



splashed water in her face. It did hurt, but made her feel better, fresher. She washed herself on the side of the head with fast, instinctive moves and fresh blood flowed into the clear water, making it filthy.

After a while, she had no idea how much time had passed, she managed to stand on two legs. She stayed there on the spot, looking down in the water. It was clear once again. There was no sign of the blood and the dirt.

She pulled back, without any idea of how to count the passing time. She turned around and began to seek out, seek back to her own tracks. Follow them up the hill, across the plains. Then... she didn't do more than blink, that was how she felt, and even more time had gone by without her remembering anything. The grass started to turn greener and juicier the higher in the terrain she climbed. It felt like climbing, an ever steeper uphill stumble towards some unknown, unreachable place.

Her head started to hurt again. Blink... *Flash!* The ground seemed to sway, the green grass to blacken, before her eyes. *Blink.* She lay flat on the ground. The night embraced her on all sides. She shivered. A short flash of it was all she got. *Morning.* She couldn't tell if it was the first or second morning. Or the third or fourth. She remembered a surface, a water, a face, but not when, not where. Sometimes she didn't recall anything of the step before this, this moment now. She struggled to hold on to the thoughts, one single thought. They always seemed to be evading her. The only thing she did remember, it dawned on her was that she didn't remember.

She suspected that she hadn't been walking in these parts before. That she never before had been remotely close to this place. It felt unknown, foreign. The grass stretching so high above her, around her. After a while it dawned on her that she remembered what she didn't remember. The realization was somehow comforting. Everything, the surroundings, her *aloneness* didn't impact so hard on her after that.

Lines stretched unreal out beyond her vision. She didn't really see them. Not with the two eyes. Just inside the head, her head. Tracks. Ruts someone had called them. Tracks left by a wagon. By wheels that allowed wagons to be pulled. Pulled by snorting, suffering bulls. She realized she had to follow tracks. She needed to.

*Thirsty.* Skin dehydrating the second the thought crossed her mind. Tongue swollen in the mouth, her mouth. The sore throat. Sun stretching down, touching her, consuming her. What wasn't already consumed. The self disappeared, only the self remained. She had walked far, so far when the forest grew around her fragile form, embracing her. The sun didn't, couldn't reach her anymore. It reached for her, stretched its tentacles, its shining rays down between the treetops, but to no avail.

Downwards, she moved downwards, along a dried-out river. Good! She found herself digging fervently and reached humidity and half set mud. Smearred it over dry, cracking skin, couldn't persuade herself to drink it. Not

yet. Didn't know how long she could afford to wait. Drove herself on. Rivers, even dried-out rivers led to water. She had heard this often enough... wherever she had heard it.

Good, good, it tasted so good. She found water and had to blink, blink. The vision did not disappear. Water, water flooded her beyond thirsty mind. The river came flowing from the opposite side of the little more than a big pond, twinkling in the twilight sunshine. She threw herself into the small pond. The abrupt chill refreshed her. She slurped life-giving liquid, drank huge swallows. An instinct, a memory, made her cautious. She halted the drinking orgy a good while before she had too much. She felt incredible. Hungry. So hungry. She dried herself on and around the lips with a dirty hand, dried the hand on the worn down, pale-colored pants. This had to be her only one. She couldn't remember another and absolutely not a third or a fourth. Tears made long lines on dust-covered cheeks. She looked at herself, looked at herself in the water mirror again, the way she (might) had done once, not so long ago. Tracks. Wheeltracks. She remembered that in flashes, virtually nothing else. Round things rolling away. Carrying little houses over even and uneven ground, bumpy forest treks and overgrown roads. Quivering fingers carefully touched skin by the hot wound by the temple. Immediately dizzy she sank to the ground by the pond. Water. Thirsty. She drank. Slept.

Day again. She crawled inch by inch an awfully long stretch to some thick branches of bush and sought out ripe berries. Ate them with a greed and a hunger that didn't come close to shocking her. Hid from the sharp light of day. Crawled back to the pond and water. Cleaned the wound again. Drank. Slept.

Next morning she stood on her two feet, stood steady and with just a slight dizziness. Her view was clear (like the water), and she knew this was really the morning after the last. She remembered the night. It was a crystal clear image in her mind. The overwhelming impact of the forest made her stand rigid for a long time, but it wasn't in any way such that she felt fear. She knew what fear was and this wasn't it. Just the memory of it provoked a reaction in her. A memory, as distant as all the others. Why couldn't she (remember)?

This was far from fear, what she felt, standing rigid in the deep forest. This was something else altogether.

Hunger gnawed in her and drove her on. She needed food. A vague emotion that didn't disappear gave her a notion that this wasn't anything new to her. She had starved before, also in the forest, the huge strange forest, when she had followed those who... hunted. Only followed. Sucking up impressions from a world seemingly so scary, hearing the adults talk about it.

She remembered! They had left her with other women and told her in a strange voice that it was nothing to fear in this place. The huge man hadn't been able to keep his eyes from flickering anxiously. Nothing had happened. But... according to them it didn't matter. They were there, the forest people, the creatures haunting the human

sleep. It wasn't this forest, she knew that. Absolutely not. There were spirits in the forest, they had told her, and vengeful, restless ghouls that sought young human souls...

A resolute glow ignited the eyes, the insecure, seeking look. She sniffed in the air. It felt completely natural, like the right thing to do. Without her ever thinking about whether it was right or not.

She climbed the nearest tall tree and started on her eager scouting. Her heart hadn't beaten many times before life in the forest started to come alive to her inner and outer view. She saw rabbit and she saw fox, chasing the poor rabbit. Hints, flashes of game. Food! Deer, big and proud. Gracious Roe. And they all had in common that they kept far away from her. Heart sank in her chest. Yes, the kind of disheartening she felt just then fit that description. Someone had taught her to read and write. This she knew, because she realized immediately how wasted, completely useless it was in her predicament.

She threw herself from the tree and started chasing the rabbit with everything she got. Leaves and branches hit her face and body when she was compelled to leave the forest trail and enter the wilderness. Leaves and branches stung her. The rabbit disappeared almost immediately. She continued to circle long after she had given up on the chase. She saw nothing, nothing at all. On the forest floor there was nothing to see, nothing to gauge. The animals had long since taught themselves to keep their distance from humans.

After a while she fell exhausted to the ground, exhausted in spirit as well as body. She more crawled than walked from the spot, both angry and discouraged. She had to enjoy berries and berries only this dark, too. But the day after and day by day after that even they became hard to find and she had to widen her search to ever-wider circles. And in her need she started to dig for roots, to sample them and carefully taste everything she did run into. Some samples made her ill, others did not. She tried new ones evening by evening, morning by morning, meal by meal. After some time she couldn't measure, it subsided her hunger, even if it didn't still it. She fed morning and evening, on these two times only. Fed. Rested. Learned. Or moved around. Or sat still. She sat still for many hours each day. At night she gathered strength. The long days she spent studying the movement of the rabbit, how it trekked and paused inside the quivering forest. She didn't hunt it. Not once did she give in too overwhelming temptation. She learned, taught herself slowly, surely its habits, how it moved and moved as one with its environment, the ground, the trees, the bushes, the air. She studied the predators' dance, their song, the way they moved in on their prey, and she shuddered, shuddered in eerie anticipation. Night brought impatience and troubled sleep. She heard prolonged howls and didn't know whether they were real or not.

She could never really be certain that any of this really happened. In a way she experienced as real, it seemed to her that everything happened for the first time.

One day she stood by a pond she remembered from several former recent visits «later», «after» the pond where she had washed the blood from her face. Everything became clearer, *focused*, to her from then on. She studied the young girl in the water surface mirror. She was *skinny*. The clothes hardly fit her anymore. It didn't matter, she felt, as they had become more rags than clothes. She fit them better, by tying, sewing the rags together. Also in this effort, she improved after a while of trying and failing. And thought they fitted her better now. She enjoyed the fact that she felt so much lighter, how easy the air reached the body, how the skin itself seemed to be able to breathe better.

In twilight, one twilight gray and heavy she managed to close in on a rabbit. She attacked it, but just as she was about to grab the damn thing, it jumped eloquently out of her reach. It disappeared like smoke and she was left in despair and frenzy, with fists hammering the ground.

Sounds from the forest first made her listen with all her senses, and then made her rise with a wary, wondering look. She stood like that for some time, like bewitched, listening to a ruckus nearby. The Hunger won over the fear and she sought the place of the snarls and hysterical screams. She sniffed and sought, but found nothing. No blood, no bone, no signs of remains or struggle. No rabbit. She had to go to sleep hungry this dark, too.

She awoke with a start sometime during the night and lifted her head, where she slept in her nest up in the tree. She heard wolves or near-wolves howlhowl and she froze in the night heat. She didn't sleep much after that. After a while she gave up trying and started breaking branches into sticks and practiced sharpening them with flat rocks.

*She sat up with a start.* She remembered this much from one moment to the other, before instinct took over. Listening, she heard only her own rapid breathing. She looked up, staring, beyond the trees and the surroundings. The moon climbed swollen and stumbling over the forest. This sight created a strange resonance in her. Its rays reached her through thick treetops, thin, silver like, like needles of ice and fire. She was convinced she heard all the sounds of the forest, but continued listening, without being conscious why. Why it felt so important.

Then... she heard it. Consciousness, what she somehow had... lost finally fractured the last bit, and the echoes, the pieces, collected themselves, the tide washed over her and the wave was stronger than what had left her. She heard it. She heard the howl of the owl, a hoot resembling the howl of a wolf. Bits of... yes, she remembered

what it was... ice gathered in her stomach. She fumbled her spear, tightened her fingers around it. Slowly she felt the burden of it, the lack of burden, and a smile cracked the young face.

It was a marvelous thing, what a person saw, when looking beyond what was right in front of oneself. One saw what was right in front so much clearer. She knew she needed meat. She wished to live. The rest of the night she used for concentration, preparation, building her anger, awakening what might remain of the forest gods. She painted her body with juice from berries, smeared dirt and mud all over herself, filled the night with screams from her inner self. And the echo returned as them mighty howl of the owl.

Very early next morning, before the first light, she followed rabbit tracks. Quite often the quick view of all the small animals in the forest threatened to interrupt her search. She wouldn't allow herself to be distracted, where she walked and ran and tripped. Her eyes moved restlessly back and forth, up and down, attempting to register every single movement. Feet drummed against the forest bed, while the sun moved across the sky. She saw without seeing the glowing disk, while she closed in on one single rabbit in the uneven terrain.

She was nearly frozen, but not paralyzed. So simple it was, to move, so... natural. Her face was rigid in her concentration, but not the smile, the one from inside. She flowed forward, seemingly without straining herself. Each step was a light, effortless, natural succession of the last. Her fatigue rested, faded away, until it no longer mattered.

The rabbit began circling. Finally! It closed in on its spawn. She realized this, without really thinking about it. And something was... wrong! The behavior of the she-rabbit became wrong. Not wrong. Right. What happened became wrong, in this... context. So many words whirled through her mind, her still fractured mind. She wondered if she had really learned all this, or was she merely remembering, remembering from a distant memory. Thoughts. They became fleeting, pointless.

The young human female rushed forward. She understood in a flash of raw knowledge. She had no problem understanding. The sight came to her in a vision before she actually saw it, the near-wolf bitch that impatient and hungry pushed a paw into the whole in the ground.

NO! A fundamental *rage* rose from the deep, from the human being. *No*, the game belonged to *her!* It was hers. She threw herself forward. The near-wolf backed off a little, unused as it was with aggressiveness in the two-legged predators. Not far, not long. It attacked with a paralyzing snarl. The two-legged one drove her spear through its heart, pushed the four-legged bitch backwards with volatile, irresistible force. A steaming mouth bit around her arm and she felt teeth scraping the skin. They hit the ground, rolled over each other over and over. She fought herself to her knees and stabbed her lethal enemy time and time again. The once so human face

consorted in black rage. But the bitch was already dead. Her last movements had been merely cramps. Even in death, far beyond death, the four-legged beast had fought to kill. The young girl, the two-legged beast slowly relaxed and her facial features softened. She picked one of the sharp stones she carried with her, used it to slice open the chest of the beast. Then she pushed a hand inside it... and pulled out the still beating heart. Her mouth opened wide and she took a big bite, tearing the big muscle apart. Blood flowed down her throat, within and without. The meat tasted delicious, the blood even better. She couldn't have imagined how delicious it was, how it made her feel. Her blood, it boiled and flowed through the veins. She caught the lame, frozen rabbit mother with her stare, through the red fog, snarled triumphantly at the lamb facing the wolf. The small animal fled and left its young at the predator's mercy. The female howled in triumph. She was alive and she would continue to live, live long. The howl of the human beast resounded like fire through the wild, through the forest, the earth and the air.

She had passed another body of water on her way further down, into the valley. The remaining humid heat made her move faster and more during the evening, the twilight. She still covered quite a distance during the day. Two days earlier she had discovered smoke on the horizon and knew now that it came from this valley. She flowed through the forest, ran across the plains, bathed with great pleasure when the opportunity and her need warranted it. Without hurry, she got closer to her goal, the far valley. Smoke, other people.

Late one day, shockingly sudden, she stood rigid in the forest glen and stared at a wall of raised timber pushed into the ground. Pushed far down, they had to be, to stand so firm and secure. Someone had placed them tight together, so tight that it was impossible to look through the space between them. They formed a huge circle at the center of the plain. People lived there inside the circle. How could they stand it? The Sun. Even now, late in the day, it shone mercilessly down into the circle. Every sunny day (and now these days, there were mostly sunny days). She remembered. She knew of such villages, such buildings, houses upon houses, remembered how they looked inside. People built a whole lot of cramped homes inside such dead trees.

An old, burned out war machine rested peaceful just inside the open gate. It was pretty much blocking the gate and she wondered why it hadn't been moved. Away from the open closed gate.

Her eyes moved, to those who worked on the field outside the tall wall. Men and women, humans like herself, caring for the growing things they had put into the ground and cut in the soil to plant more. Damaged it. She had a certain idea that this was something she somehow had seen before. She was filled with both happy wonder and dark curiosity. Her expression didn't change from the obviously eager look and she hardly missed anything of

what was going on. As the forest had taught her to teach herself. Big-eyed she studied these members of her own species staying, at least temporarily in the open landscape, staying there voluntarily. She shuddered without knowing why. Gooseflesh ran all over her naked skin. Shrank with misery, she did, when she without any problem what so ever sensed their misery. As they strained themselves. Also here among the trees, inside cooler shadows of the forest the heat rose violently in the middle of the day and the following hours. Still it continued to rise. But out there in the field, in the full exposure of the sun the heat had to be unbearable. She kept her silent stare on them, saw how they strained and how much they suffered.

And her eyes touched the many remains of the old world strewed around. The junk was not in any use, but was visible above the grass and plants all over the field, obstructing the movement of those working there. That, too, seemed odd to her curious mind.

Her eyes came to rest on a young male, a boy working pretty far away from her modest hiding place. She lost the doubting, concentrated look and her face lightened up yet again. Thought and action were virtually instantaneous. She moved carefully closer to the boy, filled with careless, excited eagerness. She had her entire attention focused on him. Studied all of him, both the body and what was hidden. She wondered, in the back of her head what might lead her to such carelessness. A worried, but not very insistent voice kept speaking incessantly, but she didn't heed it. He was... different than the rest. The dark skin, the smooth, black hair marked him. He was different because of his outward appearance, but also... in other ways.

Her thorough, intense study revealed why he had attracted her attention, from the very first look. To her it was easily understood that he did not thrive digging the earth. She read it in the way his body spoke to her. Couldn't the others see it? How he disliked every movement?

She heard someone cry out and twitched, saw them all discover her one by one. There were more shouting and more people turn their eyes on her. A huge man walked towards her. He had almost covered the entire distance between them before she was conscious of how close he truly was. She took one step back. He halted too, with an uncertain look in his eyes. He started to talk to her, in a kind, soothing voice. She understood his words. Some she had some problems with, but their immediate significance she quickly understood. Where did she come from, what was her name? She didn't really know how to answer those questions. They seemed important to him. She didn't remember, she told him so. How was it possible that she had survived in the wilderness? By hunting, she replied flat out. He asked her about the scrape on the arm and nodded when she told him the sharp teeth of the near-wolf had caused it. Many dogs had become wild in the time after the breakdown. He wondered how she had gotten away, though, stupid man. She replied with a proud stance that the near-wolf bitch had not



escaped, that she herself had personally killed her and eaten her warm flesh. Her words didn't cause the expected reaction from the big man. He looked rather worried. The meaning of all the strange questions and their strangely cautious way of approach slowly dawned on her. She remembered and understood, in a way.

A woman came forward and asked if she was hungry, if she wouldn't come with her inside the palisade and take a bath. The words were expressed with a certain kindness, but it wasn't prominent. The girl looked hard at the woman. Hadn't she just told them of her prowess as a hunter? That she could manage outside the palisade and didn't need their smothering comfort? And she had been bathing. The smell she scented from these people was far worse than she had ever smelled. Here, out in the open, it drifted in the wind, not so distinctive, but was still like a sharp pain in the nose. The smell of boredom, imprisonment assaulted her.

She didn't want to stay at this place a moment longer and moved carefully the size of a heel backwards. Everybody got seemingly restless then.

She declared quietly her desire to leave their company, to walk away. She didn't really see the purpose of telling them this. The action in itself should be sufficient. But she recalled something then, that it had been seen as important to the people she had stayed with. She turned and with light, springy steps headed for the woods. The huge man started chasing her then. Her walk turned immediately to running. It happened so fast, from one moment to the next. Like the *wind*, it was later claimed. *We saw nothing but the wind!* The young face shone when she saw that the male halted by the forest glen and advanced no further. He breathed heavily already. But her deeper senses told her it wasn't his sole reason for stopping his chase prematurely. She stopped running, but continued deeper into the forest, keeping watchful eyes on him. Relief and a kind of euphoria flooded her mind. Seconds passed and then he cried out to her from far behind, furious, enraged, at a loss of what to do, with a slight touch of anxiety, that she gathered his fellow tribe members didn't notice, or wished to notice.

– What's **WRONG** with you? Don't you want shelter and safety?

His words didn't really register in her mind, her inner self. She suspected that they would have, once, but she had changed now, beyond what once would have been her wildest imagination.

She kept running on the outskirts of the woods a few hundred steps, long enough for her to have the opportunity to wave to the special boy. Did she imagine it, hope in vain, or did his hand really move in a slight, almost invisible wave? The thought, hope alone made her blood boil a little extra, when she once again moved deep into the forest, far away from those who wanted to imprison her.

After sleep, after hunt, she forgot them all, also the boy with the dark skin. Only the moment existed to her.

The next days and nights she used to familiarize herself with the new land. She killed two rabbits early the first day and therefore she could use a lot of time to explore and to satisfy her undying curiosity. It got dark early this time of the year, the cycle, one more than clear indication, in spite of the heat that it was not Summer. It didn't discourage her in any way. She saw it as a challenge to learn to move in the dark.

Feet drummed on paths, tight-grown forest floor, through the silent, noisy night. Hours melted away. It was like time itself disappeared. Some time during the silent run, she made a quick glance up, at the treetops, at leaves woven tight. Clouds dark and heavy, in a night truly dark covered the stars. She could have stopped and made a fire, but decided, without contemplation not to do that. She ran on.

After a while, she stopped, without knowing why. Uncertain and hesitant, she sniffed for danger. There was none. There was no prey close enough either. Usually she stopped without needing a reason. This time she felt there was one. She stayed under the tree where she had stopped her wild run, hesitantly, unmoving, attempting to understand.

Something hit her left hand. She looked down, at small droplets of water jumping on and off her skin. It made her upset at first, since she couldn't determine from where it came. She touched the corner of an eye with the fingers on her right hand. Wet? Were these droplets tears? She looked up. There was no water from the sky. She was certain of this. It could, she supposed, have been gathered moist on the leaves during the twilight, enough to form water, turned into droplets, hitting her.

Next morning she packed her supplies of food and weapons and went on her way, with the purpose of putting the biggest possible distance between her and the village.

Far, far away was her goal. Further west, to what she imagined would await her, the big water. Daystar in her back felt good. She put on extra speed, traveling without thinking.

It was not so far, so long, afterwards, it couldn't be, that she noticed that daystar didn't warm her behind anymore. It blinded her in its brilliance. She realized with a start, that she had turned and circled back, and had done so for quite a while now, towards the loathed place. There was no mistake. This was familiar territory to her. She had prowled these parts only yesterday. She stopped fighting against what was fast becoming a compulsion almost immediately, taught herself as she had, to trust her instincts.

Daystar warmed her behind anew, but now it was setting behind the lone mountain in the west. She reached the settlement well within twilight and kept herself hidden while awaiting patiently the darkness.

Clouds gathered with the darkness. This night, too. Distant thunder rolled in from the mountains in the east. The top, the points of the palisade was drawn sharp in the bleak glow of the fires inside. She wanted to take a

trip, a brief trip inside. A quick smile crossed her lips. It could be fun. Action followed thought virtually immediately. She covered the final distance to the wall half-crouched, and on all fours. Without hesitation she jumped and climbed the wall, quiet and easy. She swung herself over and landed with a soft noise in the grass on the other side. As she had gathered there was nobody close to her. None of the guards had moved as much as an inch. Their smells had not changed. There was no way they had discovered her. They could just as well be made of stone, as far as she was concerned. She could not fathom why they were there. Both why they guarded and why such useless dorks had been assigned guard duty.

The wilderness already cried out for her return. Comprehension dawned slowly, why this place was so heavily guarded, why the guards behaved more like stone, than guards. This place... she wanted to huddle up on the ground merely by being here. She remembered. She had stayed, even lived, in such places before. It wasn't long ago either, it just felt that way, until this moment, when fractured and unpleasant memories flooded back to the surface of her mind.

The war machine was placed by the entrance, as if on a pedestal, a representation of a god. The very sight of it made her shiver in disgust, a disgust enhanced rather than lessened.

The houses, they had built them no more than a few lengths apart, like small cages placed tight together, in one single big entrapment. The rancid smell struck her hard. To build shelter from the rain was one thing... but this... How could they stand it? She suspected strongly that they did not. Of the people she smelled, sensed close, no one seemed any happier than the people she had observed on the field. They all paid dearly for their attempt to close off Nature, close themselves off from it. They had to be both deaf and blind to not realize that themselves.

No one discovered her on her journey between the shadows. In a moment of weakness she was tempted to make a loud, unmistakable sound, to see if they discovered *that*.

Common sense and a damp fear she did not manage to embrace kept her from such a stupid act.

She moved fast and silent between the houses, went in and out of every single one of them. Some people slept in, others were empty. It did not matter to her. She was not discovered or even detected. Nobody noticed the changes between the shadow and light or sensed movement in the air where she moved. They did not smell her alien smell. Every single one of them had to be deaf and blind and lacking the use of their senses.

She saw it in the center of it all, the big hut. As she had gathered, the biggest and most important house could be seen from virtually every other in the settlement. There were no guards, but the closed entrance, the door, attracted her interest. The girl remembered seeing some of these in her life. Not many, but some. They closed

people out and the people inside, in. She tried the handle. The door was not locked. She opened it further and before she had really thought about it, she was inside.

There was so much interesting stuff, so much catching her eye. Utterly useless, but interesting. Only a few items of any practical use to her. She brightened when she discovered a whole collection of steel blades on the wall by the dining table. It was as she had gathered. These people had such abundance of them that they wouldn't miss a couple. Fresh meat, on the other hand seemed to some extent to be lacking. Old words mixed with her new, more natural ways of expression brought a quick smile to the young face. She loosened the rabbit meat she had brought from her belt and put it on the table. Then she meticulously studied the steel blades and after a while, chose two of them. She fastened them to her belt and was immediately fast on her way.

She had just opened the door when she heard steps, and a slight change in the breathing of one of the people sleeping by the opposite wall. A woman screamed. *Behind her.* The steps, the heavy steps, thundered in front of her. It was a close call, but she managed to avoid the grip of the fast approaching bear of a man. After that, she threw all caution to the wind. She ran in a straight line. All of her became occasionally visible in the light of the many fires. Suddenly it seemed that everyone who was not asleep, and then some more were chasing her. In desperation and exhilaration mixed together to something more than, she felt in truth, as one with the wind, the one they wanted to ban her from she raced towards the palisade - and Freedom. Some of the people chasing her, stopped in their tracks, frozen like stone. To them it seemed like she flew. Flew, flew, flew. Flew away on eagle wings. One flash, one twinkle, and she reached the wall of dead trees. Another flash, another twinkle, and she reached the top of it. And then - she was gone, vanished into the menacing darkness.

Later. She heard them all around her, seemingly everywhere in the woods, the vast forest. Torches glowed in the boiling hot night. They didn't, wouldn't stop, the jerks. No way! They seemed determined to stay in here indefinitely until they had found and captured her. There wasn't any great danger of that happening, she assured herself. Their persistence irritated her, that's all. The way she saw it they totally exposed their clumsiness and ineptitude, and should not, in any way cause or even contribute her misfortune.

But they were many. And she was alone, so alone.

She still felt... dirty, after her visit inside the dead, dead trees, as if something of the disease there had tainted her somehow. She did feel tainted... and f-frightened. It had, to a certain degree been luck, when she had avoided capture. She didn't know for certain what would have happened if she had been caught. She didn't want to know. Perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad... on the surface, where it didn't count.

– RED HAIR! A woman shrieked. – A witch, I wager. May the Almighty give her the deserved punishment!

– We must find her, a pious voice rose. – For her own sake, save the wee child from eternal damnation.

The girl had grown herself big and strong in the time since arriving in this forest, and also gained speed and agility. She did not doubt her ability to defend herself, to survive in a hard, ruthless world. But she felt as if she froze now, and that the frost sank to her deep and stayed there. One horrible moment she thought she wanted to creep into the closest hole. And stay there. Insane images flickered for her inner eye. She realized they stemmed from the time Before, before what kept her from remembering. The images meant nothing to her, gave her no release, but filled her with a horror she just barely could imagine.

She kept in constant motion, forced it on herself occasionally, but it worked. Human instincts worked no matter what horrors filled the conscious mind.

Kept herself nearby, close to their oozing fires. It would have been the easiest task in the world for her to pull back, far into the deep forest, disappear from the countenance of this people forever and ever. She didn't want that. Not yet! The fear lurked close to her all the time, chasing her. Only something within she hardly understood kept her from giving in to it. She pulled herself together, raised herself to full height. In a sudden, almost painful insight she realized what the villagers never would realize, that without risk life would never be worth living.

They didn't leave the forest fast, as she had believed they would, but made more fires not far away from where her sleeping place had been. She imagined it was not the first time they had spent nights here. Still, there was no hiding their nervousness to her, coating them like infested dirt as it was. They tended to avoid the forest. Looked upon it as a place they reluctantly visited, rather than as a pleasant home.

She circled around them several times, counting them carefully, making sure no one was hiding anywhere, waiting to ambush her. She felt more secure, bolder. They were in her kingdom now...

There was a huge trunk of a tree close to one of the circles of tall fires. She climbed it silently, effortlessly. One of the inner, thick branches stretched so far out from the tree, into the night air, that it reached almost inside the circle of fires. She straightened her body to its full length, stood there for a while, enjoying the moment.

*I can see you,* she thought with a wolfish grin.

She studied them, in vain. There was no discernible difference between them. There was nothing *there*, except a single, homogenous mass.

Shaking her head in sudden anger, she stretched her arms straight out from the body. The sound started deep down in her throat, a low, growling-like sound, rising to a noisy, dark laughter of a *snarl*. In that exact moment the owl howled, hooted from the deep of the night. Each and every one of them almost jumped out of their pale, thin skin. The laughter and the owl howl echoed through the forest and seemed to come from everywhere at

once. They spotted her, floating in the air above them. Maybe they, for a tiny moment took their eyes off the demon, the abysmal sight in the tree, maybe not. They had seen her. Now, they didn't.

They stood there for a long time, frozen in their tracks. Many sat straight down on the ground without softening their descent in any way. If the leader, the big man from the big hut hadn't screamed to them, commanded them to rise and bring their weapons, they probably wouldn't have moved at all until morning.

No one got any sleep that night, not the forest spirit, nor the people who in fear and hatred and deep, fundamental confusion chased and hunted her like a trophy.

By dawn she sat wide-awake on a hill and stared at the people below and what they had built. They had returned to their dwellings during twilight, grateful because they had survived the night. Furious that they had let themselves be terrorized by the small, helpless girl and had let her get away with it.

She sat by an anthill, studying it intensely, with a wondering, despairing look. These people, by the way they lived their life sought to imprison themselves. She nodded sadly. They admired and honored the ant. She didn't really find anything wrong with that. But... they didn't need to live like it, did they? They were human beings, were they not, and not ants?

The human-made anthill awoke slowly, painfully. And late, very late. She lightened up. Was it arrogance on her part, assuming she could claim credit for this? Partying late often caused late awakening the following morning. And they had partied a lot. She giggled. It sounded strange, like an echo from an early dream one night, right after awakening in the morning.

Quite a few of those digging in the dirt this morning exposed a restless, nervous attitude, to each other, to the surrounding area and to themselves. It so happened that they looked in all directions with shifty-eyed stares. She didn't feel any pity for them whatsoever. The fact that they seemed scared to death by her presence told her everything she needed to know about them.

The wolfish grin came to her easily and effortlessly.

The Sun shone and did so mercilessly. The day grew so hot that she routinely needed to brush sweat from her forehead. And she hardly moved, hardly felt like moving, even there inside the forest shade. Finally she tore off a strip of her already torn sleeve and tied it around her head. It worked somehow. She didn't constantly get sweat in her eyes anymore.

Contrary to yesterday and the days before yesterday, this day the very air was dry, dry as paper. And that was how her tongue felt, too. Humidity was virtually non-existent, seemingly a distant memory. There was no wind,

to dry anything, but everything was still dried. And drying. Her gaze changed between the ground and the distant mountains. Didn't they get it, the ant people? Didn't they hear the silent sound of the distant thunder?

She closed in on the boy, silently moving to a position where she was as close to the dark-skinned boy as she possible could, without being seen by the other villagers. She couldn't really stomach using her talent for stealth in such a fashion, but there was not a choice was there, if she wanted to speak to him in private. If they captured her, they would probably burn her at the stake or what she felt was even worse; *force* her to conform to their ways. Images of rope tied around her ankles and wrists, and a lifted beating stick arose in her mind. And the image that filled her with dread to her very core: her kneeling and submitting before them, erasing her own self.

This close she could see the nuances in his face. Fear dissolved and was substituted with a boundless curiosity akin to blindness.

He stood by himself a bit away from the others, as he always did. It was funny. As far as the eye could see, physically speaking, he wasn't far away. Still, he was always apart from them.

She stood up and waved to him, totally reckless. He froze and looked warily around. But he didn't cry out. She rewarded him with her best, sweet smile and wanted to jump up and down in boundless joy. Reluctantly, she held back, and didn't do more than sign to him that she wanted him to meet with her inside the forest. He hesitated a bit, said something to the man on this right, and then started walking. She had already disappeared between the bushes.

A flash there, a waving hand there. She allowed him to see glimpses of her, enticing him, luring him ever further into the deep of the forest, until she decided they would be fairly safe from being... distracted.

She sat down on a thick rotting fallen tree in the middle of nowhere. He approached her hesitantly, with a sullen skeptic look in his eyes. This approach felt perfectly normal to him. It was, after all, the way he was brought up. He had been taught to fear strangers.

He accused her immediately for having stolen the two knives, bursting with righteous anger. She did return his angry stare with her unconcerned, shameless look. The two knives in her belt were a telltale sign. His outburst didn't seem to carry much punch, though, and sounded, in spite of the apparent harshness pretty weak. She stretched her legs with a satisfied smile. She hadn't been the slightest bit wrong about him.

With an obviously innocent demeanor, she reminded him about the rabbit she had left in place of the knives. He revealed that he was aware of that fact, but didn't feel it would amount to much... to the others. The young female's smile widened ever more. When she implied that she wanted them to bathe together, however, her tone of voice quickly become less brazen. There was a body of water, she told him, not far from here, deep enough to

be both cool and refreshing. After a short hesitation, he replied with a sulky No (and wavering eyes). He had to return, return to the work, he insisted. They would miss him, if he was too long gone. She became sad then. The game was done. She carefully hinted at the fact that he didn't need to return to them. He could go with her, live as she did, in freedom, unfettered by walls, in forests and wilderness. He attempted to make her return with him. And kept assuring her that he wouldn't have any problems about making them forget her minor *pranks*, assuming she would agree to submit to their ways. She shook her head. She wanted to go with him, be with him, but shook her head in dismay and sadness. She was alone, but didn't want to move in there, to be trapped inside the dead trees.

They said goodbye. She told him about the signs of the approaching Thunder. He gave her a strange look, but did thank her. And then left her. He disappeared in the forest. Usually, she would have smelled him, even if she didn't see him. Now, no senses came to her, none what so ever. A throbbing head sank down between the knees. She had had such a nice feeling inside, outside... all over herself, while he was close. Now, there was only the feeling of deep loss washing over her, a hollowness, a Hunger that made her sit still much longer than was supposedly safe. She sat still and dead and hardly moved.

(for a long, long time)

In the end there was hunger, survival instinct, driving her on her feet, making her move, away from there, into the frenzy of the Hunt. She hunted for a while, but even if she did manage to kill game, it was a clumsy and sad kill. Not soon afterwards, she found herself back on her spot at the edge of the forest, keeping virtually her complete attention on the dark-skinned boy. She stayed careful, though. No sound came from her. Light did not reflect from her surface. A person glimpsing her shape would be wondering, if she existed at all. She smiled longingly and drew to her the young male's every move and gesture. She sat still without moving, and time just went away.

Then... something abruptly changed. Bewildered she felt moisture when touching herself and couldn't stop a moan from being released from her suddenly paper dry throat, between lips she could no more keep pressed together. She looked down between her wet thighs, looked at him - and understood. The girl remembered, without that being necessary for her to understand. He needed her, too. Male and female needed each other.

By the third Dark in a row, the fifth she recalled since her arrival, pit dark clouds covered the night sky. Twilight had not brought humidity, as it usually did. The ground stayed dry and the very air seemed to quiver. The girl moaned. She knew beyond doubt that she should leave this place. Go far away. Every time she drew



breath she felt the smell the very air gave away. Her consciousness, the real one, half hidden, half hiding, cried RUN, but it also spoke of staying, in many fever-pitch voices. Such was the entire her. Filled with contradictory emotions. She stayed.

The animals in the forest, they ran. They had no reason to balance their instinct, no instinct to balance their reason. She could feel them, feeling the Storm. She felt the Storm.

The animals «who do not run away», those tied to posts and imprisoned by their human masters, they were worried. They stretched their rope, paced endlessly in their cages. But in a strangely calm way. As if something had been bred out of them long ago.

Something indescribably precious. The girl shivered some more.

The villagers had pulled back into their cage-like homes, to the safety within dead trees, within the unnatural wall where nothing of importance was happening. It should. The people inside should long since have left the place then, or at least been on their way out. No one, at this time could avoid seeing the violent approaching storm. Searing lightning grew from the mountaintops, to the heavy clouds. Roaring thunder superseded the lightning. Lightning superseded the roaring thunder. An endless row of sound and fury. And everything seemed to be happening simultaneously. Death came rolling on its plowing wheel and all the ants hid their head in their hill.

What were they *doing* in there, the idiots? Were they singing? Were they preying to their deaf gods about mercy... instead of listening to their own, inner voice? The nausea, coming on to her since her arrival, turned overwhelming. Partly digested food decorated the ground in a circular pattern. Pale and shaking she stayed put and kept observing the unfolding drama.

She had never seen anything remotely like it, she knew that. It dawned on her that she had heard stories, but they had seemed very much akin to the ones about Old Nick and such, stories designed to scare children into being nice and quiet. Also later, though, during her awakening, her own rediscovery, she had learned about wild and brutal Nature. Nothing compared to this brutal reality.

*Somebody had thrown her off a wagon.* The memory came to her in a flash of revelation.

The flashes of lightning... there seemed to be an army of them... looked like they were moving down the mountain sides, towards the valley. There wasn't any rain. Not a sign of it anywhere. The first lightning, the first in an endless line, hit the clouds from the cornfield and a veritable firestorm came in its stead. The lonesome female sat tight with tight closed eyes, but she still *saw*.

She sensed it all, as she couldn't close her senses. Through narrow chinks, like shadows she saw one of the watchtowers be blown to pieces and the pieces being spread throughout the field. The dead wood caught fire. First the remains of the destroyed watchtower, then the rest of the palisade, when the next lightning struck the sky from the center of the village. Merely seconds later, the entire field became an inferno of fire and ashes and smoke. There was no safe place anywhere, but small pockets in the open field, where the lightning had already made deep holes, long, broad wounds in the ground, became a haven of sorts. The deeper the hole, the better the safety. People ran in panic from their homes, finally using their instincts. Many were burned to cinder because they attempted to bring their things. The inferno of flames and sparks inside the village digested them in an instant.

Suddenly... it was silent, violently silent, a tiny hope of redemption. The suction from the inferno-like fires melding into one, drowned in the roar of silence. The girl in the forest glen looked up. She saw small, insignificant shadows run from the river with buckets filled to the rim with water, the steaming river, the steaming water, so totally inadequate against the raging fire. The fire swallowed every drop of water, like countless pees in the ocean.

And it all turned even more insignificant when she lifted her head a bit further, further up the valley, where another wave of lightning seemingly competed in a hundred meters run. A long, long line. Even longer, even more powerful than the former. The girl felt both repulsed and attracted by the incredible spectacle. Had she experienced anything remotely like this when living with her parents as a little girl? Her thoughts were distracted a moment, she was distracted. A moment too long. She forgot where she was. The army of lightning swooped the trees just a small stretch from her. The entire forest seemed to catch fire simultaneously and she was forced to join the other refugees, out there on the naked field. She was not distracted for long, unable as she was to keep her thoughts from the fabulous, horrifying experience the last few minutes. She kept moving, realizing with a start, what she already knew, that this was her best hope of surviving the next minutes.

A new, horrible thunder filled the air, deafening, all consuming. And then, finally, the rain came. Without warning or transition the rain supplanted the air. Suddenly it poured and it became difficult to breathe. The lightning continued to flash in a seemingly endless row. The fires stopped in seconds. The violent lightning continued to fry the ground. A huge part of the nearest forest was reduced to ashes. The villagers had stopped doing anything. They ran in mindless panic in all directions. It was no use. Wherever they ran, the sky hammer hit the anvil of Earth, sparks that could easily devour a human being. The girl threw herself into a pit with several others. Nobody cared about it the least. At this time she was, both to herself and them, just another ant

hiding in the ground. They stayed there for a while, until they once more had to flee. And again and again. She got away from them, they disappeared for her. The Storm didn't stop, didn't quit, no matter how desperate or numb one became. Nature didn't acknowledge some poor ants crawling in the wreckage of their lives, without direction, without purpose. Time became meaningless. Measuring anything an impossibility. There was no Hunger. Not even the understanding, the realization of it. Everything was wrecked, flattened in the eternal Storm. She lay still in the end, quiet and without voice. Nightmare images haunted her. In flashes she saw others, unmoving, non breathing. Quiet.

Quiet, stillness. A club against the head, persistently claiming its existence. Reluctantly, eagerly, half dead, half dreaming she dragged herself on her feet. The quiet whistled and flowed afterwards. She didn't hear the falling rain, just whistling in her ears and - she imagined - water flowing over burnt soil. A male running by screamed insane. She didn't hear any of it. Slowly she got steady on her feet and pulled towards the fortress, a heap of black burnt trees. She found the main gate easy enough. It was crushed, but still there. Whether or not it was on the same spot it had been, she couldn't say. As the war machine was nowhere to be seen, it could mean that the gate had been *moved*, but she didn't care. She stopped where she supposed the opening had been, and decided, with a distant look in her eyes to remain there for a while.

Slowly, the heat and the blood, returned to her bruised and battered body. She stood to her ankles in mud. Water flowed around her legs. She had injured her hand. Her clothes (and her) were soaked by water and shit. Huge parts of the red hair were burnt away. It seemed dirty brown now. She stood still and breathed, while whistling increased in her ears. Adrenaline gushed into the blood through the veins. She had survived, she lived. Many bodies were stiff and cold on the ground, but she wasn't. She felt fresh and alive.

The Night darkened around her as the last embers of woodwork and field faded. The Night brightened around her as her eyes once again adapted to the darkness. She stood still, quiet. There was movement in the terrain and the ruin. She paid it no heed. The people she glimpsed, and she hardly even glimpsed them, looked like ghosts to her. And she didn't exist to them. At least they didn't speak to her, didn't look at her or acknowledge her presence in any way. Perhaps they would, after reaching out of the mud they had placed themselves in, when they needed somebody to point at, somebody to blame.

It had happened to her Before. She remembered. Strangely enough the painful, crystal clear memory encouraged her to once again keep herself going.

He materialized in front of her, a long time after she had stopped hoping he would, a long time after she should have moved on. To safety, to solitude. She stared at him with an intense, burning look. Compared to the ghosts he vibrated of rainbow and embers. She gave away a cry of joy. The flash, the *Life* in his eyes mirrored her own.

They talked for a long time, while hesitatingly touching each other. Physical touch, looks, small glimpses of Hunger, in the edges of their view, nuances of longing, very few spoken words. The choice of the crossroads was there in front of her. A major division, a change. She had a choice. So did he.

They left the place together, side by side. He turned and looked back one single time. A few of the survivors had started to clean up the mess. He noticed that they did so slowly, reluctantly.

– There will always be those who want to repeat the mistakes of the past, she said softly. She heard her own voice again, for the first time in days and nights. And it sounded markedly different, as if belonging to another person. – Fire is Nature's way of cleansing itself. After its ravaging everything may sprout anew. They who're entombing themselves will ever be vulnerable in the Storm.

By daybreak the sky was once more clear and blue. When the sun rose beyond the mountains, and warmed and dried them, they were already far above the field. They took a bath and relaxed at the first water they reached. A few hundred steps later they felt as dry as ever, but significantly more vigorous. The grass grew greener, the air fresher, the higher they came into the mountains. They kept walking. They didn't need words to know they both wanted to walk a considerable distance higher up, before even consider stopping.

He pulled in air, breathed deeply, because he felt a bit out of breath, but most of all because he enjoyed himself. The forest seemed endless up here. Everything felt, was felt more powerful. He enjoyed himself, as he watched her rear and felt no shame. And marveled at how easy she moved through even the thickest forest. Every tree, every obstacle felt like a fortress to him. Everything seemed to just... move aside for her, instead of the other way around. He forced himself to sit on high ground while she went looking for game, went hunting. It even came to be a source of joy for him, that he felt no considerable envy because of her skill. Instead he enjoyed her... hunt. He saw glimpses and flashes of the man-beast now and then, a mix of deer and panther, as the female ducked in and out of brushes and bushes. The firehair was blowing in the wind.

And slowly, unnoticeable at first, even on the first day, he suspected more than noticed the changes in himself. Tiny reflections, really, on the edge of consciousness. It felt like that at first, the first nights with trial and error, journeys and dreams. The extreme awareness came later, rose slowly, inevitable. Already the coming night, he had never before experienced one without walls, walls within, without, he more than suspected he would never

be able to return, to the walls, to the person he had been. He wouldn't have survived. The body might have been able to breathe and walk, but he doubted if the heart would have beaten and the blood flowed through his veins.

He learned through her, through himself, to not stumble on the numerous roots, from trees, from bushes, sticking up everywhere on the forest floor. Stumbling walk and run became as transformed. He transformed, rediscovered himself. And he knew he would never be able to describe this, express it in words. Even if an integral part of this consti... constituted of walking days and nights with the pain of hunger in stomach and body and mind. He realized that it would ever be thus, that lack of safety from now on would be a part of daily, mundane life, never again mundane. He laughed. Funny how his ability to express himself had increased, rather than decreased since the departure from the village. He had heard so many horror stories about the «savages» roaming the wilderness, all of it lies and hearsay.

She laughed, too, sharing his laughter, not knowing what caused his laughter specifically, sharing his joy. She was also laughing every time he beat his knotted fists in wild anger against the ground, recognizing his marring frustration and desperation when he failed to catch his hunted game. He knew she laughed with him, not at him. Well, there was a partly certain viscous tendency there somewhere, a mocking, a challenge, in her voice, in the stance of her body. It didn't faze him, not as it had done when the villagers had mocked and demoralized him.

Just before, during the few, hectic hours before he killed his first game the shock rattled him. As a tiny pond in the road squashed by the foot, a flood not even feet as countless as trees in the forest could stop. He heard... the howl of the owl. Only as an echo of what he had heard the night before, but infinitely more powerful. His breath, so light, so much in tandem with the rhythm he more than sensed in his immediate and distant surroundings. He realized with a jolt that his rhythm, his very breath, only marginally differentiated from that of the forest, the wilderness. Where did this originate, where had it hidden itself? Such a question, so useless and wasted, was easily and eagerly put to rest. He knew the answer, knew it from the first time he opened his eyes.

He missed the rabbit on his first attempt. The knife sank into hard and wiry forest floor just as the animal jumped away. The weapon was stuck. A stray thought in the mind of the hunter, discarded as yesterday's feces. His forward movement never stopped, not in the slightest, smallest way. He got hold of the animal's left hind foot, squeezed, and just by an afterthought did compassion caused by the scream of the little beast threaten to halt his goal. The hunter squeezed even harder. Bones broke under the relentless pull of the hand. He held it until he got hold of the neck and snapped it like a twig. He kept squeezing, holding the game inside whitened knuckles, while he gasped and breathed in silence, noisier than the night.

Thirsty, so thirsty. He tried to remember where he was compared to the nearest pond. Thirst overwhelmed him as everything did right now. Suddenly she was there before him. He looked at her. She sat on her heels. In a cup made of huge, green leaves water glimmered and sparkled. In the cup, in her deep eyes. She offered the life-giving fluid to his open, hungry mouth and he drank it all in big slurps and even then it seemed to him it would never be empty. It wasn't. Perhaps Nature's hospitality did have a limit, as it had been for the humans living before the Disaster, but if it did, they were far away from reaching it.

With a look he couldn't quite comprehend, she relieved the dead animal from his weak grip. She started smearing its blood all over his body, drawing and painting his body, already leaner and stronger than just a few nights ago. Her eyes sparked even more. He wanted her. As usual discovery, knowledge, certainty came as it always did out here, suddenly, violently. She kissed his hand. Bit his flesh hard. While her enticing look never left him. They had been bathing together several times, fully conscious of the nudity, but to go any further hadn't felt right, then. It did now. It would never be more right than in this exact moment.

They held hands while walking back to the camp, touching each other with their many free hands. They held the rabbit between them, the lifeless animal hanging from its bloodstained ears. It was important. Food was important. But not now.

Skin, indeed all senses felt extremely sensitive. Soft forest floor pinched hypersensitive sole skin. It didn't feel strange, but part of it all. They didn't ask questions, didn't bother to answer any. Later they could seek all the questions and find all the answers the world had to offer. Not now. All senses, all impressions, were enormously enhanced. They really were, they didn't just experience it that way. The body, simply put felt completely different, as everything within awoke, came alive outside.

*I'm alive!*

They knelt on the ground, chest against chest, touching, kissing, gasping, both wild and relaxed. Some time or another he would certainly tell her his name and she would tell him hers. Not important now. She knew what she was, what they were. *Human Beings!* As they were born to live. Their fierceness, their «humanity»... there were no contradictions to it. There were no contradictions. The even bolder touching progressed naturally from the more enticing. It started now. *Now!* Everything. Rough, merciless, savage. Breathing mouth to mouth, sharing breath. Pushing against each other, pulling and tearing, feeling the first signs of Awakening, gathering pain and boundless joy. Death and Life. Ice and Fire.

They knew who they were.