



Migratory Birds
Chapter 11

CAFÉ

Written by **kodayu**

Additional proof-reading by **Nameless**



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I hate mountains!" The cry echoed in between the rocks of the Andeleau Mountains, reflected by its cliffs and steep slopes.

The rocky surface of the Andelau mountains cracks up the earth between Lake Moonfire and the meandering Rumainent River which had sunken deeply into the stone, shaping a unique canyon. But the Andeleau Mountains were much less pleasant than their limit, the Rumainent River. The mountains were high, rocky and steep, a line of thin gray blades piercing into the sky. The perfect terrain for a mountaineer, hell for every other inexperienced traveller. There were no regular tracks, the area was much too dangerous and landslides quickly covered every track again. The only other route that led directly to the Rumainent River made a long detour around the mountains. So people who explored the Andeleau Mountains did it out of their own free will. They didn't have to. But there were still a lot of adventurous wanderers who tried to cross the mountains, a challenge real adventurers could hardly resist. But they risked their lives and they had to know it. The screes, the overhangs, the huge boulders and the slippery stone were clearly visible from below. There was no snow nor ice, the Andeleau Mountains were not that high. But they were hostile pins, a natural barrier, an almost perfect wall between Lake Moonfire's shore and the Rumainent River.

The lynx pondered whether she should try it or not. The cliff in her way was not that high. Perhaps she did not have to turn around.

She made a few steps back and scrutinized the small plateau she stood on.

It was nice weather: Few clouds in the sky, floating high above the ground, a perfectly blue sky, pleasant temperatures, almost no wind, perfect visibility. There would have been a nice panorama. But the lynx did not turn around.

She slowly kneeled down, touching the ground with her hands, one leg bended. She dashed off. Her feet hit the ground, accelerated the slender body with the huge backpack, throwing her forward until she lifted off, just hit another small boulder with one feet and then jumped fully off, floating in the air for a short instant.

With a cry the lynx got hold of the cliff's edge while she tried to resist her own weight pulling her down again. Her paws clawed into the stony surface while she moved carefully to get into a better position. She panted.

Then the lynx tried to pull herself up. But she was too heavy with the backpack on her shoulders. It was no use. She neither could let herself drop. It would have been a free fall of three times her own height and a landing on insecure ground. The lynx just hung there, unable to move.

"FUUUUCK!" the lynx cried and the cry echoed in between the rocks until the sound slowly faded in the distance.

"I need a rest," the lynx sighed, still hanging on the cliff.



Jaulesse and the Romainent River

It's been a hell of a day. Dealine sighed and pushed a strand of white hair from her face. The damn boatmen and boatwomen had once again hit the trail all at the same time. And everyone of them had wanted to get a meal as fast as possible before he or she got away. Most of them were otters, anyway. What could be expected from an otter, except a slick escape?

She sighed and wiped another dirty table, cleared away the glasses and went back behind the counter. She sighed once more. Those bastards were even much too miserly to give her a decent tip.

She uttered a curse.

The music box screamed heavily distorted, tinny music into the room. She switched it off again.

"Hey! I liked this!" someone from the kitchen yelled.

"Oh, come on, Ama. I just can't take this noise anymore," Dealine replied while she put the dirty dishes in the serving hatch.

"Just this tune! You can switch it off later," Ama begged. "Please!"

Dealine sighed and switched the music box on. High whistling tunes filled the room again, awfully kitschy music that made one's ears drone. She could have strangled him.

Ama danced through the swing door. "*Oh, what have I done? If I'd just know where she's gone. I'd travel to the edge of the world just to see her smile again...*" the huge marmot sang more or less accordingly to the tune from the music box.

"Ama!"

The marmot turned around and innocently looked into Dealine serious skunk face.

"You're a lost case! You know that?" she said without any trace of irony.

"Oh, come on! Don't be such a spoilsport. It's been a hard day for us, I know. But none should mope about it. It's over, isn't it?" He threw his short marmot arms in the air.

"I don't know where you picked up this song. But I assure you it's stupid!" she said while she arranged some of the clean glasses in the shelves.

He sighed. "Whay cayn't Y jest 'ave a lyttle bit o' fun, m'ladee?" he asked in his broad southern accent he usually hid pretty well.

She just couldn't resist smiling. "I understand, Ama!" she said with a sugary voice. "I'll shut up and instead I'll beat up some customers next time we got such a day."

"Pretty good idea! Just make sure they pay as long as they can." He smiled and switched off the music box on his way back to the kitchen.

"I just don't understand how you can still stand this damn job after so many summers," she said and dried the cleaned dishes.

Ama stuck his huge marmot head through the serving hatch. "My dear Dealine, I've been in this damn job for almost ten summers now and it had always fed me quite well. And I guess I will go on doing this job when you will have

married and have hundreds and thousands of cubs. So don't try to spoil my good mood. It has got to last for- at least- ten more summers."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Ama! But I already got a cub and it's absolutely enough for me," she replied and put the dried glasses in the shelves.

"I bet the right man could change your mind," Ama cried from the kitchen where he made a lot of noise with his pans and casseroles.

"As if anyone wanted a fuck-up like me," Dealine sighed.

"What?" Ama yelled through the noise of boiling oil.

"Nothing," the skunk replied loudly and exhaled. She took her purse, poured out the money she had earned today, quickly sorted the small gems and started to calculate this day's takings.

The sound of Ama's cooking drowned out everything else, just sometimes the noise from the road just in front of the window came through when a barrow or a steam engine passed by. The ordinary people on the road paid no attention to the small café in the wooden building stuck in between the many warehouses and shops which had been build just in front of the berth on the river's shore. The small wooden house with the crude carvings was quite old, a remain from a different age when this town- Jaulesse- had been an important trading post in between Fereau City and the Andeleau Mountains. But these days were long time past. Now this town was nothing but one of the many stops on the Romainent River, one as unimportant as the rest. There was little trade with the almost completely desert hinterland so that there was no real reason why the boatsmen and boatswoman should stop there. But they still did, some kind of a strange tradition kept this town alive. The town's small mines were much too unimportant to guarantee the survival of the whole population. But Jaulesse had some kind of dignity, something which kept it alive despite the fact that there were few people who ever lost themselves there. The only people who got there by their own free will might have been some crazy mountaineers who wanted to cross the Andeleau mountains.

The ring of the bells at the door interrupted Dealine's calculations.

A lynx had stepped in, a young, slender but nevertheless muscled boy who slowly went to the desk. His very short dark brow hair was tousled, his T-shirt and the shorts were dirty and ragged. Even the big back pack on his shoulder looked like it had seen better days.

"Hello!" the lynx said and looked at Dealine with strange, dark, slanting eyes. The voice was very feline: Weak and hoarse.

Dealine rose from the counter. "Hello!" she replied. "What can I do for you?" Much to her surprise she noticed that she was bigger than the feline.

"I've seen the notice in the window..." The waitress looked like she did not know what this was about so the lynx added: "I mean the one 'bout you searchin' a waitress..."

"Oh, that one..." She nodded and smiled, carefully looking at the lynx. "I don't want to disappoint you..." she said slowly. "...but we were searching for a waitress."

"I'm a girl."

Dealine screwed up her eyes and scrutinized the lynx again. The lynx was certainly smaller than the common lynx she had seen up to now. Her muscles obviously hid any kind of femininity if there was any at all. The chest could just as well be very muscled so that the T-shirt would hide her breasts. But the lynx' self-confident manner, her clothes, the way she walked and talked was much more male than female. Even the way she stood there in front of the bar at this moment and looked at the skunk from below her short messy hair was somehow aggressive in a very male way. Dealine knew well that feline women had much more willpower than other furs but with this lynx it seemed to be something different altogether. The lynx could have been one of the many young wanderers which roam the country but Dealine had never heard of a girl who had been foolish enough to travel all on her own. She hesitated.

"Should I undress?" the lynx asked bluntly.

Dealine was absolutely confused by this impudent question, she smiled in embarrassment. "I'm sorry!" she apologized, hiding her smile behind her paw. "You really don't look like a... girl."

"Phhh..." The lynx blew away a strand from her front. "I'm used to it. I'm not interested in makin' it public."

"Seems obvious," Dealine replied, hardly hiding the teasing tone in her voice.

The lynx looked at her with her strangely slanting eyes. "So what 'bout the job?"

"Well... Perhaps you could tell me your name first. I'm Dealine," she presented herself and held out her hand.

"Jiddy." the lynx girl answered with a much warmer tone and shook the waitress' hand. "Name's Jiddy!"

"So, Jiddy..." Dealine paused and seemed to consider how this name could fit to this person in front of her. "Don't you want to know the conditions first?"

Jiddy shortly looked down to the ground and raised her head up again, looking right into Dealine's eyes. "Y'know it seems like I don't've much choice in this town... I really need a job."

Dealine smiled warmly. "Well, that's certainly true. But I have to discuss this with my..."

"She's engaged!" Ama shouted from the kitchen. "A girl who looks like a boy is just perfect for this job. We were in need of a bouncer anyway!"

Dealine rolled her eyes. "Don't you want to present yourself at least. Perhaps afterwards she'll no longer be *that* eager to get the job."

The noise of falling pans was proving that Ama was on his way. The swing door opened and suddenly a huge, massive, already a little bit gray marmot in a dirty white kitchen apron, with an old-fashioned pince-nez and a white chef's hat stood right in front of the lynx, even he was surpassing the small feline. He held out his hand. "Hi! I'm Ama, the chef in this dive," he said with a deep but also gentle voice.

Dealine hit her elbow into Ama's side while Jiddy grabbed the huge, scarred paw.



Ama

“Isn’t she perfect? Isn’t she cute?” Ama asked with visible enthusiasm. “If I’d be twenty summers younger, you’d have to be careful.” he said mischievously while he bend down a bit to get closer to the lynx girl.

Something like a smile flitted over Jiddy’s lips. “Nice to meet’cha,” she replied.

“I’d even have taken you if you’d been a boy. A feline that’s smaller than me is a truly comforting sight,” Ama said, thus earning him another hit from Dealine. “What are you hitting me the whole time? I meet the girl of my life and the whole time you’ve nothing better to do than disturbing our first rendezvous.”

“Don’t worry about this senile old marmot,” Dealine said to Jiddy. “He gets normal after he has taken his medicine.”

“I don’t need medicine,” Ama protested. “I am young and vigorous. I...”

“Ama!” Dealine interrupted him brutally. “Get back into your kitchen. This is girls’ business!”

Suddenly Ama stood to attention and saluted. “Aye, aye, ma’am!” And he marched back through the swing door.

Dealine symbolically cut her throat with her hand and then drew a chair closer and signed to Jiddy to sit down while she walked around the table and sat down herself. “So, where had we stopped? I wanted to tell you about the conditions of your employment...” She paused, thinking about what she wanted to say next. “I cannot hide that we do not earn half as much as we want to, so we can’t pay you very much. But you get free meals and drinks. We open at ten in the morning and usually close at ten in the night. Sometimes we open earlier when there’s a lot of ships leaving. Sometimes we close later when there’s still some action going on. Normally we are working the whole time but when we won’t have too many costumers you can go earlier if you want.”

“What’s my cut?” Jiddy asked while she observed Dealine who bend over the table, observing her hands which lay upon it.

“We can pay you two blue stones a day. You get it at the end of the week,” She looked up and carefully observed the lynx girl’s reaction.

For a moment Jiddy was calculating in her mind and then she nodded. “It’s OK! I wanna do it,” she said simply.

“I promise you won’t regret it.” she said and they shook their hands to sign the agreement.

“So what do I’ve gotta do first?” Jiddy asked and stood up from her chair.

“You want to start right now?” Dealine asked incredulously.

“Yeah, why?” Jiddy asked and looked right into Dealine’s huge black skunk eyes.

Dealine smiled, shrugged her shoulders and stood up too. “Alright! Why not?” she said. “You need an apron?”

“Well...” Jiddy looked at her dirty clothes. “Guess not.”

“So, let’s get your backpack to the kitchen and then I’ll show you everything.”

“OK!” Jiddy grabbed her backpack and followed Dealine through the swing door.

“This is Ama’s realm,” Dealine said while they stood in a pretty small room with an old gas cooker, two small tables, many chock-full shelves and a row of

different pans, knives and other tools hanging on the wall right above the cooker. It was real hot in the kitchen, just a small window led to the backyard and a small door somewhere else. The tables were crammed full with vegetables such as bamboo shoots, celery, carrots, itrakea¹, meeya beans¹, onions, mammoth trunk¹, cabbage and many others, some of them already cut to pieces, others hardly washed.

“Watch out!” Ama cried, carrying a pot of boiling oil to the cooker and putting it onto the fire. “Hey! If you want you can taste some of Ama’s unique fried vegetables in some minutes.”

“Thanks!” Jiddy said.

“So! That’s the kitchen,” Dealine said but then noticed Jiddy’s interest for Ama’s cooking.

“Why do you fry ’em now? There’re no guests!?” Jiddy asked the busy cook.

“Ha! There’s you!” Ama answered with a smile. “No, it’s a little trick: You fry the stuff quickly and then get it out of the oil. This way you need less time when you have to finished it. Besides the vegetables are much better when you do them this way: They don’t dry that much.”

Jiddy nodded, observing Ama who took a plate of cut vegetables and threw them into some bowl with something like a thin pastry.

“I’m sorry, Jiddy but we should go on with our tour. You can watch him later,” Dealine said.

“OK!” Jiddy said and turned around to Dealine.

“Well, normally Ama hands the food through the serving hatch so we won’t have to go into the kitchen. We have to hand the orders to Ama. Besides...” She hesitated, lowered her head and nervously eyed the lynx. “...you can write, can’t you?”

Jiddy pulled a face. “Yeah, My’an²! Sort of,” she answered.

“That should do it as long as I can read it.” She smiled confidently. “Sorry, I should have asked first. Alright! We hand the orders to Ama. We are responsible to clean the dishes and to prepare the drinks. Besides this door...” She pointed to the other small door. “...leads to the basement. We store our supplies down there.” Dealine went back to the restaurant, followed by Jiddy. “Alright! The bar!” She went behind the bar and Jiddy tried to get a view. It was real small, there was hardly enough space for a single person who was stuck in between the shelves (occupied by glasses and all different kinds of bottles), a sink and the serving hatch. Dealine sighed after she had gotten an impression of the mess with the dirty dishes in the sink. “Perhaps it’ll be a little bit too much to explain everything today. I’d suggest that I’ll care for the bar for the next time and you’ll take care of our guests. Alright?” She asked and looked at Jiddy.

“That’s OK, I’ve got experience,” Jiddy said as if it meant something utterly different.

Dealine smiled faintly. “That’s wonderful. It would be a little bit too much for me to take care of an absolute beginner.”

“One time Ama’s unique fried vegetables!” Ama cried through the serving hatch and pressed on a small bell whose high ping sounded through the entire room.

Dealine took the plate and put it on the bar. “I’d advise some sauce with it.”

But Jiddy didn’t seem to hear that comment as she stared on the plate crammed full with steaming pieces of different vegetables covered by some light brow crunchy crust, the faint scent instantly got into her nostrils so that her mouth watered and she felt her stomach rumbling.

“There’s sauce in the bottles on the tables behind you,” Dealine noticed, somehow surprised by the visible hunger of the lynx girl.

Jiddy turned around, grabbed the small sauce bottles and climbed on one of the high bar stools. After Dealine had handed her a fork she instantly began eating, enjoying the spicy pepper taste of the sauce mixed with the rather faint smell of the vegetables until she felt the hotness of the vegetables which made it necessary to eat a little bit slower.

“Real yummy,” she said with her mouth full, obviously munching her meal.

Dealine, leaning on the bar, couldn’t resist smiling: Obviously the lynx girl’s table manners were not very sophisticated. “Ama loves making exotic meals from his home country,” she said.

Jiddy nodded while swallowing another tasty piece of broccoli with soy sauce.

“Ama! What’s the name of the town you’re coming from?” Dealine cried.

“Ty Houanouk!” Ama shouted.

Jiddy looked up. “But that’s far to the south,” she said.

“Yeah, Ama’s a real stranger.” Dealine answered.

Jiddy concentrated on some small sweet fried carrots, observed by Dealine.

With a ring the door to the café opened and a bear and a moose, both in heavy working clothes, entered while discussing something about the marriage of someone or something equally meaningful. They sat down at a table right next to the window.

Before Dealine had even been able to push herself off the bar, Jiddy had jumped down from her stool and went over to the two costumers.

“Can I help you?” she asked after she had gotten to the two workers.

They stopped talking and eyed at the lynx girl for a moment. “You’re new in here, right?” the moose asked.

“Yeah, just started,” Jiddy said and looked at the two who were still much too occupied with staring at the lynx. “So what can I bring you?” she asked once more.

“Ale and a piece of meat,” the bear said without taking his eyes of the lynx girl.

“Fried tomatoes,” the moose said absent-mindedly, equally staring at Jiddy.

“OK!” Jiddy said, turned around and went back.

Dealine had started doing her dishes again, despite observing Jiddy from the corner of her eyes. She put down a cleaned glass. Maybe her choice had not been too bad.

Slowly Dealine turned the heavy key in the rusty keyhole and locked the door.

Ama stretched himself and yawned. "Another day survived!" he said and turned around, looking at Dealine who put the key back into her leather bag and Jiddy who had shouldered her backpack again and observed the skunk and the marmot. In the dim light of a nearby street lamp the three furs were almost completely unrecognizable, only their shapes distinguished them: The rather fat body of the marmot, the slender shape of the skunk and a smaller, muscled figure with pointed ears.

After Dealine had gotten closer to the marmot and the lynx, Ama waved his hand, simply said: "Good night!", turned around and ponderously went down the road next to the silently flowing broad river.

Dealine took a deep breath and looked at Jiddy, trying to get an impression of the lynx girl's face. "So, where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

"I gonna look for a place in the warehouses!" Jiddy answered.

After a day of observing the strange lynx this was just the kind of answer Dealine had expected. She screwed up her eyes in order to look at Jiddy. But she was not able to see into Jiddy's face but its serious shape was proof enough for her that the lynx girl was, indeed, not joking at all. "No, you won't!" she said simply.

"Uh?"

"You're going to sleep in my appartement!" Dealine stated with a serious tone which allowed no objection.

"I don't wanna bother you," Jiddy replied nevertheless.

"You don't bother me, Jiddy. If you can stand children, there will be no problem," Dealine said, turned around and slowly went up the road.

Jiddy followed her without saying anything.

They were climbing a road which led away from the river. As the town had been build right next to the river, most of the houses had been build on the slope of the canyon in which the river was flowing. The town had originally been founded on the small even area next to the river's shore, but as it had grown the houses had to be build on the slope of the canyon so that most of the inhabited houses now stood above the canyon's ground and overlooked the river which wound its way in between the rocks.

The night was still warm, no clouds covered the sky so that the stars were clearly visible as well as the crescent of Heya, the golden moon and the small darkly shimmering scarred surface of Koda, the black moon. Tezu, the red moon had not risen above the edges of the canyon yet. But the streets were dimly lit by the old gas lamps which stood here and there, illuminating the silent town, the only sound the steps of Jiddy and Dealine on the cobbled streets.

They had climbed the road which had gotten real steep as they approached the canyon's edge. Dealine headed for one of the small wooden houses. There was no sign that would had distinguished it from the other ones in this street: It was small, made of wood, with just two floors and a steep roof, some primitive carvings on the front which could represent animals but Jiddy was unable to recognize them.

“Here we are!” Dealine said and climbed the three steps to the door, took a key out of her bag and opened the door. “Please be quiet!” she added. “My daughter should be sleeping by now.”

Jiddy nodded and followed Dealine inside. They found themselves in a stairwell, a narrow, steep staircase leading to the second floor. Dealine cautiously went up and Jiddy tried to follow her as silently as possible. Dealine opened a door at the end of the stair and the two got into a room, dimly lit by an oil lamp. The room was pretty small like everything in this house. Most of it was occupied by an old reddish couch, but there was also a table, four stools, a shelf with books and such stuff, another shelf on the wall with kitchen stuff and an iron oven in a corner. Toys, cuddly toys and children’s books were scattered all over the floor.

“Come in!” Dealine whispered and closed the door behind Jiddy. “I’m sleeping there...” She pointed to a door on the other side of the room. “...with my daughter. You can have the couch. The other door...” She pointed to an even smaller door next to the first one. “...goes to the bathroom or least we call it a bathroom.”

Jiddy nodded.

“Do you need a pillow?” Dealine asked.

Jiddy shook her head.

“A blanket?”

“I’ve got a sleepin’ bag,” Jiddy whispered.

“Alright! If you’ll be in need of anything, just tell me.” Dealine nodded and slowly went to the door where the bathroom had to be.

Jiddy looked around: It was a poor appartement for a mother and her daughter and she really did not want to bother them but the possibility of sleeping in a real bed (or at least something almost similar) had been just too tempting. She put down her backpack and pulled out the sleeping bag.

The door of the bathroom opened again and Dealine stepped back into the room. For a moment she stood next to the door, took a deep breath and pushed the hair from her face, then she smiled. For the first time Jiddy noticed that the skunk was anything but bad looking. She was rather big for a skunk and not totally slender, but of some mature beauty as her curves were still perfectly shaped, the black fur with its white markings emphasizing the lines of her body. She could have been proud of her long thick tail and the equally full curly hair which reached to her shoulders. Her simple dress, blue jeans and a white blouse, fit perfectly as well. But in this very moment the exhaustion and tiredness of a this day full of work claimed its prize: Her limbs hung tiredly, her face was featureless, her eyes were mere dark spots and heavy bags under them seemed to carry all of the burden’s weight. Her muzzle twitched slightly.

Dealine sighed. “Are you in need of anything?” she asked wearily.

Jiddy shook her head and smiled. “Thanks!” she whispered as gently as she was able to.



Dealine

Dealine waved one hand. "Never mind!" she replied. "I am happy that I could help you." She paused and looked to the floor. "I'll introduce you to my daughter tomorrow morning so don't be surprised about a nimble girl running about."

Jiddy nodded.

"Fine! Good night then," Dealine said and went into her bedroom.

"Night!" Jiddy said and looked after the skunk.

Slowly she started to undress and threw her cloths onto her sleeping bag. Then she went over to the oil lamp and blew it out. She tried to find the way back to the couch, lay down and tucked herself up.

She looked up to the invisible wooden ceiling, her arms crossed behind her head. There was no sound but her own regular breath. Unknown scents lingered inside the room.

She looked into the darkness in front of her until she fell asleep.

An incredibly loud shrill cry woke her up. She was instantly awake and tried to get out of her sleeping bag, turned around and so fell from the couch.

"Aaaaah. There's a naked boy on the couch."

The lynx desperately fought with the sleeping bag, tried to find a way out of it.

"What's up, dear?" somebody asked with concern.

"There's a naked boy on the couch!"

"Oh, my goddess!"

The lynx kicked around inside the sleeping bag, tried to find the opening, hit around with her hands until she finally found it. She looked out of the sleeping bag. Her hair an real mess, pointing into every possible direction. She tried to get her bearings but that was rather difficult because her mind was stuck somewhere in between sleep and an instinctive state of alarm, none of it being helpful in this moment.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Jiddy. You're alright?" somebody asked.

The lynx tried to rub the sleep from her eyes. And finally she was able to see the skunk that kneeled in front of him and a young otter ³ girl whose head poked out of the door to the bedroom.

"You're alright, Jiddy?" the skunk asked once more.

Jiddy tried to nod but the movement was rather uncontrolled and so she waved her head around in the air. But this caused her a headache and she held her hand to her head to prevent it from any other movements. She swallowed. "I'm OK!" she growled. She cleared her throat. "It's... I'm... Nothin'."

Dealine stood up. "I'm sorry, Jiddy! I should have warned you or at least I should have watched out for this little fur ball."

Jiddy shook her head to clear her mind but the headache just got worse.

"Gelly, that's Jiddy. She's our guest." Dealine said to the little otter girl who was still much too afraid to come out of the bedroom but nevertheless carefully observed the half naked lynx who sat on the floor in her sleeping bag. "That's not been polite to disturb her!" Dealine said with emphasize.

"How can she be a boy?" the otter girl asked.

"She's not a boy. That's not nice to call her a boy. She's a girl just like you and me!" Dealine explained. "Now be a nice girl and say hello to Jiddy."

First the otter girl didn't move then she slowly got out of the bedroom and approached the lynx, but then it seemed like she had changed her mind and hid behind her mother's legs. "Hello!" she said shyly.

Somehow Jiddy realized that it had to be her nakedness that intimidate the girl and quickly she grabbed her T-shirt and held it to her chest. "Hello, Gelly!" she said to the otter girl and weakly tried to smile. She imagined that she had to look rather odd with her chaotic hair and her fur had to be a mess as well and her bad attempt of a smile didn't certainly make it any better.

"Well! Now everyone's up, so we can have a breakfast," Dealine said with faked cheerfulness, trying to smooth over the awkward situation and scratched herself behind her black ear. But she didn't move for a moment just like she tried to remember something. She was dressed in a wide pink T-shirt with the some white inscription and soft black shorts which reached to her knees.

"What's that writing?" Jiddy asked rather disjointedly.

Dealine needed a moment it understand what Jiddy had ment. "Oh, that! It's Latallian⁴. It says..." She stopped abruptly, blinked, turned around on the spot and said: "Perhaps I should dress first!" And she disappeared in her bedroom, leaving Gelly and Jiddy alone.

Gelly looked after her mother but then she scrutinized the lynx girl again who was still sitting on the floor, covering her chest with a T-shirt. "Are you really a girl?" Gelly asked warily.

Jiddy nodded. "Yeah, think so..."

"Why do you have no breasts then?" Gelly asked.

For a moment Jiddy glared at the otter. But the young girl did not seem to notice that. "I've got 'em," she said. "They just ain't so big."

Gelly still looked critically at the lynx girl but then she turned around and ran after her mother.

Jiddy stood up and pulled down the sleeping bag and tried to quickly put on her T-shirt and her shorts. Just in time because Dealine came out of the door again, fully dressed in the same clothes as the day before. Gelly sped out of the bedroom too, having replaced her pyjama with some soft dark brown leather clothes which fit perfectly to the dark brown otter fur.

Dealine sighed while she observed her daughter who had discovered Jiddy's backpack and began to rummage in it.

"Hey! That's not polite to rummage about in someone else's bag," Dealine said to Gelly.

"'s OK! There's nothin' to be lost," Jiddy said and waved her hand.

"Cool!" Gelly cried and pulled out a compass.

"Be careful with that one," Dealine admonished her daughter once more. But it seemed to be useless as Gelly had already grabbed a book and started to navigate in it. Dealine sighed. "She's really a furball!" she said to Jiddy.

Jiddy answered with something like an understanding smile.

"Let's get something to eat. Do you like chicory coffee?" Dealine asked.



Gelly

"I dunno. Never heard of it. But I'd try," Jiddy answered and observed Dealine who went to the oven and started to fire it. "Can I help ya?" Jiddy asked.

"Well,..." Dealine hesitated. "There're plates, mugs and such stuff on the shelf over there. Perhaps you could set the table."

"OK!" Jiddy went over to the shelf on the wall which was crammed full with crockery which didn't go together so well. There were all kinds of differently shaped and colored plates, mugs, glasses. On a shelf underneath the first one were pots with marmalade, bread, dried fruit, half of a small cheese and a paper pack of cereals. Jiddy simply put everything on the small table while Dealine was busy with firing the oven and then preparing the coffee in an old metal pot.

Finally the three furs sat down around the table and Dealine poured some of the hot dark liquid into Jiddy's mug. The sun shone through the small skylights illuminating the room with its pointed ceiling and the huge wooden beams. Dust danced in the rays of light.

After Jiddy had taken the first gulp she eyed the liquid for a moment.

"You don't like it?" Dealine asked while she poured some of the chicory coffee in her own mug.

"Well, it ain't bad," Jiddy answered. "Didn't know it though."

"It can't match real coffee... but..." Dealine didn't go on. After she had noticed that Jiddy was just leaning on the table, drinking her coffee, she added: "Serve yourself!"

"Thanks!" Jiddy said, put down her mug and cut off a slice of bread.

"I want bread, too!" Gelly cried and proudly took possession of the slice which Jiddy handed her.

Jiddy put some marmalade on her slice and as Gelly cried that she wanted marmalade too, so Jiddy put some marmelade on hers as well.

"What does a nice girl say?" Dealine asked.

"Thankff!" Gelly mumbled with her mouth full.

Dealine sighed while she put some cereals in her plate.

"It isn't easy carin' 'bout a child all alone," Jiddy stated. Carefully she looked at the skunk as this was also some kind of question.

"Hell, no!" Dealine answered. "I'm just happy that the family which lives underneath us cares about Gelly as long as I have to work. But it's no good for a cub to see her mother so rarely."

Jiddy nodded and observed Gelly who greedily ate her piece of bread.

Dealine observed Jiddy for a short moment, then she said: "If it doesn't bother you I'd like to make a proposal: We won't need you every day in the café so it would be nice if you'd take care of Gelly for this time. In return you can live with us as long as you want. What do you think about that?"

The lynx was a little bit surprised for a moment. She gave Dealine a strange look as if testing her seriousness. But the skunk was just busy with mixing her cereals and the chicory coffee in her bowl. "That's nice, but I'll pay ya," Jiddy answered after a while.

Dealine lowered her eyes to her plate where the cereals swam in some coffee. "You don't have to. We have to pay our rent with or without you, so it doesn't matter if there's one person more or less."

"At least I wanna pay for food'n stuff," Jiddy replied with odd caution.

"Good!" Dealine nodded. "So we have a deal?" she asked.

"We've got a deal!" Jiddy said and held out her paw.

Dealine smiled faintly, took the lynx paw and shook it.

"Ama! Is the meat bloody?" Dealine shouted through the serving hatch.

"Yes!" Ama yelled out of the kitchen's noise.

"Alright!" Dealine put the two plates down on the bar. "Grilled meat with beans and fried crickets."

Jiddy nodded, took the two plates and carefully carried them through the overcrowded, noisy café, being careful not to stumble over some customers' feet or tail as those occupied almost all of the café's space. There were a lot of otters from the boats but a lot of dock workers as well and all of them had for some incomprehensible reason decided to have lunch in Ama's café today.

"Meat and crickets!" Jiddy said and put down the plates on a small table occupied by a gray fox and a weasel woman.

"Thanks, lad!" the fox said and went on talking with the woman.

Jiddy tried to find a way back to the bar.

"Hey, lad!" a rat yelled towards her.

She stood still and looked at him.

"Could we have another round of ale?"

Jiddy nodded and went to the bar. "Heard it?" she asked Dealine.

Dealine nodded and put three more plates on the bar. She looked onto her notepad. "Flavoured rice with vegetables, fried touliau spider and... what's that?" She looked onto the plate.

"Guess tomato ... that tomato thing...," Jiddy said, also looking at the plate.

"Fricassee," Dealine added. "Ama calls it fricassee. Looks tasty, doesn't it?" She grabbed some glasses, began to draw the ale and then switched the music box on that stood on a small board above the bar.

Instantly the room was filled with the tinny noise of music.

Jiddy- who had just been busy settling up with some otters- froze completely, except for her tail that started to wag erratically she was completely motionless.

The otters stared at the lynx waitress, they could see that her fur had bristled, her eyes narrowed and her lips twitched, randomly baring her sharp gritted teeth. Her paws clenched around the purse she held.

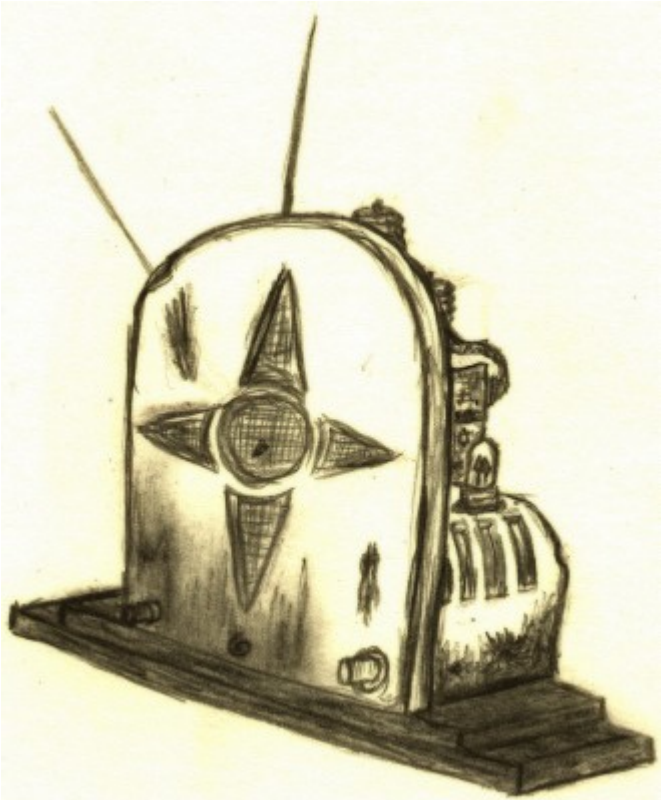
Dealine did not notice anything at all, busy drawing the ale.

"Everything alright?" one of the otters asked Jiddy.

The narrowed slanting eyes with the tiny rhombic pupils fixed their gaze on him.

Instinctively the otter tensed, feeling mighty uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"'s nothin'," Jiddy was able to utter.



The Music Box

The otter put on an anxious smile. "Fine," he said. "So...!?" He looked at her, hardly able to resist her glare.

"What?"

"Could I have my change...?" he asked.

Jiddy blinked, looked down at the purse in her paws as if she had to remind herself what it was good for and what she was supposed to do with it. "Sorry," she mumbled, quickly counting his change, laying it on the table and then leaving for the bar as quickly as she could.

"What was that?" another otter asked.

The first otter looked after Jiddy, studying her back. "No idea!" he answered, exhaling, releasing the tension.

Jiddy was standing at the bar and stared at the music box. Of course, she had noticed the strange device before but now she looked at it with a very strange expression of aggressive anxiety and a complete lack of understanding. She was as tense as an animal meeting an unknown beast.

Finally Dealine could not prevent noticing her strange behaviour. "Have you never seen a music box before?" the skunk asked her.

"It's magic?" Jiddy asked.

Dealine looked at her and shrugged her shoulders. "No idea. I think it's technology. You should ask Ama, he purchased it." He finished drawing the last ale and set the glasses on a tray. "Here you go," she said to Jiddy.

The lynx girl was still staring at the music box, her fur was still bristled, but her tail was wagging less strongly now. Obviously she did not feel at ease at all, but she forced herself to look away from the music box and to take the tray. The tinny noises let a cold shiver run up her spine but she forced herself to do her duties, cleared away the dirty dishes from a table, took some orders and went back to the bar where Dealine had already prepared some meals which had to be carried to the tables. Jiddy took up a cloth to clear some tables and put it in one of her shorts' pockets so that it hung out off it while she balanced the dishes on her paws and arms. Whenever she breathed she could smell the moist heat of the café which was filled with the scent of uncountable meals, fat, sweet smell of ale, the dry spicy odour of coffee and the dull sticking smell of sweaty fur. All these scents swirled around her while she strode to and fro in the café, carrying whatever was needed to be carried without wondering what Ama's kitchen was able to produce nor what was ordered by their guests. She could feel the effort in her legs and arms but this was nothing in comparison to the music box noises. She did never feel fully at ease when she was surrounded by so many people, especially in such a small room but the strange music made it even worse. She tried to ignore it, focussing on her work and reminded herself that she knew far worse than this.

Nevertheless she was happy when Dealine switched the music box off after the guests had left after lunchtime. She relaxed again, sat down at the bar and happily devoured leftovers from Ama's kitchen.

Dealine lazily cleaned some glasses and Ama rummaged around in his realm. With satisfaction Jiddy bite into the bloody meat of some piece of meat as she felt like her late lunch appeased her hungrily grumbling stomach.

The bells at the door rang. "The fish's here!" a boy cried, kicked the door open with his foot and walked in, carrying three heavy boxes with fresh fish into the café. He headed directly for the kitchen.

"Oh, wonderful! Ama already anticipated you..." Dealine said to him and quickly opened the swing door so that the boy could walk right through.

"There you are!" Ama welcomed his visitor as he came into the room.

Just before he disappeared behind the swing door the lynx raised her head from her place at the bar and took a quick look at the new arrival while he walked past: He was a muscled, slender marten, maybe a little bit older and certainly bigger than her. Curly brown hair covered his head. He wore a dirty, stained boiler suit, an equally abused shirt, leather gloves and shoes made from the same material. His light brown, almost yellowish eyes shimmered in the dark brow fur of his face. She noticed that his small fluffy tail wagged. But she couldn't smell anything as he was surrounded by a cloud of fishy odour.

The lynx rubbed her sensible nose and went on eating while Ama and the marten noisily discussed something in the kitchen.

"Well, if they don't have any I can't bring you any. Sorry, Ama," the marten said while he walked backwards out of the kitchen.

"Ah!" Ama remarked in a derogatory manner just when the swing door closed.

"Want something to drink, Spane?" Dealine asked the boy after he had turned around to the skunk.

The marten rubbed his paws. "Sure!" he answered. "Ale would be nice..." While Dealine got busy with the ale the marten suddenly noticed the small shape of the lynx chewing on his meat: Judging by his size the lynx had to be quite young even if his muscles suggested otherwise.

"Hi, there!" Spane said and raised his paw as he tried to meet the stranger's eyes.

The lynx slightly raised her head. "Hi!" she replied shortly and went on eating.

"Hey, Dealine...", the marten said. "I thought you'd take me if you get no waitress..."

Dealine smiled disarmingly and put down the glass of ale right in front of him. "But we got one!"

The marten looked inquiringly. "Who? You don't mean that one...?" He pointed to the lynx.

"Gotta problem with *that one*?" the lynx asked sharply. The blood of her meal had dyed the fur around her mouth.

The marten rose his hands. "Hey, you got to admit: You just don't look like a... waitress."

"How does a waitress look like?" the lynx replied coldly while devouring some more meat.

The marten jumped on the stool next to the lynx girl and leaned over to her. "Maybe waitress is just not the right job for you..." He spoke softly and smiled

towards her. Every single gesture of his was smooth and displaying well controlled strength, visibly determined to impress her.

She eyed him from the corner of her eyes but then just went on eating.

Dealine carefully observed the two furs.

Spane still leaned over to the lynx girl, waiting for a response but Jiddy seemed to have no intention of replying anything. Finally the marten gave it up, shrugged his shoulders, sat straight up on his stool and drank some of his ale. "What a shame, I really wanted that job! This would have been much better than carrying fish around all day long," he stated.

Dealine smiled. "I really don't know if you had been the right one," she replied.

"Why not?" he asked curiously while he took a huge gulp from his ale.

Dealine's smile got even broader. "You know pretty well why..."

"Oh, come on, what do you think of me!?"

Dealine smiled knowingly, preferred to remain silent and turned around to clean some more dishes.

They remained silent for some time while the marten drank his ale, the lynx finished his meal, the skunk took care of the dirty dishes until Ama suddenly came in and switched on the music box. Instantly the room was overwhelmed by tinny sounds of something like distant flutes and Jiddy froze, her fur bristling in the very same instant the sounds reached her pointed ears.

"Ama, is that necessary?" Dealine asked somehow desperately.

"Helps me to concentrate," the marmot replied with a smile.

"I'd like to know what could possibly distract you!" the skunk replied with a sigh.

"You!" he breathed and instantly Dealine hit him with her towel.

The marmot man laughed.

"I am sorry, Mister Chef, but first we must be careful with that thing and second, it seems to me like our waitress does not like music box music," Dealine stated and mercilessly switched off the music box.

The marmot groaned unhappily and looked at Jiddy (just like the marten did) who was still visibly tense.

"Alright, alright, you win," he said and walked back into the kitchen "

The marten was still looking at Jiddy, studying the tense lynx girl with interest, noticing the strong muscles that had suddenly showed up beneath her fur.

Spane looked inquiringly at Dealine, but the skunk just shrugged her shoulders very lightly and then resumed her work.

After a moment Jiddy tried to focus on her meal again.

"Jiddy!" Ama's voice sounded out of the kitchen.

The lynx raised her head.

"It's time for another cooking lesson," Ama shouted.

Without hesitating Jiddy pushed her plate away, jumped off the bar stool and went past the surprised marten without deign to look at him and disappeared in the kitchen. Spane looked at Dealine in amazement but the skunk just responded by giving him a sarcastic smile and once more she shrugged shoulders.

"Yeah?" The lynx girl asked the huge figure of the marmot which was already busy with gutting the fish.

Ama swirled around. His stained apron waved around in the air. "Stuffed fish!" he answered and dangerously pointed with his knife at the much smaller lynx. "And this parsley is just waiting for your..." He raised his eyebrows in an insinuating way. "...*treatment*..." And he pointed to the heap of the green herbs which lay on the wooden table in the middle of the chock-full kitchen.

Jiddy exhaled audibly.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Ama noticed Jiddy's lack of enthusiasm. "No complaints! The way to real *cuisine* is hard and laborious." And he turned around to his fish again.

"Just dunno what choppin' herb's gotta do with *cool*..., *coo*..." She tried to speak it out properly but she failed and thus just took up a kitchen knife and a plate for chopping the herbs.

"You have to start from the bottom and one day you'll be at the top," Ama philosophized while he cut the slimy entrails out of one of the huge fish. "Like climbing a mountain," he added.

"I hate mountains..." Jiddy mumbled so that Ama could not hear her.

"Or the military," Ama added but this time Jiddy was the one who did not hear him.

For some time they worked in silence, just the fast sound of Jiddy's knife on the wooden plate echoed through the small room as she cut the herbs as fine as possible. Her fingers held the green, wet plants while her other hand mechanically chopped with small movements. If Ama had seen her handling the big knife he might have been impressed but he was much too busy with his own duties. She pushed the first heap of chopped herbs aside and took another amount of parsley, pressed it together tightly and started anew. Meanwhile Ama carefully cut the fish open and with fast experienced cuts he detached the entrails from the surroundings fabric, pushed the slimy mess aside with his knife before he took care of the uncountable bones. From outside a few faint noises suggested that Dealine was taking care of some costumers which had come. At least the skunk was talking lowly with someone.

"You do not like music box music?" Ama asked after a while.

Jiddy did not answer.

"It was really hard to get a music box in here and it cost a fortune. We had to get it all the way from the Western Coast. But it's really worth it. Some people just come here to listen to the music box. So... I am rather surprised to meet someone who does not like it..." He waited for an answer but there was none. The marmot pulled a face she could not see.

"It's magic?"

Ama pursed his lips. "Well, the guy who sold it said that it was some technology from the Age of Dawn or something similar. I have no idea if that's true. Maybe he just wanted to make that thing more interesting. I have no idea. Well it was certainly that expensive... Ugh!" Ama exclaimed when he cut a fish open and the entrails spilled out as a foul slimy mess. "Hey, I thought this fish

was fresh?" he yelled in case Spane was still sitting in the café. He hmped when there was no response and went on working.

"May I ask you somethin'?"

"Hm?" Ama's ear twitched when Jiddy suddenly decided to say something.

"How long're you workin' here?" Jiddy asked.

"Well..." He thought about it. "It must be about eleven summers by now..." He threw one fish aside and took another one.

"You're jokin'!" Jiddy's mechanical chopping stopped for a short moment.

"No, no!" he replied while cut violently through an especially resistant fish. "I'm working here since I got here and that's about eleven summers ago."

Jiddy nodded knowingly although he couldn't see that. "I was wonderin' how y'get along in such a small town."

"Hm..." He hesitated and then laughed shortly. "I don't know myself... Maybe I work too much to think about that... After all I really have to do that if we want to have something to eat..."

"We?"

"Dealine and me, I mean," he added quickly.

"You've got no family?" Jiddy asked carefully.

The marmot sighed. "No, never had. Maybe I'm just not the right guy for that: Every women I knew ran away from me after a short time." He shrugged his shoulders while he carefully picked some loose bones out of the fish. "Even all my waitresses did. Dealine's the only one who was able to bear me for more than just a few full moons."

"How long d'y'know each other?" Jiddy picked up another amount of herbs. Almost the whole kitchen was now filled with the faint scent of fresh parsley.

"Since she got here. That must be about seven summers... How old's Gelly? Six, right? Well, yes! Must be a bout seven summers ago by now," he said thoughtfully.

"Since that time?"

"Well..." He sighed. "I shouldn't tell you... But, well! Dealine got stuck here. She was very pregnant, had no money and desperately needed a job. I had just lost another waitress who'd made off with some boatman or so and there stood this skunk: Pregnant, without anything but the clothes she wore and begged for a job because she had to pay for herself and the baby she'd have. She got the job and well, I still don't understand how she managed all that... A few full moons later, Gelly was born and I expected her to stay away for at least another full moon or even longer. But a few days later she was already back again, a small otter in her arm and wanted to work again. I tried to convince her that she had to stay in bed but she didn't even consider that. I guess she feared I'd fire her... I never saw anything like that: She held her baby in one arm and carried the plates and glasses and whatever in the other. After some time she was able to put Gelly in a small basket which she hid behind the bar because she feared to embarrass the guests. I still don't understand how she got through all that... I tried to make it as easy as possible for her but she always refused my support..." He fell silent for a moment. "She's really admirable!" he added lowly.

"Hm!" Jiddy seemed to agree and they worked in silence for some more time. "Done!" Jiddy said after a while and pushed aside the last heap of chopped parsley.

Ama turned his head around and eyed Jiddy's workplace. "So fast?" He studied the big heap of cut herbs which lay on the plate Jiddy had used. "You really know how to use a knife," he noticed with true respect. After all the parsley was not recognizable anymore as she had chopped it so finely that it rather looked like some kind of wet green powder or maybe mud or whatever. "Well... yes... erh... Maybe I can show you how to gut a fish now..." He said that because he did not know anything better.

Without hesitating Jiddy went over to the huge marmot who stepped back and thus made a little bit of room for the much smaller lynx who stood in front of the table where the fish lay around. Most of them were already treated but some smaller ones still had to be gutted.

"Here!" he hold out a fish and a knife. "Try!"

Jiddy took the knife and the fish and started by cutting it open.

First Ama watched in amazement because she really did handle the knife with speed and dexterity, but bit by bit his amazement changed to surprise and finally to mere horror when she had succeeded in reducing the fish to a heap of shreds.

"Stop! Stop it, for the Gods' sake," Ama ordered when Jiddy was about to grab another fish.

Jiddy looked at him in surprise.

"You don't have to cut it apart. Our guest still want to recognize the fish," he said. "You don't have to make a fricassee out of it."

The lynx girl was still looking at him.

"Here!" Ama grabbed a smaller knife. "Take this one! And now start by cutting the belly open with one precise cut just in the middle, from head to fin. And do it slowly!"

Jiddy carefully buried the blade of the knife in the muscled fabric while she tried to hold it which almost escaped her hold as it was still wet and slimy, slowly she cut through it.

"Better! Much better! Now you spread it apart!"

With her fingers she grabbed into the cut and tore the fish apart. Something broke as she opened it and the entrails got visible.

"Now you have to cut in between the bones and the entrails. That's a little bit complicate because if you do it wrong you will have to pick out the bones one by one. But there's a small space between the bones and the entrails. You can touch it. There you have to cut!"

Jiddy fingered the fish, the cold of the slimy entrails crept into her paws and she noticed how the water mixed with fish blood wet her fur. But finally she found what Ama had mentioned and positioned the knife before she slowly cut into the fish. She noticed the rather hard bones and thus tried to cut along this barrier from head to fin.

"Good. Now turn it around and repeat!"

Jiddy did what Ama had ordered and repeated the same procedure.

“Now you should be able to loosen the entrails with your knife...”

Ama noticed that it didn't work that way. “Alright, maybe you have missed something. But it was much already better..”

Jiddy already cut along the entrails once more and really hit some more resistance which she had to cut. Then she tried to push the entrails aside with her knife.

“Now, now. Maybe you need some more experience...” Ama noticed.

Although most of the entrails had been removed she had cut so badly that there still hang a lot of remains on the bones which she had accidentally cut as well so that they were now stuck in the edible fabric.

Ama pat on her shoulder. “Don't be discouraged. Look! The fish still looks like a fish. You just need some more practice,” he tried to encourage her.

“It's shit!” she noticed while she stared at the abused fish.

Ama laughed shortly about this blunt statement. “I wouldn't say that! But now you can find out how many bones a fish really has got and pick'em out. Don't miss one! I don't want our guests to choke from fish bone“ he advised and Jiddy buried her fingers in the fish to pick out the cut bones and to remove the remains of the entrails.

The marmot looked over her shoulder and observed carefully what his apprentice was doing. He nodded. “Good, now try another one and I'll...” For an instant he stared at the lynx's long, sharp claws. He had never seen such claws on a furr before. Carefully they picked the bones from the fish. He wondered what else she could do with such claws.

He turned around and looked around in the kitchen while he scratched his huge head. He went over to the table and picked up some tomatoes, then looked for some flour and then picked up some branches of herbs from one of the shelves. While Jiddy went on with gutting another one of her victims Ama took some of the ready made fish and started to stuff it: First he spread some flour over the inside, spread a lot of parsley over that, laid slices of tomatoes above them, put some herbs on that and finally spread some oil over this stuffing. Carefully he closed the fish and put it in a backing pan.

“Did y'never think 'bout Dealine?” Jiddy asked all of a sudden.

“What do you mean?” Ama asked. He was a little bit startled by her question.

“I mean, you're so close and stuff... And Gelly likes you too...” She fell silent.

He didn't answer at once. “I wouldn't say that I never considered this, but... She deserves much better...”

“More than bein' a waitress in a backwater town,” Jiddy noticed.

“That's true, that's for certain...!”

“More than bein' alone for the rest of her life,” the lynx stated.

Ama did not answer.

They worked on in silence and to Jiddy it seemed like Ama was even a little bit more quiet than usual.

When the night had fully taken hold of Jaulesse again, the three had left the café and gained their respective apartments again. The night was warm and there was no wind and but the air was not unpleasantly sultry, it rather seemed to resonate with some strange, all-embracing warmth that enveloped everyone and everything and lulled the few awake furs with promises of pleasant dreams.

Dealine was unusually quiet on their trip home and when they got into the poor room that she called her own, Gelly was already sleeping in her mother's bed. The faint snores of the child were barely audible. Dealine stood in the small room somehow indecisively like something was occupying her mind and she was unable to decide herself. Jiddy observed her from the couch.

Finally the skunk asked her quietly if she wanted some tea too and the lynx agreed and the skunk made some hot water in all silence, poured it into two mugs with some dark greenish powder and then handed one of them to the lynx girl while she sat down on a stool.

For quite a while they sipped their hot drinks in silence. The taste was refreshing but rather bitter.

"How long have you been on the road?" Dealine asked all of a sudden. She whispered in fear of waking her daughter.

Jiddy shrugged her shoulders. "Dunno. I stayed here and there for some time..." She shrugged her shoulders again. "Never worked out," she added lowly after a while.

Dealine looked closely at the girl: Did she hear a trace of sadness in that statement? But the angular feline features were as expressionless as always. "Was there never someone you wanted to stay with?"

The lynx gulped. Her left ear twitched and then she shook her head while looking at her mug.

They were silent for a while and drunk the tea that had cooled slightly up to now.

"What 'bout you?" Jiddy whispered.

The skunk's lips were screwed up. "I have already made too many mistakes...", she mumbled lowly. "I... I want to spare me and Gelly that trouble."

Jiddy nodded slowly as a sign that she had understood what the skunk wanted to express.

"Although... Sometimes I feel somehow... left behind...", Dealine mumbled.

Carefully the lynx eyed her opposite who sat on her stool and turned the mug in her hands. Her beautifully lush tail moved very slowly while she stared at the fluid in the mug that reflected the faint shimmer of the oil lamp, the only source of light in the small room.

Jiddy blinked and very carefully without making a noise she set her mug aside, stood up from the couch and went over to the skunk.

The woman looked up in surprise when Jiddy carefully took the mug out of her hands and then took her hands and made her rise and without any moment of hesitation the smaller feline embraced the skunk.

Dealine sank into the smaller feline's arms and held her closely without saying a word.

The light of the old oil lamp flickered slightly as the oil burned irregularly and poorly. It was perfectly silent, there was absolutely no sound inside or outside this small room. Even the faint breathing of Gelly in the neighboring room could not be heard anymore.

Their hearts pounded strongly.

The longer Jiddy held the skunk woman the more she was certain to smell this specific fragrance of desire which seemed to waft from the lush black and white fur. But most of all she could feel the pounding of Dealine's heart, her light breathing as it pressed her breast against hers and a shiver ran up her spine.

They stood perfectly motionless.

Her fingertips brushed through the beautiful white hair, admired its softness and lightness which tickled tenderly in between her hand's fur. Then as casually as she had touched her hair her fingers moved on and stroke the neck so weakly that she could feel like the skunk had to shiver due to the touch. But she was instantly calmed by a faint kiss upon her free spot in between her shoulder and neck which was as light as if Jiddy had just accidentally touched her with her mouth. But nevertheless the hot breath of the lynx waved over her skin and it did not cool down until Jiddy kissed her neck once more, equally cautiously, equally tenderly.

Somewhere in her mind a single voice cried out, told her to push the girl away as quickly as possible. But she could not feel any danger. She was still in control of everything. It was nothing but a friendly, gentle caress of the lynx which she could stop at any instant. But for the moment she wanted to enjoy it a little bit longer, just a little bit. So Jiddy went on, kissed her neck and shoulder while her fingers stroke the skunk's infinitely white, soft hair. Her fragrance was intense, unlike every rumour she had heard about skunks: It smelled like fresh laundry which had been dried in the wind besides the smell of the café that stuck to Dealine like it was a part of her. But now in these moments it did not matter anymore because she could feel like Dealine's fur tickled on her lips whenever her lips touched it and she inhaled the warmth that wafted around her body like a light summer breeze which seemed to cool everything down but instead just heated things up while oneself gave in to it. As if by accident, Jiddy pulled off the strap of her shirt and kissed the fur underneath.

And Dealine opened her eyes and stared into the darkness holding the younger girl closely to herself, enjoying her caress beyond description: It did her good to be caressed, to be shown love, but then something inside tensed.

"Please, don't..." she mumbled and pushed the lynx away, quickly putting the strap of her shirt back in place.

Jiddy lowered her head and watched the skunk out of the shadows of her frowns.

Dealine put on a shy smile for a moment but then it vanished within an instant and she turned away. Jiddy could hear her gulp.

"Good night!" the skunk mumbled weakly and then quickly disappeared through the door of her bedroom and left the lynx girl behind in the empty room where she stood. Without a sound the entire feline body tensed, every muscle started to show as Jiddy bend and with one hissing noise from her lips she

stretched herself again, her fist slamming hard against her head. She hissed curses to herself.

Later Jiddy lay restlessly in her improvised bed, her head resting on her folded arms, and she stared out of the small skylight where the stars were shining.

In the morning everything was as usual and Dealine did not display any sign which might have proven that something had happened during the night and Jiddy- who noticed the skunk's downcast eyes and her weak anxiety nevertheless- behaved accordingly.

As the sun slowly settled in the midst of the sky its rays of light hit the small town which stuck to the cliff at the shore of Rumaient River so that the sunlight pierced into every corner, drove away all shadows until there was nothing but heat left whose waves swirled all over the streets, covered the houses under its current until it streamed through every crack of the walls or through the opened windows. Not even the slightest trace of a cloud could be seen in the perfectly blue sky which had gotten lighter as the sun had risen so that the blueness seemed to have completely vanished. Just the slowly flowing broad river sometimes carried a breeze along but these were much too weak to change anything. For an instance it seemed like there could be release from the dulling heat while the wind brushed through a sweaty fur and thus cooled the salty skin underneath but then the weak airflow faded away again and the sweat welled up again through every pore until there was nothing but a painful crust of salt left upon the touchy skin.

"There will be no boatpeople today!" she stated and put on her shoes. "So..." She fell silent while she bound her shoes. "...it'd be nice..." She stood up straight again and gazed at the lynx. "...if you took care of Gelly today. Ama and I will get on by ourselves."

"No problem!" Jiddy replied.

"Yes!" the otter cried out and jumped to her feet as she had played with her dolls. "I want to the river, I want to the river!" And she ran over to the lynx girl and grabbed her paw. "Jid, we'll go to the river, won't we?"

Dealine smiled weakly as she saw her daughter's enthusiasm. "Seems like nature's calling. Fortunately we got the river, I wouldn't know what I'd do with her somewhere else."

"OK, we go to the river. But you gotta promise not to swim away!" the lynx said seriously to the girl with the brightly shimmering eyes.

Gelly nodded frantically.

"Alright then," Dealine sighed. "I'll push off. Guess I won't be back late today."

Jiddy nodded. "Don't worry!"

Dealine smiled and lowered her head as her smile died down. "See you!" she said, knelt down to give her daughter a serious hug, stood up again, opened the door and went out. Her slow steps went down the stairs, another door opened and slammed.

Jiddy listened to the silence for an instance, then she lowered her head and looked straight into the otter's eyes. "And what're we doin' now?"

"Going to the river!" Gelly blurred out.

Jiddy grinned. "But someone's gotta get out of her pyjamas first!" And without hesitating she grabbed the small girl, lifted her off and put her under her arm.

The otter cried out, laughed and playfully hit her small fists against the muscled lynx' backside who seemed to be rather unimpressed as she carried the protesting girl into her bedroom to get her changed.

After a violent fight which included the use and abuse of numerous clothes as well as some sandals which flew around the room, the use of pants as a camouflage, the attempt to bind someone with some T-shirt, the extensive use of brute force to get an otter out of a cupboard she locked herself in and other unimaginable adventures Jiddy finally managed to get Gelly into her clothes although this merciless battle claimed the lives of a T-shirt, some pants and several socks which disappeared forever in the nothingness below the bed. But finally the otter girl was dressed... Well, at least sort of... Now Jiddy looked rather undressed but she did not care, took the high-spirited girl by her hand and they left the appartement.

Jiddy sighed when she stood in the waving heat of the street.

"I want on your shoulders, I want on your shoulders,..." The girl cried while she ran around the lynx.

"OK, OK!" Jiddy sighed, grabbed the otter while she rushed by (She yelped in surprise.) and raised her above her head so that the small girl could sit down on her shoulders.

With a triumphant moan Gelly took possession of her new position while Jiddy took hold of the otter girl's feet so that she wouldn't fall down. Meanwhile the girl grabbed Jiddy's pointed ears and shook them with a happy cry.

"Hey, hey, let'em go!" Jiddy cried. "That hurts!"

Gelly grinned but she let the ears go and took hold on Jiddy's head while the lynx began to walk down the road. First the otter girl curiously eyed her surrounding from her elevated position while Jiddy was completely busy with walking straight.

"Ji-hid?" Gelly asked after a while.

"Hm?"

"Why are you a girl?"

"Eh... What d'you mean?"

"You don't look like a girl."

Jiddy's lips twitched lightly. "Can't do nothin' 'bout it!"

"And you don't behave like a girl!" Gelly added with utter conviction.

"How'd I've to behave?" Jiddy asked in return.

"You'd have to act nicely and behave yourself..."

"Like you!?"

Gelly giggled. "And you'd have to dress nicely as well..." she added quickly.

"Don't I?"

"You dress like a boy!" Gelly said harshly as if this statement explained everything.

"Oh!"

"A girl wears dresses and skirts and ribbons and real shoes..." the girl listed.

“Like you!?” Jiddy replied.

“No!” Gelly sounded a little bit hurt. “When I’m as old as you I gonna have a different beautiful dress every day!” she declared.

“kay!”

“And you need long hair, like mum! Every girl has long hair!” She took some of Jiddy’s felted strands of hair between her fingers and tried to disentangled them but soon gave up as she noticed that it was rather useless. “And you’d need breasts!”

“What?” Jiddy almost threw her burden off.

“Yes, you don’t have any!” Gelly stated mercilessly. “Mum has told me that every girl gets breasts when she grows up. But you don’t have any!”

“I’ve got ‘em!” Jiddy protested.

“Nah, you have got nothing but muscles.” She had picked up some strands of hair again and played around with them so that she fell silent for some time while they went on.

The street was no longer descending, they were almost at the harbour but Jiddy headed for an area outside of the town where a small beach lay just under the towering cliffs of the valley. There it was much more peaceful than closer to the town. So they had to go on.

“You could have been my older sister...” Gelly said suddenly and sounded a little bit disappointed. “But you can’t be my older sister...” She still eyed the strange dark brown hair in her fingers. “You could be my older brother!” she said shyly after a moment of reflection.

The strange, unfamiliar sound of a hoarse giggle escaped Jiddy. “OK, I’m gonna be your older brother,” she replied resignedly. “But do y’know somethin’?” she asked the otter on her shoulders.

“What?” Gelly let the hair go and looked into the lynx’ face as well as she could.

“With all their skirts, dresses’n stuff girls can’t ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuun...!” And Jiddy dashed off. First the otter cried in surprise and but then she cried happily while she spurred on her mount, jumping up and down on the shoulders as they ran through the streets. The girl laughed joyously as her *older brother* carried her away.

They didn’t stop until they had reached the small beach outside town. There Jiddy fell down in exhaustion and thus brought the otter girl onto her own feet again. The lynx lay in the gray and white sand, breathed heavily while the otter girl walked around a bit. Jiddy tried to catch her breath and watched the featurelessly blue sky as the otter girl suddenly lay down by her side and put her head down on the lynx girl’s belly. First Jiddy was surprised by the sudden proof of affection but then she felt the gentle tickle in her stomach that made the otter head seem almost weightless. For some time they just lay there, Gelly lazily played around with the short lynx fur, curiously buried her finger in the navel until she explored the shape of the muscles below the skin.

“You may be no girl but I like you!” Gelly stated lowly.

Although she was still out of breath Jiddy couldn’t resist smiling.

Abruptly with her small hands Gelly tested the toughness of the lynx belly's muscles as she hit it as strongly as she was able to but she soon gave up as her hands just hurt when they hit the iron hard fabric. Jiddy noticed the otter girl's desperate tries with amusement. Angrily growling Gelly stood up and stepped right on Jiddy's stomach and somehow disappointed, looked down on the older girl's face who protected her eyes with her forearm while she observed the small otter.

"Mum can't do that!" Gelly noticed.

"It's 'cause I'm a boy," Jiddy replied.

With her small feet Gelly violently stamped on the lynx belly. Jiddy grinned all over her face.

Gelly pulled a face and then started to jump up and down. Jiddy cried out when the girl hit her stomach again. "Let go! Let go!" she cried half in pain, half laughing and sat up to grab the laughing otter who jumped off and while Jiddy still tried to grab her she dashed off towards the river's shore. Jiddy instantly jumped to her feet and chased the small girl who had almost reached the water. With fast steps Jiddy got closer but Gelly already jumped in the water, still laughing. Jiddy stopped abruptly at the shore. "G-e-l-l-y, your mum'll carry on 'bout me if you get your clothes all wet 'gain!"

But it was already too late as the otter had already thrown herself in the water and dived a short distance.

"GELLY!" Jiddy shouted. "Come here!"

Happily smiling the small otter girl swam closer while Jiddy quickly pulled off her spats and waded in the water. "Come on, I gotta dry your stuff before we go home 'gain," the lynx mumbled as she got closer and thus she helped the otter to get out of her T-shirt, her shorts and to save the sandals right before the girl jumped backwards now wearing nothing but her panties which did not really matter. While the lynx got back onto safe ground she observed the otter who swam and dived with powerful strokes and moved so naturally that it seemed like she had already been swimming all of her short life. Her slender dark brown body pierced through the clear water like an arrow through air, drove herself forward with faint but effective movements of her feet and her tail while she bend and writhed her body accordingly so that she seemed to be a wave among waves just a little bit more furry than those around her.

Jiddy sighed and without taking an eye off the girl she went back to an old dry trunk which lay around on the beach to hang up Gelly's wet clothes.

The river wasn't strong here. The water's current was slow as the river's bed meandered around several cliffs of the steep valley and the place was even more secure than any other as there were a number of sandbanks with small plants and trees which separated this part of the river from the main part of it. This was the main reason why this town had been build up there, the sandbanks protected the harbour from the powerful current of the main river so that the riverboats could safely berth there. Several small currents flowed so slowly around the sandbanks that there was absolutely no danger.

As Jiddy knew about that she relaxed, she sat down on the small beach and watched the young otter from afar.

The sun shone brightly, safe from any cloud which could have hidden it and it shone straight down, illuminating the whole valley. The sounds of the distant town were almost inaudible so that there was nothing left but the gurgling sound of the water and the creaking of some grasshoppers which lived in the few bushes on this beach, the only plants there. There was just some driftwood and rocks, except for these the beach was almost completely empty. Although the steep cliff of the valley rose just behind it there was fortunately enough space for everyone to lie down in the sand and watch the sky, enjoying the dulling sound of the rushing water.

But Jiddy didn't allow herself to rest, although she sat lazily on the riverside she kept an eye on Gelly who happily swam around. The heat crept below her fur and even though there was always a faint airflow close to the river, it wasn't enough to make the heat any better. The drops of perspiration tickled on her skin but she was much too lazy not to ignore them.

Several voices came closer. Some people headed for this beach but the lynx did not even raise her head, just scratched her back where an especially disturbing drop of sweat had dropped down from her neck.

Whoever was coming settled down close by, behind some bushes but close to the river too. They chatted rather loudly. It was young people, three males and two females. Sitting where she was Jiddy could not prevent overhearing their conversations, although she was not really interested in what they had to say.

"Well, she won't get far with that attitude," the first male said.

"Yeah, talking about a mouse. Always expecting to be eaten," a second male added

"I can't stand that attitude. What does she want, goddamn?" the third male said. "Always moping about all kinds of stuff and later complaining that nobody wants to deal with her. I tell you, I'd not mind if she got lost."

"Hey!" one of the females intervened. "Mind who you are talking about."

"Ah, come on! It's true, isn't it? She's so damn suspicious as if everybody was all about her," the first male said.

"Not that she wouldn't be worth it," the second male joked.

"You damn horn-dog," the first female replied instantly.

The male laughed. "Hey, stop it! What have I said, eh? Hey!"

"Yeah, yeah, we know!" the female replied, obviously not believing a word of what he said.

"Well, it's you she has got to be careful about," the third male added.

"What are you talking about?" the second male said, slightly annoyed. "What do you think about me? Tell me!" There was a short pause. "Come on!"

"Mr. Innocent!" the second girl said with a quiet voice.

There was a short moment of silence.

"As if you'd throw her out of your beds," the second male returned.

"Well, she's a mouse...," the first male stated

"Hey!" the first girl intervened. "Do you ever think about anything else?"

“Why?” the second male replied.

There was the muffled sound of a faint slap and then they were all laughing.

The notoriously curious young otter girl had heard the laughter and had swum a little bit closer and suddenly cried: “Spane!” and waved her hand to someone.

“Hey, Gelly!” the second male shouted. “Are you all alone? Where’s your mother?”

“She’s working! But Jid’s here with me!” Gelly replied, floating in the water on her back.

“Who?”

“My brother!” Gelly replied.

Having heard that Jiddy just sighed.

“Eh?” the boy on the shore responded.

“Just over there!” Gelly cried and pointed into Jiddy’s direction.

And moments later the bushes gave way to the marten who had been looking for Gelly’s brother.

“Oh, it’s you!” he noticed while he came out of the bushes and went closer.

The lynx didn’t reply anything but watched the marten who was still dressed in a boiler suit although he wore no shirt so that his muscled chest was clearly visible. He didn’t wear any boots either. He stopped at a secure distance from the glaring lynx in the shirt and the shorts.

“So you’re Gelly’s brother?” he asked with amusement.

“So it seems!” Jiddy answered coldly.

“Jid, that’s your name?” he asked.

“Jiddy!” she corrected him.

He nodded. For a moment he seemed to expect her to say anything else. Her silence surprised him and for a moment he allowed himself to be distracted by some bird which floated through the canyon. “I’m here with some friends of mine...,” he said after a moment. “Don’t you want to join us?”

“No, thanks!” Jiddy replied shortly while observing Gelly who was just splashing about.

Spane also observed the otter girl. “Okay!” he stated and looked at the motionless lynx again. “Come over if you feel like it. We’re sitting just over there...” We waited for an answer but there was none. “OK! See ya!” And he walked away again.

Jiddy turned her head around and eyed the boy as he walked away. “Hey!”

He turned around and looked inquiringly.

“Your suit looks shit!” she said.

He looked as if he wanted to reply something, but then he just shook his head, smiled as he walked backwards, didn’t say anything until he turned around and disappeared in between the bushes again.

The lynx girl pulled a face and turned around to the otter again who looked after the marten who had just gone away.

“For you“ he said over her shoulder and before she had had a chance to turn around he was holding the bunch of flowers right in front of her face.

For a moment she was much too surprised to do anything at all. Of course she had heard him coming in, she had smelled him but not even for a short moment had she looked up from her work (cleaning tables), going on as if he did not mean anything to her. Now she stared at the white and yellow blossoms in front of her muzzle and the sweetish pollen tickled in her nose.

He stood right behind her and waited for a reaction of hers.

She was trapped between him and the table in front of her. She pushed a strand of hair out of her face. She recognized the flowers as Burning Horsetail and Dove’s Breath⁵, he had most obviously picked them on some meadow, he had added some long blades of grass so that it really looked like a little bouquet.

“Don’t you want to have them?” he asked from behind her.

Slowly she turned around, making sure that she did not touch him despite his closeness. For a moment her feline body stretched as only a feline could. She could feel his eyes resting on her and a moment later her slanting eyes met his. “What’s that for?” she asked.

“Just for fun,” he replied, smiling.

“Fun?”

“Don’t tell me you never heard of it?! You know that’s this feeling people get when they enjoy something,” he explained.

Once again she pushed this particularly obstinate strand of hair out of her face. “I know what fun is,” she replied coldly.

“So...” He held out the flowers. “You take them...? For fun...?”

“Yours or mine?”

“What about *ours*?”

She looked down. On one hand she was not really feeling at ease with him so close, on the other hand this closeness was just what it needed for her to smell his male musky fragrance, something that never failed its effect on her. She noticed that he did not wear his usual boilersuit, instead he was wearing a pair of loose blue jeans and a widely opened checkered shirt, so that his chestfur and the muscles underneath showed. She exhaled by blowing away her hair. “I ain’t the flowers-kind of girl,” she said hoarsely.

Shortly he tilted his head, looking at the flowers in his paw. “Sorry, I was convinced all girls liked flowers...”

For an instant Jiddy’s lips moved indecisively. “But they’ll do fine in Dealine’s dwellin’.”

He smiled and held out the flowers that she took out of his hands.

The moment she took the flowers into her paw she was acting awkwardly, uncertain how to hold the flowers and shortly it seemed as if their hands were almost fighting about them and equally trying not to let them drop down.

He laughed a little bit.

When she had finally taken them she held them down in one paw, mumbling a short “Thanks!” through her tightly closed lips while looking down.

“So...?” he asked curiously.

She looked up. "What?"

"Any plans for tonight?"

The tip of her tail twitched powerfully and the impulse continued until its base. With narrowed eyes she looked at him. "Like what?"

"Anything better than going out with me?" The marten's smile was rather cautious.

"Meanin'?"

"Well, we could drink a beer together, meet some friends of mine, something like that..."

It seemed like her lips twitched but the movement was gone so quickly that he could not be sure that it ever happened. "OK!" she nodded and looked up. "I'll finish at dusk, I think."

Now he started smiling openly. "Alright, I'll wait for you, OK?"

She nodded once more. "OK"

"See you!" With his now obviously self-confident smile he turned around and quickly walked towards the door, shortly waved his hand and left the café. The door shut behind him when he had already disappeared on the street although the lynx was still looking after him with narrowed eyes, her tail was wagging erratically.

The swing door opened and Dealine came back in. She pushed her long curly hair from her face while she went back behind the bar. The skunk noticed the straight look of the girl, the flowers in her hand and the strange movements of her lips just like she was chewing on something. "Did he want something from you?" she asked while she still carefully eyed her colleague.

"A date," Jiddy answered shortly, still looking out into the direction where he had disappeared, out of the broad window onto the brightly illuminated street of this midday's town.

The skunk pursed her lips. "That's unlike him."

The girl turned around to her. "Not his style!?" It was rather a statement than a question.

Dealine nodded slowly and a small smile flitted over her face. "Usually he doesn't have to ask," she explained.

"That's what he's lookin' like!" Jiddy noticed.

Dealine slowly lowered her head to hide her smile.

Jiddy looked at the flowers in her paw.

End of Chapter 11

Annotation 1: Ittreakea, meeya beans and mammoth trunk are vegetables. Ittreakea are shoots from a grass. The taste of the small, brown, conical shoots resembles the taste of nuts. Meeya beans are small, hard, primitive beans, when cooked they split open and look like shiitake mushrooms (except for their dark reddish color), having a similar taste too. Mammoth trunk is a root, looks like horseradish and tastes like a mixture of sorrel and pineapple.

Annotation 2: There are many different scripts. My'an is one of the most common, most especially in the east and but not in the Midlands. It uses a syllabic alphabet, that is best known for its calligraphy. It is the only script Jiddy knows.

Annotation 3: Gelly is a so-called cross-breed (Usually this term is an insult!). Her father and mother belong to different species. Children of such a liaison are either a full member of their mother's or their father's species. As such relations are most often rejected by the families, women with children of a different species are often outcasts and their children are frequently suffering from discrimination. If the woman is left alone by her partner in such a situation she is stripped of almost every support. Maybe that happened to Dealine.

Annotation 4: Latallian is another script. The Latallian alphabet is most common to the south, most especially in the regions around the Mechanic Rivers. It uses a rather complicated irregular alphabet that makes it particularly difficult to read.

Annotation 5: Burning Horsetail is a grass with a sort of a reddish frond as a flower. Dove's breath is a whitish labiate.