

Migratory Birds
Chapter 10

REDEMPTION



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Damn you!"

The slap hit him hard and his head was pushed sideways as if he was hit by an entire trunk. In fact it was nothing but a simple staff. It did not just hurt but it had come totally out of the blue and the surprise just added to the pain that burned white hot in his entire head. Although he wanted to cry out he had no time to do so as he could already feel the strong scaled hand that grabbed his chin and forced him to look into the emotionless black eyes. Tears welled up and he sniffed but the man that hold him just hissed.

"Pay attention when I am talking to you!" He pushed the boy's head away and stood fully up again. "What was I saying?" he asked his pupil who was still busy with trying to swallow his tears.

"You.. you..." stammered the boy who did not know what to say as the slap had erased what little memory of the ongoing instruction he had had.

This time the man's rod fully hit him and this time he did not have the strength to remain upright but was pushed over and fell from the stool he had been sitting on. Instantly he cried out, tears flowing down from his eyes, wetting his face and almost simultaneously the man had grabbed him again, holding the boy's small head in between his strong claws.

"May the Spirits damn you! Remember who you are! You are an armadillo! You do not cry! You are no weakling! You are an armadillo! Always keep that in mind!"

He was awake with a start, obliviously looking at the interior of the small inn, trying to recall where he was and what he was doing here. With a moan he sat up straight as he recognized the small inn by the glass of beer that stood in front of him. He was feeling sick and tired and this little nap had not really helped him anyway. His dreams had become more vivid with every night he had been away from his home town and for a few moments he had been convinced that he had been back to his youth, back to the young man that had been supposed to be his teacher, a strong, harsh, sometimes brutal man who had just instructed him because he knew that it was expected from him.

Absent-mindedly he rose his paw and ran it over his cheek: It had been so lively that he was convinced that he could still feel the heat where his master's paw and rod had hit him.

He gulped and leaned back in the shadows again, so that he disappeared almost completely from the sight of the other people.

The inn was rather full: The recent thunderstorm had made some of the hunters come down earlier from the Andeleau Mountains than they originally might have intended. And those who already stayed here had delayed their departure so that the paths might dry and the mud disappear. The thunderstorms had been the anticipated pretext to gather here and these wild men and women made their very best to enjoy this rare occasion. They talked all the time, exchanging news from all year round, noisily greeting fellow hunters they had not met in years and

laughing about old jokes that were told again and again. Two young women had sat down next to the entrance and played on their instruments: A bodagh and a flute out of bone. The one with the drum accompanied the other one with gentle humming and this gentle music had a strange effect on these notorious loners who were all peaceful and sociable even though their most terrible rival might just have been standing next to them. For these people, these were times of peace.

Of course he felt like a fish among birds.

He groaned and sipped at his beer. They really pissed him off. Their cheerful conversations and the way their visible ease made him sick as he was the only one among them who really knew what was going on and their attitude showed him that they did not care at all. He gritted his teeth and slightly pricked up his ears: He could not resist the urge to listen to their idle talk. Anyway there was not very much that was of any interest at all: Witty anecdotes, the latest news about hunting grounds, friendly small talk, the weather, the families, the men, the women, the animals and the Spirits. But after a while he could not overhear a conversation close by that instantly caught his attention.

"No, it's been a while since I have been at the Silver Coast. Why?" It was a wolf who was talking.

The chamois next to him answered. "No, I was just wondering if you had family there."

"No, thank the Spirits. I have got nothing to do with them," the wolf replied. "After what I have heard of them I do not want to deal with them at all, no matter their wealth."

The female ocelot opposite went on. "Well, now you do not have to bother about them anymore. That's for sure," she said. "Lots of them have fled to the Silver Coast. The others are still fighting after what I have heard."

"Fighting about a heap of debris," the chamois added disparagingly.

"But they got a sawmill up there, don't they?" the wolf asked. "They have provided wood to half the Silver Coast haven't they? So what about that?"

The female feline shrugged her shoulders. "As far as I know there isn't much left at all and what's left won't work with a total overhaul. Guess they won't have it running 'til winter."

"And what about the wood?" the wolf asked. "The people from the Coast will need that. Where will they go to get that?"

The chamois shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose others will take over."

"No, no!" the ocelot woman contradicted. "You don't know the woodcutters from down there. They have made trouble to anyone who has tried to mess with their business up to now. They are as thick as thieves when they got a common foe. They even forget to fight among themselves."

The wolf shook his head. "Damn, what a mess! Isn't Whirlwind somehow related to them?"

"Yes, I think so," the chamois answered. "Guess that's why he doesn't show up this year. He will certainly look after his folks..."

“Whirlwind?” the ocelot asked. “That’d surprise me. I haven’t met him very often but when I did... Phew! I do not think he’s the guy to care for something like that.”

“No, he’s completely different when it comes to his clan. Then he’s up and running in no time. Trust me, even though he does not give a damn about people like us,” the chamois explained.

“If you say so!” The ocelot leaned backwards.

“I just hope that this works out somehow,” the wolf added. “I do not want to think what happens when the whole Silver Coast starts running after wood in wintertime...”

The armadillo was suddenly distracted by something and turned his face around, staring into a beaver’s face.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Reverend?” the innkeeper asked again.

The eyes of the armadillo flashed beneath the hood. “Did I ask for anything?” he asked coldly.

“No,” the beaver replied, a little bit surprised.

“So why do you bother me then?” Icily he glared at the innkeeper.

The beaver blinked in surprise and then his features hardened. “I am sorry, Reverend,” he said slowly. “I was just thinking that you might want something more than just a beer...”

“Why should I want anything more?” the armadillo snarled, taking up his glass and looking at its content. “After you have taken my last money for this piss...!” And in this moment he splashed the beer into the beaver’s face. “You call that beer? One should ask for money for drinking it!” He said it coldly, sitting on his chair.

First the beaver had been completely overcome by surprise, dripping wet with beer he had just stared at the priest without being able to do or simply to reply anything at all.

Few had actually seen this as it all happened in the back of the barroom but now they had all gotten silent and were looking at the beaver and the armadillo, wondering what was going on there.

The beaver pressed his mouth together, trying to hide his fury while Nsimese lightly smiled at him.

“Todall, Ukenga!” the innkeeper said out loud.

A huge brown bear and a fat fox stood up from their stools and instantly went over to the beaver’s side.

The beaver glared at the priest. “This man needs fresh air,” he said coldly.

“Come on, Reverend,” the bear said while he leaned over to the priest. “Let’s cool down outside.” He was smiling.

“Stay away from me,” Nsimese hissed.

“Please, Reverend. You heard the owner,” the fox added from the priest’s other side. “Let’s handle this peacefully.”

The armadillo just stared at them and rose his staff which had been lying on the ground. “I am priest,” he said. “Beware the power the Spirits have given to me.”

“Please, Reverend,” the fox said soothingly. “It’s been one beer to much tonight, hasn’t it?”

The armadillo spun around on his chair and readied himself for accessing the magical powers the Spirits had granted him but before he had been able to finish his action the bear had already grabbed him. He did not even understand what happened as the bear was much faster than he would ever had expected such a huge man to be and now he simply put the struggling armadillo under his arm and carried him to the door while the fox took up the staff which had fallen to the ground and carried it along as well.

“Everything’s alright,” the fox said towards the other costumers who were looking at the two men and the armadillo.

The armadillo tried to shake himself free, at least to get his arms free, not noticing the people who stared at him while he was being carried along in such an humiliating way.

Quickly the fox opened one half of the double door and the bear simply threw the priest out while fox hurled his rod out too and then the door slammed shut again.

He had fallen down into the mud, getting himself and his habit all dirty. Breathing hard with anger he stood up awkwardly. The moisture of the ongoing rain was pouring down on his dress and wetted him furthermore. With a groan he rose to full size again, rising his head to the dark sky where the clouds were nothing but a grayish sea that sent the rain down to earth.

“Why I, in the name of the Dark Ones, have you send me here?” he shouted upwards.

The rain was dripping on his face, coldly running down his scales while he tried to make something out in this grayish nothingness of the restless sky.

Wind was blowing all over the four houses that made up this outpost at the verge of the Andeleau Mountains, coming from the cold tops where the snow never melt. The cold gusts seemed to enforce the rain, made it pour even into the best protected cracks and it looked like the summer had come to a premature end. As if ghosts of the past were still haunting the deep of Lake Moonfire they made summer to autumn long before the days would get shorter again.

“What am I supposed to do here?” he shouted again. But the only answer was the pouring of the water and the rustle of the firs that surrounded the outpost. “Why have you guided me here?” The hood of his robe had dropped back because of the water that had soaked it. Thus his head was exposed and its scaled surface shimmered in the light of the sole lantern that designed the entrance of the inn. “I would have fled to the end of the world and beyond. I would have left the area forever. But you decided to guide me here to this forsaken place. What for?” His small eyes blinked as he tried to make something out in the sky. “WHAT FOR?” He cried as loud as he could but his voice was not even strong enough to drown out the rain.

With a sigh he bend down and picked up his staff. He tried to wipe the dirt from it but it was no use. He leaned himself against the cold wood that sunk deeply into the soaked earth. “I will wait.” He wet his lips. “I will wait just like you

are expecting me to do.” He paused. “BUT NOT A SINGLE DAY LONGER THAN THIS DAMN FEAST OF THEIRS! DO YOU HEAR ME, OH MIGHTY SPIRITS? NOT A SINGLE DAY LONGER!”

And thus he started to walk away from the houses, into the wood where he had made himself a temporary sleeping place, far away from these ignorants bastards that populated the inn.

“Wait...”

She just laughed and ran faster, jumping through the hedges like he would never believed an armadillo to be able to. It seemed like her armor was not even restricting her in the slightest way, while he was just panting, hardly able to support his own weight.

“Wait!” he begged.

And she jumped over a fallen tree with just grace that her tight hunting clothes stretched around her body even more seductively than ever. The arrows in the quiver clicked and it seemed like the sound of her armor that was breaking as she left it behind in her grace.

“Please...” he stammered in between two panting breaths and leaned against a tree, supporting himself, desperately trying to catch his breath. Unlike her light clothing his thick ceremonial gown did not make things any better and in this moment it rather felt like a shroud to him.

She had stopped too and offered him a sadistically pitiful smile. “You are such a weakling, Nsimese,” she stated mercilessly.

“Damn...” He had to cough. “I never had the chance to exercise like you...”

“Yeah, I know! You are a bookworm after all. Such a pity that an armadillo has got to spoil its chances for such crap!” Her look was ice-cold although her constant smile.

Still panting he rose his head to be able to look at her. “First of all: I would have wished to see any book at all during my apprenticeship. And second: How dare you talking about the holy duty of our race!”

She rolled her eyes. “Holy duty, you say! Ha! Preaching to some brainless softskins[!]!”

“The Spirits have designed me to do so,” he said with utter conviction.

“Oh, yes! The Spirits! How could I forget!” She was mimicking understanding with sarcastically exaggerated gestures.

“The Spirits chose us,” he replied with utter conviction.

“Of course, they did!” Now her tone was almost angry and she turned away from him, getting unusually quiet all of a sudden.

Looking at her he pushed himself of the tree and slowly went over to her, taking her carefully by her shoulders.

She shook his hands off. “Where have been your almighty Spirits when our kind died, when the blood ran thinner with every generation, when we were murdered in cold blood?” she said silently and coldly.

“We cannot question them,” he replied.

"Oh, yes?" She spun around on the spot, her eyes flashing with anger. "Look! Look!" She grabbed him violently by his collar and pulled him over to a hole in the undergrowth. "Look at them and tell me what you see!" And she forced him to approach the hole and when he looked through he could see the town center with the old gnarled oak in the middle. He had not realized they had been so close to it all the time.

There were some stags loafing around in front of the bar, insulting passer-bys, most especially rabbits that came out of the dormitory opposite. Some foxes were observing them from the windows of the small bar and smiled in accordance to the deer's behavior. Then after a while the door of the huge sawmill that over-shadowed all the other buildings opened and a group of young wolves walked out. As soon as they stood in the sunlight they eyed the surroundings carefully. Almost at the same instant the stags had shut up and the foxes had retired from the window. The wolf in the middle smiled scornfully at the group, he wore a strange, soft hat and although he was not as large as his companions his tight clothing visibly displayed the play of his muscles beneath his skin.

"See, that's Tracker," she whispered by her side. "The Nighthunter's pride and glory, this year's Jurnea, last year's Jurnea, the Jurnea of the year before. He's a betrayer and everyone knows it. But because his clan has just taken over the sawmill no one dares to approach him. I really don't know how I hate more: This bastard or the cowards that the rest of the village is consisting of. But you..." She laughed with merciless mockery. "You don't know anything about that. You stay away from this town, you get your apprenticeship, you become all wise and powerful!"

"Listen, Phetalaise, you cannot reproach me that. If I had had a choice I would have stayed with my mother and your family..."

"Oh, shut up!" She was visibly bored by his explanations. Instead she was still looking at the square. "Look at this!"

He obeyed.

"See what the wolfs do?"

He was trying to get a good picture of it although she occupied most of the green hole's small space with her head: Some of the wolves had surrounded the stags and were somehow talking to them. In the meantime the one wolf she had showed him before was busy with some fox that must just have had passed by. They were too distant to understand what the fox was just shouting but the way he was gesturing it was pretty clear that he wanted to get back his kill, a black stork the wolf was now holding in his hands. One of the fox' arrows was still sticking inside the stork's chest.

"They take away their hunt," she mumbled to him.

"But... But I thought that you did not eat meat!"

She looked at him and once more there was this sarcastic smile upon her lips. "Oh, wake up! How do you expect me to keep from starving?"

"It is forbidden to us!" he insisted.

“Damn you, Nsimese! What do you know?” She was visibly angry now. “We got to live from something, don’t we? How do you imagine did we survive all these years while you were all pampered by your teacher? And then these damned dogs² come along and take the little that you have got. Come on and join them if you are so eager to do moralizing!”

“Oh yes, pampered...,” he said, but he did not contradict her.

For another moment she was staring at him but then she turned to the hole in between the bushes again. “But I have uttered a curse against them by leaving a blood covered branch of the Tacolar Tree on the threshold of their backdoor. As far as I know there were already some accidents happening... Wonder what they will do when they find out...” She grinned.

He groaned and turned around but because of this movement some nasty blade of grass poked right into the sensible skin of his face and instinctively he was up, lashed around with his paws even before he knew what was going on. He needed a moment to realize that he had been sleeping and that it had just been a blade of grass that had disturbed him.

He blinked and his blurred vision was slowly getting back to normal: He was sitting on a heap of hay that lay beneath the intertwined branches of two large firs which had grown so close together that their branches were virtually locked together and thus had formed a small natural shelter which was protected from all sides, either by the branches or by the trunk of one of the firs. It was very small but it was obviously the best one could ask for here. It even protected a little bit of the warmth but the armadillo had to cough anyway.

This sudden sound awoke a three-eyed hedgehog³ which had been laying curled up by the priest’s side. He had had to chase away the animal before he had come here but the animal did not seem to mind his presence.

“Accursed creature,” he growled and threw a small branch after the animal which quickly run away through the protecting wood.

He coughed again.

Despite his shelter it was cold this high on the slope of the Andeleau Mountains and the cold from Lake Moonfire far beneath them was raising in the morning and a cool wind was usually blowing up from below even though he could not feel it yet. It was pretty dark in his resting place too and if there had not been small holes in the cover of his shelter he would not have known that it was already day again.

He sighed and looked down his poor clothing: It was dirty and ragged and full of hay. Since he had fled he had not had a chance to get new clothes. He sighed once more as he remembered that he had dreamt of his fiancé, Phetalaise. What would she had said if she had seen him like this. Surely she would have called him a coward and a fool, not worth to represent their kind. Her words hurt like he had heard them just days ago.

“What should I have done?” he asked, looking at his paws that lay in his lap. “What should I have done as the only one left of us? I TRIED,” he cried. “I did my

best to make them pay for all what they had done but... I promise, I will try again! I will not stop until the day they have all paid or I have stopped breathing. That is my promise to you, all of you. May the Spirits be my witnesses!" He gritted his teeth and hit his fist against his chest.

Instantly he had to cough again. Most certainly he was getting too old for sleeping outside.

With a sigh he turned around on all fours and started to crawl out of his shelter. Cool air, full of dew welcomed him and the pleasant early sunlight shone right into his face and made him blink.

"Damned sun!" He shadowed his eyes with one paw.

He stood right in the forest, not very far from the outpost. Firs of different kinds surrounded him but they were rather low so close to the clearing with the houses and thus he could see the hazy but cloudless sky above him. There were some birds chirping and from the distance he could hear the noises of the small outpost that was about to wake up: The metal beat of a hammer against an anvil, muffled cries of children, the cracking of wood, the sounds of animals. The smell of a fire filled his nose.

This scent reminded him of his hunger. His stomach was feeling like a big empty hole. But he had no more supplies as he used them all on his flight to the Silver Coast and he did not even have any money anymore as he had spent it for his crossing of Lake Moonfire with the Tide Cruise Ferries.

He sighed. When he had reached Lake Moonfire he had had a dream, in this dream he had been lying on the Silver Coast and a shimmering path of light had guided him across the water and up into the Andeleau Mountains to the small outpost where he was now. He had taken it as a proof that the Spirits were still protecting him and thus guiding him to safety but after what happened last night he had certain doubts now.

His stomach rumbled again and he understood that he had more pressing matters to attend to now and he adjusted his habit quickly and then walked down to the houses.

The outpost had been build on a large clearing and a few three-eyed goats³ were actually feeding there when he came out of the forest and headed for the houses. The feeding animals lazily eyed the strange furr that walked past them, through the high grass, wet with dew.

As he could already see from the distance the outpost was already quite busy by now: The chimneys were all smoking strongly and the noises of working men and women were now audible all over the clearing. They were already working for the feast which was supposed to take place tonight.

He stepped in between the houses and walked straight past the barns, storage houses, the small workshop, the smokehouse and the hay stakes used as dormitories for the hunters and other visitors which had come down here. The men and women, bears, wolves, foxes, squirrels, boars, deer and a few felines were busy with cutting firewood for tonight, skinning hunted animals for the feast, preparing vegetables and fruit, baking bread, sharpening knives and fixing tools for themselves, trading furs and other stuff among themselves, talking and eating

their breakfasts while children were running around, crying joyously, hunting each other with never-ending enthusiasm.

But among all these people there quite a few who eyed the armadillo who passed by with hostility, especially a pair of eyes of a youngster with very short hair and ragged clothes who had still been lying in the hay and did not sit up until the priest walking passed by, but then the young furr did not take his slanting eyes off him.

Nsimese headed directly for the inn whose broad double door was wide open, letting all the sunlight in. A boy was sitting in the entrance, working on a small bow. But when he saw the armadillo approaching he jumped up and quickly ran inside the house. "Dad, the priest's here again!" he shouted.

The armadillo screwed up his eyes and hesitatingly stepped through the widely opened door into the brightly lit hall.

The owner of the inn, a typical, stocky beaver walked straight towards him from a back door. "You really have guts to come here again. What do you want?" he asked when he joined in with the armadillo.

Nsimese rose his head slightly to look at the beaver from below his hood. "Food."

"Listen, priest! You are lucky that I am a devoted believer and a kind man as well but despite this weakness I should beat the hell out of you and throw you out of my house. If you just meant half of what you said last night I can hardly believe that you are supposed to be a priest at all."

"*The Spirits do not judge us, our actions do,*" the priest recited.

The beaver inhaled sharply. "Did you really expect me to give you any more contributions?" He eyed the armadillo coldly.

In the back of the room the young boy had showed up again, he observed the man from the safety behind a table.

The armadillo slightly turned his head away. "Do you really want to chase away an old, foolish man like me," he asked calmly although deep inside he was repulsed by his own request: If it was for another situation he would have just burned this man's house to ashes for humiliating him this way, for making him beg for food. But in this moment he was much too hungry to allow himself any more pride than that. But one way or another he would make this fat beaver pay for this.

The beaver snorted and eyed the armadillo in the ragged habit for another moment. Then he hmped, turned around and went over to the counter, grabbed behind it and took out an unleavened, flat bread and a small dark sausage made of oat meal, mushrooms and a little bit of meat. "Here!" he said coldly while he went over to the armadillo and hold the stuff out to him.

"Thank you," the priest said. "May the Spirits bless you!" He took the food.

"By the way..." the owner said suddenly, looking with a strange expression at the armadillo who was just about to walk away. "Do you know some different armadillo priest?"

"No, why?" Nsimese replied.

"There were some rumors about a priest of your kind burning half a town on the other side of Lake Moonfire to the ground..."

The priest hesitated for a moment. "Never heard of anyone," he answered. "I am just coming down from the north, performing a pilgrimage in pursuit of wisdom." From below his hood he eyed the beaver nervously but when he noticed no particular reaction, he suddenly felt more courageous like something had changed inside his chest, empowering him with new audacity. "But I have heard that there are quite some of my kind in this area. Did you see any of them?"

The beaver screwed up his eyes. "No," he replied coldly. "Now if you don't mind I would like you to get out of my sight."

"Of course and thanks a lot again." With a grin which was hidden beneath his hood he turned around and walked out again, observed by the beaver and his son.

When he got outside he hissed silent curses, holding on tightly to his food.

A pair of eyes followed him on his way back.

He went out of the small settlement again, searched for a dry stone in the sun at the edge of the clearing where he could sit down all by himself. He had to search for some place like this for a while but finally he found one and sat down there. It was a little bit above the settlement and he was satisfied with it because he could oversee large parts of the settlement without being well seen himself and that was just fine with him.

With a groan he picked up his food and started eating while observing the tiny men and women.

He hardly noticed the taste of the stuff while he chewed on it, he was still in this accursed town but tonight would be the last night if his vision had been correct. In this vision which had guided him here he had seen a large fire at the end of the shimmering path, blurred shapes of furs had been swirling around it like they were dancing and celebrating something. They had moved so fast he had not been able to distinguish a real person, it had seemed to him like he had been trapped in slow-motion while the rest of the world around him had went on with the usual speed. At the end of his dream there had been an entirely dark figure which had floated just outside the light of the fire, lightning had sometimes sparkled around it but the weather had suddenly changed into a storm and then everything swirled around and the fire was flickering and he had instinctively tried to protect himself from the storm which had chased away every other person, the only thing he had been able to see was a shimmering spot right on the shape's chest which had glistened with a bright, cold light and then the shape had come to him and had given him its hand.

He was still not sure what to make out of this last part of his dream. With his teeth he ripped off a large part of his sausage and chewed thoughtfully on it. The Spirits had sent him a message, he was sure of that, they had not given him up yet and maybe this would be what he had been waiting for all the time, a way to avenge what he suffered from, the redemption. Maybe this creature of whatever it was, would be the ally he needed to go on with his plans.

He grinned and leaned back, slowly chewing his bread. Tonight was the night of the revelation and then he would show them all, once and forever.

The fight had lasted much longer than he would ever had expected. Three days and nights had passed while the Bog Walker⁴ had constantly attacked him, never giving him even a single moment of relaxation or sleep.

When the creature had been burned by the holy fire he had lit on under the huge old tree it almost instantly reformed in the darkness of the infected cavern under the tree. It did neither possess any feelings, nor did it know pain or exhaustion and thus it had always been around him while he had tried to focus on the prayers of his exorcism, to cast away the unnatural evil that had taken control of this once benevolent lesser spirit, that was now nothing more but a destructive abomination. But he had been unable to keep up his protections and the creature searched for new ways to get to him all the time without getting to close to the fire it feared. In these short moments of absent-mindedness the Bog Walker had succeeded several times, claws and teeth of rotten wood had scratched at his shell and dug into his flesh when it attacked him. The foul breath had poisoned the air around him and for a moment he had been close to choking until he had been able to whisper a prayer to the Spirits again and he threw more herbs into the fire which instantly flared up again and with a horrible howl that only he could hear the creature had fled and for a moment he had been alone again, trembling from over-whelming exhaustion and the wounds he had received up to now.

He had needed more than a moon phase to hunt it down, to track it to its lair. In this time they had already attacked him several times but the creature had not considered him to be a real threat yet. It had attacked him just like it attacked every living thing that crossed its way. But it had cost him dearly nevertheless because he had not been able to get new supplies or any reinforcements. But after all this time he had finally found the cavern where it had come were coming from: A tree which had been majestic once, but was now nothing but a dead husk in the middle of a stinking bog.

It was an old oak that looked like a perverse replica of the Holy Oak in the town. He had smelled it long before he had gotten close enough to it as everything around it was dead and had rotten and stunk of death and decay. Even the earth was nothing but stinking mud anymore he had to wade through. The leaves of the trees had rotten on the branches and it all made him want to throw up while he walked through the poisonous haze that lingered all over this place and did not let a single ray of light come through to illuminate this place.

This oak might have been a place where the Spirits had rested in the early days of the world, maybe they had even granted it a part of their holy power and had chosen it to be a guardian of its surrounding, to ensure the vitality of this remote place deep in the Blue Ridge. But now its power had to serve an unholy purpose, to be the resting place of misguided spirit which was nothing more but a cruel parody of its former self. It was no longer protecting the bog as it had been supposed to. It was slowly killing it and mindlessly attacked every living thing

that was unfortunate enough to loose itself in this place. The bog walker had to be stopped, it was a threat to every living creature, every furr and even that god-forsaken town Nsimese was responsible for.

The tree had been standing on an elevated rock and its roots had dug deep into the ground, forming a natural cavern beneath the rock and he had chosen a place right in front of the tree where he could observe the bog as well as the tree and the cavern. The foul stench of poisoned water that came from the cavern and formed glistening pools in the mud all around had been almost unbearable. Despite the cold he had started to sweat because this was the place where the creature was strongest and he had had yet to prepare his defense, the exorcism, all of it. He had started to prepare everything as quickly as he was able to, not knowing if the presence he had felt had been the closeness of the bog walker himself or simply the foul nature of his place.

It had not moved until he had lit the sacred powders that would cleanse the place. In this moment it had been above him. He had screamed in panic, instinctively he had thrown a bag of blesses seed at it and as they had instantly germed the seeds had weakened the creature by draining its strength. But within moments the germing herbs had withered again and in this time he had desperately tried to enforce the fire, invoking the power of the Spirits in order to help him battle the creature.

He had just been able to finish the last chants when it had reached him again and even though the had been able to chase it away again he had been trapped for three days in this hellish place while he had been performing chant after chant to keep the fire from dying down while the bog walker was out there, waiting for a moment of weakness. But it was much strong than he would ever had imagined and more than once doubted his possibilities to finish his exorcism. But then he reminded him that he did not have to doubt the Spirits which were guarding him and in the end he had no choice: The moment he had left the fire the creature would had attacked him without mercy.

At the end of the third night rain had set in and he had almost panicked as he had not known how he had been able to keep the fire burning while the rainstorm had gotten stronger with every moment and when lightning set in he had been able to see the bog walker lurking in the shadows, just waiting for its chance to finish him off.

And then suddenly lightning had shot down and had struck the old oak with deafening thunder. The bog walker had shrieked in pain. It had tried to summon its power to extinguish the fire that was about to burn the dead tree but Nsimese had known that this had been the chance he had been waiting for all the time. He had lit a branch in his fire, had approached the distracted bog walker and had thrown the branch at him. The creature had instantly caught fire and then the priest had thrown all of his herbs and powders at it. He had no longer been able to distinguish one from the other but the right ones had to be among them and the creature exploded in an outburst of the flames while the armadillo had chanted his prayers, asking the Spirits for forgiveness for killing one of their kind and asking for peace for this misguided creature.

And now he stood in the bar of the town in ragged, dirty clothes, injured and exhausted and the only thing the townspeople did was staring at him with an expression of disgust. He must have had stumbled right into some kind of a celebration. They had never been pleased to see him since Phetalaise's death but in this moment when he looked in their eyes he was convinced to see their hatred and none of them moved, offered him help or did anything else.

He wanted to tell them that he had vanquished a bog walker, that he had been able to banish it from the face of this earth again and that he had fought three days and three nights against it, in order to protect them and their town from it. But in the end all that came out of his mouth was a hissed curse and then he spun around and walked outside again, trembling with rage and pain.

He did not get very far. He collapsed on the edge of the town and had lain there, telling himself that this was maybe for the best if he showed them where they got him, that he had killed himself for them. But then rage took over again and he promised to make them all pay one day, for Phetalaise's death, for the death of his mother and his entire clan as he was now convinced to understand how they had died, sacrificing themselves for these unworthy sinners that were injuring the woods, only craving for money and only concerned about their own well-being, trapped in ridiculous bloody feuds, never caring about others and eliminating those that stood in their way, like him and his kind.

It was Tzerska who found him that way. The solitary rabbit hunter took him to safety and nursed him back to health until he could stand on his own feet again. But he barely noticed the rabbit and when he was strong enough again he left Tzerska without a word, pursuing a new goal: Make the town and its inhabitants pay, one way or another!

He had to have dozed off. But some sixth sense had woken him and instantly he sat up and blinked.

In front of the elevated stone he had been sitting on stood a young boy, a vole, who looked at the strange figure in the old ragged leather habit with big eyes. "Hello," he said, half shyly, half curiously.

It had gotten much darker and the armadillo instinctively asked himself if he could really had slept all the time and if could already be so late again.

The sky had darkened, only the clouds were brightly light by a distant sun which shone beyond the woods which blocked the view from the other side of the clearing. The shadows were long and the faint wind felt cold. Few birds chirped anymore and the three-eyed goats on the meadows had disappeared too. The only sounds left came up from the settlement where the furs already seemed to be gathering for the feast. There were many shouts, laughter and the sounds of celebrating.

"Who are you?" the boy asked when the priest did not answer but instead had screwed up his eyes to look at the houses.

But now he turned towards the vole. "Who I am?" he asked coldly. "It does not matter *who* I am. It matters *what* I am. I am a priest, an avenger, judge and executioner!" Slightly bend forward he glared at the boy from below his hood.

Instinctively the boy drew back. "But I thought that a... a priest is supposed to help?" he asked with slightly trembling voice.

"Do I look like I would help anyone," Nsimese growled.

Suddenly the boy seemed to realize that he had to be looking pretty frightened and thus tensed and stood up straight as manly as he could. "You don't look that scary," he declared courageously.

"Maybe not as long as I do not have burned you and your family alive," Nsimese hissed at the annoying vole.

"I do not believe you," the boy stated, getting more and more courageous. "Priests are nice people. They help you when you are hurt!"

"I would rather kill," the armadillo replied.

"Then you are no true priest!" the boy declared stead-fastly.

Nsimese stood up from the stone he had been resting on and stepped down to the boy. His slap was so powerfully that it knocked the boy down. "Do not question my devotion," he hissed with flaring hatred.

The boy laid on the ground, totally surprised and overcome by the pain in his cheek and then he started to cry, with awkward movements he stumbled to his feet and ran away as fast as he could, still crying, tears flowing all over his face.

The enraged armadillo looked after the small shape. "I will get you too," he mumbled to himself.

He sat back down on his stone and watched the settlement from afar. He could see that the furs down there had already gathered the wood for the large fire they wanted to light tonight: It was a huge pile of wood on the opposite end of the town at a safe distance from the wooden houses. There had brought some tables out of the bar and several large trunks where they could sit on and by the lazy manner the people moved about he could see that they were ready to start the feast. But it would not start until dusk, then the fire would be lit by the oldest members of the community. But they would not start eating until the golden moon Heya would have risen above the horizon, this was the sign that the feast could truly start. Then everyone, every man and woman, every old one and every child would hold hands until they formed a large circle around the fire and then they would speak the formula together which asked the Spirits for blessing the dead and the dead for blessing the living. Then they would celebrate joyously until the next morning as the dead would watch them and participate in their zest for life like they were once again alive themselves.

Nsimese hmped in a derogatory manner. They were such fools, they should rather ask their ancestors for protection.

Slowly he pushed himself off the stone and moaned as his limbs had gone stiff with cold and ached when he rose again.

Except for a few remaining rays of sunlight that were still glistening in the now reddish and purple sky, it had gotten dark and now that the sun had left it had

gotten quite cool too. They would soon lit the fire and it was time for him to join this silly celebration in order to look for the one he had seen in his dream.

The armadillo walked through the meadow, the grass rustling around him as a little bit of wind had sprung up and the blades danced around him in the dim light of dusk while a some distant birds were croaking.

When he reached the houses he could see that all the furs had gathered around the fire place and he walked quickly over to them. A very old beaver was just about to hold a torch inside the smaller wood at the bottom of the pile and everyone waited in silence for the flickering flames to jump across.

Nsimese got there just when the dry little branches cracked and went up in a blaze.

Instantly the whole crowd broke out in cheers and the old man held out the torch and hurled it on the top of the pile and everyone applauded and the children cried joyously while the fire was about to spread and cast its first rays of flickering light over the many people.

Nsimese looked around: There were definitively more people than last night, so quite some had to have arrived during the day. Like the day before there were all kind of furs but all of them shared the same bald, but strong look which marked them as inhabitants of the mountainside, the hunters, trackers, trappers and other isolated inhabitants of the Andeleau Mountains which faced its harsh environment all on their own, rarely gathered for some special celebrations like this one. But this arduous way of living seemed to strengthen their desire for a good feast and thus instantly when the fire had been lightened the two girls from the night before started to play their instruments, the bodagh and the flute, but now there was also a young man who played a small string instrument that looked like half of an oversized, wooden pear and whose gentle but strange tone added perfectly to the tune of the two other instruments. The other people clapped their hands according to the rhythm and soon there was a young couple of squirrels who started dancing, encouraged by the cheers of the rest. Deftly they swirled around one another, the special dress the girl must have spared just for an occasion like this one, floated through the air when she spun around her partner whose broad smile of happiness outshone everything else while he looked at her.

Quickly they were joined by other couples. First the owner of the inn and his wife joined the dance too and then more and more of the couples started dancing too, some of them only moving awkwardly to the music but there was absolutely nobody who seemed to mind, nor seemed to care as long as they were all happy about this. Meanwhile the children ran all around, chasing one another with loud cries and laughter while the older women tried to keep them away from the tables where the many different food they all had gathered stood as it was not supposed to be eaten until the blessing had taken place. The old and lonely men without a partner watched with amusement and sometimes one of them hurled another piece of wood on the large pile of flames which was now the brightest source of light in the increasing darkness of the night and cast its warmth all over the place, the flames joining the couples in their dance whenever a gust of wind blew over the clearing.

There were only few people, especially older ones, who were not participating in this. They sat on the trunks or stood around and watched the dancers with a smile, remembering better times or dreaming of these.

When the tune had finally ended the dancers applauded the musicians who were just about to start another slower and more sensual one and most of the people were starting to talk, relaxing after this vertiginous performance of liveliness. Small groups formed and soon the noises of their chatting murmured all over the place while the fire cracked and the wood inside burst in small explosions of sparks and embers which flew through the night like tiny sprites.

Nsimese was just standing outside the circle of fire, leaning on his staff and watching the celebration with a brooding expression on his face that was just supposed to hide his increasing anger. He could not stand all these foolish games and selfish amusements he did not take part in. It rejected him when he saw the laughter on their faces, their smiles and heard the cries of the children who had just been captured by comrades of theirs and were now falling victim to frantic tickling, gasping for breath between their cries of joy. He pressed his lips together and tried to suppress the urge to make the whole place disappear in a blaze. It was not worth the effort.

Meanwhile Tezu had risen into the sky, the red moon was a reddish crescent on the opposite edge of the sky, outshining the invisible Blue Ridge Mountains beyond Lake Moonfire. The blood colored moon looked down on the celebration just like the dark eye of Koda, the black moon whose circle of darkness was a hole in the midst of the stars which got more and more numerous until the faint glow of the Celestial River⁵ was about to come out too.

The fire was now an entire mountain of flames among the people who were talking noisily, quivering slightly with anxiety as the time of the ceremony was about to arrive, as it could not take much longer for Heya to rise too. But as long as nobody had seen the golden circle in the sky yet, they went on talking about the events which had happened since their last gathering, exchanged anecdotes and cracked jokes about their less fortunate rivals which belonged to different communities and most especially about the foolish townspeople who did not know anything about life in the wilderness. Unlike the days and nights before there was no one talking business anymore, this was a moment of celebration and there was really nobody who wanted to spoil it with less happy matters.

Events such as this one were always possibilities for the young men and women to meet each other and there was quite some couple who found themselves on these nights. Thus it was not surprising that quite some flirting and paying court took place. Although all this happened beneath the careful observations of the families, tonight was an exception and quite some less comradely, more unambiguous approach between a man and a woman was being tolerated than usual. There were no specific rules to these matters as these people did neither have the time, nor the knowledge to care about rituals and thus it was no surprise when some strong woman just grabbed the man she desired and forced him to kiss her. It was always a source of amusement when yet another poor, weak man had fallen victim to some less restrained woman.

Everyone laughed, of course. Just the many men who did not dare to do something like that looked rather envious on the poor lad. But even though these people did not know that much about courtship and such they did their best to make their chosen comfortable and there were also quite some romantic events happening too although they got a higher chance of remaining unnoticed by the rest of the crowd.

The whole area around the fire was crammed full with people and after some time it became a problem to get through them without using force. Even the children had chosen to play at the edge of the celebration. Those who stood on the outside could observe it all and that was what Nsimese did, not noticing that he was carefully being observed too, none of his movements being missed by the pair of eyes who shimmer with the reflections of the flames, recalling less happy circumstances.

Suddenly a young roe girl shouted: "There it is, there it is!"

And all of a sudden everyone was silent and they all looked to the east where the first golden shimmers of Heya were about to rise above the dark shades of the forest. A loud cheer rocked the whole place as they all cried out with one and the same voice, the sound was deafening and must have waken even the smallest animal in the wood. But this was a cry of joy and instantly they embraced one another, not caring about who was who, wishing their companions just the best and then they got silent again and then, like their had been a silent sign for them, they took each others paw and started to form a large circle around the fire.

"Waitaminute, waitaminute..." A large boar stepped forward. His richly decorated leather clothes shimmered in the light of the flames. "If I'm not mistaken, we got a priest here with us tonight. If there are no objections I'd like to ask him to speak a prayer for all of us!"

There was some clapping.

The owner of the inn wanted to step forward to speak up but his wife did not let his hand go when he wanted to do so and when he looked at her in surprise she shook her head no. He pulled a face and suppressed a grunt of disapproval but kept quiet in the end, although he could see some furs with less happy faces too.

Meanwhile the boar had walked towards Nsimese and with a smile he had invited the armadillo to walk inside the circle of furs.

With slow, dramatic movements, totally aware that everyone was looking at him now, the armadillo went into the circle, supporting himself on his staff and radiating the authority of his age and his duty despite his ragged, dirty clothes. The many different pendants clicked while he walked past the furs and closer to the fire until he stepped right in front of it, being nothing but a dark shape in front of the blaze.

"We have gathered here tonight...!" His voice had changed. Usually it had been careful, not very strong and rather brittle due to his age, but now that he spoke up it was strong and vibrant, echoing all over the place even though the rushing and cracking of the fire, it could not be missed by anyone. After all he knew what he wanted to say. "... To ask the Spirits for another blessing of those

that have preceded us... And their blessing as well!" He inhaled and watched the many furs whose eyes rested up him. As the fire was in his back he saw them as brightly lit shapes which reflected the flames like they were burning themselves.

The fire in his back was hot and he could feel it every moment that he stood there but the certainty that everyone was looking at him was even more stimulating, he was trembling, quivering with an euphoric elation that he had not felt for a very long time, he could feel it like the blood in his veins was sparkling and he felt stronger than he had in all these last days. He seemed to grow in front of all these pairs of eyes and he could not resist smiling while he cleared his throat to go on with his speech, getting more and more self-confident.

"He have gone through hard times..." He looked around shortly and noticed with satisfaction that nobody looked like he wanted to object. "...and we have endured many tests: Of our strength, of our endurance, of our will to live. But we have never weakened, knowing that our ancestors never did too. And even in hard times we were confident that they stood by our side and helped us in these crucial moments..." He could see them hanging on his every word and he grinned broadly. "Even when wrong has been done to us, we have not weakened, trusting in our heritage and our duties. We have gone on, knowing that we will be redeemed one day and there will be made up for everyone of our hardships. But..." He looked around, his eyes flying all over the many unknown furs. "...we will do our best ourselves. Our ancestors will see that we are not lazy ourselves, waiting for time to take its course. We act ourselves, we will do what is needed to be done, we will not rest until we have done everything that we are able to. Even when that means that we have to go on beyond our own limits. Nothing will stop us when we are on our way like an avalanche that will crush everything underneath and we will not weaken when we hear the pleas of mercy as we know that our ancestors would never tolerate such foolishness in times like these, times of redemption..."

First the furs around the fire had not reacted at all, staring at the armadillo in shock. But the more frantically he went on the more furs shook of the bonds of surprise and were getting nervous.

Nsimese did not notice anything of this as he was totally absorbed by his speech. "It is time to destroy what destroys us, we got to fight against those who are hurting us. We have fought before and have never complained about any injury and thus we will not stop when it is time to fight again! Fight against those who did us wrong! Our ancestors would never allow any weakness, they are watching us and they are approving every action that is necessary. We will burn everything down, even if that means to walk knee-deep in blood and crush our enemies' children. We will fight and never hesitate..."

Now the celebrating were getting agitated. Someone cried : "Blasphemy!" Although it was not very loud it seemed to break the last restraints of respect for the priest and the circle around him broke apart as nobody could support this any longer.

A bear, pale and trembling with rage, walked straight towards the armadillo.

“Dakaryn, stop!” A mouse by his side shouted and tried to hold back the large ursine but it was of no use.

“Oh, dear Spirits!” The innkeeper gasped when he noticed what was going on as the bear was not the only one to go after the armadillo who was still talking like there was nothing going on around him.

Nsimese was like in trance, totally exalted. His eyes shimmered with an inner fire while he shouted his message to the sky, not noticing that nobody listened to him anymore. He was sweating and trembling, burning with the urge to tell everyone about his mission of vengeance, to make them join him in his pursuit of what he called justice. He was certain that they would understand and did not think otherwise until a huge paw grabbed him by his collar and lifted him off the ground.

The bear stared right into the armadillo’s face, holding it just by one strong paw. “What the heck do you say? Do you really think that the Spirits would approve such carnage? How can you believe that you are right?” He shouted it right into the priest’s face.

Nsimese was completely startled for a moment as he needed some time to realize what was going on around him. “How can you dare to interrupt me?” He hissed into the bear’s face when he had gotten back to his senses. “I am a priest! How can you dare to touch me? How can you dare to question me?”

“What do you think will my children think about what you just said?” Some other furs were pulling at him to make him stop, talked to him but the bear just cried: “Shut up! I will teach this so-called priest about violence!”

“You will not dare to,” Nsimese hissed and called on to his magical powers, focussing on the spells he needed right now, ready to feel the exciting glow inside him that would transform into a burning spear, tearing the bear apart in no time. He would crush him and burn them all, his powers granted by the Spirits would make short work of this worthless vermin. He focussed on the bear and...

His eyes went wide when nothing happened, inside himself was nothing but the emptiness of his own rage.

And in this moment the bear rammed his fist into the armadillo’s defenceless stomach. It took his breath away, it seemed like the blow had torn apart his innards but instead he was torn out of the bear’s hold and flew around, slammed into a cut trunk at the edge of the ring, went head over heels and then lay silent. He could feel something like pain but it was just a small blurred spot at the edge of his consciousness just before everything blacked out.

“Dakaryn, what have you done?” The bear’s wife cried out while everyone who stood around the large ursine looked at the motionless figure of the priest.

“Oh, Spirits! I did not want that! I just wanted to make him stop!” the bear mumbled, shaking his head in disbelief. “I did not want that, really.”

It was dead silent, everyone either looked at the bear or at the unconscious armadillo. No one seemed to be fully able to grasp what had just happened.

Finally a beaver woman, the wife of the innkeeper, run over to the armadillo and some other furs joined her when she kneeled down by the priest’s side. She

held her hand against the mouth of the unconscious one. "He is alive," she shouted when she had felt the flow of his breath.

It seemed like everyone exhaled with relief.

"Let's get him inside," someone said and the furs around the priest got hold of the bald figure and lifted him up. In this moment his habit was risen from his body and his legs got visible, one being unnaturally bend and twisted and the furs around the armadillo gasped, turning their heads away as they could guess what this meant.

"Get him in the inn," the beaver owner shouted and the four men who were now carrying the armadillo followed him while he guided them towards his house.

A wolf caught up with the beaver. "How can you do that, Trokonin? Didn't you hear what he said?"

The beaver pulled a face. "I am not deaf, Allens. But even though he might be plain crazy now, he is still a priest and I will show him the respect he deserves," the beaver answered while they approached the inn.

The wolf shook his head in disbelief. "You...! You can't be serious!" His shiny leather clothes shimmered with the light of the distant fire. "What he said was straight out of the Dark Spirits' mouth! He was advocating cowardly murder. You know that the Spirits would never..."

"I understand you, Allens," the beaver interrupted him. "But I will do what I can about his physical injuries. As far as the rest goes... He is in the Spirits' hands!"

Now they reached the huge door of the inn and the beaver opened it for the men who carried the unconscious armadillo. He and the wolf looked at the priest when he was carried inside.

When they were inside the beaver laid his hand on the bigger wolf's shoulder. "Don't worry, Allens! We will give him a room in the back and won't listen to what he says."

Thoughtfully the wolf nodded slowly while the beaver went after the other men and closed the door behind him.

The wolf sighed, shook his head and then slowly started to walk back to the fire where the other people were trying to make the best out of this mess.

"Hey!"

The man looked around: There was someone standing in the darkness of the shadow of the inn and his sense of smell told him that it had to be some feline.

"How's he doin'?" the hoarse voice asked.

The wolf shrugged his shoulders. "It's a shame he isn't dead if you ask me. But with this leg of his... Well, he won't be going anywhere soon," he answered.

"Thanks!"

"Never mind," he replied and waved his hand and started to walk towards the fire again.

Heya had risen far into the sky by now and the golden moon was a perfectly round circle in the sky, casting its bright, soothing light all over the clearing with

the few houses and the musicians had taken up their instruments again and their tune echoed gently over the troubled furs and towards the stars in the sky.

He was late and yawned exuberantly. Maybe he should have not gotten involved with Kleala again. But she was much too beautiful, much too attractive and too much of a temptress for him to resist her. But with a smile he had to admit to himself that he had been anything but unwilling to give in to her. Maybe during the next feasts their relationship would become something more serious. But he should give up his wishful thinking and get to work. He had to reach Lake Moonfire before dusk somehow and thus he pulled himself together and powerfully tied up another bag with hunted animal furs he was supposed to deliver. There were already quite some standing beside him.

“Hey!”

The chamois rose his head. “Yes...?!” He let the bag go and rose to full size.

The ground of the barn was covered by straw and half of it was occupied by his bags and some crates as well while the other half was occupied by his mount, a large nalavaa⁶ that was chewing lazily on the fresh leaves that stuck out of its broad mouth. His owner had already strapped his saddle and the wooden support for his load to the nalavaa’s back and as soon as he would have finished packing he would be ready to go.

“Don’tcha deliver letters too?”

“Sure!” He rubbed his nose.

“I’ve got a letter for the town of the Holy Oak.”

He screwed up his eyes. “Which one?”

“I dunno exactly. It’s on the other side of the lake, the one with the sawmill.”

“Oh, yeah. I know which one you mean. Although there wasn’t much left of the town when I passed through last time.” He looked down on his opposite. “So...?”

Clumsily this one took a small, dirty, folded paper from under his belt and held it out to him. “That’s it.”

“And who is it for?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Doesn’t matter. Take it to one of the three clans.”

“Okay, that’ll cost you 5 blue stones.” He took the paper and held out his paw. But instead of money he just got an angry glare. “Hey, what do you expect of me? Do that detour for free?”

The other one shortly pulled a face. “You’ll get a reward from the clans...”

“Yeah, sure! And fish can fly! Come on and pull somebody else’s leg!” He held the paper out to its owner.

That one sighed. “There’s more money in this than just your fuckin’ five blue stones. Take it or leave it!” He snarled the last words and glared at the surprised chamois who was rather surprised by that reaction but the longer he looked into these strange slanting eyes the more he was convinced of the other one’s seriousness and that he did not want to argue with him.

“Okay, okay, I will do it!” He nodded weakly. “But I better be paid good for this!”

“Yeah, you’ll be!” And with these words the lynx turned around and walked straight out of the barn, carrying a large, heavy backpack that seemed almost too big for the rather small feline.

The chamois looked after the strange lynx for a moment that was about to leave the confines of the small outpost, walking straight up the hill, then he looked at the thick paper and quickly he unfolded it and looked at the strange inscription: It was very awkwardly written, hardly readable at all and the color it had been written with looked stained and was smeared all over the sheet. He did not know this kind of writing, it seemed to be My’an⁷ or something like that. He shook his head, looked up again and could just see like the small shape of the lynx was about to disappear in between the firs that protected the houses from the rough rock of the Andeleau Mountains that overshadowed them.

“Ah, what the heck...” he mumbled and put the piece of paper into his pocket before he quickly started to pack his stuff again.

End of Chapter 10



Nsimese

Note: No matter how much Nsimese himself is convinced that his powers are granted by the Spirits, magical powers are totally independent from worship or religious status. Nevertheless many priest and priestesses are magically talented as it “suits the job”. The gods and the Spirits do not grant special powers to their priesthood or their followers. Nevertheless most people are convinced that they are behind favorable turns of events when they are being called for help in times of need. In the end, no furr seriously doubts the existence of the gods.

Annotation 1: “Softskins” is an insult armadillos use for those who do not belong to their own species.

Annotation 2: “Dog” is the most common insult for any kind of canine.

Annotation 3: The natural wildlife of this world includes dinosaur-like reptiles, birds and so called “three-eyes“ which do resemble mammals in their outer appearance except for their three eyes (one being in the middle of their forehead). In fact three-eyes are totally unlike mammals despite their looks. There exists no animal counterpart of the furrs.

Annotation 4: A bog walker is a lesser spirit. One could call it a “bog spirit”. Usually it is neutral towards furrs, but misguided spirits are an extreme threat to every living creature.

Annotation 5: The Celestial River is what we would call the Milky Way.

Annotation 6: A nalavaa is a large biped reptile, something like are dinosaur. They are rather slow but extremely strong and thus often used as mounts for heavy loads.

Annotation 7: My’an is one of many different scripts in use. Originating from the east, it is less common in the Midlands. It consists of a rather complicated set of syllabic signs.