

# **Nature of Being**

**Pulsar of Fate**

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Night of Existence</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Voyage in Solitude</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>First Steps</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The First Arrival</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Crossing the Great Water</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Cold and Starry</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Coming to a First Conclusion</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Running Words</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Escape and rescue</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Instinctual Magic</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Simetra's Nightwatch</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Thought Communication</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>The Legend</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Simetra's Memories</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Separated</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>Alone</b>	<b>107</b>



# 1 Night of Existence

The last rays of the sun had long been gone when he exited the house he lived in; his eyes searched the sky, and soon they found the singular star he loved, and his heart rejoiced. This was the moment of each day that was to himself, and he appreciated it.

A big bird crossed the sky, her tail just touching the little star, and he knew that everything was alright — as far as that was possible.

‘Simetra, come here’, he said in a low voice that could only be heard by that gigantic bird. It was the only creature that would never betray him, and the partnership that connected the two unequal beings wouldn’t end until one of them died. All these thoughts in his mind, he raised one arm for the bird to sit on; then, his eyes searched the moon, and it was still there, hanging high above in the sky, and shining brightly on the grey, majestic feathers of the bird that had safely found the right place on his arm.

The bird followed his friend’s eyes and stared at the moon, and suddenly, she rose up again and started to fly towards it; the wonderful picture of the big creature in front of the moon gave the impression of clarity, stability and the wonderful dream of a fairy tale.

This was his personal Night of Existence. The night when he had been born, and the same night when his parents had bought this bird; and the very same night when they both had died.

Slowly, tears ran down his cheeks, but he didn’t try to stop them. Simetra knew better than return to him now and explored the sky once more, as she felt she’d better leave him alone for some minutes. Ten years had gone by since that day, and now, the two of them were the last survivors.

The next minutes would pass in silence. Then, Simetra would return, crossing the sky in the front of his eyes, giving him the power to hope

once more, and the energy to stay alive.

With a movement of his left hand, he made the tears go away; but the pain would stay, though it would now subside for some time. He took a deep breath, and his arm was shaking when he rose it once more; his broken voice called his last friend for another time, and she came. Finally, when she had sat down once more, their eyes met. Simetra felt the strong emotions and the powerful soul that was there inside him, and he felt the power of the bird; they would never leave each other alone.

Two minutes had gone by when Simetra rose once more, and he took a walk around, thinking of the years that had passed. They had been happy, as happy as they could have been when you had to live on your own among alien people; he didn't have any friends, and only some of those strange beings around him had taken care of him. They seemed to fear that bird, the single creature that was — and had always been — his friend.

The only creature that had saved him that night, and the only living being that knew what had happened. There must have been an attack, and the young Simetra had been found sitting on top of him who was hidden beneath a piece of cloth. Thus, the bird had saved his life, endangering her own.

His eyes followed the wonderful lines his only friend painted at the sky; then, he realized that this night was not only a night of the past. The strange people that had taken care of him had only promised to do so for ten years.

This time had passed right now. He wondered whether this would be a chance or the moment which would lead to his death; His companion would protect him, but she couldn't do a thing against fate.

Nobody could. And nobody could know about his or her destiny in advance. If he was doomed to die, he would; if he wasn't, he wouldn't, and no power could change that. Fate could decide whether somebody was invincible. It had decided his parents weren't. Nobody could go back and change that.

Tomorrow, he'd have to leave this part of the country, and he'd do so with more sorrow than happiness, since even though these people

hadn't liked the boy who had attracted so much aggression, he had grown familiar with them and this land. He decided to take a last glance at those houses around here; the next day, they would provide him with some food and send him away. He'd already organized a horse to be able to reach another city.

Another city — he'd never been anywhere else, and all around this place there was deep wood. This meant that he'd not be able to ride on his horse, but he'd figured out that this wood must end somewhere. However, nobody in this city had ever left it and came back to tell the others about it; the only pieces of information he could get were the ancient books of those who had travelled out there, and the things he'd learned by watching Simetra, who seemed to be awaiting that day eagerly, as she felt the growing tension of his.

The cold of the night was becoming apparent to the bird, and she felt that it must make his friend shiver, but he noticed nothing of it, as the real cold was inside. When Simetra sat down next to him for another time, he felt the warmth of hope once more, and suddenly realized how cold it was. After some seconds of contemplation, he decided that the two of them should go home to sleep, as they'd have to leave early tomorrow.

However, he knew he couldn't sleep, and it was not until Simetra had reassured him by sitting close to his bed that he closed his eyes, sleeping the exhausting sleep of an orphan of fate. Soon, Simetra would also close one of her eyes and join in to a half-sleep; however, she would always be alert if any danger would arrive.

But this night, the only danger were the nightmare-like memories that chased him through his dreams, and Simetra could do nothing about it, though she longed to chase away any danger out there.





## 2 Voyage in Solitude

The first rays of the sun had just touched his still closed eyes when one of the villagers was on his way to the house he resided in, bringing some food, the last gift he would be given by these people. Simetra noticed the person, but she knew that she'd better keep silent until he was gone; A tamed animal was something unnatural to them, and an animal that took care of a human being and showed emotions was something that could only be achieved by using evil powers.

Thus, the villager seemed afraid when opening the door carefully, but when there was nobody to be seen downstairs, he sighed, entered quickly and silently, dropped the food on the table and was gone even more quickly than he'd arrived. The food was the last sign he'd left, and it would also be the last significant symbol of that village for the two friends. No letter, no word was left, and one may wonder whether the villagers gave a party because the two demons were gone; We won't ever know, as we'll accompany those two fellows without returning to that place which we won't ever see again the way it is now, with its high-climbing trees and the small huts, the fire and the belief in evil spirits; all those details will be lost for us, and among these the superstitious villagers, which couldn't do a thing against their belief.

Right now, Simetra touched his nose carefully, and he woke up slowly, as he felt the presence of his friend and the feeling of safety and peace the bird brought with her. No danger would come near him right now, but he knew he had to leave. All his bags had been packed days ago, and it would have taken him no more than ten minutes to get ready; but he had to take a look around once more, keeping these pictures of the beloved house in mind. He felt that none of the villagers would ever dare to touch it or live in it, and he realized that it was another friend of his who would wait for his return if he ever decided to come

back.

Half an hour later, he'd walked through most of the now empty rooms, remembering all the tiny little memories that were connected to them; Now, he stood in front of the room he'd never opened again. The room where his parents had died. He knew he had to open this door today, as he could probably find some signs that would explain what had happened and who was responsible for it.

But for a quarter of an hour, he just stood there, staring at the door and the old, rusty handle which had not been used for ten whole years. Furthermore, all windows had been shut tightly, as the villagers had feared the dead spirits to hunt them at night; thus, he had never taken a look inside this room, and even the keyhole was shut tightly. He had received a key with the food, a key to that room, as the villagers knew he wouldn't leave without having taken a look inside it.

Slowly, he took the key and put it into the keyhole. It fit. A minute later, he was turning it, and the old lock still worked with a 'click'. Now, he could not go back anymore. It took seconds until his right hand touched the cold, rough handle. Slowly, he pushed it down, and the door showed only weak resistance.

For the first time since ten years, rays of sunlight touched the floor of the room which had been the place where a brutal crime had taken place. Two brutal crimes, to be exactly. The only thing the villagers had ever done was to take the corpses away to bury them somewhere in the deep woods, far away from their houses; then, they had sealed the room tight. The first thing he saw was the blood, the blood of his own parents on the floor. Of course, it was just a stain of blood, as bacteria and other creatures had cleaned most of it away; but time could never eradicate the horrible strength of the symbolic link between this blood and him.

He sighed, then he took one step into the room, closing the door behind him. Simetra had to stay outside; this would be a voyage into his past, and it would be a voyage in solitude. Up to now, he had not noticed that there was still light in this room; he searched for the source and found a golden medal, just lying next to one of the red stains. It was sending out a warm, yellow light, and he couldn't

remember having seen this light before he'd opened the room through the cracks of the door; it must have started to emanate this light just at the moment when he'd opened the door. Still, he felt very nervous when he realized that he had not wondered why there was light in here when he'd opened the door.

He decided to think about this later, and he picked up the medal. The same moment his fingers touched the (warm?) metal, a surprisingly strong feeling took hold of him; This was something he'd never experienced before. He *remembered* something he'd never seen, and he couldn't help but watch what was going on without interfering with this magical process.

Light flooded through the room, but not the cold, white light of a bulb, but the warm rays of the sun; the windows that had been shut tightly were open, and it was summer. The buzz of all those insects living in the woods became present as he realized he wasn't alone. A woman was standing in front of him, and he didn't waste any time trying to find out who she was; he *knew* his mother though he'd only seen her as a baby. The vibrating, emotional connection that linked the two beings made their eyes glow; but both of them knew this wasn't real. The urge to step forward and embrace her became his dearest wish, but he couldn't do so, as this was a holography. He wondered where this word had suddenly come from, but he understood that it was simply there, and he understood without any explanation. Then, his mother started talking, destroying the painful and yet wonderful silence that could not last forever. 'I can see in your eyes that you know who I am, and that you've realized that I am dead', was the way she started. He was startled, but he didn't flinch, as he heard the voice of the creature that gave birth to him. 'You must listen carefully now; please don't ask any questions, I cannot answer them. What has happened, is done, and cannot be changed neither now nor in the future, even if it was completely wrong. On the other hand, this is probably the only way to make our vision of the future come true. You must know that powers are working, evil powers of unknown strength; I imagine you must look quite self-confident now, but know you cannot face up to them. There is one person who can; this girl is your sister.'

A sister? Now, he indeed began to tremble. He had a family, even if it was only small; but he was not alone, though he'd never really been. Simetra was still there, and she would accompany him for the rest of his life. 'I feel you must be astonished now. I would give anything to be able to take a look at your face, but it is impossible for me to come back. My life wasn't taken for nothing; you have survived, and your sister is well-hidden. She doesn't even know what she is supposed to do, nor has she realized who she is. It is your task, my son, to find her and to give her all the protection you can offer. Don't ask me where you should start to search for her; I cannot tell you, for anyone could find this record and listen to it. Trust yourself; your heart will guide you, and your companion will help you to accomplish your task. I must leave now; I can hear they are coming, and you shall not see how your own parents are killed. We will meet again, please know that; but don't look forward to it, times will have changed then.'

Loud footsteps could be heard, and as quickly as the vision had appeared, the room was empty again; and this time, it was completely dark. He knew he'd seen everything; there was nothing more to do. The medal hanging around his neck as if it was a normal necklace, he exited the room. After he'd closed the door, he breathed again, suddenly realizing he hadn't done so for a minute. Still, his eyes were frozen still and he could hear the echo of the words of his mother; He checked the medal, but it was cold now. It would not be opened yet; he had to think about everything, and Simetra would be with him then.

The weight of a feather dropped on his shoulder, and he didn't need to turn his head to know she was there. Nothing had to be said right now; He took the things he'd packed long ago, and left the village, not looking back once more. The time of being subdued was gone. Now, he had a task, and he had to do something important: He had to find his sister, the only relative that was left now.

### 3 First Steps

A light breeze cooled his neck when Simetra dropped on his shoulder again. There was nothing she could report; everything had become silent after they had passed the ancient gate that guarded the village. While passing through that gate, he had felt some kind of separation and insecurity, as if leaving a safe haven, even though the village never was friendly to him. However, the environment he was passing through was bereft of any live animals, and the trees to each side had grown so high that the sky was not to be seen. Simetra had been up there several times, and she had just returned, but there was nothing she could do. The end of the forest could not be made out, and even for her, this was a new sight, for she had never been so far away from the village that she almost couldn't see it anymore.

The path he was treading upon was completely covered up with branches and leaves so he could hardly go on, but he was determined to do so. At least three hours must have passed by now, but the surroundings hadn't changed since the time they started, while his mind told him that the scenery was even darker and more dangerous. Simetra was unnaturally nervous, and the silence that was only interrupted by breaking twigs below his feet seemed to hamper his breathing, for it was a weight much heavier than his backpack could ever be.

Simetra rose again, and broke through the roof the trees had constructed above them. For him, the lone silence became a load even heavier.

About five minutes later, he began wondering where Simetra had gone, but he knew she would return; Probably, she was flying farther away to find out about a way out of this graveyard of nature. Realizing that walking on wouldn't help for he didn't see the ground anymore, as it was now covered up completely, he sat down and ate a bread

and an apple. Then, he noticed what was so special about this forest: There was no water, and the bottle he had with him would only last for a few days. This forest must have been dead for ages, and one could wonder how it could still be there, for it seemed so thick as if it was still growing — but it wasn't alive.

It was deserted, in the literal meaning.

And water seemed as rare as it was in a desert. He'd read about deserts, in the ancient books, but they were full of sand, and this one was full of trees — however, the description seemed to fit perfectly. A cry of a bird disturbed his thoughts — Simetra returned. He answered with an equal cry, and she knew where to find him. After she had crashed through the treetops, he offered her some bread, but she nervously moved her beak, pointing behind him. There was nothing he could see, but he realized that somebody — or something — must be coming. Simetra had warned him. Quickly, he hid behind a big, black tree, after he'd stored the food in his backpack again. Simetra sat on his shoulder, and the two of them stood there, behind the tree, watching the dead place in a million of dead places, waiting for it to reveal one of its secrets.

He watched to the left, for this was the direction Simetra had pointed out — the leaves began to move.

Everything was silent, and not even a breeze could be felt, but nevertheless, the leaves moved.

And some trees seemed to fall down. *Silently.*

This movement originated from something he couldn't make out clearly yet — but it was coming closer. He decided to take a step back and choose another tree, now climbing on a branch so he could not be seen from below. And he was right to do so, for something gigantic was coming. Gigantic in matters of effect, not concerning the real size.

The movement came closer, and some trees nearby fell down to reveal the sight on a small, black, quickly moving figure that threw trees around and cleared a kind of path. Still, there was absolute silence, and he knew that if Simetra hadn't warned him, he would probably have been killed by that small figure down there, for it seemed to lack eyes and was simply going straightforward, destroying the forest in

front of him, her, it or whatever it was. As quickly as the figure had appeared, it was gone, and he wanted to climb down to have a look at this new road, but Simetra stopped him.

He knew she wouldn't do so if this wasn't necessary, and thus, he decided to wait. This was a peculiar and dangerous forest, and for he hadn't seen such areas of destruction before, he wondered whether he simply had not come along such a small figure or whether something else would happen. He'd soon find out.

After this group of 'road builders' had gone, a ghastly noise shook the earth. The silence that had been there before was now replaced by a noise he could hardly endure, and it felt as if thousands of termites were eating on a piece of wood. And this was quite close to what really happened: Blue figures of equal size arrived, eating the trees that had fallen down in a monstrous speed. They left behind a black, somehow moving liquid, that smelled as if... No, he couldn't compare this nasty smell to anything he'd ever smelled before. He was glad to see those figures go away, for this meant that he could take his fingers out of his ears again, since the noise must become less brutal.

But another, equally nasty noise would still be there, and the stinking mass was still moving. This liquid was the thing that made the noises, and soon, he saw why: Little trees began to grow in the middle of this mass, and he couldn't help but watch for some minutes until the area of destruction was filled up with trees and branches again.

The black mass was gone, accompanied by the foully smell and the loud noise. Now, he climbed down, and Simetra didn't stop him. No borders could be made out — The new patch of forest fit in perfectly. He wondered in which way this destruction and reconstruction was efficient, but of course, this was the explanation why the dead forest was still alive: Those creatures rebuilt it steadily. And though he knew they were dangerous, he was happy that they were there, for it meant he wasn't the only living being here — with Simetra, of course.

And Simetra would now happily point out another direction to him, and he knew that he should advance in that one, for she seemed happy, as if there was a patch of green far, far away...





## 4 The First Arrival

*Crack.*

This was the only noise he'd heard for hours: The cracking of dead twigs beneath his shoes. And it was only due to Simetra he went on walking, for something had took hold of her, a kind of nervous happiness. He had spent the time thinking: The black figure that had destroyed the wood only for it to be built up again; How could such a system have developed? And why?

It was a kind of steady state, based on steady change — it was *life*. The ups and downs of life had found their symbolic expression right here: Though the woods seemed dead, they were alive — half-alive, at least. And the processes of destruction and construction fit so perfectly as if they were made to be presented to somebody else to watch them.

However, it was all a system of steady-state, in the end. It didn't make any sense, destroying and rebuilding constantly. He'd sometimes seen the inhabitants of 'his' village fight each other, crushing their houses, only to rebuilt them shortly after — this had been senseless, too, and he couldn't understand the motivation for those fights.

Nevertheless, this left him to realize one thing: There was a lack of sense in life. There certainly was. But still, he felt that there had to be some motivation he couldn't understand in those actions.

A sudden burst of sunlight, the first since hours, and a shriek of Simetra told him that he was close to a clearing; he didn't know what was waiting for him, but he had to be very cautious, of course — these peculiar, seemingly mindless black and blue figures could have killed him, if it wasn't for Simetra's warning.

He was staring concentratedly towards the area where less trees were trying to suffocate everything else — the clearing seemed to be about one hundred metres in front of him. Slowly, and prepared to

face nearly everything, he advanced, trying to make no sound though this was pretty hard to achieve with all those dry, dead twigs beneath your shoes. And the silence around him seemed absolute, amplifying every little noise he made. Soon, he had reached the place where the clearing had to begin; He could hide behind two trees and overlook the area, where no dead forest was growing. And it was green.

So green, in fact, that he was blind for some seconds until he had readapted to seeing a patch of nature so vivid. But this place was small, and he realized that it had probably just been left out by chance, as the black figure that destroyed the forest seemed to advance quite randomly. However, there it was. And he took a further look at it; But it still took him some time to notice the most special thing he'd ever seen: It (sat? stood?) in the middle of the clearing, on some big stones that had been arranged in a way that pleased your eyes, as if somebody had really done so on purpose.

And that — creature — was as green as the grass around those stones, and it still took him some time to make her out clearly, for she was a female — a fairy. He could remember the things he'd read about fairies: Once upon a time, they must've been all around, and the book only said that they brought happiness to the people.

In some inexplicable way he was attracted by her — she was sleeping, and her head was lying on one of these stones, her hands put underneath to protect the bright, shining skin from the rough surface. She was emanating light, and her hair seemed to glow in a yellow colour, and now, he could even make out a glimpse of her shiny, translucent wings that were folded on her back. She was pretty, even prettier than he had imagined fairies would be, and he still stood there, wondering how she might have come into this dead forest. It must have been her magic that had conserved this patch of green, or some other magic that had protected both.

His hand moved to shove away another twig so he could see her better, and the light green of her dress began to move as she became awake. Quickly, the thin body moved and particles of white, glowing dust were emitted from her as her bare feet touched the ground. Looking around nervously, the small fairy couldn't make him out immediately.

He decided to take another step, and the green fairy shrieked before she rose into the air displaying an abnormous speed. Simetra sat off quickly to follow her, but she was far too slow to do so and soon had to return to him for the fairy was gone, leaving behind only a trace of that white, glowing dust that dropped on him, giving this boy a warm feeling as it touched his skin and stopped glowing. He had quickly run to the stone in the middle of the clearing, but he could not see her anymore. He was amazed, and puzzled for a minute. Fairies had been inventions of that old books — they had been part of stories that had been written for entertainment. They could certainly not be real? Well, they were as real as those black and blue figures that ‘worked’ to maintain this forest.

Astonished, he caressed the stone that seemed to be still warm — it was smooth, and more of that dust was lying on these rocks. He sat down, and felt quite comfortable, for the stone that was supposed to be hard actually was not. A splashing sound woke him up immediately: A small fountain had emerged from the middle of the stones, and it looked as if it had been there forever, but he was sure it had just developed. The water was very clear, and it seemed to shine with a light that resembled the light of that dust — then, he realized that the dust that was lying on the stones was still shiny, while the particles that had touched his skin weren’t.

He recalled the prickling sensation he’d felt when they had dropped on him, and he realized that they must be important. Taking out a pouch of leather, he collected them, using a piece of cloth so as not to touch the glowing particles. Even in case there was no magic about them, they would certainly serve as a light in the dark. Simetra came down again and dropped on one of the stones, suspiciously analyzing the water and sneezing as she’d breezed in some of the dust. He’d just closed the pouch as he was shocked by a sound that should have been part of his imagination, but wasn’t. A somehow familiar voice said: ‘You may drink, it’s not poisonous.’

Simetra was — talking. If he wasn’t subject to a sudden and inexplicable illness, this dust must be full of magic, indeed. And he decided to do what Simetra had told him, and gladly swallowed the

fresh water — it was sweet and vivid, remembering him of the fairy that had probably made this spring come alive. The flask he had with him was filled quickly, and after Simetra had drunk, the spring went dry.

All of a sudden, the tiny rests of the dust vanished, and the stones seemed to begin to move. The clearing seemed to fade away. Simetra rose high with a shriek and came down again quickly, but he was already standing in the middle of the dead forest again that immediately had filled up the space the green grass had taken before.

Simetra told him that the clearing was indeed — moving away, shrinking against the horizon. He was still afraid to hear her talking, but he was getting used to it, as he had always imagined her talking to him — only that she really *did* so now. Irritating.

But she was right — as she told him the direction in that the clearing was moving, he knew he had to follow her. It was the only place he'd ever seen since he'd left the village which wasn't dead, and which was full of fascinating magic. He had to see it again. He had to see her again.

And he had to find out what was going on here, even if it took him hours to reach the clearing again. Or days. What else could he do? There was no water around, and he'd need more; And the only place where he knew water was to be found was the clearing. He took a step, and another one, absorbed in his thoughts and barely noticing Simetra, who was sitting on his shoulder quietly now. He was striving to *arrive*.

## 5 Crossing the Great Water

Absolute silence.

Still, Simetra was with him, and from time to time, she beat her wings and rose up high in the air to try to make out anything that was different from that monotonous forest. And each time, she had returned telling him that nothing was changing, but that things looked the same in every direction. Finally, she just shook her head imitating the gesture humans used to tell someone else that something was wrong or not working out correctly.

Indeed, she had adopted some human traits when that pieces of dust had touched her, and she seemed to have become an even more important part of his life. But slowly, both of them felt that a wind was rising: First, it seemed as if the wood was breathing, but then, they could make out a direction, and they were advancing exactly that way. Though the leaves were moving now, silence was still all around.

He decided to walk more quickly, and an hour or so later, Simetra told him that there was a sea in that direction. A grey, nearly black, dead liquid filled this sea, and Simetra added that she could not make out the end of it for it stretched to the horizon — as far as she could see, almost like an ocean.

He decided to take a rest right here, for it would probably take him another hour or so to reach this new obstacle. At least, something was happening — the monotonous forest would end somewhere. But where had the clearing gone? Had it crossed the sea? Did it change direction along the way? Or had the fairy simply taken the magic away, and tried to escape by flying over that ocean? He'd never seen an ocean. He just knew that it was a big, gigantic amount of water a human being could not cross so easily. In fact, he'd only read that this was possible, but he'd never found out about a way to do it. And

probably, this ocean wasn't even filled with water. But he doubted one could walk on such a grey liquid, and Simetra told him that storms and strong winds were triggering off high waves that made it even hard for her to fly over it, for the wind would become even stronger.

But he simply had to do it. He had to find out what was happening here. For now, he sat down and unpacked another piece of bread. When he wanted to get his flask out of his backpack, the leather pouch that contained the dust fell on the ground. Simetra told him for he hadn't noticed; but some particles of this strange, magic dust had already escaped the pouch and touched the dead earth.

And a small, green plant began to grow. He quickly grabbed the pouch so he would not lose any more of these magic particles, this memory of the fairy; And then, nuts had grown on the plant, eagerly awaiting the moment they would be taken off. He took one of them, and as soon as his fingers touched it, a voice in his mind told him:

Use the dust of fairies wisely —  
it can save your life, and help you to continue your voyage.

He dropped this nut in his lap, and touched another one; another voice emerged from nowhere:

Don't ask for more —  
this is all that is to be said for now.

He laid this nut to the other one in his lap, and those two became darker — the others seemed to be still green, and glowed a bit, but this could just be an invention of his mind for everything else around here seemed to be without colour.

However, he decided to touch the other nuts with a piece of cloth before he put them in his bag, for he wanted to take these nutritious counselours with him without using up their energy. It seemed to work, for their glow remained and they stayed green. The two he'd taken off — He felt they had to be cracked, for he'd need to find out whether they were really edible. He took the two stones that were lying below the tree (*he couldn't recall having seen them before*) and cracked the first

one carefully. The shell could be opened quite easily, and the small and light stones found their place in his backpack together with the other, already 'used' nut.

Simetra hopped on his leg and analysed the ingredients of the just cracked nut with her beak; Finally, she tasted a small piece of it and seemed satisfied. Though she could speak, he didn't need to listen to her saying that everything was fine (though she said so); And so, he finally also took a bite. The small and tiny bit of this nut suddenly seemed to grow in his mouth and filled it completely, but leaving enough room to chew comfortably. It was a wonderful, refreshing taste and he didn't become thirsty — in fact, his thirst vanished, accompanied by his hunger.

He was satisfied and satiated, and so was Simetra. The remaining pieces of the nut found their place in another small pouch, but he wouldn't need these in the next hours. Now, he had to make his way to the sea, and he felt strong enough to face everything that would come. Soon, the wind became stronger and very cold, but he was indifferent to that change, and so was Simetra: The ingredients of the nut seemed to protect them against some of those obstacles. Half an hour later, he reached the ocean. And it really was the way Simetra had described: A grey, dead mass of liquid, smelling a bit like the black mass that had been the strange dung that made this dead wood grow. He took a branch from the ground and touched the water with it, and as he drew it back, the part of the branch that had touched the liquid was gone.

It seemed to have been cut off perfectly — as if the water had done so. Certainly, this was no water, or at least, not only water; and it wasn't only dead, but could annihilate. He remembered what the nut had 'said': The dust could save his life, and it could help him to go on. But did this mean that he was protected against the effects of that liquid? He doubted this to be true, but he had to find out. His fingernails were quite long, as he'd never had to think about anybody showing interest in him in that village he'd come from — and sometimes, long fingernails were useful. One of that 'sometimes' was now. He was lucky that the waves didn't come as close as he'd expected, because they seemed to stop just one metre before they'd reach the forest, as

if there was some secret contract of fear between those two landscapes. Thus, he could give it a try. Slowly, his finger approached the surface, and as soon as his nail touched the liquid, a shot of pain raced through his finger, his hand, his body. In a reaction of reflex, he drew his hand back and fell on the ground behind him. Some twigs cracked, and he quickly had a look at his finger: Nothing seemed to be wrong, though. Even the nail wasn't hurt; but he could still recall this killing pain, and he knew that this was the wrong way to cross the ocean.

He stood up and took a step back, sat down again and opened his bag another time. Now, he took his time to count the nuts: There were eleven of them left. But he had to take one of them now. He waited for another moment: The 'dust of fairies' would save him. Yes! This was the solution. Not the nut alone could help him to cross that sea, but the dust itself must be used. But he didn't know where and how to apply it. . .

Simetra rose into the air, and tried to make her way against that storm. The power the nut had given her seemed to help, for she seemed to be able to advance. Quickly, she returned to the ground to tell him about her success. . . When he saw Simetra coming down, he realized he'd found the solution. He'd have to fly! And when she touched the ground next to him and said that she could probably make it now over the ocean, he took a piece of cloth and carefully grabbed some of those wonderful particles. He realized he'd have to take his shirt off. Simetra was watching curiously as he put the dust back into the pouch and dropped his shirt into the backpack after having taken it off; then, he took the piece of cloth again, grabbed some particles of the dust and carefully let them trickle on his back, thinking about lifting himself into the air, and being reminded of the fairy. It worked.

Simetra shrieked, as two translucent wings were growing on his back. A warm feeling went through him, and he closed the pouch carefully so as not to lose one of these particles. He knew he'd found the right solution, and Simetra realized what he was up to before even one word had been spoken.

Before he could wonder how those wings were working, they unfolded themselves and he rose high in the air; and there was another voice,



that asked him where he wanted to go, but his mind was still filled by that image of the clearing, as it had been since he'd lost it — and her.

Thus, he shot forward, and Simetra could barely follow him. The wind around him and the feeling of that killing sea below was thrilling him — and he imagined that Simetra must feel like this all the time. He wondered how long the journey would take, but he enjoyed it; slowly, the sight of the forest behind was disappearing, and he wondered where they were going, if they were really going somewhere. . .

An hour later, there was nothing but that water all below, and it went up to the horizon. The wind was gone, however, and he imagined what would happen if this sea was infinite, and if he was to fly like this for the rest of his life. Simetra had already found a place on his back some time before, as she was tired to fly at such a speed. No clouds were to be seen, and nothing seemed to be alive around here except the two of them.

Suddenly, the semblance of a piece of land appeared in front of them; first, it just looked like an island, then, it grew steadily until he could see — that it was a landscape full of dead, grey trees. Had they finally just flew in a circle? Simetra knew what he must be thinking, and she told him they weren't; they had not changed the direction at any time, and she knew that for sure. She was a bird, and her orientation could not be doubted, but nevertheless, the landscape looked so similar that this was hard to believe.

Simetra left his back again, and he slowly began to descend; when he was close to the top of the trees, he suddenly felt extremely tired as if all energy had been drained from him. In the last moments above the tops of the trees, he thought he could make out a patch of green some hundred metres away, but he wasn't sure, for he simply crashed through the treetops fractions of a second later. The last thing he heard was a big and loud 'Thump!' when his body was smashed against one of the trees, and then everything went dark.



## 6 Cold and Starry

A light breeze was running through countless leaves over a forest that was full of silence. Everything was grey in the cold and starry night, and the sun had long been gone, only to be replaced by a full moon whose light didn't enlighten anything except a small patch of green. Slowly, the grass began to move as the wind went through it, and a tiny figure that had been lying on the stones in the middle of that clearing began to rise. The creature shook his head and searched for his backpack, which was leaning against one of the stones nearby. A peculiar, magic light was around him which emanated from the dust that was floating in the air, but nothing alive was to be seen around him.

He was alone, and for the first time in his life he didn't know where Simetra had gone and whether she would ever return to him.

He began to move towards the forest that enclosed the perfectly round clearing; What had happened in the last hours? A terrible headache covered his memories like a misty cloud, and he could only wander around and wait for that memory to return to him. Suddenly, he stopped dead. Wasn't that a sound, as if majestic wings had moved the air nearby? He looked around, and then high into the sky, and finally, he shrieked to call Simetra; but there was no reaction. The wood was dead, and the air above seemed to be the same.

He wondered how long he had slept; Now, he was very hungry. As there was nothing he could do but worry, he sat down and opened his backpack, searching for something to eat. But before he could do so, he saw the nuts, and everything came back to him in a second. He had seen the fairy in the clearing; The nuts had grown, and finally, he had flown over the sea. The wings; his hands searched for them, but they were gone, and he was wearing his shirt again. The crash — there had

been a crash. The sound of the crushing trees and his smashed bones was as vivid as if it had just happened, and reverberated in his whole body. He must be dead or at least heavily wounded, nobody could survive such a crash without so much as a scratch.

Somebody must have taken care of him. *Healed* him. No, this couldn't be; The fairy would certainly not have done so? But Simetra could not cast magic, that was for sure. Where had she gone? He imitated her shriek again, and the sound echoed through his mind, but everything else was silent.

As deadly silent as it had ever been in this forest. But he had reached the clearing, he was still there; The shiny nuts were still in his backpack, and they seemed to ask for his questions. He took a look around — this certainly *was* a hopeless situation now that he was completely alone, and he would need some help. He counted the nuts once more, still finding eleven of them — they were all there. When his hand touched one of the nuts, a question was rising in his mind, but it wasn't the correct one; He was asking why the fairy had helped him, and that was not of most importance right now. But it was too late, and the nut told him:

Search your memory, the answer is there  
asking things you know for long is not fair.

He was close to tears. Not only had he lost one nut, but he was also responsible for this loss, and he had even been punished for it by the nut's words. Of course, the dust that was around him was a kind of magic shield the fairy had set up as she had been here; Nobody could come near, at least not if he or her was no real magician. This was what he had read, at least. And he had just played with the magic the fairy had left. . .

He felt as if he was a stupid little boy, and his stomach told him he was when it grunted loudly because he was still very hungry. He could use some bits of the nut, at least, though there was still most of the last nut left.

Seconds later, he felt refreshed and wasn't hungry anymore. The remnants of this new nut had wandered to those of the old one, and

he somehow knew that they wouldn't ever lose a bit of their refreshing powers. This time, he concentrated. What did he need to know? And once more, he was caught in a conflict: Should he ask for the place where he could find Simetra, his oldest friend, the place where the fairy had gone, or the way he should proceed? He wondered whether Simetra had followed the fairy. But he wasn't sure what he'd be told if he simply asked for the place they had gone to. Well, he was also wondering what he'd be told if he asked how he should proceed, but what else could he ask? And wasn't all that questioning about wondering what the answer would be?

He took another walk around the stones. He'd need an answer. The third option was the correct one. Yes, of course: The right way to proceed must be the way to find the fairy *and* Simetra, and thus, he could answer all those questions if he just decided to ask this one. He breathed in once more and felt the refreshing effect of the magic air around him; he couldn't help but see the image of the fairy lying on the stone again, and he knew he would have to concentrate very hard. He sat down on the magically warmed stone, and felt something uneven on the surface. He rose again, and found a lone feather — a feather of Simetra. . . Slowly, he took it, caressed it, and put it into his pocket. He needed to focus now. Sitting down again, he put his mind on the question how he should proceed. It seemed to work; now, he'd have to take the nut without remembering the way he'd come to own it. He opened his backpack, and his hand reached inside, carefully selecting another nut.

It seemed to work; the voice raised in his mind again, and it said:

You ask how to proceed,  
and to be told what to do.  
Do not search for an answer,  
it is inside;  
your mind has told you whom to follow,  
just look inside: These nuts are hollow.

For a second, he stayed in this state of concentration, utterly stunned; Then, he began to wonder what this was supposed to mean. He took

the two small stones and cracked the nut carefully, looking at the contents. Nothing seemed different with this nut. But then, he had a look at the inside of shell that had enclosed these nutritious ingredients: This was no normal nut. Of course, he had known this before, but now, he could make out a sign inside the shell: An arrow. The other half displayed the same sign, and soon, he was analyzing the other nuts: He found the symbol of two wings and of a clearing with a kind of shield around it. Well, exactly the things he'd figured out earlier... But what was the arrow supposed to mean?

One of the two pieces of the nut he was holding currently fell to the ground. When he wanted to pick it up again, he realized that it was *moving*. It was turning into a specific direction. He laid the other piece next to this one, and it reacted the same way, pointing into the very same direction. But — in which way had his mind told him whom to follow? Well, he'd probably find out when making his way in the direction the nuts were telling him to follow. Still, he was wondering how he would escape the figures that were destroying and rebuilding that forest. He decided to worry about that later.

He had to leave the warm stones, the wonderful, magic clearing, and he had to do so with sorrow. He didn't really know where he was going, at least not consciously. But he had to find Simetra again; and the fairy, of course. As soon as he'd crossed the border to the forest, another wonder seemed to take place: The clearing *followed* him. This could probably mean that he was supposed to follow the fairy, but at least, it meant that he was treading the correct path in a clear and cloudless, cold and starry night.

## 7 Coming to a First Conclusion

Since two hours, rain had been falling down.

He was all wet, and the grass he was walking on didn't make things better at all. He had realized that the rain only affected the clearing, for the dead forest around it would stay dry; but still, he could not leave the clearing. Not that he longed to do so, but it was kind of peculiar that you moved and the grass followed you. Though the spot where his feet touched the ground was now quite muddy, for it followed him, too, he knew he was still moving, for the trees of the dead forest in front of him vanished in front of him to appear behind the clearing again.

He had steadily followed the arrow he'd found on the nut, but now, he was getting tired. Turning around and coming to a halt, he saw the stones that would invite him to take a rest; And though there was the image of Simetra in his mind, and though he knew he had to go on, he couldn't resist. No sleep had come over him for long hours, but this time, as soon as his head touched the stones, he fell asleep, ignoring the rain and the roaring thunder around him. . .

With the cruelty of a smashing hammer, a loud, crashing sound awoke him. He jumped, and turned to see where the sound had come from; For a second, he thought that the 'road builders' were close and that he could not escape them anymore; Then, he noticed a wooden sign that seemed to *grow* just in front of him. He checked the nut with the arrow; Yes, this sign had grown in the direction he had been advancing towards, and quite easily, he could even make out the muddy spot again.

Letters began to form themselves on the still growing sign, and he was eager to find out what he would be told, but for now, he could only stay here and wait. He sat down on the small rocks again, and

realized once more how smooth and soft they were, as if not stones, but perfect pillows; Then, he heard the sound of a tiny fountain, and he turned around to see the spring again. His thirst became apparent to him now, and he drank with satisfaction, also refilling his flask.

If he wasn't missing Simetra and the fairy, and if he didn't have a mission, he would have loved this place, this safe haven in the middle of the dead forest; but thus, he could only admire it. An admiration full of sadness and sorrow.

But there was nothing he could do except sitting, drinking and waiting, hoping that this sign would sort things out. It must have made that crashing sound when it started to grow on the magic clearing, as if to wake him up and grab his attention.

Slowly, the letters began to become visible, and he stood up to take a closer look at them. Most peculiarly, he could read them without any problems; but, giving it a second thought, why wouldn't a magic sign know how to address him in his own language?

Slowly, he began to decipher the first words, and things got easier the further he got; the sign was still growing, and a lot of text was waiting for him:

Thou hast gone far,  
though far from far enough;  
Your origin is still untraced,  
your destiny unknown to human soul.

The twigs and branches of life seem dead;  
and death brings life to darkness' fellows.

Meaningful is the choice you are to make;  
for neither love nor death will be to blame  
for failure of your kindred soul.

The trees out there could be your guide;  
the nuts of dust could tell you wisely



where to go;  
Your instinct can never be proven to be right,  
and your logic can be, neither.

Lighted magic seems alive,  
but vivid is the darkness of death.

The easiest way could be right,  
but none may tell you if that's true.  
You do know this silent speaker,  
though you don't know you do;

Thou shalt not search for answers,  
nor reason, nor emotion;  
Life is a search for the way  
to search without searching.

Swing to the left, swing to the right  
to reach the centre;  
but do not stay where you are.

You must move to stay,  
and stay to die.

Thou longst for a magic creature  
and a fellow, temporarily lost soul;  
both are close, but far apart;  
He who tries to leave will stay.  
He who wants to find shall not search.  
Yet do not stay, for change lies ahead.

A decision must be quick and wise,  
for it can be made only once.

The late creatures you long to hold are waiting  
in a world not yours;  
Their magic can not save them,  
but yours combined with theirs can.

Time is gone,  
and can never come back,  
unless the magic of the **one**  
turns its wheels again.

This singular being is me,  
but I'm caught and bound to hide;  
you are to find me,  
as this is your mission.

I have been close to you for all your life,  
but you have not been allowed to know.

I am with you now,  
but you can not see me yet.  
Your magic is still not known to you,  
and I can not teach you.

I have told you who can;  
be wise and go on quickly  
without movement.

But don't you stay here;  
**get out!**

Puzzled was the wrong word to describe the way his thoughts were racing through his young mind, crashing into each other to combine to

an unknown mess. What did it mean? Was his sister talking to him?

He would have to figure this out later; he could probably take the sign with him. But — *where to?* What did these magic words mean? He'd rarely seen such a difficult tongue before, and even the most complicated books he'd read were easy in comparison with this here. As fast as he could, he scanned the lines once more, hoping for an answer to come to his mind; Then, he realized that he should not search for an answer, but wait for it. He should not move, but he should not stay, either.

What had he done the last hours? He had moved — and stayed. But how could he do the opposite? He had to *be* moved. What could move him? **Who** could move him? There was nobody here, and nothing inanimate could move on its own, unless. . . It was magic! That was the solution. But how could he make this magic of his come alive, if he didn't even know that he had any? And how could he know that this sign was real?

He had a closer look at it; Magic had made it grow, and growth was a movement. But it had stayed here. . . Suddenly, a burst of laughter reached his ears from far, far away. From the place where he had been coming from. And a loud, smashing, steady sound was coming closer. He had to get out, the sign was quite clear about that. But how?

A shudder ran down his spine, and he was sweating more than ever. This was wrong: He was pushing for an answer again, as he was being forced to decide. He had to resist this urge to decide. . . If the sign had been made grow by the magic of his sister, then this was part of him; part of his magic. He took the sign and turned it around in his hands. Then, he closed his eyes, trying to become less nervous. When he opened them again, he was far from being calm, but he knew what he had to do. His magic would make him move.

The smashing sound must now be so close that it was only hundred metres away, but he felt no fear anymore. This decision was final. The first and last conclusion that would decide whether he was allowed to live on. He held the sign over the muddy spot, still waiting for a second. Was he right? He had to be right, and if he wasn't, it was too late; He was not to search an answer, and this one seemed senseless;

He could never have searched for it. It must have come to him, as the sign had predicted.

He planted the sign in the muddy spot and sat down on it. He sat down on the sign. Nothing happened; was he wrong? The smashing sound was coming closer. . .

Yes, there was something still missing! He would not only need his, but their magic, too.

Where could he get their magic in a second? He could not open his bag that quickly, and he would risk to destroy the nuts. He searched for an answer again; just as he realized this, another burst of laughter was to be heard, **very** close this time. Closing his eyes and concentrating, he suddenly heard something else: The spring! Quickly, he ran to it, took some water in his hands and watered the post, then finally sitting down on it again. Putting his hand in his pocket, he quickly extracted Simetra's feather — the last physical memory he had of her, but there was no time to think about this now. Quickly, in a brushing manner, he started to move it over the sign.

Before he even touched it, a mass of 'road builders' approached the clearing — this was the sound he'd heard! They would smash him in a second. . . And a big, dangerous, black figure seemed to hover among them, and it laughed again, grinning with an evil face lacking most human features.

## 8 Running Words

Simetra was high in the sky, searching for her friend. As soon as he had been smashed to the ground close to the clearing, she had carefully approached the fairy, who was this time hovering above the spring, for she knew that something magic was approaching her. What she didn't know was the fact that the magic creature was using her own magic, to a little extent. As she saw the bird and realized that she could speak, the fairy sat down again to listen.

Help, help! You must help! Don't fly away, stay and help!  
He'll die!

The bird was nervously fluttering up and down; the fairy could see her own magic in the eyes of her, and she knew the bird said the truth.

Pity was filling her mind, and she rose again to follow the small creature; a sphere of magic was glowing around her, and as soon as she got close enough to Simetra, she was also enclosed by this green sphere of light. A peculiar, but somehow *good* warmth was flooding her.



If Simetra ever had had any doubts as the sphere of magic drew near, she knew she had done the right thing, for the fairy followed her after she had nervously approached her. Only seconds later, the two creatures flooded by magic reached the place of the accident; The fairy shot down again, and as soon as her feet touched the ground, it became

green; as green as the grass of the clearing. Astonished about this strange reality and her own action that followed, Simetra sat down on her shoulder, feeling as if she belonged there. Of course, she was now containing part of her magic, but she could not understand how she could have trusted her so fast without even realizing who or what she was — as if done by magic.

The same energy that had made her speak seemed to be flowing through her friend now, and within a second, he was hovering in the air, his wounds closing and his skin emanating a strange, bright, green light. He was now in a magic sphere of his own.

Then, shortly before he seemed to be normal again, this light around him changed; His sphere exploded in a dark blue with a bit of red, looking like an ultraviolet ball of energy. However, the fairy had already turned around, as if her job was finished, moving away as if fleeing from him. Simetra, however, was still watching her friend.

The powerful, energetic sphere around him was growing now, contracting once more, and then. . . It exploded in a shimmering burst of light!

Simetra was blinded, but the fairy didn't react in any way. The dark blue sphere began to manifest itself again, but it was much bigger now, somehow — touching the sphere of the fairy, mixing with it in a magic way the powerful bird could not understand. Such things were not to be understood by a purely logic brain, and Simetra was still learning how to use her newly gained emotions that added to her former instincts. She had become human, in a way, but her human parts still felt like those of an infant.

The green and the ultraviolet sphere were still in touch and Simetra was in the very middle of it until the fairy moved away; still, the fairy seemed not to have noticed anything. It was a sorry sight if one knew what was going on, but none of the beings present did. As soon as the fairy had flown far enough to separate the two spheres, the dark blue one shrank once more until it was nothing more than the size of a tiny nut, hovering in front of him. Then, with a big 'bang', it exploded again; but this time, the majestic power didn't stop after it had reached the fairy. The shock wave pushed against the green

sphere, and the suddenly astonished fairy shrieked highly as she was thrown above the trees, followed by Simetra who couldn't react that quickly, either.

Even if he had been awake, even if his closed eyes had been open, he would not have been able to understand what he had done. His instincts had controlled him and only his emotions could realize what was going on. If he had been in control of his senses in that moment, an eternal sorrow would have grabbed his soul and the feeling of loss and bidirectional denial without having ever tried to establish a connection with all the power one of them could have used. Ignorance, this was the word to express his feelings.

But he wasn't awake, and the fairy wouldn't remember anything except a sudden emotion of friendship with him. Then, another kind of magic yet unknown to him made him hover towards the clearing, and he dropped on the stones in the middle of it, where he should awake shortly after. Simetra, at the same time, was with the fairy in the partially demolished light green sphere, caught in their own magic. The brightness of the sphere was becoming less apparent, and then, a minute after they had been shot right into the sky, it had gone.

Still, the two of them were accelerating. The fairy realized they had to stop, and do so quickly. Thus, she spread her wings and grabbed the helpless bird, trying to stop this unwanted ascension. They had already been so high that their two pairs of wings started to freeze, and moments later, they began to fall like stones. The fairy aimed at the ground and started to move her hands in a way that was so strange that Simetra's eyes could not follow these movements. Then, a green ball of light, created right in the hands of the fairy, was flying even faster than the two of them, crashing through the treetops and hitting the ground. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then, the

trees shrank away and a smooth patch of green was waiting for them.



He was now sitting on the sign, brushing it with the feather, but still, nothing would happen. At least, not the thing he'd hoped for, as he wasn't moved by any kind of magic he could see. The black figure had now stopped, taking in the strange picture of a man sitting on a sign, stroking it with a feather. Even the 'road builders' had stopped in their movements. His thoughts were racing until he realized once more that he should not search for an answer. Then, the answer came. And the black figure was coming, too.

Apollo was slowly breathing in and out. He needed to calm down, decouple himself from the oppressive situation, and let things happen instinctively. Step by step, he felt as if he was objectively watching from outside, an external observer.



The black figure was not hovering in the air anymore, but was standing on the ground, slowly approaching him. When it saw his fingers trying to grab some bits of grass, it could not help but laugh again. This creature was so helpless, it could never have been the cause of that magic wave that had been rushing over this land hours before! The black figure grinned.

In fact, it grinned until the grass had touched the sign. Then, it stopped and watched the spot where that **man** had been sitting just a second before. He was gone. And so was the sign, followed by the muddy spot, the grass and the water. A majestic roar was to be heard,



and the 'road builders' levelled the remnants of the clearing in a second. He had escaped on a plant of running words.



## 9 Escape and rescue

Simetra did not know how many hours had passed, but she must have been unconscious for quite some time when she slowly fought to open her eyes again. She felt a lot of pain, and could barely move her wings. Any attempt caused a strange, crunching noise, as if the bones were broken after the fall. It was dark around her — how did she get here? Tracing back the last memory, she remembered being in the air with the fairy, being swept away by a powerful gust of magic force, and then tumbling down helplessly towards this dead and deadly forest, wings frozen.

It was still cold, and after her eyes had taken in the darkness, she realized she was in the forest, lying on the hard ground. She slowly sat up, and took in her surroundings. Not far away, the fairy was lying on the ground, apparently still unconscious, but easy to make out due to the green glow still visible around her. So that fragile creature had also made it, somehow — but wasn't there supposed to be a green, magic cushion to stop their fall? There was no time to think about this now. She had to wake the fairy — there was not telling if they were in danger, and what happened to her friend after the healing. She could also hear the sounds of the 'road builders' coming closer, though they were still far away. . .

Taking all her strength together, she approached the fairy, hopping step by step over the ground, more like a rabbit than like a bird. Twigs cracked below her, and finally, she was close, and could feel the magic emanating from the fairy. She carefully tugged at her with her beak, finally poking at her white cheek, until she heard a moaning noise. Quietly, she said: 'Wake up — you must wake up!' Finally, the fairy moved, turning on her back. Blinking her eyes, she looked at Simetra — after a short moment of surprise, she opened her eyes completely,

and sat up. Holding her side, she started to unfold her wings in visible pain. Her green light was flickering, but she grasped a leathery pouch from her belt, opened it, and extracted some of the glowing, magic dust. Quietly, she brought the hand to her nose, and breathed in — the flickering light stabilized, the pain vanished from her face, and her wings finally unfolded in full glory.

Simetra watched in awe and silence. Finally, the fairy put her hand into the small pouch again, and reached out to Simetra, opening the hand carefully. The bird leaned over, and started to pick at the dust with her beak, carefully taking it in. Her pain vanished in an instant, her wings seemed to move without any obstructions again; as if the broken bones had been mended. She could also see her feathers changing colour: They had been a deep, dark brown with some traces of lighter brown before, but now they became a slightly brighter shade, and there was a light glow emanating from her. She also felt a deep warmth in her entire body.

The fairy looked at her slightly astonished. ‘So you are a magical creature after all, huh?’, she quietly whispered. ‘I should have known after you started to talk. . . You probably do not know why all of this is happening, but we’ll find out together!’

After these words, the sounds from the ‘road builders’, which had constantly come closer, suddenly stopped. A strange laughter could be heard, and it was shockingly close-by. The fairy flinched — she knew that voice, that laughter, and she started shivering in fear. Simetra automatically moved closer — she had finally taken in all the dust, and she pointed upwards with her beak, silently indicating that they might flee by rising above the treetops. But the fairy shook her head — this must be a foe against which flying away would not help.



He had finally found the final, missing ingredient — he needed something to connect their magic together. The green grass of the clearing could play that role: It was created by the fairy, but it moved when he moved, and the muddy spot was the part transfusing his actions and that magic. He grabbed the grass, and touched the sign with it, and all of a sudden, it started moving at breathtaking speed. The black figure which had been approaching was immediately out of sight, as the plant in shape of a sign rose up into the air, whirled around and enlarged itself, such that he could comfortably sit on it. Then, it sped away in a seemingly random direction, and he could hear the wild grumbling noise of the ‘road builders’ destroying the clearing — and a barbaric roar which must have come from the black-clad figure. He could faintly see a shadow moving in the direction he had left in, becoming smaller and smaller. And then the sign started to fly in a large circle, coming closer again to the origin of their flight.

He was starting to fear that this would be his end — why would the sign ever go back, when he was making his safe escape? He tugged at the sign, crying out for it to stop, but the sign ignored his plea — and finally, he fell silent to not alert the black figure about his presence. Then, the sign started to descend, getting closer and closer to the treetops, before slowing down, and stopping mid-air. He took in his surroundings: The black figure was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear noises slowly moving away, tracing the path he had left in. So it seems the black figure could trace his movements. Could it maybe sniff out magic, like a dog could follow scents?

In any case, this should buy him some time — it seemed the figure was by far not moving as fast as the sign had flown initially. Suddenly, the floating sign began to descend through the treetops, and the darkness of the forest engulfed him. But he could see two shimmering lights close to the ground, and he was moving closer and closer to

them. . .



Simetra and the fairy stood there in silence, quietly listening for any sound. With movements of her hands, the fairy shrank her shimmering aura, until it was completely hidden — while Simetra could not follow, the fairy touched her with one hand, and the glowing also went away. In their silence, they could make out further laughter, getting louder and louder, then finally, after a moment of silence, a loud roar which seemed to belong to the same voice, and new activity by the ‘road builders’, seemingly working in a frenzy. The fairy shivered more, and Simetra was unable to calm her.

Slowly, the noises moved away — no new laughter or roaring was heard, and the strange sounds created by the ‘road builders’ seemed to move farther and farther away. Had they been saved?

They waited for a few more minutes, which seemed to last for an eternity, until the fairy calmed down and unsealed their auras again. She breathed out with relief, and Simetra deduced that the dark presence must have gone away far enough to not be noticeable to her anymore.

Then, all of a sudden, some leaves and twigs began to rain down from above — as usual, the forest itself was completely silent, so this must have been caused by somebody breaking through the treetops. The fairy, carrying Simetra on her shoulder, jumped back in surprise behind the next tree, hiding them both. The sight they would behold next was as strange and unexpected as it was relieving: Simetra’s friend descended on a strange, wooden plate, which had a wooden post on top and roots attached at the end of the post, as if it was a plant. But that did not matter — he was alive, and seemed well!

Simetra rose from the shoulder of the fairy, quickly approaching her friend, making for his shoulder instead. She was still silent, anxious

even though the figure which made the nasty laughter should have gone by now — but no voice was needed to express their feelings, as they approached each other.

Meanwhile, the fairy stood in awe, slowly moving out from the shadow of the tree. Never had she beheld such a strange sight — was this really a human, working such strange magic?



While he was descending, he could see the two lights fleeing behind a tree — but only shortly after, one of the lights quickly started moving in his direction. It was Simetra! He had found her! He ignored her change in appearance, all this did not matter now: His friend was back, they were united again. She approached his shoulder, and he caressed her feathers, while she carefully poked at him with her beak greeting him in silence. Then, he could see that the green light was emanated by the fairy, who was still standing behind the tree, slowly moving in sight. She seemed astonished, if not a bit frightened — he waved at her, and as the sign increased in size, he hopped onto one side of the wooden post. The sign balanced itself again quickly, and he motioned at her to come and join him on this vessel into safety.

The fairy's expression of surprise deepened even more, but then she seemed to calm down, shrug, and slowly approach, finally hopping onto the wooden sign. She was so light that he almost could not feel the change in weight. Wooden handles evolved on the sign, and they grabbed on — and as if this was the trigger, the floating sign started to ascend again, break through the treetops, and start to fly away at break-neck speed, carrying its three passengers towards their destination.





## 10 Instinctual Magic

As the sign was speeding up and reached an enormous height, the more and more freezing wind became painful, stinging deeper and deeper into their bodies. The noisy wind had also rendered them unable to talk to each other — now, that they were finally were all together, they had not been able to exchange a single word. They had also closed their eyes, unable to keep them open in this brutal storm. Suddenly, as the pain became more and more unbearable, the fairy moved her head, nudging Simetra with her nose. Opening their eyes with some effort, they looked at each other. Simetra noticed the pain and exhaustion in the fairy's facial expression, and in her eyes, there was an undeniable begging — as if she expected Simetra to do something about this freezing force. But what could she, a mere bird, do?

Sure, she was definitely the one among them most used to flight. Her feathers usually protected her well against the cold, but she had never flown this fast and high in her life before. Carefully, she tried to unfold her wings, to get a better feeling about the actual speed — only to be caught by the immense cold and air pressure even more. This was even faster than she had ever went when rushing down as fast as she could, her wings would not be able to stand this force for long. Quickly, she retracted them again, keeping them as close as possible to her body. What did the fairy mean to say with this strange look in her eyes? Watching her, she saw her eyes move down to her feathers. The feathers which protected her from the cold. The very same feathers which had changed colour a while ago, brightening up a bit, and still glowing ever so slightly. She remembered the words of the fairy — she was supposed to be a magical creature? If that was true, maybe the fairy was asking here to use this magic to protect them from the cold winds. But how would she do that? She knew next to nothing about

magic in the first place. . .

She remembered how the fairy moved her hands to work magic. A bird could not do that, and she would not even know which movements were needed — she had been unable to capture the movements of the fairy, which looked very refined, elegant, and somehow as if they were deeply engraved into her, triggered by instinct, without thought about every single action. How could she ever hope to do something like this, without any training which would make these movements natural to her? Closing her eyes and recalling the situation, she also remembered the fairy was in a state of absentminded concentration during her spells — at the same time focused, but also somehow out of it, as if this was a natural thing to her. Instinctual indeed. Surely, the first step would be to enter that state of mind. Simetra focused on her goal: Protect them, share the warmth and shielding of her feathers. She opened her eyes, starting down, taking in the new colour of her feathery coat, slowly expanding her wings in front of her such as not to catch the wind, turning them to better take in the picture of her own feathers. Closing her eyes again, she focused hard on an image of the feathers shaping a sphere around them, protecting them — focusing harder and harder, the tension in her muscles increased more and more.

While she was tensing up, the fairy carefully and reassuringly touched her head — she must have taken one of her hands off the handles, neglecting safety. Simetra opened her eyes again, looking at the fairy, who slowly shook her head with closed eyes. The bird realized she was taking the wrong approach: Focusing hard is the exact opposite of the instinctual, calm and natural manner she had observed the fairy working magic before. Simetra nodded slightly, breathed in deeply, and exhaled, calming down herself. She had to hold the pictures in her mind, but not force them into being — accept them as the natural outcome, taking it for granted as the obvious thing to happen. The tension slowly left her, and the pictures in her mind became clearer. She opened her eyes, looking at her wings again — she had clasped them together in instinct, to protect against the wind, and in a further attempt to reduce the tension in her body, she tried to relax them, keeping the images clearly in mind. Slowly, the glow around her body

brightened, and surprised as she was, she tensed up again and the effect broke down. She had to try again, harder but at the same time less hard than before — it felt like she was on track with this approach, and shooting the fairy a sideways glance, she could make out a smile on the pained face of the magical being.

This time, Simetra breathed in deeply and exhaled again, slowly, two times, three times in a row. She forced herself to ignore the cold, the wind, the gushing of the wind around her. Closing her eyes, she only had the vision of her feathers, of a feathery, protective sphere in mind. She opened her eyes again, overlaying that image with reality. She relaxed her wings, still keeping them pointed towards the front of her body, calmly looking forward. She could see her glow brightening ever so slightly, and her wings seemed to move on their won accord, following a strange pattern — at first, she was again slightly surprised, and the movements were stuck for a moment, but she quickly regained her calm composure. This time, she expected it — or, at least it was less surprising, even if it was still far from natural to her. The glow brightened more and more, and she continued her thoughts, imagining the effect of the sphere of protection as if it was real already — warmth, the wind stopping around them. Her thoughts became more and more detailed: Next, she imagined the feathers being thin and soft, like down feathers, but also see-through, allowing them to watch their surroundings. Her wings seemed to move faster and faster, and the images were blending into her own reality more and more.

Several long seconds later, she felt her wings stopping, relaxing — had she lost this magical state of mind again? While she was doubting herself, she could feel the fairy's hand on her head, and from the corner of her eyes, she could see her friend turning around, eyes open, staring between her and the fairy, surprised — and she knew her own reality had merged with the reality all of them perceived. 'You have done well, you really are a natural talent at magic', the fairy said in a calm and friendly voice. She was visibly relieved, and both from her voice and facial expression, it was clear that she was utterly exhausted and

might fall asleep any minute.



He was shocked, taken aback by the sudden protective layer appearing around them. Did the fairy contribute this magic, though she seemed so exhausted just moments ago? He turned around, thankful, but saw an unusual expression once his eyes reached Simetra — her wings were completely relaxed, and she seemed to be in a strangely composed, serene state — and the fairy was touching her head, smiling. His thankfulness immediately changed into surprise. Touching her head is something Simetra would not allow for just any stranger — and did this mean that Simetra did this? When, and how, did she learn about magic?

Watching her closely, he could clearly see a light emanating from her feathers. They were not only brighter than before, but it almost seemed as if she had a magical aura, not unlike the fairy herself. And when the fairy suddenly acknowledged that Simetra had apparently worked this spell, he could only gasp in awe. ‘How. . .?’, he stammered, the sentence breaking off as he tried to phrase the question.

‘Your friend Simetra has learned the fundamentals of magic all by herself’, the fairy said. ‘While she may have watched me before we escaped, and when I healed your broken body, I have not instructed her at all.’

He realized, at that point, that this was clearly not the time to watch in surprise and ask strange questions. After all, he had arrived on a plant grown into a signpost to recue them — and even before that, he had neither introduced himself nor exchanged a single word with the fairy until now. Determined to change that, he made up his mind on how to start; his rare contacts with other human beings surely did not help his confidence, he’d never really had to introduce himself, let alone to a beautiful, magical creature which was, as he had read

before, rarely ever seen by human beings, and usually fled on first sight when encountering humans.

He cleared his throat to gain a few seconds more to push up his self-confidence. ‘I am sorry, this encounter went a bit — different from how it should have been. My name is Apollo, and this is my longest and dearest friend, Simetra.’

‘I must also apologize. I have not interacted with humans for many years, and have grown quite unaccustomed to conversation. You may call me Aurora, and while I can’t say the chain of events up to now has been delightful, I am looking forward to making your acquaintance’, the fairy called Aurora responded with tired eyes.

‘You may be surprised, but I have also almost not conversed with other humans in the past ten years. I have almost lived an hermit’s life — you are the first encounter since a decade who is not shunning me.’ With these words, he raised one hand from the handle he had held onto up to now, and stretched it out to greet the fairy. She looked down slightly astonished, but remembered the human ritual to shake hands, and grabbed on with her pale and thin, but smooth and silky hand.

The touching hand made his body explode with a calming, relieving warmth from deep within. As if this was a signal for him, he felt the exhaustion from the experience during the past hours creep into his bones, making his eyelids droop — but he knew neither of them could relax while holding on to the handles on the floating sign. Even though they were now protected from the wind, they were far from being seated in a safe place. As before, without pushing for an answer, he asked himself how this obstacle could be overcome. Sitting down, relaxing in safety — an image was created in his mind, showing him sitting on a rocking chair at the fireplace, in his old home back in the village. Feeling this rocking sensation, he felt he was moving, lifted up, and placed in a seat. Simetra, during these evenings, sat on a natural branch he had fixed to the wall — envisioning her in that image, and thinking about the second chair they had for guests being used by the fairy, he relaxed slowly, and felt his thoughts melding into reality: The wood of the sign expanded, forming into two chairs and growing into

a tiny tree with a small branch in between them. Gently, also Aurora was lifted up, and both of them slowly descended onto the chairs, while Simetra fluttered up as soon as she felt that sudden movement, and then descended upon the newly-grown tree. All of them seemed to have stopped questioning these strange happenings by now — they were just melding into their reality. After Apollo was safely seated, the exhaustion took over, and he fell into a deep, silent sleep.

‘I must apologize for him, I never imagined he’d fall asleep mid-conversation, but then, he has also never worked magic before’, Simetra broke the silence, watching Aurora who could barely fight the exhaustion. ‘We’ve been bonded for a lifetime, and share an uncountable number of memories together. We feel so close as if we are one, acting in unison.’

‘I understand. You’ve come quite close, so also your natural talent for magic seems to be shared, even in case you never worked magic before. I believe I can not stay awake much longer, but I can say that magic is more than meets the eye — magic is also a way of bonding and communicating, and by sharing a part of your life and soul, you also share your magic abilities. But it seems he has overexerted himself quite a bit in the last hours, and his power is depleted — we all need rest, and the environment finally seems safe enough for us to accept this graciously. Given the recent events, we should use any chance we’ve been granted to refill our batteries. This surely was not the last encounter. . .’

She yawned, and Simetra nodded nervously. ‘I will keep watch with one eye, so please rest assured we will remain safe. Don’t worry, I am used to this, and can still rest all the same’, Simetra pointed out. With this, the last bit of strength left Aurora’s face, and with a smile, she fell asleep in the comfortable, wooden chair, racing through the skies on a grown sign, engulfed in a sphere of transparent, protective feathers.

## 11 Simetra's Nightwatch

A strangely lifeless, but relaxing silence encompassed them. Simetra was keeping watch, as she had promised and could only hear the air rushing by as they continued to fly over an endless sea of trees. This was certainly no ordinary forest, and the more she watched the trees, the more similar they appeared to be to each other. Simetra rotated her head — she was an owl, and while she was not the regular kind you may meet in an ordinary forest, she had inherited many owl-like features. With a keen eye, even though she was half-asleep, she could rotate her head and watch their surroundings. They must have been flying for hours by now, but still, in all directions, there were only trees to be seen.

There were so many questions on her mind that it was hard to stay half-asleep. What was this huge forest about, which was constantly being destroyed and rebuilt? How did they manage to find the fairy in this vast sea of trees, and why was she wandering through these lands? And, most importantly: What was going on with the world outside the village they had left? The village had been mostly self-sustainable, but still, traders and travellers passed by every now and then. Where did they come from, as they were surrounded by all these trees, and how could they pass through these lands with their goods?

Simetra decided to stop fretting about these questions. She needed to make use of the calm hours. After not even two days had passed, more unexpected and completely stupefying experiences had rained upon them than ever in their lives. They all needed some time to process what happened, and to even understand which questions might be most important to find answers to first.

Relaxing a bit, Simetra focused on herself. She had worked magic today — unthinkable just yesterday, and still, while it felt so natural

to her in the moment, it now felt like a dream. A dream constantly proving to her that it was real, by presenting its results right in front of her attentive eye, protecting them from a cold and biting wind.

Magic seemed to be so natural to her, as if it was engraved into her soul. It had taken a toll, and drained her energy, sure, but she had always imagined there were books of magic and old tomes which contained this wisdom. The magicians which had passed through their village made it seem as if this was the case: They had been carrying books with them, watching their audience with the eyes of a sage, when they showed some small magic tricks to gain some money from the crowd. There was nothing like the feeling of being connected to nature and to themselves in their eyes — this was very different from what she had experienced now. Also, they moved their hands quite differently, in slow, excessive movements, as if the motion was rehearsed over and over again.

Simetra recalled these memories from their past, and decided that when their relaxing slumber was over, after catching up on exchanging more than just their names, she'd first ask the fairy about the nature of magic. After all, Aurora's magic was what caused Simetra to gain a voice, to be able to express her thoughts in human speech. Understanding this marvellous miracle was most important to her.

It was the second time now that Simetra switched over from one eye to the other. Several hours had passed, and the sun was glowing in a dark orange, touching the horizon. The trees were dyed in a less deadly, warm colour, but it was only the sunlight granting them a more vivid appearance. It would not be long before night would fall, given this flat horizon — Simetra had rather keen night vision, but that would not protect her from the unnerving feeling that those dark, lifeless surroundings would become mostly invisible to her. They barely reflected the sunlight, and would be even more impregnable when bathed in the dim light of the stars, hiding any danger which might be lurking within from her sight.

As she was slowly accepting this lonely, unnerving night to come, the sun finally vanished behind the horizon. The last specks of light slowly faded away, marking the end of dusk, and the stars shown brighter and



brighter above them, led by a waning moon slowly fading into her view. After taking in the nostalgic night sky, she forced herself to look down onto the dark forest — and she had to squint. The forest was far from the black, impregnable and silent mass she had expected. Somehow, there was a strange, cold light emanated by it — no, *light* was the wrong word to describe this view. It was as if there were tiny fireflies rising from the leaves, dancing in an orchestrated pattern, miniature enough that it could also be some kind of dust, emanating a white and cold light. She had not seen these bright particles in their last night in the forest, and they somehow reminded her of the magic dust Aurora had with her, but in a less natural, more mechanic, somehow cold colour. The particles were slowly rising, then following an invisible stream or flow of the wind along the treetops.

‘Harvesting’, was the word which apparently jumped from nothingness into Simetra’s mind. Did she finally witness the purpose of this strange, seemingly dead forest? She tried to make out the direction these particles were taking, orchestrated by some unknown force. However, the more she focused, the less clear the direction became — whichever direction she faced, the glowing dust from the trees which were close-by seemed to move away from her, but lifting her gaze a bit higher, it seemed to come closer, as if to confuse her about the actual direction it was moving in. Still, without being able to name it, she was sure there was a deterministic movement, as if some kind of harvesting or collecting was going on.

With some effort, she averted her gaze from this mesmerizing, somehow beautiful sight. This must be magic at work — it would explain why the dust looked so similar to the magic dust she had seen on Aurora, albeit it was bereft of any colour in this case. Someone, or something, was harvesting magic from this dead forest, this is what she felt instinctively. But what was the origin of this magic? How did the dead wood produce it?

Following her instinct, she woke herself up, stretched her wings, and as expected, some fluff fell down from her feathers. Carefully beating her wings to produce a bit of wind, thoughtful not to wake any of her sleeping companions, she made the fluff fly away, leaving their wooden

plate, approaching their shield of feathers. She followed it with both of her now fully alert eyes, and imagined the fluff to pass through their protective barrier without being hindered by it. The protective sphere seemed to comply, and while the fluff was quickly moving farther and farther away now that it was out of their protective sphere, her eyes which were well-suited for nightly observation zoomed in on this small piece of herself. Slowly, it tumbled down, approaching the treetops. When it must have touched the first of the dead leaves, the light began to change — as if trying to greet the piece of fluff, they moved closer first, concentrating around it. Then, when the fluff must have passed through the treetops, a bright light erupted, and many of the white dust particles suddenly exploded from the trees as if a bright fountain of light had appeared. Focusing closely, Simetra could also make out some colours in the glowing fountain. All this only took a few seconds, and a ripple went through all the particles around that region, as if this was a large ocean of dust. Then, the bright fountain died down, and the scenery changed back to the calm, but unnervingly constant and repetitive stream of dust all around her.

‘As if the forest had eaten the piece of fluff, or some component of it’, Simetra silently thought to herself. ‘Did it draw out and absorb the magic within? Was this the reason why some colours appeared in this fountain?’, she pondered. ‘Was all this huge forest a single field to harvest — magic?’

A shiver ran down her spine. These trees, which looked dead, felt as if they were against nature, absorbing energy and directing it somewhere else. With her limited knowledge about magic, Simetra still knew that magic was present in all living creatures. Clearly, not every being could channel it, but ancient stories she had read with her friend clearly said that magic was part of the force of life in every living thing, and remnants of magic would spread to any inanimate objects living beings touched and worked with, like memories are shared with other living creatures.

This meant that likely, this forest would be a deadly trap to any living creature. This could be the reason why not a single animal was to be heard in the forest, and there was a complete, deadly silence

below the treetops. They must have been rather lucky to encounter the fairy, and escape from this trap, before their energy was drawn out of them. This might be part of the reason why they were so utterly tired, and it might also have been the cause of these strange happenings in the past days. This fountain of light, caused by simple fluff, and these ripples throughout the flow of magic dust must have been very visible also for their every movement through the forest. It was strange that all this seemed completely invisible from below, even at night. Or maybe it was to be expected, for a forest luring in victims to extract their magic energy? All this only added to the questions on her mind — even though she had come to conclusions, the *who* and *why* was completely in the dark. And, naturally, it was completely unclear how this large forest was ‘constructed’ and how the strange maintenance cycle worked. But another question was more important for them right now: how large this actually was, and when they would reach the outskirts of this gigantic field.

With all this in mind, Simetra knew she could not come to new answers on her own. While her mind was still full of questions, this gave her some kind of closure — enough to first shoot a quick glance at both her companions who were still sleeping safe and sound in this ball of feathers, and finally then to close one of her eyes again, entering the half-asleep state she’d keep up during the remaining nightwatch.

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## 12 Thought Communication

The night went by silently and without further incidents. Through the slightly transparent sphere of feathers, Simetra saw the sun rising atop the crowns of the trees, marking the beginning of a new day. The forest felt significantly more dangerous with the additional knowledge she had gained last night, and she felt it was emanating an aura of death even though it looked bizarrely natural.

The fairy, Aurora, woke up first. After a short moment of confusion before she remembered the strange situation they were in, she stretched herself, slowly stood up, and unfolded her wings, taking care to be silent such as not to wake Apollo. After rubbing her eyes, she faced Simetra, greeting her watchful eye with a smile. Simetra herself also took this as a trigger to wake up completely, blinking both her eyes and stretching out her wings, moving her claws and shifting her weight from one to the other, until she was finally fully awake. ‘Good morning’, she whispered, and the fairy did not respond with words, but reacted by moving her index finger to her mouth, pointing at Apollo with the other hand. Calmly, she took her left hand and approached Simetra, finally touching the back of her head. Simetra let it happen — they were beyond any aggression and initial fear. Then, Simetra could hear a voice whispering in her head: ‘Good morning, Simetra’.

Communication by thought? With a surprised look in her eyes, Simetra focused on Aurora, trying to respond. All she could muster was a surprised ‘How?’, but apparently that went through, since Aurora responded: ‘We have been linked by our magic and by touch, so we can communicate without speech. Let me try to remove my hand, the link should remain.’

And so she did, and while the voice was slightly more silent, all it needed was a bit more focus by Simetra: ‘Can you still hear me?’

‘I can. I think it will take me some time to get used to this, it still needs quite some focus on my end, but the more we talk, the easier and more natural this seems to become’, Simetra responded.

‘Just to clarify’, continued Aurora, ‘I can not listen in on your thoughts, nor can you listen in to what I am thinking. Our voices only reach each other when we address one another. Physical distance still plays a role, especially if other magic interferes, but we can talk like this without fear of being listened to, and as soon as you are used to it, it will be really effortless.’

‘This is really useful’, Simetra responded. ‘I have so many questions I want to ask, but it would be best if my friend would be there to join us, since I am sure he is equally puzzled about this strangely absurd chain of events. So while it pains me to wait longer, it’s probably best if I tell you a bit about the two of us first. I guess this forest is large enough to keep us up here for quite some time, right?’

‘Indeed, it is. While it is hard to pinpoint our location just by looking at this endless ocean of trees, we fairies have an independent sense of location, and I can tell you for sure it will be many hours before the landscape changes.’

‘This is quite reassuring. Well, then I will try my best to describe our story. . . I am not sure where to start — what is my first memory? I remember Apollo has told me that I have come into his family in the same night he was born. This is now 18 years ago, and we have lived in the same village ever since. You’ve met us close to this village, we have left there not long before meeting you.

The village has not been too friendly to us. In the first eight years, Apollo’s parents have been there to protect us and raise him, until ten years ago, a tragic calamity has hit us. Both of them were killed, exactly eight years after his birth. I could not do anything apart from hiding him under a blanket, and I don’t know whether this really protected him or it was a stroke of luck he was not found by the attackers. The villagers have taken care of us since then, for ten years, apparently following an agreement made in advance by his parents, until we had to leave when Apollo turned 18 years old.’

‘Who did attack you?’

‘At that time, I still lacked my current sense of self-awareness, and lived by instinct and emotion alone. The attackers looked like humans, but I could feel a powerful and evil aura when they approached, and I could feel the sudden haste when Apollo’s parents seemed to prepare for something. They must have realized what was about to happen, and they left a message for him, and had a forceful discussion — or rather, a fight — with the villagers. It was a day full of hurry and panic, and the emotions burnt themselves deep into my soul. In the end, they calmed down, and awaited the arrival of the attackers, seemingly accepting their fate, or unable to change it. It was over so fast, that I hardly realized what was going on, and only with the human self-awareness I gained the last days, I finally realize they were indeed preparing for this, planning for Apollo to be kept safe in the next ten years.’

Simetra stopped. She looked down, closed her eyes, and needed some time to calmly breathe in and out. All the happenings on that day were still vivid in her memory, and she was still adapting to her new human features, which changed the way she could interpret and understand all those past memories. More humanity did not ease her life in this regard, it only increased the level of tragedy contained in these memories by giving some actions more context and meaning.

‘I am sorry to have made you remember this’, Aurora said full of compassion. ‘While it will not help against the deeply rooted pain, there is a legend passed down among the fairies, and it is what guided me here — it is about both of you, I believe. But we should wait until Apollo is up before I continue.’

Aurora decided the best way to calm down and regain their energies would be to have a bit of breakfast. She opened a pouch on her belt, and extracted two juicy looking, light green fruits. They were small and spherical, similar to grapes. She popped one into her mouth, and started chewing, offering the other one to Simetra, who gladly accepted. As expected, these fruits also bore magic inside them — while chewing, they started to fill the mouth completely, and not only did a strong, fruity taste spread itself, but they were also nourishing and quenched the thirst at the same time. A single fruit was sufficient

to saturate them, since they just could keep chewing for a few minutes and the fruit did not vanish, until they finally instinctively gulped the remaining pieces down to empty their mouths.

‘These fruits are from my hometown’, Aurora explained. ‘Places in which magic naturally dwells have become rare these days, and so are the places we fairies can call our homes. But it is best if I continue with my story when Apollo is with us, I think he should wake up any moment now, given the tasty smell of these fruits.’ Aurora smiled, and indeed, as Simetra glanced towards her friend, she saw his nose twitching a bit, and seconds later, he was slowly waking up, blinking his eyes and yawning heartily. Interestingly, he was not confused by the strange place he woke up in, but immediately turned around and greeted his companions.

‘Good morning’, he started off, noticing the remaining colourful stains from the fruits on Aurora’s hands. ‘I see you are both already awake and having breakfast, mind if I join in?’ With this casual starter, Aurora produced another one of the grapes, and passed it to him. Not surprised at all, Apollo started to chew and enjoy the taste. Simetra could not resist the urge to try out the thought communication technique with him, and without further ado, she concentrated on Apollo and thought: ‘They are quite tasty, aren’t they?’

Apollo coughed, and finally looked a bit irritated as he turned towards her. ‘How...?’, he stammered, and looking at Simetra, he thought: ‘How long have I been asleep? What has happened to Simetra?’

‘Actually, not that much longer than we have slept, I must say’, Simetra responded via silent thoughts. Slightly shocked, Apollo thought: ‘Can you read...?’ ‘No, of course not, but you are quite fast picking up this technique and responding to me. I can only hear your thoughts because you focused on me and have actually been close to blurting out what you thought just now.’ Apollo calmed down. ‘This is rather... unusual, but somehow convenient’, he continued, also addressing Aurora. ‘It’s astonishing how fast you’ve got the hang of this, but I should have expected this after all that happened’, Aurora responded to both of them in her thoughts — it was as if a silent



conference had been established between them. A large, owl-like bird, carrying human traits and magic in it, a slender, beautiful fairy with translucent wings, fair skin, blonde undulating hair and giving off a bright, greenish glow, and finally Apollo, an 18 year old human being brimming with strong self confidence, all assembled on a wooden sign racing through the skies, communicating in silence. Finally, it was time to discuss the pressing questions and find out where they were headed, both physically and concerning their future path.



## 13 The Legend

‘I have already told Aurora a bit about our background, but held off on all the questions about our current situation — and magic’, Simetra started, addressing both of her companions and relying on communication by thought again to train this new skill. ‘Aurora told me we will certainly keep going in this sphere for quite a while longer, so we can make good use of the time. Would you mind if I start with some questions which have been weighing on my mind last night?’ Apollo shook his head, so Simetra continued, facing mostly Aurora. ‘I have been watching this strange forest through the night, and I got the impression that this dead, unnatural forest has but one purpose: Collecting magical energy. Is this correct?’

‘I’m surprised you got to the bottom of this evil concoction so fast, after having learned about magic yourself just a short while ago’, Aurora confirmed. ‘This is a violation of how nature works: A vile device to extract mana, the magical energy, from all living beings and the land itself. All the creatures living on the land before have already been sucked dry of their energy, and only little remains which is pulled from the earth by these tree-like structures. You may have seen the flow of the energy at night — it is now almost negligible, and most of the energy is spent in the maintenance effort these mechanisms you have encountered are performing. All life is now gone from these lands.’

‘Does this mean we are safe, as long as we do not leave any trace in the forest below? I have dropped a piece of fluff from my feathers last night, and it was absorbed by the trees, which made me understand what this forest seems to be doing. We must have been easy to track when we were still walking on the ground before.’ Aurora closed her eyes shortly before she responded. ‘Yes, I think we are safe — even

though we seem to be flying straight in a single direction at first glance, we have actually changed direction several times in the past hours, zig-zagging our way towards the target. So I believe we can not be followed that easily, even in case they would manage to trace the fluff you dropped before and connect it to us. I mentioned this harvesting violates the ways of nature: It is not only true because they deplete all living things and the earth itself, but this technique also does not differentiate between different kinds of mana. Both of you seem to be able to see the magical aura of living things, and you must have noticed different colours and feelings radiated by different beings. For the mana extracted by these trees, though, it is neutral, bereft of any colour.'

Apollo finally interjected: 'How can you pinpoint our location and direction in this ocean of trees? And who is behind this mana collection, what has happened to the land which was here before? We've had visitors from outside town, how did they ever get through this deadly trap?'

'You are right, I should probably start from the beginning. Before I tell you the legend which has brought me here, let me answer the easier of your questions: We use ley lines to find out our location, so we essentially navigate by magic. Since I am not home in these lands, this only roughly tells me where we are, and in which direction we are going. It requires lengthy training to notice the natural flow of magic, and see the ley lines, but it is natural to us fairies.

I already told Simetra before that there is a legend passed down among the fairies, which is what brought me here — and this legend is connected to your story, I believe.

This legend is actually both history and future at the same time. We live for many hundreds of years, and have had the chance to observe regular patterns in history — and this is one of them. Over a period of 500 years, as if it is a natural process, the alignments of good and evil intensify. While there are many different creatures which all have their very own characters, and the overall, natural balance is kept, it happens that more extreme evil lords and good heroes evolve. This is hard to put into words, since good and evil are concepts which are

different for everyone — maybe I should define that a “good” force wants to preserve the world as it is, and ease life for everybody, while an “evil” force wants to destroy the world we know, and extinguish all life upon this planet. This means both “good” and “evil” are longing for power, and over this time span of 500 years, this forceful fight is intensifying, until the forces finally clash and the world is reset by nature itself. This is the grand picture, and the legend I am about to tell you is essentially a recollection of the major incidents in one such cycle. There are common events in all the cycles, and it seems the underlying mechanics lead to similar characters evolving and clashing against each other. Please keep this in mind when listening to my legend — it is a story we learn about as children, and we experience this cycle several times in our lives.’



It was once a human king and his wife, who lived and ruled the kingdom of Amazonia. King Ephraistos was a wise and calm ruler, who planned long into the future to guarantee his people a safe and comfortable life. His wife, Seraphina, supported him with all her might, and carefully observed society to identify if anything was amiss, or discontent was developing in their people. While the kingdom was a monarchy, it was ruled in the interest of the people, and there were rarely any complaints or unhappiness in the societies of Amazonia.

While Ephraistos and Seraphina had been married for political reasons, they had come to love each other and shared their happiness. They bore two children: The firstborn, a courageous boy called Prinos, was not much of a born ruler, but shared the sense of justice and the love for their nation with his parents. The second born was a graceful daughter by the name of Augustine. She lived more of a secluded life, spending her days with books and studying the nature of magic, only making public appearances whenever it could not be avoided. For this

reason, not much was known about her, but an aura of cleverness and intelligence seemed to be hidden behind the grace she showed openly. The royal family also kept a familiar, a small pet dragon, who joined the family like a human member and was very close to Prinos.

The kingdom enjoyed a decade of peace, of almost unnatural happiness. In this time, the two children were born — but on the day when Prinos turned seven years old, the days of happiness ended abruptly. They had neglected a group of people in the kingdom who had founded a new religion, praying towards a self-made goddess to grant them a more adventurous life. This religion had attracted more and more young people in the kingdom, who had become unhappy from the very happiness and peace the kingdom enjoyed. They begged for adventure, to become heroes and heroines fighting vile spirits, for a change in this stable clockwork of peace, which only translated into boredom for them. The king and queen had ignored this movement, assuming it was a youthful trend, a temporary strife to show off strength and power. But while it began as a few teenagers grouping together, it had become a religious movement after a year, and they had formed an idol out of gold, a female goddess sitting on a throne, graceful, thinking and reading — it resembled Augustine quite well. She neither encouraged nor discouraged this movement, and while her parents begged her to publicly put a stop to this, she remained indifferent, which these people interpreted as further encouragement, projecting their feelings and dreams upon her. However, she was just uninterested in these religious movements and withdrew into her chambers to read and study, shrouding her in an air of mysticism, inspiring these ‘followers’ even more. Her known love for magic stirred them into causing the upcoming incident.

When Prinos turned seven years old, these ‘adventurers’ hijacked the festive event, causing an incident they must have prepared over weeks. And in addition, something happened which nobody had ever expected.

The birthday of Prinos was a public event, and also a holiday for all workers such that they could join the festivities. The prince himself joined the crowd, at the core of the festivities, on a square right on

front of the castle — it was a nation of peace, and while there were still guards around, nobody feared that anything would happen. And actually, it was not the prince who was targeted by those misled souls looking for adventure. They had constructed a mighty golem. The nation had experience with golems, since they used them for heavy physical work, but this was no work golem. It was equipped with a sword and a shield, and could activate some earth spells on its own. When the festivities were at their climax, they let it loose, and severed the link to its master, causing the golem to run wild in a chaotic frenzy. It approached the joyful crowd, and while they seemed indifferent at first, assuming a work golem had been misled, it caused a state of panic when it roared and started to throw balls of mud with its magic.

When the commotion started, Augustine left her chambers and gracefully moved to a balcony of the castle, watching the scenery unfold. At this point, the ‘adventurers’ themselves dispatched. Essentially, their plan was not to harm anybody, but to show off their strength and present the thrill of a fight to inspire more followers to join their cause. But as you may expect, it all went horribly wrong.

The adventurers had mingled with the crowd, and now pulled their hoods back, exposing a red bandana around their heads which was the signature of their religion, red being the colour most prominent in Augustine’s dresses. This stirred the crowd even more, tables were overturned, plates flew through the air, tents collapsed and buried the previously peaceful people beneath them. Before the golem even attacked in earnest, this panic had wounded many first casualties. Some slipped on the food which now covered the ground, others ran over them in a frenzy, and an elderly lady who had served the food before was the first victim who died in this mass panic. Cries of pain and shock echoed through the square in which they all had assembled before, and the fear intensified — exposing a peaceful nation to a sudden attack was all the more effective.

Those who wore the red bandanas fell into a state of shock. This was completely unexpected to them, and some among them could not resist the fear which was spreading, and instead of fighting the golem, they used their shields and in some cases even their weapons to pave

an escape path to flee from the square.

Prinos was quickly evacuated by the guards, who had not encountered real foes ever in their lives, but at least were trained for unexpected situations. However, nobody was there who could calm the people down, or even instruct the guards to attack the golem — Ephraistos had been evacuated, too, and was kept locked in by his guards. Seraphina had withdrawn herself half an hour ago to prepare the birthday present for Prinos, and was still in a hidden room in one of the castle's towers when the events unfolded. And there was no general or supreme leader of the soldiers around, since it was a nation which had lost any reason to prepare for war.

The golem, infuriated by the loss of the magical connection to its master and becoming even more angry by the wild scene developing in front of it, went into a berserk mode, swinging its sword and attacking the people most close-by. The original plan of the 'adventurers' was to parry these strikes, and fight back, but only a single one of them had made it through the crowd and stood in front of the golem, shield raised and knees shaking. This abomination of violence was completely unexpected to them, as is war to any fresh recruit — they were left in shock and fear. It seems their fate was sealed when the sword of the golem hit the shield of the single bandana-clad soldier in front of him, and the wood was bursting from the heavy strike.

In parallel to this bloody event, some of these adventurous youngsters who had been derailed in their thinking enough to wish for any activity to happen to pull them out of their state of peace had assembled in their meeting place and prayed to their goddess — some were dismounting the figure from the altar they had built, and the plan called for them to appear right after the situation was cleared, calling upon the crowd to join them in their religious fervour. They were already on their way when the crowd exploded into a giant panic, and people passed by their procession in fear. Unperturbed, or rather even encouraged, they continued on, approaching the square. When they reached it, the fight was underway and had already taken many casualties. Most of these adventurers were archers themselves, which is why they decided to take on the role of the ones escorting their goddess, since swords



would be much more effective against the golem. Seeing the devastated square, some of them stopped in shock; others prayed to their goddess with intensified strength, and some decided to take out their bows and go on the offensive. It was them who attacked the golem with burning arrows, and who managed to lure it away from the square, below the water reservoir of their town, which was still close to the castle — and with a coordinated effort, they ‘drowned’ the golem. Naturally, golems did not breathe, but water was the natural enemy of the dry clay the golem was made of, and would dissolve its structure. Albeit there had been many casualties, the situation seemed resolved after this, but actually, this was only the spark to start the catastrophe.

At this point, the legend the fairies tell usually explains that human beings are strongly led by emotions, and logic or careful planning is often only an afterthought and impossible in the heat of the moment — I believe you already know how convincing human emotions can be, and will grasp easily how the story unfolded.

As the situation seemed to calm down, most of the ‘adventurers’ assembled in the square with the figure resembling Augustine. Now that the danger was gone and the fear had left their bodies, they still felt the adrenaline rush through their bodies, and started to pray in unison. All the lost lives were blocked from their minds, and they prayed to their goddess with renewed vigour, embracing this painful incident as the fulfilment of their dreams.

Ephraistos and Seraphina were led back to the square, surrounded by watchful guards, and looked at the scene with dubious eyes at first. Seeing their fallen friends and townspeople, they were filled by an incredible grief; and these worshipping people seemed to congratulate themselves on fulfilling their dream, neglecting the loss of lives of their comrades. The king and queen were at a loss when faced with this inexcusable behaviour which they could not understand; and when people do not understand each others actions and motivations, this is the seed to birth tragedy.

Ephraistos and Seraphina faced each other, and without speaking any words, they decided they needed to put an end to this movement. ‘Apprehend them!’, Ephraistos commanded their guards. ‘However,

do not fight them with force, we can not afford to lose any more lives. Apprehend them in peace', Seraphina added, and Ephraistos nodded understandingly. More soldiers from the castle were called in, and they slowly approached the group which was assembled around their goddess. The previously composed ruling couple had lost their serenity, and acted upon their boiling emotions.

As the religious worshippers were approached by soldiers, they formed an outer circle of swordmen, and some archers seemed to get ready, while their core still continued to pray to their goddess. More and more of their followers seemed to approach from the streets, some strongly motivated, and others just joining their friends for whatever personal reasons they may have had. The approaching soldiers caused an emotion of unjust treatment, motivating them even more than before that they were in the right, and those who were undecided and lost right after the painful event took place joined their comrades again. Emotional decisions always cause an emotional reaction in fellow human beings, and this reaction may backfire against the original intent.

The soldiers encircled them, but did not attack. They were at a loss on how to apprehend them in peace, when they stood in front of them, swords raised, with strong emotions and determination in their eyes, so the soldiers only raised their shields and it seemed a temporary stalemate was reached. Suddenly, a single arrow had come off, from the side of the 'adventurers', but it did not actually matter who started the upcoming fight; it sparked the fight among former comrades, friends, neighbours, and they had completely lost sight of their original intentions.

All this was watched by Augustine, who was standing on the balcony the whole time, while Prinos was still kept isolated within the castle together with the familiar of the royal family. Augustine watched in silence, with a graceful aura, and a completely unmoved facial expression. She did not know how to feel about these people, who seemed to worship a figure resembling her, who had killed many townspeople and were now fighting a bloody and intense war with the soldiers of the royal family. Was she supposed to act? And if so, how should she react to put a stop to this?

A part of her felt that this was the first time she actually saw something happen in this country, in reality, outside of her books. It was a painful bloodbath, and far from any of the adventures and dreams she had kept to herself when reading secluded in her chambers, but it was — a ripple of change, in this never changing country. This was an emotion she could neither accept nor deny, and she could not even clearly say whether she felt positive or negative about it. In short, she was confused about her own emotions, and frozen in place on this balcony, taking in all the details of what happened on the square below. At this time, she was only six years old, but she had already grasped the concepts of life and death. She had been reading most of the two last years, escaping into the world of books, and in these fantastic worlds learned about many of the peaceful and warlike merits of human nature. However, this was the first time she saw people being killed, and there was nobody to take her away from that balcony, so she remained in place, completely frozen.

The clashing metal and flying, burning arrows below were completed by the background humming of the praying worshippers, who became more and more enthusiastic as time went on. Augustine was mesmerized by this view and sound. She wondered if a part of her own personality longed to be down there, in that figurine of the goddess, cheered on by the young fighters to bring this world more of this destructive change which clashed against the established, calm peace of the last decade.

It was this moment of thought, which was intensified by the natural cycle: Powers of creation and peace, clashing against powers of destruction and activity. Two sides of the same coin, split into two extremes — it was this moment when the unexpected happened. A magical link was established between Augustine and the figurine which was worshipped by the people below, and the golden figurine came to life. The link was powerful and visible to all those in the square: A think, colourful thread which shot from Augustine's forehead to the golden figure below. The 'goddess' raised, slowly stretching, and silently seemed to morph from her golden metal body into a human being. Augustine herself remained frozen in place, but something about her was changing: It was as if a part of her suddenly escaped her body,

and migrated into the now more and more humanoid figurine.

A playful smile developed on the face of the 'goddess', as she came alive. She took in her surroundings, and emanated a bright light as she evolved into a human figure. Her worshippers were shortly stupefied, but then increased the intensity of their prayers, reflecting the smile which was shown to them. From there on out, it all happened in the blink of an eye: A wave of light originating from the 'goddess' pushed away the soldiers attacking her followers, and it seemed to fill them with an unquenchable rage. Their eyes became red as if they were bloodshot all of a sudden, and while they had still been reluctant to attack their former comrades and townspeople before, they went into a berserk mode immediately. 'I am Auguste', the figure proclaimed, 'and I will ensure that your boredom will fade for all times to come!'

With this proclamation, black wolves appeared, surrounding the worshippers and the soldiers. A giant fight evolved, and it was unclear who was friend or foe — everybody attacked the closest being, and the clashing of swords upon swords, the bursting of shields and the crushing of bones filled the air. Auguste smiled, and laughed with full conviction. Meanwhile, Augustine's face changed to one of shock and fear. While she was previously frozen and unable to understand her own, conflicted feelings, all this was now gone and replaced by sheer, pure terror. She started to tremble, and shivering from head to toe, she started to run — stumbling at first, almost tripping since her legs were shaking as they had never done before. She ran towards the safe place in the castle where her brother Prinos should be kept. On and on she ran, speeding up — her step slowly grew more steadily, and she finally reached the room in which she would find protection. Then, before entering, she breathed in, and shortly closed her eyes, trying to compose herself; but the link to Auguste still existed, and as she closed her eyes, she could see what happened outside through her own eyes, and feel the rage and the empowering worshippers around her. She felt a sudden strength, and these feelings clashed with her fear, almost tearing her apart. Auguste was her, and she knew she was just an incarnation of a part of herself, empowered by these prayers and actions. Still, Augustine was unable to accept this, trying to shut out

these feelings. It was her fault, for sure, her lack of self-control, which caused all this — now, she was sure about this, and it struck her like a lightning bolt.

Opening her eyes again, she could see the door leading to the safe room where her brother was kept being opened by faithful guards, who had acknowledged her presence. She had also been followed by her maids, who stood by silently, catching their breath, but unable to act — and then, she ran again, towards Prinós. ‘It’s me, it is all my fault!’ she cried out, tears streaming down her fair, tender cheeks. She ran towards him, and at the same time, depreciated herself; if she was at fault, she should not be granted this protection. She should pull back, resign to her fate, and die, to protect this nation. She closed her eyes again, as she saw the innocent look from her brother, who watched her without blame and with pure love. This was not right, she could not accept it. She was a monster, and she should be detained. How did this all happen, in the matter of minutes?

As Augustine thought all this, she took one step after the other, slowly tumbling towards her brother. She cursed Auguste, her fate, her indifference and her own tolerance — how could she ever have accepted such vile feelings? She did not deserve to live, her memory needed to be destroyed. With these self-destructive thoughts in mind, she reached the arms of her brother — and vanished into thin air.

The link to Auguste exploded with a loud bang, and Prinós was shocked. What had just happened? Confused, he looked around. There was no trace of Augustine left, and all he felt was a sense of sadness and tragedy clouding his heart and making it hard to breathe.

Meanwhile, the royal couple had started to evacuate. They had carriages prepared; even though this was a peaceful nation, a tiny bit of preparation in case of danger was still done, as if out of a long forlorn habit. The guards rushed them inside, and also Prinós and the family’s familiar were led towards a secret escape path, and then directed into a carriage. The guards had to carry him at first, since he would not move after what had happened, crying out Augustine’s name as if to bring her back. But there was no reply, and in the end, the whole royal family, barring Augustine, was moved to a remote

town in their nation, hidden in a safe house only they themselves knew about. Even the guards did not know the exact location, since they had handed them over to other guards, until they arrived at their final location after several such handover procedures. The maids and servants who travelled with them had been blindfolded for the journey, and when they finally arrived, they required a whole day in silence to catch up on the recent events.

The main town and their castle, however, was taken over by Auguste and her followers. The townspeople had seen the furious soldiers and the black wolves, and were easily led to believe that this was part of a violent plan from the royal couple. While they had ruled the nation in peace for a decade, it is always easy to accept betrayal from those who might have been your friends, but never were really close to you — humans easily accepted that others prioritized their own personal gain.

Auguste changed the nation quickly: She started using arenas previously used for competitive sport events for bloody, public fights, and began to breed dragons and wild creatures to let loose in nearby forests to attack unsuspecting villagers. They had undergone human violence to increase their thirst for human blood, and given these changes, it was easy for her to establish an adventurer's guild and give her followers the life they longed for. Nobody dared to ask the question where these monsters came from, and how they evolved. This was seen as a natural calamity, and they were quick to accept Auguste as their new, supreme ruler. Since she was still too young to lead most public events, she quickly accepted some advisers from her loyal followers who did her every bidding.

Auguste knew what had happened to Augustine, and it was also clear to her that the remaining royal family survived and would pose the greatest danger to her bloody rule. However, she did not know the location of the safe house, nor did she have another way to track them, since it was even unknown to the children of the royal couple. So she sent out some of her worshippers, clad in black robes carrying a sign of sword and shield, which had become her coat of arms. But it would take them a year to find the royal family, and carry out their

bloody mission.



Aurora took a deep breath. She had communicated all this via her thoughts, at times also relaying vivid pictures from her own imagination. Apollo and Simetra sat there in silence, at times shivering at the lively pictures which entered their minds, and feeling as if they were a part of this powerful legend. And in fact, they were, but Aurora needed to conclude first to make them realize. Before starting upon the final scene, though, she took out the grapes again, as the sun had already moved high above them, and it was almost time for lunch. Apollo and Simetra gladly accepted, as these also quenched their thirst, and they also took a deep breath — and finally, Aurora continued.



The whole nation was transformed, since the townspeople were now led to focus on their personal happiness, and not the happiness of the state. While they had previously performed many rituals and followed traditions together, their entertainment was now delivered to them in form of bloody arena fights. Adventures in the guild went out to find their own adventures, which left many out there to die, and other kinds of entertainment were taken by force, as slavery was not deemed a taboo anymore. The nation's wealth went downhill, and in less than a year it was already clear that to continue their new lifestyle, they would need outside resources. A war with the neighbouring nations was unavoidable, and it was what Auguste was planning for. She set up weapon factories and training camps for soldiers and sorcerers.

Additionally, she recruited the winners of the most dangerous arena fights as her close, personal guard, convincing them to serve her with her magical and suggestive powers. Finally, she also researched the field of forbidden magic, extracting mana from the living, and channelling it into weaponry which would be used to attack her enemies.

A year passed by, and the royal family was still kept safe, but they knew that they would be inevitably be found. They prepared for this, and the former king and queen focused on giving Prinost a chance to live on and take over their dream of peace. To reach this goal, they studied shapeshifting and illusionary magic, which they carefully applied to Prinost such that he would not be recognizable by others anymore. They also hid his aura, sealing his magic and all his memories about how to use it, such that his characteristic mana would not be visible once he was found. Finally, they created a puppet which looked the same as he did before, and emanated mana similar to his, hoping this would fool the attackers.

And finally, on the same night when Prinost would turn eight years old, the attackers came. They knew it beforehand from some of their still faithful servants, but they did not flee — the whole nation had become a land which was too unnatural to them, and most inhabitants had been made into their enemies. There was no place they could go. Their familiar, the pet dragon, had grown slightly, and took it upon her to hide the real Prinost from the attackers. They rushed in, and finished their task quickly, as the couple showed no resistance. Auguste watched the scene play out via a magical link, and was satisfied with the work. All of them had been killed, and no trace of the magic of the royal family was left. A magic symbol signifying the rule of the royal family was left in the castle, and it broke in the very same moment they died; it had been kept intact by their very magic, so Auguste was sure they had been killed.

The attackers retreated shortly thereafter, ignoring the pet dragon which sat there in silence, almost like a gargoyle made of stone. The real Prinost was hidden behind him, kneeling inside a cupboard, and remained unharmed. The townspeople later on would bring him food and all necessities to survive for the next years, until he would mature



at the age of eighteen. Such had been the agreement with the late royal couple, and nobody who was alive would know the real identity of the transformed Prinios anymore.



At this point, Apollo and Simetra interrupted Aurora, Apollo breathing in the air sharply as he was shocked at the resemblance of this story to his, and Simetra letting a silent shriek escape her beak. The legend had finally, and brutally so, connected to their own reality.

‘The legend is not finished yet’, continued Aurora, ‘but I think at this point it might be best if you continue to tell me about your experiences from the last days, Apollo. Your mother has left you a message, and I am sure your sister has also contacted you in some way. Note that while the legend repeats itself every 500 years, it always concludes a bit differently, so while I can and will tell you the original story, the path you take will likely be different. But before that, let us have a real lunch up here, and digest the story over a meal.’

With this, Aurora produced a tiny, foldable table from her belt, which magically grew in size as she unfolded it and set it upon the wooden sign they were travelling on. She continued to put some tiny, wooden plates upon this table, which also grew in size. Apollo touched one of the plates, and while they were made out of wood, they seemed to be coated in a way which impregnated them against any dishes and maybe even soup. Next, Aurora took a small chalice from her belt, and poured something into the plates: Indeed, it seemed to be soup. The plates were deep enough that she could fill them quite a bit, and even Simetra would be able to eat with her beak. For Apollo and herself, she added two wooden spoons to complete the lunch table. She clasped her hands together, and said a small prayer to thank nature for this meal — and then invited both of them to dig in. Silently, they gladly did, all lost in their individual thoughts.



## 14 Simetra's Memories

Apollo was silently digging in the soup. Astonishingly, it seemed the soup had become warm of its own accord — either the plates were imbued with magic, or the chalice had actually warmed the soup while it was poured out. He did not give it much thought and even though he appreciated the astonishingly fresh flavour of the vegetables which were part of the soup, it only caused a slight smile to play around his lips. But his head was elsewhere, trying to digest the story. All he remembered from the past was that Simetra was with him since the day he was born and that she protected him; but actually, he had never learned much about his parents. While he spent the first happy years of his life with them and their parental warmth and love was still present in his heart and mind, he actually never learned about any of their jobs, tasks, dreams or experiences in life. All he knew about them was that they were his parents, and cared for him.

Apollo shortly stopped moving the spoon to his mouth and stared into the air in front of him, slightly shocked. Only now, he realized that he never actually tried to ask them about their background, their history. Could he be blamed for that? Thinking further, he started to wonder: If he was supposed to match up with the person in the legend, shouldn't he know about his sister? Tracing back his memories, he realized that while there were emotions left from before he'd reached the age of eight years and while he surely remembered his parents and the tragic night, his mind was mostly blank concerning the years before. He'd never wondered about that since he had been with Simetra, and humans don't recall many memories from the very first years of their lives when they still don't have a well-defined sense of self just yet. But was this the only reason?

He shook his head hard to escape the frozen state he was in and

blinked his eyes. Only then, after refocusing, he realized that he was not staring into thin air anymore; the fairy's face had entered his line of sight. Aurora must have realized he was frozen up and stared at him calmly, with a slight, friendly smile on her lips, not saying anything. He blushed as she was quite close, and he realized only now that she was actually pretty: her face was tiny, with slightly puffed out cheeks, and her skin was pale apart from a few freckles around her snub nose. Her green eyes sparkled at him, betraying the young age her body seemed to have by emanating an intelligence and wisdom of many years. They matched the light green colour of her slightly transparent dress. Apart from the pointed ears and the translucent wings on her back she looked like a human in her teens, maybe a few years younger than him. Her blonde, wavy hair was slightly tousled as if dishevelled by an unseen wind, and it took Apollo some effort to compose himself again and focus back on eating. Aurora had given him a bit more space after she saw that he blushed, and a somewhat playful smirk remained on her face afterwards.



It was hard for Simetra to deal with the memories which had suddenly started to rush into her mind. As if a dam broke loose, her mind went back in time while eating — the legend had brought back her memories from the first years with Apollo, when she herself was still a young bird, unaware of what the happenings in her surroundings meant. But she was aware now, and the memories all came back, almost making her faint from this sudden pressure. She was glad the soup was placed in front of her, since it allowed her to follow her instinctual, mechanical motions to eat. This kept her from fainting, at least. But inside, thoughts were swirling, memories taking new shapes, as if a seal had come undone all of a sudden. She could not remember speech from that time, but there was a scene quite like the one in the legend buried

in her memories which now suddenly got meaning. The girl which must be Apollo's sister was there, and she remembered they all lived in a different place, flooded with luxury. The one day clearly matching the day from the legend was when they had moved, and when the girl had left them. At the time, she did not interpret human interaction, but Simetra still felt the loss and tragedy in the hearts and souls of the persons around her — and she also carried the memory of that painful event in her heart. Only now, it all got meaning. With this new understanding, a pang of deep pain from the past shot up inside her.

She had to slowly sort out these thoughts, and reorganize this memory to rebuild a coherent line of events. The turmoil in her brain gave her a headache, but after sorting this out, she knew she would have to tell this story to Aurora, unless Apollo did it. But maybe his memories had been sealed until now, too?



Aurora calmly ate the soup she had provided to all of them. Carefully, she watched Apollo and Simetra. They were reacting in quite different ways; while Apollo seemed calm first, he suddenly froze up, as if time had stood still for him. Curiously, Aurora bent over, staring into his eyes, which seemed to focus into thin air. He must have been so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not even notice her. She took the chance to muster his face, and she found he had dark blue eyes, with small specks of brown, as if his irises could not decide which colour to settle on. His face was slightly stubby, probably from the last days of travelling, and it bore sincere, determined features, even though his eyes were quite absent-minded at the moment. She curiously tried to stare deep in his eyes, into her own reflection, as if to draw out his thoughts and history. Then, he suddenly refocused and blushed, and she drew her face back. While he was the protagonist here, he was still

a human man, and easy to irritate. She smiled in face of this youthful demeanour.

She watched Simetra next, while continuing to eat silently. The bird seemed to endure a strange pain, mechanically eating all the while, as if to calm herself down. She must be remembering something, digesting the things which had happened before she became aware of herself. If she were humanly shaped, she'd probably be sweating, but as she was a bird, all Aurora could make out were her eyes moving restlessly from one place to another, betraying her inner turmoil even though she was calmly eating the soup.

Clearly, both of them were in a very different situation, probably for the first time in their lives. Simetra seemed to remember something, while Apollo was incapable of thinking straight. His feelings might have sealed away his past, but as in the legend told among the fairies, the familiar would be the trigger to draw them out.



Slowly, all three of them were satiated, but they were still lost in their individual thoughts. Simetra's eyes lost a bit of their restlessness as she seemed to calm down, and Apollo was silent and composed, but had a questioning look on his face.

'It seems you have a lot of questions on your mind', started Aurora, looking Apollo straight in the eyes. He seemed to flinch a bit, but then nodded, averting his eyes ever so slightly. 'What is the earliest memory you can grasp?'

Apollo focused again, looking at Aurora. 'My memories are mostly blank before the time my parents died', he said. 'While I can still remember their warmth from before that, and feel their love, everything else seems completely clouded.'

Simetra turned her head, looking at Apollo in astonishment. 'The legend made me remember the painful day when your sister vanished',

she began with a trembling voice. Apollo turned his head, focusing on his companion. 'The legend matches my memories so much it is frightening. Only now I manage to interpret the images kept in my mind from before I gained my sense of humanity.'

Apollo touched her feathers, trying to calm her down. However, at the same time, he glanced at her with sparkling, interested eyes. They had spent their lives together, but these memories were apparently locked away from him, probably sealed by a lock of painful loss. He feared what would come, but he had to proceed, and he would have to ask Simetra to tell the tale.

Endlessly long minutes passed by, while Apollo kept stroking Simetra's feathers, trying to calm her down. He did not need to say anything, for Simetra knew what he was going to ask. After she had recollected her memories and brought them in order, she slowly calmed down again. To ease the stressful situation, Aurora slowly put away the plates. As she lifted them, they shrank back to their former small size. At the same time, they seemed to clean themselves. Next, she took the spoons, which also had been magically cleansed, and put them back into the bag at her belt. She left the table in place, putting her elbows on the wooden desk and resting her head in her hands. Without specific pressure, but rather with a calm and collected gate, she looked at Simetra until she was finally ready.



We have lived in a big estate when you were born, Apollo. Your parents bought me on the same day you were born, and I have since watched over you as a companion, a familiar. We were a happy family: Your parents, you and me. At the time, I was not aware of human speech, but from the images which came back into my mind, I can assume your parents had some ruling power in the region we lived in. They had servants, which they treated like friends, and regular feasts were

held which many of the people in that region visited. It seems your parents did not segregate their people by status or rank, and it was a very peaceful atmosphere without any visible oppression or crime.

One year after you were born, your mother was pregnant again, and your sister joined our little family. There was a big celebration, and the peaceful times continued after. Our estate was a big manor house, with a large garden, and I remember all too well how we played there and in the nearby forest. Once your sister was able to walk, even though she was too young to leave the house alone, she would sometimes sneak away and join us, playing hide and seek and other games close to the mansion. Still, most of the time your sister had to stay at home. I did not fully grasp the reason, but her skin was very white, as if made from porcelain, and would at times become red when she stayed outside for too long. She must have had some kind of strong sensitivity to the sunlight, and it seemed to cause her pain to stay outside for too long, especially in summer. However, these were happy days, and sometimes, other children from the nearby town would join us, and they played with us as fellow children, as equal friends. These were joyful days, and there is a lot of warmth from these times filling my memory. I remember these emotions well, even though I can not recall the words I heard at that time, and can not even recall your sister's name.

Your parents were very busy with their ruling duties, but they still spent all of their remaining time with both of you. It was a youth without flaws, as if taken from a fairy tale, or a beautiful dream. As in the legend, it might have been too good to be true, or at least, it seemed to be too peaceful to stay this way forever.

Now that I am slowly grasping humanity, I feel like there ought not be light without shadows. And sure enough, from time to time, I could see some of the villagers becoming lethargic. Drowned by the peaceful times, an escapist drive to leave the stable environment and roam the nearby lands started to dwell in the youngsters. Those who joined us in our hide and seek games started to recite stories of adventure from long ago, of warriors from a forgotten time fighting against powerful foes. At first playful, I could slowly make out a fire



burning within their eyes, as they did not only recite these stories in awe, but also started to dream about themselves becoming such heroes. They pointed at pictures in the books they brought, every time more eagerly pointing at heroes and beasts of ancient times.

At the same time, your parents became ever more busy. I could not follow what was going on in detail, but it seems there was a conflict with a neighbouring country, and it took them quite some effort over several years to convince them to enter a peace treaty. It seems this conflict had been sparked by a personal attack: The inhabitants of that neighbouring country did look different, with slightly darker toned skin, since it was a country with endlessly long summers and sunshine and desert-like regions. I remember that when I saw first pictures of these inhabitants, some villagers made comments about them being of different origin, even blaming them as enemies of humanity due to their looks alone. Apparently, there was some incident which sparked this conflict, and it took a long effort to spread more tolerance among the people in our land. It is astonishing how much I can infer from the pictures, gestures and facial expressions alone, now that my vivid memories are all revived.

Still, your parents seemed to have succeeded at that, after years of effort. Trade relations had been established, and our neighbours started to come as regular visitors into our country. However, it seemed like some of the hostility had entered the minds of our people. Some of the heroic stories told by the children had been twisted, they now talked about dark-skinned foes, who were killed by bright, shining heroes, sometimes even saving princesses held captive by those lords of darkness. While I could not understand speech, I could take all this from the images drawn in books and being embedded in the emotions the children exuded. As you may imagine by now, the fact that your sister had very white skin and rarely left the manor made some people worship her as the ideal human being. Your sister, in response to some of the children looking at her with glorification shimmering in their eyes, stayed at home even more, only increasing this effect.

It must have been this small twist, which continued to seep into the minds of the people which was the trigger. Along with the escapism

bred by the peacefulness, it led to the following events. They unfolded only a few years later. As the legend made me recall, it was on your seventh birthday, marked by a large festive event. All around the estate, people had been busily preparing for the day, and when the day finally arrived, your parents managed to take time off from their duties to spend time with their family. A large tent had been put up next to the estate, in the garden right behind it, and a stage with musicians had been built inside. Large desks with a free buffet lined the tent and everyone was free to come and join the festivities. The family was seated close to the stage and many people arrived to greet and congratulate us. For me and I believe also for you, the necessary formalities were mostly boring and exhausting, but there was still a calm and controlled atmosphere. Guards were there of course, too, but they were sparse, and actually seemed in a festive mood, too. Nobody expected any malicious actions to take place.

Hence, what happened then caught us all by surprise. A loud, roaring sound backed by great power could be heard from afar. All those present in the garden were irritated by the noise and their heads shot up, searching for the source. Apparently, the sound was coming from quite some distance away, but not from the ground; it came from up above. None of the people present had ever heard such a powerful roar, but they all had an ominous feeling and were reminded of the stories from long ago: This was like the sound of a dragon, a creature which according to history once roamed the skies, but had not been seen for ages. How did a dragon find its way here on this day? Were these creatures even still roaming this world?

It did not take long for chaos to unfold. After an eerie silence, a few moments later a single person mumbled the word 'dragon', which all of them were thinking but did not dare to pronounce. The panic began right after. A dragon, in this day and age, a creature which could bring calamity to whole countries? Cries of fear filled the tent, tables were overturned, and even the tent itself began to tilt as people pushed with all their might to escape from the area. Amidst all that terror, energetic youngsters in shiny armour suddenly appeared. They invaded the stage, which the musicians had already fled, and as they drew their

swords and held up their shields high into the air, they let loose a battle cry which apparently was supposed to calm the people down. This failed miserably, as another roar from the ancient dragon could be heard just a moment later, much closer by. A gust of wind made the tent waver, and suddenly, a golden light could be seen through the white fabric of the tent, which grew in size by the second.

Your sister and your parents were already being evacuated and on their way to safety, but you still stood there, frozen in place. I kept you company and tried to alert you by shrieking, but you seemed to be completely spaced out. As the light grew brighter and while the soldiers were busy evacuating everybody, several hooded figures appeared behind the buffet tables. They started to chant in unison, and a protective barrier seemed to emerge right on top of us. The youngster warriors assembled themselves right in the middle of it, and it only took a few seconds until the fire breath of the dragon arrived. The fabric of the tent lighted up like paper and vanished in an instant and the breath pushed against the barrier with forceful might. The young warriors lifted up their shields and went into a protective stance, while you and I were still frozen in place. The heat propagated through the barrier and got almost unbearable. It was as if time stood still; the cries of the people pushing to escape the tent had quieted down, as the tent was slowly emptying, and only the gushing of the fiery dragon breath could be heard, along with the continuous chants from the hooded figures.

As the soldiers serving your parents realized you were still frozen in place, two of them came rushing towards you. At the same time, a slightly crackling sound could be heard from above, as the barrier was slowly giving way with a groaning noise. As it finally shattered with a sound similar to a mirror exploding into thousands of pieces, a soldier pushed you to the ground and put himself above you, lifting up his shield. I quickly took protection behind the shield, too, as the second soldier also lifted his shield and braced himself for impact.

The devastating fire hit the shields both of the soldiers and the youngsters at full force. It seemed the shields of the youngsters were covered in some kind of protective resin or imbued with magic as they

seemed to be fully ignorant of the fire. However, they could barely withstand the force of the breath pushing against them. I could hear loud cries from the hooded figures at the same time, and they fell to the ground, burning to a crisp. Their magic was broken, and they could not offer any resistance against the powerful attack anymore.

The soldiers protecting you were powerful enough to endure the force, but their shields could not take the heat and began to melt. Slowly, but surely, they were exposed to the fire themselves. Their armour shielded us, but a painful moan could be heard from the trained soldiers as the temperature rose. When the fiery breath finally came to an end, both soldiers were lying on top of us, and the stench of burnt flesh was unbearable. They would never move again.

Finally, the pain from light burns brought you to your senses, and you extracted yourself from below the two bodies. While we were running towards the manor house to search protection, I turned my head around and saw the youngster warriors mostly unfazed. While it seemed their strength was exhausted from withstanding the powerful breath, they appeared to be without physical injuries. As they saw the remnants of their hooded friends, though, terror entered their eyes. The dragon was circling above, apparently watching the situation below. With the tent and magicians removed, it seemed like it did not regard the small humans below as a potential danger anymore. As a predator, it must have been sensing the fear in the hearts of the young warriors down below, too, and the beast seemed to calm down slightly.

It was this exact moment when a small explosion could be heard from the forest and smoke started to rise. The dragon was alert and turned to look in the direction of the noise, expecting a long-distance attack to come. You also stopped to run and turned; While your focus was in this direction, I turned around to face the manor house, trying to nudge you to continue fleeing. It was only due to this change of viewpoint that I saw a small, almost invisible sphere flying towards the dragon from the manor. As it approached, it quickly unfolded into transparent wire, which formed a net. The dragon was too slow to react and was caught up in the net immediately. It seems the net was magically enhanced, as it slowly enclosed the dragon, who was

twisting inside more and more, until it finally could not move its wings anymore, and started to tumble towards the ground, letting out a powerful and angry roar.

But such an intelligent and proud beast of the past would not give up so easily. With sharp claws it attempted to break the net, while at the same time recharging its breath to attack with another gust of fire. The hard scales of the dragon were unaffected by the cutting magic the net must have applied when it wrapped itself around tighter and tighter, but at the same time, the claws were ineffective against the net. The dragon kept falling down until it finally opened its jaw wide to prepare for another attack. Tumbling down, it was not really possible for the powerful hunter to aim at a specific target, so while it would likely hit the forest most of the time, all the unprotected humans who had attended the feast and were now on the run were at risk.

You were watching in shock, stupefied and helpless, and unable to escape to safety. I tried to nudge you, pointing towards our house, but you didn't respond. At the same time, most of the young warriors seemed to have heartened up and they started to run towards the place where the dragon would likely hit the ground. Also, the flow of people on the roads leading through the village started to change. A procession of people, carrying a palanquin in the centre of the crowd, slowly started to approach the scene. They were surrounded by more young warriors, mostly children. Even though they were clad in armour, I could recognize some of them who played with us during the happy days before. Among them, there were also some carrying bows and more hooded figures who started to chant. Soon, they were enclosed in a protective shield which moved along with them. It was a strange sight, and a mysterious atmosphere. The soothing noise of the chanting child magicians was soon broken by the battle cries of the archers, who started to attack the dragon.

Finally, you seemed to realize the impending danger right as the dragon was almost ready to unleash its breath. There was no time to flee to the manor house anymore, but there was a pair of large boulders nearby, originally placed there as decoration next to the path leading to the house. Thinking that these should withstand the fire

attack, we hid ourselves behind the closest one, and peeked around the boulder to continue watching the scene as it was unfolding. Not a second too late, as the dragon's breath started to scorch the earth not too far from our hiding place. Only as it got closer uncontrollably and singed a nearby bush, the full power became apparent. But it was not only the wood and bushes which were burning, as the stench of burnt flesh began to fill the air. Not all people and animals who had fled were so lucky to find a safe hiding place and it seemed like the air was converted to a burning inferno.

It was almost unbearable, but as the fiery breath seemed to catch more distance, we courageously spied around the corner of the boulder. I could feel you were slightly shivering as we could see the dragon's breath hitting the procession of people carrying the palanquin. Luckily, the gush of fire continued to move and the shield was able to hold it off long enough. Mostly unfazed, the protected people kept walking and the archers tried to attack the falling, tumbling dragon with arrows which seemed to be imbued with magic. I remember they were glowing in a bright blue and I had the impression they were flowing towards the dragon like a stream of water, travelling as if carried by invisible waves instead of flying in a straight path, but still hitting their target well. These seemed to be effective against the fiery beast, as it started to scream as the stream of arrows reached the scales. It seems the arrows were slowly... seeping in, maybe this is the right way to put it. They carefully made their way through the tiny joints between the scales as if following a natural flow and then got stuck in the dragon's body.

As the dragon tried to unleash its breath again, it seemed the fire was forming much slower. The magic imbued in the arrows must have been sealing the dragon's power and, surely enough, more and more arrows rained down upon the majestic beast until it finally squealed, interrupting its magic attack. The net, which seemed to be shrinking ever so slowly, finally caught the dragon so tightly that it was unable to even move a muscle. In these few moments, the fight was essentially over, and the young warriors who had been disheartened before now finally reached the dragon. With a battle cry of their own, they drew

their swords. A painful slaughter began.

Still feeling unsafe, the two of us struggled to slowly exit the safety of the boulder. At the same time, the procession had come to a halt and they set down the palanquin at their centre. Those who had carried the palanquin seemed to start to fiddle with the drapery which was hiding whatever or whoever was within, and they were actually slowly lifting the protective curtains. A white figure with ideal proportions, made from the most exquisite marble available in the country, was slowly unveiled. She looked so much like her that both of us gasped in shock.



‘Diana’, Apollo interrupted in a loud, sobbing voice. ‘Her name was Diana!’

Aurora and Simetra, who had been absorbed in the visuals the recited tale created in their minds, were abruptly brought back to reality. They turned to face Apollo, who was holding his head in his hands with an expression of shock, silently shivering all over and crying with empty, rigidly staring eyes, slightly bloodshot from intense emotion. But before Aurora could even open her mouth to address him a sudden rumble went through their wooden means of transportation as it came to an immediate halt. In the blink of an eye, the three of them started to fall down from midair, at breakneck speed.





## 15 Separated

Apollo had lost control. As his memories came flooding back at him, his instinctual magic had broken down and the magic of flight he subconsciously controlled even when they had been sleeping evaporated into thin air. There was a throbbing pain in his head as the emotions from the past came gushing out of the locked area they had been dwelling within until now. He did not even realize what was going on around him, nor did he notice right away that he was falling. Emotions locked away for a decade came back to him with excruciating pain.

Diana was all his mind would focus on. Memories of his sister, his childhood, came back all of a sudden. Her fair skin, her porcelain-like beauty, her sensitivity to sunlight; all of those details he'd heard in the story he could now confirm with his memory. But there was so much more: her smile, her laugh, her scent, the regal aura she exuded at all times. It all came back, together with the pain of loss and infinite sorrow. He knew the continuation of the story, but could still not accept it.



‘Simetra, quick!’

Aurora regained her senses first, and on instinct started to unfold and flap her translucent wings. It took Simetra a bit longer, as it seemed she needed time to switch back from her storytelling to the realization that she was still a bird, as she had been her whole life. As Aurora dashed down and held on to the sign they had just recently

been riding on, Simetra quickly realized her proposal must be to try and slow down their fall. Simetra followed her example, and wrapped her claws around the signpost, fluttering wildly to try to help keep the wooden sign from falling. Meanwhile, Apollo, in a streak of incredible luck, was still seated on their old means of transport, as if nothing had happened. Only then, Simetra realized the feathery shield around their means of transportation was still there. It must have kept the wooden boards in balance, and prevented Apollo from falling off.

As Aurora and Simetra struggled to slow down the falling sign with Apollo on top, Aurora managed to take a glance at their surroundings. The sun was shining up above and if not for the deadly forest below it would have been a wonderful day. The sunlight was refracted in her translucent wings and the colours of the rainbow could be seen on the wooden planks right in front of her, playfully moving about. As Apollo was still beside himself, Simetra took in the beautiful sight, and as if fuelled by the colours, she doubled her efforts to keep them floating over the trees. Aurora quickly moved her head around, as if searching for a way out after their long flight through the endless sea of trees, her blonde hair swaying from side to side.

Seconds as long as an eternity went by, and Simetra was close to passing out from the effort. Finally, Aurora reached out her left hand, in a fast, but very controlled movement. She squinted, and grabbed onto something. To an observer, it seemed as if she was trying to take hold of thin air, but her movements were so careful as if she was trying to softly touch the web of a spider, neither breaking it nor getting caught in it. Aurora seemed slightly surprised and taken aback for a moment, but quickly calmed herself and continued. More seconds went by, and while Simetra was trusting her deeply after the short while they travelled together, she was slowly reaching her limits and began to doubt her own perception: the air started to shimmer close to Aurora's hand, just like it would on a hot summer day near a dark surface. As if a mirage was developing, it seemed the air was opening up, revealing an image of something different, far away. Like watching a faraway scene through a lens, or observing something through the reflection in a calm lake, a slightly transparent and blurry image of a

grassy, dark area shimmered in the air. Simetra could only capture a glimpse of it, though, as if a tiny rift had opened in the air and was still unstable.

‘Hold on, we have to overexert ourselves in one last effort!’, Aurora spoke through their link via thoughts. With her last energy, Simetra fluttered as strong as she could, operating by will alone. Aurora let go of the floating sign with her right hand after pulling it up slightly and quickly moved her feet below it to at try to keep it atop the trees. With her second hand free, she reached out into the rift and with coordinated, experienced movements widened it. Simetra watched as time slowed down to a crawl in her mind. She closed her eyes to refocus her last energy on keeping their means of travel in the air. Ever so slowly the rift was widening, but Simetra was unable to continue observing. Her complete mind was focused on moving her wings, up and down, up and down, in a steady rhythm.



While Aurora realized time was running out, she had to take a gamble: they could not risk to land here, and recreating a safe place such as the clearing she had used before would not be possible in the limited time they had available. She could not control wood to let it fly, as this was not a natural effect, and the sign was in any case imbued with a strong magic she would not dare to touch. However, she knew they had to take it along, and Apollo would not regain his senses fast enough to stabilize the situation. The only way which came to her mind was to escape via a ley line to a place known to her. This was a risky venture, since she was the only one among them who had experience travelling through strands of highly condensed magic, and it would take her quite some time to prepare their escape route. Time which they did not really have, but there was also no alternative in sight.

She decided to trust in her own power combined with Simetra's strength, and began to search, expanding her perception such that she would see the tiniest movement of magic. The sunlight and prismatic colours which would be projected through her wings would guide her in the search for a flow of magic in the nearby area. She forced herself to stay calm, and the experience of many years helped her to succeed. The ley line was found, and she slowly tapped into it, feeling her way to a place she had visited before. She was shocked, as she learned their location and how close they actually were to the place from which she had begun her travels quite a while ago to meet those two companions: She was close to her hometown.



Simetra was on the brink of finally losing consciousness from exhaustion. Her muscles ached, and it felt as if her wings were breaking off her body, and only pain remained. Mechanically, she kept beating those wings she could not feel anymore, without any thoughts, just a single, clear focus. Up and down, up and down, like a clockwork, always striving to keep the rhythm going.

As she drifted towards nothingness, she felt a slight movement of air, pulling her to the side; or did she imagine it? Maybe she was just drifting into unconsciousness, falling deeper and deeper. Finally, everything went dark.



Apollo reconnected with reality as his environment changed. He felt like he was dragged away from the painful pangs in his head into a

large, powerful stream tugging him along, without any way to fight back. As if somebody had thrown him into a torrential river, all he could do was struggle to stay afloat and follow the current. But what was this strange river he was floating in?

The painful memories got pushed aside. Apollo was struggling to stay alive, swimming. However, the liquid he was in was very much unlike water: while it was certainly fluid, it did not splash, nor was it of a consistent viscosity. The colour seemed somewhat yellowish, but whenever he tried to focus on it or name the colour, it seemed to change slightly, as if the colour could be anything from the colours of the rainbow. It seemed like the liquid did not have a fixed colour, nor was it transparent enough to see more than a few centimetres beneath the surface. When he did not focus, the yellowish tint came back. Looking upwards, he could make out a blue, but somehow blurry sky, as if out of focus. Forward and backward, the stream seemed to continue forever, and the horizon was out of focus again; it was similar for the waterline, which seemed somewhat earthy, but hard to get into focus. Somehow, all this did not look like reality to him.

Only then, he realized that he could not see the others anymore. What did happen to Simetra and Aurora? How did he end up right here? He started to cry Simetra's and Aurora's names in an attempt to alert them, hoping one of them would suddenly pop out of the stream right behind him. But nothing happened, and his voice was deafened by the somewhat hissing, crackling noise of the liquid flowing all around him.

Apollo panicked. While he had essentially lived alone for many years, without contact to other humans, he always knew there was a village nearby, and there was Simetra to keep him company. At times, he would have felt lonely, but he'd never been completely isolated from the world around him. However, Apollo now felt as if all other people had been swept away. Nobody, no other creature would respond. No single animal could be heard. The strange, rushing noise was slightly unsettling as he frantically moved his hands, trying to swim against the flow of the stream. The current was too strong to resist, though; trying to go back the way he came would never work.

Apollo tried to calm himself down, and collect his thoughts. As he succeeded, the stream around him became less wild, as if responding to his increased serenity. However, the current did not become less strong or slow down. As Apollo pulled himself together, he realized that he did not feel wet at all: still wearing all of his clothes, the liquid was not seeping in or drenching his clothing, which would otherwise have become so heavy already that he'd have a hard time staying afloat. He decided he needed to collect more information about this place and this liquid to find out what was going on. Swimming against the current would not work. Following the current might be dangerous, though, since he did not know why he arrived here at all and where the stream would take him. Maybe he could try to reach the waterside? But was there anything on the shore? Apollo squinted, trying to make out any structure on the shore. However, the imagery was very evasive, as if it was all a blur. Was this reality, or rather a dream? Reality couldn't look that way, could it?

He slowly struggled to swim towards the waterside. While doing that, he had to follow the current so he would not get swept away. Luckily, the liquid was not cold, or he might have already frozen to death, as it took quite a while to slowly get closer to the shore. The activity was draining him of his energy, as if he was also fighting against himself; also, he had still not fully recovered from his emotional breakdown just a few minutes before. Furthermore, he was struggling alone, while up to now, Simetra had always kept him company.



Aurora carried the unconscious Simetra in her hands as she flew through the ley line. She had locked the wooden sign in place between her legs, as her wings prevented her from carrying it like a backpack. She also had Apollo's backpack with her, slung around her arms and carrying it in front of her right below Simetra. She was lucky that there would be

no attack or other need to use her hands while floating in the ley line, as she was mostly defenceless this way. She had lost sight of Apollo quite a while ago, as he had fallen right into the magic torrent of the ley line just shortly after they had entered through the rift. In the end, this should not cause any major issues, as long as he followed the current; he should still end up at the exit at the end of the ley line. However, he would be floating in liquid, highly condensed mana for quite a while, and it was not well studied what would happen if a human being stayed inside condensed mana for too long, or even drank it. Aurora was worried, and scanning the surface of the torrent of mana below her carefully, although she was extremely tired from the recent events, both physically and mentally. Apollo was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he was further behind, travelling slower than they had been? Maybe he fought against the torrent? Aurora turned around, fighting against the flow of magic, which did not only move the liquid torrent below her but also the air above. Her progress was slow, but steady. If only Simetra had been awake; as a bird, she would have been able to scan the distance far better. Maybe she could emulate Simetra's brilliant eyesight with a bit of magic, making use of the fact that she was in contact with her, drawing out Simetra's natural abilities?

Aurora concentrated. She closed her eyes, and focused on her fluttering wings, moving up and down in a steady rhythm. The eyesight of a bird; she envisioned a bird like Simetra in her mind, flapping its wings, following the very same rhythm. A bird of prey, looking towards the far away horizon, focusing into the distance. She became one with these visuals, and slowly opened her eyes again.

She could see Apollo, far away, further upstream. He seemed to be struggling against the current, finally gave up, and then after a while he seemed to try to reach the shoreline. How far away was he from her? Aurora tried to estimate the distance, but her temporarily changed eyesight did not include the necessary experience. Now that she knew which direction he was in, she relaxed slightly, and her eyesight went back to normal again. Surely enough, she could not make him out anymore, not even when squinting. This was bad; would she reach

him in time? If he really managed to reach the shore, she was not sure what would happen to him. The ley line was a powerful force, and exiting it by escaping the torrent manually might throw him out at a random place, or could even hurt him. She tried to call out to him, but to no avail, it seemed; at least, she could not hear any response. The gushing noise of the liquid mana below increased, as her mind began to race, and the wind she had to fight against seemed to increase, too. She also tried to contact him via her thoughts, but the interference by the strong mana prevented her from getting through to him. Her only hope was that the increased turmoil of the mana flux would also get hold of him and transport Apollo along, towards her. Still, would she reach him in time?



Apollo was slowly getting closer to the shoreline. As he struggled, the current became faster and more turbulent, as if trying to push him back. The gurgling of the liquid increased, seemingly trying to devour him. He took that as a sign to continue escaping the grasp of this strange torrent, and mobilized all his strength. At full force he continued, and the shore came closer and closer. Finally, he could make out the earthy structure at the shore, lined by something like small, mossy stones. This was one strange river, and he knew he had to escape it somehow, as not only his heart began to throb heavily from the exhaustion as he was panting more and more heavily, but his head was throbbing, too. Somehow, this environment was pushing onto his mind, slowing down his very thoughts. He had to exit this stream as quickly as possible. He was sure that falling unconscious in this strange river would not end well.

Finally, he reached the waterline, and touched the mossy stones with his bare hands. Somehow, the moss felt as if it was burning his skin, and the current increased in strength even more, but this could not



stop him. Fear was driving him, as his head was aching more than his muscles by now. It took him three attempts until he could finally get a steady grip on one of the mossy stones, and with an inhumane effort, he pulled himself out of the liquid. Quickly, he rolled towards the earthy surface behind the stones, escaping the burning sensation the moss imprinted on his bare skin. As he lay there panting heavily, flat on his back with the pain in his head slowly subsiding, he could see Aurora approaching from up above. She was still far away, but slowly getting closer. She seemed to be carrying Simetra in her hands, and even had the wooden sign with her; Apollo rejoiced. Aurora was wildly moving the head, trying to signal something to him with one hand, and he could see her mouth moving, but the gurgling liquid drowned out all other sounds.

Apollo jumped to his feet, starting to run towards his companions. As he did so, the ground beneath him gave way, and he was sliding farther away from the stream. The pull was so strong that he could not resist; he tried to hold onto something, onto the earth around him, but it seemed to have become too slippery to even grant his fingers any resistance. As he cried out to Aurora one last time, he could barely make out her face, which was full of worry and sadness. Fractions of a second later, the image of Aurora holding Simetra in her arms burned in his mind, he fell into darkness again. As void spread out around him, he could see one item falling towards him: his backpack! Aurora must have thrown it in the last second, and he managed to catch it while tumbling in the nothingness. A worry crept into his mind: Did that mean they could not follow him anymore? Was he supposed to stay inside this strange, forceful stream?

Apollo was at a loss, as the world around him slowly brightened again. All of a sudden, he could see the sky, and a strangely shaped crack in the air which he must have fallen through right now. A second later, his back crashed against something wooden, and he could hear leaves rustling as small twigs scratched his skin. He had tried to turn mid-air, but he was too slow, so he at least covered his eyes. He hit a thicker branch a few moments later, and the air was pushed out of his lungs. Finally, he hit the ground hard, and was left unconscious.



## 16 Alone

Apollo slowly came to his senses. His head was brimming with pain as his eyes shot open; as a painful brightness overwhelmed him, he quickly closed them again. He tried to lift his hand to shield the bright light, but his arm wouldn't budge. Both his arms wouldn't move, also his legs seemed to be fixed in place. He tried to lift his head, but it seemed there was a headband keeping it down. Only his hands could move a tiny bit.

Did somebody restrain him? He had to open his eyes to find out what was going on. Slowly, he tried to raise his eyelids, squinting into a bright, blinding light. It was an unnaturally cold light, likely produced by an artificial lamp, but it was still too bright to focus on anything. Since he could not even rotate his head, he had to wait for his eyes to adapt. Apollo feared crying for help, since whoever may have put him here might be close-by, just waiting for him to awake. He had to make sure to at least get a grasp about his surroundings, situation and location first. As he tried to make a quiet sound, he only heard a strange, muffled noise echoing back to him, as if he was in a small, enclosed space.

Slowly, panic started to crawl up his neck, and he was soon bathed in cold sweat. How did he end up in this situation? The last thing he remembered was slipping into darkness at the shore of the strange river, and then falling through an equally strange crack in the air, hitting twigs and finally the ground. He must have been transported back into the forest, and somebody must have taken him from there after he fell unconscious. As his eyes were still trying to adapt to the painful brightness, he tried to tug on the things holding him in place once more. It seemed there were clamps around his arms, close to his hands, and from the feel of it, more clamps held his feet in place. In

addition, there was a headband holding his head in a fixed position and when he breathed out hard, he could feel his breath coming back, as if there was something blocking the airflow around him. The situation seemed hopeless to escape from, and even at full strength, his shackles would not budge. A somewhat metallic noise could be heard as he tried to move against the clamps holding him in place, which made Apollo believe the shackles were made of metal. And then, there was a throbbing pain in his head and back, probably from wounds inflicted from his previous fall from the sky. The worst, however, was that he still could not see his surroundings, and that he was completely alone in this situation.

Step by step, he could open his eyelids a bit more. The lamp turned out to be rather large and wide and mounted directly in front of his face. Everything around the lamp seemed dark at first. Apollo tried moving his eyes down, trying to get anything into focus. However, since his head was fixed in place, he could not even see down to his feet or his hands, but had to rely on the feeling that they were fixed by metal shackles. Apollo could not make out much more than his shirt, the bright light in front of him, and some dark material below him on which he was lying. It seemed that around him, there was only darkness compared to the bright light..

Even trying to focus left and right, he could see mostly darkness, but Apollo also could not cover much area in these directions since his head was fixed on place. He also tried to listen, but his surrounding were mostly silent, maybe even artificially so, since not a single noise could be heard apart from a very quiet, high-pitched hissing, or maybe buzzing sound which had been there since he first woke up in this place. It did sound like a swarm of bees, as if there was a nest close-by, but if he really was still in the mana harvesting forest, there had been no animals in this deadly area before.

It was still hard to really open his eyes and focus on anything given the bright light right in front of him, so he started to fantasize about such strange ideas. Furthermore, Apollo was very tired, likely from the exhaustion from swimming through the strangely coloured river and the fall right afterwards. His breath was not ragged anymore, but

he could still not feel much energy in his body. While there was panic keeping him awake, a sudden dull feeling got hold of him, and he ran the risk of falling asleep. The fact that he basically only had his mind to think about potential explanations for this situation, and almost no input from the environment apart from a continuous, steady noise did only strengthen this effect. This was like a dream, but a really bad one.

He struggled against his shackles once more, thus increasing the pain he felt which also helped to keep him awake. It seemed that nobody was there to help him get rid of this drowsiness or to rescue him from this dangerous situation. Slowly, but steadily, a strong, almost unnatural feeling of drowsiness took hold of him, and after a fight of two more minutes, he could not resist anymore. Apollo gave in to a deep, dreamless sleep.



Aurora was getting closer to him every second, and she could finally see Apollo's outline in the distance with her normal eyesight. But it seems she was too late: He was already climbing over the shoreline, exiting the ley line as if it was normal to do so. Didn't he feel the mana current drawing him back? Aurora started to cry out to him, wildly moving her single free hand, trying to alert him. But Apollo did not seem to notice her yet, and she could see him finally laying down flat next to the mana river, apparently exhausted from the struggle.

As he finally stood up, even though they were still quite some distance apart, Aurora felt that their eyes met; he froze in place, and his face brightened up shortly. Suddenly, the ley line seemed to eject him, as the ground below him crumbled apart and he started to fall. Aurora knew it was too late, and she was surprised it had taken so long for the inevitable to happen. Sadness crept into her face as she kept flying towards him, knowing she wouldn't be able to reach him

in time. All she could do was watching him fall, as exiting the ley line at a different destination than the one she destined them to go to when opening the initial rift was beyond her abilities. It was an incredible, maybe even impossible feat that Apollo had managed to achieve without knowing.

While Aurora watched Apollo fade into the distance, she realized she may have one single way to support him. While neither she nor the still fast asleep Simetra could follow him, she could try to throw his backpack towards him. It might help him to survive at whatever location he was thrown out, as he had also survived in the mana harvesting forest before. Aurora took aim, and threw the backpack towards him with her single free arm, keeping Simetra safe in her embrace. She prayed that she'd made it, as she saw the backpack vanish together with Apollo into the dark void beyond the ley line.

Moments later, a tremendous draft of air took hold of her. She tumbled, and the river below her exploded in a wild frenzy as if complaining about what had happened. Aurora was usually very proficient at flying, but the powerful hurricane which suddenly broke loose was too much even for her. She managed to hold on to Simetra, but apart from that, she was thrown through the air without any way to control her flight as the storm pulled her along, down the ley line, and dangerously close to the mana stream. The wooden sign soon escaped the grip of her legs, and fell into the river. She barely managed to stay above the stream as the powerful hurricane moved her closer to the end of the ley line at tremendous velocity.



As Simetra woke up, her muscles still hurt and her head was pounding with pain. She opened her eyes slowly, and as she took in her surroundings, she was surprised to find she was in some kind of wooden cabin, lying on a soft bed. She sat up, careful not to rip the soft bed sheets,

and twisted her head. She was alone in here, but clearly somebody had taken care of her. There was a bowl of water next to the bed, and a perch she could sit on comfortably, which she did immediately. Only now, she realized how thirsty she had been and started to drink the clear water. Her headache slowly subsided as the cool water refreshed her life energy.

After quenching her thirst, she started to wonder how she ended up here. Somehow, this place felt safe, for the first time in a long while. The last images in her mind were from the struggle to keep Apollo and the wooden sign afloat, together with Aurora. Aurora had been preparing something which looked like a spell, which would hopefully guide them to safety. Had they succeeded?

As Simetra continued sipping from the clear water, she took a closer look around. The wooden cabin was professionally built, with intricate decorations and a simple but comfortable furniture. It felt like a comfortable place for guests, having only a single room on a single floor. There were some cupboards with several assorted bowls and jars whose contents looked like naturally made products such as tasty jam, honey and more. Only then, Simetra realized it was bright inside, so there must be a light source somewhere, albeit she had not made out any windows yet. Looking around, she found that there were indeed windows, but the wooden shutters were closed, and the light was definitely not streaming in through these. Simetra looked upwards, and found that the light which felt like sunlight seemed to come from a bright globe levitating close to the ceiling. A warm, sun-like shine was emitted by this globe, which probably was powered by magic.

To find out more about her location, Simetra would have to open one of the windows. She approached the shutters, and pulled on one with her beak. As if triggered by that, the light source dimmed itself magically, such that she could barely see the outlines of the furniture in the room at first until her eyes slowly adapted. As she managed to open the shutters, she realized why, as it seemed to be the middle of the night and the bit of light which was left escaped the window and shone upon green leaves and healthy twigs. It seems the cabin was located in a tree, but not one of the trees in the dead, silent harvesting

forest, but a real, healthy tree. Also, there was a grating in front of the window, so there was no risk of falling out; and no chance of escaping. But Simetra did not think about escaping, as this place felt safe to her.

Slowly, Simetra started to wonder why she was alone. Surely she was just left here to relax and recover from their wild travelling so far, but she still felt unsteady as she did not know what had happened to her companions. Rarely had she been alone in the last years, especially when at ground or inside a building. It was a strange, uncomfortable experience, and the forest was quite silent at night apart from a rare noise from animals active at night coming in through the window. Compared to the silence of the dead forest they had travelled through before, however, this was a lively and comforting soundscape.

After breathing in the refreshing, but cool air for a while, Simetra decided to close the shutters again. The light inside the cabin became brighter once more, and she looked around. There was also a door with a small window inside, also closed with a wooden board which could be moved to the side to allow checking on visitors before opening the door completely. She fluttered over, shifting the board and looking outside. There was a suspension bridge in view, so she was likely high up in these large trees. She closed the board again, and tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge; likely, it was locked from outside. Was she held captive here?

Even though all this indicated she was kept here against her will, she still felt safe. This all looked a bit like a place where fairies would live, so Aurora might have brought her here. Maybe the door was only locked at night to protect her from unwanted visitors, or from getting lost in this unknown location? She opened the board at the door again and had a closer look. There was no guardian placed outside, as surely would be in case she was held captive. What should she do now?

She closed the board at the door again, and sipped a bit from the clear water. It really took a while to refill her, she had felt completely sucked dry as she woke up earlier. She was not hungry yet, somehow she was still satiated from the meal they had at lunch. However, she was also full of worry, which likely prevented her from feeling hunger,



too. All she could do in here, would be to either stay awake and worry, or try to sleep. Indeed, she was still somewhat tired, now that her thirst was quenched. But how would she tune down the light?

As Simetra thought this and placed herself on the soft bed again, the light slowly dimmed itself, until it finally became the shade and brightness of moonlight. She felt put at ease a bit, as the lighting globe above her also projected some tiny specks of light on the ceiling, simulating a beautiful, starry sky. This helped her to calm down, and while she could not stop worrying, there was nothing she could do right now but sleep. Slowly, she drifted into a light, not fully relaxing sleep filled with uneasy dreams of loneliness.



As Aurora woke up, she hurt all over. It took her a few seconds to collect herself. There was green grass growing around her; she must have reached the end of the ley line, and been ejected from it the hard way. She held her head, as even though the grass here was dense, she must have had hit the ground hard moments ago. The wooden sign was lying next to her, probably ejected, too. There was something below it, or rather someone. Aurora quickly crawled over to the sign and put it aside, and luckily, it seemed that Simetra who had been caught underneath was unfazed. She was lying there, probably still unconscious from the fall, but breathing normally. Aurora relaxed; they had reached safety, for now. She looked around, and found the large menhirs around them she knew so well. This was the clearing where the ley line leading to her hometown ended, a place used by her people when they wanted to get close to nature itself and experience their inner peace.

It was silent, and the peaceful forest around her which consisted of real trees full of life emanated a warmth she had missed for many weeks. Aurora unfolded her wings, stretched her legs and arms, and

found nothing was broken. She had been really lucky to escape this wild hurricane mostly unfazed, even rescuing Simetra and the wooden sign along with herself. She fumbled along her belt, until she finally found a small whistle. As she carefully put the whistle to her mouth and blew, a clear sound, bright as a bell, escaped the tiny instrument. She paused shortly, and blew again, and a tune and rhythm unique to her and known by the other fairies travelled through the air, amplified by magic to travel the many kilometres to her hometown. Her family would be here soon.

Aurora rubbed her forehead as if to wipe away the remaining pain. Her head still felt a bit dull from the heavy fall, and she had bruises all over, but this was a small price to pay for them being safe. Still, she worried about Apollo. They had to find him soon, or he might be found by evil first. She tried to stand up, and her legs were still wobbly, but she managed to stand still. While her wings would unfold just fine, she was not strong enough to take off right now. She closed her eyes, and felt the strong flow of magic from the ley line around her. It was still wild, if not angry, and it was impossible for her to synchronize with it. She'd have to wait for her family to arrive to help her recover her stamina, and heal both her bruises and Simetra.

She took some time to calm herself. For the upcoming rescue mission, she'd have to be as focused as possible. This also seemed to calm down the ley line slightly, and in her mind, she apologized to the natural flow for the disturbance. While she would still have acted in the same way since there was no other solution to quickly escape from the danger which they were in, she still disturbed the fundamentals of nature even more than the current state of the world was already doing. Apollo escaping the ley line forcefully was something she had not factored in, and this was something she had never heard of happening ever before.

As she reached her inner peace again after many minutes in a natural silence, she could hear the excited beating of wings nearby, coming closer. She opened her eyes again, and looked in the direction of the sound. A warm smile developed on her face as she recognized her father, mother and the elder of their small village approaching. They smiled back at her, while there was also worry in their faces, as they

saw the strange wooden sign and the unconscious owl on the ground, and Aurora standing there on shaky legs, covered in bruises. She lifted her hand and waved slightly to show them she was fine, but as they finally landed and touched the ground, they froze in place as they felt the wild torrent of mana from the ley line around them. Her parents reacted first. They came running at her with open arms, and almost threw her to the ground as they embraced her. Aurora felt the warmth and safety, and held on to the two of them as her legs wouldn't hold her anymore.

'All that matters is that you are back safely', her mother said in a warm voice. Her father patted her slightly, and took a yellowish potion from his belt which would be able to restore her stamina. The elder watched in silence, but with a slightly sharp glare towards the strange piece of wood and the owl. Aurora leaned on her father, and took the potion from him, uncorking it with her thumb in a well-trained movement. She downed it quickly and closed her eyes for a few moments as she felt her stamina return. Aurora was able to stand on her own almost immediately, but she hugged her parents with all her might to savour that moment of reunion.

After a minute of silence had passed, Aurora was mostly recovered. She nodded, as if to encourage herself, stepped back, and addressed all of them, pointing at Simetra as she mentioned her. 'We have to take action quickly, but let us first return Simetra to our village so she can recover. We can talk along the way.' Her parents nodded, they understood each other without the exchange of more words. Aurora took Simetra in her hands, and instructed her father to take the wooden sign with him. Moments later, they were up in the air, and the elder joined them as they rose. Up in the air, Aurora began to contact the three of them via thought communication. This was more convenient during flight, and allowed them to breathe normally without interruption by speech. As close as they were, they could even communicate much faster than they could by speaking normally.

Aurora speedily talked about their travels so far, how she met with Apollo and Simetra, that both did not cleanly remember their past and Simetra had actually not even awoken to her humanity yet when

she met her, and how they travelled on the wooden sign. She left out many details, since she needed to cut to the incident in the ley line as fast as possible such that they could go and look for Apollo. As she mentioned that Apollo had exited the ley line by himself, the elder turned to her with wide eyes, very much unlike his usual calm expression. ‘This has only happened once before’, he explained, his voice carrying the wisdom of many decades, but still shaky even when transmitted via thoughts. ‘While there is nobody still alive to confirm the tale, there is a myth that when the legend was born and the story played out for the very first time, the main actor had some powers defying our common sense of magic. Since this myth has a doubtful origin, it is not told as part of the legend, but passed down from one elder to the other in case at some point it may prove to be based on reality. I would never have thought I’d be allowed to live in a time period in which this would happen. Once we are back, I will have to consult the old records.’

After this, the elder fell silent, lost in thought. Aurora’s father made use of the silence to contact several hunters and experienced scouts, whom he could also reach via his thoughts, as they were slowly closing in on the village. Luckily, he was the leader of the guards, and would no doubt have a search and rescue team assembled shortly after they arrived. As Aurora had finished her story, the exhaustion crept into her mind. While the potion had returned her stamina, mental exhaustion could not be overcome by normal magic. She flew closer to her mother, who took her hand, knowing her exhaustion and sensing her anxiety for Apollo’s safety. Would they reach him in time?