

Migratory Birds
Chapter 9

RIFT



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She could hear him coming and due to her sharp feline senses the faint rustle of his clothes and the way his feet brushed through the low grass already revealed his identity to her so that she did not have to raise her head when he had gotten close enough. Instead she went on to wash the dirt from her fur. Except for her loincloth she was naked but the man did not seem to bother her. The water splashed quietly when she squirt her light brown fur.

Cheza hesitated for a moment, cleared his throat to make sure that she knew that he was there as well but as she did not react in any way, so he was a little bit uncertain what to do. After a moment of reflection he sat down on a stone close by. Unwillingly he noticed that he stared at her, he had already seen her naked before but he had never had such a good look at her, as she was now standing in the sunlight. So this was the first true opportunity to scrutinize her a little bit more closely even though he felt a certain reluctance about doing it, but his curiosity was stronger. Even though she had something like female curves, they were hidden underneath the juvenile appearance of hers, her small size and her muscles. They were the most important reason for her androgyny because any man could have been proud of these firm, powerful lines which covered every inch of her body. Her shoulders might have been slender if her biceps would not stretched every time she rose her arm and exposed the bulge of her strength which descended towards her firm chest and underneath it extended to the wavy outline of her belly where every single muscles formed a ring and then transformed into the straight lines of her thick legs which just revealed their strength when she stretched them. Her short fluffy tail hang down from above her small, curved backside. While his eyes wandered up and down the nude girl he was unable to neglect the envy he felt as well as this strange other feeling of confusion, amazement and something like admiration which made his heart race. He looked away and across the lake.

Cold water flowed over her furry skin. The rising morning sun dyed everything in an ethereal beauty.

"You have to excuse Dhail," Cheza started. "This is not easy for him..." He paused shortly, anticipating any kind of response but she went on ignoring him.

"You know, unlike me, he isn't here for mere pleasure. He has to study this area... The magic, I mean. It's some kind of exam for him if he wants to ascend to the third circle of sorcery... As you might already know we're foreigners just like you. We're from Lezardos, that's south from here, down the Romainent River and even a bit further..." He paused as he was just recalling his home town and all its marvels. It seemed to him like it was there just beyond the horizon, just like the shades of the Andeleau Mountains had become the shadows of Lezardos' towers. "It's a place full of magic," he went on. "And Dhail is a member of one of the best known families. His grandfather and his father had been sorcerers as well and that's why Dhail has to carry a heavy burden as he has to prove that he is a good sorcerer all by himself and that it's not just his father's reputation that has given him access to sorcery." The llama sighed. "We're already here since several full moons and he has not made any real progress ever since. That's why time is

running out on him and I doubt if he can still be able to achieve anything that will satisfy the council.” He blinked as the sunlight shone directly onto his face, the warmth did him good. “I have to admit that I do not know what to do myself. I have been willing to accompany him from the start although we both knew that I would be much more of an additional burden than any kind of help. And now time is running out on him and the only thing that I can do is watch...” He fell silent. In his hand he was tearing apart a blade of grass which he had picked up, still staring at the distant outline of the Andeleau Mountains.

It seemed like the water was set afire by the sun as the waves reflected it with full power. Small clouds hang almost motionlessly in the sky. Some crickets or cicadas chirped close by.

His tongue ran over his lips. “It’s nothing personal. He’s not particularly hostile towards you. It’s just... some kind of disoriented anger of his... or so...” Suddenly speaking got difficult for him and thus he fell silent once again and looked to the ground.

“What ‘bout you?”

It took some time before he really grasped her question as he had already given up any hope for a comment of hers. “Pardon?”

“What ‘bout you?” she repeated. She rose some water in her paw and poured it over her shoulder so that it ran down her chest, shimmering wet in the bright light, before splashing into the lake again. “How d’you feel?”

A weak smile flitted over his face. “I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “I love him... But... Sometimes I just don’t know what to do. After all I just try to comfort him when he pushes me away once again. So what am I supposed to do? Sit and wait ‘til his anger has consumed him entirely? I just don’t know...” He hurled away the remains of the blade of grass he had almost completely torn apart by now.

“Y’know, this won’t be the last time he’ll gotta face somethin’ like this.”

“No!” Cheza said quickly. “You don’t know him as long as I do. He can be really different when he isn’t so tense...” He chuckled lightly. “In Lezardos he was used to be a very amusing speaker, full of wit and irony. He was feared because of his sharp tongue. So there was always something to laugh for us...”

“Was!” she repeated brutally. Water sprayed from her hair when she shook her head, her pointed ears flickered.

“You’re cruel,” he said.

She looked at him over her shoulder. “If y’give an asshole what he want’s he’ll want more ‘til there’s nothin’ left for you.”

“Dhail is different,” he replied with utter conviction, himself surprised by the speed of his response.

She looked straight at him.

“I love him!” Cheza replied her look with unexpected strength.

Jiddy just shook her head. “Those you love the most will hurt you the most,” she said. The last words died away, then she pulled a face and looked at the water she stood in.

“Sorry that I am not that cynical,” he replied coldly. The llama tried to retain his aggressive stare but when he looked at her he was unable to percept any kind of hostility in her face. He shook his head and did not answer anything.

They kept silent for a while.

Jiddy came out of the water and without caring about drying herself up, she start to dress again.

Cheza watched her in silence as the female curves disappeared bit by bit beneath the ragged cloth. Within a few moments everything that might have identified her as a member of the opposite sex had disappeared again. She looked at him from below her short, wet hair.

They walked back to the hut while the sun was finally about to rise fully from behind the Andeleau Mountains, a huge ball of heat. Suddenly the birds and insects buzzed and chirped around them while the lynx and the llama walked through the wood. The grass and leaves rustled beneath their feet.

Cheza was not really surprised when he intercepted Dhail standing on the veranda of their cabin but as soon as the harvest mouse had seen them too he walked back into the house and thus there was no one to welcome them when they arrived finally.

“I’ll stay here,” Jiddy said and sat down on the edge of the veranda.

Cheza just nodded and walked into the house.

Dhail was busy preparing lunch, putting what was left of their supplies on the table and did not even look up when Cheza stepped inside. Nevertheless the llama walked over to him, took him in his arms and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. Dhail shook his lover’s arms off and walked back into the kitchen.

“What’s wrong?” Cheza asked while walking after him.

As noisy as possible Dhail took two plates (making sure he did not take three) and walked past the llama, back into the living room. Equally noisy he put the plates on the table. “What took you so long?” he asked coldly.

Cheza wrinkled his brows in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“You know damn well what I mean,” the harvest mouse replied.

It took Cheza quite some time to understand what Dhail was hinting to him. The insolence of this accusation let his jaw drop down while he was still struggling with the many different feelings that arose within his soul. “Do you mean that I... that we...” Cheza laughed nervously in disbelief. “You don’t accuse me of having... You can’t mean that seriously, can you?” He waited for a reply but there was none.

Dhail just showed him his back.

Suddenly the cold-bloodedness of Dhail let the anger take control of Cheza while any doubt he had had about this question crumbled away. “How can you ask that?” Cheza yelled. “Don’t you even trust me that much anymore?”

Suddenly Dhail spun around and glared at the man he had believed to love. “It does not matter if I trust you or don’t! It matters what you have done!”

“Oh, yeah?” Cheza shouted. He waved his arms while he was trying to find the words for a reply. His anger had wiped out every coherent thought in his head. “As it would matter what I say! As you’d believe me!”

“As long as you deal with this slut, tell me, how could I trust you!” Dhail yelled as loud as he was able to.

“You’re really becoming paranoid you know that!”

They were now standing just a feet from each other, clearly seeing the wide opened pupils, the tension, the cramped faces of their anger. But they were no longer able to notice that.

Cheza rose his index and hold it right beneath Dhail’s muzzle. “Your behaviour is absolutely ridiculous!”

“Oh, right?” Dhail cried. “I do know damn well how you look at her.”

“How do I look at her?” Cheza hissed.

Dhail exhaled through his gritted teeth. “Like a fucking breeding bull!”

Cheza did not know what to reply and gulped, having gotten absolutely pale in that instant. His fist trembled strongly when he rose it beneath Dhail’s face. “As you would know about my feelings? Eh? AS YOU EVER CARED ABOUT MY FEELINGS!?” His voice cracked because of the unleashed power. “WHO’S THE ONE WHO’S ENGAGED WITH SOME STUPID GAL CHOSEN BY HIS FAMILY?” Cheza yelled it right into Dhail’s face. Then the llama gulped and made a step backwards. “Do you think that I just offered my butt to you because of mere generosity or what? Do you believe I stay with a paranoid sorcerer for more than six fucking years for fun?”

“Don’t come along with this crap! Do you think it’s an excuse after all this screwing females of yours?”

“What the hell are you talking about? That was long before I met you! Have you finally succeeded in frying your brain out with your spells?”

“Why don’t you answer me then? If you are so damn innocent or don’t you just want to spare your little pussy this spectacle?”

“Who’re you callin’ a pussy?” The snarl was hardly comprehensible but it was enough to make the two men stop instantly.

They started to turn their heads around but Dhail was not meant to finish this movement as one of her feet was suddenly kicked right into his stomach.

He gasped for breath, rolled his eyes while he was still fighting against the intensity of pain. Behind the crimson red curtain he could feel the gaping hole of unconsciousness but somehow he managed to remain conscious.

“That’s for callin’ me names!” Someone hissed. “And that’s...”

She grabbed him by his shoulders, threw him up, turned him over in midair and hurled the harvest mouse against the floor so hard that the wood creaked beneath him and he cried out in pain when the impact tore through him. This time everything was blacking out for a moment but the burn of his pain brought him back to life within an instant so that he could hear her: “...for treatin’ the one who loves ya so badly.”

For a moment Cheza was torn two ways, totally surprised and absolutely confused by what had just happened. He looked at his writhing lover on the floor and then at the lynx girl who was just about to grab her backpack which had been standing next to the door and walked outside with strong steps. When the harvest mouse at his feet moaned he instantly kneeled down. “Are you alright?”

He was trembling due to the pain but nevertheless he was able to put his paw down on the ground and hissed "This time she pays!" while he was able to get on his feet without Cheza's help. His vision was still blurred and his back hurt like hell but he really did not care.

Cheza eyed the wavering harvest mouse who headed straight for the door. "What are you doing?" the llama yelled after him.

But Dhail did not even hesitate a second. He walked outside. He was still in pain but he just gritted his teeth and looked around, searching for the lynx until he perceived her shape on his right as she walked straight into the wood. "This time you pay," he hissed to himself and then ran after her with surprising speed.

"Dhail! Dhail!" Cheza rushed out of the house and saw the harvest mouse running into the forest. "Damn!" He ran after him.

The lynx was much faster than he would have expected her to be, especially because she was not running at all. But he was running at top speed and he saw the shimmer of her light brown, dotted fur between the trunks and the undergrowth and this was all he needed to accelerate even more. Dhail jumped out of a line of trees onto a small clearing which was surrounded by very large, old trunks and overgrown stumps which let no light through. She was just walking out of the clearing again.

"Jiddy!" he shouted.

She turned her head lightly, perceiving the shape of the harvest mouse from the corner of her eyes she went on without hesitating.

"You gonna pay, slut!" he shouted and then the wave had already build inside him, boiled up behind the walls of his will and when he cried the words out it rushed through him with the unleashed power of his anger while his words twisted it, shaped it until it warped out of him and shot towards her.

She noticed a flash and her instincts made her jump aside. Then the bolt crashed into the wood where she had been a moment before, tearing a trunk asunder. It exploded into thousands of wooden sherds while the upper part leaned over and then fell down in slow motion, crashing into the surrounding wood. Kneeling on the ground, the lynx girl was just able to stare at the place where a tree had been moments before. Then she spun around, quivering and trembling with fear but still glaring at the harvest mouse. She growled.

Dhail stared at his smoking paws, at the empty space in the wood and at his paws again. He could not grasp what he had just done.

Her backpack dropped to the ground. She gulped and fought back her instinctive fear, focussed on this glowing red of rage that flared up and thus she approached the harvest mouse, snarling and with exposed claws.

He heard the snarl and rose his head, noticing her approach. "Stay away!" he hissed at her. But she did not seem to care.

He threw his hand into her direction and the formulas in his mind were already gathering again, starting to make sense as one by one they fell into place, defining something new all by itself and then it was lingering in his mind, he focussed and gritted his teeth and with a cry he let it flow. It swirled around his arm, shot into his paw and then slashed through the air and she threw herself to

the ground while the air around her was suddenly pulled together and then shot about as if it was made of solid matter, wind slashed about, harder and faster than any natural tornado could and it cut through everything in their surroundings, leaves, grass, ivy, branches, trunks and all that it met. It all transformed into a whirl of cut pieces that swirled around them while the swirls shot all around with high speed and without any control.

A short cry behind him made him hesitate for a moment and this was enough to break his concentration and make the spell wear off. The harvest mouse turned around and noticed Cheza who stood at a certain distance holding his arm where an ugly cut was visible. Instantly Dhail was by the llama's side. "What's wrong?" he asked and tried to take a look at the wound.

Cheza stared at him with his eyes wide open and then pushed his hand which was just about getting hold of his arm. "Damn you!" he hissed. "You could have killed us, you know!" He was still panting.

"That's not my damn fault," the other man replied, feeling his anger coming back. "That damn slut's the one who made me lose control." And as his own words reminded him of the lynx he turned around and was instantly paralyzed.

Jiddy was not really standing there, instead it seemed as if she was hanging, held by invisible strings, even though her feet were still touching the ground. Her eyes had gone totally white, there was no pupil left to be seen. Her mouth was wide open.

"What...?" Dhail stepped forward, shaking his head in disbelief. He looked around, suddenly noticing what his spell had revealed.

The clearing was unrecognisable anymore. His spell had torn the undergrowth, the ivy and several trees apart and just the larger trunks were still standing and thus what everyone had expected to be stumps hidden beneath the ivy was now fully exposed and this were no trunks for sure: There stood seven monoliths in a perfect circle, higher than five men, made of old greyish stone overgrown with moss and lichens. But underneath these the alien shapes of partly eroded carvings, displaying unreadable hieroglyphs of every size were still visible and the mere size of the seven stones was all that it needed to make anyone stop in awe.

While Dhail stood there, staring at the monoliths, a powerful gust of wind had blew around them. His short hair fluttered around his face, the leaves all around rustled powerfully.

"What is this?" Cheza said out loud, stepping towards Dhail, staring at their changed surroundings. "What is happening?"

Dhail shook his head and looked all around. The llama's words had suddenly drawn his attention to a new fact: It was getting darker by the moment, the sun seemed to disappear, everything was suddenly vanishing in darkness while the wind got even more powerful.

"What's going on?"

"I don't understand this..." Dhail mumbled, the wind tore at his clothes. He shivered as he was suddenly getting goosebumps. Something was going on, he could feel it. The power that was suddenly awaking made him shudder as he had never felt anything like this before. It was as if something was approaching. He

could feel how Cheza's hand was touching his shoulder, while he was still looking around, looking at the circle of monoliths and in the meantime it was still getting darker as if all light was being consumed.

They could not see very much anymore, it was almost pitch-black now just like at the deepest bottom of a cave.

"What is going on?" Cheza asked.

Except for the llama's words every noise had vanished.

"What is going on, Dhail?" His voice quivered.

And suddenly there was light again for a short instant.

The two men stared at Jiddy when a small flash shot across along her arm.

The lynx was still standing in a strange twisted position, she was totally motionless, her torso bend backwards, her face head turned towards an invisible sky, her arms hanging in midair. Her hair and her tail fluttered relentlessly as if she was trapped inside a powerful torrent of wind.

"Jiddy?" Cheza wanted to step towards her, but Dhail held him back.

"We got to get out of here!" the harvest mouse hissed anxiously but Cheza did not react although he had heard him pretty well.

Unnatural growls, desperate cries and mad gurgles suddenly escaped Jiddy's throat. Her entire body bucked, rocked, twitched and quivered. Her head was randomly thrown around like it had a life of its own. She had grabbed it with her paws, tried to keep it in place while she cried out in pain, fighting for control of her limbs which were opposing her, escaping her control, moving around in impossible ways, being bent backwards, defying every joint. Just her hands seemed to be under her control and hold onto her head like it was the only thing she could do while she cried out at the top of her lungs, a high, but equally hoarse cry, the sound of a wounded animal.

"We got to get away!" Dhail cried at Cheza but the llama was unable to take his eyes of the crying lynx even when Dhail forced him around.

Jiddy writhed, randomly crying out, each time changing the tone of her voice. And suddenly her hands let go and shook uncontrolled around her body.

"We can't help her!" The sorcerer yelled. "We got to go before it is too late..."

In this moment another flash shot about the lynx girl's body, once again illuminating their surroundings. There seemed to be nothing left but the ground and the circle of monolith, beyond those was nothing but darkness as if it had transformed into an impenetrable wall.

Another cry escaped her throat but unlike every other it was so intense that it broke through everything, the deafening sound shook everything, cut the two men to the quick and the monoliths reflected it, suddenly waving around like during a powerful storm. Jiddy did not move by herself anymore, she was being moved as her body bucked. Her fur moved as if it contained a shaking liquid, her featured were disfigured, her limbs warped in any possible manner while bubbles boiled up beneath her skin, burst inside her and dissolved everything inside. She was crying no longer.

It had gotten dark again

Dhail's voice was trembling when he spoke up. "Cheza, we must go..."

“What about Jiddy?” The llama whispered, his eyes widened in fear, still fixed on spot where the lynx had to be.

“It is too late! We must try to save ourselves,” Dhail said quickly, shaking with anxiety and fear he whose possession he was not willing to admit. He pulled at Cheza’s arm “It is too late...” Electricity crackled, the hair of the two men rose by itself when lightning started to dance around Jiddy. It illuminated the scenery again and showed how her body was shaken erratically, foam shot from her mouth and suddenly the feline body rose from the ground as if it was lifted upwards, pulled by invisible strings that were locked into her body. “Dear gods,” Dhail gasped. His mouth had gotten all dry while he could feel the power of magic that had been unleashed. Jiddy’s body was now floating several feet above the ground and suddenly thunder rolled and deafened the men for a moment and everything went black.

It had been as if the thunder had been an enormously big tidal wave which broke on the stones around them and suddenly it swept it all away. It tore at their bodies, almost pushed them over while their surroundings were torn apart, falling apart like a puzzle. It washed around them, deafened them with its sound and filled up their lungs until they gasped for breath while the bits and pieces of their environment were drained into nothingness, revealing an ever stranger surrounding: Black and red sinews build up around them, pulsing with an irregular beat. And then the blood vanished, sucked from their bodies without leaving a trace, disappearing into the depths of this strangeness, this irregular, randomly build organ whose sinews stretched all around them, trapped them inside its only irregular cavity which was just illuminated by the reddish twilight of boiling blood. The forest, the lake, even the circle of monoliths had gone.

Cheza lied on the uneven, disgustingly warm ground and clumsily rose to his feet, as did Dhail by his side. “What...” he stammered just when a flash blinded him. Blue light shot through the cavity, the alien muscles curling up in convulsions as the bluish light flowed down through its veins, taking them over bit by bit until there was no reddish light left and the limbs’ movements died away. Instantly it got colder.

Blinking, Cheza opened his eyes again, instantly noticing the floating lynx.

Bluish lights flickered throughout the room, it seemed to swirl around the lynx. It vanished, reappeared, stronger and weaker, coming from no precise position as it radiated from the air itself. It illuminated the room with flashes of blue which brightly illuminated the wall-like structures around them for short moments.

Suddenly a flash burst out, blinded the men for a moment, an electric crackle filled the air, the lights flashed faster and faster until it cut time into small pieces of reality, almost blinded them in one instance and then drowned them in darkness again, the rhythm accelerated, still accelerating until it flashed so quickly that the were able to see like the girl was rising into the air.

“N! O!” cried Dhail while he stumbled forward towards Jiddy. The flashlights only allowed him to move in stop-motion but in every fiber of his magic trained body he could feel that it was anything but a trick of the light.

“W. H. A. T. S. H. A. P. P. E. N. I. N. G???” Cheza shouted at the harvest mouse.

Thunder rolled throughout the space they were in again. Jiddy was flying like she was torn upwards by something pulling on her chest, her arms and legs were helplessly hanging downwards while she rose on. Her hair fluttered around her as if powerful winds were tearing at her. With unsupportable, mind-twisting slowness a cry of pain escaped her throat and turned into a howl which was suddenly stretched and got higher and higher until it reached a level where she could have no longer have uttered it but it even strengthened and in this moment, small blue flashes jet out of her mouth. The air smelt like ozone.

An explosion took them off, the shockwave hurled them across the entire space, when a lightning struck Jiddy’s body with all of its power. The two men were slammed against the wall opposite. Cheza cried out in pain, as it seemed like his spine was breaking but then he already dropped to the floor. The bitter taste of iron filled his mouth when he carefully opened his eyes, just to open them as when as possible when he saw the girl.

Jiddy was freely floating above the ground, she was erected now, blue lightning crackled around her just like wind which swirled around her. The clothing was completely ragged and bleeding scratches covered her entire body. But her face was contorted to a broad grin and Cheza’s blood ran cold when he saw the small lightning bolts which shot from her eyes. “Dhail!” the llama stammered, hardly noticing that time had found its usual course again.

“I see it!” the harvest mouse at his side said while he carefully stood up as he had fallen down onto his face. Blood dropped from his muzzle and from an ugly wound on his forehead. “It’s a storm spirit... I don’t understand this...”

Cheza stared at Jiddy who was Jiddy no longer. The lynx stared down on them with the very same cruel grin of sharp predatory teeth. The electricity crackled and slowly she rose her hand. Instantly lightning gathered around her paw, it smelt like burned fur.

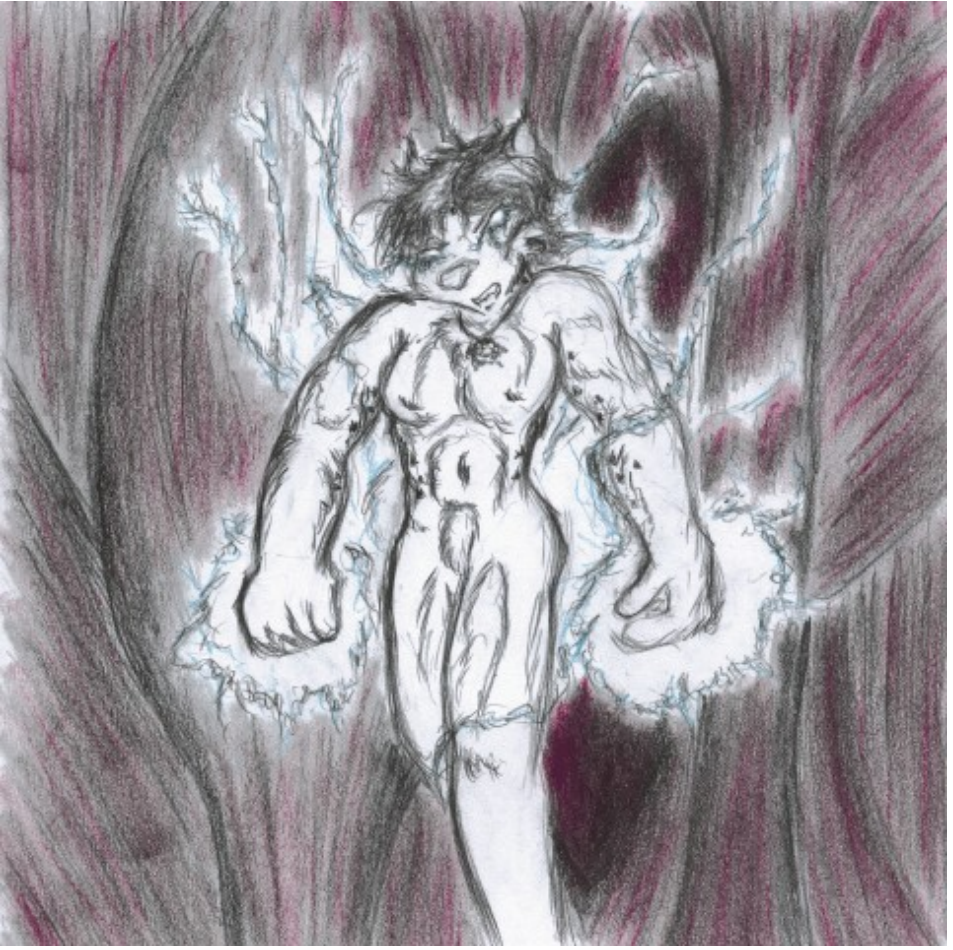
Dhail gulped.

Lightning shot through him, his body was almost torn apart by its power, he shook, trembled, rocked due to the electricity, his limbs shook uncontrolled in ways no one would have made willingly, a gurgle escaped his throat. The lightning crackled even stronger, the fur on his chest was reduced to ashes, the body was thrown backwards against the wall again. Then the lightning bolt died away and the body collapsed.

“Dhail!” Cheza cried and grabbed the motionless harvest mouse. “Dhail!” He shook the lifeless body. “DHAIL!” Grief sealed off his throat as he took the harvest mouse into his arms. “Oh, Goddess! Dhail!” Tears broke free when he embraced the smaller man. He cried in pain and despair. Slowly he turned his face around towards the floating lynx.

Some perverse variation of a pitiful smile flitted around her lips while she looked down onto the llama.

Tears dropped from the llama’s cheeks. “You’ll pay! I swear,” he shouted at the floating lynx, embracing Dhail even stronger.



“Don’t mourn the living.” The harvest mouse was weak, just when he had finished the sentence he had to cough terribly, spilling blood onto his paw.

“Dhail!” Cheza stammered while the sorcerer freed himself from the llama’s hold.

“No time!” Dhail pushed Cheza’s arms away and tried to get onto his feet.

“You haven’t finished with me yet!” Dhail hissed towards the lynx who was looking at him with what could be some kind of amazement, at least the smile had vanished. Dhail stumbled as he tried to stand up but Cheza quickly took hold of him and helped him onto his feet. Dhail coughed again, his chest burned like hell but the pain just focussed his attention to the lynx who was raising her hand again. Electricity crackled again.

The lightning bolt shot from her. But this time he was prepared, before he even saw it coming, he felt like time and space were warped by her, warped into her direction with himself at the end of the tunnel.

He wiped from blood from his muzzle, focussing on it as he tried to remember what he intended to do. For an instant everything around him disappeared, he was feeling dizzy, but the blood in his hand reminded him of what he needed to do and he waved his hand spilling the blood the moment the lightning shot about.

Thunder struck when the flash hit a barrier. The electricity crackled with almost deafening intensity, blood fizzled and its remains caught fire that shot about, consumed by the intense heat that had been set free. The harvest mouse screamed, every muscles of his body stretched while he tried to maintain the barrier.

Dhail cried. It seemed to him like his mind was boiling. The blood was still a part of him, he could feel the powers that tore at it, that struck it every moment the attack lasted. He cried in pain as he could feel how the small drops of his own blood were consumed and his concentration was wearing off, he couldn’t handle so much anymore. He stammered the formula of the spell as it was the only hope left for him, but it was no use, she was much too powerful for him.

“Cheza, flee!” he screamed, although he knew that the llama could not leave this place. “RUN!” Sweat run from his forehead. Any second now. Blood shut from his nose, the heat of the lightning was burning his fire even though the flash itself did not reach him. He could feel how his skin was burned.

Suddenly it stopped and Dhail stumbled backwards. The pain wore off and an intense vacuum suddenly filled up his mind. He gasped and fell down. Cheza caught him.

The harvest mouse gulped, cast aside the dizziness and stood up straight again. With wavering steps he left his lover’s hold. “You can’t beat me!” he hissed at the lynx. His small black eyes flashed with hatred.

The lynx floated motionlessly. There was no sign of exhaustion but after all she was a physical being no longer. It was not mere chance they had escaped her attack. The lynx looked down on them with an expressionless face, lightning shot from her eyes.

Dhail tried to focus on her but he was barely able to look straight forward. He almost fell down when he stumbled due to his weakness, Cheza instantly rushed to his rescue but he caught his equilibrium again and pushed off the llama's helping hands. Stumbling, he walked on towards the girl.

Now the swirl around her instantly changed its tone of electrical crackle, the tune changed to a high howling like wind rushing through a narrow passage. More and more wind swirled around her, her hair fluttered stronger and stronger while she rose her arms.

The cold of the wind brushed through his face and he felt like she drained the wind towards her. His short hair fluttered. "Oh no, you won't!" he hissed. A gust of wind almost pushed him over but he slammed all of his weight against the blow and thus remained erected. With a cry of anger he hurled himself towards her and took out a small bag of leaves. Old words of magic flowed from his lips while he focussed on the brittle, dry leaves, he gathered the motion around him, invoked pictures of high trees and rustling leaves and he tried to focus on the wind around him, on the way it blew and the way it tossed and pulled at his body. He focussed and transcended the pictures, tried to attain the essence of his tools.

Gusts of wind swirled even harder around him, tore at the leaves he held as strongly as he could. It almost pushed him over but he did not even move an eyelid. His eyes closed, mumbling the spells he was oblivious to his surroundings while his thoughts raced. The wind cut into his skin, it had gotten ice-cold, it hurt and he shivered. He was almost panicking as he felt totally lost in his own spell, for an instant he was convinced that he would fail and in this moment he heard someone calling his name. Poor Cheza, he thought for a moment. Then he looked up and stared right into the lightning-struck eyes above him, the leaves left his paws were instantly torn apart by the wind and in this moment the spell was set off.

The hurricane pushed him over, slammed him against the wall of his strange surroundings and when he looked up he could see how the lynx was trapped between the remains of the leaves which glowed in a strange light.

"Got ya!" he mumbled, swallowing the blood in his mouth. Carefully he stood up.

The lynx jumped at one of the glowing leaves, wind and lightning shot all around her when her hands tried to close around the tiny leaf. The air was ablaze with electric fire but the lynx could not reach it. With gritted teeth and bulging muscles the lynx gathered all of her strength and little by little her hand closed around the leaf. Her fur caught fire but she did not seem to care.

"Dhail!" Cheza was at the mouse's side. "You're alright?"

"No!" he yelled, not taking an eye of the lynx. "Stand back now. If anything goes wrong, run!"

"What?"

"You can't do anything and I don't you to get hurt!" The mouse tottered.

"What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea!" the sorcerer mumbled while he approached the lynx.

With every step he got closer to the lynx he could feel the electricity, the heat and the magic that surrounded the lynx who found against the focus of Dhail's entrapment. He stopped in front of the lynx, his face was illuminated by the burning white and blue light of the lightning, a storm tore at his small rodent body.

"Holy Sun¹ protect me!" Dhail mumbled and he reached out with his hand. The leaves were consumed by the fire of lightning.

Instantly he was within her reach and was pulled towards her, pain shot through him as the thunder bolt cut through his body. The lynx was above him, her face contorted in a toothy grin. The storm had torn him off his feet and he cried out as he was thrown around, the storm had taken possession of his body and swirled him around like he was nothing, lightning shot around him. For a moment he was able to see the outside world, the forest, the lake, peaceful as usual.

Lightning struck and he was inside the storm again. You have underestimated her, shot through his mind, as he understood that it was force of nature he was dealing with. The lynx was above him and took hold of his small body. He was torn apart. His limbs seemed to extend, it pulled at both of his end and he cried out in pain as he was torn apart, every fiber shrieked in pain and terror, his bones cracked, his entrails shot through the cavity of his belly and then he extended to an impossible length, his body was stretched like an elastic, it seemed like his feet were miles away from his head and his mind cried out as it was no longer able to grasp what happened, but the only thing that escaped his throat was a low long-drawn gurgle.

But then it stopped suddenly, he slammed to the ground and coughed up blood, and when he rose his head he saw that Cheza had jumped the lynx. The feline body tensed, lightning struck and the llama was thrown about as if his body was nothing at all. With a shriek Cheza crashed to the ground. The harvest mouse's eyes widened.

Somehow he was able to focus on her, somehow he perceived her throughout all the dizziness of his pain filled mind and he spoke the words with an unknown easiness. He felt the chaos arranging to swirling patterns, he hold on to that, arranged and he felt like it was getting a shape underneath his invisible touch. He tried to focus on her, sending it off with all his hatred and then he punched the lynx with all of his power. His hand cut the air and the lightning and then hit her.

Like a slap of anticipated pleasure he experienced the impact of his spell on her, shockwaves of his impact shot throughout her body, he could feel bursting veins and breaking bones. He cried out triumphantly and let his mind shoot through her, appreciating like it twisted her body, broke it, tore it apart...

But then he saw the bluish light crawling along his arm and he knew that it was already too late. It exploded in his head, he cried out in pain once more, his brain boiled up in his skull, whitish sparkle shot through him and instinctively he retired and instantly he was released from the pain.

Panting he tried to catch his breath again, pain droned through him and just very slowly he was able to raise his head to look at her: Her whirlwind was gone.

She was still standing, although not floating anymore, lighting just rarely sparkled around her and she had wrapped herself into her own arms.

Pain shot throughout his limbs and a wave of pain washed over him so that he struggled to remain conscious. He gulped the blood which had gathered in his mouth.

With painful slowness she rose again to full size again. Blood dripped from her opened mouth, stains of blood stuck to her burned fur. Her eyes flickered but when she noticed him they lit up again. Lightning crackled around her and the wind gathered as she slowly lifted off again. Her contorted face fixed on the injured sorcerer.

He wanted to laugh when the panic became too hard to support. Every fiber of his wanted to flee, but he was even too weak to raise his head any longer. With a desperate laughter he stumbled into her direction. His senses told him that she drained all the energy around them, he felt like the warmth wore off and like the light disappeared. Darkness took over, just the lynx was enveloped in the light of a new storm which gathered around her, it shimmered and flickered around her, the lightning started again, made him shiver as he realized what it meant for him. In a last futile attempt he screamed and tried to reach her. He tried to focus but all that he could think about was... nothing at all. He punched her without any power and an instant later the current of her lightning shot through him. He screamed in pain and collapsed, his hand reaching out for whatever could hold him and suddenly it closed around cold metal. And instantly he knew that it had to be the Silver Arc that was still hanging around the lynx' neck. He collapsed, his hand closed tightly around the pendant.

For a moment he had even forgotten about the storm spirit and instinctively he focussed on the pendant. He could feel it in his hands and he could almost see the Silver Arc before his eyes, its rough shape, the darkened metal, the barely recognisable animals and it grew in front of him and then he melted into the silver, dived into it and instantly he could feel the waves sloshing against his mind, incomprehensible structures swirled around him, too vast to grasp, too powerful to be ignored, guiding him into a specific direction and he was thrown out of it and shot through the mess of lighting and thunder, burning rain poured onto him, wind like swirling razor blades cut at him but he was of no substance anymore when he fell through this place and in the shades of the darkness he could see the shapes of a city, reigned by shadows. And while he fell on further down he saw a small sphere of glowing light in its center, enclosed by lightning and wind. When he fell past it he tore it out of its confinement and instantly it exploded. It hurled him backwards while he was overwhelmed by unfeeling emotions and unliving memories, his mind was flooded with pain, joy, hatred and love, anger, passion, desperation and pointless hope.

He could hear the lynx girl scream when he was suddenly back inside his own body, stumbled backwards and collapsed to the ground.

"Dhail!" A well known voice cried out for him and then the llama was already at his side, the familiar scent of his anxiety wafted around. "How do you feel?" he asked with concern.

The harvest mouse made no attempt to stand up again as he pretty well knew that it was futile. "Haven't felt better in years," he whispered, too weak to speak up properly.

He saw that the darkness of their confinement had vanished, they were suddenly in the forest again. Sunlight shone down on them and birds chirped close by as if nothing had happened at all.

Somehow Cheza managed to get them both to the house. Dhail was not able to remain upright but he was able to walk at least and thus the harvest mouse was held by the llama. The sorcerer had been able to walk the short distance while Cheza carried the unconscious lynx girl on his shoulder. She was much lighter than he would ever had expected her to be.

Dhail collapsed into the old rocking chair which stood on the veranda while Cheza carried the girl inside. The little bit of wind that eased the heat of the sun blew around him and it did good to his sore body which was still covered with uncountable smaller and bigger wounds. Unlike the lynx nothing seemed to be very serious even though he had a lot of burns and other bleeding wounds, they just hurt a lot. The real serious damage had been done by the lightning bolts he had received but this damage had never been of visible nature.

On the contrary the girl which Cheza laid carefully on the bed inside was seriously injured. She rather looked like she had been turned completely inside out: Her fur was nothing but a burned mess, just like her hair. But her fur was superficial damage in contrast to the rest of her burns that looked as if she had been skinned, beneath her fur there was nothing but a reddish, touchy, burning hot membrane which did not even look like skin anymore. The veins shimmered like bluish threads woven into her body and whenever Cheza touched her a little stronger it instantly started to bleed. Her breath was very weak and with every moment it seemed to become more irregular. Cheza stood up and looked down on her: She really seemed to be more dead than alive. Beneath all this mess she looked strangely peaceful, her harsh features had smoothed and she looked somehow helpless and vulnerable, like a young, lost girl that had gotten trapped in a terrible accident.

Cheza gulped. He felt helpless. He had never seen wounds like hers before and he was not even able to take his eyes of her but then he forced himself to turn around and he went out to join the harvest mouse.

Dhail sat in his stool at the edge of the veranda, eyes closed, breathing slowly. Most of his wounds had disappeared, young, new skin shimmered here and there where his magic had done its deed. When he heard Cheza approaching he opened his eyes and looked at his mate without saying a word.

"She needs your help," Cheza said while he stopped at Dhail's side.

Dhail slowly rose his head. "Do you really believe I would help her?" He looked straight at the llama.

Cheza stared at the harvest mouse in the rocking chair. "What do you want to say?" he stammered. "You will not help her?"

Dhail replied his look. "She tried to kill me, remember?"

"What...?" Cheza stared at him in disbelief, totally speechless for a moment. "Damn, does that matter now? Do you want to kill her?"

Dhail looked at him and then turned his face away without answering.

"Would you do the same if it was me lying there?" the llama yelled at the harvest mouse.

"It's not you," Dhail said coldly.

"BUT IT COULD HAVE BEEN ME!" Cheza cried. "The storm spirit could have taken over everyone of us!"

Dhail did not reply anything but stared at the darkness of the night forest that surrounded them. "The storm spirit has not chosen her at random..."

The slap hit him without warning and although it had not been that strong he fell down from his seat because it had surprised him so much that he had lost his equilibrium. Holding his burning cheek he looked up at the llama.

Cheza was crying, but not a single sob escaped him, as he pressed his lips together with all of his strength. There were just tears flowing soundlessly down from his eyes and over his cramped face. "Damn you! Where is the one that I LOVED?" the llama cried almost hysterically. "The Dhail that I was used to never would have let somebody die and now you... you just..." Now a sob escaped him and he turned around, trembling with frustration, anger, helplessness and this maddening feeling of loss that he could not deny any longer.

"Cheza, I..."

"SHUT UP!" Cheza cried. "I can't stand any excuses anymore!" He was weeping like a small boy but he really did not care anymore. It was stronger than him. But then he stretched, tightened and sniffed strongly, suppressing the tears for a moment. "If..." He gulped. "If you do not go in there right now...", he said as coldly as he was able to. "...I will leave you" He was trembling. He had never expected himself to be strong enough to say that but in this moment he was certain that it was the only thing left to do for him. Although he feared Dhail's response he would not weaken, he would not compromise. Jiddy's life was at stake and if Dhail did not want to heal her... He heard like Dhail got back on his feet and he closed his eyes and for a short instant he was begging for not weakening and for Dhail as well.

There was a short pause and then Dhail's footsteps disappeared inside the house.

And the llama inhaled, he looked towards the sun that shimmered between the trees and he whispered a short prayer of thanksgiving to the Sun God¹ that he had allowed them to return into the warmth of his light.

It took quite some time.

Cheza had been leaning at one of the veranda's pillars for the whole time. He was tired and very sleepy but he did not dare to disturb the sorcerer who was busy inside. From time to time he heard Dhail's whispering and noticed a strange glow in the corner of his eyes but he never turned around to see what happened

in there. Dhail had to know that. It was all in Dhail's hands now and he had to trust him with all the faith that was left to him.

Far beyond the lake the sun had already disappeared behind the horizon. But it was still dusk and one could still see almost everything. But it had gotten strangely silent. There were no animals to be heard, except for the buzzing and humming of insects. The faint wind was hardly strong enough to make the leaves rustle a bit. But most of the time everything was calm and from far above Koda, the black moon, was visible as a dark shade in the sky and it looked down on him and the small hut on whose veranda he stood, like a blind eye that never blinked.

When Dhail came out again he was trembling and despite the twilight Cheza was able to notice that the harvest mouse was unusually pale.

"How's she doing?" Cheza asked cautiously.

"She will make it," Dhail replied weakly and gulped. "In a few days she will be alright again..." His voice just died away. He fell into a chair.

"What's wrong?" Cheza asked, carefully eyeing his mate who was looking much more confused and anxious than after his fight with the storm spirit.

"I told you that the storm spirit did not choose her randomly, it was no coincidence, it was..." The harvest mouse fell silent. "Dear gods, if I had known..." He shook his head and fell silent for a moment. "Please, can you leave me alone for a while?" he asked after some time.

Cheza screwed up his eyes.

Dhail looked up at him and smiled weakly. "It is... It's nothing. I just need some time, OK?"

Cheza stood up from his chair, but he hesitated and looked down into the mouse's eyes and for a short moment they were both silent, then acting on an impulse of affection Cheza kneeled down and embraced the sitting harvest mouse and hold him tightly. "Remember that I am always here for you," he mumbled.

Dhail did not say anything but he relaxed in the hold of the strong llama and it felt good.

"I love you!" Gently Cheza gave the harvest mouse a kiss on his head, then he let him go and walked inside. There on the small camp bed lay the lynx girl. She was looking much healthier now although her burned fur had not disappeared, but the alien peacefulness had left her and instead she was looking like she was used to: A strong, muscled girl that slept, recovering from a terrible affliction.

For a moment he had to suppress the urge to go over to her and tousle her messy hair but as his sleepiness was taking over again he just went over to his large bed and lay down over there and before he had even been able to undress he was sound asleep.

Meanwhile Dhail was still standing on the verandah, staring at the dark wood. He sat almost motionlessly in his chair, his mind racing while he looked at his surroundings. But in the end all that he saw was the dark nothingness of the night that lingered around him, endlessly calling out for him.

The sun was shining brightly and as the last days had been quite rainy the sunshine felt very good. One could really feel that it was still summer although the moist air was still cool. But this was rather pleasant and the wind which constantly flowed over the water of Lake Moonfire was weak and feeling good too. The lake was as peaceful as it could be, the waves sloshed lazily and the crystal clear water shimmered with all the brightness of the sunlight. The reed mace which grew at the shore clicked in the wind and its fluffy seed was carried along until it dropped down on the water and floated up and down on the light waves. Many birds flew all around, trying to catch the uncountable insects that buzzed all over the water's surface and on the shore and in the forest of the islands and peninsulas. There the light of the sun shone through and made the whole wood gleam with a dim, greenish twilight which was just disturbed by the direct rays that shone through like they were pillars that supported the ceiling of leaves that rustled far above the ground. In these rays of light danced the small insects and sometimes one of them flew away to sit down on the leaves of fern that grew everywhere and if this insect was mistaken it did not sit down on fern but on the moss that grew on the mysterious ruins of a long lost civilization that had once ruled this land. And in between all this stood a small wooden hut and in front of it a llama and a lynx with a backpack.

"Do you really want to leave so soon? You can stay a few more days. It would do you good."

The lynx looked away. "Thanks! It'll be better this way."

The man nodded. "I understand. But please pay attention, OK? You have not fully recovered yet. You should take it easy for a while."

Jiddy smiled lightly. "Thanks! I'll remember that."

Cheza inhaled deeply and looked at the forest. "So it is goodbye then."

"Rather farewell" she mumbled, also looking in the forest.

With a smile he looked at her. "You are full of surprise, aren't you? I would have not expected someone like you to make a difference between those two," he said, teasing her playfully.

The lynx girl grimaced.

"No, please, Jiddy! Don't get me wrong. I just wanted to say that such a remark is somehow... Hphh... old-fashioned, you know?"

She nodded. Her hair was much shorter than before. In the end they had to cut off the burned strands and now it did not even hang into her face anymore. At first she had not done anything about her hair, just shortly before her departure she had finally taken care of it.

"Where will you go?" he asked.

She turned towards him and blinked. She needed a moment to realize that he had been asking her something. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Dunno!" she replied honestly. "Actually I'd wanted to head for Fereau..." She fell silent and turned her head away. "Guess I'll cross the mountains," she added after a moment.

Cheza nodded. "OK! However I wish you the best of luck. *In this hour, my friends, I dare to leave/ you, my home and what I hold dear./ Please take care of my house,/ where I left behind my memories, my fear.*" he cited an old poem.

She smiled again and grabbed his shirt for an instant. She pulled lightly while looking to the ground. "I hope, you'll..., y'know, be happy," she mumbled and let go the shirt again.

"We? Well... I hope so too." He tousled her short hair.

"Jiddy!"

The two turned around and noticed the harvest mouse who stood on the verandah.

"Wait!" Dhail said.

She watched him while he joined them.

The harvest mouse just grabbed her arm, mumbled "Excuse us for a minute!" to Cheza and pulled the lynx girl away who was glaring at him, but did not resist the non too gentle treatment.

They stopped at the edge of the wood. Dhail inhaled deeply and then he started to talk lowly to the lynx. Cheza could not hear anything. Dhail talked the whole time, his face was serious and it was obvious that he did this rather out of a sense of duty than because of mere kindness. Jiddy on her for her part did not move at all, she just looked at him with this harsh expression that she displayed usually as Cheza had learned up to now. But she seemed to be listening carefully although not a single muscle in her face moved. Just her tail wagged animatedly while she looked at the harvest mouse who went on talking. She did not ask anything, nor did he make any sign that she had a right to do so.

Cheza watched them from the distance: They were really a strange couple, they were both as large as one another and the seriousness Dhail expressed was perfectly reflected by her face although he lacked these harsh features that gave her this natural appearance and could fool one about her feelings while he one the contrary looked rather sweet (at least in Cheza's eyes) and rather forced himself to look as serious as possible. But in this instant they looked like a strange set of brother and sister and Cheza could have been amused about this if he had not guessed that Dhail did talk to her about serious matters.

It took quite some time before the harvest mouse fell silent. He looked at her. She looked at him.

There were just the few sounds of the forest surrounding them.

Jiddy mumbled something and then turned around, waved her hand at the llama in a very cute, girlish way and without any other word she turned around and walked into the wood, leaving Dhail and the surprised Cheza behind.

Instantly Cheza ran over to Dhail. "Hey, why is she leaving..."

With his arm Dhail blocked his way. "Let her go," he mumbled lowly.

"But..."

"No, Cheza! Leave her alone" Dhail looked at his lover. "You have already said goodbye to her. It is sufficient and she knows that! It's already hard enough for her."

For a moment they fell silent and looked at the small shape of the feline which walked in between the trees, her muscled body illuminated by the rays of light whenever she past through one of them and then she disappeared into the dim twilight of the forest again while she seemed to be hidden by the sunlight which formed some kind of a bright curtain behind her that had fallen down. She walked through the low fern and bit by bit she vanished from their sight until there was no lynx to be seen anymore, completely surrounded by the moist haze of the forest.

“What have you said to her?” Cheza asked.

“That the storm spirit was after her, right from the start. That it was not a coincidence that she lost herself in that thunderstorm,” he replied. He was still looking at the place where the lynx had disappeared and when Cheza looked at him there was an unfamiliar expression on his face as if he had lost something. “And do you know what...?” He hesitated. “I have an idea why... But I don’t dare thinking about that.”

“But...” The llama was visibly confused. “But...”

Dhail looked at him, his face was expressionless but it was obvious that he eyed his mate, searching for something in that one’s face. Then he sighed and looked away again. Gently he took his hand. “Come on, Cheza. Let’s go back inside. Now I do have more than enough work to do and most of all...” Suddenly a light smile flickered in his face, something Cheza had dearly missed for a long time. “...we got to catch up with something...”

Cheza grinned and gave the smaller harvest mouse a gentle kiss and all of a sudden he picked the crying sorcerer up, carrying the protesting harvest mouse on his arms back inside their house.

End of Chapter 9

Annotation 1: The Sun God is the son of the Mother Goddess, brother of the Moon Goddesses. He is considered to be a god of judgement and is mostly venerated by men.