined and Fistle tried to kick and shake himself and then with all his power he was able to push himself off and roll over so that the lynx lost his grip and then the fox kicked as powerfully as he could.

Wheel jumped, attired on the stag's back and rolled down, hitting the ground, hitting a stone with his face and then he just heard something behind him and he rolled over when the stag reached him again. Thunder tried to get him with his antlers but the wolf was once again faster and rolled away just in time but now the stag transformed his dash into a kick.

He did not hit anything. Fistle just saw the lynx above him, jumping with all fours and then he landed right upon him and started to thrash at his chest and another chill ran down his spine when Fistle heard like his shirt was torn apart by claws.

Wheel was pushed over, the kick hitting his head and he fell down. A cough tore through his chest and when he inhaled his chest whistled like a tea kettle. That was just the sign his opponent needed to attack again but the wolf just threw his arm upwards and his fist sunk deep into the stag's stomach.

The lynx was slashing around with his claws like a ball of razors, totally uncontrolled and in panic Fistle hit all around himself, kicked and then hurled his knee upwards, hitting the feline right into his crotch, so powerfully that no man could stand that.

Thunder stumbled backwards, trying to catch his breath, to overcome the pain and mindlessly he threw his arms around, got hold of the wolf and hurled him

aside. But this one just rolled over and was back on his feet jumping at the stag with a howl.

It hit the fox' face like liquid fire, blood poured up from the cut and he was completely startled, but then a fist was incoming and everything went black.

The wolf landed on the stag back, grabbing the larger deer with his arms and Thunder instinctively tried to shake Wheel off. But the wolf was holding on too strongly and even though he was thrown about by Thunder's movements he did not let go. A painful cry escaped the stag when the teeth of the wolf sunk into his shoulder and he spun around in total panic and this time the wolf crashed into a bush and lost his grip. But he was instantly back on his feet and with a howl he jumped at the stag once more and this time a precise kick into the face sent the larger deer to the ground where he lay trembling, shaking, coughing, staring at the wolf in utter terror, unable to move, just staring at the wolf's yellow eyes.

The wolf growled a last time and then he spun around and run away, leaving the terrorized stag behind who did not do anything but tremble.

Breathing hurt as did his legs and his head was droning because of the blow of the stag he had received. But he ran on.

Leaves and branches were torn off, rustled like a storm when the lynx rushed around a corner and reached the path again, just behind the wolf who did not even have the time to wonder about that. Then the feline was dashing away again, pushing himself off on all fours and not getting up until he had joined up with the wolf.

They were running side by side, they got closer to the town. The path was broad enough there.

The wolf tried to get a look at the lynx but the only thing he could percept was the strain and the shimmering of the dark eyes and the sweat beneath the totally messy hair. His teeth were gritted and he was breathing hard and the wolf had to realize that he had to look very much the same. Exhaustion waded through his body, tore at his limbs hard as steel, pulled at them, threatened to tear them apart at any time. But he fought on against the hardening, forcing his legs to move and tense again and again. Every muscle was getting as heavy as lead and as stiff as steel, it cost him every effort to force them to keep on moving.

Wheel tried to focus his blurred vision and took a look at his opponent: This fur was unmistakable, the light brown fur with some gray hairs here and there and especially the much darker markings on the back. It was not a dream, he was running against a feline. And in this moment this one turned his head too and their eyes met for a short moment although the wolf did not see anything but the shimmer of the slanting eyes which seemed to be a reflection of his own.

The lynx turned away, gritted his teeth so strongly that his entire muzzle quivered and he accelerated

He was so heavily panting that he started coughing, he had to reduce his speed just to catch his breath again and in this precise moment the lynx passed by him.



The wolf's feet mechanically kept going on while he stared at the lynx who was now in front of him. He could hear his heavy breath and it was almost painful just to look at the tensed muscles of the lynx' legs. Wheel wondered how he could still keep on running so fast. Even though he was not much faster than Wheel, he was just fast enough to become first. And Wheel knew that the very moment the lynx had passed him. Somehow this feline had the will to keep on running, to win. He could hear his breath.

Wheel tried to keep up with the lynx, although sweat was constantly flowing down his forehead. It had already wet his entire back's fur and the salty fluid stuck so tightly to his skin that it felt like he would suffocate sooner or later. So he breathed even more heavily until his hurting lungs sounded like a screaming steam engine which would blow up in the next few minutes.

The forest thinned out, they were approaching the town now.

Every fiber of his body hurt, every limb, every muscle and every sinew. Beside his legs, which shot new pain throughout his spine whenever they hit the ground, his stomach hurt like its muscles had turned to separate plates of steel which scratched on each other and if he would fall down they would pierce through his innards and he would die the very same instant. But he kept on, he didn't even see anymore but he didn't have to after all. The salty scent of lynx' sweat was strong enough for him so that he would even have found him in perfect darkness. He just had to follow the trace of salty, slightly sweet scent and this bopping light brown spot in front of him.

Something happened and he didn't even realize it. Maybe he was thinking about Shannanah, maybe he wasn't even thinking anymore, just his legs stretched and he dashed forward when the flash of adrenaline broke through him. Stars exploded in front of his eyes, he could taste iron in his mouth, but then suddenly he was at the lynx' side and he was looking right at his angular, cramped face.

"Hey!" he shouted. It hurt even more than breathing. "Hey!"

The lynx did not react. A silver pendant swung wildly around his neck. Sweat was dripping from the strands of his hair and onto his muzzle.

"You..." Wheel could feel a stitch in his side. If the lynx did not give in he was lost. "...you... run..." He had to gasp for breath. "...you just... run... for... the money, don't you?" Suddenly he could feel something in between his legs and he was stumbling but he got back his equilibrium and thus caught up with the lynx.

"What?" The lynx' hoarse voice was nothing but a short hiss in between his gritted teeth. He was panting equally heavily.

"You... can get..." Wheel gasped. "...the money. Just let me... win! I don't... care 'bout the money."

"I win anyway!" The lynx tried to speed up.

"I give you more!" Wheel shouted in a sudden urge of panic. "I'll give you fifteen... if you just let me win this damn..." Wheel gasped. "...race!"

The lynx did not react, he just ran on. But then a single drop of sweat flowed down from his nose, along his muzzle, over his lips and then disappeared below it before it reappeared just when he gulped. "'kay!" he panted. "But if y'shitten me... I'll finish you off."

“Whatever... you... want!” Wheel assured him and in the very next moment the lynx already fell behind. He ran considerably more slowly and before Wheel’s mind had fully grasped it, he was already in lead.

He ran on. He just ran on. Everything was reduced to this green tunnel which he was running through, there was some vanishing point in front of him, a spot of light at the end which was getting closer. He didn’t feel anything anymore. His body was gone somehow, there was just this spot of light left, a free space between the trunks which he didn’t recognize as trunks anymore. They were just bars which held him captive and the light was the freedom beyond. He was running as fast as he could and he could feel like it was getting closer but it didn’t seem that way. It felt different, wrong. He wasn’t approaching it. Shadows passed by as he moved on, he was still moving but he didn’t get there.

The beating of his heart was the only sound left. It beat in slow motion like it had given up working, it refused to beat faster, it had given in to the exhaustion. His heart pounded as slowly as it could.

The trees burst apart, blinding light came in, cool wind almost swirling around, new brown spots, shouting people, crying, cheering, howling, buildings flashed by, broke in and were condensed to tiny lines of gray and brown, flashing, sparkling lights, more cheers, more cries, more howling, feet hit the hard ground of a street, blows through the entire body, swirling scents, a last flash of pain, a gasping howl and he hurled himself around a corner, his feet were searching for grip, he kicked against the ground, threw his body around, left behind a cloud of dusty earth as he dashed forward again and then he flew to this huge tree, taken there by his own momentum and he hit the rough bark with his hand, smashing the small bough he had been carrying all the time and the sound could be heard throughout the whole town until it transformed into cries and deafening applause.

She smiled at him and he blinked because he desired to see her more clearly but he couldn’t. He could just perceive so much that he understood that she was smiling. She seemed to say something but he could not understand her. He was so happy to see his love’s face...

“Get him back onto his feet or he’ll die from exhaustion!” the old man shouted and instantly Searcher and Blade grabbed their unfortunate brother and pulled him to his feet and Shannanah had just been trying to speak to him.

They held the limp wolf boy in between them on his arms. And somehow this method showed some effect at least he was able to put something like a smile onto his face when he believed to recognize his wife’s face but when he was taken up it transformed into the face of his sister and he blinked and stared at her without understanding that change.

“You damn fool!” his father cried, his silver hair waved around his happy face. “You know how to frighten your family.” And he poked him so that his son coughed painfully. His mother said nothing as usual. But she smiled at least.

“As soon as he can walk, get him in!” the old man ordered. He was sitting on the lawn around the Spirits’ oak with Uncle Gem and slowly the two old wolves

got onto their feet. "I want him inside as soon as possible!" And the old man turned around and walked back towards the sawmill, through the many people which had gathered around the wolf's clan, trying to get a look at the winner.

Wheel blinked and now he was finally realizing how many people had gathered around him. Almost the whole clan was there, except for the women, of course. And behind them there were the other people, the stags, the foxes and all the other.

"Now, now!" The armadillo priest stepped forward, non to gently pushing some of the wolves aside. His old blood dyed cloak was waving around his strange shell. His necklaces and fetishes clicked as he got closer. With those black eyes of his which hid deeply in between the scales he focussed the wolf boy. His long twisted rod wavered meaningfully. "Step aside!" he whispered and instantly Searcher and Blade let Wheel go.

The wolf boy almost fell down as his legs were barely able to support him but somehow he managed to stay tall, although he was staggering.

"Throughout your strength, your speed, your agility and your stamina you, Wheel of the Nighthunters, have gathered a branch of the holy Tacolar Tree justly and brought it back here to the Oak which protects this village, just like Benyon did when the Spirits needed his help. So like him you have earned the right to represent this settlement in front of the holy Spirits and their servants. May summer, fall, winter and spring bless you. May the sun's light be blessing you and your clan. May Heya, Koda and Tezu watch over you and your loved ones 'til this season's circle has passed..."

Everything had gone silent. no one was even moving while the priest spoke. Just the leaves of the oak rustled as if the Spirits were floating by to watch the ceremony.

"...and thus I declare you, Big Wheel of the Nighthunters, to be the new *Jurnea*, the only true speaker in front of the Spirits!" The armadillo slowly took something out of his tunic and carefully he held out a leather bag which was decorated with feathers. He hold it up high so that everyone could see it. With a long thin fingers of his he undid the knot of the leather strap which had closed the bag. The feathers which had been undid too were instantly freed and were taken away by a faint airflow. Meanwhile the priest turned the bag around and ash was poured down onto the wolf's head until the bag was empty. "May the Spirits bless you, your family and this settlement!" the priest said finally.

Then the wolves started cheering and for some moments Wheel was overcome by the noise. Ash stuck to his nose and tickled, but he tried to restrain himself. And then Blade and Searcher got to him again and pat onto his shoulder, the cries and shouting got even louder, everyone was trying to get through to him and his brother and sister had trouble to protect him from all the different people. The exhaustion came back and he could feel like it took him away. He could see the back of the priest who retired, he imagined to see the face of Shannanah who tried to get through to him and then for a short instance when the people made way for the priest he looked all around, trying to find the eyes of his wife, to find a

trace of her, to hear her voice, to smell her fragrance or anything. He spun around, people cheering around him, wolves patting on his shoulder.

“Where’s Shannanah?” he mumbled.

The people and the noise swirled around him, getting faster and faster as he tried to find a single trace, to catch the smallest hint of her presence but he could not even smell her. There was every other scent he knew, every single scent of every single relative he knew, swirling around him.

“Where is Shannanah?” he cried out but his voice was drowned out by the cheers around him.

They approached him, pressed around him, tried to greet him, to touch him, to pat onto his shoulder, to congratulate him, a maze of voices and noises, a spinning labyrinth of furs that closed in around him, that took his breath away, that started to crush him. Sweat poured from his forehead while he stumbled backwards.

“WHERE IS SHANNANAH?” he cried out in panic.

But they were still after him. His heart raced, every beat hammered against his skull and with all his remaining strength he turned around and pushed the people aside, threw them over, throughout the whole crowd, crying the name of his wife, searching for her, searching for a way to get out and suddenly he stumbled out of the crowd, getting out of the mass and the only thing he saw was the lynx, standing all alone, leaning forward, supporting himself on his knees, still heavily breathing. Then he suddenly he turned his face around and his dark, slanting feline eyes were looking straight into Wheel’s.

Wheel stumbled a little bit and dropped to the ground.

“Hey, Jid!”

The lynx turned around and suddenly perceived Mlala freeing himself from the crowd and running towards him.

Meanwhile the Nighthunters gathered around the unconscious Wheel and the rest of the people around the Nighthunters. Except the Nickel and the member of Storm’s End who stood at the side, each clan for itself, watching the cheering people with glaring looks.

“Wow! You made it second!” Mlala came closer.

Jid looked up at him and inhaling deeply stood up straight. “Yeah, seems like it...” he said, still looking at the crowd which had gathered around the victor. Suddenly a loud “Heave-ho!” echoed over the square and the males of the clan lifted Wheel up, carrying him on their shoulders, while other members of the clan pushed the people aside, the strange group went over to the sawmill.

Jid was distracted when Mlala pat on his shoulder. “I could have never done that!”

“Heya!” Mlala’s father came over from one of the stands of the square and walked over to them too, dragging Enja along who held his hand.

Jid was once again looking after Wheel who was just about to be carried into the sawmill. His eyes narrowed.

The people started to disperse and spread all over the square, some sitting down on the lawn beneath the oak, some joining the stands, some simply chatting in groups. Everything seemed to be very peaceful except the two groups of the foxes and the deer who were gloaming close to their headquarters, anticipating the contestants belonging to their clans but bit by bit these groups got smaller while the rest walked back into headquarters until their were just the most important members of the clans left.

“Damn!” The old lynx powerfully slapped the younger lynx on the shoulder (this one coughed unwillingly). “You were almost as good as Wheel.” He laughed. “That will teach them a lesson about our kind!” And he started laughing aloud, his face radiating joy.

Enja and Mlala looked at Jid, equally smiling and he started to feel uncomfortable as his tail wagged strongly. “Don’t mention it!” he mumbled.

“Don’t mention it?” The old lynx laughed even louder. “Damn, this day will be remember by our family for the rest of eternity! I just can’t tell you how proud I am!” And suddenly the bigger lynx leaned over to the youngster, grabbed him and embraced him with joyous carelessness. “Congratulations, Jid, congratulations!”

For a moment the lynx was visibly confused by this, his tail wagged frantically. At first he made obvious attempts to brake free but after some time he relaxed a little bit

“Now!” The man let Jid go. “Tonight we will have a feast! Yeah! This is worth a celebration!”

And he grabbed Jid’s shoulder and forced him to go over to their small hut with them while Mlala started to inquire him about the race what the tired runner answered in monosyllables but to Mlala’s satisfaction nevertheless.

Just Enja followed behind. First she was busy with looking at the few wolves who were still loafing around in front of the sawmill then she looked at the members of the fox clan and then over to the deer. Slowly she turned to the wolves again and then all of a sudden she ran away as fast as she could.

The priest stood beneath the oak. His strangely colored brown coat covered all of his broad body so that just his pointed muzzle was visible. No one seemed to pay much attention to him. He was supporting himself on his long, gnarled staff, standing in the shadow of the old oak whose leaves rustled from time to time.

The people were already partying again. Some of the stands which sold drinks and food were pretty demanded and lots of people sat on the small piece of lawn in the shadow of the oak (although they kept their distance to the priest) as the sun had not just risen high into the sky but had already passed by its peak and thus the air and the entire village was already highly heated up and as there was not a single cloud to be seen in the blue of the sky it could still get hotter and thus everyone was happy about a little piece of shadow. The felines, ursines, squirrels, mice and boars from the village and its surroundings were chatting lowly all the time, exchanging information they had gathered since almost a year

because they had had no opportunity to talk to one another before this special occasion. After all the race was nothing but some kind of a pretext to come together for a day. After all the Big Three usually settled this among themselves.

But right now at least two of the clans were not even thinking about settling anything at all as they were still waiting for their runners to come back and nothing had happened up to now. The few remaining members of the Nickel and Storm's End were getting impatient. Most of the foxes had already disappeared inside their family seat, this maze of interconnected houses and huts with the bar at the front, facing the oak. There were just some youngsters left, impatiently walking to and fro, kicking small stones aside. On the other side the most important members of the deer clan were still present while the rest of the clan had either disappeared inside the huge dormitory that they called their family seat or mixed with the people standing around. However there was just a small group of old (but still very impressive) stags left which cast a gloom all over their surrounding.

The armadillo watched all this in silence.

Suddenly a figure was running around the corner and for a moment all the people stopped whatever they had done, a few cheers and a little bit of clapping came forward when the old rabbit dashed towards the oak, holding a single, mistreated branch of the Tacolar Tree in his paw and he did not stop until he had slammed it against the tree like the tradition demanded it.

But his arrival did not get as much attention as the next one did: He was rather staggering than running although he did not look that exhausted at all. But something seemed to slow him down and the impressively huge figure of the stag was looking rather miserable than anything else. There were some few cheers again but when the members of Thunder's clan stepped forward these cheers died down instantly.

Powerlessly Thunder slammed his branch against the oak and still panting he looked over to his family's seat where he was being anticipated. Slowly he started to walk over to his father and his uncles and Thunder tried to display as much dignity as he could. But in the end it did not help very much.

The stags were mercilessly staring at the incoming youngsters.

"I... I..." Thunder wanted to start but then his father slapped him so hard that the young stag was almost pushed over.

"Get inside!" The man hissed to his son who held his burning cheek and slowly he started to walk towards the door.

His father glared at the crowd around him and then walked after his son, displaying all the pride he could to prove that this was not supposed to be a defeat.

Tzerska and the armadillo priest stood almost side by side, watching the door of the dormitory slamming shut behind the stags.

"I hope he gets more than that!" Tzerska said coldly and spit out. Then the rabbit started to walk away.

"Tzerska!"

The low voice of the armadillo made him stop.

The priest had turned around and obviously looked at him although his eyes were hidden beneath the hood of his coat. "How long do we know each other?" the armadillo asked.

"Much too long if you ask me," the rabbit replied. Unwillingly he laid his long ears back.

A smile flickered round the armadillo's lips. "Just my feelings, just my feelings..." he replied. "But I guess one might say that we always have respected each other?!"

The rabbit shortly wrinkled his nose. "The Spirits know what I think about your mendacious clan," he answered.

Although the rabbit could not see it, it was obvious that the armadillo's expression was changing for the worse. "Whatever," the priest said lowly. "I give you a good advice, Tzerska and I just do it because you are one of the last true believers. But listen carefully because I will just say it once: You do not want to attend the feast tonight."

The rabbit screwed up his eyes. "What are you up to, priest?"

"Isn't it obvious that this day is still heating up...?" And suddenly he held out his hand and pointed towards the forest and as Tzerska looked over there he saw the long expected fox arriving.

Fistle was a total mess: His clothes were reduced to shreds which hung around his body and these were partly dyed with blood as he had received several severe cuts alongside bruises and other wounds. He was not even pretending to run anymore, he was just stumbling forward, heading straight for the Nickel's headquarters.

Everyone was staring at him in silence and even the assembled foxes needed a moment to realize that they had to help him.

His face was contorted like he was close to crying and when some of the foxes came over to him he almost fell into their arms and they carried him into the house as quickly as possible.

It took a while before the conversations started again and even then it was rather a low mumbling than anything else.

Tzerska looked after the foxes who had all disappeared inside the building by now, but the rabbit's mind was still racing. "Did you mean this..." he asked the armadillo and turned around towards the priest.

But then he stopped because where the priest had been moments before was now nothing but shadowy lawn. The rabbit pressed his lips together. "May the Spirits curse you, priest!" he whispered and then walked away, leaving the square and all the people there behind.

"He's not taking it," Searcher said without delay, walking over to the end of the huge table.

The old wolf looked up. "What do you mean?"

Searcher sat down at the table, next to his father. "He is completely out of his mind, mad with anger and desperation. We had to lock him in because he lost control. Chimes is guarding him."

The old wolf looked at his grandson and then leaned forward. "Do you mean he does not approve our action?" His voice was low and quiet, already reflecting his suspicions, a foretaste of his anger.

Everyone at the table looked at Searcher who was getting visibly nervous. He laughed shortly. "If it would be that..." The wolf wet his lips and then blurred out: "He wants her back!"

For an instant it was completely silent.

"What?" Barrel, Searcher's uncle, gasped.

"WHAT DOES THIS SINNER THINK?" Grampa flared up, quivering with anger, his eyes flashing with anger. "We even let him have his bastard children and the only thing he is thinking about is this vulpine *SLUT*?"

Searcher nodded.

"I SHOULD RIP HIS THROAT! Hasn't he besmirched his clan's name far too often by now? AND HE DOESN'T EVEN STOP?" The old man was trembling, his tail was stiff like he was about to tear something or someone to pieces within an instant. "HE SHOULD BE DAMN GRATEFUL THAT WE SEND HER BACK WHERE SHE BELONGED!"

Most of the men nodded.

"I WILL SHOW HIM!" And he stood up awkwardly but with surprising speed.

Boulder was the first one to react and stood up, laying his paw on his father's shoulder. "Please..."

"WHAT?" The old man flared up. "Do you want to protect your son, this disgrace of our family? Isn't it enough that he sullied our bloodline?" He glared at the younger wolf who was not able to stand that for long.

"Please, father, he is young, he is confused. He needs time!"

The old man stared at his son who gulped nervously. The old man could smell the other one's fear but nevertheless he was not letting him go. He gritted his teeth and growled.

"Please!"

Searcher had stood up too and joined his father. "Grampa, he is confused and tired, he will be alright after a good night's sleep."

The old wolf glared at the two wolves once more, then he slowly turned his face away. "I can not allow such behavior!" he snarled and then shook off his son's paw, walking back to his place at the top of the large table. "And I will not allow him to go on like this!" he flared up once more. Then he sat down.

"I will take care of this," Searcher answered quickly.

"He should be grateful that his cubs are still here with us!" the old man mumbled, now looking more tired than angry.

It was all silent. No one of the ten men in the room dared to say anything. Boulder sat down at his place again, just Searcher stood there, nervously eyeing his grandfather.

"I will try to bring him to his senses," Searcher said cautiously.

“Do that,” his grandfather said. “And if he doesn’t...” He fell silent for a moment, lowering his head. Then he looked up again and his eyes were flashing. “Tell him that I will not allow anything like this to happen again.”

Searcher nodded, turned around and quickly left the dining hall.

Blade was leaning at a pillar outside when he came out. “What’s up?”

Searcher pulled a face. “He doesn’t even know how lucky he is. He’s just gotten himself off the hook again.”

“Wow!” She was walking after him who headed upstairs. “I thought he was ready now!”

They walked upstairs where most of the private and sleeping rooms were, loosely connected by a number of corridors and larger rooms, a maze of interconnected rooms where any stranger would instantly get lost in. Usually one could hear the saws working below but on this day of celebration the constant drone of the machines had stopped and thus one could hear the faint noises from the rooms, the low talking and such. They walked through it without delay.

Finally they reached a corridor at the back of the building. In front of one of the doors sat Chimes, busy carving something. The wolf jumped up when Searcher and Blade got closer.

“Anything new?” Searcher asked.

“No, I have heard sobs for some time but since then he’s quiet,” Chimes replied.

Searcher nodded and then exchanged a look with Blade who nodded to him. “Okay, ready for another round,” he mumbled and then he opened the door and walked into Wheel’s room.

Wheel was sitting on the floor, leaning against the edge of the bed. His bloodshot eyes were wide open but they seemed to stare into nothingness. He did not move when his brother and his sister came in.

For a moment Blade and Searcher waited for a reaction but then the woman kneeled down at her brother’s side. “Wheel, you OK?”

A silly, scornful smile flickered round his lips. “Why are you asking me that?” he mumbled. “Does it matter to you how I feel?”

Searcher grimaced. “Does it matter to you how we feel?” he replied.

Wheel looked up. His face was an entire mess: He had not washed himself since the end of the race and thus all the dirt still stuck to it. His bloodshot eyes stood out of the dirty fur like two pearls of reddish marble in between splinters of wood.

“Do you have ever cared about your family, your clan?” Searcher went on, then fell silent for a moment, staring back at his younger brother, waiting for an answer of his. But as there was none he went on himself: “No! First you cheat during last year’s race and when it is uncovered you run away like a coward. Did you ever care about us back then? Did you care about Quill who was promised to marry you? Did you care about what we had to face when the Nickel and Storm’s End gave us hell on earth?”

Wheel turned his face away.

“Of course, you didn’t! You were busy fucking some *fox* from the Silver Coast, weren’t you? It did not matter to you, a Nighthunter, bringing a vulpine whore into our home?”

Suddenly Wheel’s body tensed. “Don’t you dare talking like that about my wife!” he snarled.

“Ah, come on! You don’t believe that crap yourself, do you?” Searcher covered his face with his hand for a moment. “OK! That you feel responsible for her, because she has given birth to your cubs... OK! I have to admit that I do understand that! But now you should be damn grateful that we got you rid of her and that we even allow you to keep your crossbred cubs!” Searcher almost yelled that at his brother in front of him.

“I love her!” Wheel said stone-cold.

“GIMME A BREAK!” Searcher was trembling, his tail as stiff as a metal bar. “What have you done in return, eh? What have you ever done for your family, except sullying its name and its bloodline?”

“I RAN!” Wheel cried.

“AND THAT WAS THE LEAST ONE COULD EXPECT AFTER WHAT YOU DID LAST YEAR!”

“OH YEAH?” Now Wheel was getting equally agitated, baring his sharp canine teeth just like his brother did. “AND YOU PAY ME BACK BY TAKING MY WIFE FROM ME!”

“YOU ARE SUCH A SELFISH WIMP, WHEEL! A DAMN MISERABLE LOOSER!”

“YEAH, I AM A LOOSER! WHAT DO I CARE? I WOULD NOT HAVE WON THE DAMN RACE IF I HAD NOT BRIBED THE LYNX!”

Searcher was speechless for an instant, staring at Wheel with his mouth wide open.

“What?” Blade, who had been almost forgotten by her brothers, stammered after a moment.

“YEAH! I DID NOT WIN THE RACE! GOT IT? THE LYNX LET ME GO FIRST BECAUSE I PROMISED TO PAY HIM!” Wheel was trembling, every muscles of his was tense with anger and frustration.

“That’s not true...!” Searcher said, almost begging. He was completely pale.

“Bet ya ass!” Wheel snarled at him.

Blade and Searcher exchanged a look, both equally startled by Wheel’s confession. Their younger brother had turned away and rubbed his muzzle like he tried to get rid of something. He was still trembling.

“We got to...” Searcher started but Blade already nodded and instantly the wolf turned around and opened the door, Blade following right after him.

“Blade?”

She hesitated a moment and then turned her head towards Wheel.

His jaw was quivering and now he was looking completely tired and powerless again. “Are the kids alright?” he said lowly. He was almost unable to control his voice. He was close to crying.

She eyed him from teeth to toe. “Don’t worry. Quill is taking care of them,” she said coldly while walking out the door. Then she slammed it shut.

They walked back towards the dinning hall. Their steps made the floor drone as they walked so powerfully. Both of their tails were stiff and Searcher nervously ran his hand over his muzzle again and again, trying to find the right explanation for this new fiasco he had to report. But whatever got on his mind, it was hardly good enough to save himself.

Searcher hesitated when he had to open the door of the dinning hall and Blade encouragingly laid her paw on his shoulder and nodded towards him when he looked for her. Slowly he opened the door and walked in while Blade waited outside.

She stood in front of the large, heavy door and she could almost feel like the tension inside was mounting but when she heard her grandfather cry she should have been prepared for this but it let her blood run cold nevertheless. She felt sorry for her brother who had to face the men inside. She was unable to understand what they spoke of inside, she heard just the cries getting out and as fast as she had expected Searcher got out again.

He was pale except for the right half of his face which looked like the skin underneath his fur had been sat afire: The blow must still be hurting.

“So what...?” she asked.

Searcher exhaled, then he looked up and his features hardened. “We have to take care of the lynx.” he said.

It was poor. Neither them, nor he could deny that but he knew that this was the very best this family was able to do and thus did not really mind, instead he displayed such an insatiable hunger that he devoured the haunch of roasted hare with such visible delight that the lynx family was slightly embarrassed by his behavior: As hungry as he had been he did not care much about manners (as if he ever did) and had grabbed the haunch with his fingers and had started gnawing at it before his host had had a chance to hand him a knife and a fork.

Enja and Mlala openly stared at him while he tore off piece after piece of meat with his carnivorous teeth, from time to time stuffing bread or some of the fruit into his mouth as well, before giving his haunch a little bit more attention. It took him a while to notice the silence at the table and then he looked at the two lynx at his side who were still staring at him. He needed a moment to realize why they were looking at him that way and for a short instant it looked like he blushed but then he mumbled a low “Sorry!”, picked up a fork and a knife and went on eating, although he behaved rather awkwardly with these.

“No, no!” the old lynx intervened quickly. “Please forgive my children, Jid! They are just surprised that someone eats like this because I have always told them not to. Please do whatever you want.”

Jid kept silent while slashing the meat with almost desperate helplessness. But he did not give up trying, quite on the contrary he seemed to feel rather embarrassed by his own behavior and kept silent most of the time during the meal.

“So...” The old lynx pushed his empty plate away. “What do you have planned, Jid? Do you want to stay with us for a little longer?”

“Thanks, but I want to cross Lake Moonfire as soon as possible,” he replied quickly.

The man nodded. “Very wise! It’s much better to avoid the storm period when one is able to,” he agreed.

“She will loose herself in it,” Enja mumbled and Jid stared at the girl with eyes wide open, trying to find out who she had meant.

Her father ignored Enja’s comment. “But I insist that you stay at least another day,” he said with a smile. “You should rest a while after such an effort!”

“I...”

“Ah! Ah! I don’t want to hear any contradiction, young man!” he interrupted Jid. “You are our guest and I want to be damned if I am not a good host. Maybe I can even find someone who takes you to the Silver Coast with his carriage or so. There is always someone going there. Don’t you think that is an agreement?”

“Thanks, but...”

“No *but*, my friend! Just *Thanks*’ enough!” He smiled at the younger lynx who had lowered his head a little bit.

“You deserve it,” Mlala said friendly. “After all you are the winner.”

Jid’s right ear flickered all of a sudden when he eyed Mlala for a short moment. But nobody seemed to notice.

“Wheel is nothing but a cheater,” the other lynx went on. “I bet you would outrun him easily.”

“Why?” Jid said as casually as possible, playing around with the broken bone on his plate.

“Why? Pfffff... I mean after what happened last year...”

“What happened last year?”

“I don’t know. I was out of the race pretty soon. But as far as I know Wheel had hidden a branch of the Tacolar Tree somewhere and thus he did not have to run the whole distance. Somehow the priest found out afterwards and some participating stranger was declared winner...” He paused shortly. “Afterwards he ran away and did not come back until two full moons ago, bringing home a vixen he had married somewhere. His entire clan was totally furious. But now...” He smiled. “I guess I does not really matter anymore.” There was a short pause and he looked at Jid who stared on the table and suddenly his face brightened again. “As long as you stay you have to train with me. Next year I will have to carry on a legacy after all.” He smiled broadly.

“She can’t. Someone is awaiting her...” Enja mumbled and once again everyone was looking at her in bewilderment. The little girl had kept unusually quiet during the meal and she lacked all the liveliness she had displayed earlier. She just sat on her chair, dangled her legs and stared at her empty paws.

Her father leaned over to her. “Everything alright, Enja?” he asked carefully.

All of a sudden the girl broke out in tears, grabbed her father’s arm and pressed her small face against it, sobbing and trembling.

“Shhhh....” Quickly her father stood up from his chair and picked her up in his arms. “Don’t worry, Enja, everything will be alright.” He rocked the tiny girl in his arms for a moment. “She must have had one of her visions again,” he explained to Jid who had been unable to take his eyes off the girl.

Jid nodded slowly.

“Maybe all this excitement has been a little bit too much for her,” the man mumbled. “We will get a little bit of fresh air.” And slowly he carried the girl outside through the opened door of the hut, rocking her gently, trying to pacify her by whispering to her but Enja seemed to be unable to calm down.

“Oh, man!” Mlala sighed. “I wish she would not have these visions. It troubles her so much.”

“Hm?” Jid turned around to him as he had still been looking at the opened door where Enja and her father had disappeared.

Mlala waved his hand. “Never mind!”

They sat in silence for a while and Jid started to gnaw at his claws. Mlala observed him and he noticed that his tail wagged rather strongly. For a moment he was wondering about that.

There was the quiet noise of talking coming in from outside.

“You really don’t know how happy you have made my father,” Mlala said after some time. “You have really shown them all and my father is really proud to be a lynx again.”

Jid blinked at him just like he did not understand.

Mlala went on: “My father has even thought about offering you Enja’s hand...”

Jid’s mouth dropped open.

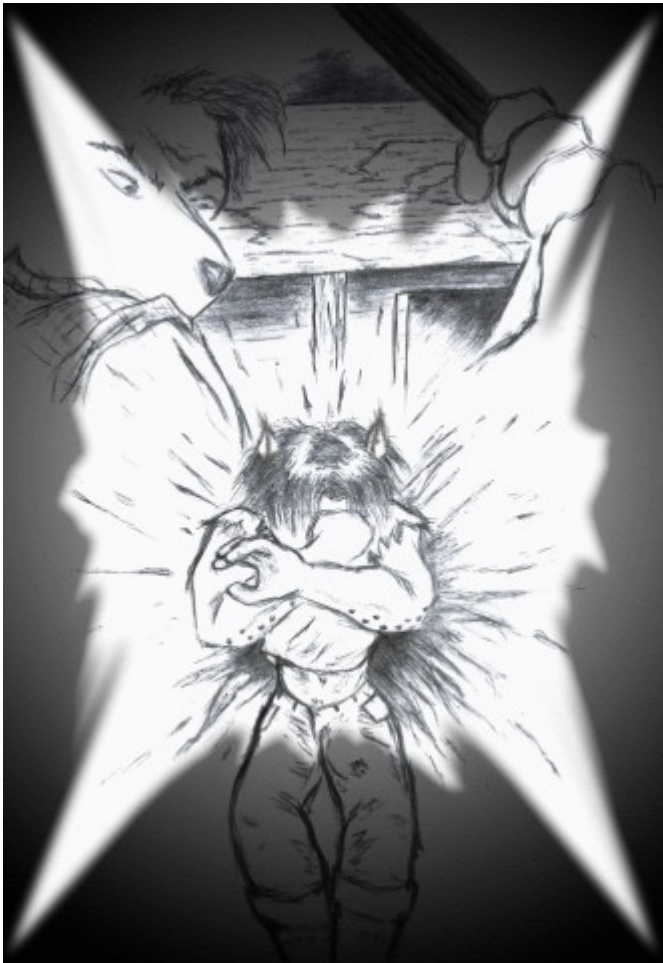
“...but as you have already said that you do not want to stay here....” Mlala paused, having folded his hand in front of his muzzle. “As if we had much of a future here...” he added lowly.

“Jid?” somebody cried from outside. “Jid?” Mlala’s father was coming back inside, strongly holding his struggling daughter by her hand. He was smiling, his tail wagged. “There is some wolf who wants to speak with you,” he said.

“Back in a minute,” Jid said to Mlala and stood up, walking towards the door. As he passed by the man with the lowered head he noticed that he smelled somehow strangely but he just saw Enja who was staring at him with her eyes wide open.

He walked outside and for a moment the sun blinded him when he walked down from the small veranda.

It was a simple, violent blow against his head and he lost consciousness even before he hit the ground.



Despite the action outside the room was completely silent. But this was the innermost chamber of the entire complex of buildings which had been build one upon the other until they had transformed into some kind of a hive with the queen's chamber at the center of it all, the best guarded, the most comfortable place. But unlike these expectations the room was pretty poor and there were no guards as well. There were just three foxes sitting on the cushions which covered most of the ground. A small wooden clock ticked on the wall while the man were busy cleaning their guns.

A shy knock at the door disturbed their peacefulness.

"Yes," one of them said slowly.

The door opened just a little bit so that a younger fox could get his head through it. "Father, the priest has come." He wet his lips. "He wants to speak with you."

One of the foxes raised his head. He was neither very old, nor remarkable in any other way. His fur was silvery with a little bit of a reddish shade as well, short curly hair covered his head as well as a small red cap. Upon his slim, well trained body he wore a black vest, a red shirt with some golden decorations and tight black leather trousers. With stringent eyes he looked at the youngster in the door. "What does he want?" he asked with a well controlled voice.

The younger fox shrugged his shoulders. "He said that he just wants to say it to you."

The fox exchanged glances with the two other, older foxes. Slowly he turned towards the door again. "Let him in, but I want you and Fitte to accompany him and guard the door as long as he's in here, understood?"

The young man nodded. "Sure, dad!"

Cautiously he closed the door and the sitting man skilfully gathered the different parts of the gun he had been cleaning and quickly assembled it again. He eyed the barrel scrupulously, then inserted a bullet and shut it with a click, laying it down right in front of his crossed legs when another shy knock at the door got audible.

"Come in," the man said loudly and instantly the door was opened by the young fox who guided the strange figure of the armadillo priest into the room. Without a word the host invited the guest to sit down while the young fox retired again, closing the door behind him.

Clumsily the priest sat down on the cushions, his worn-out tunic stretching around his scaled body like a cocoon. The armadillo could not miss the gun at the fox' feet.

"Welcome, Reverend Nsimese, in my humble demise. How do I deserve your visit?" the fox said slowly without displaying the slightest trace of irony.

The priest inhaled deeply. As usual just his pointed muzzle was visible beneath his cloak. "Greetings, Hoarde, it's been a long time since I had the pleasure to speak with you."

"Yes, indeed," the fox agreed. "Now, Reverend Nsimese, as you might already have noticed I have urgent matters to attend." With a faint grin he waved his

hand over his gun. "So I would appreciate if you told me about whatever needs my attention. I think that's best for both of us."

For a short instant the cold eye of the priest shimmered beneath the cloak but as quickly as it had gotten visible it disappeared again. "Of course! I know what a great burden it is to lead a clan such as yours, especially in times where one can't even depend on one's own son, right?"

The comment hit its target pretty well but the fox just needed the shortest moment to get his control again. If his frown had not twitched one would never have seen it but the priest noticed it and smiled secretly beneath his protecting cloth. "Indeed, so what do you want?" the fox asked much more harshly than before.

"Actually I came here to bring you good news... Well, maybe it's not good news, but... I would say that it is useful news." He stretched the last words meaningfully.

Hoarde showed no emotion. "Maybe," he replied coldly.

"However I guess that I will do you a favor by telling you this, so..."

The fox leaned forward. "If your news are worth it, I am willing to return the favor," he interrupted the armadillo as he got impatient. "You know that we are a clan of traders. We pay when we have to."

Deeply beneath his tunic Nsimese smiled again. "So... Yes! I might tell you, but..."

"What?"

The priest obviously eyed the two older foxes in the back of the small room.

Hoarde noticed his look. "You know my uncles, Reverend Nsimese. There is nothing I have to hide from them."

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish! Now, what I wanted to talk to you about is the race."

Unwillingly the fox' ears were pricked up.

"As you know...", the priest went on. "...there was a roamer, a lynx running right after Big Wheel. The one and the same lynx who injured your son severely and humiliated him in front of the whole village." The priest waited for a reaction of the fox but this one was much too self-controlled by now to show anything at all.

"I do know that," Hoarde said impatiently as the priest did not go on.

"So I guess you feel deceived about the result of the race."

The fox put on a sarcastic smile. "That's no secret."

"What if I told you that the race had been desecrated? What if I told you that there has been a fraud? What if I told you that the result of this race is invalid? And what if I told you *names*?" The priest had talked more and more quietly so that he was leaning over to the fox who had equally gotten closer to the armadillo.

Hoarde screwed up his eyes. "What do you want to imply?" he said carefully.

"Didn't you wonder about this lynx? A mere feline, very young and obviously not very strong, defeats your son in hand-to-hand combat..."

"What do you want to say, priest?" Hoarde hissed.

“And in the end he lets Big Wheel win, just like that! Such a formidable fighter, just behind Wheel and he lets him get away just like that...”

The fox had gritted his teeth and breathed heavily.

The armadillo enjoyed this for a moment before he went on: “Or should I say: SHE let him get away...”

The fox needed a moment to grasp the implication, his cramped face changed from anger to surprise, from surprise to doubt, from doubt to cold-blooded hatred. Meanwhile he sat up straight again and before he had even noticed himself he displayed cool self-confidence again. “This is, indeed, very interesting,” he mumbled, still somehow lost in his thoughts.

“I guess someone like Big Wheel is not particularly choosy about his mates,” the priest added.

“Yeah, I guess so,” the fox hissed, obviously carried away by the line of his thoughts.

“And most of all...”

The fox turned around and glared at the priest.

“I know that the lynx is with the Nighthunters right now...”

Hoarde’s eyes widened in surprise, then all of a sudden his features hardened and were as motionless as stone. “Thank you, Reverend Nsimese. You can rest assured that I do know what I am supposed to do.”

A smile flickered over the armadillo’s lips. “I never had any doubt about that,” he said politely and then added almost casually: “Unlike Storm’s End the Nickel do have to defend their right, don’t they?”

Once again Hoarde screwed up his eyes and glared at the priest.

“There’s one last thing I wanted to ask you.” He waited until the fox had fully turned towards him. “As this lynx slut has desecrated the race I wanted to be sure that she will receive proper punishment for her blasphemy.”

The fox leaned forward. “You can be certain about this,” he whispered. “*Dead certain!*”

The sun was sinking slowly, the shadows stretched and danced all over the houses and the trees in the yellowish and reddish light which shimmered in the eyes of the people on the square.

The whole square was now crowded and the few stands were absolutely overtaxed with the many requests for food and drink but nobody really seemed to care. The many voices were a constant drone, sometimes interrupted by laughter and joyous screams of children but basically everyone was just enjoying him- or herself. The men and the women stood separated and except for a few families and some younger couples the two groups were busy with oneself and thus the feast went on. Some bears were busy with preparing the large fireplace where the Moakrens² that had been hunted down just for this occasion were supposed to be roasted later. But traditionally the fire would not be lit until dusk and thus the people had to satisfy their hunger in different ways. But no one seemed to mind and the owners of the stands (like lots of the people, they were all outsiders who

had come here just for this occasion) did not complain. No one seemed to notice that just very few members of the Big Three were present, actually there seemed to be no one at all. But the other families of the town did not worry about that as they already knew that the defeated clans were busy licking their wounds.

It was a happy gathering that he could just see with difficulties from his window. But he had run out of tears and thus he looked at the partying people like staring at the waves of a lake. Sometimes he hit his foot against the ground but then he was completely motionless again, leaning against the frame of the window.

Since a certain time he had heard faint noises from below which he could find no explanation for. Usually his clan would have been celebrating with the rest of the town. So why did they not today? It could not be just because of him. They had dealt with him, they had locked him away and now they could have enjoyed their victory and the humiliation of the two other clans. But they did not. And he was wondering why.

It sounded like they were removing the furniture, like planks of the wooden floor were removed and after some time but back in place. But the only thing that was stored there were the family's...

Suddenly he stood up straight. His tail had gotten stiff.

They hid the weapons beneath the planks! Did they get the weapons? Why did they get the weapons?

His mind was racing while the muffled noises that came up from below confirmed his suspicion: The faint, rhythmical clicking of metal was all that he needed to hear to know that they were busy, loading the guns.

What the hell was going on here?

He leaned forward to take a look at the square again: There was just a small part visible, at the end of the narrow passageway his window was facing. But it was enough because after a while he was convinced that neither any wolf was attending the party, nor a fox, nor a deer. A shiver ran down his spine.

A faint movement made him look at the opposite end of the passageway and he did not see much more than two figures disappearing behind the sawmill. But for a fraction of a second he noticed the light brown, speckled fur of a feline the two figures had carried and although he had not seen it properly he instantly knew what that had been.

"Holy Spirits," he mumbled, holding his hand in front of his mouth. He was hardly able to keep standing.

They had the lynx! They had captured the lynx! The thought droned inside his head like the echo of thunder. And they were preparing for a fight as well!

It felt like a paw got hold of his heart and pressed it together. He was staring outside, trying to make any sense out of his observations but he knew that he would never know as long as he was locked in this room.

He was trembling with anxiety and started to walk up and down in his small room: From the window to the door, from the door to the window and back. He was breathing heavily and it seemed like every serious thought was fleeing from

his mind, escaping him whenever he got close to it. There was just one thing he knew for sure: He could not wait any longer.

Suddenly he stood still, looking straight at the window: He could not stay in here! He had to get out! He had to know what was going on! He had to help his cubs! He had to help the lynx! He had to do something!

And the first thing to do was breaking this window without anyone hearing it.

End of Chapter 3



Annotation 1: A crawler is a small crustacean-like pest that lives in any place with sufficient moisture. It is most often found under stones in the wood. It gets as big as a palm, feeds on decaying plants, small insects and carrion and is absolutely good for nothing. Some people say it is edible but there are very few who would like to find out.

Annotation 2: A Moakren is a large flightless bird, similar to an ostrich. It is a rarely seen creature that lives in the woods, even this far to the north. Its meat is considered to be a delicacy (=tastes like chicken).