

Migratory Birds
Chapter 4

FLIGHT



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Her head was droning like a steam engine and it was so heavy that it was anything but a small effort just to lift it up a bit. But somehow she managed it and instantly dull pain swirled throughout her skull, colors danced in front of her eyes and the blood rushed in her ears but nevertheless she was instantly fully alert as she had scented the other one's presence even before she had consciously grasped it and instantly she was upon her feet, jumping up with a quick movement of feline grace, extending her claws and ready to defend herself. But almost as quickly she regretted it because the pain increased and for a short moment everything blackened.

"Slow!" A male voice advised her. "I do not want to harm you. Despite what my family has done to you."

Breathing heavily she was able to fight back the pain and now she noticed that her view was not troubled by her headache but that she stood in an almost completely dark room which was only illuminated by two dim candles. Her lynx eyes pierced the darkness and she perceived the familiar shape of the wolf which stood opposite her, leaning against the stone wall next to some decorated corner.

"We are safe in here... For now," Wheel said and blinked while the lynx girl let herself drop down on the low bench with the quilt she had been lying on. "Can I help you somehow?" the wolf added cautiously.

Angrily she waved her head and growled lowly.

The wolf gulped and watched the ground beneath his feet. "I am sorry for you being kidnapped. It's my fault. I have lost my temper and told them that you are the real winner and now..." He rose his eyes up to her again. "...Actually I have no idea what they have intended to do with you. That's why I brought you down here." He wet his lips. "They won't look here for you. At least not as long as they are busy up there..."

She growled once again while running her hand over her aching head. At least she seemed to have no wound.

Wheel watched her in silence and the lynx did not hurry. But when she looked at him again, she was startled for a moment as the bigger wolf was looking completely different than the wolf she had seen during the race: There was no trace of this feverish energy of his left, he was sunken eyed, his hair messy and every movement he made displayed such weakness that it had to be an incredible effort of his just to keep standing where he was. He looked like misery itself. For a moment she watched him too but then her eyes wandered through the small room they were in: The ceiling was rather low, wooden beams in the wall seemed to stabilize the stone walls which were decorated with colored wall scrolls she was not able to see properly because the only light was the dim light of two candles which burned in the corner Wheel stood next to. This corner contained something like a wooden staircase with three steps or such where small idols, figurines, cups with some oily fluid, old, extinguished candles (and lots of molten wax) and similar stuff stood upon. These steps were covered with straw which had been dyed red and in the middle of the last one stood a very alien idol, an ornamental stone carved in the shape of an owl which was

completely painted black and the strange eyes of the bird looked coldly down on them.

Wheel who had noticed her looks also observed the altar for a moment. "That's our totem," he explained. "The owl. That's why we are called Nighthunters. It also represents Koda, the black moon which is our guiding star. As far as I know the other clans possess similar totems. Nickel's star is Heya, the golden moon. Storm's End is linked to Tezu, the red moon. Each of us represents one of the three moons. Sometimes I believe that's why we are hostile towards each other. We are all the same and nevertheless forever separated from one another. It's always been that way..." He fell silent and watched the black owl, lost in his thoughts. Although not looking at her he said: "I hope you don't mind lying on this bench. It's a deathbed. Whenever one of us feels his end approaching he comes down here and rests here, so that our totem might guide him to the Spirits..."

After a while she stated shortly: "It's OK."

He could not resist smiling faintly.

"Where're we?"

"We are in the shrine in the basement. All the other rooms down here are storage rooms, except this one."

She nodded and instantly pulled a face as the faint movement had triggered another wave of pain. Thus she closed her eyes for a moment to get rid of the pain but when she opened them up again she looked directly at the Silver Arc upon her nude chest and noticed for the first time that her shirt was missing and that her vest was partly opened, opened wide enough to let the base of her small breast show. Screwing up her eyes she looked at him again. "Where's my shirt," she snarled.

The undeniable aggressiveness of her snarl made his fur bristle and he turned his head away. "I am sorry I had to use it as a diversion. It had your smell and the absence of your smell would have been what my family would have noticed first."

"Y'know..." she hissed.

He gulped. "Yes, I know," he said lowly. "I know..." he whispered.

Although her dizziness and her headache she stood up from the bench. "So? What's next?"

"I..." Wheel fell silent. Suddenly his tail was as stiff as a metal bar. "I wanted..." He gulped and then inhaled sharply. "I want to suggest you another deal."

"Not interested," she said coldly, glaring at the wolf. "I just wanna 've the fifteen red stones you owe me, not 'nother rotten deal of yours."

While her refusal was still echoing in his ears the surprise he had felt at first left him and it seemed to him like it robbed him of every other feeling as well, left him behind empty and helpless. He felt like falling into the gaping hole of desperation he had luckily been walking alongside. But now this shady feline, this mysterious girl, this blasphemer, this traitor, this... She was his only hope ever to get Shannanah's love back again and before he had any time to reconsider his thoughts he had been walking over to the lynx girl and had laid his hand upon her shoulder. "Please..."

She shook his hand off.

This was too much for him. "Please, you are my only hope," he blurred out, hardly able to restrain his tears. "I... I don't know what to do anymore. It's... it's..." He gulped, hot tears flowed down his cheeks. "I am not selfishly asking you for help. It's about my cubs... They got to get away from here. They belong to their mother and I am..." Now he was no longer able to keep his voice in check as well and he started to whimper. "You are the only one whom I could ask. You are a roamer you know how to get along in the wilderness. You can't refuse it... I... My cubs are less than three months old, they do not deserve to die..."

She had not shown any emotion during his speech, nor did she seem to have been impressed by his emotions but when he had just finished the last sentence her ears twitched and her tail started wagging anxiously. "What're you talkin' 'bout?"

"The fight will... They said... The other clans will attack us! The priest told them that they..." Wheel blurt out.

"Who?" Jiddy interrupted him brutally. "Who're you talkin' 'bout?" She collared the bigger wolf and shook him in excitement. "The armadillo? Are you talkin' 'bout the armadillo?"

Tears flowed down his cheeks when he nodded weakly, making no attempt to free himself from her hold.

"Shit!" She let the wolf go and turned around, lost in her thoughts for a moment. Then she spun around again. "That's a trap!" She screwed up her eyes and approached him, looking deep into his lupine eyes. "Do y'get it?" Her rhombic pupils had narrowed, tiny spots in her eyes, much more animal than furry. Her glare seemed to pierce right through him.

Still shaking he gulped, sniffed and then forced himself to calm. He nodded. "Why..." He gulped again. "Why are you so sure?"

"This armadillo's told me somethin'. I don't remember. Somethin' 'bout ancestors and payback. He's used magic on me or drugged me or somethin'. I dunno. But I could feel it too: He was serious 'bout it," she mumbled.

Wheel nodded although he did not really understand what she said.

"Whatever he's up to and whatever jerk-offs you and your fuckin' family are: If y'got a chance to stop him..." She glared at him.

"What about my cubs?" he asked.

For a short instant her eyes narrowed even more, flashing hatred at him, her tail wagging strongly.

"Please! They belong to their mother. I do not even know what happens to them if their are not fed by her..."

"What's 'bout their mother?" she snarled impatiently.

"They..." For a moment he was frightened by her glare but then he remember the picture of Shannanah and thus something changed for him. "They abducted her," he heard himself say with an alien straightforwardness.

"Who?"

"My family," he whispered.

"What?" she almost cried out.

"They have separated us. They brought her to her hometown at the Silver Coast against her will..." His hand formed a fist and he rose his head and looked straight at the lynx girl. "She's my wife. We belong together. But most of all our cubs need her. You have to help! I am not experienced with the wilderness. You have to bring me to the Silver Coast for my children's sake." For a moment he was silent and now it was up to her to turn her face away. "Someone has to bring them to her... And you are the only one who could help me right now... Please..."

"Shut up!" she cried out. Her agitation had suddenly changed and she started to walk around inside the small room with powerful, angry steps, her paws closing to fists and reopening constantly.

"I...", he tried to say.

"Shut up!" she cried again, walking even faster. Her tail wagged as if she was about to hunt someone down and there was just one possible prey in sight...

They were quiet for a moment and the only sound was her strong breath and the noise of her feet on the ground.

"OK," she said lowly. "I'll do it. But it'll cost you!"

"When we get there I will give you whatever you want," he answered while he started to feel light and easy like never before. His relief was far beyond words, whatever might happen from now on, Rush and Shade would be safe and there was nothing else he desired.

Angrily she waved her hand. "I don't need any pittance," she grumbled.

Steel sat beneath the window and listened to the noises of the feast outside. He was impatient, because on one hand he was able to feel the strange tension everyone else was obviously feeling too, on the other hand the chatter of the people outside, the sounds of their drinking and eating was so tempting and peaceful that he was hardly able to believe that a fight was supposed to take place any time soon. But the cold metal of the shotgun in his hand was all that he needed to be reminded of his duties. He would have preferred guarding his cousin but now he had been designed to keep an eye from the office window as long as the party was going on outside. If there was any sign of the foxes or the deer he was supposed to pull the rope which was connected to the sticks which held the shutters open. Then most of the front windows would shut within an instant and the sawmill would transform into a small fortress. It had been built this way a long time ago and that it was still standing proved its steadiness. But in the end none wanted to harm it anyway because it was the heart of the town. The town would not be worth anything without the sawmill which was the only facility to cut the trunks within a very large area and its machines were almost irreplaceable. Maybe that was the reason why the other clans were envying the Nighthunters.

The wolf carefully peeped out of the corner of the window: There were just the people of the town, talking and eating. It had already gotten rather dark outside. In between the large trees which surrounded the village there was just a little light coming through and although the richly colored sky suggested that the sun

had not fully settled yet some people had already lit a few lamps. Of course the they were roasting the moakrens now and the light of the fire which burned brightly beneath the large animals. Usually the clan of the race's winner had to pay for the meat but of course, this year everything was different and Steel could not resist smirking a little bit. It still had to be decided who was paying what.

He licked his lips because he had seen a group of bears at one of the stands which were just about to empty their huge tankards of beer and just by watching Steel was getting thirsty as well.

Quickly he turned away and sat down beneath the window again. He folded his arms and tried not to think about it.

After some time the door opposite him opened very slowly and as quickly as he could Boulder slipped into the room, rushed over to Steel and sat down by his side. "What's up?" Wheel's father asked.

"Nothing as far as I have seen up to now," Steel responded, partly pulling a face.

"Any sign of them?" Boulder nervously eyed the window above.

"Not as far as I know, there is absolutely no fox, nor any fucking stag to be seen."

Boulder nodded and then turned around and looked cautiously out the window. "Yeah, none to be seen," he mumbled. "But that just means that they are preparing for something." And he sat down again.

"Seems like the priest was right," Steel mentioned.

The older man pushed his hat from his frowns. "Yeah, strange. As we'd ever heard anything than lies from this damn armadillo."

Steel nodded. "I really can't understand why you have accepted him for so long."

Boulder eyed him. "He's this town's priest," he exclaimed in surprise.

"Yeah, whatever..." And with a yawn he rubbed his eyes.

They kept silent for some time, just listened to the noises coming in from outside, the humming of the conversations, the droning of the fire where the giant birds were sizzling, the occasional cries of children, someone was playing a flute somewhere. Suddenly a larger group broke out in laughter.

"Seems like they are having a good time," Steel mentioned.

Boulder grimaced. "I would not want to swap places right now," he grunted.

Steel nodded. "I hope it is as quickly finished as last year."

"No," the older wolf replied coldly. "They will not make the same mistake twice. This time it's really them or us!"

They fell silent again.

In the meantime the entire sawmill had become quiet. There was not a single sound to be heard and thus the noises from outside sounded like they were all lost inside a very vast room. The sounds seemed to be strangely distant like they were not even real at all, maybe they were just the magical echoes of a feast which had happened a very long time ago.

Suddenly there was a change: It got all quiet for an instant and then there was something like a murmuring.

Instantly Boulder turned around and looked outside and his eyes went wide when he saw stags armed to the teeth, walking through the crowd which gave way to them. The metal of their rifles, swords, knives and axes glistened in the last rays of sunlight and then a single ray pierced into Boulder's eyes and he was just able to duck when the shot broke through the window.

"Shut the windows!" he shouted.

But Steel had already pulled the rope and with a slam all the windows of the first floor were blocked while the cries of the panic-stricken crowd echoed in their ears.

The wolf girl had retired to the opposite wall, trembling, holding the crying cubs as tightly as she could, she stared at Wheel in obvious terror.

Awkwardly Wheel got onto his feet and made a step forward. "Quill! You have to give me my cubs," he said, still panting hard.

The girl just stared at him and held the two small bundles even tighter. "Get away," she stammered.

"Quill, they need their father, they need their mother. Please give them to me," he said very slowly and approached the trembling girl a little bit more. He was a complete mess now that the splinters of the door hang in his fur. With his blood-shot eyes he looked at her and made another step forward.

"I warn you, Wheel," the wolf girl replied with a quivering voice. "Do not come closer!"

"I want my cubs!" Wheel hissed. He was trembling as well, nothing but a dark shape in dim light, his tail wagged excitedly.

"Wheel!" Quill stammered. "Do not come closer." And as quickly as she could she took the two cubs in one arm and grabbed a small gun from beneath her skirt. Trembling she aimed it at Wheel, pressing herself against the wall.

For a moment Wheel hesitated, exchanging looks between her and the gun in her hand. He gulped. "Please, Quill, I just want my cubs."

"Do not come closer!" she almost cried.

"Quill, please..."

"Stay back!" Her entire face was distorted, her lips quivered and beneath her cramped frowns her eyes shimmered.

"Rush and Shade need their father..."

"STAY AWAY!" she cried as loud as she could. Now tears were flowing down her cheeks and she was not even able to hold the gun straight anymore.

Wheel tried to look at her and she looked at him: Their eyes met and for a moment the girl tried to fight against his look but then she turned her head away, sobbing and trembling and her hand dropped down and she started crying.

Wheel cautiously went over to her and laid his paw upon her shoulder. "Thank you, Quill," he said lowly while he took his children out of her arms. "Thank you," he whispered.

The gun dropped to the ground and she covered her face with a paw and cried without end.

He dashed out the door, down the hallway and around the corner. For a moment he was confused because the lynx was nowhere to be seen but then a small feline shape stepped out of the shadow. "Let's get going," he said quickly and they run on, through the different hallways.

Shots seemed to be everywhere around the house, echoing all around, resonating inside the wooden building with deafening intensity. There were shouts and cries as well, angry and desperate ones, the whole sawmill seemed to drone with anxiousness and then shots broke through it just from below their feet and a massive explosion followed behind, almost sending them off the ground. The entire building seemed to rock, everything seemed to be thrown around, when they almost dropped to the floor after the shock wave had hit them. Rush and Shade were crying at the top of their small lungs, expressing the fear everyone felt and Wheel jumped to his feet just when he heard the collective triumphant cries of a large group of men and then there were even more shots as the ground beneath them seemed to erupt.

"Dear Spirits! They must have blown up the loading ramp," he mumbled.

A panic-stricken cry from one of the distant rooms pierced their ears and there was some kind of a rumbling noise

Wheel was getting pale, when he heard that. "Oh, Spirits! They have left the women all by themselves!" he stammered and then he stared at his cubs and at the lynx who was looking at him with strangely cold eyes, and then again to his cubs and to the feline again.

"Take them!" he shouted and laid the two small bundles into the arms of the surprised lynx who looked at the two canine babies in total amazement. "I have to help them!" Wheel stammered. "I'll join you later!" And then he was off, running down the corridor where the cries had been coming from.

It took him no time to find the room. Cries were coming out from behind the door and before he even knew himself he kicked the door open and dashed inside. He did not even have the time to notice the wide opened window or the three stags standing there. With a cry he crashed into them, threw them over and the third one was just able to cry out when he fell out the window. The second one was just able to grab the window ledge, hanging outside. The first one had been thrown to the ground and tried to stand up but Wheel was faster and jabbed him so strongly that he was thrown against the wall and collapsed to the ground.

The shot hit him from behind and the pain pierced into his side like it was suddenly set afire. He stumbled for a moment, turned his head in surprise to see two foxes which had been standing behind the door holding shotguns in their paws, aiming at him.

The shot hit him directly, ripped his flesh to pieces, blood jetted from him while the lead sunk into his body, a painful howl escaped his throat and then he was thrown over, dropping to the ground.

He heard the sounds of women screaming. It sounded like underwater. His hands were cramped around his ripped chest and belly and the pain was beyond his grasp. There was a rush, a flow, which carried him along, bathed him in pain and while he felt like his body writhed and bucked he was feeling disconnected

from it like an uninvolved observer. There was just this droning sound that carried him along, dissolved him. Sometimes he cried out when a new impression hit him then he was thrown upwards and he cried out at the top of his lungs, screaming while his mind was blown apart by the indescribable pain and then it subsided and a strange feeling of peace was taking over again while he tried to keep on breathing.

Everything that happened around him was nothing but a blur, like hidden behind a crimson curtain: There was a light brown flash passing by, screams, cries reached his ears, there were shots and everything fell apart, transformed into a mess of incomprehensible impressions, a whirl that tore him down. Everything went black and suddenly was back again, time raced by and paused, tearing bits off him.

After some time he could no longer measure he screamed again. The pain got insupportable, it tore him to pieces and it forced him back into this bleeding body of his that writhed on the ground. His voice gave up working but he went on screaming, burned alive by his wounds.

He did not notice that somebody got hold of him but when he fell backwards again, after the pain had subsided for a short instant, he was falling into that one's arms and was looking into a familiar face and with quivering lips, coughing up blood, he said: "Tell her... I... I... didn't know... and that... that I am sorry... I love her... I... love... her..." Suddenly he dropped down and then his entire body was thrown about by spasms, he breathed stertorously, the blood in his throat kept him from screaming, burning hot lights of pain shot through him, tore his mind apart...

Someone let him go and then there was a click and a shot.

It was pretty high above the ground and the roof was particularly slippery here but at least she did not have to care about light. When she stood on the wooden planks, the thick smoke swirling around her, the cries and shouts of battle coming from the front side of the building, the sound of shots, the hammering of steel upon steel, the blaze brightened her surroundings so much that she saw every small crack in the wood beneath her feet. She inhaled deeply and the smoke instantly filled her nostrils and lungs and triggered a wave of unwelcome memories as she recalled where she had smelled this specific scent before. To her sensible nose this smell was far more than just burned wood because this scent was mixed with uncountable others as well and the most terrifying of these was the unmistakable smell of burned fur.

The blaze had caused strong gusts of wind which swirled around her with increasing strength, let her hair flutter while she turned around to get an impression of what might happen on the other side of the building. But she was unable to percept anything visual but her pointed ears were able to recognize the sound of carnage she was supposed to know pretty well.

A small, weak hand at her chest moved and the wolf cub in her arms yawned and reminded her that she had to hurry.

She ducked her head and shoulders as much as possible while she approached the edge of the roof, a quick look indicated that there was none to be seen and before she had had any chance to worry about the height she had already jumped down, flew through the air and hit the ground so strongly that in this instant pain shot into her shinbone. But before it was able to influence her she was already running through the darkness, a shadow rushing through the blackness which reigned there because the sawmill screened off the light of the fires.

This part of the building which adjoined the forest directly had been made of solid stone without any openings in the wall. Maybe this was the reason why nobody had tried to enter the building by this side. But while she dashed through the night her skilled sense were still constantly alert.

Thus she had already noticed his movements long before he had been stepping out of the darkness.

“You stop...”

Before he had been able to end her feet already crashed into his vulpine face. She could almost feel like his bones gave in to the impact and a jet of blood sprayed over her feet when the man was hurled backwards and slammed on the ground. But she was already past the immobile fox, running on further towards the bright cleft in between the sawmill and the next house. It was something like a burning crevice as the light of the fires danced on the ground and before she reached it, she slammed herself against the wall and looked around the corner.

The blaze had taken control of most of the buildings in the town center now, men ran around, weapons in their paws, she saw many antlers and the fluffy tails of vulpines as they rushed by. Suddenly one of them seemed to stumbled and fell down but the sound of the shot which had burst through his chest just reached her later when the reflections of the flames were already dancing in a pool of blood. Like merciless thunder the noise of many guns pierced the night and suddenly the powerful attack stopped as everyone was trying to get a cover. Cries of the wounded drowned out the droning of the fire.

When the smell of blood reached her nose, she could instantly feel its force of attraction on her. The iron fragrance tickled in her nose and cast everything in its way aside while it rose directly into her head. Her muscles twitched in response, her features hardened and she screwed up her slanting eyes until they were mere slits in her face. She bared her sharp predator's teeth and an instinctive growl left her throat while her heart started to race, pumping blood into her veins until she was no longer seeing anything but a blurred red.

It was another weak whimper which brought her back and for a second she stared at the two lupine babies in her arms with total confusion, unable to explain to herself how they had gotten there. But when she recalled again and there was nothing which could have hold her back anymore. She did not even feel her injuries anymore when she raced off again, no longer worrying about the dying men which battled against each other beneath the burning, twisted oak in the middle of the town's center. But this short moment had released her remaining strength and when she dashed off she was fuelled by a fire inside which she had rarely felt in a moment of consciousness.

Before she understood it herself she transformed into a racing shadow which rushed by the backside of burning houses, shortly she noticed a group of fighting men in between the next houses she passed by and she was certain to hear a shot which was fired at her but she did not stop. Mud sprayed around her feet when they hit the ground, the noise of the battle was deafening but she was no longer aware of that. A bullet shot past, another one and her lynx eyes perceived the two men in front of her which were about to load their old-fashioned guns again, slowly the two man, still too far from her, rose their arms again, the barrels pointed at her while the men lowered their heads to aim at her and then a moment of silence followed while they locked on their target. Then she was off the ground and for a very short instant she feared that she had miscalculated the distance, being too far from them. The two men had no time to pull their weapons upwards, to aim at the flying lynx and for a moment they just stared at the furr who seemed to fly over to them, their jaws dropped down in disbelief and then she was already above them and let her feet kick right into the first one's chest. Something broke when she landed hard on him and the man was on the ground but she was already off again, her entire body spun around while her leg pierced the air and with the whole power of her momentum her feet hit the much bigger stag in his face and threw him over. He seemed to fall in slow-motion compared to the speed with which she was stopping her spin and ran off again. The second stag did not touch the ground until the lynx was nowhere to be seen anymore.

Covering some distance to the square the noise was partly fading and the shots rather sounded like distant thunder than gunfire. But the cries and shots, the painful howling and the battle cries could not been misunderstood. The poorer houses (which did not belong to the clans' families) she approached now seemed to be completely lifeless although her instincts told her that somewhere in the darkest corner of these poor huts a family was hiding, hoping that this fight would not reach them, hoping that the knife and clubs they had found would be sufficient if they were less lucky. Of course, no one paid any attention to these families, they were not worth worrying about and maybe this was the only reason why they were not involved in this fight. They heard it, they knew, they had to know about the battle but it did not matter to them which one of the clans was in charge, it made no difference and thus they did not want to get involved with the clans' business. None wanted to! In a situation like this it was a death sentence.

She did not understand it until she stood in front of the house of Mlala's family and wondered why the door was opened...

Breathing hard, her legs ached, every limb seemed to be sore and her wounds hurt again, she stood in the door frame of the poor hut at the very edge of the town and her lynx eyes illuminated the twilight inside with merciless clarity. She had not cared about the smell first, pushed it aside as a reminiscence of the battlefield, but then she had run to the door, her tail wagging frantically, her ears twitching, her lips quivering and when she had looked inside something inside her had broken, a strange strength had suddenly taken control of her, had

hardened her features and had stopped her racing heart which had skipped a beat when she had perceived the corpses on the floor.

Mlala lay closest to the door, face downward in a pool of blood. A hunting knife lay close to him, it had been no use against the bullets which had exploded in his chest. His father lay on the table, his blind eyes stared to the ceiling. There was nothing but a single bullet wound on his forehead. His right hand was cramped around a small piece of reddish cloth and this cloth belonged to Enja's dress. The girl sat on the wall, her face was strangely peaceful, her eyes closed but her head leaned against the wall in a terrifying manner: Her throat was cut, it did no longer support the weight of the head and the blood of the girl had flowed down her side, stuck to her light brown fur and her poor dress, even her hair was full of blood.

Jiddy stared at the dead lynx, unable to move, even unable to think. She did not feel anything, it seemed like every single limb of hers had gone numb. There was nothing but the sound of her blood rushing in her ears. But while she stood there the scent of blood rose into her nose and enveloped her mind, swirled inside her like an iron butterfly which brushed her with its wings of death. A shower of memories flowed over her but before it had started she already saw Mlala, Enja and their father again, unable to ignore the dead and before she understood herself she was growling, a painful noise which echoed through the small hut as an instinctive but honest lamentation and when she ran out of air and the sound died away. A murderous sparkle lit in the emptiness inside her, it spread into her blood and for a moment it seemed as if the the painful desperation was replaced by uncontrollable fury but then felt the faint breathes of the two cubs at her chest again and she knew this was no time for mourning.

Although whoever had committed these murders had searched the small hut, they had forgotten the hayloft and thus her back pack was still lying there, like nothing had happened. As quickly as possible she took it up, shouldered it and climbed down the ladder again, picked up the cubs she had shortly put down on the table and then she let her eyes wander over the three dead lynx for one last time. She hesitated.

Quickly she grabbed the only oil lamp which stood on the table and ran outside. She stopped some steps from the wooden house, put the cubs down for a moment and then lightened the lamp with a fast movement. When the wick burned brightly she hurled the ceramic container back inside. It shattered on the opposite wall and instantly the oil was spilled all around and was set afire, the wood caught fire and in a matter of an instant the inside was burning brightly while she already picked the two lupine babies up, turned around and walked away, right into the forest. Meanwhile the flames were already shooting out of the door, smoke billowed upwards into the night sky where it mixed with the smoke of the battlefield in a single cloud of death which lingered above the small settlement.

Searcher slammed against the crate and the sharp edge pierced into his shoulder. He screamed when the stag forced him against the wood and the corner dug deeper into his flesh.

“Got ya, dog!” the stag hissed.

But before the stag was able to move again Searcher’s jaw closed around his arm and the sharp canine teeth were buried in the muscles and the deer screamed while blood flowed around the wolf’s tongue and the stag let him go, stumbling backwards, holding his bleeding arm and then Searcher was up on his feet again and he threw his fist around and hit his opponent’s chin from below and this one fell to the ground and lay motionlessly there.

But Searcher had already moved on and grabbed the deer’s rifle and he ran over to the other side of the storage room where the other stag was kneeling, burying his knife in a screaming wolf’s body again and again.

Thunder heard just a click.

“Don’t even blink!” Searcher hissed.

Thunder’s bell rang slightly but then the stag could feel the cold metal of the barrel at his head. He gulped and raised his paws. The knife dropped to the ground.

Beneath the stag Chimes was just shivering, he was no longer able to cry, bathing in his own blood he stared at the deer above him in total shock, unable to grasp anything but the pain. His eyes were unnaturally wide opened while there was coming something out of his throat, a trembling, sobbing sound, just interrupted when he coughed blood.

“Seems like ya little plan to blow up the ramp was no success, eh?” Searcher sniffed, his nose was bleeding but he did not mind. “Get off!”

Very carefully Thunder rose from Chimes, holding his paws up.

There were a few shots on the other side of the storage room, yells and then something was collapsing and then all of a sudden almost everything got silent.

“Seems like the roof could not take that much damage,” Searcher noticed and tried to scrutinize the stag’s face: It was cold and expressionless.

“Hey! Over there!” Steel was running past the crates, a gun in his paws and two other wolves followed him after. They were covered in dust and debris, hardly recognizable anymore, as they had just witnessed the collapsing of the roof. When Steel saw his cousin on the ground he run over to then and instantly kneeled down.

“Dear Spirits!” he gasped, grabbing Chimes’ paw and when he looked up his face showed nothing but terror. “Who did this?” he was just able to gasp.

“You may thank our dear Thunder here,” Searcher hissed.

Steel looked up at the stag and his eyes reduced to mere, flashing slits. “If he does not survive this I will make you pay I swear!”

Thunder showed no emotion.

Steel leaned over Chimes and whispered something to him and with his dirty paw he stroke the quivering wolf almost gently, trying to calm him but then all of a sudden Chimes bucked and then he screamed at the top of his lungs. It pierced

through the entire large room and cut into their ears but then he fell down again and lost consciousness.

Steel was trembling, breathing strongly and then he jumped to his feet and grabbed Thunder.

“Hey!” Searcher was just able to cry.

“Okay!” Steel hissed at the stag. He had grabbed him by the collar and forced him backwards. “We can finish this right here and now!” And then with a growl his mouth opened and exposed the sharp line of teeth and he pushed the stag down and instantly he was above him, his teeth piercing into the skin of the deer’s neck. His hot breath flowed around the pulsing flesh.

Searcher paw lowered onto his shoulder. “Don’t! He is much more valuable as a prisoner.”

Steel could feel Thunder’s instinctive fear although the stag tried to control himself but the wolf could smell it and most of all he could feel the fast pulse of the blood between his teeth.

“Don’t,” Searcher said again.

Slowly Steel stood up again. He was still trembling and his eyes flashed hatred at the stag who was daring to face his glare but did not express anything at all.

“Help the others to get Chimes up to the women. They might help him. I’ll bring this one to the front.” Searcher held his rifle at the stag again and made him a sign to stand up while Steel was walking over to the two other wolves who were trying to lift up the unconscious Chimes.

There was a series of shots from the front and then there was a bang like from a muffled explosion and instantly Steel’s and Searcher’s eyes met. The creaking sound of cracking wood reached them.

“They wouldn’t dare,” Steel gasped.

Searcher was speechless.

“They are burning down the house?” Steel gasped in disbelief.

Searcher gulped. “Let’s hurry!” He turned around and noticed a faint smile on Thunder’s lips. He took his rifle in both paws again. “If we are going to burn you will die with us,” he hissed and then gave the stag a sign to get going.

They walked through the darkened corridors which resonated with the echo of the shots, cries and screams.

Long before they reached the offices they could already hear the yells of the wolves which cried out for ammunition, for water, for help and for reinforcement. But the noises of the fight almost drowned all this out, it sounded like a torrent that swept away everything and when Searcher pushed the door open smoke instantly surrounded them as half of the room was afire while two younger wolves were doing their best to get this under control while the men were defending the sawmill. They leaned against the wall next to the windows, hid behind temporary barricades which blocked the windows, shooting whenever possible. They cried out orders, almost unable to deal with all the action and the sulfurous smoke of the gunpowder stitched in the eyes of the two newcomers.

For a moment Searcher was totally lost and looked around in confusion. He was barely able to recognize the members of his family among these.

“DUCK!” Someone cried and the wolf and the stag were on the ground even before they had really understood what to do. But it was just in time because the whole window closest to them exploded in a blast, the debris shoot around them and the deafening crash ringed in their ears but the fighting men were already up again and shot with all what they had. There were Trunk and Steady Vane fighting side by side, the hair fluttered in the gust caused by the fire and they shot and shot at whatever got into their sight. Steady Vane had a wound at his shoulder but he did not even seem to notice.

“Get up!” Searcher yelled at Thunder, trying to drown out the noise of the battle and clumsily the stag got on his feet and the wolf led him on to the opposite end of the offices while they tried to evade the bullets which got in through the windows. But finally they reached a door and Searcher pushed it open and forced the stag inside.

Searcher stood still.

The stillness in the room was overwhelming, it seemed to make all the noise from the outside disappear as did the light of the few candles which were so unlike the explosions and the blaze outside this one.

For a moment Searcher was confused, looked at the three wolves which kneeled on the ground and then he perceived the body between them and the only thing he could do was gasp. Every drop of blood disappeared from his head and for a moment he could feel like he was about to crack. His vision was blurred, the sounds were nothing but a muffled drone but every heartbeat of his was close to crush his skull as it hammered inside his veins with unknown strength.

Even Thunder had gone pale and did not even dare to move.

In between Trunk, Boulder and Grampa lay Big Wheel. He was hardly recognizable anymore as shotguns had ripped his chest and his stomach apart. Except for these there was a small wound right at his temple, the entry of the bullet that had killed him. He lay there and even though his indescribable wounds his face expressed a strange tranquillity like he was asleep, dreaming of something beautiful.

Grampa stood up. Unlike Boulder who had obviously been crying, the old wolf did not show anything like that. Instead his face was absolutely cramped so that even the smallest wrinkle of his features looked like a crevice. He trembled, very lightly but he did and when he walked closer he bared his sharp lupine teeth. “Somebody...” he hissed. “SOMEBODY IS GOING TO Pay for this!” And his voice cracked and it sounded like a whimper for a short moment but then with unexpected speed he had dashed over to Searcher and had torn the rifle out of his hands, aiming at the surprised stag.

“NO!” Searcher cried.

“Stop the fire!” Although his voice was anything but very strong anymore, hoarse due to his constant shouting, it had still the necessary strength to reach every single pair of ears of his subordinates, as well as the right tone of his authority so that everyone was sure that this command was coming from him.

Instantly the guns stopped and despite the fire from the other side of the square, everyone obeyed.

Three shapes broke free from the smoke, stumbling forward, coughing, the clouds swirled around them like they were burning themselves but finally they left them behind, bullets passing by their cramped bodies and finally the foxes reached the barricades and their comrades helped them to get over them. Being dragged to safety they simply collapsed.

The fox with the swirling blue headband around his head dashed over to them and kneeled down by their side. "What's going on inside?" Hoarde asked without any delay.

The fox coughed, trying to catch his breath. His leather clothing was ripped apart and several, light cuts disfigured his juvenile body. The crimson of blood mixed with the red of his fur. "Xuedoo is down, Barryt, Jolt and Kinshi are trapped in an office. We couldn't reach them anymore. We..." He coughed hard, then inhaled sharply, making an unpleasant whistling noise. "...we had to get out. The stags are trying to get a hold at the engine room but it doesn't look good either. We've underestimated them..."

"What the hell do you say?" Hoarde cried out. "We've damn underestimate nothing at all! This is simply not possible..."

"What do you say?" The fox, his young nephew, cried out, virtually losing control. His eyes were widened in terror of what he had seen inside and his enraged uncle was nothing which could frighten him. Not anymore. Despite his exhaustion he suddenly got the strength to sit up. "That's a damn carnage inside!"

The older man collared the younger fox and shook him violently. "This can't be a carnage! This is not possible!" He cried so loud that he drowned out the noise of the ongoing battle and around them everything was getting completely silent as the foxes on the barricade suddenly looked at him. But he did not notice that. "They are not supposed to endure so long! They should not have so many weapons! The priest told us that..." Suddenly he fell silent, staring at the bleeding younger fox with eyes opened wide as his words had triggered a thought which was implying that... "Oh, dear Spirits," he gasped.

The younger fox gulped and eyed his uncle who seemed to lose the strength which had kept him standing. The strong paws dropped down from the collar and Hoarde was stumbling for an instant. Some relative at his side tried to help him but the man was not even trying to stand up. "They knew we were coming..." he whispered. "They knew it..."

All the foxes stared at their powerless leader, the man who had led the clan for their good, the man everyone respected because of his capacities. Now he was just kneeling on the ground and he seemed just to be an old man. His blue headband was hanging lifelessly around his head.

"Retreat!" he whispered. "Get everyone to safety and protect the retreat!"

Wordlessly they looked at him for a moment but they got back on their positions on the barricade while some of them cried out the news, trying to gather all the fighting men.

Hoarde covered his face with his hands. "How many?" he lowly asked his nephew.

The young fox wet his lips. "Four," he mumbled. "Five if Cutlar does not get through the night..."

A shot close by made the old fox start. "Five," he gasped. "Five..."

The young fox lowered his head, unable to support the sight of this powerless man in front of him.

Suddenly Hoarde pulled himself together and while the young fox was observing him in surprise he was standing up. "Get me Blizzard! We need to talk!"

Although his many wounds and his exhaustion his nephew did not hesitate, quickly stood up, nodded shortly at his uncle and dashed off as fast as he was able to.

With a sigh Hoarde turned around to the barricade. "Who's left?" he cried at his cousin.

"Seems like everyone is here except Barryt, Jolt, Kinshi and Newl," the man answered, never leaving the sawmill opposite of their reinforcements from his eyes.

There was nobody shooting at their position anymore. Even the wolves on the other side had stopped as they had to have noticed that the foxes had stopped their attack. Nevertheless the men did not lower their guard, despite their exhaustion and their tiredness of the meaningless fight. The smoke of the burning houses swirled around them, the fires had transformed the night inside the town into day. There were small fires everywhere but mainly the second floor of the sawmill was now burning brightly and the deadly light was reflected in their shivering eyes as they listened to the shots which came from the other end of the long drawn building.

Hoarde stared at the building with his eyes screwed up, chewing at his lips.

"Uncle?"

He turned around.

His nephew stood at his side, heavily panting. "He's here!" he said shortly.

The older fox gently pat on his shoulder. "Get yourself a rest, Stat and tell the others to take care of the fires. We've already lost enough..."

Stat nodded and then slowly walked away, past the old, burning oak.

Hoarde looked after him for a moment, then made a sign to his cousin close by to join him and as quickly as this one was able to, he climbed down the barricade, his gun at his side and joined his clan leader as well as two other foxes. Then they turned around and walked over to the end of the barricade where three stags were already anticipating them. In the dim twilight of the blazes the three men seemed to be even larger than usual. With their antlers they were certainly double the size of an ordinary fox but now in their bloody, ragged clothes the pride they usually displayed was totally lost.

Hoarde walked right over to the huge, white furred stag with an impressive, twelve pointed antler. His clothes of red velvet, his small beard and his harsh face would have usually given him an almost majestic appearance. But even him had

not been spared the traces of the battle. "What the hell does this mean, Hoarde?" he cried out with a ringing, deep voice as soon as he saw the fox coming over. "Why have you ceased fire?"

The fox did not let himself be intimidated by the visible rage of the much bigger stag and did not speak until he was standing in front of him. "We will not go on with this slaughter," he said simply.

"WHAT?" The stag cried as loud as he could. The short word contained rage, anger and fury as well as something different which made his voice tremble slightly, something Hoarde would have named desperation and restrained grief.

"Blizzard, four men of my clan are already dead and one more will possibly not see the dawn." He sighed. "This is useless!"

"THE NIGHTHUNTERS WILL NOT GET AWAY WITH THIS!" the stag cried. His cramped face quivered, his limbs trembled, his veins were poking out from beneath his fur and now there was no misunderstanding anymore: The old, once proud stag was at the limit of his capacities, slowly losing control.

"They knew about our attack, Blizzard," Hoarde said weakly. "There's no way for us to get inside without burning the whole sawmill down. And what would that be good for...?"

"I WILL NOT ALLOW THAT!" Blizzard cried in pain. "I WILL CRUSH THEM! I WILL..." Suddenly he fell silent and the two stags at his side eyed him anxiously and then the strong, proud stag burst out crying, tears welled up from his eyes and the huge figure collapsed to a whimpering bundle of trembling fur.

Quickly one of the stags at his side took hold of the old man and hold him while the foxes watched this strange incident with total amazement except Hoarde who did not even blink. "What happened, Drought?" he asked one of the stags.

The huge figure gulped. "Thunder is dead," he said shortly.

For a moment everyone was silent and when a shot broke the silence they all jerked unwillingly.

"I am offering you my condolences." Hoarde gulped. He had a bad taste in his mouth as he was considering one moment what it had meant for him if anything had happened to Fistle.

Slowly Blizzard was led away by the stag at his side and the foxes watched in silence. Just Drought stayed behind, but he did not speak on as he looked after his older brother too. After some time he turned around to Hoarde again. "What now?"

The fox sighed. "I suggest that you retreat as well. We will reinforce our positions and make sure that no wolf gets out while we try to find a solution. This night won't get us anywhere anymore..."

Drought nodded slowly. "OK! But I won't let the wolves get away..."

"Who said anything about that?" the fox interrupted him violently. "Nobody kills four Nickel! NOBODY!"

"Then we agree about that," Drought said.

"There's one more thing," Hoarde said. As he had already partly recovered from his tiredness, it now seemed like he gathered the last parts he had lacked.

"It seems like the dear *Reverend Nsimese*..." He hissed the name. "...has lured all of us into this situation. We have to get rid of this treacherous armadillo once and forever!"

Drought nodded. "You can count on us and what concerns the Nighthunters... Maybe I have an idea..."

Hoarde pricked up his ears. "What?"

"Two of us who guarded the backside of the sawmill have been attacked by some lynx. And they say..." As soon as he had mentioned the lynx the foxes were virtually hanging on his every word but now they were virtually trembling in anticipation. "...he had been carrying Wheel's cubs."

Hoarde screwed up his eyes. For an instant his face displayed disbelief but as Drought seemed to have no intention to correct himself, the fox was beginning to understand what an opportunity he was offered. "We need a hunting party," he blurred out.

The stag nodded and slowly he started to smile. "I guess we get the Nighthunters anyway..."

Hoarde started smiling too. "Certainly," he agreed. "I have just one request: Let us handle the lynx! We still got a score to settle."

"Do whatever you wish..." And he hold out his hand which Hoarde shook willingly.

Meanwhile the shots in the distance had subsided and there was now a dangerous silence gaining hold of the two while the foxes and stags started to reinforce their positions. Few men remained on the barricades while the others took care of the fires which still illuminated everything even though there was already some reddish shimmer visible on the horizon which looked like there was another battle ravaging somewhere far away. Meanwhile some of the men readied their weapons and started to prepare for a hunt.

The fox eyed the stag.

This one slowly turned around and undid his gun. "What's up?"

Stat screwed up his eyes as he was partly blinded by the bright rays of dawn which pierced through the foliage of the forest around them and which illuminated their surroundings: The low incline of a mountain, mainly overgrown by firs but as well as some other trees. Fresh dew dripped from the leaves and needles while the last rags of early morning mist died away in the sunlight. Birds chirped and this was the only noise except the sounds of the six men.

"I said: *Nobody* walks ahead! Not even you!" the fox snarled at the much bigger stag.

The red furred deer smiled scornfully. "Gimme a reason why I have to take orders from a *fox*," he asked with a big grin and shook the gun in his hand.

"Maybe because we've got a mission to fulfil and maybe I am the leading scout..." Stat hissed. "...and maybe because you're too stupid to do this on your own!"

For a moment the stag was ready to ambush the smaller vulpine who would not have had any chance to escape his antlers in such a short distance.

“Skyfire!” The huge stag with the ten pointed antlers walked over to them and laid his hand on the shoulder of his enraged relative. “He’s the scout...”

For a moment rage was still ravaging throughout his face, as he chewed upon his own teeth, his eyes flashed with hatred but then he just glared at the fox another time, shook off the other stag’s hand and walked away.

“Thank you!” Stat said without any kindness and then kneeled down again to scrutinize the tracks on the muddy ground again.

The other men, three stags and two other foxes, observed him in silence from a certain distance.

He needed a certain amount of time to distinguish the different marks and signs, the broken branches on the ground, the trampled grass, the wet leaves. The loose end of the bandage around his head fell to the ground and quickly soaked with muddy water when he fully kneeled down and sniffed at whatever he had found. “Yes,” he hissed and quickly stood up again. “Here we got him again. Seems like he’s not that good at all.”

“Why the hell do you need so long?” Ice, the stag with the ten pointed antler, asked impatiently.

Stat turned around. “Would you have seen any track here at all?” He waved his hand around.

The male deer kept silent.

Stat walked slowly over to him, glaring up to his eyes. “I want to get this lynx and the cubs just like you,” he hissed. “But we’re not dealing with a bloody beginner. Whoever this lynx is, he knows how to hide a track. But he’s not that good. Not good enough for me, that’s for sure!” He was now standing right in front of Ice and faced him directly. “But better than you!”

The stag did not move, nor displayed any other reaction, proofing the rightness of his name. “Then what are we waiting for?” he asked coldly.

Stat nodded slowly. “Damn right!” He turned around and gave a sign to his fellow foxes. “Let’s go!”

Stat walked first, the three stags right behind him and the two other foxes were the rearguard when they walked by a low rock face which left no choice for a way but going left or right. They walked right, breaking through the small, young firs which grew at the rock face’s edge until they finally reached its end and then started to climb the low mountain again, passing by large boulders, old firs and many trunks of fallen trees. Stat led them after some trail which was invisible for anyone but him. He was the only one of the small group who saw the faint indications, the broken branches at the trees, the leaves pressed deeper into the ground than the others around them, the missing dew on the fern as somebody had shaken it off while passing by, as well as all the other, almost non-existent hints. His two fellow foxes, Shaperd and Rabb, were scouts too but they lacked most of his experience and were just some kind of a backup for him, because they were mainly pretty good fighters (if the stags would prove to be any trouble). As far as Stat was able to judge the three male deer, Skyfire, Ice and Cumulus, he

was sure they possessed no scouting skills at all. After all they were supposed to capture their prey once he had tracked it down.

A smile flitted over the vulpine's bandaged face. There was no way to run from him, despite the lynx' visible attempts to hide his trail. After all the fox already had gotten a taste for him.

The track led up into the first hills of the Blue Ridge Mountain. The lynx seemed to be heading north-west, which would lead him deeper and deeper into the Blue Ridge while the terrain slowly became much more of a mountainside with every step he made.

The even, muddy, sometimes even swampy ground which dominated the area of the pass where the settlement had been installed gave way to a rocky and much more unstable ground while the low and gnarled, broad-leaved and coniferous trees were cast aside by large, upright firs and redwoods as well a few slender birches and Bershel trees. Nevertheless the hillsides offered good places for thick undergrowth too and thus lush bushes and many younger firs grew all around, offering few space to walk freely until the next boulder would block the way and forced one to find a way around it.

Stat sometimes lowered himself and sniffed closer to the ground. His kind might not be as good trackers as most other canines were, but Stat had developed his sense as much as he could and now he surpassed most wolves by far. Thus a short sniff was all that he needed to confirm that they were on the right way. First it had just been a suspicion (maybe a hope as well) but with the time he was sure that they did get closer to the lynx who seemed to be hindered by the cubs and whatever he carried along as well. However they were approaching him, very slowly indeed, but it was good enough to make Stat confident that they could capture him before dusk.

After some time the lynx must have changed his direction slightly. Obviously he had been climbing the hillside for the first time but then he changed his direction to west and went on along the hillside which would still be a detour if he wanted to gain the Silver Coast in the west but less demanding than going deeper into the Blue Ridge, of course.

From time to time Stat had to check for additional signs. Then he was busy eyeing the ground and looked for broken branches in the surroundings until he had found something that confirmed that they were not just following some fooling scent of an animal or such. The fox was rather surprised by the fact that the lynx left almost no footprints behind. Just very rarely there was the outline of a feline foot (strangely the lynx seemed to wear no boots) visible somewhere in the mud, but basically he seemed to be so nimble that it was quite some task for Stat to find any trace at all, although the lynx seemed to become much more careless with hiding his track. Sometimes he even found an obvious footprint in the muddy earth and this confirmed that the lynx was not making any attempt to hide his trail anymore. Nevertheless the mere fact that the lynx was leaving behind so few signs at all was remarkable. It seemed to Stat that hiding his trail had become a second nature to the feline which was yet another proof that they were not dealing with an amateur at all.

Stat smiled for himself: It was a real challenge for him and he was much more than just willing to accept it. He could already feel this special excitement that overcame him every time he was hunting a worthy prey and this lynx was as worthy as any prey could be. Unconsciously he accelerated and the others who followed had to catch up with him but they did so willingly.

Ice was the one who followed right after Stat and whenever the fox stopped he eyed the fox' investigations curiously because he was amazed by this one's abilities although he would never had admitted that publicly. But quickly the stag was infected with the hunting fever too and he took his rifle from his back and readied it just in case something would get into their sight. He turned it in his sweating hands and followed Stat as closely as possible.

They were almost running now. Stat was getting more and more anxious, he could feel the excitement like a sparkle beneath his skin and his heart throbbed strongly in his chest whenever he found another sign of the lynx' trail.

They broke through the trees, guided by their prey. Ran down the hillsides, jumped over the small rivulets and climbed the hills on the other side as quickly as they could. They were no longer paying attention to hide their presence. The foxes were already able to smell the feline scent which had gotten stronger and stronger and the faster they became the more intense the scent became too. It guided them and at the same time thrilled them beyond description. It seemed like they were linked with the lynx now and they were just pulling at the string that connected them until their target would finally get in sight. And the stags were just responding to that and ran on with the rest, feeling the strange attraction as well that had taken hold of their hearts and made them walk on with all their speed. Their instincts responded to their collective hunting fever and the thought of defending their families' honor just added to that. The lynx was theirs and the cubs too. They did no longer doubt that. They were too close now.

They were footprints on the ground and Stat did not even have to examine: They were wide apart, each step at least three feet from the one before, deeply pressed into the ground. The lynx was running. He was fleeing from them and Stat's heart hammered even stronger as he was convinced to smell the sweat of fear the lynx left behind. And he accelerated even more.

"He knows we are after him," Stat yelled, his eyes flashing.

"What's so damn funny about that?" Skyfire asked coldly from behind.

"He's making mistakes and if we don't botch it up now, he's ours." And he grinned, exposing his sharp teeth while the forest rushed by them.

She knew they were after her and she ran through the undergrowth as fast as she could. Sometimes one of the cubs whimpered but this was really not the time to care about that. Her heart raced and she was exhausted by her long walk but she could neither care about that. There was nothing but a single thought in her mind: Flee!

The branches slapped into her face, the stones cut into her feet and the backpack pulled heavily on her but she just ran on, slightly bowed down so that

the two wolf babies would not get hurt when she jumped over yet another trunk and the stiff branches of a fir hit her, its needles pinching into her skin, the wood tearing at her clothes and getting hold of her backpack so that she was almost torn backwards because of it but she broke free within an instant. The crack of the wood had to be audible for miles and she knew that there was no chance of hiding anymore. Whoever was after her had already not fallen for any attempts of hiding her trail so he would not fall for yet another attempt of that. The only chance she had now was to outrun him, although her exhaustion and her aching limbs.

But she just screwed up her eyes, gritted her teeth and broke through a line of trees and ran down a slope with few undergrowth almost free of bushes which would have slowed her down but then she already jumped over a boulder and found herself right in between young trees again and she had to fight a way through. But she did not have a choice and she knew that. She had seen what they had done in the village. They would not have mercy with a single lynx. They would not have mercy with a single *girl*. She gritted her teeth.

And then there it was: It was not really a smell, but rather a feeling. But the wind had suddenly changed and a gust between the trunks had carried along some scent, too faint to be classified, but strong enough not to get unnoticed and she understood that time was running out on her. They were fast, they had covered much more distance than before as they had never had been close enough to catch up with her up to now. But now they had to be right behind her.

She gritted her teeth until her jaw ached and with a rattling breath she dashed on, releasing her last remains of strength and she jetted forward not even perceiving her surroundings anymore. Her legs hurt whenever she moved them, it was like a drone of pain inside her head. But she did not feel that anymore. There was nothing but this vanishing point in front of her, something she had to reach, something that escaped her all the time.

Her growls transformed into a hoarse, powerless cry when she threw herself against yet another line of young trees. The wood broke around her, surrounded her and she struggled to get through and in this moment she heard the crying of the two cubs for the first time. It was very weak but she heard it nevertheless and then her feet hit the ground again and she dashed forward, jumped down a boulder, slammed against a trunk and stumbled forward, heavily panting, unable to catch her breath and when she turned around to run on her eyes widened as she stood right in front of a small rock face.

She could get up there! But not with the two babies.

She spun around and looked to the other side: She had jumped right into this hollow which ended with the rock face she had been looking at and its entry was up the hill and there were some noises coming down from there.

She gulped and then even before she knew what she did she jumped in between a small group of thickly growing young firs next to the rocks and she pressed herself against the cold stone, panting, sometimes coughing. Sweat dropped from her frowns and it took her some time to notice the faint cries of the cubs in her arms.

She dropped down and pressed them against herself. “Shhhhh... Shhhhhh...” But it was futile to appease the two small wolves which were quivering and weakly trying to free themselves from her.

“Please... Please...” she whispered. She knew that these cries were loud enough to attract her pursuers and she trembled as she knew what was about to come. She was hardly able to hold herself back anymore and the only thing that kept her here were these two helpless babies.

“Shhhh..., please, don’t...” And something like a sob mixed with her words while she pressed her face against the two cubs inhaling their scent with every breath she took: A sweet fragrance like hay in autumn. It made her quiver and she pressed her eyelids down as she felt like something gathered behind them and a sob escaped her throat and she hold the cubs as tightly as she could while those cried on because even they could feel that something was terribly wrong.

There were birds crying up in the trees and the cracking of wood was getting closer.

With a powerful movement she tore her shirt apart and before she knew what she did she held the cubs against her breast and when she felt the two small paws reaching out for the fur of her chest she could not longer hold her tears back and she cried tonelessly while the two babies started nuzzling her breasts.

“Sh!” The fox threw his hand around and instantly the five others stopped.

He was panting strongly and his instincts cried at him to run on, to ambush his prey, to overcome him before he even had had a chance to flee on. But he had to keep control. He could not allow himself to make any mistakes now and thus he had to calm down, keep his cool head until they got him.

“Why are you stopping?” Skyfire hissed aggressively. The huge stag was trembling with fever.

Stat’s ears flicked when he sniffed several times. “He’s here!” he growled with satisfaction.

Instantly the stags put down their rifles and the two other foxes took out their weapons too.

As silently as possible Ice approached the scout. “Where?” he whispered.

“Dunno!” Stat replied, still panting slightly. “But definitely in this hollow.”

Ice nodded and then gave Cumulus a sign that he should guard the exit. Cumulus just nodded and instantly disappeared behind a trunk.

Then Stat gave them the sign to walk on.

As stealthily as they were able to they went on, descending into the small hollow which was just limited by a rather low but steep rock face. Their feet barely touched the ground and the leaves did not even seem to rustle when they put their boots down after a step. Skilfully they evaded every single loose branch like the good hunters they were supposed to be. They walked on, step by step, carefully eyeing everything, listening to the faintest noise which might have revealed their prey. The rifles in their paws were constantly searching for a target, never resting while they walked on.

Now everyone could smell the feline. It was undeniable. But his scent seemed to be everywhere, it lingered all over the hollow and thus they lacked a precise direction. It fooled them but it also thrilled them again. Although they tried to be calm, their senses were so sharp now that the scent was making them restless again.

As carefully as they were able to, they went on, past the larger trunks, through small groups of younger trees, over the small boulders and the fern which grew here and there. Their eyes shimmered and glistened as they were looking everywhere and it was certain that the lynx could not get past them unnoticed.

Ice caught up with Stat. "Where is he?" His voice was hardly audible. But his eyes flashed with excitement.

"Close!" Stat replied anxiously. "Very close!"

The growl made them stop: It was deep and very, very low and transformed into a snarl which displayed no fear but quite the contrary. The men's blood run cold. This was a direct attack at the feverish strength they had gathered during their hunt and this snarl had been enough to drive it away in an instant. What could possibly dare to challenge them? It left them behind in a void of doubt and for an instant none of them knew what to do.

"What was that?" Ice hissed.

Instinctively the five men had gotten closer to one another, standing almost back to back, eyeing the boulders and young trees and all that was there around them, searching for something, some movement or anything that explained what they had heard. They aimed their guns at invisible enemies, changing from target to target with fast anxious movements.

And there it was again, even more threatening than before, a hoarse snarl from the deepest bottom of a predator's chest.

Stat gulped and gritted his teeth. He could not loose control. He was a hunter. There was nothing to be afraid of. And he focussed on his task again and set his sight on the bushes, the trees, the boulders of the hollow. But behind the leaves there was nothing to be seen, nothing moved, not even in the faint airflow. He breathed heavily, becoming more and more fearful because there had to be something which escaped his skilled senses. Something he had never expected to happen. And when he listened to the sounds of the other men, their heavy breathing, the nervous rustle of the ground beneath their shoes, the anxious gulps, the almost inaudible clicking of their guns when they aimed at something different, he understood that they were feeling exactly the same.

There was a fresh, green leaf falling down right in front of his face.

He blinked and very slowly he turned his eyes upwards and finally he raised his head, looking up into the trees.

He was just able to scream when the shape closed in from above, a blade in its paw flashed in the sunlight.

In the light of a new dawn, when the sun was just about to rise from behind the Blue Ridge Mountains, the waters of Lake Moonfire were set afire by the red and purple twilight as the sun tried to outdo the moons whose light had been the lake's fuel during the night. But the blaze of the sunlight upon the low waves of the lake were nothing but a short living interlude because as soon as the sun would have finally risen above the line of the Blue Ridge the strange glow would disappear and instead the waters of the lake would become crystal clear, so that one might see the ground near its shore. But far from the coast where the lake got deeper there would nothing to be seen anymore except for a gaping darkness beneath the water line. And maybe that was the reason why so many people were scared by the lake as its shore seemed so friendly while there seemed to be no ground in its middle and there were supposed to be the mysteries the people talked about for ages, hidden underwater, so deeply that not even a single ray of light would ever illuminate them, nor any living being would ever be able to see them.

But for now the lake was peaceful and there was absolutely nothing frightening about it. The high, steep, holey granite rocks of the coastline, smoothly carved by the waves which had washed over them since the creation of the lake, shimmered like silver just like its name required it. Distant from the Silver Coast there were the uncountable islands of the lake, small isles, some merely a rock above the water line, and huge islands thickly overgrown with trees.

A distant observer might have seen a perfect silver plate with strange green toppings all along its edge but from the window she was looking out, there was absolutely nothing mysterious nor fascinating about it. There was just water and trees and rocks in the water and maybe she would have seen something different if this view had meant anything different to her. But in this precise moment it seemed to her like the sardonic smile of a malevolent spirit, the rushing of the waves the echo of his penetrating laughter. But nevertheless she looked out the window, completely motionlessly leaning on its frame, the coolness of a morning at the coast was hardly kept off by her thin white night gown. Now her bloodshot eyes hurt even more due to the brightness outside but it was nothing compared to the real pain she suffered from. Maybe the pain wasn't even the worst at all but the knowledge of her helplessness and her weakness. She had cried herself to sleep, but when she had woken up again she had just felt worse and now, in the early morning, she was standing at the window and looked outside and thought about how she might have been happy to see the lake again under different circumstances.

They had simply thrown her off the carriage when they had gotten close enough to the small trading post. Pushed down from the back she had fallen right into the mud of the old road and when she had been able to stand up again they had already turned the old carriage around and were climbing the road again. Helplessly with her hands and feet tied up she had stumbled towards the trading post and when she had finally reached it, her fur soiled by the mud, her clothes torn apart, her entire body covered with small wounds and bruises, her hair felted

and her entire face cramped by grief, tears running down through the mud on her cheeks, she had been almost unrecognizable but none had hesitated a second to help her and when they had gotten closer her father had recognized her and she had collapsed in front of him and he had just been able to catch her before she fell down to the ground and she had just cried, even when they had untied her and had carried her in their house. But finally her eyes had ran dry and while her mother had cleaned her fur like she had done when her daughter had been a puppy she had just blurred it all out and afterwards she had started crying again while her father and the few other inhabitants of the trading post had sat in total silence in the room next door where they had been able to hear everything. When she had ended there was no sound at all, nobody had dared to say anything and just her crying had filled up the empty house. Then they had tried to get her to eat something but she had refused everything and so her father had taken her to bed, had carried her up into the small room which had been hers once and he had laid her down into the bed and she had fallen asleep simply because she had been so exhausted.

But during the nights that followed she had been haunted by nightmares and when she had waken and the familiar scent of her husband had been missing she had remembered everything and she had started crying again until the early morning when she had no tears left and she had stood up, stumbled through the house like a ghost for the whole day, not saying anything, nor crying anymore. She had refused eating and even though her parents had promised everything just to encourage her a little bit she knew so well that there was no chance left for her anymore and she had went to bed as desperate as the night before. In the darkness and loneliness of her room the grief had overcome her and she had cried herself to sleep once more.

And now she stood at the window and tormented herself with puzzling about her situation even though it meant that her wounds would not heal but after all it was the only thing she could do for Rush and Shade and Wheel as well.

They had told her that Wheel had agreed to her abduction and that he never wanted to see her again. Even though she was convinced that it was yet another lie, the doubts she was unable to expel from her mind hurt so much as she was unable to find a reason why he had not done anything at all and the only explanation she found was that he had not known about it either. But it was not convincing enough.

“Shannanah?” The gentle voice at the door interrupted her line of thought.

“Yes,” she answered lowly.

“Don’t you want to come down and have some breakfast, love? Your father has brought Geraugahr along, maybe he can help.” Although her mother tried to sound as encouraging as possible, she was not really able to conceal that she had hardly any real hope to offer.

“I am not hungry,” Shannanah mumbled.

“But you have to eat something...” There was a short sigh. “You got to get your strength back. It is no good for a mother...” She fell silent as she knew that this comment might hurt her daughter.



Shanannah

"Maybe later..." the girl answered.

There was another sigh. "Please, Shannanah! We just want to help you!"

"I know..." She gulped. "I will come down later."

"Alright," her mother said resignedly and the steps outside indicated that she went away.

Shannanah leaned her head against the cold glass of the window. There were some birds flying over the house and over the lake and they vanished so quickly in the distance that one might wonder if they had ever been there. Shannanah had not even noticed them.

At a certain moment she lost her sense of time completely and her physical and psychical tiredness took hold of her while she leaned there. Although the landscape outside did change it was no longer reaching her as her mind was constantly swirling around one and the same matter she found no solution for and although she felt like crying she did not do it because even this seemed too tiring to her. She had no strength left to resist the void of her desperation and a certain part of her was even longing for it. Slowly her slender shape was gliding down the glass and unconsciously she sat down on the window ledge while staring into the nothingness.

It seemed like there had been no change at all but suddenly she stood up despite her weakness and very slowly she walked towards the wooden wardrobe in the corner and opened it. Between her hunting clothes, her oil-skin jacket, her old ragged children's clothes, between the different dresses her mother had made for her she found what she had been looking for. As carefully as possible she took it out and when she raised it into the sunlight which shone into her room the lustrous cloth shimmered like it had been washed days ago and the richly decorated leather which held the different parts of cloth together felt so smooth beneath her fingers as if it had lost any trace of age. She laid it on her bed while she undid the simple shirt and pants she had worn and then she started dressing. The cloth softly brushed her fur when she pulled it over her head, glided over her curves and instantly seemed to nestled against her body but just so much that it still felt incredibly light. Slowly, with quivering fingers, she closed the buttons of the leather which held the dress upon her body so that the light, whitish cloth stretched around her, caressing every single curve of her femininity. Then she picked up the wrapover skirt which was the second part of the dress and made of the same whitish cloth although it was slightly thicker and unlike the tight top it was on the contrary very handsomely cut so that it fell around her legs in many elegant folds so that she was not limited in her movements.

She tied the string which held the skirt around her loin and now that she was fully dressed she walked over to the window where her own reflection stared at her with the very same bloodshot eyes: But now she was wearing the richest dress which fit her absolutely perfectly, emphasizing the curves of her breast and her belly. The cloth shimmered in the sunlight like the surface of the lake under the light of the moons and as it was partly transparent one could imagine the equally beautiful body underneath. It fit perfectly to her gray fur and her black hair and except for her face, contorted by hours of crying, she seemed to be the very

same as the one that had worn this wedding dress during the happy ceremony at the border of the lake. But she was not that one anymore because she had neither Wheel at her side, nor did she feel the faint heartbeat of her cubs deep inside. Quietly the tears welled up again and she leaned against the window once more and cried soundlessly.

“SHANNANAH!” The voice of her mother sounded so excitedly that Shannanah was instantly alarmed although her grief. The stomping of her mother’s feet on the staircase got closer. “SHANNAHAH!” The cry was repeated once more and then her mother’s strong paw already hammered against the door. “SHANNANAH!”

She did not need an instant to reach the door and she pulled it open so strongly that it slammed against the wall with a deafening sound but she did not percept it as she stared into her mother’s face, filled with tears. The vulpine girl needed a moment to realize that these were no tears of sorrow but of joy. “What...?” she asked breathlessly.

Her mother tried to say something but she was unable to and instead she pointed downwards.

Shannanah did not need anything more to dash out of her room, down the stairs. She slammed open the door to the living room, her eyes needed a moment to adapt to the brightness inside but then she already smelled the faint sweetness in the air and she stumbled forward into the room, towards the dark shape which stood out from the light and as the one had been reading her thoughts he did not hesitate to hold out the two small bundles in his arms. And when she took them into her arms she was suddenly surrounded by that faint scent again she had missed so dearly and between the dirty, ragged cloth she instinctively recognized the faces of her cubs and in the very same moment all the emotions she had kept at bay welled up again and she fell to her knees and started crying even stronger than before as she was still unable to grasp that this was real. Her entire body shook, she whimpered and tears flowed down her cheeks as she covered her children with kisses.

“They need to be fed,” someone said.

But she was unable to hear the lynx now.

She was sitting on a rock and looked over the Lake which seemed to be peaceful and calm as there was just a faint wind which did not create very strong waves so that the sound of the water was nothing but a faint sloshing beneath her. She was sitting far above the waterline but beneath her was nothing but the gray stone of the strangely carved cliff which might have shimmered silvery if there had been any sun at all but it hid behind the clouds and so the sultry air was not tempered by the rays of sunlight which might have heated up things a bit. But so her fur was nothing but a sticky mess while her felted hair was fluttering in the faint airflow and she felt somehow dirty although she had cleaned herself as well as she had been able to. Nevertheless she wet her hand with her tongue and rubbed the moistened fur over her face but she was not surprised that she did not

feel any better afterwards. She leaned against the rock again, folded her arms behind her head and eyed the enormously large lake, its shimmering surface, its uncountable islands, the birds flying over it and the faint outline of the Andeleau Mountains in the distance, flanking Lake Moonfire at the opposite shore as the Blue Ridge Mountains was flanking it on this one. She exhaled and let the faint ache of her stiff muscles linger in her mind. For a moment she was occupied by trying to recall when she had last felt that but she was not able to remember. But strangely she was somehow relieved that there was still something that was really able to challenge her. The feeling was anything but pleasant but it felt good nevertheless, somehow... If there had not been such a terrible prize to be paid...

And for a moment she was breathing heavily, closed her eyes and just went on breathing until...

“Hey.”

She had been completely lost in her thoughts so that she had not noticed the arrival of the vixen although her instinctive, constant alertness.

“How do you feel?” Shannanah asked and a faint, friendly smile flitted over her face. She had still big bags under her eyes and it seemed like the tiredness had not completely left her yet, but unlike before she was now radiating some kind of peacefulness.

It wasn't until Jiddy rose her head that she noticed the change of the girl. Totally surprised she sat up straight and was unable to take her eyes off the shaven head of the vulpine girl. “What happened to your hair?” she blurred out.

Another weak smile rested upon Shannanah's lips. “It's a tradition of my people to shave your hair and burn it when you are mourning. It's a proof of respect for the dead,” she explained. Slowly she sat down at the lynx girl's side who was not yet able not to feel sorry for the beautiful black hair the fox girl had had.

“I understand!” Jiddy said and finally took her eyes off the vixen.

For a moment the small lynx and the bigger fox sat silently side by side and looked at Lake Moonfire.

Jiddy lowered her face. “There's one last thing Wheel's asked me to tell you...” She fell silent and waited for a reply but there was none. Hastily she fingered her own paws, wet her lips and she did not raise her head to look at Shannanah but rather went on after a while. “He told me that he didn't know 'bout what his family planned and that he'd never agreed... 'Cause he'd never allowed anyone to hurt you or your cubs. He asked me to tell you that he was sorry 'bout it.” Her fingers were constantly moving like she was trying to hold something that was constantly slipping from her. “And he said to me that he...” She inhaled. “...he loved you and that there was nothin' that could... possibly... separate you two...” She fell silent. Her tail wagged nervously but she did not dare to look up at the young widow, she had already seen too much pain. She played around with her fingers and let the wind brush through her hair. The small silver pendant on the leather strap around her neck swung to and fro in the wind and it seemed to be much heavier than she could remember.

“Do you know why he was so lovable?” Shannanah’s voice was toneless. “He was a true family man, someone who really loved the people around him even though they hurt him or held him captive. They could have done anything to him and he would still had loved them... That’s why he returned.” She fell silent for an instant and when she went on her voice was even weaker than before. “I had never imagined they might possibly accept his death...”

“Those you love the most, will hurt you the most,” the lynx girl added equally tonelessly.

Shannanah looked at the feline with surprise as she had expected anything but such a harsh reply. “Do you really think that?”

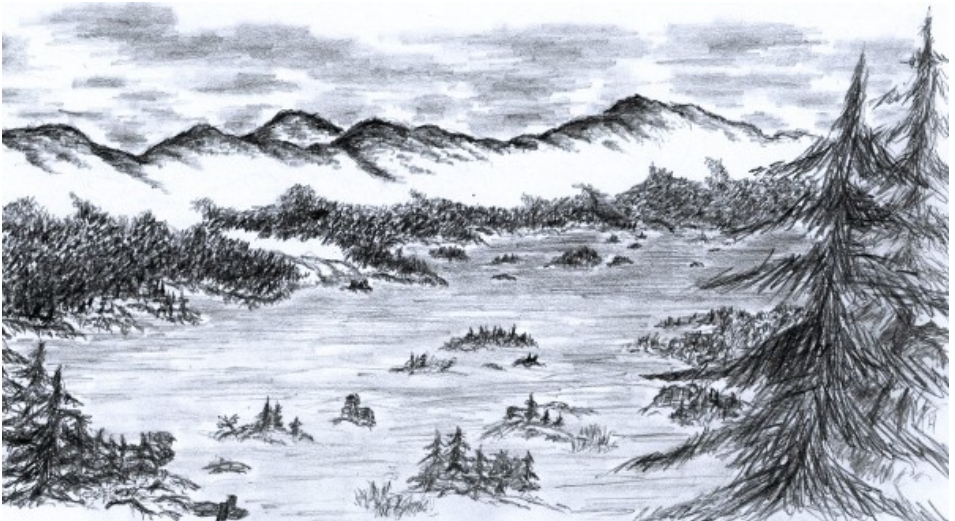
Jiddy drew her knees closer and wrapped her arms around them. “I dunno.”

They fell silent again, lost in their private thoughts.

The wind was getting stronger for a moment and so did the waves beneath them whose sounds echoed all around the hollows of the coastline, mixed with the rushing of the trees to unify in a strange harmony. Some gulls cried far above them.

The vulpine girl wet her lips. “I can never pay you back what you did for me, but if there’s anything that I can do for you...”

Slowly Jiddy rose her head, her short, dark brown hair fluttered in the wind while her almost black slanting eyes reached out for the horizon far beyond the lake with its shimmering water. Now the water sloshed calmly below her strong feet again, but her Silver Arc was still dangling constantly around her neck, swinging to and fro without rest. “There is,” Jiddy mumbled. “There is...”



End of Chapter 4