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Migratory Birds - 10th Anniversary

Migratory Birds
Chapter 20

LAKE

Written by **kodayu**



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It is said that during the Age of Dawn the entirety of the Forest of Jgelgar had been a huge city which had covered the entire land with its uncountable houses, castles and sky scraping towers. It was said to have been the richest town all around, outstanding by its size and the wealth of its population. Maybe other cities had been more powerful or more beautiful but this one had been the largest of them all and when the disaster had struck and the Age of Dawn¹ had ended in the fire and destruction of the Spirits' War, the huge city had fallen apart like a giant of clay and the place had been abandoned, the many buildings crumbling to pieces until one day it had been overgrown by the dense forest known today as the Forest of Jgelgar.

Oddly enough nobody ever found any ruins there and where one suspected the remains of large buildings beneath the gnarled roots of the giant trees one just found rocks and boulders of natural stone. Maybe there had never been a city at all and all these stones which covered everything and were themselves hidden under roots, moss, fern and other plants had just been mistaken for the remains of a city. But some people insisted that beneath the boulders, in the gaps between them were hidden remains from the legendary age and thus the Forest of Jgelgar kept its mysterious aura even though there was nothing to be found.

But when one stood between the boulders overgrown by the fresh green of fern and the dark green of the moss and the twisted and bend roots of trees that overshadowed everything, incredibly large and old oaks, maple trees, pines, redwood, larches and M'boli² trees and the sunlight shone through the distant foliage and its rays brightened up the cool fresh air which came down from the mountains surrounding the forest, most wanderers did not need any myths about ancient cities to feel that this place was special all by itself.

Unfortunately it was anything but welcoming to wanderers.

The many stones and boulders, the roots everywhere and the slick moss made any kind of a road or even a beaten path absolutely impossible as one was always busy trying to get from one stone to another, tried to avoid the treacherous roots and on the other hand the slickness of the moss and thus most people were rather stumbling across the Forest of Jgelgar than wandering through it. No mount was able to walk here and no carriage or motorized engine could deal with this uneven ground where the water flowed underneath. That was why most people simply stayed away from the forest and walked around it in order to reach their respective goal a little bit more easily than that. Even larger animals were seldom found there and thus even hunters avoided the Forest of Jgelgar and inside it there was no known settlement, there was not even a single settlement within several days distance from it.

It was almost entirely silent in the green light which was filtered by the leaves far above the ground, except for the sounds of animals and the rustling of leaves and the gurgling of the small rivulets which hid under the stones. This was the major advantage of all predators within the forest, they only had to follow any noise in order to find potential prey. Being safe within the Forest of Jgelgar meant to be silent.

He was used to it, his steps were as silent as they could be. He did not even have to think where to put his feet down, instinctively they came down on fern and moss, sinking deeply into the soft plants which grew on the hard grey stone. He had given up on the treacherous security of boots a long time ago, wandering bare-footed across the forest as his own feet offered a much better hold on stone and moss than any slippery sole ever could. On the other hand his two toes with the thick cloven hooves did their best to stabilize his hold on the perfidious ground.

Thus he walked quickly from stone to stone, supporting himself on his staff. At the very top of the staff was a large lizard's tusk which was fixed with pieces of leather. Several colorful feathers hung down from colored leather straps and swung to and fro while he walked on.

Occasionally he stopped and kneeled down, looking at the plants which grew in the gaps between the stones, sometimes ripping out a few of them, grinding them between his fingers and smelling carefully at the greenish remains, before picking up a few more of those plants or going on without wasting any more time on the unripe herbs.

There were countless bunches of flowers hanging down from the strange backpack he wore. It was made from light wood which was held together by leather straps. Bunches of flowers, leaves, entire plants hang down everywhere from his backpack, alongside leather pouches and bags which seesawed while he moved. The backpack was firmly attached to his body, not moving in the least to prevent it rubbing against his thick fur, hide or his clothes. The greyish clothes of thick linen hid him well against the stone all around. He wore a shirt, short pants, a vest and countless straps and belts sporting many tools as well as several knives and lots of small charms made from feather, scales, chips of wood, crystals and tiny animal bones.

He leaped over a few stones, much more light-footed than his stubby shape would suggest. He jumped over the small brook which showed in this small scarp which was framed by huge trees which grew at its sides and overshadowed the stones which were hardly visible as the close presence of the water had encouraged the growth of ferns and mosses which covered almost every spot, forming soft huddles he stepped on, his feet squirting water out of them.

Suddenly he stopped. He raised his snout and sniffed for a moment, turning his head into every direction.

The sound of the water beneath him and the chirping of distant birds surrounded him.

He turned around, quickly walked around a boulder three times his size, slipped into a gap at its foot where the brook flowed by and lowered himself to his knees. He pressed his hand against the large boulder's side while he moved his head as far as he could to the ground. The brook had deposited lots of sand in this spot as well as a few pieces of wood. Very small patches of moss had grown upon it, showing tiny reddish flowers. He screwed up his eyes and reached out his hand, into the spot where the boulder and the stones next to it had formed a little crevice the wood stuck in. Very carefully his fingers closed around something

slippery and slowly he pulled it out. In the daylight he could see the tiny, brittle fruiting body of a slime mold. It was not any larger than a segment of his thick finger, a ball of brownish web-like filaments upon a small stem. It was as if his fingers could break it any moment. The hog grinned to himself, got into a kneeling position and pulled a tiny flask from one of his many belts. He undid the cork and put the slime mold inside.

He was just about to put the flask back into the small loop of the belt he wore around his chest when he stopped cold.

For an instant he did not move at all and just listened to the noises around him, his ears moving slowly as he listened carefully: There was the rushing of water, the chirping of the birds, the faint rustling of the leaves far above him. Lowering his head a little bit he sniffed carefully. He inhaled and blew the air through his nostrils. He frowned. His left hand closed firmly around his staff while his right hand reached out to loosen one of the knives he wore on a belt around his waist. While doing that he rose slowly and turned around. Instantly the scent became stronger and he knew the feline had to be there even before he saw it.

The lynx was entirely naked, except for torn feline spats and a pendant around her neck. At first he had thought that it was a male as the small breasts were almost entirely hidden under the felted breast fur, which was about as dirty as the entire rest of her body. There was no trace of the original light fur color on her front left as all of her fur was covered by so much dirt. With both hands she supported herself on a large staff, almost hanging down from it. Her headfur was even more felted and from underneath it one narrowed slit eyes glistened, staring at him, the other one being hidden under a swollen frown. She showed him the sharp line of her carnassial teeth.

She was still several feet away from him, not close enough to jump at him, but still he moved back a little bit, lowering his staff with the pointed tusk at its tip. He did not take his eyes off the lynx whose tail was wagging nervously. He could see the muscles on her arms which she used to keep herself upright, holding on to the crude staff in her paws.

Her chest rose and sank quickly.

He was almost convinced to smell her breath despite the distance between them. Without moving he waited for her to say something.

The scent which he could perceive from her was foul like bitter, stagnant water. It surrounded her like a cloud and almost hid away the natural scent of her own body. Yet it had been this light fragrance which had alarmed him: It was the sweetish scent of dry leaves in the sun mixed with something fresh such as dew in the morning, but in this moment it was entirely overpowered by the sour scents of dirt, mud.

He screwed up his eyes, observing the small feline who seemed to be quite young, even though her muscles spoke otherwise.

She had not spoken yet.

„What do you want?“ He observed her carefully. He saw how she trembled, how she ground her teeth and suddenly one of her arms shot upwards and she grabbed her own face.

She opened her mouth and closed it again, strange hoarse growls escaped her. The boar screwed up his eyes.

The noises she produced sounded like whining except for the snarling undertones. For the first time he noticed the sweat on her face, it had drenched most of her face's fur and glistened wetly upon strands of hair.

„What do you want?“ he asked again. The scent that surrounded her made him restless, it was full of sweat and contained the iron-bearing fragrances of blood and the sweetish, putrid scent of pus. He noticed that she had laid her ears back. His muscles flexed in response.

She snarled into the hand which covered her face, her lips twitched and quivered. The muscles of her body were tense.

Very slowly he started to retire. He did not take his eyes off the lynx, observing her very carefully. He held his staff in position in order to defend himself if necessary.

He saw how her eye was suddenly resting on him again and before he could react, the lynx was already jumping at him. Having let go off her staff her small, light body shot through the air towards him. With one leap she passed over several stones between them.

He retired quickly as he saw how she was about to attire, he almost stumbled, but he was able to keep his balance, but instinctively he looked down. It was a scream which made him look up again.

The lynx screamed in pain when the leg she had tried to attire on simply bent, she slipped off the stone, hit it hard, then her entire body slipped down the moss covered surface. With her back and her head she hit the stone behind her before she slipped into the gap between the stones.

The one eye which was visible opened wide as did her mouth in a silent scream of extreme pain. It contorted her entire face, every muscle, vein and sinew showed on her body while she trembled and rocked under the pains which ripped through her body, almost tore it apart. Tears ran down her face mixed with the sweat which fell down from every hair.

Her jaw locked. Through the bared line of her teeth came a painful, long-drawn sound, something between a whimper and a snarl.

The boar just stared at the lynx.

She opened her mouth, gasped for breath. Then her teeth snapped shut again. „Gneeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...“ Her body shivered from the intense pain that was not leaving at all. Suddenly her quivering hands tried desperately to get a hold on the stones around her, tried to free her from her position. The muscles of her body were as tensed as they could be, but her hands slipped off the wet surfaces, her hold was anything but stable enough. She shook her head in desperation, her long claws dug into the stone and as she tried to find a hold and instantly her paws slashed all about, the moss on the stone surface was torn apart while her claws tried to dig into the stone. Desperately she clawed at the stones, her one visible eye wide opened in an expression of mad desperation.

He saw that the leg which had not been able to hold her weight was trapped underneath her, in the gap between the stones, while the other leg was lying in a

crack between two stones, unable to raise her body all by itself while the other leg obviously did not have any power at all.

Finally she got a hold of something, her hands pressed against the stone right behind her and she was just about to push herself upwards. New sweat shot from her pores and wet her face, it dropped to her muzzle with still showed her teeth, but then she slipped off again, fell down again, crashing into the stones once again. Her head hit the stones and the boar saw blood shooting up.

Instinctively he turned his face away as he could almost feel the pain himself.

Yet when he looked at her again, he saw that she was trying to get out of her position again. Her claws dug into the stone once more. Drops of blood were dropping down where she tried to find a hold and her hands spread it all over the stone, making it even more slippery. Her attempts were totally erratic and lacked every sense of coordination by now.

He exhaled. For an instant he lowered his eyes, before he dared to look at the lynx again. There was a part of him urging him to get away as quickly as possible, but he exhaled and did not listen to it. He looked to his right. There was a thin fallen sapling lying between the stones. He put down his staff, grabbed the sapling, quickly broke off the remaining branches and then held it out towards the lynx.

„Here, grab this!“ he told her.

For an instant she did not react at all, until the tip of the sapling touched her. She looked up and he froze when that single eye with the rhombic pupil glared at him, it quivered feverishly. But after a moment both of her hands grabbed the piece of wood and almost tore it out of his hands. He had to use his entire weight in order to counter her pull. Her arms' and hands' muscles tensed while she held onto the wood.

He fell backwards when she came out of the gap and he landed hard on a stone. As quickly as he could he stood up straight again.

The lynx had fallen down herself, she was lying belly down on a stone, breathing strongly, but besides that not moving at all.

He studied her and now he noticed that the spats of the leg which had given up on her had hidden a primitive splint made of wood.

While observing the lynx again, he kneeled down and picked up his staff again. When he stood up straight again he paused for a few moments, waiting for a reaction of hers, but the lynx did not move.

The boar inhaled, he pulled a face and finally moved a little bit closer. Very carefully he poked her with the reptile teeth at the top of his staff.

A split-second later her hand had gotten a hold of the staff. It was almost torn out of his hands, but her grip was not as strong as before. Despite this she managed to pull it closer and an instant later her teeth were buried in the hard wood of the staff just beneath the reptile tooth. He pulled at the staff in order to get it free, but her jaw had firmly locked around the staff. Despite this she did not move at all.

He was totally surprised by her action. As a test he pulled at the staff, the result was that he was rather pulling her closer than freeing his staff. „What is that

supposed to mean?" There was no response, the hurt, powerless lynx just lied on the stone in front of him and did not move at all, his staff trapped in her jaw.

After a moment he finally let go off the staff, realizing that it was no use at all.

He looked down on the girl and then he turned away from her and looked around. He could hear the wind in the top of the trees far above him. The moisture which was trapped underneath the leaves and the branches had crept under his clothes and mixed with his sweat. There was no warmth in the air anymore as the short autumn was already over them, and he felt it in this moment while the wind brushed through his fur, so it had to admit that it had been the behavior of the lynx which had made him sweat.

He saw movement and quickly looked around, but the only thing there was, was a small group of crawlers³ which had shown up under some rocks.

There was the voice of a woodpecker coming from somewhere, the rhythmic knock mixed with the sounds of the running water around the two furs.

There was the noise of wood falling down on stone.

He had squatted on a stone and looked around when he heard it. He did not want to leave his staff with her, it was precious to him. The lynx did not seem to be a threat in this moment, despite her strange behavior. He turned around and noticed that the lynx' teeth had finally let go off the piece of wood.

The boar knelt down to pick up his staff. When he did so, he could see the lynx raising her one eye.

He stood up straight again and looked down on her without saying a word.

Her mouth started to move, but there was no sound coming out of it. For a moment her lips moved until she was finally able to produce a croaking noise. She lowered her head again and just breathed again as if speaking was an immense strain for her. She raised her head again. „Herrr mre...“ He rather read the words from her lips than heard those words. Her voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper. „Preeeazze!“

The man inhaled and looked around as if he expected to see any different person she might have had addressed, but nobody knew any better than him that there was nobody in four or five days' distance. Not in these woods.

„Why's that?“ he asked bluntly. „So that you can attack me again?“

It took the lynx a long time to understand his words. For an instant he saw how her eyes shot around, her lips quivered as if she was mimicking his own words in an effort to understand what he had said. She tried to answer something, but after a moment she just shook her head.

For a moment the boar hesitated. Then he walked towards the lynx until he stood right next to her. He studied her from above. It was obvious that her right leg was injured, probably broken. Her improvised splint had not survived her jump.

She turned her one eye towards him and looked up at the boar. He was much bigger than her and despite his species' typical paunch and thick bones, he was muscled and as lean as a wild hog could be. The scent of crushed wood, musk and clay surrounded him.

The man leaned over and grabbed her arm. She tried her best to help him getting her on her own feet again.

„You can thank the Holy Mother that I respect her teachings. Otherwise I would let you die here,“ he said while he pulled the feline’s arm around his shoulder. Now that she was this close he noticed that the stink which surrounded her was even more terrible that he would have expected.

He wrinkled his nose, as long as she was this close to him he could give up on searching for herbs, that was for sure.

He grabbed his own staff firmly and then the two of them walked over where her own staff lay on the ground. He picked it up, firmly placed it in her paw and without any other word he got going, almost dragging the lynx behind who did her best to hop on her unhurt leg while they walked over the boulders and the stones which made up the ground in the Forest of Jgelgar.

The nature of her injuries was mostly guess-work for him. Yet holding her so close to himself, he had more than a chance to observe her, to study her movements. Quickly he had noticed that the scent of fresh blood was absent, but the scent of old, dried blood which had to stick to her dirty fur was strong. This was an indication that none of her wounds could be very deep as she must have had moved a lot, walking through the forest and her wounds would have reopened under these circumstances. Whatever the reasons for her injuries, it was likely that there was more to it than a few wounds.

She did not express her pain, but he could feel that she to feel it as she sweating almost constantly and the muscles of her face moved as she pressed her lips together and seemed to be clenching her teeth as well. She did this most often when she had to put down weight on her injured leg, she also did it when she tried to inhale deeply which was a hint at a bruised rip or two. So it was likely that there were more bruises hidden beneath her fur, inflicting even more pain.

As he noticed the scent of pus as well, it was more than likely that she was also suffering from some kind of fever which caused her sweating.

The hog had more than enough time to ponder these questions while they walked through the forest. They were slow as she needed his support to keep on going. Her strong, muscled arm firmly grabbed the fur of his shoulders as she supported herself.

Occasionally she let go a little hiss when the pain was too much, but besides this she made no attempt at speaking.

The man did not make any effort to start a conversation either, instead he watched the play of the light on the stones, how small spots of light shimmered upon them for a short moment before they started to flicker and disappeared as the leaves far above were moving in a gentle wind which they could not feel down below.

The way ahead of them was as uneven and rough as any other in the forest. There was no path to follow, no clear track and hardly any even ground at all, just the moss and fern covered stones, huge boulders and fallen trees. He chose a

way between the biggest trees in order to make things easier for the lynx girl. The stones seemed to have arranged themselves in some kind of a wide trench which rose to each side, forming natural embankment with the largest boulders and the roots of the trees which held them firmly.

The huge trees which had found a hold on this ground were old and had grown high and mighty, their foliage casting everything on the ground into an eternal twilight even during the brightest day. They were so large and their crowns so full, that there was no undergrowth which could have been strong enough to survive beneath them, as it took strength to grow upon the stones, to build roots so formidable that they could overgrow them and reach the soil underneath.

Even large animals had to face these difficulties in order to survive in this terrain which made every step arduous. The few ones who could live in the forest hid away in the shadows, knowing full well, that no hunter could run in these surroundings. So the predators of the sky were particularly persistent around here, because their rule was mostly unchallenged and thus they swooped down on anything that looked like easy prey.

„GET LOST!“ the scream echoed through the forest while the boar threw his staff around in order to chase off the ghost eagle⁴ who had noticed the two furs and most especially the injury of the smaller one.

The hog would have chosen a different path if he had been alone, but the two of them walking through the trench had been too inviting for the large bird of prey which was about to try separating the two furs, swooping down on the hog in order to scare him away or at least to get a hold on the feline as long as the hog was trying to protect himself.

The huge brown and black wings of the birds flapped around them while it tried to grab the feline with its sharp claws. The bird screeched and feathers flew around as it evaded the staff which the boar could hardly manipulate at all as long as he held the lynx girl by his side.

„Get off! Get off! In the name of the Sun!“ the man yelled.

The eagle flapped its wings, rose into the air in order to evade the staff again and with a screech it came down again, its claws aiming for the lynx' head and shoulder.

The boar ducked, trying to pull the lynx to the ground with him, but his arm slipped off the smaller feline's shoulder and instantly he realized that this was the perfect opportunity for the large bird to get a hold of the girl who was still upright.

The man spun around on the ground to see in horror how the claws of the bird were about to bury themselves in her flesh.

Then something happened, the man could hardly follow the movement at all: The bird, certain of his catch, had not changed its course at all and the lynx hardly moved until the very last moment. In this instant she ducked, just going to her knees and instantly shooting upwards again as the bird had just swooped past her.

Blood and feathers suddenly shot around.

The wing of the bird was suddenly crushed and with its scream its deadly, steady soar transformed into a whirlwind of limbs and wings as it gyrated through the air in a deadly curve. With another scream the eagle crashed onto the stones, its wings being broken by the power of the impact as it rebounded off the stones.

The boar stared into the direction of the bird which had attained far ahead of them.

Then his head spun around as he looked at the lynx girl.

She was quivering a little bit, blood dripped from her arm. It was soaked as she had an entire piece of the bird's wings in her clawed hand which she had torn from it the moment it had rushed past. Her teeth were clenched and she hissed with every breath. Her one healthy eye glistened feverishly.

For a moment he just eyed her in surprise, suddenly realizing what she was capable of.

„Wait here!“ he said quickly and got to his feet again. He turned away from her and with his staff firmly in his paws he went ahead and left her alone for a moment.

He tried to calm himself while he used the moment to reassess the situation: The bird had attacked them out of nowhere, as they usually did. Considering the lynx' obvious injury, the eagle's sharp senses had not failed to identify a potentially easy prey. Ghost eagles' impressive size allowed them to attack smaller furs. They rarely did, but in the forest they hardly knew anything larger than themselves, except the lizards which hid in the darkness.

Slowly he approached the bird. He could see it trying to move, its wings were still twitching, even though there were splashes of blood on the moss on the stones all around.

The eagle had been in full attack when its wing had been torn apart, the power of the impact must have been tremendous. He could hardly imagine the animal's ordeal as all of its hollow bones were being shattered within the few moments of its crash.

He stood above it and looked down: Its wings were horribly broken in several places, bones showing through the fine skin and feathers while the torso of the animal lied on the edge of a stone, strangely distorted, as its position did not seem to align with its wings. The bird threw its head around, its feet clawed helplessly as it tried to get out of its position. The beak was wide open, the thin tongue dangle around, blood dripping from its tip, further staining the feathers. The majestic plumage was already hardly recognizable anymore.

The boar sighed. „Holy Mother and her Spirits, forgive me!“ he said and rose his staff.

He hesitated for a moment, even though the sharp tip was already pointing at the bird's chest. He was convinced to see the panic in the bird's eyes, his helpless and futile attempts of escaping this situation that it did not understand. Or maybe it was just the endless pain of having all its limbs crushed, he thought to himself.

A moment later the staff shot forwards, easily crushed the bird's chest and pierced through its heart.

It twitched for another moment, before it stopped moving at all, slumping down at the side of the stone, its panic-stricken eyes loosing their sheen.

Powerfully he pulled the sharp lizard tooth which formed the tip of his staff from the animal's flesh.

He pulled a face and just stood above the eagle for a moment, once again studying it, before he raised his head and looked around.

As usual the surroundings had gotten quieter in the presence of a predator and he could hear how the birds all around started to chirp again. Slowly the forest's sounds seemed to re-awaken and he inhaled as he realized how strange the situation had been a moment ago.

Suddenly he heard the dripping of water just over his shoulder and he turned around and felt drops coming down from a tree above him, hitting his backpack and himself the moment he moved. The boar looked towards the tree above him, but he could not see anything but green leaves.

„Yes, I know,“ he said lowly. „Forgive me.“ He closed his eyes for an instant.

Then he undid his backpack, kneeled down and got a knife from a sheath in his belt while he leaned over the large, dead bird. With all the power of his four fingers he took hold of the animal's head, positioned the blade and with a quick movement he cut off the eagle's head. Instantly blood stained his hands.

While he carefully started to pick up the dead bird and tried to fold its broken wings again, he could see that the lynx girl started to move again.

She had been standing motionless for quite some time while he had inspected and killed the eagle, but now she slowly started to hobble into his direction, trying to support herself as well as she could on the staff she used as a crutch. For the first time he noticed how difficult it was for her, because she was almost totally unable to use her injured leg, so that she had big problems to stand on the stones at all.

It took her quite some time before she had reached him. During these moments he had decided that it was no use to try to transport the dead bird as a whole. He had put down his knife on the eagle's wing and started to cut them loose. More blood was spilled all around and he pressed his lips tightly shut while he did so, the stench of the fresh blood rising into his sensitive nose and mixing with the obnoxious stench that surrounded the lynx girl.

„This is your fault!“ he spit out. She had been standing besides him for a moment, when he finally opened his mouth. „I did not want to kill it. Not here. We are much too close to the sanctum.“ For a moment he was silent while he picked up the wings he had cut loose and put them down on the ground.

They formed a huge carpet of long black and light brown feathers which looked like nothing else in these surroundings.

„But now I will have to atone for it.“ He raised his head and glared at her. „And so will you.“

He turned towards the dead bird's torso and picked it up as well, carefully he laid it down upon the wings. Then he stood up.

For a moment the two furs looked down on the headless torso upon the wide-spread wings. It was a strange sight.

The boar glared at the lynx girl again.

She raised her head and he saw the shimmering of her slanted eye beneath the thickly felted hair as she returned his look.

„This forest has allowed me to harvest herbs for many autumns, because I always respected the sanctity of life⁵ as well as I could. Your attack on that bird was needless and unjustified. It would have fled if it had noticed that I defended you. But you just had to...“ He pressed his lips together. „And I had to kill the poor creature...“ He snorted, his lips twitching around his tusks.

The lynx girl looked to the ground for a moment. Her head moved a little bit and she wet her lips when she raised her head again. „Srreee,“ she hissed through her gritted teeth. She made another attempt: „Srreee...“ She gritted her teeth hard and lowered her head again.

He noticed droplets of sweat upon her face, but chose to ignore them again. He turned around and pulled his backpack closer. It was made of leather and wood and divided into several individual parts, not counting countless pouches and bags which had been tied to the wood, alongside the bundle of herbs and flowers. He opened one of the compartments and pulled out a ball of string.

Quickly he started to wrap the torso of the bird in its own wings, then he wrapped string all around it and pulled it tight, so that it transformed into a large bundle which he could carry.

„This is taking too damn long,“ he said mostly to himself. He did not need to look up in order to know that she was wondering about his statement. „If we don't get going the damn lizards are going to smell the blood and as far as I can see you won't be fast enough to get away from *them*.“ He looked up and their eyes met for a moment.

Finally he bound the dead bird on top of his backpack, making sure that it could not bleed on anything and then he shouldered the backpack again.

He was grateful that the bird was not as heavy as it looked, nevertheless he turned towards the lynx and said: „You can walk by yourself.“ and started to walk ahead, not caring if she followed or not.

She was hardly able to say how much time had passed or how far they had walked as the pain in her injured leg was all she could think about. Without the man's support, the entire weight of her body pressed down on it and despite her lightness it was enough to pump a dull pain through her body which subsided and rose with every step she made.

The sweat which formed on her forehead flowed over the skin of her face beneath her fur while her hands held on to the staff, cramping around the rough wood as she tried to hold on to the one thing which could lighten her walk over the slippery, treacherous stones on the ground.

Her teeth were clenched, as she tried to suppress the urge to scream out. Her breathing was nothing but a hiss between them.

Occasionally she gasped and looked up, looking for the hog who was walking ahead of her.

The man stopped from time to time, turned around and looked for her, making sure that she could follow, but he did not speak to her anymore, he just observed her from a safe distance.

The lynx girl inhaled with a snort, rammed the staff into the ground and walked after him.

Pain and strain were suppressing her rational thinking, walking was everything she could think about as her instincts told her that the man was her only guide through the forest.

The air between her teeth hissed whenever she inhaled and she walked on, following the man through the trenches and small hollows of the forest, through the darkness which gathered beneath the high trees and around the fallen trunks and stumps of these forest giants, overgrown with fern and moss.

Sloppy bugs fled from her which she paid no attention to as her gaze was fixed on the ground, trying to find stable ground for every step she made, putting down her soft feet on the hard stones which looked stable and even enough to allow her to stand upon them for the short time of a step. Her eyes quivered as she had to focus, suppressing her instincts which were always at the edge of overwhelming her with pain. It was necessary to stay focused as every step could mean slipping off, stumbling, falling over, causing further injury and trapping her in this merciless forest.

Sweat dropped from her felted hair and onto moss she passed by.

It was not until she felt the ray of light upon her fur that she raised her face from the ground and looked up again and instantly her eyes opened wide.

Beneath them was another hollow of immense size, an irregularly shaped amphitheatre, framed by the largest trees she had seen inside the forest up to now. Their smooth trunks overlooked a lake at the very bottom of the hollow, which occupied most of it. The boulders all around seemed to emerge from the lake, creating an uneven, steep embankment all around the lake, except for one side where there was something like a stony shore which was mostly covered by old leaves, moss and fern. From these arose something which looked like random boulders, or maybe it wasn't. She was unable to make it out from the distance.

Far above the branches of the trees created a light roof which let in some evening light which shone down on the lake, creating a multitude of reflections upon its surface which shimmered and glistened, reflecting the light against the trees and boulders all around.

Even from the distance she could see bugs and other insects dancing in these rays of light, just like the small birds which swooped down from time to time, flying around far above her in order to catch their prey.

A few brownish leaves were falling slowly through the warm air, towards the lake below.

She inhaled the warm air deeply, suddenly realizing how cold most of the forest had been, a hint of the oncoming autumn.

She started to quiver as a strange sensation of instinctive dread came over her, as if she had inhaled it the moment she had opened her mouth to the warm air of the clearing with the lake.



Her skin tensed around her muscles and bones and her fur bristled. It became more difficult to breathe, her tail started to wag faster and she pricked up her ears, listening to her surroundings.

Yet there was hardly any sound at all. Her healthy eye shot around as she studied her surroundings more thoroughly.

Beneath her the man stopped, turned around and looked at the lynx girl who was still standing between the trees, not moving at all. He stood half way between the edge of the forest and the lake, having walked down the hollow's edge.

While her eye shot around she noticed the boar standing beneath her and how he looked at her. She grabbed her staff even more firmly as before. Beneath her fur the knuckles of the hand turned white as she held on to the piece of wood in order to suppress the tension which had gotten a hold of her body.

Quivering from the strain of walking on her injured foot, she put it down on another stone in front of her, then another and another. The blood hammered in her ears as she walked on as fast as she was able to.

Finally the hog turned around again and walked ahead again, towards the set of boulder she had seen by the shore.

It took a long time before she caught up with the male.

The boar was bowing in front of something that seemed to be a small shrine but it was nothing but a stele among what had looked like nothing but a random set of boulders from the distance. Now that she was this close, she realized it had to be the remains of a temple or shrine, made from the stones all around. Except for a few, dilapidated walls there was nothing left of it anymore.

She raised her healthy eye towards the stele again: Somebody had poured various colors over the top of the smooth, column-like stone. The colors had run down the side of the stone leaving long traces in the natural hollows of the grey stone. Additionally various strips of leather and cloth hung down from it as well, some of them almost entirely rotten away, others still showing traces of colors too.

Someone had carved a simple picture into the upper part of the stone: It was the rough shape of an upper body with a head and arms held upwards. The head showed nothing but a small hollow for the eye, the muzzle was wide opened. The lower body was not shown at all, there were just a few waves carved into the stone, symbolizing the water's surface.

In the hands of the boar was a bundle of leaves. He bowed motionlessly in front of the stone.

Jiddy stood still and watched the man in silence who whispered words she could not understand.

The boar leaned over and put down the bundle of leaves in front of the stele.

Very slowly he rose to full height again and slowly he unstrapped his backpack and put it down to the ground. He undid the remains of the bird which had been attached to it. He left the torso of the dead avian, but he took the huge wings and the head and approached the edge of the water.

For a moment he raised it above its head, holding it up high.

Jiddy shivered.

Then the man started to kneel, putting the wings down on the water's surface, the head of the bird resting atop of them.

For a moment the feathers floated on the water, then suddenly they started to sink beneath the surface to disappear entirely an instant later.

The lynx girl could hear him whispering again while she gulped and inhaled quickly.

A faint gust of wind moved through her hair and she pushed it out of her face again, noticing a bird which drifted on this current far above her, but beneath the treetops. Its feathers seemed to be white.

Then he turned around again and the eyes of the two furs met.

He glared at her, but then he snorted through his large nostrils and went to pick up his backpack again. He took it in his hands, but did not put it on his back again. He just carried it away, speaking over his shoulder: „This is the sanctum of the spirit which guards this lake and all of the forest. You better ask for its forgiveness too. I might have killed it, but you were the reason I had to.“

The lynx girl looked after him, seeing how he walked through an opening between ruined walls.

She hesitated for a moment, feeling the cool air brushing through her fur, then she approached the lake very slowly.

The surface was perfectly still, except for some pond skaters and a few leaves drifting over its surface. There was the sound of flowing water, a very faint splashing coming from somewhere.

Jiddy's pointed ears flicked.

The sound seemed to come from everywhere at once. The high trees, whose roots held the boulders in a tight grip, had shaped a perfect dome above the lake, trapping the sound and reverberating it all around. Except for these faint sounds of water everything seemed to be perfectly silent while Jiddy stood there.

She saw herself in the clear water and below the water's surface she could see the lake's ground, hardly the length of her own arm below the surface. It was covered by dark green plants that looked like moss. She could see her own face as a reflection: Her hair was dirty and terribly felted and her fur was stained. One dark brown, slanting eye looked at her, studying her harshly, her angular features, the thin line of her tightly closed mouth and the other eye which was hidden under her swollen frown. The Silver Arc hung down from her neck and on the water it flashed occasionally, catching a ray of light from time to time.

One of her ears flicked again.

For an instant she could feel her fur bristling again and she shivered, even though the few rays of light which came in through the roof of branches far above where warm.

The lynx girl turned away and slowly she limped after the hog.

On the other side of the walls was something of a secluded spot. Three of the walls were still higher than an average furr, such as the one with the opening both of them had walked through. The opposite wall was hardly at the height of one's knee and it faced the shore of the lake.

Someone had made the effort to clear the ground of stones and in the middle was an old fireplace which was still full of the black ashes of the many fires which had burned there.

The boar had leaned his backpack against one of the walls.

„I have got to look for firewood,“ he said. „Here!“ He threw a piece of cloth on the ground in front of her. „Clean yourself, you are reeking...“ And without hesitation he climbed over the low wall and walked towards the trees, leaving Jiddy behind.

The girl looked after him for a moment. She turned her head, because she felt uncomfortable with the stele in her back. She looked at it again for a moment, studying the carving of on the upper end; the way it had eroded showed that it was very old. The faded colors made it stand out against everything else on the clearing. A brightly colored spot in between a landscape of moss, fern, lichen, trees and stone.

For a moment she leaned against the wall with her head turned. Then she pushed herself off and hobbled towards the cloth on the ground. Awkwardly she leaned over, moaning in pain.

The surface of the lake was as still as it had been the whole time. Three birds shot over it and one of them cackled loudly while doing so. Far above where the trees reached the free sky a gust of wind shook the branches. A few leaves fell down.

He did not have to go far. While he climbed a few stones he had already spotted a fallen tree and he headed directly for it.

The upper side of the trunk was mostly rotten, moss and fern were already about to grown upon it. But the underside which lay upon the stones looked rather dry. Nevertheless he had to search a little bit before he saw a few broken branches which were dry enough to be used as firewood. While doing so, he noticed a small shoot with a white purple tip which grew upon the trunk as well. It was Herzogenhorn. He picked the plant and put the small stalks under his belt.

Then he kneeled down and reached into the hollow beneath the trunk, took hold of a branch and pull at it with full power. It was quite stuck in there and he needed some time before he had finally been able to break it off and pull it and some more of branches out of the hollow.

Finally he stood up again, took the whole wood upon his paws and walked back towards the lake. He was slow and careful as he was quite hindered be the amount of wood he carried.

When he approached the ruins again, he did not see the lynx at once. For a moment he had nurtured the notion that she had disappeared with his backpack, but then he noticed her sitting on the ground next to one of the walls.

As he approached her he could hear her making a sound: It was the chatter of her teeth. She was shivering as she had crouched, having wrapped her arms all around herself, nothing but a small ball of fur beneath the stone wall. She was trembling powerfully.

Instinctively the boar stopped and watched the lynx girl. He felt uneasy for a moment and he pondered the reason for this, as he was convinced to feel no love for the lynx girl at all. Her behavior was much too erratic, too hostile and too violent. As he looked at her he noticed that she had actually cleaned herself, even though her efforts had been hardly enough to remove all of the stains in her fur which was still very felted too.

He wet his lips and looked elsewhere. Insects danced in the rays of sunlight which came in through the trees and small birds darted through these rays, their beaks wide opened to catch whatever got into their reach.

He went on walking, making an effort to be as noisy as possible.

Almost instantly the lynx girl looked up. Her second eye has showed up again even though it was still mostly covered by her swollen brow. He saw it glistening as she observed how he got closer. Her shivering had stopped almost at the same time.

He let the firewood drop down on the spot on the old fireplace. Then he turned towards the lynx girl. „Here...“ He held out the small shoot of the plant with the white and purple tip he had found on the dead wood. „It’s Herzogenhorn,“ he added. „It will ease your pain.“

Very slowly she raised her hand and took the small greenish plant out of his paw.

„Chew it until it tastes bitter, then spit out the rest.“ Without any other word he turned around again and kneeled down in order to arrange the wood for a fire.

While he did so, he noticed that she was not stinking that much anymore either. He inhaled deeply in relief.

When he had finished he stood up again and got his backpack, the piece of cloth he had given her lay on the wall next to it and he picked it up. There were the reddish stains of blood among the other dirt which stuck to it.

In this moment the lynx girl changed her posture, as she lowered her arms. Her features were twitching, but there was less sweat visible upon her face than before.

„Whrrr...“

He turned around and looked at her.

„Wharr...“

She tried to speak, but nothing but growls came out of her mouth. In an explosive movement she punched herself with full force, her fist hitting her forehead.

He started due to the unexpected, totally unrestrained power of the blow.

Jiddy shook herself and covered her face with her paws; she could feel the ache in her eyes which indicated that she would have cried in this moment if her eyes had not been so painfully dry.

Slowly the boar let his backpack drop to the ground by the fireside. He kneeled down again and got a small bundle of waxed paper from one of the backpack’s pouches.

During the moments the lynx needed to calm herself, he got a match from the bundle and put it away again.

Finally the hoarse voice of the lynx could be heard again. „Wherrewe?“ It was hardly more than a growl.

„What do you mean?“ He looked at her again.

For a short instant the lynx eyes shot about. „Whererewe? Thss placce? Whtss th'nam!“ She articulated every word as accurately as she could, pulling strange faces while she did so, but everything that passed through her gritted teeth and by her lips was hardly anything more than a growl or a hiss.

He stretched himself and exhaled. „This is the Forest of Jgelgar,“ he explained. He waited for a moment, observing carefully how she reacted.

For an instant her eyes wandered, her ears flicked.

„South of the Ceemayan Mountains,“ he went on, but he saw that her tail just kept on wagging

The lynx girl just stared at him. „Mmmm...“ Her face was contorted in concentration. She puffed and her lips quivered and moved a few times before she gave it another try. „Mmilannss?“

The boar was taken aback for a short moment, then he shook his head. „No, we are in the Northern Reaches⁶.“

He could see that she clenched her teeth together. She looked to the ground for a moment. Then she covered her face with her paws, feeling the burning in her eyes again.

„If you don't know where you are... How did you get here?“ he asked after a moment.

The lynx girl just shook her head, but he saw the anxious movement of her tail and he was certain that she had expected anything but the answer he had given her.

She covered her face with her paws. She was feeling weak, weaker than ever before in the last days when she had wandered through the forest without any sense of direction. Despite her wounds, despite the fever, despite her hunger, she had never felt any weakness as her instincts had driven her on.

From beneath his eyebrows the boar observed the lynx girl for a moment, then he turned his attention towards the fireplace again. He pressed the match against a stone and with a powerful movement he lit it. The tiny flame shot up and carefully he held it out under the dry wood, watching how they caught fire little by little.

When he saw that they were starting to burn on their own, he threw the match into the fireplace and rose again.

„I am Theles, from the clan of the Dawn Striders,“ he said without looking at her. „What's your name?“

„Jiddy,“ she said. Her voice was still very hoarse, but he could understand her a little bit better as she seemed to have less problems to articulate. „Name's Jiddy,“ she said with a hint of relief.

The man ate slowly, he observed the girl who was eating as well, showing no inhibition or restraint while she did so, gorging the meat with obvious hunger and unexpected ferocity.

Her sharp teeth flashed up while she devoured the meat.

He had prepared the dead bird for them. Having gutted it quickly and then having roasted it entirely upon the fire, until the feathers had mostly smoldered off.

The meat was dry and tough, not entirely pleasant, but it felt good to eat something warm and meaty.

Theles observed the lynx girl from time to time. He noticed that she grimaced every time she swallowed an expression of pain showing on her features for a moment. It was gone as quickly as it had shown up and she went on eating hungrily.

Now his eyes wandered up and down her body. „This pendant...“ he mentioned suddenly.

The girl stopped and looked at him, then she looked down on herself, at the silver pendant that hung down from a leather strap, resting between her chestfur.

„It's a Silver Arc, right?“

She looked at him again and nodded. She had screwed up her eyes a little bit.

He nodded as well, while shoving a piece of meat into his mouth. „I have never actually seen one before, but I have heard of them.“ He chewed on his food for a moment. „They are powerful, old magic. Some say that the first ones were made during the Age of Dawn.“ He put the bone into his mouth and gnawed on it for a moment, tearing off the last pieces of meat with his teeth.

Jiddy hesitated for a moment, but then she went back to eating.

„Does it work?“

She raised her head again and swallowed quickly. For a moment there was this expression again.

„Does it work?“ he repeated.

She lowered her eyes. „I dunno,“ she growled. „I hope...“ Her speech was becoming more and more accurate, but her voice was still very hoarse and her tongue was heavy. The words which came from her mouth were worn-out as if they had already been used many times before.

Once again the boar nodded slowly. „That's the thing about powerful magic, isn't it? There is so much affecting it that nobody can tell if it is working at all...⁷ In a town not far from my own, they are making stuff like that. Not Silver Arcs, but something rather similar. They are called Fortune Mesh.“ He fell silent. „Hard to tell if they are working too... Once I met someone who owned several ones of those.“ He looked at her and their eyes met for a moment.

The girl eyed him; her slanting eyes were carefully studying his figure.

Theles threw the bone into the flames and then wiped his hands clean and stood up. He grabbed a piece of cloth where he had deposited herbs on which he had gathered during the day, before he had met the lynx girl. He sat down cross-legged again. He leaned over the cloth and his nose just a few inches from the herbs he started to pick them apart with his hands. He handled the fragile plants

carefully. Their potency had nothing to do with their looks, but the better they looked the higher the price he could ask for them. Therefore he tore off decayed leaves and rubbed off cobwebs. The different scents of the herbs rose into his sensible nose and even in the dim light of the fire he could tell them apart easily.

He picked up a small ball of burs and with surprising skill he picked them apart, despite his thick fingers. For an instant he looked up, studying her as she was just about to eat the last remains of her food, cracking the bone with her teeth and chewing it entirely, until nothing was left. She twitched lightly as she swallowed.

Theles took five of the burs and looked at her. „You have got bruised ribs, right?“

Jiddy looked up and nodded.

He held the burs out to Jiddy. „Eat these!“ he said. „They will make you feel a little bit muzzy, but they will help with the chest pain and they are good against fever as well.“

The lynx girl took them out of his hand and put them into her mouth. A bitter taste spread upon her tongue as she chewed them.

The boar approached her in the meantime. „Spread out your leg!“

She hesitated but as soon as she moved her leg, he took a hold on it and pulled it closer carefully, not handling it too forcefully but his fingers not lacking insistency either as he lay it down on his own knee.

She clenched her teeth as he undid the dirty, ragged spat which covered the splint underneath.

Her face contorted as he tugged the felted fabric off her fur and then pulled out the piece of wood she had used as a splint off as well.

He looked up and observed her reaction. Carefully he touched her shinbone.

Instantly the lynx girl hissed.

The fingers wandered over her leg and she firmly pressed her lips together.

„Well it does not seem to be broken,“ he stated.

Breathing heavily Jiddy nodded.

The boar pulled his backpack closer and started to rummage around inside.

„Terl mer...“ Jiddy hissed suddenly. Her speech had deteriorated.

„What?“ He asked.

„The storree,“ she growled. „With thre meshes...“

He could see that she was trying to control the pain. He pulled a piece of cloth from his backpack.

„Preesss!“

The boar inhaled and while he got his water bottle and started to wash the dirty, felted fur: „I really don't want to say this has got anything to do with you, but...“ He paused shortly. „See, the man was a criminal on the run and I was deep within the forest too. I don't know if he thought that I was some bounty hunter or something. He just attacked me. Actually I had known about his presence in advance. He was hardly as skilled as you are. But I had not expected him to be so fast. Big mistake! I knew someone watched me, but went about my own business. There are denizens of the forest better not disturbed. So you don't.“

„I was about to pick something up. Can't remember what it was. Maybe Gegefeil or Lao Gen Oyo, something with a red flower, I remember that. But it's not important. I was just bending over when he jumped me from behind. Right away I got his knife at my throat. I am used to pain, so it was no problem for me to grab the blade with my paw. I still have the scar here.“ He raised his hand and waggled it before he resumed his work of drying her cleaned fur with the cloth. „But that guy, he was a badger, he cut my hand instead of my throat. So I was lucky. Bled like a fountain but it didn't matter. I was still standing, something that badger hadn't counted on. And I was fighting back. So what happened was a really nasty little fight. I tried to get that knife out of his paws while he tried to kill me.“ He nodded. „I was heavier than him, on top of him, but my hand bleeding like damned. So we fought. I couldn't get that knife out of his paw, but he wasn't getting anywhere either. I can't tell you how long we went on. Must have taken quite some time though.“

„Because...“ He paused shortly and picked up a few herbs which he placed carefully inside another piece of cloth. „Because suddenly I heard that hiss and I am damned if I didn't know that one. Wouldn't surprise me if you knew the hiss of a Cheereyo Lizard too. That hot breath hissing through that line of sharp teeth. This really low sound.“ He paused again. „They are the most dangerous predators in the forest, far more so than the ghost eagle we encountered today. These damn beasts smell blood from a mile away and I was still bleeding like a dying bird. So I hear that hiss and that thing couldn't care less about two men fighting, made us much easier prey. So the next thing I did was get away from that guy, get on my feet. He thought he had an easy target in that moment, so he got his knife and tried to stab me, but before he was able to, he got that Lizard right above him. I heard him scream when that thing came down on him. I didn't look behind. I was just running, getting away as fast as I could. I don't challenge those lizards, the forest belongs to them, I am nothing but a passer-by, so I leave them alone. And if you know how to avoid them, they are not that much of a problem.“

„Do you see the irony in this? He tried to kill me, because he thought I was a bounty-hunter and in the meantime his death sneaks up from behind. The Cheereyo left me alone, they don't care about anything as long as they aren't hungry. You could dance in front of their muzzles, they wouldn't give you a second glance. So that thing was attracted by the smell of my blood, and our noise of course. But I didn't give a damn about me, it fed on that badger and then it was satisfied. I went back during dusk, my stuff, that I had dropped during the fight, was untouched and except of that there was nothing but a puddle of blood left. The Cheereyo drags its prey into some safe spot and eats it there. Sometimes you hear terrible stories about guys still half alive while being carried away by a lizard. The Spirits may prevent that I ever end like this.“

He had finished placing the herbs on the cloth and he picked up the piece of wood she had used as a splint before. Quickly he held it out over the fire. „Now the thing was that there was some stuff from the guy left too. Bloody clothes, a small bag that had fallen to the ground. In there I found some jewelry, made of filaments, Riverstones⁸ and Aphen Shells⁸. I know that stuff. They are called

Fortune Mesh and there's only one place where they make them and that's Tinnej at the edge of the forest, north from here. I know the place, although it's usually not on my route. But I figured that he might have stolen that stuff from someone, so I decided to return it."

The piece of wood had started to smoke lightly and quickly he took it away from the fire. He waggled it in the air for a moment, before he placed it against her shinbone again. „So I went north and did my work on my way up there. That's usually not such a good idea, because you can't find the herbs you are looking for if you take some random route. You got to know where something grows and you got to return to that place when you can harvest it. Of course I don't mind finding new spots but it doesn't pay if you don't do it with some plan on your mind. Sometimes you have to search a place three times or even more often to notice something like Kamden Moss⁹ or the webs of the Dreamwalker. But... Well, anyway I went north, to Tinnej. To bring the jewelry back. As soon as I was in town, I started to ask around. I knew some people there who know me too, so it wasn't much of a problem. They tell me that this jewelry had to be the work of... a woman, a specific woman. They told me where to find her and I looked her up. She had a shop of her own, she was one of the crafters for Fortunes Meshes, she was magically gifted. I met her in her store and you know what she was? She was a badger too, a very beautiful lady my age. I didn't know what to make of that, but I..." He paused shortly. Carefully he started to stretch the cloth with the herbs around her leg.

„Yeah, I didn't know what to make of it, but I was cautious. So when she asked me, I didn't tell her the whole story. I just said that I had found this jewelry in the bag of a badger who had fallen victim to a Cheereyo. And I asked her if it was hers.“ He sniffed shortly. „She looked at me in total terror. I didn't know what to make of it, then she tore the jewelry from my paws and started crying from the deepest bottom of her heart. I didn't understand, when suddenly a man, her husband as I learned later, arrived. She wouldn't stop crying, but when she showed him the jewelry his reaction was pretty much the same.“ He inhaled. With a piece of string he fixed the splint and the cloth around her shinbone. „Now it turned out that the man in the forest had not been some thief, at least he had not stolen from them. He had been their son! They had given him that jewelry because he had been on the run. They told me that he had been in some kind of a brawl. When I asked around later I found out that he had actually killed a man, most possibly pretty much the same way he had tried to kill me. But his parents had helped him anyway. They had given that jewelry to him, in order to help him escape. Obviously he had been a killer, but they didn't care or at least, they did not believe it. To them he was still their little boy who needed their help, even though he had killed a man in cold blood and tried to kill me too. And in the end I even got a reward from the town council. There had been a bounty on his head, I hadn't gotten him but I had brought the news about his death so they decided that it was good enough. I don't like blood-money, but I could use it at that time, my wife was expecting our fourth child at that time and the Spirits had not been kind that year because it had rained all time and there weren't many herbs that

had gotten over that. Except for Hollow tubers¹⁰, there can't be enough rain for that weed. But I guess that doesn't..."

He had finished his work by now, having fixed the splint around her injured leg again.

In this moment he had raised his head in order to look at her, but when he did so she had leaned forward, her hand had grabbed his chestfur and she had yanked him closer. The power of her grab was slightly painful, but he forgot about it the moment she placed a kiss upon his lips.

„What...?“ he gasped.

„Yeah, still hungry...“ the lynx growled.

It had gotten stronger ever since she had met him. Maybe him being a male had actually helped her to trail him. Her instincts having led her to him and now demanding to get even closer.

She was not sure about it, but she certainly had not felt it until she had felt his hands upon her leg, handling it with equal amounts of strength and care, while she had studied him from her slanted eyes, watching the mesmerizing movement of his lips which opened and closed slowly, glistening wetly while he spoke. At this point his words had already been lost to her as she had not been able to follow him mentally anymore.

During the first part of their trip she had been physically close to him and as a boar the musky fragrance which surrounded him had not lost its effect on her and his careful treatment now overcame the reservations she had had due to his unsympathetic reactions during their trip. Maybe she had to blame herself, but this was nothing she would have cared about anyway in a moment like this.

During the time he took care of her leg she inhaled deeply again and she noticed that she had started to like this particular scent of his, this mix of musk, wet earth and something like patchouli. When she had first encountered him, the scent had been anything but pleasant, it had tickled powerfully within her nose, but by now she almost enjoyed it.

Its intense nature created a strange sparkling feeling upon her tongue and it had not been until these moments that she had had an opportunity to notice this change, as the herbs he had given her were tempering the pain. The fire close by was easing her feverish restlessness as well as the contrast between the cool air of the forest and her own body temperature decreased.

It had been these burs he had given her which had overwhelmed her last reservations against the unknown male. When she had bitten upon them, a strange taste had spread upon her tongue, it was not unlike some kind of licurice, but at the same time it seemed to numb her sense of taste until a wooly feeling had spread all over her mouth, not unlike the effect she was feeling a few moments later: It felt as if she was wrapped entirely wool and it enveloped the pain of her injured limbs and the exhaustion of her body after having wandered through the forest for days and days, but beyond the pain was still the tension she felt in every fiber of her body as if every muscle was made of wire.

The desire to replace this tension with something else, to overwhelm it with something different was staggering, while she watched Theles carefully treating her leg with herbs and cloth, his thick fingers being surprisingly nimble and soft as they brushed over the fur and skin of her swollen, touchy leg: Strong joints around fleshy fabric, short, but powerful nails, almost entirely devoid of fur or any other hair, thus revealing the rough, solid, dark-brown, almost black skin.

It was an instinctive impulse and she gave in to it without remorse when her lips met his.

She could feel her heart beating faster when she felt his lips upon hers. Her skin started to prickle and she was just able to growl a few words to him when she saw the surprise upon his face, something which did not mean anything to her anymore, neither did the words she had spoken, only action mattered and thus she grabbed his long chestfur and yanked him closer, wanting to be surrounded by that strange male scent, craving to feel its effect on her, to feel him get under her skin and within her body, replacing the fatigue and the pain with all the pleasure he could offer her.

„Listen, girl, I am married, there is nothing I can offer...¹¹”

Jiddy just responded with a growl as he had broken the second kiss for these words and she was getting impatient, feeling her own arousal like an additional ache alongside the pains of her limbs.

She grabbed him even more powerfully and despite being larger he gave in to it, surprising himself as he did so, but there was something about her which crippled his inhibitions. This was the only thing he could wonder about while she forced him into another kiss, her thin lips merging with his own, her tongue invading his mouth and engaging his own in a dance of slippery surfaces. He could feel the raspyness of it while she felt his snout and his teeth and his tusks.

Still pulling on his chestfur she leaned backwards and he followed her movement as she lay down on the ground. It was hard stone, only partly covered by softer patches of moss, but Jiddy did not pay any attention to this as she felt her entire abdomen tickling in anticipation, her skin haven already gotten tight, stretching over her form, especially over her breasts but most evidently all around her mons where her pubic fur had bristled and her labia itched with every heartbeat.

She could already feel droplets of her own lubricant upon her netherlips while she spread her thighs and opened them for the man who was on all fours above her, raising her lap towards him and ignoring the pain in her chest and her leg.

He looked down on her with big eyes, hesitating. But he was distracted by something and before he knew what he did he had lowered his head towards her abdomen and saw her spread legs. He leaned backwards a little bit and suddenly he could feel her paw on his head, urging him to lower himself.

Theles took hold of her legs and took some weight off them, still fully aware of the lynx' impairments unlike herself who did not pay any attention to this anymore. Her hot breath flowed over her chest with the glistening silver pendant.

Her labia were nothing but something shimmering between her strong thighs and her pubic fur, but as his head disappeared between her thighs he inhaled

through his large nose and his large nostrils flared even further while they hovered right above her sex and he inhaled her female scents. They were powerful and not as lavish as he would had expected, not as rich as those of a mature woman, but with strong notes of sour, sweet, slick, wet, like a piece of moss after the rain. It displayed its glistening moisture which would fully emerge the moment it would be touched, to wet his fingers and every other limb which would dare to go down there. And in the darkness around them her pubic fur seemed to be just this: A patch of moss which hid a source which he could tap and drink from if he just opened his mouth and his lips.

Jiddy could hardly move in this position as pain started to flare up as soon as she tried to. It was the only thing which prevented her from reaching out towards him, pulling him closer, forcing him to go on, easing her increasing yearning. She growled impatiently, her claws scratching on the ground.

For a short instant his eyes glistened as he looked into her direction, reflecting the light of their fire, but then the shine disappeared again as he lowered his gaze and opened his mouth wide, exposing his tusk while his entire muzzle lowered itself onto her mons.

Instantly Jiddy tensed and became paralyzed as his mouth closed around her sex, the lips of his mouth merging with her netherlips. His snout between her soft pubic fur (which tickled in his nostrils) he let his tongue slip over her labia, gathering some of her moisture upon it and savoring the taste which spread in his mouth, getting stronger while he closed his lips again which passed by her entire mons as he did so.

For a moment she could feel his rock-hard tusks and she shivered and hissed.

Her taste seemed to be ephemeral, vanishing quickly and he felt the urge to enjoy more of it, so that he lowered his muzzle again. His snout closing around the little ruby of her clit and his lips pressing strongly against the softness of her labia while her pubic fur tickled against his skin.

The strong muscles of her thighs tensed, but her instincts kept her from closing her legs as she wanted him to go on, not to hinder him and her entire abdomen started to sparkle in pleasure as the feelings he triggered with his lips and his tongue started to spread. Instead they spread to him like a shy butterfly, releasing more of her scents which urged him to press his tongue deeper between her folds until they ran to and fro between them, licking up the drops of her juice which seemed to melt upon his tongue, disappearing into tiny thrills which tickled in his mouth.

Eagerly the tongue dug deeper, slipping into her opening and spreading it apart while he did so. His saliva mixed with her juice and Jiddy tensed suddenly as she could feel how her own sex responded with a throe of pleasure and an outbreak of additional fluids which he licked up eagerly while he retracted his tongue, resuming a steady rhythm of exploring the insides and outsides of her sex, the touchiness of her folds, the irritability of her hard clit and the warm depths of her opening while his lips did their part as well, his entire mouth caressing her between her legs, probing and testing the entirety of her mons.

It had been some time since he had gone down on a woman like this and he had never encountered someone who had demanded his attention like this while giving herself up like this at the same time. He looked towards her while his tongue went in deeper and he saw how her entire, still sweaty features contorted, twitched and then relaxed again and again as she wallowed in the pleasures he offered her: Her eyes twitching as she narrowed them, then almost opening as she raised her eyebrows, her mouth opening and then suddenly everything contracted again as she let go an inaudible gasp and she closed her mouth again, her lips nothing but a thin line which showed her teeth a moment later... It went on and on like this while his tongue ran through the soft, swollen labia which nestled to his tongue.

Even though she hardly moved at all, pain was still lingering in her veins and her delicate position beneath the male was straining her entire chest with her injured ribs. With every pulse of her heart blood rushed through it and triggered a painful itch in her side which mixed with the excitement of her breasts which had swollen and reacted to even the faint movements as her teats trembled and were shaken, the tiny, hard knobs standing out in the cool air all around, the skin above them tightened and covered by tiny bumps which had emerged when the skin had retracted around the round curves of her breasts' fabric.

It felt as if his tongue dipped into a lake as the riches of her sex seemed to be endless, flowing around his tongue, cool and wet upon his lips, sating a thirst he had not felt until she had urged him to answer her desire.

Her teeth flashed as she opened her mouth wide, for a short moment she was surrounded by tiny sparks of light, reflections upon the countless droplets of moisture upon her entire body, were it fluids from her sex, saliva or sweat and she could feel how her entire abdomen seemed to contract. A powerful sting hit her side as her muscles tensed and she growled in pain, threw herself around while his tongue went deep into her folds, slipped out and then flicked over her clit, only to be replaced by his tusks which grazed it, while his tongue slipped through the entire line of her folds and slithered into her opening once again.

The climax rushed up to her and overcame her with ease. For a moment she couldn't breathe as all of her chest's muscles seemed to tense under the onslaught of pleasure and it was too much for her ribs. Everything in front of her eyes got deep red as she lost control and threw herself around, almost slipping out of the man's hold, but then the shivering which arose from her abdomen spread towards the rest of her body and she gasped breathlessly while her muscles relaxed again. Cool air shot into her lungs and she bucked as pleasure and delight got a hold on her. Saliva shot from her lips as she opened her mouth explosively, her eyes tightly closed and then she shivered and her muscles relaxed and all the pain and the tension was gone all of a sudden, nothing but a pleasant warmth was left.

The boar looked down on the lynx girl, his tusk grazing her folds and he could still see the flush on her face which almost looked like the fever she had experienced before, except that she was relaxed now, her features lacking the

expression of constraint. Theles lowered his hand towards her face and stroked her cheek.

Then he let go of her lap and carefully put her fully down on the ground again. Quickly he grabbed the edge of his shirt and pulled it over his head. He undid his pants as well and pushed them down fervently while she leaned over her again, he could see how her glistening eyes were studied his loins.

Little tremors of pleasure were still resonating through her limbs, but the moment after he had opened his pants she had been able to smell that particular note of musk which surrounded every male sex and it caught her attention. From narrowed, slanted eyes she eyed the dark outline of his sex: A long, smooth member nerved by veins and tendons and on top of the erected shaft was a tongue-like glans whose smooth surface flickered in the light of the fire while Theles placed himself above her, his two arms coming down right next to her head.

She raised her legs towards him again and she could feel his rough, coarse fur brushing over the soft fur and skin between her legs until his sex met with her still over-sensitive mons.

Then his sex came down on hers and Jiddy closed her eyes and inhaled through her teeth.

He shivered due to the edginess of the sensations which were triggered in his sex as it met her mons and encountered unexpected resistance, her aroused, swollen labia as the opening of her inner folds withstood the pressure of his glans for a moment. No matter her arousal, her passion and the yearning sound in her gasping, shallow breathing while he could experience the slippery wetness between her thighs, of the fur that surrounded her sex, but mostly of her incredibly soft netherlips which started to wrap themselves around his tongue-like glans and a moment later, when he could feel how another heartbeat of hers pumped even more blood into her entire abdomen, opened it to him and allowed him to enter her suddenly.

Her depths wrapped themselves around the entering member. Moist fabric lined her strong muscles which were still not giving in just yet, prolonging the pleasure of penetration. Yet the thin tip of his sex, the small fleshy tip, nudged her insides, send tiny sparks through her body which Jiddy relished. It prepared her for the oncoming full girth of the glans, its round shape slowly spreading her folds for the entirety of the shaft which slipped between the slick sex' strong muscles which pulsed and throbbed around the male sex and this movement made him feel sparks of pleasure as well which seemed to synchronize with hers.

His fingers firmly around his sex which was gliding into her, the boar could feel the strength of his own heart-beats as everyone of them rushed into his head and almost overwhelmed it, sending him into short instants of blackness, as if he was about to pass out. Or maybe it was just his blink, but it did not feel that way anymore. Nothing did.

As he settled fully down upon her lap, he had to take his fingers off his own member and as he did so, they slipped past her labia and the little knot of her rock-hard clit and he felt their moisture once again, which made him aware of the

scents of her arousal again, which were overwhelmingly strong now, reminding him of ambergris. He obeyed his instincts when he raised his fingers to his nostrils and smelled at them, the intoxicating female scent rising into his head like a sweet drug, before he lowered his hand again and slipped these fingers into her wide-opened mouth.

Her lips closed around them and she opened her legs even wider, rising her abdomen while the taste of her own arousal spread inside her mouth and the weight of his body pressed down on her, fully embedding his member deep within her. Her one healthy leg wrapped itself around his pelvis and embraced it with all the power of its muscles. Sucking on his fingers she arched her back, wallowing in the feeling of containing his sex entirely, until a powerful sting shot through her body, effectively reminding her of her injured ribs. She twitched and growled, threw her head around and gasped, before her teeth were closed tightly.

Jiddy's hands cramped around his chestfur, pulling upon it with painful power while she tried to overcome the pain, but before it was gone pleasure washed over it. She gritted her teeth even more powerfully as her mind was torn between pleasure and pain while the boar had started never stopped moving. The moment his member had fully slipped into her, glided between the moist, eager folds he had already started to shift his weight as he could barely support the claiming pressure which surrounded it now and he reminded him of her youth and undeniable strength which he would not have had imagined to express itself so impressively.

His sex slowly glided out of hers and it glistened in the light of the flames as droplets of her juices were dripping to the ground beneath them, before it disappeared in the warm, moist opening again, her swollen labia firmly wrapped around it as they fuelled her ongoing enjoyment, interrupted by little shivers which reminded her of her previous climax and foreshadowed the next.

Her entire sex was still irritable and strained, her entire abdomen tensed rhythmically and Jiddy was shortly overtaken by a sensation of exceeding exertion which left no space for anything else within her body and as it was the only thing which mattered to her in this moment, she welcomed it as it washed away any pain as well and when it was gone, she felt nothing but the sex within her, moving in and out, triggering tiny sparks of further delight. His sex and its movement was like a rolling wave and she pressed herself hard against the ground, pushed herself towards him, pressing her abdomen against his loins as she craved to feel him entirely, how his sex parted her abdomen, opened her to a flood of sensations and how his balls slapped against her every time his large body came down on her, this mass of male muscles, dark fur, fat and intoxicating scents. Sweat showed on her brow again and she bit on her lip as she claimed the indulgence of holding this man within her, her one healthy leg powerfully pressing down on his backside.

It felt as if he was crushing her as he had never been so aware of not only their size difference but mainly about the difference of their weights. She pressed herself against him, held onto him with one leg and still he could feel the

resistance of her arm's muscles whenever his loin slapped against her. He could see in her face that she was experiencing pain, but whenever she gasped there was something like a grin upon her lips, flashing up and disappearing just as quickly when she closed her mouth and bit her lip again. Their faces were almost touching.

Powerfully he grabbed her injured leg and quickly he shifted his weight and then raised it above himself, so that it rested on his shoulder now. Taking his mind off it as he had feared to fall down on it any moment and when he moved this time, he could feel the different angle of his sex. It glided through her tight, slippery folds as if it was the first time again.

Jiddy moaned in approval and a stupid, instinctive smile showed on Theles' face while he felt how her labia tensed around the base of his shaft, his sturdy balls pressing down between the muscled halves of her behind while the entire length of his sex was enveloped by firm, smooth, throbbing, wet fabric. An instant later it slipped out again and caressed every inch of the female sex which rippled in excitement, most especially around his tongue-like glans, its smooth touchy surface igniting another rush of delight for him.

The boar responded to it with a grunt, feeling his entire body tensing from his short tail to his ears which flicked erratically while he mated with the lynx girl. He quivered due to the strain of supporting his own weight upon his hands, he was sweating as well which emphasized his natural scents (something which did not lose its effect on Jiddy) and droplets of it fell down from her and disappeared in the fur of the lynx girl which was already wet from her own sweat and the juices from her own sex which had partly wet her abdomen and her thighs by now, something he was well aware of too as he felt it upon his own skin when he moved upon her and as he did so powerful scents rose into his nostrils when he inhaled, by now a mix of both of their scents, combined with every trait of arousal and sex.

He raised his hand to her face and stroked it, then he grabbed her risen leg powerfully and used it as a support while he summoned his strength and came down on her harder and faster, responding to his urges, his desire to join with her even more closely.

The entire place was overtaken by the hisses of the girl, the grunts of the man and the slapping of their bodies against each other while the flames flickered, moved by the emerging aspect of the lake and the forest all around.

Jiddy was rocked by him, her entire body shaken. Every movement caused pain of some kind and her mouth opened in gasps of pain and breathless ravishment, her entire belly welcoming the male sex with heat and dripping wetness, firm and persistent grip around it. Her hands and claws were firmly planted into the ground as she withstood his weight and his power, shaken by Theles' thrusts which she was craving by now, wanting more of them, stronger and faster ones by the moment.

The boar responded as well as he could, grunting and puffing, quivering all over, his loin slapping her lap, his entire weight pressing down on her for a moment, trapping her sex with its hard, little knot of a clitoris between their bodies,

before the sex slipped out again, caressing her insides with all its texture, the bumps and veins and the shape of his glans, while they responded with a never-remitting grip and tiny ripples which run over the shaft and then seemed to shoot into his body, most particularly into his backside where he could feel his own power gathering while he continued to move ever more fervently.

His face contorted, his muscles tensed, he pressed himself against her, tested her resolve, the strength of her arms which were the only thing which kept him from pushing her over the ground. He could hear her hissing and he let his head drop down, his tongue slipped out of his mouth and licked the erected nipple it found upon her swollen breast and when it slipped back in a sweet taste spread inside his entire mouth and then his entire head, while his pelvis started to rock hard, to release all of his power in a series of thrusts which pressed his sex even deeper into her as before, shaking her, making her respond with shivers which he could feel in the moments when his member slipped out again, her insides holding on to it even more powerfully, but then his sex was already about to immerge again, to spread those lips and tight muscles apart, before he slapped hard against her.

„Girl, I am coming...“

And then he roared as he could feel his climax like a gush. From his backside to his loin and throughout his entire body. He trembled and rocked hard a few times, hardly aware that he had triggered her peak as well, while his muscles went into shock, refused to obey his own will and paralyzed him, before he groaned once again as sudden ecstasy rushed him and his entire body throbbed as his sex contracted deep within her, releasing his semen in little spasms which expanded throughout his whole body and every new one of them released more pleasure and joy, until he was on all fours above her, closing and opening his eyes, his mouth wide opened, trying to grasp every sensations which shot by, too fast and too many to hold on to. From his tail to his ears he wallowed in the afterglow of his climax which had sent him into a state of numb bliss and deep satisfaction, his sex still deep within those wonderful soft, warm folds.

The climax hit her as if she was running into a wall, stopping her cold and instantly dazing her. She had already given in to her instincts, but in this moment even those failed her while every fiber within her body tensed with her clit and her sex as the center of it all. There was nothing but her body anymore with its strong muscles, her small breasts, her dense fur, the hidden softness of her insides and the indulgence of her folds between her thighs which were still holding on to the throbbing male sex as it trembled within her, spurting out the seed which mixed with her own juices. And an instant later all of this seemed to dissolve, to disappear inside a sea of pleasure which was suddenly rising from below.

Jiddy growled from the deepest bottom of her chest, her entire body shaking as she did and then she immersed herself in this vastness of delight and satisfaction which surrounded her with warmth and satisfaction, soothing her mind and her body while she plunged in little bubbles which rushed through her fur and sparkled upon her skin, washed away all strain and stress until she

emerged again, floating beneath a cover of trees far above, surrounded by a lake and moss-covered rocks and the sounds of splashing water.

She opened her eyes and saw plants and trees which felt oddly familiar. A few leaves were falling down from above and even before she could see them she knew that they were there. They showed up in the light of the fire a moment later and she watched them falling down towards her as she lay on the ground.

As she moved her hand, she knew every crack in the stone she rested on, every patch of soft moss and she raised her hand towards the dark roof of the trees far above her and watched her own fingers as if she saw them for the very first time, flexing and moving them slowly.

The boar was still above her, a soft, warm mass of maleness which was familiar and alien at the same time. A man whose member was still embedded within her body, triggering a congenial, fuzzy feeling inside her abdomen as it quivered and throbbed, giving off the last few drops of semen which filled her sex. The sounds of his breathing mixed with the constant sounds of splashing water.

Jiddy inhaled deeply, feeling the cool air in her lungs. It seemed to be fresher and she inhaled again, enjoying its unexpected newness which it shared with the newly-formed stone body which stood on the other side of the ruins' wall.

Instantly Jiddy grabbed the boar, hands and claws pressing against him while she stared at the thing...

It was nothing but a dark shadow against the even darker background of the forest. Scents of deep water, old stone and rotting plants surrounded it while it overshadowed everything in its surrounding.

Jiddy's eyes widened. Her instincts returned like a shock which got a hold of her entire body as she realized that this thing had not been there before...

The huge creature stood perfectly still, not moving at all despite its huge, rough shape which reminded a furr from the distance as it seemed to stand on two legs and had two mock arms, but it was at least three times larger than any furr could ever be. It consisted entirely of stones, held together by thick, gnarled, intertwined roots which made up the material body of what could only be a spirit. Wet moss and other water plants hang down from it and water poured down from these plants, creating the sound the lynx had noticed moments before.

Her movement was as fast as it was powerful. Sharp claws flashed up, grabbed his fur and with surprising power she yanked him to the ground, throwing him off herself.

The boar hit the stone ground hard and when he threw his head around he could only see how the lynx girl was already on her feet, struggled to keep standing as her injured leg refused to carry her weight so suddenly.

She slipped off the ground, almost fell down, but instead of standing up again, she shot forwards on all fours, running away as fast as she could.

Pain pierced into her chest where her injured ribs were while she shot over the ground. Her teeth were gritted and her breath was nothing but a hiss between them. Sweat was suddenly bursting out of her pores again.

The huge creature seemed to make a step into the lynx' direction, but instead of rising its leg, it rather seemed to shift, the stones rolling forwards while the rest of the body seemed to follow.

Jiddy did not look behind herself as only running away seemed to be able to temper the feeling which had gotten a hold of her: As if all of her insides were suddenly cramping. The urge to retch was over-powering, while something different had gotten hold of her heart as well and seemed to contain it in a merciless grip. She could feel it moving and twisting around with every heartbeat. But her instincts did not leave her any time to reflect upon this as her entire head was buzzing with crushing panic while she approached the edge of the dark forest.

In this moment the roots came off the stones, which fell down, bereft of their support, crashing onto the ground, while the roots themselves shot forward, the largest tendrils forming spider legs which dashed forward.

The lynx girl heard the noises in her ears where it droned like an avalanche and she ran on even faster, running away with all the speed she could muster from her injured body. Her face was contorted in pain as she shot across the stone ground, saliva shot from her mouth as she gasped for breath, trying to pump air into her aching chest. She ran on all fours, her feet and legs swishing over the rocks and moss beneath her, but her injured leg gave in, offering her less support with every step. With wide opened eyes she stared over her shoulder and looked behind, seeing the spirit as a huge, spider-like creature almost right above her.

In this moment she tripped. She yelped as she fell down hard, slithered over mossy stones. She went head over heels, her small body bouncing off the stones before she landed on her face, her head hitting a stone hard.

She did not lie there for a moment as she raised a quivering arm which grabbed the stone in front of her and pushed her off the ground. Blood dropped from a fresh wound on her forehead and even though she was not even on her own feet again she was tottering. Everything in front of her eyes was blurred, even though her instincts drove her on, she could not make out her surroundings anymore, neither was she able to hold her balance, her head resonating with the numbing pain of her crashing into the stone.

With her claws she dug into the stones in front of her and pulled herself forward, her healthy leg trying to push her off the ground. She crawled forward without looking back, completely taken over by panic.

Pulling herself closer to a larger stone, Jiddy spun around. Despite her state of alarm she understood that she could not flee anymore. It was not time for running anymore... With narrowed glistening eyes she looked at the creature who stood above her, growling from the deepest bottom of her chest, her fur bristling, blood dripping from her forehead she faced the creature with gritted teeth.

The small lynx quivered from teeth to toe, dirty, ragged, wounded and bloody, pressing herself against the stone behind her, staring at the spider-like spirit, its huge legs having almost surrounded the small feline.

Jiddy trembled and clenched her sharp teeth. The muscles beneath her fur flexed.

The roots which formed the spirit's form were immobile.

She opened her mouth and growled, her trembling getting stronger by the moment. The arms which she pressed against the stone behind her tensed. She twitched; her eyes were mere slits in her face.

A drop of blood fell from her frowns onto her muzzle.

„Stop! Stop!“

Completely nude the boar rushed over the stones, he almost fell down as he slipped off the slick mossy stones, but an instant later he stood right in front of the lynx girl, holding out his arms towards the lynx and the spirit, separating them. „Don't...“ he gasped. „Don't!“

He inhaled deeply as he tried to catch his breath again. „Don't...“ he said once again. „Please...“

The lynx girl was still trembling while she stared at him, her claws twitched as they were sheathed and unsheathed again and again, her fingers cramped against the cold stone in her back.

The spirit was still totally immobile.

Theles turned his head towards Jiddy. „It stopped,“ he said breathlessly. „It stopped the moment you stumbled.“

She looked at him and growled. She had not understood one of his words.

The man raised his eyes towards the center of the roots, a tangle of old, partly rotten, gnarled wood without any visible limbs, except for the long legs. He wet his lips. „Don't you see? She is scared,“ he said towards the spirit. „You are frightening her... I do not know what you want from her, but I beg you, Master of the forest, don't come closer!“ He inhaled deeply as he was still partly out of breath. „She is hurt,“ he added.

For an instant the spirit was as motionless as it had been before.

Theles studied it closely, he could hear Jiddy growling behind him.

The roots creaked. Very slowly the spirit started to move. The front legs came off the ground and for a moment it seemed as if the entire shape was about to roll over when its frontal limbs were rising while the back lowered itself. The central tangle dropped to the ground and all of the roots were forming a large ball.

It creaked as a new form emerged from its middle: It had the rough silhouette of a small furr, complete with long ears, a short muzzle and moss for hair, except that this silhouette was entirely made of roots and completely hollow inside, nothing but a fragile shape of wood, resembling the shape of a furr. Two small eyes of dark, greenish fire glowed inside as it looked at the boar and the lynx girl.

There was another growl from the lynx.

Theles just stared at the spirit for a moment, captivated by its appearance, still standing between it and the girl who was still lying on the ground.

For a moment the forest was silent around them, there was nothing but the rustle of leaves in the cold wind of the night which came down from the mountains all around.

The spirit started to move again and despite its appearance, the way it moved was unlike that of any furr: The entirety of the roots started to bob up and down as if the furr-like shape on top was nothing but a statue floating upon a wave. It

moved from left to right over and over again, bobbing up and down, the two greenish eyes looking at the man and the girl.

The spirit's movement was mesmerizing, but after a moment Theles shook it off. „I don't understand what you want...“ he said towards the creature. „I am not a wise man, I don't understand you. Please, we are nothing but wanderers who ask for your forgiveness for kill...“

The spirit did not seem to pay any attention to his words, instead it moved closer, still bobbing up and down all of the time and while it did so, the head with the greenish eyes did not seem to pay any attention to the boar who stood in front of it, instead it seemed to attempt to get a look at the lynx on the ground who was starting to growl menacingly.

Theles' mind was racing and suddenly he spun around and kneeled down to the lynx girl. Hastily he took a hold of her. „Don't be afraid, just trust me...!“ For an instant he saw the glistening of her sharp teeth, but despite his instinctive fear of these he grabbed her arm, threw it over her shoulder and stood up with her, forcing her to her feet. Then he embraced her from behind and with his arms around her, holding her tight, feeling the tension of the small feline body, feeling the twitching of her muscles, he turned towards the spirit again.

„Trust me,“ the boar whispered into her pointed ears. „Don't be afraid!“

As he held her she had to face the spirit and her screwed-up, slanting eyes rose to meet the greenish ones deep within the tangle of roots.

She reacted by tensing even further.

He could feel her tail trying to wag, but it was trapped, being pressed against him, just like she was trapped in his arms. Her ears were laid back and he could see them twitching.

She opened her mouth wide and a moment later he could feel her teeth against the skin of his arm which held her, but she did not bite yet. He understood that it was a warning. Theles gulped down the bitter taste which had spread upon his tongue. „She is with me,“ he said towards the spirit.

The spirit had stopped moving in the meantime, being entirely immobile again. Then a light shiver seemed to get a hold of the entire mass of intertwined wood. Its mock face lowered itself and approached the lynx girl.

Greenish fire was reflected in dark brown pupils as their eyes met.

Theles could feel Jiddy's restless breathing. It was burning hot against his arm, the hot air blowing out of her wide-opened mouth which held his arm with its sharp teeth.

Except for the agitated breathing of the two furs, everything was silent.

The wood creaked as the spirit started to move again. In a sudden movement the entire shape retired and it started to bob up and down again, but in a different pattern. With every move it seemed to rise further into the air as the lowest roots raised the furr-like shape higher, until it seemed to float above the ground, supported by nothing but thin, long tendrils. The shape on top swayed to and fro, started to turn and spin around while it rose and fell quickly, its limbs being thrown around, the moss it had for hair flying all around the furr-like body.

A sound seemed to rise from the lake, a strange droning noise as if the water was quaking, but the sound rose and fell with the movements of the spirit, getting louder and softening again.

And then the two furs could feel it in their feet, the entire ground seemed to tremble in response to the noise from the lake. First the water droned, countless ripples glistening upon its surface as it did, then the earth responded with a thud.

The leaves of the trees all around rustled accordingly, many of them falling down around them until they were standing in a shower of falling leaves, staring at the spirit who kept on moving while their feet were shaken by the tremors of the earth and the lake.

Stones crunched in response to the little quakes, leaves rustled, the lake droned and the spirit moved at the center of these sounds and movements, its shape rising and falling, tendrils flying around as it lost its solid form, suddenly nothing but a batch of roots anymore whose ends flew freely through the air, thrown towards the ground and shooting up into the air again. Stones started to gather around it all by themselves, every tremor of the earth moving them closer together, towards the tangle of roots and starting to form a heap.

With a thud of the ground the roots shot downwards between the stones and an instant later the entire heap had reformed as the spirit's first appearance, a huge figure of roots and stones, overshadowing the ruins, the stele and the two furs who observed it.

The lake was still droning and the spirit responded with huge steps, stones creaking and crashing down on the ground, shaking everything around. Step by step the spirit approached the water again, the deafening steps of the stone feet echoing over the clearing.

When the creature stepped into the lake, water splashed all around and came down in shower like the leaves which were still falling too. With rhythmic steps it walked into the lake, never slowing down, the entirety of the lake resonating, droning. Waves splashing around when it moved forwards, showers of drops splashing down, the creature standing still while the drone reigned and then it made another earth-shaking step, deeper into the dark waters and then the lake responded again and then the creature moved again and little bit little the water started to surround the figure until it submerged entirely.

For a moment the sounds went on: A drone followed by a thud, but they got weaker and finally faded away entirely, until there was nothing but the echoes in the ears of two furs left who had been standing motionlessly, who had kept on watching the spirit.

„Ladies of the night¹², tell me this wasn't one of your dreams,“ he breathed.

Theles carried Jiddy over to their chosen spot between the ruins.

At first the lynx girl had tried to fight him off, but her attempts were hardly serious enough to prevent him from doing so. He had noticed that she was not talking again, uttering nothing but growls and hisses.

Carefully he put her down on a spot next to one of the protective walls and close to the fire, making sure that neither her injured leg, nor her ribs could hurt her.

She reacted with another outbreak of rejection when he tried to study the wound on her forehead, but he gave up quickly as he saw that the wound was still bleeding but just superficial.

Quickly he turned towards his backpack and the spot where he had left his work with his herbs unfinished. He gathered a few of the burs he had already given her earlier, before he turned towards the girl again.

Jiddy retired against the wall, growling at him, but she could not intimidate him anymore. He had felt the feverish heat of her body when he had carried her over to the fire again, he could see her shivering from pain, exhaustion and returning bouts of fever.

The burs were illuminated by the flickering light of the dying fire while the boar grabbed her powerfully and with a strong hand and pressure upon her jaw he forced her mouth to open. She struggled instinctively and he could feel her claws around his head all of a sudden, but even though he could feel them pressing against his skin, she made no attempt to hurt him seriously while he stuffed the burs into her muzzle and forced her to gulp them down.

„By the gods, girl, why can't you behave normal for a moment...“ he gasped.

Her eyes glistened with rage when he let go of her again and she showed her teeth. Hissing and growling she retracted to the wall again, pressing herself against the cold stones.

He stood up, walked towards his backpack again and pulled out his rug, which he took in both hands and walked over to the lynx girl again and held it out to her.

Jiddy grabbed it powerfully, almost tearing it from his hands, pressing it against her body while she studied him with narrowed, glistening eyes.

He looked down on her for a moment, but then he turned around and walked towards his herbs which were still lying there on the ground, before she had seduced him, before the spirit from the lake had showed up. He kneeled down in front of it and he screwed up his eyes in order to try to secure them before he went to sleep.

The dying light of the fire was hardly enough for him to see anything at all. He used his sense of smell the best way he could, but it was still difficult and took quite some time to sort the herbs which had gotten mixed up during all the commotion.

The fire cracked. It had almost burned down, there was nothing but a heap of embers left by now.

He blinked, noticing how the dim light stressed his eyes. There was not much more he could do before sunrise. He gathered the herbs he had sorted, bound them together and carefully placed them inside his bags. Then he rose, stretched and looked at the lynx girl again.

She had curled up just like a little cub, nothing but a ball of fur beneath the rug. He could see that her breath was slow and regular.

After a short moment of hesitation he went over to her. He bent over in silence and very slowly he put two fingers at her forehead, trying to feel her body temperature.

Almost instantly the eye that was turned towards him opened, her lips twitched, bared her sharp teeth but it only lasted for an instant. The eye studied him and he backed away. It twitched shortly then it slowly closed again.

The boar inhaled deeply, consciously savoring the cool air deep in his lungs.

The fire was still crackling, far above there was wind in the crowns of the trees and the forest gave of strange noises, the sound of flowing water, fizzling leaves, the sounds of small animals and winged creatures that hunted those animals.

His eyes turned towards the lake, studying its surface which shimmered in the faint light which was reflected upon its surface which seemed to be perfectly smooth. There was the faint sound of running water, possibly coming from the opposite shore and in the air was the faint scent of wet moss, wet wood and wet stones.

He inhaled these scents deeply while he raised his eyes towards the stele at the edge of the lake. His breath flowed out of his mouth and formed a small cloud of fog in the cold air which came down from the mountains which surrounded the forest.

A few leaves fell through the darkness.

„Holy Mother, creator of life! Holy Spirits, guardians of her creation! I...“ He fell silent. He wanted to ask them for something, but he did not know what he could possibly ask them for.

At his feet the embers of the fire gleamed one last time, then they fell apart into black pieces and as they gave off their last light, a tiny plume of smoke arose and filled his nose with the pleasant scent of a warm fire one last time.

Gentle winds carried the cold of the night along. The dew of the morning had transformed into hoar frost upon the leaves of the trees. A thin white layer upon the green which had already changed to a dark brown color in many spots, sometimes even an almost blackish shade where the dying leaves had been pierced by the frost and were now rotting from within. But the leaves had not fallen down from most branches just yet. Only a few trees were shedding their foliage which fell towards the ground, swirling through the cold breeze which brushed through the Forest of Jgelgar.

Theles stood between the old walls at the edge of the lake, having raised his snout into the air and inhaled slowly. His nostrils flared as he sniffed carefully.

He could smell the frost in the air which rendered it dry. All of its moisture had already come down as hoar frost somewhere and the only thing which was left in the air were the scents of distant snowy mountains and the smells of the forest itself.

He lowered his face again and looked towards the lynx girl who sat on the ground, not far from him, slowly rubbing her neck. Her face showed hints of pain which arose from her injured ribs due to her raised arm as she scratched herself on her back.

„The first snow will be coming soon,“ the boar mentioned.

The lynx looked up at him. Then she nodded slowly.

Sunlight did not reach the ground directly, but it was illuminated the treetops above them, the frost upon their leaves reflected it down to the ground. It seemed like all the trees above them glistened and shimmered brightly, a few bird being dark shadows between them as they swooshed by the clearing, quickly disappearing in the shadows of the trunks again. They were nothing but dark spots upon the surface of the lake which lay still, its bottom hiding in darkness.

Jiddy slowly looked over the expanse of water, before her eyes stopped at the stele which stood by the shore.

Clumsily she got to her feet, numb pain spreading from her leg and her chest as she did so. She exhaled audibly when she stood erect.

With slow cautious steps she walked past the ruins which had sheltered them for the night and approached the pillar with its stony surface of faded colors.

Her hand came down on it as she supported herself upon it. From beneath her eyebrows she examined the lake and the reminiscence of the night's events came back to her. Her fur bristled a little bit and her tail started wagging.

The waters were motionless except for the few spots where leaves had fallen upon its surface and faint waves were slowly dying away. From somewhere the sound of a small stream of water could be heard.

Her sharp teeth started to gnaw on one of her claws which had emerged from its sheath.

„Jiddy...“

She turned around.

The boar stood between the ruins, fully dressed, his staff in his paws and carrying his backpack.

The lynx girl turned around and hobbled towards him.

He held out her staff as she got closer and she took it from his hands, nodding towards him.

„How bad is the pain,“ he asked her.

Jiddy shook her head. „Bettr,“ she growled.

He nodded once and then he took her arm and laid it upon his shoulder, thus supporting her as they started to walk away from the lake. In this moment he could smell her particular scent again, this mix which reminded him of the ground of a beech grove with its countless layers of dry leaves which hid the moisture underneath mixed with these peculiar scents of feline fur.

„You want to get out of the forest?“ he asked.

The lynx girl by his side nodded.

They walked towards the edge of the clearing, walking much faster than the day before as the lynx girl's steps were much steadier than the day before, even though the pain was not gone yet.

„I could take you to my hometown,“ the boar mentioned as they climbed the embankment of stones which marked the border between the forest and the sanctum.

He observed the lynx girl, waiting for a reaction of hers, but there was none for a while. Then she shook her head.

They climbed the small hill of stones and much to her surprise there was a hole in the trees, due to some fallen trunks. Beyond the forest she could see the grassy slope of a mountainside whose peaks disappeared in the lowly floating clouds.

For a moment both of them watched the mountains which were not as far away as Jiddy would have expected as they arose right at the edge of the forest, as if they were stretching through the cover of trees, rising into the sky above. The slopes were almost entirely devoid of any larger plants, there was nothing but high grass covering them, glistening wet in the light of the sun. Further up the mountains the grass gave way to dark gray rock which looked through the green coat. The tops were almost entirely hidden in low-flying clouds which drifted around them, rarely exposing a thin cover of freshly fallen, short-living, white snow.

The boar inhaled. „You are crazy...,“ he said once again and exhaled. He lowered his face for a moment and when he looked up again, he raised his hand as well and pointed towards one of the closest mountains which featured a particularly rocky, elongated top. „That's Mountain Achequo. If you cross it you will reach the hills above the Fhein Chasm. Since a flood a few autumns ago the Fhein chasm is impassable, you have to follow the paths around it. It is quite a task in your state but if you hurry up you can make it before the snow reaches the valleys. If you follow these tracks you will reach New Ceema without fail. I know the place, it's good to pass wintertime.“ He turned towards her and looked directly into her face. His features had hardened as his lips curled around his tusks. „I do not like the idea of you travelling all alone.“

Jiddy was still looking towards the distant mountains, carefully eying their slopes, the rocks, the trees and the snow. Her tail wagged. She turned her face towards him. „Why?“

„I do not want to think about what can happen to a girl all alone. You seem to be an experienced roamer¹³, but you know better than me that you have to find a place sooner or later. Not just for now...“ He paused shortly. „A home, a job and maybe a mate,“ he added.

The lynx girl inhaled and for a moment he saw how her jaw moved, but she did not answer.

„Furthermore considering your state, trying to cross the mountains to New Ceema is very risky at this time of the year,“ he stated. „What do you expect to get from this?“

Jiddy lowered her head a little bit and her hair fell into her face so that it was hidden from his sight for a moment. Beneath the fur, the skin and the muscles of her chest she could feel how her heart was beating powerfully. It was not beating fast, but its slow, forceful rhythm resonated throughout her body. She raised her head again and with her slanted, feline eyes she looked at the boar by her side. „What’s a *feral*, d’you know?“ she asked.

The boar looked at her in surprise. Her manner of speaking was strange and foreign and her voice husky, but for the first time since he had met her, she was not just growling anymore. „A what...?“

„A *feral*,“ she repeated and looked at him.

Their eyes met for a short moment.

The man blinked. „Is it something like a feral animal...?“

Jiddy shook her head.

„Then I have no idea, never heard of this before.“

Jiddy nodded slowly.

„Why do you ask?“

Jiddy quickly shook her head once again.

He tilted his head and watched her angular, androgynous features for a moment. He felt like he had never really noticed them before with its harsh lines which emphasized her feline nature. He narrowed his eyes when he asked: „Does it have anything to do with what happened last night?“ It was the first time that either of them mentioned the matter and suddenly he felt something like relief, now that he had finally spoken out, as she could confirm that his memories were not cheating on him, that it had not been a dream.

Jiddy pressed her lips together and he could see how her entire features hardened, her eyes getting smaller as she screwed them up. Her tail flicked. She looked towards the mountains ahead of her. „Dunno,“ she mumbled, but then she turned her head towards him and looked straight into his eyes. „But I gotta find out.“

The boar was silent for a moment and studied her face for the moment, suddenly fascinated by its angular lines which mixed the signs of youth with a determination he had rarely seen before. He did not know what he could reply. He inhaled the cool air deeply. On this spot the fresh air from the mountains

mixed with the humid, saturated scents of the forest. He could recognize a few scents right away... Red oak, alder, Douglas fir, silver fir and Tacolar¹⁴... He exhaled again and snorted a little bit while doing so. Finally he moved and bent over a little bit while he undid his backpack.

The lynx girl watched him.

When he had put his backpack to the ground, he opened the upper part, pulled out a piece of cloth that he would have used to wrap herbs in. He shook it and spread it on the ground, before opening the lower part of his backpack, quickly pulling out some food and herbs that he could reach with his paw, placing them on the cloth.

A moment later he folded the cloth into a small bundle and while standing up, he held it out to the lynx girl.

Jiddy looked at the bundle for a moment, then she looked at him again. Her mouth was opened as if she wanted to say something, but she did not, closed it again, swallowed and took the bundle from him.

„You won't need a water bottle, you can find lots of that,“ he said. „I know this food is not enough to last all the way, but I can't spare all of mine, you understand.“

She nodded.

The boar nodded as well. „I put in some Flowers of incandescent¹⁵ and some thringwood tendrils. Chew the flowers if your pain gets too strong. Crush the tendrils and rub them on your leg.“

She looked up and he saw how her eyes sparkled in the light. „Thanks,“ she mumbled.

He nodded again, bent over and picked up his backpack again, putting it back on.

She watched him for the moment, still holding the small bundle in one paw.

There was a moment of silence when they stood opposite each other, on the small hill of rocks and rubble at the edge of the forest. There were the sounds of birds all around them, chasing each other through the treetops, but never really showing themselves to the furs down below who did not speak for a moment.

Theles finally opened his mouth again. „Farewell, Jiddy, may the Holy Mother and Her children guide you during day and night.“ He held out his paw.

Jiddy hesitated for a moment before she took it and they shook their hands. „Thanks,“ she said again. Then she raised her head. „Y'know...“ She hesitated. „Long time 'go I met a man who wasn't as kind as you...“

The boar smiled a little bit and nodded. „It's okay... I am following the way of the gods... And I saw the spirit! I always knew it was there, but now...“ He paused. „I have the strong feeling that I might never have seen it without you.“ He was smiling at her, but to his surprise she did not return the smile. Instead the lynx girl looked away.

She nodded; there was an odd expression upon her face, something he had not seen up to this moment. „Far'well,“ she mumbled and without further delay she turned around and walked down the hillside, her soft feet making no sound

on the stone, but her staff did as she tried to support herself in order to relieve her injured leg.

Supporting himself on his staff Theles looked after her for a while, although her small shape quickly disappeared in between the shadows of the forest.

There was chirping of birds above him, faint wind rustled in the trees and some leaves sank down right in front of his muzzle. He watched them like hypnotized: Their dance was a very slow, graceful one as if they riding an invisible swing.

He had to chuckle because of this silly thought. „You are getting old, my friend!“ he said to himself. „Autumn is getting closer!“ And dexterously he spun around on the spot and walked down the huge heap of stones, heading in the direction of his hometown, the staff coming down hard on the stony ground, the feathers and decorations on its tip swinging to and fro.

The day was cool this far to the north and the low floating clouds were the vanguard of a winter which left no time for autumn. Autumn had to hurry and reached out to cover the land beneath its mist and falling leaves. The haze rose from the forests like they were breathing and the clouds ascended towards the sky, joining each other up there, wetting the meadows of the hills that limited the border of the forest of Jgelgar on their way. But as this happened one could see that the forest was still mostly dark green, a foreshadowing of the later loss of their leaves, but up to now the lush foliage still rustled in the wind and countless drops of molten hoar frost fell from them, onto the cold, soft ground that gave in to every step of even the smallest animal or the lightest furr and despite this the traces of the lynx girl were nowhere to be seen.

Her bare feet seemed to leave no track behind, despite the staff and her injured leg Jiddy walked so skillfully that she did not leave behind anything although she did not even seem to care about that. There were only some few broken branches that could have led towards her. But one could never be sure if it was her trace or that of some large, dangerous predator that sneaked around in the darker shadows of the forest.

Jiddy was not even longer in the forests anymore; she had left them behind and everything else that hid beneath the dense vegetation. Her breath formed faint haze in front of her muzzle and she inhaled deeply, totally absorbing the freshness of this day with an unseen sun. She could feel autumn pulling at her limbs but she would not give in to it, she would not wait for it to reach her.

She raised her head and looked up ahead, seeing the green slopes with the lush grass and with emphasis she put her staff that she used as a crutch into the soft earth beneath her which confirmed that the Forest of Jgelgar lay behind her. And suddenly she started running as fast as she could with the help of the piece of wood.

The pain from the injured leg seemed to be gone in this moment and instinctively she ran so fast that she was starting to pant, nearly going to the boundaries of her capacities. The staff hindered her, but she ran on. The grass was flying past her feet which barely touched the ground anymore. It was just a light

touch before she jumped off again, dashed on. The moisture of the wet meadow sprayed around her, the mist of the hill whirred around her, whitish shades of moisture that cooled her heated skin. Her short hair fluttered around her face and her tail waved in the wind as if it had become a part of it.

Clouds around her rose off the ground, swirled past the small shape on the slope and bit by bit they revealed the landscape beneath: The dark, dense green of the lush forest in the valley between the mountains, the glistening of the dew on the foliage, the clouds that rose from the many openings in between the trees and up into the sky.

Her weight did no longer matter to her, she was weightless like her entire body had become ethereal, there was no exhaustion anymore, no crutch she had to rely on, no injured leg, no sound but the rushing of the wind in her ears and the beating of her heart. And she ran on, the grass beat against her legs, late flowers with rotting petals flashed past in the corner of her eyes as did all her surroundings. The cool, moist air cooled her body while she went on, just ran and ran, raced up the hill like it was no obstacle at all. She was a part of it who did not need to make any effort to make it all fly past her, it all dissolved around her, rushed around her in a large whirl and she was in the eye of the storm, going on and on, endlessly.

With a loud fluttering noise birds rose fluttered up into the sky. They emerged from the forest and flew around the small feline shape before they caught the drift of the wind and accelerated. Countless wings rushed around her, the black shapes accompanied her like she was one of their own and then she screamed excitedly and all of a sudden the birds swirled around her in turmoil as they gained speed and shot past her, rose into the sky until the mist surrounded them.

There was a grin upon her face.

END OF BOOK ONE.

Annotation 1: The mythical past of the world. A golden age when magic and technology had been one supreme science. It ended in the destruction of the Spirits' War.

Annotation 2: M'boli trees are a giant kind of tree, rivaling the sizes of redwoods. Their leaves are thin, feathery and light green.

Annotation 3: Crawlers are small crustaceans that live in any place with sufficient moisture. It is most often found under stones in the wood. It gets as big as a palm, feeds on decaying plants, small insects and carrion. They are edible, but hardly palatable.

Annotation 4: Ghost Eagles are among the biggest avian predators. They got their name from their plumages in various shades of brown and black, which make extremely difficult to see in the mountainous areas they live in.

Annotation 5: It is common belief among all furs that the Holy Mother, creator of the world, considers all life to be sacred. The exact implementation of that law is disputed though, but most furs agree that unnecessary killing is a sin against the Holy Mother's creation.

Annotation 6: The Northern Reaches are at the north of the Midlands and are considered to be the northern frontier of civilized life. It is a very harsh land with different mountain ranges, very few settlements, bordering the Frozen Sea.

Annotation 7: Magic is a fickle thing. As it depends upon the ability of a magic user to "convince" one thing to do something which is within that object's own capacities (such as wood catching fire), some effects of magic might look like a completely random occurrence.

Annotation 8: Riverstones are a gem which looks like a darker version of aquamarine. Aphen shells are the shells of a freshwater clam and are quite valuable due to the large amount of mother-of-pearl they contain.

Annotation 9: Kamden Moss grows in very dark, moist places, typically in the proximity of a source or a small rivulet. It grows in tiny lumps which produce a blue or purple flower.

Annotation 10: Hollow Tubers are mushrooms which are shaped like a whitish tube. It can be used as an additive for cloth dye as its mush fortifies the durability of the color.

Annotation 11: Furs of all species consider sex to be something of a social glue, as lovers are indebted to each other. So Theles is telling Jiddy in advance that he cannot uphold his part of such a deal. Ironically he is offering it the next day anyway.

Annotation 12: "Ladies of the night" is a common name for the three Moon Goddesses.

Annotation 13: Roaming is an old costume which goes back to long forgotten times. A roamer is a young fur who leaves his or her hometown in order to search a job, a mate or simply his own place in the world.

Annotation 14: The Tacolar tree is a very rare tree with a very smooth bark and leaves with a silvery shimmer. It grows rather wide and its branches are very twisted. It gets surprisingly old and its branches are said to have magical powers.

Annotation 15: Incandescent is a small orchid which grows on trees. Its petals range from yellow to red, hence its name. Thringwood is a very inconspicuous liana of the temperate forest which is very often overlooked. Only the young, green tendrils do have a medicinal effect.

