

Migratory Birds
Chapter 6

NIGHTFOREST



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YOU DAMN BASTARD!”

Jiddy tried to open her eyes. But she was already pulled up, yanked by her breast fur.

“You...” The voice trembled from anger. “You..., you...! SLUT!” he cried and threw her onto a nearby trunk.

She crashed into the tree. The sudden pain rushing into her head, every other feeling was wiped out, her spine cried out as it felt like it had burst open, the echo vibrating through every limb, crushing the dullness of the sleep. She collapsed, her aching back rubbing down on the trunk. She tried to tear the curtain of pain apart that blurred her vision and unexpectedly she was able to open her eyes while she fought against the retch which extended from her pain. She saw her own bare arms holding her naked body.

But she wasn't able to recognize herself as somebody grabbed her and pulled her up again, almost tearing the fur from her skin.

She hang weakly in the grab, unable to clear her mind from the pain that seemed to overwhelm her.

“No!” she heard a girl cry.

“You shut up!” The one who hold her shouted. “I'll pay you out later!” and then he hissed into her face: “First I'll deal this... this...”

“Rustlan! Don't!” the girl cried again.

The grab suddenly let her go and she hit the hard ground, the impact breaking through her, taking her breath away until it had swept the dullness away and left nothing but the piercing pain in her spine and the dull ache of her face. But she had regained consciousness and was able to raise her head so that she saw how Rustlan slapped right into Sheela's face who had tried to hold him back. Sheela cried out in pain but the strength of the blow made her fall backwards onto the ground.

Jiddy rubbed over her hot muzzle so that a red spot of blood remained in her hand. She fought back all the pain in her aching body and stood up, equally trembling from anger and pain. She raised herself and looked into Rustlan's burning eyes, his face contorted from hardly restrained fury.

She rubbed her muzzle again, a huge stain of blood soaking her forearm's fur. She sniffed without taking her eyes from the heavily panting black bear.

She heard Sheela sobbing. The puma girl still lay on the ground, hardly moving.

“Sheela!” she said silently but with emphasis. The sobbing stopped for an instant. “Run!”

The puma girl didn't move, too surprised by the sight of the bleeding lynx girl standing there.

“Run, Sheela!” she yelled again and suddenly Sheela got on her feet and with wavering steps she stumbled forward into the forest, tried to get away as fast as her feet could carry her.

“Yeah! Run, Sheela!” Rustlan shouted. “You'll get your share later.”

"You won't do..." Jiddy did not get any further, as a punch hit her right in her face. Intense pain shot through her muzzle, for an instant everything got black. The lynx fell to the ground.

"After I've finished with you, you won't be able to hold me back anymore... You won't be able to hold anyone back anymore." Rustlan hissed through the white line of his teeth.

The sound of steps got closer and behind Rustlan appeared Merron and Teryne.

"Stay back!" Rustlan yelled. "You can do her after I've finished!"

Jiddy grunted, blood from her muzzle stained her fur, her hand shot backwards, almost pushing her off the ground, but before she was up again, his boot hit her stomach with full power. Gasping for breath she fell backwards again, when yet another kick hit her in the face.

The pounding pain of her head felt just like her brain wanted to explode in the next few instants. She could feel the hot flow of blood from her muzzle as well as its iron taste in her mouth. Her mind was no longer able to fully register her surroundings. It seemed like the pain covered herself, bound her to the ground, leaving for her nothing but the sound of blood pounding in her head and a blurred vision of Rustlan who stepped closer, raised his feet and kicked her in her stomach. The blow from the hard boot pierced through her and tear her consciousness fully apart so that she was nothing but a rocking piece of flesh, crying out with every new blow that hit her.

He kicked, kicked, kicked...

Rustlan stepped back, heavily panting, a smile of satisfaction in his face as he looked down onto the naked lynx body.

"Now, who's playing with whom?" he yelled and kicked into the motionless body once more.

"Rustlan, let her go!" Teryne said from behind. "It's enough."

Rustlan turned around and glared at the fox. "Do you want to tell me anything?"

"No, really, Rustlan!" The fox waved his hands and instinctively made some steps back. "I just thought..."

"You want something, huh?" Rustlan yelled, his voice echoing in between the trees as he approached the retiring fox. He started to grin when he noticed the expression of fear in the smaller furr's face.

An unexpected snarl made him turn his face around.

There stood a heavily bleeding lynx, his eyes entirely white, his long fur erected, his long sharp teeth bared, his hands razor-sharp claws, the pounding muscles stretched to the brink of being torn apart, visible underneath the skin, snarling. She was hardly standing, rather bending over.

Rustlan fully turned around, his mouth open from surprise he stared at the lynx.

With a hoarse roar the lynx thing jumped up at the surprised bear who still had futilely been trying to cover his face.



She ran. She ran as fast and as far as she was able to. She had never been a good runner. But she ran.

She didn't care about the aching of her bare feet that constantly hit the ground. She did neither care about the branches that hit into her face and onto her nude body. She just ran until her lungs ached so much that she was no longer able to breathe. She tried to catch her breath, to get air into her rattling chest, to overcome the stitch she had.

She leaned on a tree, closed her eyes, still heavily panting.

She got aware that she was still completely naked. Her head sank onto her breast and slowly the pressure against her eyelids got too strong and with a suppressed sob, the tears broke free and flowed around her furry cheeks.

She just stood there for some time, sobbing, sometimes stupidly hitting her hand against the trunk of the tree. Then she gathered herself, wiped the tears from her eyes.

She sat down on a fallen trunk, looking down at the fallen leaves on the ground and the small insects crawling in between. The rough bark of the wood cut into her skin. But she barely noticed that.

Suddenly she stood up again, looked to the ground for a short instant and then she ran back. But her legs were heavy as she was still much too exhausted from her flight. After a small distance she had to slow down, tears once again gathered in her face, but she tried to get on, to run or at least to walk as fast as she could. She tried to fight back the ache in her lungs and the pain in her legs' muscles. But then she had to walk slowly, tears freely flowing from her eyes. But she went on.

And then she saw a figure in between the trees, running as fast as it could, sometimes stumbling to its feet again, running on all fours for a short instant until it was upright again.

Sheela fully rose her head and then she recognized the light brown fur, the tousled hair and nothing was able to hold her back, neither her lungs nor her legs.

"Jiddy!" she yelled and ran. "JIDDY!"

The lynx was nude except for her Silver Arc, her fur was stained with blood and she just rose her head when she heard the cry and then ran straight towards the puma without slowing down.

Sheela wanted to welcome her, to embrace the small feline but as Jiddy had not slowed down she almost ran into the puma girl. But instead she swept the puma girl away, tearing painfully at her fur, pulling her further on. "Move," she hissed between her gritted teeth and pulled at the puma much stronger than Sheela would ever had expected her to be able to. As if the lynx had suddenly grown her strength mocked her size and her feline daintiness.

Before Sheela understood she almost fell down but the lynx held her, pulled at her and somehow automatically Sheela's feet started to move by themselves and she gave in to the paw which pulled her further on. Sheela tried to say something, but Jiddy's merciless grip and the effort of running after her was more than she was actually able to deal with. She was hardly able to get a look at the lynx but she did notice the cuts, lacerated wounds, bruises and haematoma beneath the fur that covered the lynx girl's body although she could just see her back.

“Jiddy!”

But the lynx ignored her, just pulled at her fur, forced her to run on. Her eyes were nothing but slits in her face, her sharp teeth gritted and her jaw had cramped while blood dropped from her nostrils.

“Jiddy!” Sheela cried almost hysterically.

But they just ran on.

They ran through the forest, the green and brown landscape rushed by while they jumped over trunks and branches, broke through bushes, swirled around the trees. The early sunlight shimmered upon their faces, blinded them shortly while they jumped over another rock but then their feet hit the ground and they ran along: Free space in front of them with few fat trunks and no undergrowth. Their feet echoed strangely through the forest ground with a fast hollow sound.

Sheela’s hair fluttered in the airflow, her ponytail wiped just like her tail and they ran side by side, Jiddy’s hand still cramped into Sheela’s fur, leaped simultaneously over another tree, hit the ground again.

They ran on, Sheela could feel like her lungs hurt whenever she inhaled. She coughed but she tried to run alongside Jiddy whose face was just a contorted mess. The lynx’ muscles visibly stretched and rocked below her skin while she moved, it seemed so easy for her to run, her legs catapulted her forward without any effort. There were old scars hidden underneath the fur of her back. Small drops of blood fell down from her nose.

Sheela stumbled. She had been distracted. With a yelp of surprise she fell onto the ground, Jiddy’s hand let go and Sheela slid forward, her muzzle sank into the ground, something cut into it, then she went head over heels and lay still.

Before she even understood what had happened Jiddy was at her side and pulled her to her feet.

The lynx said something but it was nothing but a hiss in between her teeth. Her breath was fast and heavy.

“I’m fine!” Sheela mumbled while she stumbled to her feet. “I can walk.”

“You’re not!” Jiddy hissed but then she was already pulling at Sheela again, trying to get her to move and the puma girl was still much too dizzy to realize what she was doing and so she followed the lynx as best as she could while this one nervously eyed their surroundings with twitching ears, sniffing a few times. And then she pulled at the puma so strongly that she almost fell down again but instead she was forced to run again and she stumbled forward, tried to run, to catch up with the lynx girl whose breath was a rush of air in between her predatory teeth. The lynx pulled at her stronger and stronger, repeating it again and again, desperately trying to get the puma girl to move faster but Sheela was just able to stumble on. Jiddy’s pull was strong enough to make her fall again and she had problems just to remain upright. The only thing she could see of the lynx girl was the frantically wagging tail.

And then she could hear it too as something broke behind them: They were being followed.

She did her best to run properly, trying to catch up with Jiddy but the lynx girl was not only faster but still mindlessly pulling at her and thus preventing the

puma from running. Sheela was panting and she was still feeling dizzy. The forest around her was nothing but a blur, a rush of trees and bushes passing by, a whirl of greens and browns. Blood was droning in her ears and she gasped to get her breath again but the only thing she was really feeling was the pull that forced her forward and she was unable to do anything but obey.

“HEY!”

As if the cry had been some kind of a signal Jiddy stopped, spun around, grabbed the puma by her chest fur and hurled her around, slamming the girl against a trunk and jumping in front of her with claws and teeth exposed blocking her with her own body.

For a moment her breath had been taken away by the sudden movement. She crashed into the trunk and pain shot through her spine while she gasped for breath, coughed and inhaled strongly to overcome the weakness that was about to drag her down. She was barely able to percept what had happened but she did so when she noticed the lynx standing right in front of her, ready to attack whoever was about to come...

She rose her head and then she noticed that no one had to come: He was already there.

The fox had stopped at a certain distance from the two nude girls and stared at the lynx who snarled at him, teeth and claws exposed, preventing him from getting any closer to Sheela.

Teryne gulped and tried to say something but then he shut up and just made a step backwards when Jiddy snarled louder for a moment. He was carrying a backpack. A bleeding cut disfigured his face.

“Teryne...” Sheela mumbled.

He rose his head and looked at her like he had not had noticed her before. “I wanted to...”

A hoarse snarl escaped Jiddy’s throat and Teryne was making another step backwards.

“Jiddy?” Sheela asked the lynx girl.

Jiddy did not react.

“Jiddy!”

For a short moment the lynx rose her head and looked at the puma.

“Let me deal that...,” she said. “OK?”

The lynx hesitated, looked at Sheela for another time and then stepped aside a bit, lowering her guard.

Sheela smiled at her although she did not look and then the puma made a step over to Teryne.

“What’s up, Teryne?” she asked as neutrally as possible.

“I... I...” The boy was still staring at Jiddy who did let him escape from her sight. “I wanted to bring you the backpack... and this,” he said nervously, put the old ragged backpack down from his shoulders and a bundle of clothes while anxiously looking at the lynx girl.

Sheela looked at the stuff and blinked. “Why?” she blurred out absent-mindedly, suddenly feeling her nakedness.

All of a sudden the fox looked at her. "I... I..." He tried to say something, his mouth moved but there were no words coming out. He shut it and looked at the lynx again, then at Sheela. He gulped. "It was not OK what Rustlan..." The following words were nothing but incomprehensible mumbling. "I... I wanted you to bring that!" he said with sudden emphasis.

"Thank you!" Sheela mumbled.

Teryne gulped and rose his paw. "Originally I wanted to..." His paw stopped on its way, he looked at Jiddy from the corner of his eyes and caught a glare of hers. He gulped again. "It's not like I... it's just..." He was slightly trembling. "I wanted you to know that..." He pressed his lips together. His face cramped. The boy rose his head and stared straight at the lynx girl, who was still standing there, absolutely naked, her entire, muscled body tense, looking at him from below the strands of her messy hair. Unconsciously his hand rose to the bloody cut on his cheek.

Sheela observed him, looked at Jiddy and looked at him again.

Suddenly he turned his face to her again. It was still cramped but now his eyes and lips twitched. "Go to the berth in the west! Rustlan won't look there." And before he had even properly finished the sentence he spun around and ran away as fast as he could.

"Teryne!" Sheela shouted after him. "Teryne!"

But the fox boy was already disappearing in between the trees, still running as fast as he was able to without looking back.

Sheela looked after him, much too confused to understand what had been going on. She was still exhausted from the run and very tired because of all that had happened this morning and thus everything on her mind was an entire mess: Pictures of the past night, the shouts of Rustlan, the fighting, the flight and now the fox she had rarely given a second thought about. She stood still and looked in the forest.

The puma girl took a deep breath and cleared her mind a little bit before she looked around: For the first time she noticed the change of the landscape and the beauty of the forest around them. They had to have covered quite some distance. The branches of the low, broad-leaved trees hang just above their heads, their coloring dyeing the light in a bright fresh green. The gnarled trunks stood wide apart, the uneven ground between covered by nothing but short grass. The treetops somewhere extended into the sky, invisible to anyone at the bottom of the trees as their leaves grew thickly. Just like a park, Sheela thought.

Something like a cough made her turn around.

The lynx supported herself on a tree, strange noises escaped her mouth. Her muscles were as tense as before.

"Jiddy?"

It was almost like a cough but that seemed to burst her throat. For one more moment she was able to fight the nausea but then her stomach cramped once more and with something like a strangled cry she started vomiting. Bitter sloshy mess forced its way up in her throat and she tried to seal her mouth with her paw but then she had to cough and it all welled up while the bitterness filled up her

mouth, overcame her with all the power of the reflex, leaving behind nothing but a strange weakness. Her mouth exploded in bitterness with yet another painful croak. Her gullet convulsed, her stomach cramped painfully, pressed the bitter nothingness into her mouth, almost into her nose but then she spit it out. The acid etched her mouth which was completely filled up by it.

“Let it out! Let it out!” Jiddy hadn’t realized that Sheela stood next to her. The puma pat on her back. “Let it out!”

The lynx girl trembled as her stomach still cramped painfully. She retched but there was nothing more which could be coming up.

Sheela carefully pat on the nude lynx girl’s back while that one went on vomiting. She could feel like the small, tense body spasmed.

Her cough weakened and the urge to throw up diminished and thus Jiddy weakly wiped her muzzle with her forearm and slowly tried to stand up straight again. But suddenly she stumbled and would have fallen down if Sheela had not held her at the right moment.

“Slow, slow!” the puma girl advised, holding the smaller girl by her shoulders.

Jiddy stumbled, hardly able to stand. She felt weak and tired, everything was nothing but a blur anymore and absent-mindedly she tried to wipe the reddish mess from her mouth, smearing it all over her muzzle. “I’m OK,” she mumbled. “Just need a rest...”

“You are...,” Sheela began to say but then she stopped. Her eyes opened wide when she saw what Jiddy had thrown up: It was a bloody reddish mess.

“I’m OK,” the pale lynx mumbled and almost collapsed.

But Sheela hold her. “Jiddy,” she gasped.

“Tired...” Her voice was hardly audible anymore. And when her feet gave in this time she was no longer able to support herself.

Sheela was able to catch her before she hit the ground. She tried to lay Jiddy down, to get her in a vertical position. The lynx body felt almost weightless in her hands. “Jiddy!?”

Jiddy’s eyelids flickered. “It’s OK!” she whispered. “Just rest...” There was some kind of a calming smile upon her lips. Her eyelids flickered once more then her head fell back and she did no longer move.

“Jiddy...?” Sheela swallowed the bitter saliva which had gathered in her mouth. “Jiddy?” she asked lowly and gently shook the limp body. But there was no reaction.

Carefully Sheela laid the lynx girl down, holding Jiddy’s head in her lap, eyeing her face. She didn’t know what to do, what she could do, what she should do. There were alone in the middle of an uninhabited island, miles away from anyone else.

Sheela just sat there, holding the limp body in her lap, her hands carefully brushing over the face and then she felt the heat beneath her eyelids gathering and soundlessly she started crying.

She was falling, that was the only thing that she was certain of. She could feel how everything was passing by her. Even though there was nothing to see, the darkness was perfect. Or maybe it was not dark, maybe she just could not see. The thought was unsettling but she was not afraid of it, she was strangely calm, everything was warm and she felt no need. There was nothing to worry about, there was nothing at all. She was rather feeling than thinking, her mind as powerless as her body.

She exhaled and it seemed to last forever, all of the air in her lungs slowly escaping her body while she fell. It was as if she lay something of and her fall got faster while she left her breath behind. The power of her muscles fled her too and she relaxed like she had never relaxed before. She felt totally weightless, even though she was still falling. She was floating above an abyss that was getting closer.

The darkness around her was pulsing, dark red distinguished itself and shot past before she was able to percept anything at all. She tried to concentrate and suddenly she noticed that there was something she knew in there. Birds, fishes. And then she saw the faces, faces smiling at her. She knew them, she was certain of it and for the first time she could feel something like irritation. She knew these people, but they were gone so fast, she could not remember who they were. AS soon as she had focussed on one picture it was already gone, replaced by another, that disappeared within moments to be replaced by yet another. The faces pulsed dark red in the darkness.

She tried to hold on to one, but her fall was too fast, her body was powerless, her mind was empty. She tried to hold on to that shadow of a doubt that had touched her, but it was as if it was escaping her too. It slipped out of her weak paws and vanished in the darkness above her.

She exhaled again. Everything was flickering, it was getting darker.

She relaxed. She could feel the smiling faces.

And suddenly like a flash everything was illuminated, the faces were torn apart within an instant, twitched and twisted. Far above a hand had suddenly appeared, glowing brightly and distorted. It came down and penetrated the void like breaking through the water's surface. The faces were suddenly pulled towards it, their smile distorted into an expression of agony until they dissolved in the light of the hand that reached out for her.

She was alone except for it.

It was so large, fear suddenly overcame her when it came closer and was getting bigger and bigger. The light that surrounded it was shining on her and it was as if it had a weight that was suddenly pushing down on her. It forced its way into her throat and into her lungs. She wanted to cry but she was not able to. It pushed down on every limb of her body, that suddenly tensed and twitched. She began to jerk uncontrollably. The warmth was dispersed, the soothing darkness vanished, her body gained a crushing weight.

She fought against it, but she was no longer in control. She was surrounded by light, suddenly her fall was painful as if something was shooting past her.

Instinctively she had closed her eyes and when she opened them again she saw the hand closing around her.

She crashed into it, sudden pain shooting all about her body. She gasped for breath, the air burned in her lungs like fire. Suddenly she felt her entire body again and the pain was too much to take. She had never felt anything like this, her limbs were afire and cold cut into her skin. Her head wanted to explode and her belly wanted to consume itself.

She wanted it to stop, but all she could do was scream.

Jiddy suddenly spasmed and screamed from the deepest bottom of her chest. Tears were running down her cheeks when her eyes suddenly opened again and saw a hostile surrounding: Cold and impenetrable darkness that hid behind a veil of rain. A glowing hand retreated from her chest.

The pain the lynx felt was insurmountable, it held her in a merciless grip that seemed to grow stronger by the moment. Instinctively the lynx cramped in a foetal position. She screamed, her mouth wide open, her sharp teeth exposed. Her claws had unsheathed while she squirmed and writhed.

Her hand cramped around her contorted face, the claws cutting her and she did not even notice. She did not notice anything anymore, neither the tears that kept on running down her face, nor the pain. It was suddenly blacked out, everything eclipsed, when she suddenly bucked, her muscles reacting instinctively.

“Jiddy?”

She inhaled, the pain of her unwilling lungs was insignificant, and it transformed into a growl when she gritted her teeth.

Two hands tried to take hold of her and instantly the lynx shook them off, slashing about. She jumped on her feet, stumbled, almost fell down, hit her head against the stone above, stumbled away and then fell down when she slipped off the muddy ground. With a hoarse cry of panic she struggled to get onto her feet and then on all fours she dashed forward and ran into the rain that washed over her nude body with all its cold.

Mindlessly she slashed about, tried to fight back whatever could surround her. Hitting and kicking all around her, she tried to get away. Whimpering she tried to run away on all fours but then slipped off again and fell down once more.

The mud soaked her entire fur but the shock of the fall did her good as it pierced into her head and annihilated every other feeling for an instant. Quivering, trembling with pain, panting and terrified beyond description she tried to get up.

It was almost completely dark, there was no light left anymore. The rain rushed down from the sky in a powerful, never-ending torrent, that made all the trees of the forest disappear behind its cold curtain. There seemed to be nothing but a large boulder with a small hollow underneath where a trembling puma girl stood, looking at the lynx with concern and... fear.

Jiddy was still shaking, standing on all fours, her breath fast and agitated and although the rain was so strong that with every instant it took away more of her warmth the lynx did not move.

The Silver Arc around her neck turned incessantly around itself.

Jiddy was totally wet now. The rain had not needed more than a few moments to wet her completely and so as her entire fur was soaked with the cold she was starting to quiver because of it. But she did not seem to notice. If she noticed anything at all. Her eyes glistened in the dim twilight while she bared her teeth and a hoarse snarl escaped her while she looked at the puma.

Sheela stared at lynx, terrified by what she saw. "Jiddy...?"

Her muscles had tightened and stretched all over her body, exposing the powerful lines underneath her fur. Her wet hair hung over her face, covered it almost completely except for her slanting eyes that were wide open, showing her lynx pupils like the puma had never seen them before. Her claws were exposed while her tail wagged frantically and from the deepest bottom of her chest a hoarse, low snarl came along.

"Jiddy...?" Sheela uttered, looking at the lynx with her eyes wide open.

For a moment the lynx growled at the puma girl, showing her sharp white fangs while she walked up and down opposite the hollow the puma stood in. She was walking on two feet again, although still in a strangely bowed position. Her moves were hectic, fast and skilled, she walked up and down without taking one of her glistening eyes from the puma girl, her face twitched from time to time, her breath was fast and hard while the rain pattered down on her back, soaked her fur. Step by step she was coming closer, her eyes burning with an inner fire.

"Jiddy, please...!" Sheela gasped, staring at the feral lynx girl getting closer. She had never seen someone like that before and the feral expression on the lynx' face was more than just troubling her, it called onto old instincts that told her to run, to get away from this predator. She gulped and tried to resist the urge to run away.

Jiddy gritted her teeth and snarled louder, lowering herself and slowly she walked over to Sheela.

Instinctively the other girl retired to the back of the hollow until she met the cold stone of the boulder. "Please, don't..." she stammered.

But Jiddy was coming closer, snarling.

"Don't..." Sheela gasped. "Please, I did not want to..."

Jiddy was entering the hollow.

"Don't..." Sheela whispered. "Please, don't..." Jiddy was just two steps from her and the puma closed her eyes, trembling with fear. "Don't, don't...!"

The lynx reached her, the snarl had gotten more subtle but not less threatening.

Sheela could feel the hot breath on her own fur, the moisture of the soaking wet lynx, her musky scent more intense than ever before. "Please..."

The lynx responded with a snarl and approached her further, the cold nose got closer.

Sheela was breathing hard, her chest cramped in terror and she gulped, not daring to open her eyes.

Something touched her.
“AAAGH!”

Her punch hit the lynx totally in surprise and the power that she had released from within herself was enough to hurl the lynx outside the hollow.

A hoarse cry escaped the feline when she flew through the air and then she crashed into a tree with full power, a gasp escaped her, before she fell down into the mud.

Sheela's hand was still flickering for an instant, but then the light that had surrounded it died away as quickly as it had appeared, while Sheela held her face in her paws, staring at the lynx lying in the shadows, while she was still trying to grasp what had happened.

A moan escaped the cramped figure who lay under a tree in the rain. The lynx was still able to move despite this. Nobody should have been able to shake this off so easily.

“Jiddy...” Sheela looked at the other girl. It had sounded like a desperate plea. She had not wanted to release her magic power but it had happened all by itself.

Jiddy rose herself to her knees and a moan escaped her throat and the moan changed into a hoarse cry. She howled in pain with her mouth wide open, so that the rain flowed into her mouth. She had to cough while every muscle of her body cramped, exposed the powerful lines underneath her skin, which almost tore it apart as they jutted out so strongly. Every fiber was visible, from the powerful fabric alongside her legs, the iron hard circle of her belly, her chest's muscles which outdid her small breasts almost completely, up to the tight lines along her arms and to the crevasse of her neck. It seemed like she wanted to cry but just a single low, but an even more painful feral growl escaped her throat.

Sheela covered her head with her arms but nevertheless she was unable to look away from the lynx girl who was standing up again with awkward movements while the water ran down her body, soaked every single hair of hers while she tried to express some kind of pain the puma girl had not even imagined that it could possibly exist. Fear covered her like a shroud. She had never seen someone like that, never seen such a painful mourning, nor a person like her who seemed to consist out of nothing but tensed muscles, ready to attack but even so... even so...

Jiddy sat on her knees and howled, her face cramped and she held it with her paws, her fingers cramping around it. Her eyes were open as wide as they could be, they glowed with a wild, mad fire. Her howls transformed into some kind of retching sound. She coughed, her paws enforced their hold and the howl transformed into this strange retching noises again while she fought to get control of her mouth again. But instead she was spasming, her entire body was suddenly shaking from within and an gurgling noise escaped her throat before an instant later she had vomit. Clotted blood shooting out of her mouth. She was on all fours again, her body shaken by the spasms of her stomach. Every trace of power had suddenly left her again. It was as if she vomited her own strength. Little by

little it got better as she equally weakened everytime she was overcome by yet another spasm. Finally there was nothing but painful coughs left.

For a while both girls were unable to do anything. The rain poured down on Jiddy while Sheela watched her from the distance.

Jiddy writhed around as she tried to get up again, but she was too weak and the ground was much too slippery as she was still trembling, just interrupted by her coughs which always ended with an aching gasp as she tried to get air into her abused lungs again which hurt just from breathing. Did they still hurt or did they hurt again? It was of no importance.

Something like weak laughter escaped Jiddy, it was hardly more than a raspy sound in her throat, hardly recognizable at all. Her arms and legs slipped off just when she tried to find some grip to stand up again but when she had succeeded she was laughing again and slipped off, her face slammed against the ground and then her laughter or whatever it was changed, interrupted by several coughs she was sobbing, feebly trying to get on her feet again while she was trembling.

The rain could no longer stop her and she ran out into it and over to Jiddy and took her by her shoulders, helping her up on her feet. But when the lynx girl was standing she suddenly pushed the puma away and stepped away. Her sobs had vanished, instead her breath was rattling in her chest. Sheela looked at her, breathing heavily, trembling with cold and something different she could not name.

Jiddy spun around and stared at Sheela with an expression that was hardly controlled: Her face was still cramped, her frowns knitted, her eyes wide open, expressing fear, desperation and rage at the same time and the puma stepped back, frightened by what she saw.

Jiddy was trembling. Water was running down her cheeks, washing away all the tears that still might have been there.

"I... I tried to heal you..." Sheela stammered.

Jiddy tried to say something but when she opened her mouth there was just a growl coming out. The lynx girl snarled, tried to force her mouth to perform certain movements. "Wha...." She snarled. "Wharr... What... ha... harr you... done?"

"I wanted to heal you," Sheela replied instantly. Rain dropped from her soaked hair.

With a powerful movement Jiddy slashed through the air as if she had wanted to hit Sheela or had wanted to cast something away.

"You were injured..."

Jiddy growled in protest, showing her teeth. Her breath was fast and irregular and the lynx was still trembling.

"But..."

"Norr... Norrt sickr!" Jiddy could hardly do more than growl these words.

Sheela stared at the excited lynx. In this rainy darkness there was little she could percept but somehow she knew that Jiddy was either ready to run away or to attack any instant. "You had internal bleedings...", she mumbled and then she blurred out: "Really I did not want to hurt you when you lost consciousness, I was

just so scared. You have got to understand. I really did not intend to hurt you or anything. It happened all by itself. I am not in full control of this power. You got to understand that...!" She fell silent.

For a moment Jiddy was motionless, then she moaned. And suddenly she hit her frowns with her paw, again and again, with strong fast movements.

"Don't!" Sheela rushed at her side and grabbed her arm. "Listen: I did not know about this and I am sorry! I was just an apprentice! I had to do something, so I used this spell. I did not know what it would do to you. I just thought that it would help you. You have to believe me! I did not know about this. Honest! I did not want to hurt you. But... But you had internal bleedings. It was the only thing I could do..." She blurred it all out without pause or reflection. She was just hoping that she could somehow get through to the lynx girl.

"Please!" she added. "Please, you have got to believe me." The rain had soaked the puma girl by now. She shivered but she could hardly say if she did because of the rain or if it was something else. "I didn't know about those... pictures..."

Jiddy rose her face and looked into her eyes. The expression of fury had entirely disappeared, instead she expressed shock.

For an instant it seemed as if Sheela attempted to smile but the expression disappeared instantly again. "I did not know." She shook her head. "I would not have guessed."

"Corrd..." Jiddy growled. She just stood there in the rain. Pain was still lingering in everyone of her muscles, every breath hurt and her soaked fur pulled her down. But she did not move a muscle. "Cowrd..."

It took some time before Sheela was able to grasp what Jiddy had said. She could feel the cold as well and she became of the rain again that was still pouring down on the two girls in the forest. She was hardly able to stand straight anymore but she shut her mouth and swallowed her salty tears and nodded towards the lynx girl who was looking at her, a dark face in the darkness of this rainy night. Slowly they went over to the hollow to find shelter from the rain.

Carefully Sheela bent down and walked back into the small depth she had chosen as their resting place. Jiddy followed close by. They sat down in between the rock, some roots and Jiddy's backpack.

Jiddy just slumped down as if every little bit of strength had left her and Sheela was unable to see anything but a small, mud covered feline: The water had completely soaked her hair, having left nothing but a mess which stuck to her head, some thin strands hang right into her face while the water dropped down onto her muzzle. Everything seemed to express tiredness and Sheela just felt miserable when she looked at her companion, feeling sorry although she still did not know why.

The rain was a constant rushing sound around them while the water soaked the ground, transformed it into a slippery, unstable cloak of mud which extended just underneath the thin cloth of rotten leaves and rotting moss. The rain kept on falling down from an entirely gray sky where the different shades and depths of

darkness indicated that the worst was still going to come, despite the actual strength of the rainstorm.

Soundlessly Jiddy stared into the surrounding rainy grayness of the night. Sheela pulled her legs closer to herself and looked at her knees, evading the lynx girl's eyes. They did not speak, nor do anything else so that there was no sound but the surrounding rush and their own breaths. Jiddy gulped and wet her lips and Sheela waited as she expected that the lynx would say something but there was nothing.

They sat and waited.

Sheela spied at Jiddy and saw that the lynx girl was still looking out into the increasing darkness.

Sheela moved and thus attracted the lynx girl's attention.

With lowered head Jiddy observed that Sheela grabbed a cloth which hung out of the backpack, hesitated, but then slowly moved closer to the lynx.

"You're all muddy," the puma mumbled lowly and carefully started to brush the cloth against the light brown fur and started to free it from the mud. Carefully she ran the soft, slightly wet cloth around Jiddy's features, rubbing a little bit stronger whenever the mud stuck a little bit more firmly. Thus she traced along Jiddy's forehead, burying the cloth in the fur.

"Srry," Jiddy growled. She was unable to pronounce any clear word. She cleared her throat. "A..." She gulped and pursed her lips. "A..." She tensed and in a fit of rage shook herself, gritting her teeth.

Sheela started.

"A... Ay..." Her frowns knitted as she tried to concentrate on every single word. "Irm..." Jiddy gulped again. "I'm srry."

Sheela just nodded and went on with her work which she had shortly interrupted.

They were silent again, but when Sheela suddenly interrupted herself, Jiddy looked at her from the corner of her eyes and noticed that the puma girl covered her eyes as she had started to cry inaudibly.

The lynx girl looked away, her heart beat fast.

The puma girl was trembling, sniffed strongly but did not utter any other sound. She was shaken by an outbreak of grief and exhaustion. It had been too much for her, she was at the very limit of her powers. She had been able to feel the tears come up as soon as she had started to clean Jiddy, but she still had had the power to hold them back. Now they had overcome her and she could not hold them back anymore. She trembled, she felt cold and tired and her tears did not bring any relief to her. Unwillingly a low wail escaped her when she gasped for breath. She covered her entire face in her paws while the tears ran down her face.

In this moment two wet arms closed around her. First reluctantly, but then Jiddy took the puma girl in her arms.

"Don't cry." Her voice was still even more raspy than usual, but it was clear what she said. "Don't."

The puma girl sobbed powerfully, still trembling she returned the embrace.

It was a constant rushing roar as the rain poured down in never easing intensity. Everything was blurred behind this watery curtain which hid everything underneath its streams. The trees were nothing but distant shadows and the sky had completely disappeared in the vortex of falling drops. Their horizon was now nothing but this darker grayish mist behind the shadows of the trees, an impenetrable shroud. So there was not even a single trace of time left, maybe it was in the middle of the night, maybe morning was close, everything had dissolved in the falling water.

Sometimes the wind rose, caught the drops in its airflow and transformed the rain into a whirlwind of moisture which pelted down onto the ground before the wind got even stronger and found its way into every crack, hollow and niche. Sometimes the roaring silence was torn apart by distant lightning which suddenly displayed a part of the low floating clouds, heavy air masses whose towering, bulging mists swirled around in the sky so that even the short moment of lightning illuminating the sky was sufficient to display the fast rush of the clouds which poured in and out of the sky, surmounting one another, spun around and buried everything underneath. But then the flash had disappeared again and there was nothing but the grayish curtain of rain left which roared constantly.

When the thunder followed shortly after the lightning Jiddy held Sheela to her in a close embrace and when the thunder struck the whimpering puma girl pressed herself even stronger against the lynx' chest.

It was the cold that kept them awake. They were still wet and there was no chance of lightning a fire, so the two girls clinged to one another, the puma trembling instinctively whenever the thunder rolled.

Due to the heavy rain, some water had already flowed down into the hollow they were sitting in. An whenever a gust of winds rose the moisture of their furs became icy. They had wrapped Jiddy's sleeping bag around them, but it was totally insufficient as long as they were as drenched as they were.

They had hardly spoken all the time. Not more than absolutely necessary. Jiddy obviously did not want to speak as she still had trouble talking and Sheela was too tired to think of anything she could say.

Another peal of thunder rolled and Sheela pressed her face against Jiddy's fluffy chest.

Jiddy looked into the invisible sky: The only thing she was able to see was this hypnotic vortex of falling drops which seemed to fall all right onto her although she just was just looking up. For some moments she just stared onto these dimly shimmering spots of falling water.

"When I... touched you..."

Jiddy looked at Sheela.

"...I saw those... pictures. I did not want to. It just happened. I would not have..." She hesitated. "I'm sorry."

Jiddy gulped and looked away.

"I lied to you!" It was just a very low mumbling of hers but as she held the puma girl so close to herself that one was able to hear it nevertheless.

Cautiously Sheela looked up into Jiddy's face: Her lips were a thin line, her eyes were almost completely hidden underneath the shadow of her hair.

"I'm from Black Pit." Her voice was toneless and displayed no emotions. She had just made a simple statement.

Sheela slowly rose a bit so that she could look into the lynx girl's face, as she wanted to be absolutely certain that this was no misunderstanding. But the expression on the lynx' face reassured her that she had not was not mistaken.

Jiddy's features were cramped, her teeth gritted. She closed her mouth firmly and pressed her lips together.

It felt like someone drained all of her blood from her head, she felt dizzy for a moment, gulped and with these beautiful eyes of hers she stared into the emotionless angular feline face.

Sheela sat up by herself, leaving Jiddy's embrace.

Jiddy looked at her when she retreated and then looked to the ground. She gulped. "That's..." She wet her lips. "That's what you've seen... I guess." Jiddy fell silent for a moment. "I lie 'bout that. If I told anyone..." She sniffed and shook her head. "It's worse than... y'know... what they say. They're right to be 'fraid of me." A sarcastic smile flickered round the lynx lips. When the expression died away Jiddy bowed her head down.

It had been a cruel statement but Sheela did not know if Jiddy was not hurting herself much more than she hurt her. She gulped.

"I lost my parents when I was still a very small kid. My mother'd taught a lil' bit of readin' and writin' but when I'd lost them, I found myself on the streets. " She paused and wet her lips with her tongue. "D'you..." She fell silent.

The puma looked at her.

Jiddy moved her head erratically. "I... I was... You just ain't yourself anymore, d'you understand? It's like... You gotta live somehow, so you rely on your instincts... I dunno any 'bout this... You just don't think anymore. You gotta be fast to get somethin' to eat or to get away from the Shadows, or the gangs or the hunters..." She paused once more and drew her legs closer, wrapped her arms around them so that her muzzle was almost completely hidden behind them. Sheela had taken the sleeping bag with her when she had retired, so that Jiddy was now sitting in the cold. But she did not seem to notice.

"You gotta be like an animal, y'know. I can't remember... It's..." She moved her hand next to her head. "You gotta be like an animal, y'know.

Sudden lightning illuminated the hollow: Jiddy was nothing but a shade in the surrounding darkness, another shadow in this flash of light. The thunder rolled with a long-drawn sound but Sheela just twitched slightly, still staring at the lynx.

"I was just one more kid on the streets. But they didn't get me: Not the the hunters, not the gangs, not the hunger, not the diseases, not whatever. I escaped them all." Her voice was suddenly full of something like grim satisfaction. "But I..." She shook her head. "I was longer speakin' or thinkin'. I was just fightin' for my meals or runnin' away." She inhaled.

Sheela felt cold and drew the sleeping bag closer around herself.

"I can't tell you how long I... I don't even know my age." Suddenly she seemed to laugh, but it was gone within an instant. "Guess you don't know what I'm talkin' 'bout..." She fell silent.

"How did you... get out of..." Sheela had troubled to pronounce the name. "...Black Pit?"

Jiddy looked at her for an instant, her feline eyes shimmered despite the darkness. She inhaled. "A feline gang spotted me. They hunted me down and held me captive for..." She fell silent, her pointed ears twitched. "They *tamed* me for bein' their... *pet!*" She spit the word out. "But I was lucky... In some way... One of them spent time with me and... He helped me. So I, y'know, learned stuff again. But they didn't want me that way, that was not what they wanted from me and the guy who'd been lookin' after me..." She paused and when she started anew her voice was much more silent so that Sheela could barely hear her due to the rain. "...got tired of me. Some of them wanted to have some fun with me before finishing me off, that's when I got away." She wet her lips. "I..." She looked away. Her voice was hardly more than a whisper: "I killed them. Sometimes I can still taste the blood from when I'd ripped open their throats." Her hoarse voice shivered.

A gust of wind carried along a jet of water which sprayed over the two girls in their shelter. It had gotten completely dark now except for some kind of strange sparkling light which seemed to be constantly reflected by the rain drops so that it was unable to lose itself in the surrounding darkness, instead it displayed the falling water like a uncountable threads of watery velvet which hang down from the ceiling of the clouds. And whenever another flash lit the sky the strange light was reinforced and for a blinding moment everything was dyed in whiteness, leaving behind nothing but white and black, before the darkness took over again where lights drifted around.

"How did you get out?" Sheela asked.

"There's the Iron Ring, it's like a wall. It's all around the city. It's... huge. But they've to get the slag from the furnaces out. So there's something called a *train*. It was crazy to try, even I knew that, 'cause the slag's so hot. But I didn't know of any other way. I was small 'nough to hide in one of the metal containers. I was lucky, 'cause the slag was still hot, but it wasn't scorchin' anymore. I burnt almost my whole fur. But I got it. I fuckin' got it..."

Meanwhile the rain had gotten weaker, although it continued. But now there were no more heavy drops but instead some kind of thin constant drizzle which covered everything. Everything hid behind this thin mist and somehow the night had taken finally over. Heavy clouds still had to float somewhere far above the ground. There was no light left except for these strange faint reflections which still appeared here and there from time to time and illuminated the mist so that its thin lines of falling water were clearly visible when the light passed by like it was passing through beneath some curtain which fluttered in the wind.

There were no sounds, the drizzle was soundless and every other noise was completely absorbed by it so that there was nothing but the sound of their breaths, one heavy and quivering, one strong but slightly rattling.

They could see nothing of one another but the outlines of their shades.

The sleeping bag rustle as Sheela rose her hands and carefully she blew onto them, to warm them a little bit. Her blow was a faint, almost whistling noise which made Jiddy's sensitive ears twitch.

"Would you mind if we warmed up one another?" The lynx girl's rough voice was as low as caring.

Sheela did not answer but she stopped blowing while Jiddy tried to observe her as well as she could. But in this complete darkness even her feline eyes could hardly recognize any of the puma girl's features.

The sleeping bag rustled again when Sheela nodded.

Cautiously Jiddy approached her, drew the sleeping bag closer together and while she moved closer towards her they could already smell one another, the specific scents of their furs, the faint juicy sweetness of dried oranges and the earthy dampness of meadows. Instantly the warmth gathered in between them, flowed around them, trapped underneath the heavy cloth of their cover, swirled around the shape of their bodies.

Sheela saw like Jiddy had taken hold of the sleeping bag's edge and rose it with her arms when she was just next to Sheela and carefully she embraced the puma girl so the sleeping bag was laid down all around them, wrapped them up beneath the cloth while she carefully took the puma girl in her arms.

Sheela shivered slightly but then she could already feel Jiddy's body touching hers and she let go, exhaled and she felt the lightness of Jiddy's arms on her shoulder and for a very short moment she could see the gentle shimmer of the lynx girl's dark eyes in the dark.

"I'd never hurt you," Jiddy whispered as she brushed her face against Sheela's and as the puma was unable to resist her, Jiddy cautiously forced them both down onto the ground so that they finally lay down, one next to the other. "I promise!"

