The Novel-Writing Process: *The Fall of Ratatoskr*

**An Honors Thesis (ENG407)**

by

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Abstract

To write a novel is more than the final product. The creation and revision of a novel-length work is a process, spanning months and years of word generation, revision, and polishing. However, there are few courses that can teach the methods needed to sustain plot, character development, and tension over thousands of words and hundreds of pages. Contained within is four months of this process, culminating in roughly 23,000 words of a longer narrative that will, after continued work, form a full narrative arc. I demonstrate this process of generation and revision in the text itself as well as present a synopsis which outlines the complete narrative of the presented work.

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I would like to thank Mrs. Jill Christman, who convinced me that a talent with writing is never wasted and always worth pursuing.

I would like to thank the squirrels of the Ball State University campus for their continued inspiration for this project.
Overview

The goal of this project was to produce, over four months, part of a novel-length manuscript, presented as a “partial” and as a synopsis that spans the full narrative arc of the novel. While this project is not intended to be presented in full as a possible choice for publication as a novel, it serves as a useful learning tool in producing writing material in a timely manner and preparing that material for publication, if the author so chooses. The partial itself is a result of word generation—continuous writing with quantity over quality held as the goal—and subsequent revision to polish the writing to an acceptable level.

Inspiration

My reading career has been filled to the brim with fantasy novels, particularly those using animals as main characters. Authors like Erin Hunter—the pen name of a team of authors who co-write the Warriors series—and Brian Jacques—the famous author of the Redwall series—have paved the way for writing about difficult and important subjects—war, friendship, love, and acceptance, to name a few—with creatures that possess very human-like personalities. Whether it be the wild cats that make up the Warriors series or the mice and other animals in Redwall, animals and their interactions are a perfect fit for human problems, placing them on a small and specific scale while still speaking to these larger universal themes.

How could these writers still interest me? Their target age group is several years below me, the writing designed for younger readers. These authors aren't writing traditional literature; these are commercial novels, books meant to live on personal bookshelves and not in classrooms. But this points to a fundamental flaw in books written for children and teens: that they are incapable of digesting “literature” as we know it on their own, that “literature” only exists within academia.

Thus, part of my goal was to break this tradition, to write something that could be considered “literary” while drawing on the same idea these authors had: to set the stage of human life within animals. I was drawn to the idea by the squirrels on the Ball State campus, particularly the three or so melanistic squirrels (black squirrels) that I had seen in various locations. Where had these squirrels come from, and why were there so few of them? From there, the idea blossomed into a story: these squirrels were the leaders of their various areas—"Pierre" to the south, "Jacques" to the west, and so on—and controlled all the other squirrels. The bell tower became a tree, and suddenly I had four forests—the four sides of campus, though they bear little similarities—and a story of friendship, pride, and war worth writing about. These themes are not inherently related to squirrels; it's doubtful, really, that squirrels would organize themselves this way. But humans certainly would, and what better way to tell a human-like story than through a creature that has so embedded itself in Ball State life?

In addition, I made a long-reaching connection to Norse mythology, specifically to the tree Yggdrasill and the three primary creatures who dwell upon it: Nidhogg Nagar, the snake (or wyrm) who gnaws at the roots of the tree; the unnamed eagle, who lives in its highest branches; and Ratatoskr, the red squirrel who relays messages between them. This manifests in various plot
elements in the novel as well as in the character choices, as well as in the title, referring to the failings of the squirrels to preserve the peace that Ratatoskr did, and thus bringing on the Norse doomsday: Ragnarok, the destruction of the world in ice, fire, and water, and a subsequent renewal of the world.

Content

The primary section of this thesis is the partial, a document that contains the first ten chapters of the manuscript and clocks in at roughly 78 pages. This document was written over the course of four months and revised in a method known as “horizontal” writing, wherein word generation supersedes, in the beginning, word revision. The work was then later revised, similar to building a house from the foundation up, until it was polished to a publishable quality. The partial does not contain the full narrative arc, however; it is only a portion of the story, prepared as though it would be presented to an agent or editor for review and consideration.

However, that does not mean that the partial is inferior to a complete work. It still contains all of the necessary aspects of a novel, including a relatable main character to whom readers can connect, and opens up large narrative questions that must be answered in the full novel. The partial is successful if the characters can invoke emotion from the readers and create tension at every turn, drawing them into the narrative and keeping them turning pages, wanting to know more. At the end of the partial, the reader should want to know what happens beyond its pages.

For that, I have drafted a three-page synopsis, breaking the full novel into three acts (drawing on the three-act structure seen in plays and other novels) and further dividing each act into individual scenes. This shouldn't be treated as the definitive walkthrough to the whole novel, but rather a guide for the writer, to know where the story will travel and give the author opportunity to insert more interactions and events to deepen the story. The synopsis is also a significant writer's tool in determining the overarching themes of the novel, and where a theme can be added or developed further.

Target Audience & Justification

While writing the thesis, I kept in mind the writing style that I had seen in Warriors and Redwall. The language in these series could best be described as accessible, and possibly more shallow than what some would consider “literature.”

I wanted to aim beyond that, to write at a level that would be acceptable for late teens and adults. Oftentimes I had to field comments about my character choices, how it would feel “silly” to read a story about squirrels. I often referred to it as “my squirrel story,” but the species of the characters does not automatically preclude this work from consideration as a “literary” work. These are still characters in a specific setting, dealing with world-changing problems that ripple out from the main characters and ultimately affect everyone. So what could make this work less “literary,” if the writing were up to snuff and the characters were worth reading, their plights similar to real-world troubles?

The problem may be the label “fantasy,” or the immediate genre label applied to works of this
kind. Students do not normally read or examine this type of fiction in academia; they are focused on literary fiction, writing and characterization that exists out of time and place. The problems presented in literature are universal. Thus, the assumption follows that genre fiction—romance, science fiction, fantasy, western—could not possibly be universal. The characters could not be relatable beyond the scope of their time periods, the writing not eloquent enough to invoke the same types of emotions. Genre fiction is just “entertainment,” while literary fiction is “thought-provoking.”

This manuscript challenges that notion that genre fiction is not of the same quality as literary fiction. The writing is beyond that of the “typical” genre novel, the characters experiencing issues and facing questions that exist outside of their species, time, and place. Questions of friendship versus pride do not only belong in the world of literature; they are prevalent even in genre fiction, and in everyday life. War is not exclusive to literary works; it is a human problem, experienced by many across the vast expanse of time. And these same dilemmas can exist in genre fiction; these problems can receive their own answers, but with new lenses and in surprising ways. Genre fiction does not stifle the ability to answer these questions, but liberates the author to use new types of characters to answer literature’s toughest dilemmas.
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by

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PROLOGUE

THE STORY OF NOCE

For a long, long time, the forest grew wild and unruly; the animals grew that way as well, and battles were not uncommon among fellow species. The owls warred with the hawks, the wolves dueled with the wildcats, and even the squirrels, red and black, dueled endlessly through the warm months. But the winters were long, and unbearably cold; some believed that the long-awaited spring would never come. And one winter, that was exactly what happened. The chill never broke, and the snow never melted; the trees shivered, naked to the terrible storm, and one by one the animals began to perish beneath the mountains of snow. At first, the climbers and fliers survived, but soon even they began to feel winter’s iron claws tear away at their stomachs and hearts. The end of the winter was no longer a thought; they were certain that the land would kill them long before.

But beneath the snows, a new kind of plant began its germination. The sapling grew, and grew, even as the snow and wind continued to swallow the forest. The plant would not give up; though not one creature could see it, that plant was fighting winter…and winning. For however long—not a soul alive or dead knows—winter and spring fought their secret battle in the drifts until, miraculously, the top of the young tree peeked out over the snows, right in the center of the forest. And on that day, winter finally broke.
The tree kept growing as the snow melted away, washing clean everything that the fresh water touched, threatening to even drown the forest. But that great tree sucked up as much of the water as she could. She would not allow winter his last gasp. And in time, the shoots and leaves of the forest began to grow again; the forest returned to life, and over many years, the animals that had once populated its ground returned. Only those who had witnessed the endless winter, and the rebirth of spring, knew the truth; they had been saved, rescued by the grand tree that had grown taller than any other. And they called her Noce, the hardened and sweet 'nut' of their forest, that had withstood nature's fiercest beast...
CHAPTER ONE

JACQUES AND LUMIERE'S EVENING MEETING

The forest at evening was more red than green; the sun struck its long rays across the western end of the forest, and the day-dwelling creatures were heard yawning in their hollows both high and low as they prepared to turn over their ownership to the night creatures. But by the time the edge of the sun had slipped past the edge of the forest, one creature still stirred. Jacques was still awake, searching about the floor of his small patch of forest for any fallen nuts that he could scavenge. He could already smell the change of the leaves; the autumn air always smelled sharper than the swollen summer air. But the trees, although they were ready to disperse with their leafy coats for the slimmer winter fare, were not yet ready to release their nuts for their hungry squirrel parasites. The rumbling that shook Jacques' stomach was evidence enough for that, and he sighed heavily, his body resting on a pile of orange leaves.

"Why must the trees be so stubborn," he muttered weakly, and he coughed, trying to pull in more air for his weakened lungs, and feeling his skin and fur stretch against his ribcage. It had been too long since his last meal, and he was slowly starving now. He had always been the thin, almost emaciated leader among the forest squirrels, but Jacques looked almost sickly now compared to what he once was. With no one to bring him his meals as before, and with little sense of food-gathering in this particular section of forest, he felt more and more on the precipice of death. If only someone would bring him food!
Yet he shook his head slowly; he couldn’t think that way anymore. Besides, his petal-light weight afforded him impressive agility, and as he picked up his feet and raced through the forest, looking for a riper tree, he appeared to all others a black blur in the browns, yellows and oranges of early fall.

Soon, he stopped, paws skidding on the leaves that dotted the ground between tree roots and grass shoots. The forest had started thinning here, and a quick scenting of the air told him immediately what had happened: he’d traveled too far south, and the distinct, smoky smell of the southern canopy overwhelmed him, and the fur on his tail shook wildly.

“Curses,” he said irritably, panting hard as he took in his surroundings. “Nothing looks the same from down here.” He’d never had to forage for food like this; he could have simply sent out a scout to do it for him. And while he thought he had a better understanding of his old forest kingdom than anyone else, somehow he had forgotten exactly where the boundaries lay.

Lumiere would have known, Jacques thought to himself, staring up at the sparse canopy. That was a pang that hurt even worse than the hunger. It had been months—maybe years, Jacques couldn’t remember—since he’d last seen his guardian and friend. But were they really friends now? They’d barely spoken since Jacques took the kingship.

“Lumiere probably hates me now,” Jacques moaned.

“Jacques?” A nearby voice sent Jacques straight up the nearest tree, and only when he was close to the first branch did he stop and look down, scanning the floor for the enemy that had hailed him. But within moments another black squirrel had appeared in his sight, ears twitching with pleasure and white hairs drawing lines under beady eyes and in a large, bushy tail.

“Lumiere!” Jacques cried out, and scuttled down the bark of the tree as quickly as he’d scaled it, approaching the other squirrel and embracing him, their tails twisting together. “It’s been too long.” His grin stretched across an already thin face; maybe Lumiere hadn’t forgotten him after all.

“That it has, Jacques,” Lumiere answered, extracting himself from his friend’s hug. “What are you doing so far south? I usually don’t see you all the way down here.”
Jacques’ face grew hot, and his tail drooped, rustling the leaves around them. “You know me. I’m terrible with directions. I may as well run blind in these forests.”

Lumiere laughed, and picked up one of the leaves that separated them, examining its vein pattern before peering over its edge at his friend. “But don’t you have to safeguard the western forest?” He pulled the leaf apart, and it stripped into four pieces, falling back to the floor as small, crumpled remnants. “Food is scarce this autumn, so it has to be difficult to find enough to feed everyone.”

Jacques turned away, focusing on a faraway tree that appeared to be shivering in the strong sunlight. How could he say it… How could he ever explain to Lumiere what had happened? His head lowered slowly, and his tail seemed to lay flat. Maybe Lumiere would judge him harshly, or maybe he’d see it as poetic justice. Either way, each word that tumbled out of his mouth was like biting into a burr.

“I lost my forest,” he said flatly, and his tail twisted back up as he saw it all over again before his eyes: the mass of squirrels that had invaded his hollow, and the sharp-lined, cold voice of the northern leader as she ordered her subjects into the reaches of the western forests. Jacques been restricted to a small patch just beyond the western forest, where the canopy thinned and turned into open sky and dirt meadows. Perhaps, Jacques reasoned, that was how he’d ended up so close to where Lumiere resided; his friend had always lived in an unclaimed patch of forest, where the canopy of sky was wider than the sparse tree leaves.

And he’d been completely unable to stop it. It didn’t matter why the old black squirrel had wanted his land, his people. It didn’t even matter that no squirrel had ever done something like it before, taking land from another king. She’d done it anyway, and pushed Jacques out. And with his difficulty in finding food, he almost wished she’d just killed him, rather than leaving him to scavenge and starve.

“Lost?” Lumiere repeated, and stared blankly at Jacques. “But…”

Jacques shook his head roughly, and turned back to face the other black squirrel, doing his best to smile, but feeling certain that it looked more like a grimace. “Anyway,” he said quickly, anxiously forcing his tail back to life, “how have the younger ones fared this summer?”
Lumiere grinned, and crossed his arms; he struck an imposing figure on the forest floor, even though he was a good half-head shorter than Jacques. “They’re chipper and bright,” he remarked, tapping his foot on the leaf under his toes. “They talk of how much they want to visit the sacred tree. They can’t get enough of the stories of Noce.”

Jacques laughed, and nodded wisely, eyes closed in thought. “Or of the squirrels themselves, I’d wager. Stories of valor and bravery, defeating wickedness...”


And just as quickly as they had smiled, both squirrels slipped off their grins and turned to look at the skyline. Even from there, they could see Noce, a tree tower among the rest of the forest. While the rest of the trees in the forest had flowered and leaved from winter to spring to summer, Noce had remained, for the first time in all memory, mysteriously bare. Jacques, not being particularly religious about the old tree, had enough superstition in his bones to wonder what could cause such a large, hardy tree to suddenly wither. Lumiere, on the other hand, believed so strongly in the tree that, when spring had struck, and Noce remained encased in winter’s coarse arms, he had momentarily panicked, and the small feast of maple nut and wine berries had been upset in the kitchen, leaving the floor stained for days with berry juice.

“It’s a sign of something much worse,” Lumiere said; neither squirrel dared to exchange glances. “Perhaps your losing the western forest was an inevitability... a mark of much worse events yet to come.”

Jacques turned and looked at his friend, who for all the world looked ages older than any other squirrel the overturned ruler had ever encountered. But he knew better; Lumiere was old, the oldest of the five black squirrels, but he still had many seasons left ahead of him, to care for orphaned grey squirrels and instruct them in the old beliefs and new regimes of the forest. The thought of never being leader again steamed him, but the thought of Lumiere no longer telling stories of Noce—the stories of a dead god-tree taking their place—ran like ice in Jacques’ veins.

“Perhaps,” Jacques admitted, and Lumiere turned to meet his eyes. “But I imagine that, in time, I’ll reclaim my patch of forest, no matter how small it may be.”
Jacques put on his best brave face, but he wasn't convinced, himself. His stomach writhed inside him like a snake at the thought of all that had happened. He was just one squirrel; how could he ever take back two armies worth of land?

Lumiere hesitated, but eventually nodded, reaching out for Jacques' paw. "I am certain you will," he said. "But as the day is aging, I have to finish food collection."

Jacques nodded, and released Lumiere's paw. Without another word or nod, he departed back north, holding his tail to the left to guard his eyes from the falling sun. He knew, somehow, that Lumiere had just put on a show for him, too. That his friend was probably happy that Jacques was no longer king. But the idea of being left out here to die troubled Jacques so deeply that he stamped his foot on the ground, nearly crushing a beetle in the process.

Lumiere was just putting on a show, exactly like the rest of his subjects. No one had come to his rescue during the invasion, and no one followed after him. There were no refugees looking for him, and not even guards hunting him down. The loneliness stung in a way that made his fur tingle. He thought he'd won them over with his words, but it took more than what he had to win their hearts.

It never occurred to him to ask Lumiere for help. Besides, Lumiere had already given them so much. He'd fed them, kept them safe, for years until they'd grown old enough to take over the old kingdoms. How could he ask any more of his old friend?

"I won't let it stay this way," Jacques said aloud to the empty forest. "I have to convince her, somehow, to give me back what is mine." His words seemed to give him the strength he needed, and he tore off for Noce, in the hopes that the giant tree might guide him to the Northern kingdom.
CHAPTER TWO

JACQUES MEETS ALEXANDRE AT NOCE

Of course, the question remained exactly what Jacques would even be able to tell her. He pounced from tree to tree with the sun behind him, allowing its rays to point him due east. He tried to stray north a little, but he had to frequently stop and check his position, look for Noce's branches.

He had a strong feeling he could find something at Noce that the Northern ruler would find tempting. And in any case, it would be a safe place to stay for the evening.

He bounded over another tree, the leaves rustling with the bouncing branch, when a chattering sound reached his ears. He froze, checking both above and below for culprits, before approaching the trunk of the tree with curious eyes.

Past the tree, he found the source of the chatter: Alexandre was at Noce, along with another black squirrel. Jacques couldn't quite tell from this distance, but he could guess it was probably Pierre.

“Been a while since the three of us were so close,” Jacques commented quietly as he listened to the chatter, though it was too far away to discern any notable words. He couldn't even remember the last time any of them had had an amicable conversation. And the chittering below certainly didn't sound friendly.

Soon enough, Pierre left for the southern forests and Jacques climbed down, slowly, watching Alexandre's movements.
“Alex!”

Predictably, Alexandre shot straight up into the air, but he had enough religious sense not to rush up Noce. He turned and met Jacques’ eyes, but his mood did not change.

“Good grief, Jacques, you nearly stopped my heart!”

“It’d take a lot more than a little scare to stop you,” Jacques laughed as he approached. Finally, Alexandre smiled, and gave Jacques a friendly paw-squeeze. “What are you doing out here?”

“Looking at Noce,” he replied, his eyes moving up to the base of the tree. “What has become of her, Jacques?”

“I don’t know, Alex,” Jacques admitted. “Maybe it’s just time for the tree to die.”

“Noce doesn’t die,” Alexandre said, in short, clipped tones. “She’s a god, not just a tree, you know.”

“Right,” Jacques said, though his eyes rolled. “A god-tree. I remember the teachings.”

“Then you’d know better than to roll your eyes at her!” Alexandre snapped. Jacques just laughed a little to himself, and patted Alexandre reassuringly on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, old friend,” Jacques said. “I mean no disrespect to our goddess.”

Alexandre just shrugged off his paw and turned fully to face Noce. The sadness that filled his eyes seemed overwhelming; Jacques thought the weight of it might just crush him.

“What do we do, Jacques?” Alexandre whispered as the sun slipped out of sight at last.

Jacques just shrugged in the twilight. “I don’t know.”

Alexandre turned to look at him. “Pierre threatened me, you know.”

“He what?” Jacques faced him too, eyes ballooning in size. “But Pierre... we grew up with him! Why would he--”

“He’s different, Jacques,” Alexandre said simply. “We always knew that, though. He never cared about Noce. Just liked to run off to the rocks and play.”

“Yeah, well, I liked to climb trees and chase birds,” Jacques said, attempting a laugh. Alexandre’s expression hardened, though, and Jacques’s laughter wilted away.
“There’s something...wrong with him,” Alexandre said after a pause. “He had these weird eyes, Jacques, eyes like...like he’d just killed something. Eyes like an owl.”

“A squirrel with owl eyes?” Jacques couldn’t help but giggle a little at the notion. “Maybe things have been going badly for him in the South. We’re all jealous of your successes in the East, anyway.”

“I’m not particularly sure why.” It was Alexandre’s turn to chuckle. “It just takes some common sense and proper treatment. It’s hardly my success if you all fail so painfully at being decent leaders.”

“Oh, right in the gut,” Jacques said, miming a punch to his stomach.

“You shouldn’t be laughing,” Alexandre said. “You don’t even have a kingdom anymore.”

“That’s none of your business, Alex.” Now the laughter really and truly was gone.

“Isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t.” A small growl escaped Jacques, and his feet seemed to spread apart of their own accord. He wanted to be tough here.

“Well, tell me, Jacques,” Alexandre said, stepping closer. “Why is it that you have no kingdom, no throne, no followers? Why is it that you’re now reduced to scavenging for food like that decrepit friend of yours?”

“Don’t talk about Lumiere that way,” Jacques barked. But his confidence was leaking out of him.

“All I’m saying is that there’s a reason you lost your kingdom,” Alexandre shrugged. “You’re not a particularly good leader. Not even when we were kids.”

“I was good enough to lead as long as I did, wasn’t I?” Jacques said, trying his best to puff himself up, but he already felt too deflated.

“I guess,” Alexandre shrugged again. “Your subjects hated you, though. You know that, right?”

“Aren’t you even glad I’m still alive?” Desperation eked through the last word; Jacques hoped to catch Alexandre’s eye, but he refused to meet the deposed king’s gaze. Was this how friendship was supposed to be?

Maybe out of pity, Alexandre slowly nodded. Jacques wondered what this conversation would have been like were it he who had pushed Jacques out.
“Of course I’m glad you’re alive,” Alexandre said. “We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“Yeah, a truly spectacular friend you are,” Jacques muttered.

Alexandre laughed. “I’m not one to sugarcoat things. You know that.”

“Yeah well, the least you could do is offer support!”

“That’s kind of what I need right now. Regarding Pierre,” Alexandre shook his head. “What do I do about him?”

“Ignore him,” Jacques said simply. “Like always.”

“But...” Alexandre looked uncertain, and again Jacques placed a paw on his shoulder.

“It will be just fine, Alex. You’ll see.” Jacques squeezed, and the reassurance seemed to lighten both of their moods. At least if one of them had to be a decent friend, Jacques would be that.

“I certainly hope so,” Alexandre said. “I should be returning home.”

Jacques nodded, knowing that he had no home to return to himself. He released Alexandre and gave him a quick nod. He sorely hoped that his pain wasn't showing through. Maybe Alexandre could invite him home? “Sure, right. Your subjects will be missing you.”

“One good thing about not being a king, right?” Alexandre laughed. “No one worries about you. You can do as you please!”

“I suppose,” Jacques said, his face falling. So much for that hope, he thought.

“Good night, then, Jacques,” Alexandre said, bounding off toward the rising moon. Jacques gave him a quick wave before turning his eyes southward.

Jacques had never liked the feeling of eyes on his back. It made him feel a little queasy, overly anxious, knowing that someone else was watching. And there was only one squirrel who could do that while hiding. It were as though his paws were already wrapped around Jacques' neck, and it made him unbearably uncomfortable.

“You can come out now,” he shouted. A loud rustling came from a nearby tree, and Pierre dropped down into the clearing, his eyes glittering.

“How long were you listening, anyway?” Jacques asked, though he already expected the answer
Pierre would give.

“As long as you two were jabbering,” Pierre answered. “You shouldn't be out here, Jacques.”

“This is no-man's-land,” Jacques said. “I have every right to be here.”

“You gave up all your rights when you let that—that—”

“Oh please, Pierre,” Jacques said, rolling his eyes. “Don't tell me the Northern queen has you stuttering like a newborn.”

Pierre's paw seemed to move at lightning speed as he slapped Jacques to the ground.

“Watch your tongue, Jacques,” he hissed. “Always had a loose tongue. You'd best keep it safe in that oversized mouth of yours unless you want me to tear it out.”

Jacques noticed, for the first time, the gleam of teeth around Pierre's neck. Some of them were far too large for normal creatures, and he wondered where Pierre could find such bizarre treasures.

He'd been drawn to the same types of treasures when he was little, too. Pierre loved playing among the rocks and dark places, and he'd often come back with the remains of some animal in his paws. Lumiere often threw them away without a second thought, but Jacques had been intrigued by their strange shape. Now, though, they just leered at him, daring him to comment.

“Got it?”

Jacques stood back up, wiping dirt off his face. “Yeah, got it.”

“Good.” Pierre strode past Jacques, up to Noce, and placed a paw on her. “At least you're not as blind to the stories as Alex. You always had that...”

“Skepticism?” Jacques offered.

“You knew better,” Pierre said. “Knew better than to think some god-forsaken tree was actually a goddess.”

“Maybe she is,” Jacques shrugged. “But it doesn't matter now, does it?”

Pierre stared at Jacques, though it felt as if he were staring straight into his heart. “It matters more than ever, Jacques.” He then spat upon the tree, and gave a small wave. “I'll leave you to finding yourself a nice, dead tree to sleep in.” Moments later, he'd vanished into the darkness.
Jacques stood for a while, listening to the rustling sounds dissipate with distance. He could still feel the uncomfortable eyes on him, watching him like an owl poised to strike. It was as though the Pierre he'd known had vanished, leaving behind this creepy, violent creature whose eyes could follow him anywhere.

"Loud thing," Jacques commented before turning back toward his original path. Or, at least, what he thought was the right path.
Chapter Three

Jacques Encounters the Nocturnal Rulers

“Please tell me I’m not lost,” Jacques huffed as he climbed up yet another tree.

It had been some hours since nightfall; he’d lost count of how many, and frankly it didn’t matter to him. Night was night, and being a small daytime rodent meant that he was now in very serious danger. On the forest floor, he ran the risk of encountering badgers, who could tear him to pieces in moments with their large jowls. He wanted nothing to do with those giant creatures, but the trees were hardly better cover; the owls in the trees had keen eyes, and silent wings, and could snatch him off a tree in the blink of an eye.

They very notion sent a sick feeling through Jacques’ gut, but he clung onto his current branch despite the nauseous worries. From this newest perch, Noce looked quite a bit closer than she had previously, and the forest was a little more dense and leafy here than his last climbing adventure. But despite this assessment, he had no idea on which side of the forest he’d ended up. Whose territory might he have wandered into unknowingly? None of the trees looked familiar at this time of night; for the most part it just appeared to Jacques as a blob of leafy masses, suspended in midair. And as misfortune would have it, the moon was directly overhead, pointing straight down at the forest.

“Not that I even know which way the moon goes,” he said bitterly as he scrambled farther out on the branch. “Nothing makes sense at night.” The branch swayed gently under the squirrel’s weight as he
pushed farther out, where the wood began to thin dangerously. But Jacques wasn’t worried; yet another advantage of being lightweight was the ability to go where his fellow squirrels could not.

No, the only thing that worried him at the moment was getting truly and impossibly lost. He’d always had servants to run errands for him, gather food for him; Jacques had an easy life by comparison to his subjects. He’d never needed to navigate, to find food; all those lessons Lumiere had taught him had now turned to cobwebs and ash in his head. But rather than feel disappointed in himself, he was met with a burst of anger, rage at the injustice of the Queen’s capture of his forest. What right did she have to his land?

“This wouldn’t be happening right now if I had my forest back!” he shouted suddenly, and the branch, now quite spindly, shook fiercely as the black squirrel prepared himself for a jump to a new branch in an adjacent tree. “Then I wouldn’t have to look for all my own food, or have to navigate trees, or—“

The snapping sound cut off Jacques’ rant as he immediately leapt away from the falling branch; by chance he managed to latch onto the branch he was aiming for, as the other tumbled to the forest floor with a loud crash. He scrambled, scraping against the bark, to get onto the branch, fearful that this branch, too, might give under his weight. But it held, and he shifted himself onto the top of the branch, looking down at the floor where the branch had landed.

“Quite a drop.”

Jacques shot backwards toward the trunk of the tree immediately upon hearing the voice, kicking up bits of bark as he ran, and scrambled around to the other side before poking his head back out in the direction of the unwelcome sound.

He cursed silently at the owl that was now sitting on a branch just below him, stretching its wings as it gazed up at Jacques with intent brown eyes. Jacques stared back with his own beady black eyes, which had narrowed considerably.

“Thought you’d eat me, didn’t you?” the black squirrel snorted, readjusting his grip as he spoke. “Well not me! I’m too thin. No meat. You’ll be spitting up pellets for days.”
The owl chuckled, a low, mute screechy sound that violated Jacques’ eardrums like nothing else. “Certainly not,” the owl said, ruffling its feathers to finish its stretch. “But how can you understand me?”

He hadn’t expected this question. It was true that most species couldn’t communicate directly, but some early squirrels had taken interest in learning the languages of other creatures, especially the predators, and passed on the knowledge through time. At least that’s what the legends had said. Jacques could speak it from birth, and had tapped its resources for good reason: the owls could see everything. They were nature’s perfect spies, and a gold mine of information to the usurped leader.

“I would have thought I’d be a legend in your hollows,” Jacques laughed; he was trying his best to forget the fact—the same fact he always had to forget—that he was talking to a creature that could kill him in a heartbeat and not blink. His knocking knees weren’t helping. It was easy with small owls, but not large ones like this.

Again the owl chuckled. “You misunderstand, squirrel,” he boomed, and shifted from claw to claw. “I meant a barrier of species. How could you ever understand my motives.” He paused, and took a quick scan of the forest floor. “But that is not why I am here, Jacques. Yes, I know your name,” he added, when Jacques visibly twitched. “As you said, you are well-known in our circles. And as I understand it, you have a ravenous appetite for information.”

It seemed as though the owl wasn’t going to eat him after all. Jacques sighed, and crawled down to the branch where the owl perched, keeping very close to the base of the tree in case he needed a quick getaway.

“Information is more valuable than food,” Jacques quipped, and allowed himself a small smile. “But what information could you have for me?”

“It depends on what you’re offering,” the owl remarked, and picked off a piece of down from his body. “As we hear it, you aren’t in a position to offer us anything any longer. Or do you doubt us?”

Jacques shook his head instantly; the last thing he needed was to burn the branches between him and the owls. “I never doubt your wisdom,” he reassured the owl. “You’re right. I don’t have anything to offer except my word and my honor.”
The owl pointedly stared at him, and Jacques backed up before he could stop himself. Instinct, he decided, was greater than reason, but he was able to prevent himself from scurrying away. A long silence passed between them, eyes locked, but the owl broke the silence with the scraping of talons against the tree bark.

“That is all we may have for now, then,” he conceded. “You have never failed us before, and at present you are who we may turn to. I have plenty to tell you, rest assured. But in exchange, you must cease using our hollows, and when you come to power again, none of your subjects may use our hollows either. Other birds, we care little for, but there will be no more nesting in our creations.”

Jacques opened his mouth to argue, but snapped it shut immediately. It wasn’t a difficult request; owl hollows were usually very high up in the trees, and there were plenty of other hollows farther down that he could make good use of. Besides, it wouldn’t be so impossible to remove an old nest, create the appearance of another bird’s hollow. All in all, it was an excellent deal.

“I can agree to that,” he answered, and the owl nodded his approval.

“Very well,” the owl replied. “Since you were overthrown, the violence at the southwestern corners has ceased almost entirely. But it seems that Pierre has a new target. If he were to gain control of the eastern lands—“

“Wait,” Jacques interrupted, avoiding the owl’s sharp stare. “That must be why—”

The owl hissed. “Do not interrupt me again. Information, as you say, is more valuable than food. It ought to be more valuable than your own musings.”

Jacques nodded slowly, but still he couldn’t shake the thoughts that were forming.

“Good. Now, if Pierre were to gain control of the east, that would leave two leaders. But the northern leader has never been about conquest; her aim is discipline. Perhaps that was why you were so unceremoniously forced out.” The owl squawked a small laugh, ignoring the glare Jacques gave him. “Regardless, her aim is far different from Pierre’s. We cannot be certain, but we believe his goal is just as I said: conquest. If he pursues his goal in its entirety, it will lead to a full-scale war.”

The owl stretched his wings once more, shifting about again as though restless. “That is our
position, and our information.”

“We already deal with internal fighting among the grey squirrels,” Jacques said after a moment. “With their focus directed inward, it’s a wonder they haven’t simply banded together and removed us from power. There are only five of us, after all.”

The owl nodded once, and Jacques nodded in turn. Hearing him say it aloud was so strange, but it was true; only after the four leaders had been established, and the class system implemented, had the murders of black squirrels ceased.

“I’ve never cared for direct offense; it’s bloody, and disorganized. How is it that both the north and the south have the ability to mobilize these squirrels, squirrels who despise each other, against a common enemy?”

“It may be that they see opposing leaders as obstacles to their own freedom and leadership,” the owl offered, but shrugged his wings as an additional response. “Squirrel government makes little sense to any sensible creature.”

Jacques disregarded the jibe; he didn’t need more of the owl’s sharp tongue. “Well, regardless of that, if Pierre does succeed, then where does that leave Alexandre? An outcast like me? Where would that leave me?”

“I cannot say,” the owl answered.

Jacques, at least, had an idea, but thinking of it was terrible in its own right. Jacques knew Pierre; there was no way he’d be merciful. If he’d really threatened Alexandre’s life, it was a sure bet that he’d follow through on that threat.

“Maybe,” Jacques suggested, “we just need to hide Alex. Until this blows over. It...has to just blow over, right?” He could practically taste the lie on this tongue.

“The solution to your problem is none of our concern,” the owl commented, and raised his wings. “As I said, I do not understand squirrel diplomacy. But I do hope you regain your power soon, Jacques. It is somehow comforting to know there is at least one educated squirrel among you.” With that, he took off into the sky, flying straight at the setting moon.
“Yeah, thanks,” Jacques said, then kicked the branch in frustration. “Thanks for nothing. Your so-called all-seeing eyes seem to be failing you lately.” He climbed farther up his new tree until, after some time, his head poked out of the top level of leaves to look for the moon again. It was directly behind him, setting slowly in the pitch-black.

He remembered suddenly that the moon and the sun travel the same way; he’d been traveling in the wrong direction. He cursed quietly before slipping back below the branches and came to a stop on one that looked particularly sturdy.

Why had Pierre confronted Alexandre? The eastern leader had the most land of any of them, but it had never been a concern to any of the other black squirrels; Alexandre had never had a taste for fighting. That didn’t stop his subjects, however, from quarreling amongst themselves, and he had the most squirrels of any of them to look after. Perhaps that was the goal, after all? If Pierre could turn Alexandre’s subjects against him, he could double the size of his own army, and point it straight north.

“But why go to Alexandre?” Jacques found himself asking aloud. It made no sense. The only other reason Pierre might go straight to him would be something about Noce…and surely Alexandre had seen the damage as well. Pierre might have cared nothing for Noce, but Alexandre believed very strongly in the guardian tree, almost as much as Lumiere. In some ways, Jacques thought, Alexandre was worse; he’d taken it almost to a fanatical level, placing every last decision and outcome in his faith that Noce would point to the answer. That, Jacques knew, was why Pierre hated Alexandre so much, apart from all of the eastern leader’s fancy words.

“He hates Alexandre,” Jacques repeated aloud, and the answer came to him like a gust of wind. “Who better than to crush Alexandre’s faith and hope? And Pierre would do it with his bare paws.” He raced down the tree and pointed himself north. He had forgotten all desire to find his way home, as a new plan grew wildly in his brain.

Pierre didn’t want to take Alexandre’s land, or people. He wanted Alexandre himself. And with that one faithful squirrel he could kill the faith of all animals who ever believed in Noce, and turn their hearts to him. Pierre would become the hero, and Alexandre his first victim.
CHAPTER FOUR

A SUMMONS TO THE NORTH

Jacques picked away idly at the nut he held close to his body, balancing himself carefully on the midsection of a branch. With each bite he considered the previous night and what the owl had told him. He was glad, he supposed, that the owls had given their word to support him, but he couldn't help but wonder what help they could even be for him. They were excellent scouts for information, it was true, but that came at a price. They knew so much...too much, in fact. There was no telling what they would do with that information. It wasn't as though they couldn't communicate with other squirrels; it was only Jacques who knew the workings of owlspeak, but owls could speak squirrel as well as any other language.

Every language except snake, of course. The squirrels had been the carriers of knowledge between the snakes and owls for as long as Noce had been around, but the art was dying out. Jacques was the last of the squirrels who could speak with the owls, and no one could be certain if any squirrel could speak with snakes anymore. It seemed like such a long time since anyone had spoken to the snakes; most squirrels ran from them, deferred to their desire to consume squirrels with abandon. Why speak to a snake? Jacques asked himself, and shook his head.
Maybe there was such a squirrel out there, but Jacques had never met him. He'd spent too much of his life wrapped up inside his hollow, sending others to the outside. What he knew best was his hollow, and the forest was almost like an alien world to him, the movements of the sun and moon puzzling even with his limited navigational techniques.

He felt so small when he thought of Pierre and Alexandre's abilities, how they had paid attention to Lumiere's lessons while Jacques had ignored them, thinking instead of the time he would inherit that forest from an aging old black squirrel whose name he'd forgotten. Sure, Jacques had been a king...but what had he learned during his reign? What skills did he still retain from his childhood? The more he thought about it, the weaker and dumber he felt.

And in the winter it would be far worse; his small frame, with so little insulating fat, would shiver in the open winter air. He had no one left to care for him in those cold months, and the snow that was sure to come would wipe out any ability he'd have to find food. His old friends? They'd be perfectly safe and secure. But Jacques would be alone.

He bit into the nut, grateful that autumn hadn't yet abandoned him to the starving winter. And yet, he noticed, the weather was unseasonably warm today. The nights were cool, it was true, but today felt almost like a breath of summer. He stared up, through the trees, and saw clouds gathering fiercely. They seemed to him like a mass of grey squirrels, all gathering up and ready to smash into the forest, taking everything with them. Jacques sighed; it was a wonder that it hadn't already happened. But those clouds did mean one thing: rain. And he didn't fancy being stuck out in it. He hurried away at his nut, thinking back on his last conversation with the owls, when from below he heard a knocking sound.

"You are Jacques, correct?" called up a voice. Jacques looked down to see a grey squirrel with a bone-spear in one paw. His subjects had never carried weapons, but he knew whose did: the Northern leader's. He stared down this armed fellow, and shrugged mightily.
"That depends on who's asking," he called back, leaning against the trunk of the tree. "And how he plans on asking." He eyed the bone-spear meaningfully, knowing that the squirrel probably wouldn't catch the tone of his voice.

Sure enough, the nuance was lost. The grey squirrel knocked against the tree again, and raised up the spear, pointing it straight at Jacques. "Not he, you idiot. She," the squirrel responded. "Unless you've already forgotten what Her Highness managed to do?"

Jacques shrugged. "You mean stealing my kingdom? Oh, how could I ever forget." He chuckled to himself, though the pain of losing his kingdom still stung deep down.

This response was met with a spear that grazed Jacques' cheek and stuck to the branch above his head. A trickle of blood fell down the side of his face, and he looked up at the spear thoughtfully. Where on earth did she get those bones, anyway? They looked almost like cat teeth, and suddenly he wondered if it were common practice for soldiers to be trained by killing wildcats. He shrugged it off with the guess that they were probably squirrel bones; it was nothing for the Queen, he imagined, to cannibalize her dead troops for their spoils.

It reminded him of Pierre, and he shivered a little as he thought of the terrible things that squirrel had done as a child. Who knew what he was up to now.

But while he had been thinking, the opposing squirrel had climbed up the backside of the tree and was now standing right in front of Jacques. With one paw, he pulled down the spear, and pointed it right at the black squirrel. Jacques eyed him closely, and then realized, with a small gasp, that this happened to be one of his old subjects. So she was sending them on errands like this, was she?

"Yeah, you recognize me, don't you," the grey squirrel said, moving the spear closer to Jacques' body. "The queen treats us better than you ever did, you know."
"I am certain she does," Jacques answered in monotone. He lifted one paw and placed it on top of the bone that formed the end of the spear. "Though I daresay I didn't need weapons to keep you all in line. You were pleasant as could be."

The grey squirrel marveled for a moment, but then shoved the spear closer. "We were duped," he said shortly. "And now you're gonna pay for running off on us. She wants an audience with you. And you have no other choice but to come with me."

Jacques laughed, but inside his stomach turned over. That nut was making an awful lot of noise now inside his body. What on earth did the Queen want with him? He'd already lost his land; did she plan on killing him, on making sure he could never take back what was his?

Of course, he fully intended to reclaim that land, but that was another matter entirely. And maybe, yes...maybe an audience with her would give him an opportunity to weasel his way in, and get that land back. After all, it was a few days to travel to her hollow, and that would be plenty of time to formulate a plan.

"Lead the way, maestro," he said finally, and the grey squirrel stared at him, perplexed by how easily he'd given in. He moved past Jacques and tossed the spear to the ground, where it stuck resolutely in the dirt. The two of them descended the tree and, once the spear had been reclaimed, began the march to the Northern kingdom.

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Some hours later, Jacques was finally hit with the realization that he was actually facing the Northern queen head-on, and the nerves of doing such a thing brought a shiver to his whole body. Last time, he'd simply ran away before she could ever cause him any physical damage. But the price he'd paid was an easy deposition. He'd lost everything to keep himself alive. Now, that deal didn't look so great.

What if she just killed him, the same way that squirrels in olden times had died? The stories of squirrel wars were vicious and blood-strewn, with both males and females leaving the children behind to
fend for themselves. Many of these children, Jacques knew, became orphans, not all that different from the ones Lumiere cared for now. Not all that different from how Jacques, Alexandre, and Pierre had been brought up, actually. But in their time, there had only been a few grey "orphans," certainly nothing like Lumiere had described to him.

So then where were these orphans coming from? The war had happened when Lumiere was in his prime, and when Jacques was just a young squirrel, fresh out of Lumiere's care. It was at least five years his senior, and yet orphans were still filling Lumiere's hollow. What had happened to their parents?

"Move it along!" the guard shouted, several yards ahead of Jacques now. He rushed to catch up, and they carried on their path. But the black squirrel was still lost in his own thoughts, walking them in circles as he often did in forests. He was sort of thankful that the guard had to escort him; it was doubtful he could have ever found his way through the landscape. That's what he'd had servants, couriers, messengers for; he never had a need to memorize forest layouts. He knew, roughly, which way east and south and north were, but if he managed to lose track of the way he was traveling, he was doomed, unable to gather his bearings.

It had gotten worse since the dethroning. With no forest to call his own, he wandered aimlessly between the borders, looking for food wherever he went, and without a care as to where he really was. That was how he'd managed to be found so easily before; he hadn't realized just how far he'd traveled until Lumiere appeared before him. In fact, he wasn't even that sure of where he was now.

"Where are we, anyway?" he said aloud, scratching his chest with one paw.

The guard heaved a sigh, but did not turn around. "Southern forest still. A little ways before we cross over into the east. Not a one day journey; we'll have to stop once."

He'd ended up in Pierre's territory? Jacques thought he might faint from the notion. Somehow, he'd been wandering around the southern forest without alerting the attention of any other squirrel. What
on earth was Pierre doing, anyway? What could convince him to spare his border guards and leave himself so defenseless?

No, that was the wrong word; he shook his head, and looked up at the canopy and the dark grey storm clouds beyond. Pierre was anything but defenseless. The queen could certainly give him a run for his money, but the southern leader had a strength that Jacques did not possess. And it was a strength that frightened him.

"Where are we stopping?" Jacques then asked, thinking of the trouble that could be caused if they stopped in Alexandre's territory.

"Eastern forest, close to the crossing," the guard huffed.

Jacques nodded; of course, that was obvious. The land around Noce had been designated as no-man's-land, a place where any squirrel could travel. It had always been marked by the way Noce's fruit fell—a bizarre pattern that composed a ring—and the resulting circle meant that squirrels from all sides could meet when necessary. Not that any sort of meeting had taken place in a long while; the black squirrels weren't the only ones losing faith in the old ways.

Save for Lumiere, of course, but he was a bit of a religious nut. Jacques smiled to himself, thinking about the lectures Lumiere used to give on Noce's importance. They had once been hot topics for the squirrels he cared for. But in recent times, stories of war were the flavor. No one wanted to hear about an old, decrepit tree, and especially not one that hadn't even bothered to flower for the spring and leaf for the summer.

But, Jacques supposed, that was how fate worked: things happened as they were meant to happen. At that moment, a shadow fell over him, and he glanced up at a small owl that was now making circles over him. Well, only relatively small; they were all gargantuan to a creature as small as Jacques.
"Ahoy, up there!" Jacques called. The guard turned around, faced scrunched up, but when his eyes followed from Jacques up to the owl, he panicked, and darted up the nearest tree. Jacques, only mildly aware of the guard, chuckled at his cowardice. "Come on down, then!"

The owl lazily drifted down and settled on the dirt, stretching its wings before tucking them away. It was amazing the difference in size a pair of wings could make.

"We have some news for you," the owl said, in clipped tones. Jacques nodded, then noticed the owl seemed to be staring elsewhere: not at him, or at the guard, but at the forest floor, yards away. "Or, should we say, a rumor."

"What better dealings than rumors and myths?" Jacques joked, crossing his arms. "So, what is this rumor heard on the beaks of owls?"

"Not on our beaks," the owl said, and now it turned its glassy eyes on Jacques. "On tongues."

Jacques stared back, puzzled. A squirrel rumor? As if reading his mind, the owl shook its mighty head, and stared hard at the black squirrel. He wracked his brain, trying to think of something else that might carry speech, some other creature with a tongue...

And then it came to him, and his eyes grew wide. "The snakes?" he whispered, and the owl nodded imperceptibly. "But...

"It is but a rumor," the owl said quickly, spreading its wings. "However, I would take caution. We have never had discourse with reptiles, and the art has been long lost to other creatures, including your own." The owl paused to stretch out its wings once more. "Or so we thought. It is best advised that you avoid contact with them, lest the rumors of the end of snake-tongue turn out to be false." With that, the owl took flight, and aimed its way south. Jacques watched its path for some time, feeling his stomach sink into the lower recesses of his body.

A squirrel who knew snake-tongue...an art that Lumiere had failed to learn as a child, an art that no squirrel alive possessed. Except, it seemed, for one. Jacques knew why the owls were so concerned
about this turn of events; the owls had their own reasons for wanting the snakes kept out of the squirrels' war.

They competed for prey. There had long been stories of owls and snakes tearing each other apart in the pursuit of prey, and legend had foretold of a squirrel that could speak owl-beak and snake-tongue, and through his gifts brought peace to all animals. That was just one version, though; there were plenty of others, including some that Lumiere refused to speak of.

Either way, it wouldn't be good for any of them to have the snakes nipping at their heels. Jacques looked up at the tree that the guard had scaled, and was glad to see him working his way back to the ground.

"Just a friend," Jacques reassured him, and the guard gave him a very nasty look. "Shall we?"
CHAPTER FIVE

A NOT-FORGOTTEN BETRAYAL

There was only so long they could carry on in silence, Jacques thought to himself after several hours of walking across dead leaves. The guard had not uttered a peep since the owl's visit, and Jacques had given up hope of conversation much earlier. Thus the leaves under their feet were the only ones making good conversation at the moment, as well as the rumblings in the sky. The canopy overhead was thinning out; Jacques could guess that they were nearing Noce now, her canopy not having graced the forest in over a year. In the past, though, it seemed to meld into the rest of the trees, but the leaves seemed of a different sort. They were more blue in color, as though they captured the sky in their image and projected it onto the ground. Truly mysterious.

Now, of course, the clouds were better canopy, and far away they were spilling rain onto the edge of the western forest.

Where exactly did Noce come from, Jacques began to wonder as he eyed the falling rain in the distance. It had been taken for granted that this god-tree had been plopped right down in their forest. Sure, he knew the legends of old, the tale of the tree that grew up out of the great snow. But why? Why here,
and why then? And, of course, now that Noce was dying...why now? What was the purpose behind all of it?

The questions made his head spin a little, so he coughed, hoping that the guard might do something of interest. To his dismay, the guard didn't even acknowledge the interruption. He merely stopped at the edge of one of Noce's great roots, looking up at the empty sky himself.

"Looks like rain," the guard noted. Had he never bothered to look up? Jacques ignored him and stepped around the roots to the base of the tree. Jacques leaned against the trunk and felt a calming sensation run over his body, as though the wood were massaging his back. It wasn't magic, or superstition; it was just nostalgia. The memory of times long past, when Jacques and Pierre and Alexandre had all been young, reckless, and curious. How Lumiere had put up with him, he didn't know.

At least the guard didn't say anything about it; he had rested himself resolutely on the edge of the clearing--a clearing, Jacques noted, that should not have been--and was pointing his spear at Jacques. It was a fair bet that Jacques could outrun any thrown spear, but there wasn't any need to take that chance. He was just fine with the plan as it was going, and if he behaved himself, it would only serve him better in the long run.

And yet he knew the guard probably wasn't actually trying to stop him from fleeing.

"Does she treat you alright?" Jacques asked. The guard's nose twitched, as a primer for a response. He swung the spear around gently, in small circles.

"'Bout as well as you did," the guard admitted.

"How would that be, eh?"

"We're like all the other grey squirrels. Vermin, not worth the skin on our backs, not worth the skin on yours." The grey squirrel spat on the ground before him. "S'what you taught us, right?"

Jacques did not reply, but stared up at the barren branches of the tree. Had he really called them vermin? He didn't seem to remember that.
"You sure as nutshells did," the guard said, as though he could read the black squirrel's mind. "Told the lot of us we weren't worth the effort to pick food. But I guess it's throwaway words for throwaway squirrels, right?"

That got his attention. He dropped his gaze to the guard and scowled. "You threw me away too, didn't you? Didn't bother to come after me, did you? So who threw whom away, hm?"

"You ran away! YOU left US, so that the Queen could take over!"

"And you didn't even stop her, did you?" Jacques stood now, the distant sound of rain at his back. "Just let it happen. Probably didn't even put up a fight, just let her march right on in and--"

A rock smacked into the wood next to Jacques' face. The guard's expression had darkened, and his eyes seemed to glitter.

"You think we let this happen?" he hissed. Jacques watched him carefully—or rather, he watched the spear in his hand very carefully. "You think--you think we WANTED this?"

Jacques nodded slowly. The guard leapt to his feet and rushed the black squirrel, but Jacques knew better. He scaled Noce, up to her first level of branches, and stared down at the guard whose expression had turned to one of horror.

Of course, of course. No one would ever dare to touch Noce, not like that. It had only been him. Alexandre, Pierre, and himself. They gave mortality to Noce's godhood.

"I think you did."

The response was barely a whisper, escaping Jacques's mouth as though he had just sighed. Now, at least, he felt weary, weary of traveling, yes, but also weary of the struggle which he had become part of. He was tired of that struggle, tired of how things were being upheaved, and now more than ever he wished he could just rest and return things to normal.

"I think you let it happen!" Jacques called louder, descending the tree paw by paw. "You grew tired of a king who let you laze about, a king who put no demands on you. You wanted glory, power...all
those things denied to you in your comfortable lives! And she could give them all to you.” He dropped
the rest of the distance and stood again, facing the guard.

The guard stared him down, searching for a response, before simply jabbing the spear into
Jacques’ chest. It wasn’t hard enough to stab through, but it was painful enough that Jacques gasped a
little.

The guard snorted loudly. “You’re a fool, then,” he barked, and nudged the end of the spear into
Jacques’ chest. "And a traitor besides. If I had my way, I would--"

"Well you don’t," Jacques said matter-of-factly, despite the fact that the spear really was digging
into his chest and he could feel the warmth that indicated both pain and running blood. "And if you try to
have your way anymore, you’ll be carrying me back to your Queen rather than escorting me."

That shut the guard right up, and he withdrew his spear. Jacques immediately tended to the gash
on his chest, the red of his blood shimmering on his fur. It was almost comical, he thought, as he muddled
about to look for something to stop the bleeding. A spiderweb would’ve been useful at the moment, but in
the meanwhile he picked up a leaf and held that to the wound. It was comical, yes, that his blood could
shine like that on his fur. He didn't even know blood could shine like that; most blood had been muddied
by dirt and grime. But pure blood like this, straight from the wound? It had a strange brilliance to it, as
though its very existence were a miracle.

At last, around the roots of Noce, he found a spiderweb, and hastily scrambled it up in his paw.
The owner of the web crawled out of a hole and immediately began spinning her web again, and Jacques
gave her a polite nod, though he was only supposing that spider was a she.

"Thanks for...uh, saving my life," he muttered to the spider as he mashed the web up to the
wound. He placed pressure with both paws, feeling a bit of blood seep through. But he was overall much
more confident about his chances now, and he removed his paws. The web held fast, and though the pain
was still there, it had receded to little more than a distant ache.
He walked, slowly, back to the guard, who had returned to his squatting place, the spear now laying on the ground instead of poised for attack. The guard was staring at his feet; no doubt, Jacques thought to himself, wondering whether or not it would be worth the punishment to do away with him right now. Jacques wondered the same thing himself, and yet--

"You wouldn't hurt a fly," the guard said, just loud enough for Jacques to hear. Jacques took a seat against Noce, breathing a little easier as the blood clotted under the web.

"What d'you mean by that?" Jacques asked, leaning one paw against his leg. The rain, he noticed idly, was drawing closer.

"You never hurt a one of us," the guard continued. "Whenever there was ill deeds to be doin', you sent someone else. Never did anything yourself. Thought you might be squeamish or somethin', all things considered."

Jacques had no reply. His tail undulated behind him, and he occasionally let it tap the tree behind him. He hadn't lost much blood, but he figured it would be good practice to be aware of his surroundings after being wounded. Wouldn't do to lose his bearings.

"Maybe you're just weak," the guard said after a while. "Or squeamish, like I said. Or maybe you had some sorta...bad event, or whatever. Either way, you're not a fighter."

"That's true," Jacques said, thinking back to his time as king. He had succeeded his father's throne without fuss or fluff, and it was just assumed that everyone would swear allegiance to him. But if this one guard were any indication, that certainly hadn't happened.

"Then what ARE you, I wonder," the guard said, and now he looked up at Jacques. "What kind of squirrel are you, if you aren't a fighter?"

Again, Jacques had no reply. He didn't want to think of what kind of squirrel that made him; he was just glad that he wasn't, as the guard said, "a fighter." He'd never been one, not as long as he could remember. Pierre could push him around with zero effort, and even Alexandre knew that he could best
Jacques without too much trouble. Jacques had just never had Pierre’s physical strength or Alexandre’s moxie to hold his ground. He didn’t even have the Queen’s resilience, if the cut on his chest were any indication.

Maybe that was why he’d honed his language skills. Maybe, if he couldn’t beat them with his teeth and claws and fist, he could beat them with words. Words could move a thousand where a fist could move only one.

"I guess I’m just a bard," Jacques laughed to himself. "A wordsmith, making a something out of the nothing."

"Sounds more like a snake to me," the guard muttered, silencing Jacques once more. "Snakes, all their fancy talkin’, and all for what? To...to sway ya, to get ya over to their side. Awful snake-like behavior, to do nothing but talk."

Jacques’ tail stopped, and he sighed deeply. The pain was still there, but now it was joined by another pain, a pain that seemed to resonate from his heart instead of his wound. The rain seemed to pound in time with his heart. It was probably a good half-hour from them still.

It wasn’t being compared to a snake that upset him, but the idea that all he could do, all he’d ever do, was be able to talk... Somehow, it sounded like a rotten deal to him. And look where it had gotten him so far. He couldn’t talk his way out of having his kingdom taken. He couldn’t convince this guard that he hadn’t abandoned them. And he couldn’t get the visiting owl to divulge more of their information to him.

"A fat load of good talking’s done me," Jacques whispered. He placed his hand to the wound and looked at the dirt, turning it with one toe as he did the only thing he could really do now: think. Think about what he’d done, what he could do, and what awaited him in the Northern kingdom.
CHAPTER SIX

A CALL TO THE EAST

Night had fallen on Noce and the forests, and yet Jacques could not yet pull himself up a nearby tree for sleep. It evaded him, as an ant might evade his footsteps, the ant being all the braver and more powerful for the effort. The guard, on the other hand, was fast asleep in a tree; he'd traveled for two days without rest to find Jacques in the first place, and his fatigue had gotten the better of him. Jacques wondered what the Queen would say about that, letting him free to roam about and possibly escape.

But she was smarter than that, he guessed. He also guessed that she fully expected him not to flee, knowing that an audience with her was a rare treat for only the criminals and commanders. No one else could catch even her glance, and now she was sending him an open invitation. He would be foolish not to take it, and in fact she probably thought of him as foolish. Jacques sometimes thought of himself that way, foolish and arrogant and weak-willed.

The guard snored loudly; maybe that was why the night had felt so still, apart from the pounding rain. It was a strange stillness, as though the night were taking its time, breathing in, in order to release
some sort of important statement. That statement, in fact, seemed to pull at Jacques from somewhere behind his wound— which was healing nicely—and call him into the forest before him.

He knew which way it was calling him: east. He'd paid attention to the setting sun, just for the sake of getting his bearings. They were, in fact, going around the east side of Noce. But now that eastern side was beckoning him, through the darkness and the rain. And finally, after some solid, empty moments, he could no longer bear it.

He dashed off, past the sleeping guard into the tattered Eastern forest that quickly opened up to gorgeous green trees, trees that did not wither and die even in the colder months. Alexandre lived in an evergreen forest, and it was more than just a fancy moniker: his forest was the pinnacle of luxury. And, arguably, he, loyal and caring to all his faults, deserved it, unlike the Queen's sparse and stony forests or Pierre's withered and peckish woods, or even Jacques' own, unremarkable land. Alexandre was gifted with the green.

He continued, hearing nettles rather than leaves under his feet. The nettles had a strange scent to them, fresh and yet... Another scent lingered, the rain unable to wash it out. Like they were dying under his feet. He couldn't help but stop and pick one up, giving it a really good sniff.

"They're dead," he said suddenly, and then rushed off again, leaving the nettle in his wake. He'd never known the truth about these trees, that their nettles died and fell off just as any other leaf would. Were they leaves? Were they spines? The Eastern forest was full of surprising things, not least of all what awaited him deeper into the forest.

Overhead, an owl's call paused him once more. He called up to the bird, but it gave no response. It sent out its call again, and it was at that moment that Jacques actually listened. No owl, he realized, would go out in these rains unless it was for something far more important. The call wasn't for food, or goodwill, or even, really, information. It was something else, something he hadn't heard before. It was no
owl word he could distinguish, and yet it somehow reeked of the same sense as the dying nettles on the ground. Not even a smell, or a sound, but a weight as heavy as the humidity of a summer day.

"This place is creepy," Jacques said quietly to himself as he bounded forth, tail bouncing with the urgency of his trip. He'd lost all sense of direction, allowing the ethereal call to direct him. But even if he'd had the moon by which to direct his travels, he'd never know if he were straying too far to the north or south; it was impossible to tell, even with the thinner evergreen trees lacking the ability to block out the moon and stars.

He continued, over the crest of a hill, and suddenly the landscape became familiar. He'd been here, just once before, and yet the shape of the place was all too reminiscent of a place of childhood. This was, undeniably, Alexandre's domain.

And yet the place was silent.

Jacques stared down at this long-forgotten place, unsure if he should continue to heed the call. The smell and sense of death was overpowering, and something in the back of his brain, in the deepest part of his gut, told him to turn back. His every muscle wanted to flee the scene. But the wound, a now-scarring wound, on his chest beckoned him forth once more. And, against the body's wishes, and against the mind's logic, they followed the heart's call. He fell into the valley, and the shadow of death fell upon him.
CHAPTER SEVEN

JACQUES DISCOVERS A HORROR

Jacques was keenly aware of every footstep he took in the "palace" that Alexandre called home. It was unlike any other kingdom's home in that Alex had refused whole-heartedly to live in a tree hollow or in an underground cavern. “No!” he remembered Alexandre once crying out, in their childhood days. “His subjects had to have the best and grandest palace any squirrel had ever seen!” The result was this monstrosity of wood, dirt, and other various collective items, though at the moment it stood as regal as it ever had.

The entrance to the palace itself was composed of many columns—mostly made of pieces of bark strapped together with nettles—that outlined pathways into and around the palace doors. The dirt itself was matted down, and the rain brought up the smell of soil and nettles constantly, like a perfume. The front entryway, a giant double-door structure, had various plants carved into its surface. The wood, Jacques knew, must have come from one of the other forests, perhaps from a wind storm; it looked too dark and lined to be from an evergreen.

Jacques couldn't help but admire the work as he approached. He knew Alexandre must have helped with it; he wasn't one to sit on his laurels while his subjects did the work. Sure, maybe when it
came to the BIG tasks, he'd shove them off on someone else, but he wasn't afraid to work with his subjects. Maybe that's what made him so likable.

Apart from the bath. But he didn't want to think about that now; he still had to get through the rest of the palace. He placed one paw on each door and pressed, finding that they swung open with little effort. The creaking noise echoed through the rooms beyond, and a horrific stench seeped out of the palace into the open rain.

He moved as quietly as he might, jumping every time he happened to step on a leaf or twig. There was no movement in the halls beyond, though, and Jacques continued, slowly, still feeling the weight of the area pressing down on him, like a stone dragging him to the bottom of the pond.

It didn't help that a number of other things had pressed themselves down upon the roof of the palace. Rain fell into the corridors in torrents, the wooden walls once so grand now rotting away before his eyes. Rubble from the roof littered the floor, and the windows—really just holes in the woodwork—had been torn open in places like sagging frowns.

It was unsettling beyond belief, but he refused his nerves the impulse to flee; instead, he stopped in one of the halls, staring out one of the frowning windows. Why was he here in the first place? What had brought him here? All he could remember was feeling a pull, a call to something deep down in his chest, and now he was here, raiding Alexandre's palace!

What on earth was he thinking?

And yet the weight made itself known again. Something dreadful, he sensed, had happened. He felt sick to his stomach to think of what it might be. He knew Alexandre's subjects had many children; the kingdom was the most prosperous, evolutionarily speaking, of the four. But maybe that was the source of the shadow that fell upon him.

"I won't know until I find something," Jacques whispered, and then jumped at the sound of his own voice. The silence was a snake curled up in his mind, poised at every moment, and whenever that
silence was broken, the snake would strike in his mind. He gave himself a good mental slap and continued to the back of the palace, where the baths resided. It was almost painful, as though this silence-snake had its own brand of venom that caused pain with the aging of time.

Soon enough, he exited the back doors to the open air baths, composed almost entirely of stone and fed fresh water daily. They were a common meeting-place for young and old alike, and it was in that bath that Alexandre frequently made himself an equal, chatting up his subjects—perhaps, companions?—as though they were old friends. It was a place to cleanse both the body and the soul.

At least, it normally was. At the moment, the bath was devoid of fresh water, and the wet stones shimmered in the moonlight. But the bath was far from empty.

In the bath sat a black squirrel, hunched over and breathing heavily. Jacques watched him for a while, unsure if he should call out to this squirrel or not. But at the other's tail twitch, it became obvious: that ratty old tail belonged only to Pierre, and Jacques wasn't about to make himself known to this enemy.

What was Pierre doing in the bath, anyway? Jacques crooned his neck as best he could, trying with all his might to remain silent, and caught just the glimpse of another squirrel body—another black squirrel body, to be precise—on the floor.

In fact, the body and its blood were all the remained. The head—Alexandre's head, there was no doubt in Jacques' mind that that body belonged to him—was not in sight. But the curled right arm of the opposing black squirrel gave him some nauseating hints.

Pierre's breathing increased, and he turned about-face. Alexandre's head dangled from one paw, and a string of sharp bones caught the moonlight and lit Pierre's face from the bottom, just enough to give the Southern leader a truly sickening visage. His face was almost skull-like, and Jacques nearly toppled over from fright.

Millions of thoughts raced through Jacques' head: Pierre had killed Alexandre. That was what had happened here. Pierre, somehow, had managed to find his way into the Eastern kingdom, either chase or
kill the other squirrels that lived in the palace, and then he...then he killed Alexandre. Not only killed him. Pierre cut off his head. What was he going to do with Alex's head? What was going to happen to the body? A thousand more questions crossed his mind as he tried to back away from the opening and avoid being noticed.

Unfortunately, his foot slipped over a leaf, which sloshed loudly under his foot. Pierre's head darted this way and that, and--as though he'd known all along--he dropped the head and ran for the palace.

Jacques panicked and fled, diving down corridors that he had suddenly wished he'd memorized, the sound of Pierre's breathing following him the whole time. As he ran, Jacques thought about his options. They were few. If Pierre had managed to kill Alexandre--and Noce knows who else, since the place was barren--then he had to know the layout of the palace to some degree. He knew it better than Jacques, that was for sure. And that sent the poor black squirrel into a frenzy again, dashing down this hall and that, losing track of where he was going until he felt as though he were running in circles. The rain outside was getting louder, and occasionally the torrent would dump itself on his head whenever he passed under a gap in the ceiling.

Finally, as he rounded another corner, he saw one of the window-gaps. That was a way out, even if it wasn't THE way out. He leapt through the gap, expecting himself to be safe. He'd escaped. That was all he needed.

But a cruel paw twisted its way around Jacques' tail, and he collapsed, face-first, into the dirt, his tail squirming to escape the paw that had collected it. Jacques kept his face in the dirt. He didn't need to turn around to know who had grabbed him. It was so obvious. Let him run around in the palace long enough and wait outside the window-gaps. He'll tire himself out, never think of checking for a spy outside the window. And then...

"Caught ya," Pierre sneered.
Jacques' mind, ever on edge, was teetering rapidly into panic territory. No, no, this couldn't be happening to him, he was going to die, Pierre was going to kill him and chop off his head and probably eat the rest of him who knew what sort of things went on in his head. His paws scrabbled at the dirt, but he didn't have the strength to pull himself out of Pierre's grasp. His arms gradually gave way to fatigue, and he collapsed entirely into the mud, panting loudly. His head still raced on, pulling him into darker and darker nightmares about what the Southern leader was about to do to him.

"Nice try," Pierre snickered, and yanked on Jacques' tail, hard. Jacques let out a scream, and was promptly met with a foot smashing into his back. How did Pierre know exactly where to stand to knock all the wind out of him?

"Keep it shut," he said, hissing through his teeth. "Or I'll make you silent." Even without the struggle of getting air to his lungs, that threat was just enough to keep Jacques silent. He had no desire to die, not yet. And if he died here, there would be no chance of being found. The kingdom was probably deserted, or belonged to Pierre now.

"That brain of yours is probably screaming," Pierre commented, and sat right on top of Jacques' back. It knocked the wind out of him again, but he was startled by how much Pierre suddenly weighed, as though a very hefty stone had just been dropped on his back. Since when did Pierre have this much weight? What had he been doing all this time?

"Well let it keep screaming," he continued, "because you're gonna listen well. Don't expect me to tell you anything of real use."

"Never...would've thought it," Jacques coughed. Pierre beat the top of his head once with his paw, and it shook Jacques' vision.

"Smart mouth," Pierre said. "But you never know when to keep it shut. And that's why I won't be telling you a thing."
First intelligent thing you've ever said, Jacques said to himself. He didn't dare bring on another hit to the head, or worse, something even more sinister. Pierre wasn't armed at the moment, but there was no telling if he could just rip his head off by force.

The very thought made him shiver.

"What do you think you saw back there?" Pierre asked. His tail fluttered about Jacques' face, covering his eyes every now and then and drenching him with even more water. It was frustrating, to be blinded like that. He just shook his head.

"Oh, come on, Jacques, what did you see? Tell me." His voice oozed like sap. "I know how clever you are with words. Illustrate for me, in your very unique and special way, the scene which you depicted in yonder bath house."

"And you say I'm clever with words," Jacques couldn't help but say. Pierre yanked at Jacques' neck, the skin feeling as though it could tear in two right there.

"Not as clever as you, nut-for-brains," Pierre said. "Talk."

Once Pierre released his neck, Jacques gave an almighty cough. He felt as though he'd never caught a real breath in his life.

"It was a grisly sight," Jacques began. Maybe if he embellished as much as he could, Pierre would like it. "The moon in full cast, its light drifting down to the famous bath house, now devoid of drop or denizen." He paused for breath, or for a possible blow to the head. His voice shook as he continued. Save for two. On the ground, in a shimmering self-made pool of blood, lay the Eastern leader's body, still as the tree in a calm. And over that body, a shadow: a menace, a monster so formidable that even speaking its name would send you to shivers." Maybe Pierre would like that, he thought, his body now trembling with his voice. "In one hand, he bore the head of the Eastern leader, a trophy for his successful conquest--"
"Wrong," Pierre snapped. He pushed Jacques' head into the dirt and turned himself about to pin Jacques, with his entire body, to the ground. His head was right behind Jacques' ear, his mouth primed for secrets to spill out.

"Killing Alex was child's play," he whispered, and held Jacques still as the latter squirmed and writhed under his weight.

Jacques wanted to scream. He wanted to cry out as loud as he could at the injustice of it all, at the outright murder of another black squirrel, at the horror of their band of five being stripped down to four. And, most of all, he wanted to scream at the bloody murderer that had him pinned so soundly to the forest floor.

But he did not scream. He twisted about until his energy left him again, and Pierre laughed, long and hard, at his bootless efforts.

"But you, old friend," Pierre whispered. "You, I could kill blindfolded. You're weak. Nothing but mouth. I could cut out your tongue and end your life like that." He snickered in Jacques' ear, the sound like snake-tongue to his frantic mind. "How'd you like that, hm?"

Jacques just shook his head wildly. He wanted nothing more at the moment than for Pierre to let him go, because he was now convinced: he was going to die. Pierre had chosen now to kill two birds—well, squirrels—with one stone, or bone, or tooth, or whatever it was that he had used to take off Alex's head.

"It was a bone-spear," Pierre said, as though he could follow Jacques' thoughts. "Long-range. But for you, I think a bone-sword would do. Or even just a bone fragment! Slip right inside that mouth of yours—"

As he spoke, Pierre slipped one paw forward and wrenched Jacques' mouth open. It was a credit to Pierre's strength that, even with one paw disabled, Jacques could not overthrow him. Pierre cooed as a mother might to a child, and reached in to tap first his teeth, and then his tongue.
"--and slice it right out." He let Jacques' mouth slam shut and pinned his fourth paw back to the floor, securing Jacques' place in the mud once again. "But I don't think even that would stop your talking."

Jacques stopped squirming; he had given up, partially, but the fear of that torture had frozen him in place. He shook his head, ever so slightly, and Pierre laughed again.

"You can tell everyone that I killed him," Pierre said. "Tell the whole bleeding world that Pierre, the Southern Leader, murdered Alexandre the Gutless as though it were a game of tag! And HE WAS IT!"

He roared the last words, and the wind began to pick up, the sounds of rustling leaves joining his voice and the rain. Jacques breathed slowly, unsure now of how he could ever escape.

"Oh, yes, I am going to let you go," Pierre then said, pulling himself off of Jacques, but not before grabbing the back of his neck and pulling him along. It ended with Jacques, off-balance, almost unable to breathe, and forced to stare right up in Pierre's bright eyes.

"You will live tonight, Jacques. Live to tell the tale of Pierre and Alexandre. And then, when next we meet...you will die." He grinned, and finally released Jacques from his grip.

With the grip finally released from his neck, Jacques felt the overwhelming desire to run. It screamed out in every muscle of his body, from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail. He wanted to run, as far away from this monster that had just pinned him and had threatened to end his life.

But he did not run. He turned around, baring down even though he was unarmed and Pierre was still very much armed, not with weapons but with physical strength. And Jacques, in that respect, was defenseless.

Yet he still clicked his teeth together, tail alive with the electricity of battle. Pierre watched him and then fell over onto his back, cackling as though Jacques had just told the most fabulous joke in the world.
"You've gotta...gotta be kidding me!" Pierre gasped through the laughter. Jacques, for his part, stood up again, now back to his very small and not at all intimidating self. "You, f-fight me?"

He pushed himself back up to his feet, wiping tears from his eyes. "Ah...that was a good one, Jacques. You, fight me?" He stared down Jacques and then leaped on him, sending them both to the dirt in an instant.

What happened next, Jacques couldn't say. He could feel hair being pulled, muscles being bitten, and all parts of his body being kicked and scratched over and over. He couldn't move, couldn't fight back, couldn't even call out for help. He was utterly alone with his anguish as Pierre beat all reason and sense out of him, his incredible and vicious brawn overcoming Jacques' useless, mouthy brain.

And then it was over, and Pierre climbed off of him, dusting himself off. "I told you I wouldn't kill you this time, you little rat," he commented while Jacques pulled himself up, wincing with each movement. "Consider yourself grateful."

Jacques turned around to face him, but Pierre had already scaled a tree, his beady eyes shining down on Jacques on the forest floor.

"I'll be seeing you soon, Jacques," he concluded, and leaped away, into adjacent trees, rustling the leaves of the branches as he went.

Now that Pierre was gone, Jacques could assess the damage that he'd left behind. He checked his body over for bleeding, any possible broken bones, but much of the damage was cosmetic, or buried under the skin. Just a little blood. Nothing broken. But he would be heavily bruised for a while, and the missing chunks of hair—and, he noticed, tail—would not endear him at all to the Queen.

He sighed, and turned to face the palace again. There was also that damage to account for. Slowly, he walked along the perimeter of the palace, running one paw along its exterior wall, feeling with each step the sinking stone that was sorrow in his belly.
Pierre had not neglected to pick up Alexandre's head; Jacques supposed he'd stopped here, just after his departure, to pick up the head. Only the bloody body remained, the now-thinning rain washing away what little blood was left. Jacques looked over it, seeing the matted blood and fur that coated everything, and finding no other wound apart from the missing head.

Jacques fell to his knees, tears like spring falling to the dirt and blood. He hadn't known the adult Alexandre well; he hadn't even bothered to be friendly to him, even though their situation as a "rare species" was so dire. Their friendship had ended so long ago, dissolved in the wake of future leadership. He'd thought of Alexandre exactly what he had thought of all the others: nothing more than opposing leaders, there to maintain a careful balance, a berry perched upon a precipice.

"Alex..." He placed one paw on the body and stroked it. It hurt to move his arms, hurt even to move his head. But he stood up again and, very slowly, lifted the headless body onto his back. The weight and the pain nearly crushed him, and it took more than a few minutes to gather some sort of stability.

And yet he had it. He craned his head upward to find the moon; it was sinking fast. It was unlikely that he would make it back to Noce before sunrise. And no doubt the guard would be livid with his departure, probably cut off a paw of his just to prove a point.

That was all secondary. He took one small, tentative step, and though he thought the pain might force him to the ground, crying out in agony, he somehow found the strength to take another. And another. And another. And soon, albeit slowly, he was walking through the forest, the regal Eastern king's body aloft on his shoulders and back.

"It'll be okay, Alex," Jacques whispered, step by step. "It'll be okay."

He already knew what he wanted to do. It was something no one had ever done, though plenty had talked about it. He wanted, more than anything, to give Alexandre a proper sendoff. To be buried somewhere memorable. And while he had momentarily toyed with the idea of the springs, that idea was swept away by another, far more appealing one.
He would bury Alexandre's body at Noce, the first great casualty seen under the death of their god-tree. It was no coincidence, he considered, step by step. It couldn't be pure chance that Pierre was rising up, that the Queen was rising up, that Alexandre and Jacques had both been put down. The balance of things had been disrupted, and their tree, seeing no reconciliation in sight for them, had withered in the power of burning life against eternal slumber. She was now dead.

Jacques knew that for sure now. Lumiere never wanted to say it; none of them did. But Noce was just as assuredly dead as the body on Jacques' back. And without the protection of the tree, there was no telling what other great horrors might come to the forest.

Like the snakes. Jacques shivered at the thought of snakes invading every hollow they possessed. He knew that owls would frequently do the same. They were not all that different, snakes and owls. And they relied upon the squirrels to pass on their messages. In turn, they kept their battles to their enemies.

But that was in ages long past. The snakes were presumably loose cannons, killing without mercy. The owls were tentative at best, and likely to turn against them all. And the squirrels...

...well, they were in an upheaval of sorts, Jacques concluded, step by step. His foot caught on a root, but he swung his weight around and managed, however precariously, to stay standing. On he went, finding the forest thinning before him.

Things were turning ugly. There was little doubt in this. The question remained where it would go from there.

"Probably to a frozen hell," Jacques muttered to himself. "We'll all freeze to death."

A cold breeze blew past, as if to confirm his suspicions.
CHAPTER EIGHT

ALEXANDRE IS BURIED AT NOCE

The sun slipped up behind Jacques as he crested over the invisible line that marked the end of Alexandre's old forest--well, whose forest was it now, really--and Noce, the forever no-man's-land of the four forests. Jacques did not yet see the guard, and didn't particularly care at the moment. The body, after hours of carrying and heaving over limb and rock and being soaked through by rain, was growing heavy on his back, and all he wanted to do was drop it at the earliest instant and leave it in the dirt.

But he just couldn't do that, and had soldiered on through the night, Alexandre's decomposing body shifting back and forth on his shoulders and spine. His own wet fur was starting to smell a bit, and Alex's body was no better.

"Almost," Jacques said softly to himself through heavy breaths. He heard a distant clacking sound, and the guard came into view, spear pointed straight at Jacques. He sighed; the guard had finally woken up, it seemed. The body on his back and the guard, now an obstacle in his way, made him grind his teeth together furiously.

"You villain!" the guard shouted, waving the spear back and forth. "Leaving me here at night to be eaten by Noce knows what!"
"Noce can't really save you now," Jacques muttered darkly, shifting back and forth on his feet. Somehow stopping had made his feet hurt more than the walking, and he'd tripped over more than his fair share of rocks, tree roots, and occasionally an owl pellet.

"Shut it!" The guard approached with the spear and, slowly, his face changed from anger to a full-blown O of surprise: open mouth, raised eyebrows, and wide eyes. He stumbled back, forgetting all about the spear in his hand.

"Wh-wh-wha-"

"It's a body, you yellow-bellied nitwit," Jacques said sharply, anger clouding over his face. "Have you never seen a body like this before?" He wasn't interested in standing still any longer. He marched past the guard, toting the body still, and came to a halt in front of Noce, her sad, barren limbs reaching out to the clouds in the sky as though they were cast-away white leaves.

Finally, finally, he laid Alexandre's body on the ground, and he turned his head up to the sky. The guard, still in shock, watched from a distance, spear now back up at the ready.

"Noce," Jacques said, the sky and the tree now his audience. "Noce, great goddess, why have you forsaken us? We, your children, we, who watched you grow and in turn were watching us grow. Behold: one of your children is dead at the hands of another. Now we, the last of the black squirrels, number only four, and this one, your poor child Alexandre..."

He paused, his breath catching in his throat. He couldn't cry now, he couldn't cry now...

"Your poor child Alexandre has fallen at the hands of a brother, his head taken and his body left to decay among the worms. But lo, I have returned his body to your sacred grounds, in the hopes that maybe his death will reinvigorate your life."

He'd never done anything like this before. It was an old squirrel's tale, the offering up of dead warriors to the goddess. No one had done it in ages. And yet for Alexandre, it seemed somehow
appropriate. He was surprised he even remembered the words; he supposed he had to be making some of them up.

"Please, Noce..." He slipped down to one knee, and he'd failed to stop himself from crying. "Protect us, and love us. Protect us, who need you to save us from Pierre. Protect us, who need you to save us from the Queen. Love us...love us, your dear children, and take back into your arms one of your dearest and most loving. Alexandre was faithful to the end. Please...do not disappoint him."

He hung his head and let the tears fall. Lumiere would've been proud of him, he thought, as he placed one paw on Alexandre's fur. Around him, the wind picked up, the cold chill of oncoming winter wrapping around him like an errant leaf.

After some time, he stood up, and wiped his face with his arms. He turned to the guard, who had dropped his spear and was staring straight at him.

"Wow," was all the guard could offer.

Jacques snorted at him, and shook his head roughly. "Help me bury him," he said, and turned to the forest. "We need something to dig a hole."

"Right," the guard answered, and they took off to scour the edges for stones shaped just enough like scoops to dig out the dirt with their paws.

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Jacques had let himself wander to the western edge, trailing southward. Stones were more plentiful here, and gave more opportunity for snakes to hide, he reasoned. A perfect place for Pierre's little slithering army. A perfect place for Pierre, too, now that Jacques thought of it.

As if the forest were answering him, he stumbled across a scattered pile of feathers. One of them, caught by the wind, flew into his face, and he examined it closely, running his paw over the fluff.
"Why would..." he wondered aloud, and then looked at the other feathers. Once again, he felt pulled, and followed the feathers that seemed to draw a path. This time, just past the invisible boundary to the south, he came across precisely what he had dreaded most: the corpse of an owl.

"Oh no," he breathed, moving closer to the bird from the wing side. He had no desire to find out the owl was actually still alive; that was just asking to have his head pecked off or his body ripped apart by talons. But when he finally got close enough to touch the owl, its body was quite still, rigid, and only slightly warm.

Jacques had never seen a dead owl before, never even thought such a thing possible. Some of the white-faced owls already looked like ghosts, and it seemed unlikely that a creature like that could die. And yet here it was--not a white-faced owl, but an ear-tuft owl of sorts--lying dead in his path.

"Oh no." He took a few steps back, fearful not that the owl would leap up and attack, but that something else might. And after last night's fiasco, he couldn't deal with that. He bolted in the opposite direction, only just catching the soft sound of hissing behind him.

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Once he was suitably far away, he stopped, and nearly fell over from the pain in his legs. In his fear he'd forgotten about last night's journey, but now that the panic had fallen away, the pain rose up to take its place, and it nearly brought screams to his mouth.

"I can't...can't do this," Jacques huffed, trying to push himself back to his feet with his paws. But his muscles wouldn't obey. Everything seemed to cry out "NO" whenever he made to move his paw, his foot, even his poor tail. He thought he might just lie there forever, and die from the pain and eventual starvation.

"Jacques?"
Jacques twisted his head around and saw, peering over him, the body of Lumiere. He twisted some more and saw a head, too. This was somehow comforting and also horrifying, and he turned away from his friend.

"Go 'way," he mumbled, his face partially covered by dirt.

"So that WAS you writhing about in the muck," Lumiere said, nudging Jacques with one foot. Jacques responded with a groan of pain. "What are you doing down there?"

"I'm in pain!" Jacques practically screamed into the dirt, but it muffled so much of his voice that he may as well have been talking jovially about the weather.

"Why on earth would that be?" Lumiere asked, and then looked harder at his friend, saw the swelling of bruises and the missing piece of tail. "Oh...oh my, Jacques, what on earth happened to you?"

"Get me standing again," Jacques shouted, "and I'll tell you!"

Lumiere nodded and rushed around to Jacques' shoulders, heaving as hard as he might, but the truth was that he was old. Old, frail, and never built with that much muscle. But it was enough to get Jacques at least trying to stand, and by degrees they were both on their feet, though Jacques was still nursing his aching legs.

"Now will you tell me?" Lumiere said, watching Jacques closely. He saw, too, the cobwebs that indicated a deep cut.

Jacques did not look at him. He was grateful for the help, but now all he wanted was for Lumiere to leave him be. He couldn't bear the thought of Lumiere knowing. But it came out anyway, words like water over rocks.

"Alexandre is dead," Jacques said. His eyes faced the ground, his whole body tilted as though he would tumble right over.

And then Lumiere actually did fall over, onto his behind, his face a perfect mirror of the guard's from earlier.
"I..." Lumiere put his paws to his face, disbelief filling every crevice of his aging appearance.

"I..."

"Believe it," Jacques said, as though he could read Lumiere's mind. "I found him in his own palace, in the spa." He thought about telling him about the beheading, about Pierre taking the head...well, everything about Pierre, but it didn't seem quite the time. Not yet.

And now that Lumiere knew, he couldn't just tell him to leave. "I need help burying him," Jacques said. "I...I can't do it on my own, not the way I am now. Please."

Lumiere paused, and then jumped back to his feet. "Of course."

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The guard spotted Jacques as he came over the ridge, and did not move as a second black squirrel followed. Jacques gave him a solemn look, and the guard nodded at Lumiere, as though they understood was what needed at that very moment.

"So we need to dig," the guard said. In his free paw, he held a sizable stone, triangular in shape, that would work wonders as a makeshift shovel.

Jacques, who had completely forgotten about collecting rocks, rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "I, er..."

"Jacques had a small accident," Lumiere piped up, poking Jacques once in the ribs. The latter responded with an almighty moan, and nearly toppled over. "Last night has left him pretty worse for the wear. So let's give him a break for now."

Jacques was still moaning. The guard looked at him, the corner of his mouth turning up a little.

"Yeah, sure, I can do that, I reckon," he said. He set down his spear and, stone in hand, walked over, then past, the body to a spot right under Noce.

"You gonna help, hm?" he called to Lumiere. He dug the stone in and pushed out some of the dirt. Lumiere watched him for a moment and turned to Jacques.
"I didn't," Lumiere stammered, "I mean, I don't think I could--"

"It's fine," Jacques said, standing upright again and waving him off with a paw. "I don't know that he realized how old you are. You really don't show it."

"False words lead to lost teeth," Lumiere chimed. The grey in his black fur was more pronounced than ever. But Jacques just waved him off again and walked over to the hole, curious to see the progress.

Lumiere, on the other hand, approached the body, and gazed over its swollen form with a sort of distant sadness, a thousand-yard stare trapped in his eyes and a chill causing his muscles to wither. Jacques watched him carefully, wondering if his friend would burst into tears, shout in anger, or just stand silent, a perfect match for their beloved god-tree.

"Least you can do is help!" the guard shouted, shoveling a heap of dirt toward Jacques. He dashed forward, muscles crying out, and sniffed angrily.

"You've got it under control, don't you?" he said, brushing the dirt off his tail. "Looks great already. Don't need my help, and my friend's elderly. He can't help you."

"Bah," the guard snorted, throwing more dirt at Jacques, who expected and dodged it the second time around. He gave one evil eye to the guard and went to join Lumiere at the body.

It took one look to know which emotion Lumiere was going to display at that moment. He was every bit the stoic old squirrel, and Jacques placed a paw on his shoulder. Lumiere reached up and placed his own paw over his friend's, and they both heaved a long sigh.

"Pierre, though?" Lumiere commented. Jacques just nodded; there was nothing more that needed to be said about it. Lumiere looked at him, eyes still gone, as though looking through the forest to a world beyond its leafy canopies.

"Lumiere?" Jacques said, trying to meet Lumiere's empty gaze. His friend merely shook his head and turned back to the body.

"I wonder what Antoinette will think," he said.
"Antoinette?" Jacques had never heard the name before, and tilted his head.

"The northern queen of the forests. How did you not know her name?"

Jacques did his best not to fall over with surprise. So that's who he was dealing with. "Well I didn't grow up with her."

"No. No, I suppose you didn't." Lumiere crossed his arms, tapping his elbows with his paws.

"So what is she like?"

"Hey!" The guard was standing at full height now, stone resting against the tree. "Hole's ready. Bring your friend over here. Maybe both of them!" He laughed at his own joke, and Jacques resisted the urge to pick up a pebble and chuck it at the mouthy squirrel.

"He's right, though," Lumiere said, and walked around to the front legs. "Get the back; I've got the front." Jacques obeyed and carefully, they lifted the body, haphazardly at first but then gaining skill and balance. One foot after another they marched it over to the hole, while Jacques did his best not to look at the gaping neck wound that had gathered pus and clots in the interim.

"No respect for you," Jacques muttered angrily. Lumiere just shook his head.

"What do you expect, after you lost the western forest? Did you really think your guards would still look at you the same way?"

"Of course not. But it wasn't like I--hey, wait a--"

"Stop here," Lumiere said, and they came to a halt by the hole. Jacques gave Lumiere a long, hard stare, which Lumiere did not return as they lifted the body over the hole and lowered it into its last resting place, a far cry from the Eastern spas.

"There," Lumiere sighed, and looked over at the pile of dirt that had been created. "We will cover him first and then say some parting words."

"Jacques already said some," the guard said, and Jacques found himself avoiding Lumiere's eye now. It was embarrassing to be thought of as religious in the same way as Lumiere, the same was as
Alexandre had been. And now that he thought of it, it hadn't been appropriate at all that he'd said something. He should have saved it for Lumiere, the truly religious one.

"Please give him a proper send-off," Jacques mumbled. Lumiere watched him for a while and then gave a slow nod. Jacques' whole body sighed in relief. Sometimes, he had to admit, it was good that Lumiere was so willing to please him like this.

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"Friends, visitors, and our dearest goddess, Noce..."

Jacques stood with his paws held at his chest. The wound there had long since healed over, but a dull ache continued, the ache that lay deeper than any flesh wound ever could. His whole body was still racked with aches, of course, but this was different; it felt as though the ache spilled out from an indescribable location in his body. If souls were a thing, he could believe in them right now, in the idea of a soul causing external pain to the weeping and worn body.

"...we ask you to look down with kindly eyes upon this poor, lost soul, our brother, gone to us now but not gone in your eyes."

The guard shifted from foot to foot. The end of his spear occasionally knocked against the ground, and Jacques couldn't help but throw him a nasty look. The guard didn't even notice; he was too busy trying to keep himself, Jacques noticed, from being sick.

"Alexandre was a dear friend of ours, and a noble leader of his forests. It was said that the Eastern lands were the jewel of your eye, and there is no doubt in my mind that it was the finest land, led by the finest king."

The body didn't even smell anymore, not really, and the fluids had largely dried up; even the swelling from the rainwater had dissipated a little. What remained was little more than a headless carcass. And yet seeing that black fur, matted through with blood and pus, was more than a little unsettling to Jacques. He remembered Pierre's threats, could feel where part of his tail was missing, and could just
imagine himself in Alexandre's position, a rotting body on the forest floor. It was more unsettling than the
sight of the body or the smell, which had largely faded from the night.

Really, the guard should've considered himself grateful he hadn't had to carry that body through
the forest like that. He would've been a prime target for owls.

"And now we send him back to your graces, in the hopes that you may once again rise up to
protect and love us, your dearest of dear children."

Why hadn't there been any owls, Jacques suddenly wondered. He had wandered throughout the
night without encountering so much as a chipmunk. Come to think of it, the whole forest had been filled
with a silence that he had never not-heard before. Where had all the creatures gone? Had the owls fled?
Had Pierre done something to them?

There seemed to be so many questions, none of which Jacques could properly answer.

"Jacques," Lumiere said. Jacques tilted his head up to meet Lumiere's eyes. "Was it really..."

Jacques looked away. It was hard to admit that one of their own kind had committed such an
atrocious deed. He could feel two pairs of eyes on him--the guard and Lumiere--but also an ever-looming
third pair, a sinister, bloodthirsty pair of eyes that followed his every moment, whether in body or mind.

"I would prefer not to talk about it," Jacques muttered, crossing his arms tightly to his chest. The
wind blew cold around them, and he hunkered down, eyes pointed right to the ground.

"What abou' what?" the guard said loudly, marching around to Jacques' front. "How did he die,
hm? Not very chattery now, are ya?"

"Leave him be," Lumiere said. The guard waved him off without a look.

"Not gettin' off that easy, Mr. Dethroned King. Make with the sharin'." The guard nudged Jacques
with the butt end of the spear.

Jacques, in one fell swoop, grabbed the spear and snapped it in his hands, though the effort to do
so nearly tore his arms out of their sockets.
"Why, you--" The guard leapt upon him, but Jacques just kicked at him, keeping his arms close to his chest. The kicking was enough to persuade the guard off of him, but the pains had returned, and Jacques cowered on the ground, rattled with aches.

"That's enough!" Lumiere said sharply, moving past the guard and helping Jacques to his feet. "This is a somber time, and you are sullying it with needless warfare!"

"Somber, my left foot!" the guard said, shoving Lumiere aside. "This traitor deserves whatever's comin' to him, and he should learn his place--at the BOTTOM of the chain!"

"I said, that's enough!" Lumiere, ever the gentleman, did not shove him back, but the look he gave the guard could have sliced off his tongue in one motion.

Jacques looked between them, body still full of aches. Gently, he lifted his feet past them and walked over to the mound of dirt that was now Alexandre. He knelt down as best he could without falling over and quietly pressed one paw into the dirt.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Jacques said softly, taking little notice of the paw that had come to rest on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I didn't think to...I'm just..."

"It's okay, Jacques," Lumiere said, rubbing his paw back and forth. "You couldn't have stopped this."

"But what if I could have?"

"Then how, Jacques?" The anger shone through despite Lumiere's soft voice. "Tell me. How on earth could you have prevented what happened?"

"But..." Jacques stuttered. "But...Lumiere, but what if--"

"There is no time for what if here." The paw stopped moving and squeezed tight. "If you believe there is something to be done, then it must be done for everyone else. Alexandre can do nothing but remain beneath this holy ground."

"Holy..." Jacques sighed and shook his head. "Noce's dead, Lumiere. This is not holy ground."
The paw squeezed tighter. "Noce lives beyond this tree, Jacques. Faith is stronger than the strongest sapling." Lumiere removed his paw. "And now, perhaps we need that faith."

Jacques stood and faced Lumiere. "We need faith in the goodness of our kind," he said firmly, "not in ancient trees and folklore. We need faith that we can do good."

Lumiere frowned; Jacques frowned right back.

"We hav' ta get movin'," the guard shouted at them, and the two turned to face him, still frowning. The guard's resolve weakened a little, but not enough to dissuade him from stamping his foot impatiently.

"He's not quite so scary without that spear, now is he," Lumiere commented, a grin beginning to form on his face.

"Wasn't scary even with the spear," Jacques replied, and his own frown vanished. "You should probably get back home now. I don't think the Northerners will welcome you much."

"Perhaps not," Lumiere nodded. "But do you expect them to give you a warm welcome?"

Jacques shook his head slightly. "Not really. But the Queen will be most interested in hearing what I have to say."

"No doubt," Lumiere said, and gave a small salute. "Unfortunately, my place is not with miss Antoinette, and I daresay my company will not be welcomed."

Jacques gave Lumiere a puzzled look, but Lumiere shook his head, holding up a paw to prevent any answer. It was a mystery, Jacques decided, he'd have to uncover without his supposed friend's help.

"Until next time, Jacques." He raced up the nearest tree and took off, leaping from branch to branch.

Jacques waved him off and then turned back to the guard, still smiling. "Let's go then, Mr. Fearful Guard."
CHAPTER NINE

JACQUES MEETS ANTOINETTE

At last. The Northern kingdom.

Like the Southern forest, the trees of the North were sparse things, full of spindly needle-trees that offered little cover for the sky above. Between them were rising rocks and hills, followed by valleys and hidden holes for all sorts of creatures, even large caves that housed creatures that Jacques couldn't imagine. And the sky itself looked more grey than blue, almost washed out, as though it had drowned itself, and the air tasted bitter, like deep winter.

Jacques was hit right in the face with a cold blast of air, the chill being synonymous with both winter and the North. It was a long-standing rumor that the squirrels of the Northern kingdom were born with ice in their veins and snow-pecked faces, white amid grey. Jacques was perfectly happy to believe all of it.

"Let's keep movin'," the guard said. He had taken point for this part of the journey, and Jacques was glad to let him do so. He'd never set foot in the Northern kingdom; no one had, really. The Queen had come in and taken over, easily it seemed, with just the force of her voice and fist. And it was a certainty
that her guard would be the strongest of the four, the one most well-trained, and the one best adapted to weather of all sorts. Life in the North, it was concluded, was hard, chilly, and without reward.

"The trees..." Jacques said quietly, turning his head up to the sky. He'd never seen the trees here before. The outskirts of each kingdom were fairly similar, but the farther in one traveled, the less alike they seemed to be. The trees here were not sickly, but they were spindly, with leaves like needles jutting out in all directions. The sky above, now grey with the first snow, swirled around, moving with the cold winds.

"S'always like this," the guard said. Jacques had to remember that the guard, prior to the capture, had never seen this before. "Everything is so much..."

"Colder?" Jacques suggested.

"Yeah." The guard stopped and turned to face Jacques. "Cold. Rocky. Unpleasant. Sometimes I miss the...well, I miss home."

A heaviness came to the guard's eyes. Jacques moved to him and patted him on the shoulder. His subjects had had it no better than he, it seemed. But at least they'd had the assurance of food and life, more than Jacques had ever had after his dethroning.

"Don't we all?" Jacques said, grinning a little.

The guard pushed his paw away. "Would still be there if you weren't such a bloody coward." He marched on, leaving Jacques to ponder the anger for the time being until, fearful of getting lost, he followed.

The terrain, as the guard had said, was rocky, but Jacques barely noticed that quality until they got close to the heart of the territory. These weren't just rocks; they were boulders of a gargantuan size, and both squirrels had to scrabble over them, toes slipping and grinding to keep traction. They pushed their way past what Jacques noticed, at the top, to be a wall composed of these boulders.
"Quite a defense," Jacques commented. The guard grunted and slid down the rocks into a dark, earthy pit at the base. Jacques followed, his aches complaining a little less than they had earlier. At the bottom, a single hole had been dug into the dirt, and the guard disappeared inside, Jacques catching only the flash of his tail.

"This way," the guard said as he vanished. Jacques peered first into the hole, uncertain if he dared to stick the rest of his body inside. But he didn't get much of a choice; the guard, after all, had not disappeared, and yanked him inside, where the two of them slid down a short corridor into an open room, connected to an even longer corridor whose light dimmed in the distance.

This, Jacques realized, was something new. An underground fort. But even newer was its light source, a mystical mushroom that gave off a blue cast, making the whole thing seem, if possible, even colder. Two more guards--ones Jacques did not recognize at all, came forward and immediately tied Jacques' arms around his back with a thick piece of root. His shoulders complained with pain, but he kept his mouth shut.

"We'll be taking you to her promptly," the first guard said.

"Watch your tongue with our queen, y'hear?" the second said.

Jacques just nodded; something had given him the fear of having his tongue cut out before he could really use it. With his paws secured, the two guards led Jacques into adjacent rooms, while the former Western guard picked up the rear (and picked up a new spear on the way.)

"Scared?" the back guard sneered. He was back in familiar--well, semi-familiar--territory, and felt free to tease Jacques all he liked. Jacques just shrugged, and let slip a few words.

"What have I to fear but death?"

The guards led Jacques through the corridor to a large, wooden door barred with a single, thick branch. Jacques eyed the branch as one guard moved to lift it out of the way, then turned his gaze to the door itself.
The door, he was surprised to see in the light, was not unadorned. Etched into the door were a variety of battle scenes, depicting fights with strange creatures—four-legged beasts with fur and teeth. Jacques had never seen creatures of that sort in the forest, and he wondered who alive had ever seen such a thing.

"Wolves," one guard said. "And wildcats. Run rampant around here."

Jacques glanced at him, curious to know more about the beasts, but the guard simply shook his head. He left Jacques standing, paws tied, at the precipice while the two of them pushed open the doors into the throne room.

Light immediately flooded into the corridor, both blue and red. Mushrooms lined the ceiling and torches pockmarked the floor, a bizarre melding of light that gave one the feeling of... well, Jacques couldn't quite place it. But it seemed otherworldly, something that could not, or should not, exist below the earth. Along the edges of the room were more guards, all bearing bone-spears of varying lengths and sharpness. They jeered as Jacques was led into the room, waving their spears at him gleefully.

Some of them, Jacques knew, had been part of his guard. He wondered how many had defected, how many had died for him. He wondered how many had been eaten by "wolves" and "wildcats."

Directly across from him was a massive carved seat, designs matching those of the door outside. In that seat rested the Northern queen, head resting on one paw as though she were simply bored with the current processions.

Antoinette was a stately looking black squirrel, a few lines of grey poking out beneath her black fur. She certainly looked older than Jacques, but younger, he supposed, than Lumiere. Either way, she had some years on him. And her eyes had a glitter in them that was unlike anything he'd seen in another squirrel's eyes, except for maybe Pierre. It didn't help that he felt unsettled by the way her eyes were pinned on him, but he put on his best grin anyway.
"Antoinette, my dear." Jacques said, bowing his head slightly. One of the guards slapped him on the back of the head.

"Jacques." Antoinette responded, still slouching in her seat. "How's despotism treating you?"

"Poorly," he chirped. "But it's a life of excitement and wonder, at least. How's tyranny for you?"

Another slap on the head. Jacques turned to glare at him, but his face was met with another slap. The guards roared again with laughter.

"That'll be enough of that," Antoinette said, waving one paw. "Release his bonds and get out of my sight."

Jacques turned back to her, his eyes narrowing. Why would she so readily remove his restraints? The guard who had slapped him used his spear to slice off the bonds, catching part of Jacques' back in the process. Jacques did his best not to show the pain.

"Out!" Antoinette shouted, and the guards—including those along the perimeter of the room—fled, closing the door behind them. Once they were gone, Antoinette rose from her seat and walked up to Jacques.

"As sharp-tongued as ever, Jacques," she whispered, lifting Jacques' head with one paw. That was the true power of her intimidation, Jacques realized: she was so much taller than everyone else. She quite literally towered over her rivals, and in that she had garnered respect, admiration, and fear. "It's a wonder they didn't just cut it out."

"Ah," Jacques mused, "but then I would have died eventually, somewhere in the forest. And you couldn't have that, could you?"

"Certainly not," she answered, smiling. "Better to leave you scurrying about, passing on rumors like a rat."

Jacques frowned. "I'm no rat, Antoinette."
"You've yet to prove otherwise. Jacques." She removed her paw from his jawline. "You run at the first sign of danger, leaving your men behind to be conquered, killed—who would do that, but a common rat, Jacques?"

"I had no choice," Jacques answered quietly. He thought furiously of how to turn the conversation back in his favor.

"No choice?" Antoinette said, turning her back to him and spreading her arms wide. "What choice but honor and glory! To die for the good of your people!"

"You wouldn't have killed me."

"Well, I suppose that's true." Her arms tell and she turned back to him, one paw on her side. "I would have tortured you first."

"What are the wolves?" Jacques blurted out, thinking back to the carvings. Antoinette's grin slipped, and she walked back to her throne, placing one paw on the back of it. Jacques watched her eyes trace its shape, seeing in them a strange darkness.

"You don't have the beasts we have," Antoinette said. "You don't have the monsters that lurk in the night. You befriended them. Those rotten owls."

"What do the owls have to do with it?" Jacques asked, approaching her.

She faced him, the blue and red light catching in her eyes. "The owls don't kill your kind."

And suddenly it made sense, the conquest and subsequent capture. The Northern kingdom, Jacques knew, was not so mighty after all.

"How do you do it?" she hissed, grasping Jacques' shoulders with a grip worthy of the strongest soldier. Jacques winced under her strength. "How do you communicate with them?"

"I've--been able to for as long as I know," Jacques said, trying to pull away from her grasp. But she held fast to him, her face pressing ever closer. And yet he could see an advantage growing out of this
exchange. He had a power that she didn't, and all her might in the world couldn't make right the death of her people to owls, creatures with a speech beyond her grasp.

"Who taught you?" she said, her voice raising in volume.

Jacques paused, uncertain if he really wanted to answer this next question. He knew the answer, of course; it was something that Antoinette could never know, not without interrogating him or Pierre.

"Who taught you?!" Her voice had raised to a shouting volume.

"I can't tell you," he said, a whisper compared to her shout. She shoved him hard, and he rolled against the ground, catching dirt in his wounds that made him want to scream out.

"I could kill you right now," she hissed, approaching him again.

"You misunderstand," Jacques said, pushing himself up to look at her from the ground. Now she really did tower over him, like an old tree. "I never said that I won't tell you. But I can't tell you. Not for free."

Antoinette responded by kicking him in the side, and this time he couldn't stop himself from shouting out in pain.

"You think you can bribe me, Jacques?" she cried, swinging another swift kick at him. "You think you have any sort of power here? I can just torture the information out of you and then kill you. Simple as that!"

"What makes you so sure I wouldn't lie?" Jacques said. He'd curled up on the ground now to avoid more kicking. It was working according to plan, he thought to himself. He had to make himself appear weak, easily beaten. That would make her cocky. More likely to make a mistake. More likely to dole out mercy in his favor.

More likely, he knew, to give him what he wanted.
"Depends on the method of torture," Antoinette said simply, kicking him once more, this time in
the back. Somehow her foot managed to find the spot that the spear had cut earlier, and Jacques howled in
pain. But he'd heard hesitation in her voice.

And he just couldn't stop himself from grinning at that fact.

"Look, Antoinette," he said, still curled up and now heaving a little from the pain. "We both know
it's easier to work with me than torture me. And my demands...are a pittance. I can give you what you
want." He paused, thinking about Pierre's demands. "And I can give you more."

"More?"

That single word was an assurance that he'd gotten to her. He carefully pushed himself up to a
sitting position, wrapping his tail around his wounded back. Pierre's information, he knew, was about to
become very valuable.

"I've been to the Eastern kingdom, Antoinette. I've seen what's happened there. I can give you
information that no other squirrel would have."

Antoinette snorted. "In exchange for what? My kingdom?"

"Of course not," Jacques said, waving a paw. "I don't want this place. Barren and cold. Barely any
cover in the trees."

"So you want YOUR kingdom back," she said, crossing her arms tightly.

"Do you really think I deserve that?" he retorted. "Do you think any of these squirrels would
follow me, after what I did? Don't be ridiculous."

He thought for sure that she would kick him again. But she remained silent, one foot tapping the
ground impatiently.

"I want to be part of your army," he continued. "That small measure of power, you can give me.
I'd report back to you, and I would slowly regain the confidence of my old guard. But they would know,
without a doubt, that I belong to you."
He could practically see her brain mulling over the idea, coming to the decision he wanted. Mentioning the Eastern kingdom had been the right option, he knew. It had been enough to push her over the edge.

"And you will, of course, get to keep the Western kingdom," he added as he stood up. He'd offered exactly what he wanted—needed, really—to get back to his position of power. And he could tell, by the look in the queen's eyes, that he would get it.

"Very well," she said, placing one paw on Jacques' shoulder. "That, I can afford to give. But now you must give me what I want."

Jacques nodded. The information he had was beyond a fair trade for what she had given up.

"The Eastern kingdom is--"

"I don't care about that," she said quickly. "I want to know who taught you owl-speak."

Jacques' heart sank. He'd hoped that she had forgotten about that. But it seemed as though he had no choice.

"Lumiere taught me," he said suddenly, averting his eyes from hers. The grip on his shoulder tightened.

"Then, Jacques," she said, "your first task as my commander is to bring Lumiere to me."

Jacques pulled away from her grip. "I can't do that," he said quickly. "He--he's peaceful!"

"You don't have a choice in the matter, commander," Antoinette said simply. "You will bring Lumiere to me. Or you will find yourself a place among the greatest sufferers of our time." She turned her back to him and returned to her throne. "Send in the guard. You will take two of them with you, to ensure that you do as you're told. And I will spread word of your...promotion."

Jacques swallowed, feeling a lump growing in his throat like a trapped acorn. "As you wish," he said, and turned to push open the door.
"And Jacques," she added, as he exited the room. "Remember. Your life...is a gift, generously given by my hand. And if I so choose...I will strip it away."

Jacques did not look at her. He nodded, eyes bulging with fear, and left the throne room to meeting the waiting guard. His guard.
CHAPTER TEN

JACQUES AND BYRGHIR AT ODDS

Jacques realized almost immediately that it had been too long since he'd last ruled anything other than his stomach. He had no idea how to speak to these guards, and he certainly held no delusion that they would even listen to him.

Instead, he just stared at them, and they glanced back, though some of them whispered among each other, occasionally laughing as though telling jokes just out of Jacques' earshot.

"Right," Jacques began, and they turned their attention somewhat to him. Some still whispered in small groups. "So, we're going to--"

"The Queen has ordered a small band to travel with our new..." The group turned to see a large grey squirrel, bedecked in armor--where on earth was she getting these kinds of items?--and holding a bone sword.

The armored squirrel met Jacques' eye and chuckled. "Ah, our new 'commander,' as it were." He slurred the honorific, and the rest of the guard laughed right along with him. "We'll need a band of four or five at least. Any volunteers?"
Not a single paw was raised. Jacques did his best not to look dejected, but it must have showed on his face, because the armored guard laughed harder than the others this time.

"Right, okay, you lot here in the front," the armored guard said. "Remember, he's your...leader. So do what he says. But don't leave his side for a moment." He nudged one of them in the shoulder, and they laughed among themselves again while throwing glances in Jacques' direction.

Jacques moved past the crowd of guards and stood before the armored guard, eyeing him with some sense of fear and a lot of curiosity. "Who're you supposed to be, anyway?"

The guard looked down at him, placing one paw on Jacques' head. "I'm the guy you deposed, runt," he said coldly. "You don't need to know my name. Just call me Captain."

Jacques had no place in his heart at the moment for guilt; he threw off the captain's arm and stared up at him, eyes fierce. "In that case, "Captain," you will find me some weaponry."

"You mean your tongue isn't enough?" the captain laughed, and the rest of the guard joined him in a raucous chorus. Jacques turned to face them, wishing at that moment he had a sword, or the prowess to steal one. He didn't even think about being unable to wield one.

"It's more than enough to shame the lot of you," Jacques said loudly. The guard still laughed, but it sounded somewhat muffled. "Disgusting, really. A disgusting band of little children pandering to whoever gives them the biggest helping of food. Can you even fight?" He shook his head with absolute certainty. "I doubt it. You wield weapons, sure. But you all have weak hearts, softer than moss!"

The laughter had subsided now and was replaced with pair after pair of anger. Some of these, Jacques was certain, were from his own guard. And it was these defectors that he hoped to shame the most.

"Get out of my sight, all of you. Go find a floor to scrub." He turned back to the captain, whose gaze appeared the heaviest of all. "Fetch me a spear, and squirrels who can actually protect me. Not this sorry lot."
The captain stared at him for a long time before turning his back on Jacques, his tail swishing furiously. "As you wish..."Commander." He stepped away, the rest of the guard following him in step.

"Still loyal to him," Jacques commented as the last few retreated around the various bends in the corridor. He had an uphill battle to fight, it seemed, for this leg of his journey. And though he desperately didn't want the guard with him, he needed to earn their trust somehow. What better way than to get some alone time with a few special members? He could even convince them to switch sides, see his way of things, not that brutish armored--

"Weapons," the captain huffed, dropping a pile of spears and swords in Jacques' wake. Jacques only had to give them a cursory glance before--

"These are all broken," Jacques said, lifting one of the spears whose handle had been broken in half. The result was something closer to a knife, and the bone-blade itself was rough and chipped.

"You didn't specify, "Commander,"" the captain said, turning around. "You can make do with that, of course--"

"You would be wise, Captain, not to turn your back on me," Jacques said quietly. "You would also be wise not to cross me." They both knew these were empty threats, but the captain still did not move. "I suppose this bone-knife will work. But I expect a new blade to be selected before my departure. Am I clear?"

The captain nodded, and turned to face Jacques again with an outstretched paw. "I will take it to the smith directly. You should follow. It would do you well to learn the layout of this place."

Jacques nodded, crossing his arms tightly as he followed the captain through the mushroom-lit halls. He paid little mind to the direction he was traveling, instead watching the captain's back and, occasionally, the eyes of whatever guard he happened to pass on the way.

They all met him with defiant stares, noses turned up and eyes turned down. It would take a lot more than threatening their old commander, Jacques knew, to turn them over to his way of thinking. He
wondered if he'd even have time before Pierre came running again, furious that Jacques hadn't bothered to spread the rumors far and wide.

"This place is rather small," Jacques commented as they turned another corner filled with blue mushrooms.

"Too many cave-ins of late," the captain responded. "We've had to downsize."

"How do you train a force down here?"

"We don't." The captain stopped and turned to face Jacques. "We go up to the rocks to train. Our squirrels can fight in the worst of weather, including the treacherous snow."

"Do they get snow elsewhere?" Jacques asked.

The captain shrugged. "We're not an invading force, Jacques. We defend. We are the fortress, our army the walls."

Jacques pondered that for a moment as the captain turned around again, leading him further into the so-called fortress. A fighting team designed only to defend...

"Byrghir," the captain said suddenly. Jacques looked up at him, head tilted.

"Captain?" Jacques said. He did not face him.

"That's what I'm known as," he said. "Ancient names, old names...names of the grey squirrels who were conquered by the invaders with night's fur."

Jacques raised a paw to his mouth, but the gasp escaped nonetheless. He wasn't sure why; it seemed obvious that the grey squirrels would have names. But hearing such a name aloud was a new experience.

And the name itself resonated within his chest, like a bell chiming a story long forgotten in the squirrel world.

Finally they approached the smith's domicile, a small, circular area lined with all sorts of bones from a variety of creatures.
"So those animals ARE real," Jacques whispered.

"Of course they're real," Byrghir responded. "What did you think, that these were all squirrel bones?" He laughed, the smith laughing along with him. Jacques flushed, but continued to gaze upon the bones with awe.

"Some are actually teeth," the smith answered. "Pretty rare we can get those, but quite a bit nicer than bones."

"A rare commodity indeed," Jacques said, his eyes falling on one very long, delicate shape in the corner.

The smith followed his eyes and then nodded solemnly. "Ah, snake tooth," he said, and Jacques met his eyes. "Beauties, but hard to work with. Like owl bones."

"Owl bones?" Jacques asked.

"Hollow," Byrghir responded. "Their bones break so easily. Can snap it with a simple stone, really."

Jacques approached the snake tooth, running a paw over it carefully. When he reached the sharp tip, he rubbed the edge, and found the hole in the center of the sharpened end.

"Taken a liking to it?" the smith said, chuckling. Jacques pulled his paw away abruptly, worried how these two squirrels might see him if he were to express interest in such a deadly item.

"I just..." Jacques turned his eyes elsewhere and fell upon another shape, this one quite a bit more familiar: an owl's beak. "Where did you get that?"

"Remember the owl I mentioned before?" Byrghir said. "Took his eyes and beak. Kept some feathers, too."

"Can you use that?" Jacques asked, pointing at it with one paw.

"Don't know," the smith replied, standing up from his stool. "Never tried. But if ya like it, Commander..."
"Do your best," Jacques said, letting his paw drop. "I...I'm confident, if you've made all these other weapons."

"Ha," the smith laughed sharply. "Those were simple crafts. But this..." He pulled the owl beak off the wall and ran his paw over its length. "This will be a fine blade, I can wager you that."

"Can it be a knife?" Jacques asked.

"Whatever for? It's got no range, no strength to it...whoever heard of a commander with a knife?"

"Just do as I say," Jacques said wearily, stepping past the smith and Byrghir. "Have it ready by the next morning, if you can."

The smith regarded him before nodding slowly. "Of course, commander. You shall not be disappointed." He motioned for Byrghir to leave, and the hulking captain stepped out to follow Jacques back down the corridor.

"You're rusty, aren't you," Byrghir commented as they came to an intersection. Jacques, unable to remember which way they'd gone, headed straight. The captain made no reply.

"No one respects me," Jacques said quietly by way of response.

Byrghir chuckled. "Of course they don't. Antoinette spoke to you directly. You ousted me without a fight. And you gave up on so many of these squirrels to save your own skin. Why should they?"

"They don't understand," Jacques said, feeling a bitter taste come to his mouth. "If I had died, Antoinette could have just killed them all. Me being alive...that means something to her."

"Doesn't mean a thing to us, really," Byrghir said. Jacques stopped and faced him, worry clouding his face. "You left us."

"Were you one of them, Byrghir?"

Byrghir laughed loudly, the sound reverberating through the cavern. "Remember me now, do you, Jacques?"
Jacques looked over his face once, twice, what seemed like a thousand times in the space of a few moments, before he shook his head, very slowly. Byrghir's laughter died away, but he kept a very small smile.

"I wouldn't think so," Byrghir said finally. "I lived pretty far away from the king's hollow."

Jacques' face flushed a dark red. Not even his second-in-command had any respect for him. He was making such light of this situation, one which had Jacques on top. Had his subjects been the same way, when he was a proper king?

"The messengers told us a lot about you, though," Byrghir continued. "You were so lazy that you had others split nuts for you. Really, Jacques..."

"What I did as king is none of your business!" Jacques snapped, unsure as to why this one squirrel was so easily getting under his skin. He could feel his tail puffing out and his ears flattening. Byrghir, on the other hand, looked completely calm.

"Did," Byrghir repeated, and Jacques felt the air deflate out of him. "You may imagine yourself reclaiming glory and kingship. But you were never fit to be king. You deserve no glory." He poked Jacques in the chest with one paw. "You don't even deserve to be our commander right now. You're weak. Small-minded, and small-hearted to boot. Your selfish nature has brought you to a place where you will move no higher. You will only fall."

Byrghir marched off, leaving Jacques to stare after him. His tail lay flat on the ground, eyes watching the receding shoulder blades on Byrghir's back. Jacques felt so incredibly small, smaller than he ever had in his life, and it wasn't just Byrghir's size that made him feel that way.
Synopsis/Outline: The Fall of Ratatoskr

Act I

- Jacques has lost his forest and is surviving on the outskirts of the southwestern area.
- He has a conversation with Lumiere about losing the forest and how to get it back.
- Jacques travels to Noce in order to find a safe place to think.
- Jacques finds and speaks with Alexandre and Pierre.
- The owl pays a visit to Jacques to speak of owl-speak and snake-tongue and of Pierre.
- The next morning, Jacques receives a summons to the North.
- They travel and talk/verbally attack each other for the day.
- That night, Jacques travels to the Eastern castle.
- Jacques finds Pierre has killed Alexandre.
- Pierre threatens Jacques and expects him to “spread his story” to everyone.
- Jacques carries Alexandre's body back to Noce.
- Jacques buries Alex's body with some help from Lumiere.
- The guard and Jacques continue north.
- They arrive at the underground fortress and Jacques is led into the Queen's chamber.
- Jacques meets Antoinette for the first time and attempts to bargain with her.
- Jacques lies about learning owl-speak, putting Lumiere's life in danger.
- Antoinette grants Jacques command of her army.
- The army hates Jacques, for the most part.
- Jacques meets Byrghir.
- Jacques and a team of four squirrels go to find Lumiere.
- Jacques convinces the guards to stay behind.
- Jacques finds Lumiere but cannot convince him of anything.
- Pierre finds Jacques and threatens him again.
- Byrghir comes to Jacques' rescue.
- Jacques and Byrghir travel back to the Northern kingdom together to tell their lie about Lumiere.
- Antoinette doesn't seem fooled but sends them off to the East anyway.
- Jacques, Byrghir, and the scouting team leave first.
- They reach the river as the scouting team has crossed.
- Jacques leaps across the river, Byrghir fails.
- An owl rescues Byrghir from the river and then scolds Jacques.
- Byrghir and Jacques find the remains of the scouts (eaten by snakes).
- They follow the river back to the original crossing point and find the army.
- The army fords the river with logs and they march on to the castle.
- They are ambushed by snakes as the owls flee overhead.
- The armies fight for some time while Jacques hides in a tree.
- Byrghir is fatally wounded.
- Jacques leaps down and kills a squirrel.
- Jacques comes face to face with Pierre, who hisses commands at the snakes.
- The Southern army pushes the Northern army back to the river and Jacques calls a retreat.
Act II

- Antoinette tells Jacques that she knows of his deception, jails him
- Jacques barters his way out and says he'll bring back Lumiere's dead body
- Antoinette permits him to leave with ten guards
- They travel back to the South, the guards are waylaid by snakes
- Jacques is captured by Pierre
- Pierre cuts off part of Jacques' tail to use as an ornament
- Pierre takes Jacques to Noce and tells him of his plans for the dead tree
- Pierre lets Jacques go, saying that "they are the last two and should stick together"
- Jacques flees to the west
- Jacques finds Lumiere as he is being dragged off by Northern guards
- Jacques is "given credit" for the capture in front of Lumiere
- Jacques is then jailed as well for insubordination to the Queen
- Jacques breaks down and tells Lumiere of everything
- Lumiere forgives him as he's being dragged off to the execution
- Jacques is brought in at the same time to witness Lumiere's death
- Jacques threatens to kill himself if Lumiere dies
- Antoinette backs down and agrees to spare Lumiere
- Lumiere is released but chooses to stay to help Jacques
- Pierre captures Jacques again and throws him in a jail
- Later that night...
- Pierre takes Jacques back out to Noce
- Pierre tells Jacques of the "real legend" and the chosen squirrels
- Pierre takes Jacques back to the jail and throws him inside
- Morning chanting event
- A small team comes to break Jacques out of jail
- They travel north and the first snow falls
Act III

- Jacques and the rescue team returns in heavy snow
- Jacques tells the army of the hollowing of Noce
- Antoinette refuses to listen to Jacques
- Jacques assumes control of the kingdom and forces Antoinette out
- Lumiere and Jacques inform the army of Pierre's ability
- The army marches on Noce with Lumiere and Jacques leading
- They arrive to an abandoned area but with Noce completely hollowed out
- Ambush, yet again
- Pierre flees to the upper area of Noce; Antoinette follows after
- Jacques stays behind to help Lumiere with the army
- Lumiere leaves to go find the owls
- Jacques manages to kill some enemies and then is cornered by snakes
- The owls arrive again and save Jacques and apologize
- Jacques scales Noce, the thundersnow begins
- Jacques finds Antoinette injured and Pierre gleeful
- Jacques and Pierre fight while Antoinette flees
- Pierre pushes Jacques off Noce
- A lightning strike kills Pierre and sets Noce on fire
- Jacques tells the armies of Pierre's death and urges them to leave
- The forests catch fire
- Jacques attempts to move the animals out, finds Antoinette bleeding to death
- Jacques carries Antoinette to the edge of the forest
- They find a plains and running water to the east (the Owl River)
- The fire is halted by rain and snow
- Jacques is named keeper of the forest and they move back to the center through the burned trees
- Noce is gone and in her place is a very small sprout