

It's not a good call to make ourselves sick.

Again I wipe the pans out with leaves and put them in a clearing along with the water bottle. If it does rain they'll fill up and that's one less thing to worry about in the morning.

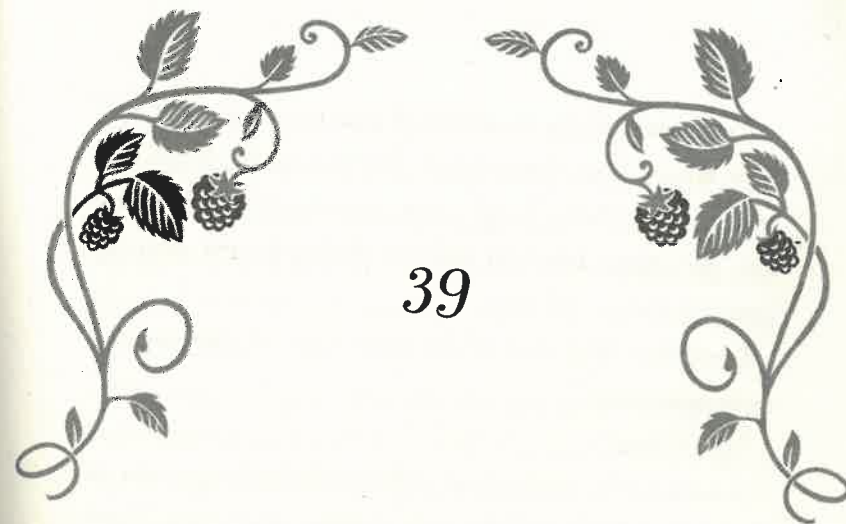
In the distance, a wolf is howling again. Or maybe two. If you listen, and I've been listening for ages now, it sounds like a conversation. Like they're far apart but calling out all the same, across the forest. We heard them in the city too and yet we never saw them, they never came. Though this is crazy logic. They'd have been shot if they tried to make it across the Buffer.

I look for the cat – for the yellow glow of her eyes – but there's only darkness. At some point, as the sun slipped away under the horizon, she slunk off and we haven't seen her since.

Bear's asleep now – the rise and fall in the sleeping bag has become rhythmic – but my brain won't close down, everything in it is swimming around, inky and confused.

I need to close the gap of the tent – weigh it down with stones so the cold air can't get in – but first I look out. One last time before I shut my eyes and let go.

There are no drones but the lynx isn't here either and the forest feels big and empty. There's a screech overhead. Just an owl, I figure, though it shoots through into my dreams. Makes them nightmares.



"Bear!"

It's morning and all the air from my lungs is pushing out his name, but it's just a tiny cry into the forest. He isn't here.

The lynx is here. The wild cat we thought might protect or attack us, one or the other. She's looking around, working everything out – our makeshift tent, the burnt-out fire, and me standing here, screaming. But no small boy. No Bear.

He could have gone to collect firewood, but why would he go so far when there are branches everywhere? He could have followed some animal or bird. He might do that then get distracted, forget the route back. Is that what happened? Did he go so far he can't hear?

I know he's not hearing my cry. If he was, he'd be yelling back to me. Bear can let rip when he wants to.