

One Paw Clapping in the Forest

Chapter 1: How Arctos and Ursula Nai went to Lyamael City to buy a pig

It was a fragrant spring morning at the edge of the city; flowers were a-bloom. The sun was shining, the river was rolling along. Birds were chirping, squirrels were... well. Squirreling, of course! Arctos yipped and squealed as Ursula attacked her with a spray of freezing cold clearwater straight from the family water reserve. Arctos shook herself wildly, returning the spray of cold water, drenching Ursula, whose squeals echoed her own.

"Stop! Stop! I surrender! If we aren't back home with a pig by sundown father will feed us to the trolls! We best be moving along now." Ursula nudged Arctos in the direction of the northern path that led to Lyamael City, where the fanciest pigs were out at the market.

Ursula had been tasked with finding a steed for her father, now that her brother had left to apprentice under the Shaman of T'ir, taking their Anna with him. Anna had been in the family since Ursula was a baby, but the boar was of good stock. In fact, Anna's parents had lived for decades with Ursula's parents before bidding farewell to their mortal coils.

Arctos didn't much care for the hooved beasts. She preferred to scamper along, occasionally leaping and bounding into the trees, flying from branch to branch - hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting and smelling the trees as she flew through the breeze. Limbs outstretched, tethered to nothing in the world - truly free! - how could riding on another being's back possibly compare to flying through the air? Nonetheless, Ursula was her best friend in the world, and it was Ursula's responsibility, so Arctos would help her procure a stinky pig.

The two journeyed for a little over two hours before they noticed a dark shadow pass overhead. Neither knew what the shadow meant - perhaps Manotr, resident inventor of Lyamael City, had finally succeeded in creating the promised Zephyr-craft that he had been designing since the beginning of time. Or perhaps it was a rare 'apple of Dunia' - a day-asteroid that breached the planet's atmosphere during the hours before noon-dark. Regardless, it was summarily dismissed and soon forgotten as the aroma of freshly baked grasshopper pie sneaked stealthily across the path, percolating and permeating through their environs, pushing out any thought other than PIIIIEEEE!

Old Brother K'pizamista was part of the reason Arctos had agreed to help Ursula with her quest. The friendly baker always had a piece of pie and a cozy bearhug just for her. Collecting both, and watching as Ursula delivered the order of pie tins her mother had fashioned at his request, Arctos turned eyes back to the path.

They would eat their pies as they took a break from their trek at first twilight. As noondark set, the playmates decided to play their favorite game; 'Grow a Tale.' The game involved taking a real incident and building it into an outlandish story that absolutely no one would believe by exaggerating or misrepresenting details and fudging facts.

"Me first!" declared Ursula. "There once lived a fellow of thunderous might whose forearms were oft mistaken for tree trunks. He earned the trust and friendship of all he met and the undying loyalty of his faithful companion, a shining, luxurious creature with wings of gold and ears soft as white gossamer. He wore a green hooded cloak and commanded such authority that those who came in his presence had no choice - nay, no desire! - but to shower him with gifts of wealth and vows of fealty. He in turn showered all who had a need with favors and bounty and the cycle continued. Ballads were written of his famous exploits - his victory against the goblins, the

time he kidnapped the orc princess as a punishment for her brothers harassing passersby. Statues were built and murals painted. Children would dress up as him and take turns playing the man or the fuzzy winged mammal."

"Wait, wait wait..." interrupted Arctos. "You can't just make up a story without basing it on a real person. Who is this mystery legend supposed to be?"

With an impish grin, Ursula replied, "why Uncle Waïam and your father, of course!"

Arctos roared with laughter. Ursula's uncle, her mother's younger brother, had fancied himself something of a steal-from-the-rich-and-give-to-the-poor figure. Together with her father, he had once tried to negotiate a deal with the leader of the fishing village to put a stop to the haggling and bartering of the fishmongers at market since they always seemed to get the better end of the bargain. When that didn't work, they had tried to kidnap the leader's daughter, a burly maiden of great physical prowess, who had simply knocked them out and delivered them in an unmanned pig-cart straight to the Naï family stronghold.

As soon as Arctos knew who Ursula was growing a tail on, everything fell into place and it made the story all the more hilarious. The remainder of their repose was spent sharing similar tall tales and some crabapple ale that made a perfect counterbalance for the sweet menthe taste of the pie.

It took them just under one hour more to reach the resplendent city of Lyamael. The shining spires that rose over head were taller than most of the trees in the outer forest, though as one went further in, the trees grew taller than the clouds. Likewise, as they traveled further in to the city, all the way at the center was the colossal Beacon, where the Bells of Taïr and the Green Orb that could be heard, seen and felt for miles around stood. Their destination was the market, just past the Square, and the market was where the pig show was currently held.

Pigs of various sizes, ones with ornate saddles, with horns that had been painted, twisted, braided, manes similarly decorated, and tails of varying length. Some had been bejeweled from head to hoof. Some were decked in silken caparisons and mirror-worked ambaaris.

In one stall far to the left side was a shabby store run by a very tired-looking old woman and an enormous pig that had a tarnished caparison that looked like it had been covered with week-old menthe paste that had been left out in the sun too long. Arctos almost didn't notice it the shy, little pig that peeked out from between the giant beast's legs. Tapping Ursula on the shoulder she walked briskly in the direction of the old woman, unenticed by the row of shiny, garish pigs decked up to the ears and vendors calling out words of praise or tempting offers.

The old lady looked away as though she had dreaded this moment. Ursula, unlike Arctos, had been tempted by a pig two stalls away and a merchant that had loudly proclaimed that the purple painted rainbow pig with copious bling and eyelashes longer than any pig should have was a mere 20 gold pieces. Arctos eyed Ursula, then turned to the lady and asked,

"Mother, ye look like ye speak truth and nothing less. Please do us a kindness and give my companion one good reason why the pig two stalls down is being sold for 20 gold pieces and tell us why yer pig would be a better buy even at 40 pieces."

"40 pieces!?!!" Ursula shouted with a start. "Are you crazy? Why in the world would we spend 40 pieces when we can get that pig for 20 pieces and save father the extra gold!?"

The old lady looked at the two, considering.

"Ye here for yeh father ye say?"

Ursula nodded.

"A family that would send their daughter out to buy a pig, a daughter that would do so, and a friend to look out for that daughter with diligence is a family that must have much love to share." The old lady stroked her chin, thoughtfully, then looked at Arctos.

"Ye do seem a good family for my Suki, so I will tell ye true. That pig has not more than 5 years left and is in constant pain after a harsh fall crippled his hind legs. Stroga over there keeps him numbed with a dose of something stronger than crabapple ale every so often, or the swine would squeal and roar the whole day through.

As for Suki, she is five of age and born of a prize winning steed and a gentle sow who live, still, in a pasture near my farm. I am in no rush to sell her, and would gladly go home happy should ye choose to go a different path even now. For 40 pieces, I would give ye Suki and Suki's runt of a little brother, Sixer. Born last in the litter it is a miracle Sixer is still alive, but he clings to Suki and she adores him."

"Done!" Arctos declared, giving Ursula not a moment to consider. Ursula, not an unreasonable girl, considered a moment after Arctos had committed them to the sale, then agreed, this was an obvious deal, anyone could see that.

And so Arctos and Ursula returned with Suki and Sixer.

Chapter 2: How Arctos tasted the waters of the green lake and began to phase out
Ursula perched on Suki's back, cooing soothing noises in her ear every so often as Arctos scampered alongside Sixer, coaxing the little guy into friendship, taking care never to leave his sister's watchful purview lest she panic. The four travelers walked along the path back to the forest for a time before second twilight took hold. The heat of the day had swallowed the water they had brought, so Arctos took to a tree to see if she could spy a water supply to replenish their skins. Arctos herself did not notice thirst much, but she knew Ursula and the pigs would need water before they reached home. Far in the distance, she saw a lake, aglow with the light of wisps.

"There! Head west!" she directed Ursula. "I see a spring lake in the clearing up ahead. We can take a short break before heading home. It isn't too far off the path, I wonder why we've never seen it before."

"You've never seen it before because you've always had your nose in a pie for half the journey and we're always rushed to get back before nightfall."

Mild squabbling ensued while they made their way westward. Neither noticed the wisps that had previously lit the lake up had slowly winked out, one by one, as though they were summoned elsewhere by some mysterious force.

As they approached the lake, Sixer began to bleat in a less than playful tone. With each step forward he seemed more and more reluctant to keep on, and finally he let out one panicked whine and hid behind his sister's legs.

"What's wrong? It's ok, little guy, see?"

Arctos, who had been a few paces ahead, splashed into the water, took a short swim, and a little sip, then filled her skin. When she turned to look, she saw that Ursula had a curious expression on her face. It was as though she was looking past Arctos at something. In fact, she seemed to be looking *through* Arctos.

She explained her plan to Arctos, hoping her friend would understand, then quickly tied the pigs to a nearby tree. She watched carefully for any signs of their phasing in and out the way Arctos had but saw no evidence of cause for concern. Then she foraged for poke berries and fashioned signs out of large dried out Willa leaves and posted them on some nearby trees. She used her knife to etch a large 'X' in the trunks of the trees just in case.

Meanwhile, Arctos had scrambled up a tree, perched on a branch and seemed to be chewing on a leaf, thoughtfully. Ursula called her down. Arctos was reluctant, initially, but something prompted her to come down and see what Ursula had to say.

"Are you feeling any different from before? Can you understand what I am saying? It sounded like you were speaking a different language before, does it sound like I am doing the same?"

Ursula queried.

Arctos whimpered, uncharacteristically. "I didn't think I was speaking in a different language; it sounded just the same as always to me. I don't feel any different now either. I can understand what you are saying perfectly fine. I know something happened... but I don't know what it was and it frightens me."

Ursula breathed a sigh of relief. This time she understood every word Arctos said. She gave her friend a long hug, then said, "I'm going to use the lavastone pendant that father gave me just in case. It was enchanted to hold three charges of lesser restoration in the event of an emergency. I think this qualifies." She held the stone over Arctos, but rather than glowing with magic, it stayed inert and lifeless in her fingers. Puzzled, she decided to cast a spell to detect the presence of an evil, or possibly - dare she hope? - good creature in their midst that was the source of their current dilemma. Rather than feeling the tingle of magic on her fingers, She felt nothing. She tried again, but to no avail.

After a few moments, she turned to Arctos and said, 'Do you think you can manage to make it all the way back home without a break? I want to get home to mother and father as soon as we can.'

"That sounds excellent to me. Let's go."

"Wait! At the very least, in case it was the water, let's put your skin in the pie box, now that there are no pies left in it and keep that away from our rations."

And so they journeyed on.

Chapter 3: How Ursula's parents and uncle sciened Arctos' and her father's transformations
Toward midnight, just as they reached the last bend before the Naï stronghold, Ursula started to sneeze violently. After the first two, Arctos had reflexively uttered the customary blessing in response, but after the third, "ꞑꞑꞑꞑ ꞑꞑꞑꞑ" was what she said. Ursula turned to look at Arctos. She saw her eyes glowing green in the dark. Not wanting her friend to be alarmed, she picked up the pace, hoping their parents would be able to identify the cause of Arctos' predicament. The first to greet them was Arctos' father, Phascos, followed closely by Uncle Waïam.

"Ho! You brought pigs! Good work!" cheered Uncle Waïam. Phascos gave Arctos a slightly awkward, but loving pat on the head. He hadn't ever been very attached to Arctos, and she, for her own part, had spent more time with Ursula and her parents than she had with Phascos, who was always off on some adventure with Uncle Waïam.

The four went in search of Morgaela and Seivel, Ursula's parents. Ursula kept glancing over at Arctos, whose eyes were no longer glowing green. Her own eyes stung as though she were

coming down with a bug and her nose itched again. Seivel placed his palm just above her head, spreading his fingers, casually checking his daughter's state of health with a minor detect disease spell. As he did so, Ursula filled them in with the details of their travels, and displayed, not without some childish pride, Suki and Sixer. Morgaela, smiled, lightly rubbed Suki and Sixer to welcome them, then subtly lifted a finger in Seivel's direction for a moment, voicelessly whispering a message to him that she would take care of Arctos while he was to determine the root of Ursula's sickness. Her uneasiness was conveyed in thought, though it was not apparent to any who were not privy to the message. The two had long been adept at passing messages to each other without showing any evidence of it to any who should happen to be in their vicinity. They often worked in tandem, understanding without words what the other intended and swiftly executing whatever was needed. They did have moments where knowing each other as well as they did was a hindrance - especially when they fought. Anticipating answers and responding to them before they were spoken was always a risk in an argument. This, however, was not one of those occasions.

Morgaela led her daughter's companion to the guest room that was practically Arctos' room for the number of nights and amount of time she spent there.

"I'll just be a moment, Arctos, I want to run some tests to make sure everything is ok," she said, and went to her room to bring her testing kit. After taking vials and slides of samples, she affixed two crystals behind Arctos' ears and asked her to focus on a glowing gemstone while she looked into her eyes. Arctos' eyes began to glow and she spoke a few undecipherable words, but if Morgaela was concerned, she did not allow it to be seen by the young one.

Returning to her study, Morgaela glided to a tall bookshelf and gingerly withdrew a large, brown book out of the second shelf from the top. Opening the book, she sifted through until she reached a page with an image not unlike Arctos. The image was not, Arctos, however, and the book itself was a history of the familiarity between Arctos' & Phascos' line with the elves line. Their species had long been linked to the Naï elves, particularly ones of druidic persuasion. Over the course of generations they had evolved to be diurnal and consume a more varied palate than their forebears. The page Morgaela had been searching for was the documented incidence of a malady that plagued the species that ordinarily had a unique immunity to poisons. Resulting in an affliction that modified the very genome that protected them, KoRV, as it was termed, was described only as a physical malady. What Morgaela now feared was that the retrovirus had been altered by the effect of Dunia under the influence of Feag, and some unknown magic had caused it to mutate into a magical malady.

Meanwhile, Ursula was babbling on in the other room with Seivel, Waïam and Phascos. Occasionally, Ursula would sneeze or Phascos would have a fit of coughing that neither seemed concerned about. Seivel, on the other hand, had been disturbed by the result - or lack thereof - from his minor spell earlier, and was none too happy. Not wanting to cause any undue distress, he unobtrusively continued his inspection of his daughter, and extended his analysis to include Phascos and Waïam as well. The spell he had cast before had been unsuccessful, as though there had been an antimagic field surrounding them. Now, however, he was able to see that a sickness had, indeed, caught a hold of Ursula. Unable to identify the sickness, nor determine the extent of its potential for damage, he excused himself to check on Morgaela.

The two met in the study, where he revealed what he had found, and she explained her theory about the mKoRV. While they were discussing what to do, a loud crash was heard in the next room. They rushed out to find Ursula and Waïam on the floor, pale and terror-stricken, while Phascos was nowhere to be found. Ursula whispered, “he... vanished! Just like Arctos did before! She said... she...” words failed her.

Across the hall in the room Arctos was in, high pitched ululating and snarling began to emanate. The three rushed to the room to see Phascos and Arctos, eyes glowing green, faces contorted with rage, claws and fangs bared, scowling, ready to attack.

Chapter 4: Me Arctos

When I awoke, I was in a tree, arms dangling on either side. My left shoulder throbbed as though it had taken a blow. A memory flashed across my brain but I couldn't quite catch a hold of it. There seemed to be quite a few such memories floating through my brain. The kind that if you were to finally manage to catch, they would be clearer and more vividly raw than others. These flew like miniscule mosquitos through my brain - I had a feeling they were like the kind that were small and fast that you could never catch but had the most potent venom.

As I strained to catch a thread of one of those memories, I felt the weightlessness I had before, except this time it was not in my extremities, but in my head, and it came in a rhythmic throb. It was as though I was losing altitude quite suddenly. With each pulse it felt as though parts of my mind were being detached and rearranged, as though my brain was a puzzle that had multiple solutions depending on where one joined the pieces.

**CHEW. I CHEW. I CHEW THIS LEAF. THIS LEAF IS GREEN. I
SWALLOW. THE LEAF I SWALLOW IS GONE. MUST EAT MORE
LEAF. GREEN LEAF. LEAF ON BRANCH. ME ON BRANCH. I PICK
NEW LEAF. I CHEW LEAF. WHERE URSULA?**

Where's Ursula? I remember returning from the lake and seeing father and Uncle Waïam. I remember Morgaela putting some strange crystals behind my ears and asking me to focus on a gemstone. The rest is so hard to remember. Like trying to wake up from a dream. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I am conscious of a deep, agonizing heartache when I think of Ursula. Part of me fears what probing my subconscious mind might reveal.

**DIE. SHE MUST DIE! ALL NISSE MUST DIE! THE MASTER
COMMANDS US TO KILL ALL NISSE! THEY ARE NOT WELCOME
HERE. THEY MUST BE KILLED!**

I didn't mean to do it. The rage was overwhelming. **GOOD GREEN LEAF! MUST EAT
NOW. CLAWS ARE NOT SHARP ENOUGH.** What have I done?! Oh my dearest

sister! Please come back. Please save me from myself. **WHO GOES THERE? STOP! ATTACK! MUST KILL INTRUDER.** I remember seeing the orb. **LISTEN TO MASTER! NISSE MUST DIE!** Where am I? What have I done? I cannot bear to be here any longer. **COME MY KIN. FOREST IS OURS! WE MUST FIND THE SOURCE.** What is the source? Who am I? **WHERE IS THE SOURCE? ME ARCTOS.**

Dearest Urnnaar.

By the time you receive this message we may all be in grave peril but more likely, long gone. Be alert, be strong, my son the great Dunia will show you the way yet.

Your father and I have placed our research and crystals in the hidden cellar where only you will know to look, but be warned. A contagion has broken out among the elves and we are succumbing to the plague in greater numbers than your father and I can contain. We lost your dearest sister to the koalas before we knew what was happening. Arctos was first to contract the disease, and in between stretches of delirious rage she gains lucidity and laments her loss, filled with grief and unfathomable remorse. There is anger on our part, at a disease that has taken both our daughters from us, and anguish, for we know not how to cure it. The next to fall prey to the virus was Phascar. Waïam is devastated, but holds out hope. He sends missives by lark to the surrounding cities, but respects the quarantine we have placed on our village.

The bears have since retreated to the trees, where they alternate between lucidity and delirium, in search of an unknown master and the source they cannot explain. Do not come back until you know it is safe to do so, and when you do, we hope our preliminary findings and samples can provide you and any scholars you share them with some groundwork to be able to build upon.

Love always, my darling boy. My heart aches to see you, but my hope is that I do not, for I could not bear to lose you too.

Love from your father, whose spirit shall guide you forever from within.

Your Ma.