

V i n c e n t L a k e s



The Children of the Wild

The Children of the Wild - Vincent Lakes

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by

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The Children of the Wild

The early evening was suffocatingly warm and humid among the dense trees of Marathlor, somewhere in the deep rain forests of the great southern continent of Solanar. The last fading light of the sun still lingered upon the treetops, filtered by the leaves so that a hazy gloom was all that remained underneath the upper layers of the giant trees. The air was brooding and heavy, full of beastly shrieks, stinging buzzing and strange twittering that echoed in the surreal environment of this exotic splendour. The colorful birds and fluffy rodents moved hastily through the verdant scenery, rushing toward their nests and dens to find safety before the dark when all the fierce beasts and predators would come out to hunt. The jungle was not safe during the day, but at night it became a living and breathing menace that devoured anything too weak to defend themselves.

Beneath a thick layer that formed the ceiling of the forest, a most peculiar village had been built, supported by the massive branches of the tallest trunks. Like a wooden raft that was floating in the air, the entire village swayed gently upon its flexible foundations as a small tribe of mysterious people had gathered around a large fire at the center of the village. It would have been easy to guess that these people were the Nomads of Parisol. But no, the shepherds of the savanna wore no marks like those on the skins of these forsaken people. All adults had their bodies full of strange symbols that crawled around like serpents on their skin, reaching every little part of their figure. This complicated structure built into one unbroken line was the source of their greatest power - the gift of shapeshifting, which had earned them a unique name among the peoples of Solanar - the Morphers - one of the most feared and dreaded nations alongside with the Dryads of Narachel, sentenced to isolation by the fear of unknown and unexplainable. They were forsaken, but by no means were they forgotten, for in the legends of old their name was still whispered unwillingly, as if it gave the most uncomfortable feeling for the one who said it.

Covered only by a simple loincloth and nothing else, the men, women and children had come together to witness the rite of passage for one of their daughters. Sindiel, a girl at the verge of adulthood, who had had her first menstrual bleeding exactly one month ago, was about to receive the spell tattooed on her skin that would distinguish her from the rest of the world for life. She would become a true Morpher - a hunter in the dark. And in the form of a great black panther, she would guard the forest that had whispered her name since the day she was born. But before she could do that, she had a long and painful ritual ahead that would require all of her strength and perseverance.

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The rhythmic pounding of the drums overwhelmed all the other sounds as Sindiel approached the fire with her parents whose skins were fully covered with identical signs with the rest of the tribe. Signs that bound them to this way of life, signs that defined them as a nation, as if it was a uniform they all chose to wear.

"Be strong, child," her mother whispered, as they stopped in front of a wooden table with leather straps attached at both ends. Her words were supportive, but her voice lacked emotion. The ritual would last for three or four days, depending on how fast the shaman worked. During the entire time she was not allowed to have any food, only water and leaves of the Caltharn bush. A herb that would help her to withstand the immense pain as the shaman of the tribe would insert ink beneath her skin with a sharpened bone of a leopard, a detail that had very significant symbolic value. A leopard represented the most important qualities: strength, agility and quick mind for all Morphers of Marathlor, signifying the deep kinship they shared with each other, no matter how independent and self-contained the individuals had become over millennia as they adopted more and more habits and features from their beloved spirit animal. It was the reminder of what once was, where they stood now, and the incentive to accelerate the rate of evolution as it continued to shape them further away from humanoids.

"Go with courage in your heart," Sindiel's father incited her, seemingly proud that his daughter had finally reached this stage in her life. His pride was certainly true, but was it because of his own achievement to bring a new member to the growing pack, or was it truly because of his daughter's milestone? Nevertheless, all his assumed concerns were in vain, for Sindiel, as fragile as she seemed, was determined to do what the tribe expected from her. She wanted to become one with the beasts and prowl among the ferns at night; furthermore, she was more than willing to become a feared guardian of the woods and defend the land with her life. Her deepest wish was to secure the safety of all the young ones in the village and kill all the intruders that wandered within the borders of Marathlor, especially the stubborn Horned Ones of the South that constantly, and seemingly tirelessly, attempted to conquer the forest with their fires and axes. She was going to suffer through the ritual and become what she so passionately desired, or she would die on the table, but the shame of lamenting and wailing was something she refused to bear.

The grey leaves that were stuffed in her mouth tasted very bland, almost like paper, but after a while she felt a slight bitter aftertaste that made her grimace lightly. Two elder warriors made sure she was tightly fastened to the table before stepping back. As the first few minutes wandered by, she felt the drums beginning to pound harder in her head, but then the sound became strangely distorted

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and vague. She began to slide away from reality, leaving all the people around her behind as she floated away. Her body felt tingly, which progressed into complete numbness within few minutes. The Caltharn leaves were potent, but they would not be enough to hold back all that was reserved for her. Once her arms and legs were firmly against the wooden table without a chance to move, the wrinkly shaman approached her with his tools. The ceremony was about to begin - a sacred service to honor the Immortal Anduniel, who was the protector spirit of all the Morpher tribes around the jungle.

And then, after the first Awen¹ signs had been carved on her smooth skin, inducing several thin blood streams running down on her feet, the warriors returned to the table and carried her inside the shaman's hut where the work would continue until the spell was finished. The crowd applauded and cheered for having another child to reach the critical age required for the rite. A feast was held to honor both the proud parents and the suffering daughter, who heard their joyful merrymaking through her foggy affliction as the shaman punctured her mercilessly over and over again with the hideous blade. There was something strange about this feast though, the people refused to eat much, mostly just nibbling their meals reluctantly. Only those without the marks of the spell on their skin hungered for roast, the rest of them waited for the night, and the moment when they could sink their teeth into raw meat and taste the fresh blood of their prey. The daytime habits of these people were merely a veil that covered their true nature - a tradition from the distant past that was preserved for the sake of all the younglings who were still unable to follow their parents at night.

The first couple of hours had been relatively easy for her as the drug she had enjoyed was working wonderfully well, but as the old shaman climbed higher toward her inner thighs, she felt like every burning hit could make her cry. But even in her obscured mind, she refused to show signs of weakness. She might have moaned quietly, yelped when the blade cut a little too deep, coating her forehead with cold sweat, but she did not cry. And as the time passed, and the village outside of the hut turned quiet as the silence of twilight sneaked over the land, the pain turned into vexed torment, and eventually into unbearable throbbing.

The fresh ink shone sharply black underneath her skin like lichens in water, slithering along her well shaped legs in the dim torchlight. Both moons appeared that night, the silvery Suri and the blue Aure, which was commonly believed to increase the power of the spell. Sindiel was truly blessed, even though she probably would not congratulate herself even if she was conscious enough to realize such details. Slumbering restlessly in a nightmare that refused to end, she welcomed all

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the demons with utter defiance, laughing at her tormentors.

"I'll have to rest a little," the shaman mumbled with a squeaky voice, mostly to himself as Sindiel was not in a state to understand his words. "We'll continue at sunrise." Then, without bothering to loosen up the leather straps at all, the old, wrinkled man walked away and left the girl alone with her truculent illusions.

By the time he returned at the break of dawn, Sindiel was fully awake, staring at the familiar man she had gotten used to see throughout her entire childhood. But now she was deeply embarrassed, wishing for the shaman to just disappear instead of seeing what had happened in his absence. Her crotch was wet and slimy from the blood that had oozed out on the table as well as on her inner thighs. What made the situation even worse was her inability to hide that mess. The leather straps prevented her from pressing her legs together, which was insanely awkward and disturbing. A part of her, however, was hoping that the shaman would notice this most uncomfortable issue and have the courtesy of letting her off to clean up before continuing - but no. Blindly ignoring her bleeding parts, he proceeded with his terrible tools after filling her mouth with leaves again. Sindiel had no choice but to accept and chew, or go the rest of the way without pain reduction, which in itself was not very tempting idea. The drug turned her attention away from herself, causing her to forget and ignore the ongoing menstruation as she dived back into the bizarre haze of detached illusions. But even as the soft feathers of numbness surrounded her mind, the constant, uninterrupted burning sensation returned as the shaman began to dig through her skin again with the bone spike.

Sindiel sailed away, and left her tormented body behind as she dived back to her youth, to the days when life had been very different for her. Her parents were warriors, just like all the other members of the tribe, including the elected chief and his family. The rulers of the tribe took part in hunting as often as they could. That was an aspect of their lives that could never be forfeited under any circumstances. The rulers, like every other Morpher of the tribe, had a hunger that could not be satisfied with cooked meat. Sindiel had watched as the men and women changed forms at dusk and left the village in small packs to hunt - to kill. She and the other children had shared tales around the fire, dreamed of how they would join the packs one day and roam the ground level of the forest, and nothing could stop them. They would be invisible as panthers, securing their territory from all possible threats.

But now, when the time had come for her to go through this most sacred rite of them all, she found herself ashamed and scared as a result of the prevailing conditions, and it irritated her beyond

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belief. All Morphers were highly independent, basing their lives on individual courage and bravery. The support and love of the family was artificial in most cases, like an ancient tradition from times when they had arrived to these woods, from times when they were still in the middle of the process of perfecting this gift they had been blessed with. Now they were more hunting animals than humanoids, but they continued to uphold the structures of human society, even though many of their practical ways resembled more of a leopard who only joined together with others when it was absolutely necessary for propagation and protection. It was easy to see that at some point these small tribes would dissolve as a result of more primal behavior they were adapting from their animal forms.

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The hours turned into days, but no one from her family bothered to come see how she was doing. This was the first harsh lesson about the ways of her tribe. She knew them, but the process of understanding was still very difficult and painful, cutting deep into her childish beliefs and assumptions. After the mild initial celebration, no one really cared. The life in the village continued with a general knowledge and acceptance that they would soon have a new member in their pack. That was all they really cared for: another individual to be added to the strength of the tribe. And as a female, she would also play the role of a mother with the one who could successfully impregnate her, and in time she would walk her children to receive their respective rites. After that she would abandon them, like her parents had abandoned her, and seek out a new partner, unless of course, the same one was strong enough to earn the right to copulate with her for another time.

The Morphers had evolved to where their breeding habits were very close to their spirit animal. It was very common to have twins and triplets, which was crucial for their survival as one female had a chance to give birth twice in her life, three times if she was extremely lucky. The dark forests of Marathlor were harsh and unforgiving, resulting in many casualties during the long hunts at night. A mother was rarely there to witness the rites of their second litter.

Slowly, very slowly the black ink formed long lines of mysterious writing on her dark skin. Her black hair was soaked in sweat, and her firm breasts, also covered with tiny droplets of sweat, moved back and forth at the rapid pace of her breathing. The shaman paid no attention to her symptoms of ungodly pain other than feeding her more leaves from time to time. Sindiel chewed with tears in her dark eyes, but she still refused to sob or whimper, for such signs of weakness were

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not a part of her life.

The table cover was filled with dried blood which, alongside with the tremendous hunger, made her feel weak and dizzy as the third day was slowly shambling by. The shaman was finally working on her neck, which was the last area to be tattooed. She laid on her stomach now, turned over by the same warriors that had tied her up in the first place, which felt far more comfortable than the previous position. Painting the buttocks and back were easy; the neck, however, was incredibly difficult, and she almost gave in a couple of times at the peak of pain as her tolerance for it was about to fail. Somehow she struggled through, and when her world was nothing but flaming agony and she was ready to scream her lungs out - it was all over.

At the sunset of the third day, the shaman sighed deeply to himself and took a little distance, observing his work critically. No mistakes were allowed or something terrible could happen when the spell was read. After a few minutes of inspecting and studying carefully, he nodded approvingly and began to untie the girl.

"You will probably feel very weak, so be careful when you get up. I will bring you something to eat and drink," he spoke with softer voice than ever before, like he had a whole new respect for Sindiel after what she had gone through.

Her hands shivered as she pushed herself up and dragged her numb body to a chair nearby. The stunning drug that lingered in her blood was still keeping her in a sort of impervious cloud. She glanced at herself, admiring the signs that now decorated every inch of her slender body, and suddenly an overwhelming feeling of victory washed over her - she laughed and cried uncontrollably. Having the seemingly endless ceremony finally behind her, the storming emotions and the bottomless feeling of relief were momentarily too much for her to bear. But she was still too weak to try the spell. It would have to wait for the next day before she could do that. Now it was time to rest and gather strength for the first hunt.

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The night in the heat of the jungle was lonely as all the others except children had gone out hunting. Sindiel lay in her bed wide awake, still restless and uneasy from the arduous experience she had gone through, mortified after being exposed for so long on the stinking table. It was all over now, but she would always remember the painful moments she spent lying there, suffering helplessly. Fortunately, most of the process had been nothing but foggy blur to her, leaving only

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scattered memories instead of all the horrid details, but she could never forget the hurt she felt as the bone blade felled through the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, or the inner sides of her arms. Her entire body ached, feeling like she had been beaten with wooden clubs, the same kind what the Minotaurs often used when they marched into their beloved forest.

There was no celebration for her achievement, no encouraging words once a new day arrived. In fact, she barely saw her parents during the entire day. To them she was an adult now, free to wander off from their protective circle to begin her own. Saddened by this, she stared at the glowing embers of the large fire. She would have to get ready for the night, but the feeling of loss was still too strong, and she had to swallow a few times to prevent herself from shedding a tear. Everything happened so fast, and soon she would be invited back to the shaman's hut to learn how to use this blessing that had been bestowed on her. In the darkness of the night, she would perform her maiden hunt, which was going to be the final stage of the ritual, but that was not all.

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After the younglings had had their breakfast, Sindiel received the summon she knew to expect and rushed to the shaman's hut to learn all the details about the fresh Awen structure painted on her skin. Once the old man had finished explaining the spell, he unexpectedly proceeded to another subject - something what Sindiel did not see coming at all.

"After your first kill, the young males of the tribe will compete against each other for the privilege to copulate with you," the shaman explained.

"And I'm supposed to submit without resistance?" she enquired - not angry, but slightly shaken by the news as it was something she had not prepared for. But at the same time there was a subtle undertone of plain curiosity, which did not go unnoticed by the old shaman.

"It is expected that you let the dominant male to lay his seed in you," the old man said without showing any signs of his observation. The girl laid her dark eyes to the floor and nodded quietly.

"I understand," she said briefly.

"Now, remember that this pattern will be repeated every night until you're pregnant, it's the way of our people." While talking, the shaman prepared some tasty fruit tea and offered some to the girl in a large, finely decorated clay cup. She took the cup and had a lengthy sip. The sweet taste of the drink suffused around her mouth, refreshing and leaving a pleasant flavor of mixed fruit behind.

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"I understand," she said again, almost whispering, feeling a light shiver going through her. Was it subliminal fear for the unfamiliar - or was it curious and plain obscene lust? She tried not to rub her thighs against each other as her wetted crotch itched in need to be touched, for this was one of those things she sometimes dreamed of before falling asleep. But showing her urges publicly like that would have not been appropriate in the presence of the shaman. The old, worn man gazed at her thoughtfully, but said nothing further. If the girl already understood her place in the tribe, it was not his task to keep telling her something she already knew. Sindiel hungered freedom, and at dusk she would be granted just that - the glorious and exciting freedom of her first hunt.

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The hunters gathered around the great fire at the center of the village when the sun began to set behind the distant silhouettes of the Jagged Mountains. Sindiel joined them for the first time as a full member of the pack. Needless to say, she was excited beyond comprehension to finally take part in this event her ancestors had made into tradition ages ago. There was no invitation or formal call, just silent knowledge of what was right and true. And as the Solari disappeared, revealing the pale and eerie moons, both shining their cold light upon the sleeping world, every hunter triggered the signs covering their bodies by humming the letters of the secret language, thus assuming the form of a panther.

Among others, Sindiel chanted the signs to cast the spell, sending an odd sensation throughout her body as the might bound to the symbols began to rearrange her flesh and bones. It was not painful, but highly peculiar for sure. Feeling strangely stretched and shapeless as every part of her body adjusted to the new mold that would drive her forward in the night. Her hands and feet turned into large paws with long, sharp claws; her eyes gained a yellow shade as the pupils faded into stripes and dark fur grew out of her skin. The tattooed lines of Awen remained faintly visible on her fur. As a web of light grey stripes, they wandered all around her strong feline body, holding up the spell until the enchantment would be cancelled by activating a different set of signs on her body.

The world was suddenly full of scents and sounds as her sensitized senses were flooded with oddities she had never noticed before. The jungle around her became much more alive than ever before, and she was momentarily overwhelmed by it. But little by little, she adapted to the change and embraced her new remarkable qualities. It was time to get into the core of her own essence - the hunt.

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Together with the rest of the pack, Sindiel descended from their village in the trees and followed her tribesmen among the ferns. The dreadful black figures of large panthers flowed through the scenery like silent death. Those few lucky rodents who were able to see them coming before the hunters caught their scent ran quickly into their hides beneath the leaves and branches. The Morphers never hunted in a large pack, and soon after their descent, an enormous, strong panther who had scars reminding about battles of the past diverged from the main group. The rest of the animals followed his example and found their own paths, including Sindiel.

It was not overly difficult as her instincts took over and the ancient code of the hunt that was already in her blood was guiding her through the first night. It would be an experience to remember, and she threw herself at it, enjoying every thrilling moment.

Knowing that many of her kinsmen were going after the large rodents living among the undergrowth, Sindiel wanted something more. She knew that some panthers formed teams of two, or even three in some cases and chased an antelope or an okapi, which really stood no chance against such a superior enemy. However, they did have the potential to cause serious damage to their opponent during their extensive death struggle, even an experienced panther had to stay alert around those animals. It seemed rather foolish, but those were exactly the kind of prey Sindiel was looking for, wanting to make a grand impression on her first hunt.

She did not have to look for long before she arrived to a small forest clearing and saw a careless okapi drinking from a small spring in the middle, which was clearly a place for many animals to gather throughout the day. It was likely that other members of the pack would find their prey in this clearing, too, but the okapi was hers to kill. Approaching from below the wind, she blended in the shadows. Prowling silently, yet swiftly as she prepared to attack. The scent of the unaware okapi tensed her every muscle as the thrill of the hunt took over. This was the motive why she had gone through the rite, the sole reason for her existence. This okapi, this clueless animal would be her first - the first of many that she would kill. This was her life now, and she enjoyed every passing second of the stunning feeling she was getting out of it.

The okapi reacted to something indeterminate, raising its deerlike head, listening carefully, the white-striped legs shivering in sudden nervousness. But it was already too late to escape as the black shadow leaped out of the bushes with a terrifying roar; the hungry, yellow eyes fixed on the target. Aiming for the okapi's throat, she made a flawless hit with perfect precision. Her long, pointed teeth punctured the arteries as the shocked animal let out a panicky cry and made a desperate attempt to run. But the panther's grip held tight, weakening the prey by shredding deeper

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into its flesh. The distraught okapi could not take more than a few steps before its legs failed to carry any longer. It collapsed under the heavy weight of the panther, who delivered another crushing bite to its fully exposed throat, relishing the fresh blood of her first kill. She sank her blood-soaked head deeper into her fallen prey to taste the victory over and over again, until she suddenly felt foreign presence in the clearing.

Another young panther had entered the area. At first she presented her teeth and snarled at the unknown intruder, but soon enough she realized that this panther was one of her own kin. A gorgeous, strong specimen that had found the same pond. Sindiel could not remember who this panther was, but she certainly noticed the defined muscles on his flanks, and the majestic, noble figure as he padded across the clearing. At first she thought that this Morpher must have come after the obvious prey, but this muscular male was after a different kind of prey as he approached her nimble mien. Having smelled her heat from afar, he approached the supple silhouette of Sindiel with great interest.

Without remembering any of the shaman's teachings, she felt a lustful burning inside of her as the most primal instincts told her to submit before this magnificent male. But then, something unexpected happened. Another male, one that had approached below the wind like Sindiel had done only a few minutes earlier, made a complete surprise attack against the other one who had given his full attention to the fertile female.

All of a sudden, the clearing was full of disturbing noise, driving any animals that might have remained there away. Aggressive roars and growls filled the air as the two large males engaged in battle, the prize being an intimate moment with the young female who followed the fight rather confusedly. The outbreak was very short, but utmostly intense. The prowling panther that had now lost the element of surprise came to learn that the large male that had noticed Sindiel from the other side of the clearing was much stronger, quickly turning the fight for his advantage. Within seconds from realizing his unfavorable position, the prowler disengaged and leaped away into the night. Without further delays, the victorious male turned to Sindiel and roared loudly in order to challenge any others who might be sneaking around, but the clearing retained the silence that had fallen over as a result of the brief confrontation.

A low menacing growl rose from the male's chest as he mounted her. Sindiel groaned painfully as the male conquered her untouched body rather violently to demonstrate complete dominance, but the sharp pain of the first thrust quickly faded by the compelling lust as the strong male accelerated his pace, pushing himself furiously deeper and deeper until the torrid act reached

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its climax. Emotions had no place in this performance, it was nothing more than an attempt to produce offspring that could continue carrying the tribe forward. After making sure that none of his semen would be wasted by holding Sindiel firmly in place for a few minutes, the male jumped off and disappeared into the woods without looking back. He would return by her side only if she became pregnant with his children, otherwise they could meet again some other night - or not. The chance was always there, but the act surely did not provide him any kind of exclusive rights for her. No, the next night would be a whole new adventure for both of them.

After resting for a little while, Sindiel continued to gnaw the meaty bones of her kill. The carcass was getting colder as the hours passed, and she knew it would be time to head back soon. But what an exciting night it had been! For the first time in her life she had truly lived, and she was already eagerly waiting for the next time, for Morphers were indeed the rulers of the nightly jungle - the true children of the wild.

1. Awen - or Sul'Awen - is the form of magic that prevails in Telwar. Bound to letters, the secret language is the way mystics and other less known folks weave their magic on items, surfaces and even on skin, like in this case. It takes strict dedication and determination to learn even the basics of the symbols that form Awen, and some factions carry it from one generation to another in a very restricted form, like the shapeshifting spell that is tattooed on the skin of every Morpher as they enter adulthood. The Morpher shamans have no true knowledge of Awen, they simply copy the signs as accurately as they can from one to another without really knowing what the symbols mean. This prevents them to use it more creatively in a way the mystics do, as they bend the boundaries by inventing constantly more complicated spell structures to reach their goals.