



Migratory Birds
Chapter 15

AIRSHIP

Written by **kodayu**

Edited by **Raid the Revenge**



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

This story is a work of fiction, any resemblance to persons, living or dead or imaginary characters is mere coincidence.

The crew

Sty, fox, the captain

Ileeree, vixen, first navigator and the captain's wife

Abama, prarie dog, second navigator

Silent Cry, rabbit, helmsman

Lokos, viscacha, first engineer

Meloy, goat, mechanic

Berry, spectacled bear, mechanic/girl friday

The mercenaries

Bedaï, bear, leader of the mercenaries/cannoneer and swordsman

Cafy, raccoon, mercenary/lancer

Itha, wolverine, mercenary/archer

Recha, vixen, markswoman and Ileeree's cousin

Nekoi Devoya, antelope, priestess of the Moon Goddesses

Pensha, squirrel, Nekoi's acolyte

Fadr, weasel, mage



The air was still warm despite nighttime. The faint wind that brushed through the trees and over the hills of the land was far too weak to cool anything anymore, most especially because the eastern horizon was already about to color itself in purple. It would still take quite some time before the first rays of direct sunlight would brighten up the country but it was not too early to allow the first glimpses of the dawning day to shine, but in the west the sky was still covered by stars and the gold and the black moons had not settled yet either. In the west the darkness still seemed to be impenetrable.

The clouds shifted and changed, mist drifting from one end to the other in fluid motions. Everything was silent.

Even when the metal and wooden shape broke through, there was no sound to be heard. The mists tried to cling to the foreign object, which was being carried by a gigantic patchy balloon. Finally they had to let it go when propellers drove the object onward and the mists evaporated and disappeared. The airship ventured freely into the clear sky.

Even on its deck there were little sounds to be heard. There was little wind, the engines found almost no resistance and the huge cogwheels that projected from the wooden floor turned very slowly and emitted only few creaking noises as they rotated.

The squirrel stood upon the deck.

For a moment he just stood there. The sweat which dried upon his furry body, making him shiver from the cold, but it was nothing to interrupt his sobs which he tried to muffle with one paw. Tears had wet the fur of his cheeks.

The land beneath was passing by with an incredible slowness.

A strong sob escaped his throat and his entire body rocked when it tore through. He whimpered. Then he raised his head and looked transfixed at the railings to his right which separated the ship from the nothingness of the sky it was travelling through. He went towards them and without even a moment of hesitation he climbed up and looked ahead.

He calmed down, his tears stopped as he looked at the sky ahead of him. His breath got steadier, his features relaxed and his eyes widened. Very slowly a smile was starting to spread upon his lips.

He did not seem to do anything, yet the squirrel was beginning to move very slowly at first and then slightly faster until he reached the point of no return. His feet loosened themselves from the railing and he dropped into the sky. He was still smiling.

The air was jetting past him, his hair fluttered, he inhaled deeply and closed his eyes for a moment.

Then his eyebrow twitched and then his eyes sprung open.

His face was blank as he saw the oncoming ground far beneath him.

And suddenly he screamed in terror, realizing what happened as the trees came closer, just like the ground, the hills and the rocks, growing in size any moment. He did not stop screaming.

She jumped up from her bed, colors danced in front of her eyes. She felt totally weightless. Her entire surroundings which she could not even see yet, seemed to spin around her. She retched, tried to hold on to something, but her paws slipped off the wooden wall. Her entire body swayed. She tried to find balance but everything around her seemed to be upside down as if all of her senses were suddenly totally out of control, beyond any point of logic or intuition. There was nothing she could hold on to and she fell out of her bunk, some sort of instinct preventing the worst as one arm of her shot around and caught her fall before her head hit the ground. Her legs were still inside her bunk but she stared at the floor now and even though she was holding steady, it seemed to move.

With a moan she dropped out of her bed, slumped to the ground and lay motionlessly. She did not even dare to open her eyes. Despite this everything was still spinning around her. She had not even noticed the ping in her ears yet, nor the sparkling sensation beneath her skin. Something was terribly wrong and she did not know what it was.

She tried to stammer a quick prayer, but what left her lips sounded like nothing but a moan.

The woman rolled about, trying to evade whatever had gotten her. She slammed into a swivel chair and a desk and finally lay entirely still. She just tried to breathe regularly, although the repulsive sourness in her mouth made it difficult.

“Pensha...,” she moaned, while everything was going black and the floor came closer.

There was no reply.

He awoke.

For a moment he was confused and totally oblivious to his whereabouts. He needed a moment to realize that the soft thing that shared the narrow bunk with him was a young woman, but in the same moment he was distracted because he experienced a strange sensation of faultiness.

Something had wakened him and while he sat up he pricked his ears to hear whatever it could have been. But there was no sound, except the constant drone of the machines and the faint breathe of the woman next to him.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to get a feeling for his surroundings: The wood the entire room was made of, the beams and planks, the nails and tenons, the extended, complicated metal machinery hidden within those other parts, something he always failed to grasp entirely. Nevertheless he was able to envision it just like the rest of the ship, he could also feel the presence of all those other furs who were images flashing past.

Everything felt just like usual. He scratched his head while he looked about: His room had not changed at all. Everything was in the same place as the evening before.

He shook the red furred shoulder of the young woman next to him. "Wake up!"

"Uh...?" The fox turned around sleepily, two half-opened eyes looking at him while he stepped out of the bed and gathered his clothes that lay all over the floor.

"You have to get up!" he said. "They are going to come for you anytime."

The young fox blinked and frowned. "Do they know I am here?"

"Nonono," he said quickly while he pulled a shirt over his head. "There is something going on. I don't know what it is yet, but they are possibly going to come looking for the both of us. So..."

The fox sat up in the bunk, the sheet that had covered her dropped down and revealed the curves of her nude body while her hand searched around between the sheets, trying to find a hairband that she pulled out after a moment. Instantly she started to pull her long hair that had a slightly darker shade than her body fur into a ponytail which she fixed with the hairband.

He did not look at her. He was fully dressed now, wearing a frock that hid most of his slender body, he was just about to reach out for a cap that lay on his desk when he noticed it...

The ground had started to tremble.

"What...?" she asked.

He looked about, into the wide-open eyes of the woman who sat in the bed, totally paralyzed by the trembling she felt just as well. Both of them noticed that the trembling got stronger. Everything about them was starting to shake...

Instinctively he let himself drop to the ground as the whole craft was suddenly rocked by inner forces. The creaking of wood and metal reached his ears and for a moment he feared that the whole ship could break apart. The engines suddenly roared, hammered inside their metal containments. He could hear the thuds of tubes and the crackle of cables that were torn apart and the entire ship seemed to scream for a short moment.

Instantly he was back on his feet and stared at the woman who sat in the bed as if nothing had happened, just the expression on her face showed him that she had experienced this as well.

They looked into each other eyes while they noticed the silence. Everything was silent.

The omnipresent sound of the engines had died down.

In this moment a bang rocked the door of the small room. "Fadr! Fadr!" a male voice shouted.

"I'm coming," the man in the frock exclaimed instantly.

The woman quickly covered in the bed and pulled the sheet over herself while Fadr quickly pushed her clothes into a dark corner.

"FADR!"

"Coming!" He unbolted the door.

Yells were audible from below in the engine room. Everyone was awake now, they ran around on the main deck (he could hear their footsteps) and through the corridor. The fighters were all preparing for a battle while the engineers tried to

tame the whistling machines and the creaking gearwheels. The buzzing of cables was audible and the air smelled like ozone, there was even a little bit of smoke lingering in the wooden corridor.

Fadr looked straight into the face of a gray fox who did not hesitate one moment.

The fox grabbed the weasel's arm and pulled him along. "You come with me!"

The features of the weasel who had just left his room hardened. "I am able to walk by myself, thank you!" he said and jerked himself free.

"Come on!" the vulpine captain ordered and went ahead, towards the deck.

The weasel followed the fox.

When they went past a door, it opened and a raccoon became visible.

"You, on the bridge, now!" the captain said.

The raccoon just nodded.

"Where's Recha?" he yelled towards the raccoon while he and the weasel were walking on.

"No idea, captain!" the raccoon yelled.

"Damn!" the fox exclaimed.

The captain slammed open the door to the uppermost deck and the two furs stepped outside. A fresh wind blew around them, their clothes fluttered lightly around their bodies.

"Nothing in sight, captain!" the wolverine reported instantly when he saw how the fox came through the door.

The fox just nodded and went towards the railing.

The weasel followed him.

The captain reached into one of his pockets and fetched a small telescope. For a moment he studied the horizon: They were surrounded by clouds, there was not even the ground to be seen. The fox pulled a face and put the telescope away again. "I don't like this. It's simply too..."

As fate wanted to mock his remark, there was suddenly a loud bang and the whole ship was shaken by its power. The three furs grabbed the railing in order to keep standing, as the whole ground was shaking beneath them again.

When it had passed, they heard a painful crunching sound from the huge gearwheels in the middle of the deck. The three men stared at them while the huge pieces of wood and metal tried to move, fighting against some force that restrained them. The gears did not move anything but a few inches and instead the sounds got even worse. Finally the gearwheels came to a halt with a shrill squeal and steam shot up. At least the drone of the engines had come back to live.

"Damn!" the fox exclaimed. "Mage, follow me!" He was already up again and ran towards the door.

Clumsily the weasel got on his feet too, sighed and ran after the vulpine, leaving the wolverine who was still staring at the gearwheels.

The fox slammed the door open and instantly he stood in the hammering heat of the engines' room, surrounded by deafening noise with smoke and steam which waved all around. The only source of light was the eerie fire of the flames

from the main firebox. He could hear the steam engines working with maximum power again and when he looked casually at one of the many gauges at one of the many tubes that stretched all over the iron wall of the room he noticed that the pressure in the pipes was close to the absolute limit.

“Is da second firebox on?” someone shouted, trying to drown out the noise.

“Yes!” another voice yelled through the thick clouds of smoke.

“Throttle da pressure!” the first voice replied.

“But it’s almost at minimum,” the second voice yelled.

“Throttle it, damn! Piss on da rest!”

In the meantime the weasel had arrived as well and looked around in disgust.

The captain who had overheard this instantly jumped down the small ladder at the entry and walked past the hammering pistons, searching for the engineer. “Lokos!” The clouds, the reddish light and the noises had totally surrounded him in the narrowness of the room but when he was past the pistons he could see some shape standing there. “Lokos!”

The viscacha turned around. “Captain?!”

“What’s going on?”

“Look!” The engineer raised his hand and pointed towards the huge machine he was standing in front of. It was a maze of pipes and tubes, linked together by valves, gauges and strange containers with bubbling fluids. Above these gauges was a small metal board with small flickering lights that all interconnected in the middle where another container was, containing a small shimmering sphere of dark reddish, shimmering metal and a strange crystal which radiated swirling lights of everchanging color. The longer the fox looked at it the more he got aware of what was wrong with it: *Most* of the small tubes were broken, even some of the larger pipes were broken. Fluids had dyed the metal of the machine with strange colors. Some of these spots seemed to have rusted, other looked burned. Some of the containers had burst. The metal boards were broken by the heat and the crystal in the centre of all this mess was virtually burning with spinning colors which were changing so fast that the only light it emitted was of a painfully bright white.

The fox simply stared at it.

“Who did this?” he asked in disbelief. His words were hardly comprehensible in the noise all around, but the engineer understood anyway.

“Somebody willfully destroyed it,” he shouted.

The fox screwed up his eyes.

“Actually it was close to overload. Somebody destroyed all of da connections, almost took da crystal down too. If we had not shut it down, it would have blown up. Now da whole engines’ gone haywire and some cylinders ’ave broken due to da overpressure“ he shouted at the captain who could not take his eyes of the mess around the crystal.

“Lokos!”

The viscacha turned around.

In the narrow passage between the mess of the crystal's cables and the pipe-covered wall stood a young spectacled bear. "We only got two hundredweight of coal left!" he cried.

"Forget it! Just keep da damn engine running!" the engineer shouted as a reply and the spectacled bear nodded and disappeared.

"Where's Meloy?" the captain shouted.

"Fixing some burst pipes in da transition of the tween-deck!"

The fox nodded, looking at the mess of the cables again. "Can you fix this mess?"

"Honest, captain, no!" the engineer replied. "We don't have 'nough coal and we got to shutoff da engine down to work on da cylinders. We got to go down, captain!"

The fox stared at the viscacha, the flames from the firebox illuminating his face.

"I am sorry! Dere's no oder way or da entire whip will dow down like a lame duck as soon as we run out of coal. Actually we are only able to fly with minimum speed anyway," the viscacha replied, nervously eyeing the angry fox.

The captain gritted his teeth. "We are already behind schedule!" he yelled.

The engineer helplessly shrugged his shoulders. "We can already be happy dat da crystal has not blown up da entire ship."

The fox growled in anger. "How much time?"

"At best a few hours if we get all da stuff we need," the viscacha replied.

For a moment the fox bared his teeth and especially in this red light he looked pretty fearsome to the smaller viscacha. "OK, I'll set a course. But I want to be airborne again as soon as possible. You have to work the night through."

The viscacha pulled a face but did not object, not daring to contradicted the enraged fox. "We'll do our best."

For another moment the fox looked at the mess around the crystal, then turned around and walked towards the exit of the engine's room, where the weasel stood.

"Now what do I have to do?" he asked the captain when he walked by.

The fox looked at him. "I want you and all of the rest of you to search the ship. There must be someone or something who did this. Search every corner, every damn inch of this ship. I'll be on the bridge."

The mage screwed up his eyes, but obeyed and started to search for the rest of the armed men on board.

He found the first one on his way towards the mess.

The corridors seemed to be too small for the large bear who leaned in a doorway, a sword in his paws.

"The captain wants you and your men to search the ship," the mage said.

The bear sniffed. "Can't tell me that himself, can he?"

The mage inhaled. "He's gone to the bridge."

The bear looked down on the weasel and waited for a moment.

"What?" the mage asked.

"Search the ship, eh?"

The mage raised his shoulders.

The bear pressed his lips together and finally pushed himself off the wall.

The weasel in the cowl observed how the overshadowing figure of the bear maneuvered above him, rising to full size until his head almost hit the low wooden ceiling. "I'll tell Itha and Cafy, you inform that vixen....," he said, shoved the weasel aside and went towards the upper deck,

The weasel looked after him. "Oh, thank you!" he stated.

A moment later the bear was gone and the weasel rearranged his clothes before he went on.

He stepped closer to a door and was just about to knock on it when he noticed something wet beneath his feet. He looked down and noticed a puddle of water that came out from underneath the door.

The weasel experienced a feeling of numbness suddenly overcoming him when he saw the water. It was as if a hand had suddenly gotten hold of his heart and pressed it together while the blood shot into his head. He suppressed the panic that was about to get hold of him and slammed at the door.

"Nekoi!" he shouted. "Nekoi!"

There was no response. He wet his lips and quickly got a knife from under his frock, pushed it into the gap between the door and the frame. He moved it upwards until he met a little resistance. Carefully he pushed his knife on, fortunately not meeting further resistance and a moment later the bar which had locked the door was out of the way and quickly he stepped inside.

Paper and clothes were scattered across the floor, everything was drenched by water that was all about the floor. Among all this lay the figure of an unconscious, scarcely dressed antelope.

He kneeled down by her side and shook her by her shoulder. "Nekoi!"

The woman did not respond.

He grabbed her by her shoulders, pulled the limp woman up and slapped her. "Nekoi! Wake up!"

The woman groaned.

"Wake up!"

Her eyelids fluttered and he shook her strongly, eliciting another groan.

"Come on!"

He shook her another time and suddenly felt something wet at his paw where it had touched her gown. Holding the antelope in one hand he stared at his paw. Some part of his mind planted the vague expectation of seeing blood, so he needed a moment to realize that it was just the water who had soaked the woman's fur and clothes.

"Dear goddesses!" the antelope gasped and her hand rose towards her head. She hid her face away for a moment. "What's going on?" she moaned, looking at the smaller weasel who was still holding her.

The weasel looked at her, frowning. "Water....," he said simply. "Everything is wet."

The antelope stared at him. She was still feeling dizzy, hardly able to get any complex thought together, but slowly a notion was forming in the void of her skull. "Pensha!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Have you seen Pensha?"

She looked at him and their eyes met.

"Where's Pensha?" she asked him.

He just shook his head.

"Dear Goddesses," the antelope exclaimed again and the two furs stood motionless on the wet floor, staring at each other.

The fox walked straight onto the bridge; useless anger troubling him.

The crew of the bridge instantly looked at him when he slammed the door shut. They were all present now: His wife and first navigator, Ileeeree, stood at one of the navigation consoles. The rabbit Silent Cry was at the steering wheel as his duty as the ship's helmsman requested. Abama, an old, experienced second navigator, a prairie dog, sat at another navigation console.

Ileeeree instantly rose from her seat when her husband came in. "Captain..." she began.

"We got to go down," he said with a growl, interrupting her. "Abama, where's the next bigger settlement?"

The prairie dog jumped out of her swivel chair and ran over to a map which was fixed on a board at the wall. After a short moment, she had located what she had been looking for. "There is one about 8 leagues north-north-east! But..." She hesitated shortly. "It is hardly more than a trading post."

The fox had approached the main window where he looked out into the morning. The sun had risen and there was still a little bit of fog coming up from the dense woods beneath their ship which floated over them. "Okay!" he growled. "Silent Cry, set a course. Lokos is giving you all the power he can."

"Aye, captain," the rabbit replied quickly and turned the steering wheel.

The fox was about to walk over to his ready room.

"Captain..." Ileeeree repeated cautiously.

"Yes?" he snarled angrily.

"One of the gyroscopes is broken and the stadiometer is out of order. Someone might have..."

An enraged growl escaped the fox. "ANYTHING ELSE?" he suddenly yelled at them.

The three other furs stared at him in surprise. "Sorry, I just thought you needed to know," Ileeeree replied.

He glared at her and then went into his ready room, slamming the door shut.

Ileeeree, Abama and Silent Cry looked at each other.

"You take over, Abama," she said to the older woman who nodded in reponse. Then the vixen walked over to the door of the ready room, knocked carefully and entered even before there was an answer.

Sty was sitting in his chair. He had not bothered lighting any lamp and thus sat in the faint light, which came in through the small windows. He glared at her from beneath his eyebrows.

She closed the door and leaned against it, looking at him. "What's up?" she asked, observing her husband.

He sighed and pulled a face. "It's damn useless! Every effort of us is getting sabotaged!" he cried all of a sudden again.

Ileeree sighed. "Look, we are all trying to do our best..."

"HA!" he interrupted her. "It's not enough to try, one has got to do it! If this fails we won't just be broke but dead as well!"

The vixen sighed once more. "These are just unhappy circumstances..."

"*Unhappy circumstances? My ass!*"

"It's not very helpful to have a captain who's just busy blaming everyone around him," she replied coldly, also becoming angry by now.

He glared at her and then hmped.

She pushed off the door and walked the two steps over to his desk. "It is not improving the moral of the crew if the captain cannot cope with problems," she stated.

"And what should I do about it? Go out and push the ship?" he asked scornfully.

"What is it all about?"

"Look, this is more than just some minor breakdown of the engines," he explained emphatically. "The damn crystal core could have blow up because of this. There could just been a few pieces of us left, scattered over two leagues, simply because someone has not taken enough care. Where were the guards? Where were the mechanics? There was something going about the ship and breaking the most... *vital* parts of it and nobody even *noticed*. And this is not going to be the last trial we are going to face, so what is going to happen if one succeeds? What's going to happen then? Do we even have a chance at all? Or is everybody absent when it happens? Just like this time!"

"This was not a combat situation..."

"This is a combat mission. We must be prepared to fight at any moment and instead... everyone is... is..." He was desperately trying to find a word. "Damn! What do I know what they were doing? Pawing themselves off or something."

Ileeree smiled and went around the table he sat behind. She embraced the fox from behind and her hands had instantly found a way under his leather jacket. "Is that what you did back then...?"

"You know what I mean!" he replied harshly.

Her teeth sank into the fur of his sideburns and picked at it, the pull on his hair was on the verge of being painful, but his wife knew what she was doing, so it was nothing but an irritation while she was at his side, her hands running over the muscles of his brightly furred chest. "Do I know?"

He sighed. "I have important things to do."

"More important than caring about your beloved?" she whispered into his ear, her breath tickling a little bit when she spoke.

He exhaled deeply, he was fully able to feel the way of her fingers on his chest how they ruffled his fur and how the furless pads touched the skin that was bared for short moments. Her hands followed the lines of his tensed muscles. He took her hands. "Not now, please."

"You are much too tense," she replied and gave him a kiss on his short hair.

"This is the most serious threat we have met and it was nothing but luck that has kept us alive..."

"But that's exactly why you must relax..."

"You know that this mission is more important than any other..."

Her fingers traveled over the ripples on his belly, brushing through its thick but short hair, getting lower by the moment.

"True! But that's exactly the reason why you must keep..."

"Yes, relaxed, I know, I know..." he sighed.

"Rrrright," the vixen growled and tousled his hair before she gave it another kiss.

They were quiet for a moment while the vixen snuggled up to him, pressing her body against his side, his head resting against the softness of her breast, while she held him close and went on playing around with his hair.

"Do you know how much this disaster will cost us?"

"Shhhhh..." Her teeth nipped at his ear.

"It was just going through my head..."

The vixen leaned forward and whispered right into his ear: "You know, I could get mad now, because you are right here and the only thing that you think about is your mission, instead of paying any attention to your wife's caresses..."

"Oh! Yes!" He paused. "Tell me when I can get back to business!"

She bit his ear.

He grinded his teeth and after she had let go of his now aching ear again, the expression changed to a grin. He looked upwards into her face.

The vixen pouted and for a moment they were looking deep into each other's eyes, before his lips started to prepare for a kiss and she gave in to his suggestion and their lips joined. His lips were dry and cracked but they smoothed when they met hers and their tongues reached out for each other. Their slickness combined and got absorbed in the warm atmosphere of their joined breathing. It quickened their heartbeat and their sinews seemed to imitate the sensations of their tongues, craving for equal treatment as them which were turned around each other, gliding upon the layers of warm moisture.

She broke the kiss. "You could relax a little bit."

Sty turned his face away for a moment, then he grabbed her by her shoulders, pulled her down into his lap with full force and kissed her again.

When he broke his kiss, she laughed out loud.

"Relaxed enough," he grumbled.

"Do it again," she said grinning.

"What? Kissing or manhandling you?"

"Both if you have to," she breathed.

Now even he could not help smile, and while Illeere lay on his lap, they kissed again, their smooth lips joining for a long time, their tongues winding around each other, transmitting moisture and taste while they had closed their eyes for the time, feeling each other's closeness.

In this moment the door was slammed open.

The antelope, dressed only in a light gown that revealed more than it hid, stumbled into the room. Her legs were weak. She was hardly able to stand and tried to catch her breath while she supported herself on the door.

"What's so damn urgent?" the fox snarled, trying to hide his surprise with anger.

Under different circumstances the antelope would have been amused by this kind of situation but not in these moments, she was much too troubled herself. "Pensha's missing," she answered quickly, staring at the vixen who had jumped up from her husband's lap and now stood next to him. The red of the vixen's skin was showing despite her fur.

"I told you not to disturb the captain," another voice added and Fadr stepped in the small room too. The weasel was smiling lightly at the antelope who was just able to glare in response.

The captain sniffed and studied the new arrival for a moment. "If I am not mistaken your presence is not required, mage," he said none too politely, too much aware of the awkwardness of the situation.

The only sign of surprise was the blinking of the weasel. Then he bowed his head, still smiling, turned around on the spot as his eyes flashed hatred when he slammed the door shut.

For a moment they were all silent, then Sty started anew. "What do you mean *missing*?" he asked.

The priestess was still a little bit too confused to answer right away. It was obvious that she had not yet recovered of this morning's incident. "He is not aboard," she said while inhaling deeply.

At first the fox was just staring at her, then his frowns started to knit. "Do you know what you have just said?" he asked while she already answered with a nod. "Nobody could have left the ship while we are airborne..."

The priestess nodded. "I am well aware of that...", she mumbled. Her voice was hoarse and she had lowered her head.

"Damn!" The fox looked away. "Are you sure...?"

The antelope gulped and nodded. "I asked the warriors to search for him. They have found no sign of him..."

For another moment the room was quiet except for the usual noises of the ship's machines. Meanwhile Ileeree had finished straightening her clothes and stood tall next to her husband. She glared at the antelope.

The captain inhaled once again, none too sure what to say right away.

"There is something..." the antelope added slowly. "...something that troubles me..."

"What?" It was the vixen's voice.

"There was water in the room,... my room, I mean."

The fox just stared at her. "What?" Sty exclaimed powerfully. He looked at Ileeree and they exchanged a look. "Do you... Do you have any idea what you are just about to say?"

The antelope nodded, raised her head and looked at the two foxes.

“What... GODDAMN MESS IS THIS?” the male fox roared. “THIS IS A DAMN...” He had jumped out of his chair and stood behind his desk with noticeable muscles twitching beneath his fur. “THIS IS...”

The vixen softly laid one of her paws on his shoulder.

Sty was distracted for a moment, but in this short instant he was able to get control over his feelings again. “Damn! Damn! Damn!” he exclaimed and fell back onto his chair, holding his head in his paws, his wife still patting his shoulder.

Ileeree stared at the antelope and the two women exchanged a look.

“If I get this right...,” the voice of the fox was heard again. “...neither the mage, nor you did detect anything.”

The antelope nodded.

“So answer me! Why are you on this ship if you not even capable of detecting the most...” He searched for a word. “...drastic violation of our security!” He waved his hand and looked up, directly into her eyes. “It was here!” he yelled. “It was right here onboard this ship!”

The priestess gulped and lowered her head.

The fox just shook his head. “This is a joke...” he said towards the vixen and let go a fake laugh.

The antelope looked away, her long antlers showed that her head was moving slowly while she chewed on her lower lip. “You know that Pensha was my acolyte, I needed him to...” She moved her index in a circle and left the sentence unfinished.

The fox was close to jump from his seat, just to make the antelope feel what he felt like. He was breathing hard, not knowing if he just wanted to rip her heart right out or if he wanted to make her share her companions’ fate. He gulped the saliva in his mouth and almost instinctively reached out his hand for the small sword that was always hidden beneath his clothes. In this moment he felt Ileeree’s hand on his shoulder. He looked up. His wife was not looking at him; she was glaring at the priestess icily; her feeling were much closer to hatred than rage. He turned towards the antelope again and inhaled deeply, gathering strength from his wife’s touch. “

“I don’t care about your... *companion*.” He spoke the word with disgust. “I expect you to carry out your duties,” he said coldly.

The antelope swayed a little bit. The weakness that had gotten over her, was getting more intense again. She looked up and tried to say something but when she met the eyes of the two foxes she shut her mouth again. Her features froze and then she nodded slowly, not returning the glare she got.

“We will have to land soon because of the damage your companion did!” Sty hissed. He tried to look into her eyes, but the antelope did not raise her head again. “Dismissed!”

The priestess spun around on the spot and left the room. The door slammed shut behind her.

With a moan Sty covered his face in his hands. “Hell, is there anything that can still go wrong?” he sighed.

"Maybe it is better this way," his wife said. She was still looking at the closed door.

After he had been forced to leave the captain's room the weasel mage had been standing on the bridge trying to resist the urge to blow the whole place to pieces with some spell. But then he got aware that he was not alone.

Silent Cry and Abama watched him as did Recha, the young vixen and cousin to the captain who was on her first mission as a markswoman. The prairie dog was unable to hide a smile while she observed the moody weasel.

Fadr stretched instinctively and put on a better-looking face. "Seems like I am not needed here anymore," he said casually, smiled to Recha and went over to the ladder which led up to the main deck. He climbed it quickly and disappeared outside.

Recha looked after him. "What's going on?" she asked curiously.

"Our archmage just got his tail cut," Abama mentioned none too politely and could not help herself but to grin in a way that hardly fit her age.

Silent Cry sighed and turned towards the vast main window again, watching the sky that floated around them.

Almost the entire bow consisted of glass, being held together by metal straps. The bridge which was also made of some unknown light, dull and silverish metal which seemed to reach into the glass but actually it was not linked to the main windows' structure. The semicircular helm looked as if it was floating, being linked to the wooden structure of the bridge's back where the odd mechanics of navigation were. Sometimes one could believe that the steering wheel was standing right in the sky with nothing but a large gyrocompass, protractor, wind meter, the voicepipe and the gear system by its side. There was no place on the entire ship Silent Cry wanted to trade for this one and while Recha watched him standing there she understood why.

"If you ask me,..." Abama went on. "...this mage is nothing but trouble anyway."

"You don't trust him?" Recha asked in surprise, finally taking her eyes of the magnificent view through the main window.

"I would not entrust him a raw egg. But if the captain says we need him..." She sighed and gently knocked at the glassy and metal instrument in front of her. The small metal circle in its very center swiveled lightly.

"Why do you say that?" Recha asked, her face showing wrinkles..

The woman prairie dog hmphed. "A reptile doesn't bite another one's tail," she stated. "You won't find a single mage who says something truly bad about one of his colleagues. At least not to any outsider. What's going on behind the curtains...? Well, that's something different!"

"Unfortunately our ship would not fly without magic," Silent Cry interjected. "Flying on such a fine ship and rejecting magic. My, my..."

"I did not say anything about magic in general, Silent Cry," the woman contradicted. "I was talking about wizards."

“But Fadr is a mage,” Recha interjected quickly.

“Wizards, mages, warlocks, sorcerers... same difference!²“

“Or shamans, ghost doctors, witches...” Silent Cry added from his place at the steering wheel.

“Ahah, now you are making a big mistake!” Abama contradicted strongly.

The vixen had to smile, she pat on Abama’s shoulder and then left the two furs behind who were just about to discuss even more fervently.

She climbed the ladder to the main deck and walked out into the open, shutting the door behind her. The fresh air did her good and up there was enough of that. She looked around at the clouds which rose from the ground and now swirled around them. They were flying over some kind of a valley or canyon with a large river. Its slopes covered were by light woods that went past beneath them and from this ground rose the clouds. It was still not that late in the morning the sun was still weak and except for the coloration of the clouds it had few effects up to now.

The main deck was mostly occupied by a large array of gearwheels which were enclosed in the wooden ground right in the middle of the deck. They were turning slowly now but nevertheless they were making as much noise as if they were running with full speed.

“Morning, cutie!”

The vixen turned around.

At the railing of the level above the bridge stood Itha, against the bright nothingness of the morning sky, smirking at the vixen and trying to peek at her cleavage from above.

“Morning, Itha,” she replied and then yawned and stretched herself. “Although I don’t know if it’s a good one,” she mumbled while she relaxed again.

“The sight of you is all it needs,” the wolverine replied.

She looked at him with her frowns knitted as she tried to find out what he was really up to but the young man was just smiling broadly at her. He was a fine specimen, at least when it came to his outer appearance: He was not very large, but well built with clearly defined muscles. Although he was no true muscleman, his brightly shining fur under his disregarded clothes and his messy hair gave him just this look of an audacious adventurer he seemed to desire. He wore a light armor with a white shirt under the dark leather which made his dark brown fur shine even brighter. He was the archer among them.

“What if I wanted to invite you to breakfast?” he asked and jumped down to the main deck, attiring just in front of her.

“Breakfast is for free,” was the only thing she could reply.

He sighed. “Ah, what cruel statement! But I will forget about this lack of politeness if you accompany me,” he said.

Recha blinked. “Well, erh...”

“Thank you, that’s very nice!” he said and then made a gesture that ment that she should go first. Much to his pleasure the vixen did so and he walked after her so that he could observe the seducing play of her lush tail while she went over the main deck, past the large gearwheels that occupied its middle and towards

the door at the other side which led down to the cabins and the kitchen which was also the mess aboard.

Behind the door was a narrow staircase where an equally narrow corridor branched off but if one wanted to get down to the mess one had to climb down further until another corridor where the small room used as a kitchen was stuck in between the storage rooms.

When the wolverine and the vixen walked into the room there was already a very huge bear, Bedaï, the canonner aboard and head of the mercenary crew with a stocky raccoon by the name of Cafy, their lancer. The bear was just busy with lighting a fire in the oven. For some incomprehensible reason, every time he lit the small branches and paper he used as firestarters they went out with a fizzle after a few moments.

“Good morning!” Itha said when he walked into the room.

“Goddamn good morning if you ask me,” the raccoon replied with a grim smile, dunked his piece of sweet bread in the cold milk in the mug in front of him.

Itha grinned and walked towards him, sitting down on the table. “Well, at least it hasn’t been one of us,” he stated.

Recha was still standing at the door, observing Itha and the bear by the oven, when all of a sudden Bedaï howled in rage and slammed his fist against the iron shell of the oven. The blow had been so strong that the metal creaked under his hand.

The raccoon, the wolverine and the vixen had been startled by the sudden outbreak and now watched like the bear went wordlessly over to the table and sat down.

“It’s no use, Commander,” Itha said. “This oven can only be tamed by Berry.”

The raccoon sighed. “And this one won’t be coming out of the engines room until they have repaired everything. So I guess we can forget about warm meals for the next week.”

Recha had been looking at the oven for a moment, but when she turned her head again, she noticed that the bear had been staring at her.

Itha wanted to say something to Cafy, but he noticed the bear’s facial expression and closed his mouth again.

It took some time before Bedaï spoke finally. “Where were you?”

Recha’s tail wiggled shortly. “I didn’t hear the alarm,” she said.

“You were not in your bed,” the bear replied and picked up the Cafy’s mug as if it was his own and drank out of it.

The vixen shortly looked elsewhere. “You went into my room...?”

“I am your commanding officer and we were in a state of emergency,” Bedaï growled. “And I don’t care if you are the captain’s niece or not! I am your superior, understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she said lowly.

Two fingers of the bear’s hand tapped against his forehead. “Where were you?”

“In the bilge,” she said, her blushing cheeks were visible even underneath her reddish fur.

The large male faked a smile, then he shook his head. "You have the first guard, get to your post!"

"Yes, sir!" Recha mumbled, turned around and left the room.

For a while the three men were silent. The raccoon turned his empty mug in his paws, but did not stand up to get himself some more coffee. The wolverine looked around, all over the room, wobbled around on his chair, sniffled, wagged his ears and checked the raccoon on the opposite side from time to time.

"So what was this all about?" he finally asked the bear.

The ursine turned towards the smaller male. "The priestess' pet lost it, sabotaged us and jumped overboard."

Cafy stopped turning his mug and stole a glance at the bear.

"No kidding?" Itha asked in disbelief. "Holy Mother of crap! What the damn was that?"

The bear shrugged his shoulders. "Wish I knew!"

"Did you see him while you were on guard?"

The bear glared at the wolverine. "Yes! I threw him overboard myself!"

The wolverine grinned broadly.

Bedaï exhaled strongly and shook his head. He stood up and went towards one of the small cupboard next to the oven. He took a bottle with sour milk and poured himself a glass.

"Somebody could have helped him along..." Cafy mentioned.

"Do you want to accuse anyone?" Bedaï said with his very low voice.

"No..."

"Then you should not say something like that!" the bear interrupted him.

"And what about our little prey?" Cafy interjected.

The bear did not react but drank his milk in a single gulp instead. "If our dear priestess cannot protect her pet from that, she does not deserve any better," he said.

"Maybe this was some kind of a lesson from the Goddesses for us: Stop believing in heartless antelope bitches!" Itha mentioned and grinned.

Cafy glared at him. "She is a priestess, you know."

The wolverine moved his hands in a defensive manner.

"Point is: If she can't protect her pet, can she ultimately protect us?" Bedaï said as he tore himself a piece from a loaf of sweetened bread.

While eating his bread, the bear went back towards his chair at the table. Cafy rocked on his stool and Itha looked out of the porthole, where the clouds flew past on their way into the sky.

"Hope this will pay out some day..." Cafy said after a while.

"Either that or we will all bite the dust," the bear replied emotionlessly, stuffing more of the bread into his muzzle.

"Well, hope you have taken care of your last will, Cafy!?" Itha said with a grin.

"At least I don't have to give my money to some charity...", the raccoon began with a slight bow of his head. "...lacking other options."

The wolverine pulled a face and fell silent.

They were all silent for a moment and the two men watched the bear going on eating. He had drunken milk from his refilled glass and now it dropped from his broad muzzle.

"I don't give damn 'bout the priestess' pet or anything," the bear said and tore off yet another piece of bread. "But the captain's plan is falling apart before we have even reached our destination!"

The wolverine smiled. "I am surprised you trust him anyway."

"I know what a helluva fighter he is," the bear rumbled with bread in his mouth. "When it comes to his other abilities..." He inhaled deeply.

"Well, such a bounty casts aside many a doubt," the raccoon mentioned.

The bear nodded slowly and then went on eating.

"Is it true that you lost against the captain?" Itha asked suddenly, looking curiously at the bear.

Instantly the features of the huge man darkened and he glared at the wolverine with ice-cold eyes.

Itha raised his hands in defense. "Just curious, Bedäi," he said quickly. "Just curious!"

It got silent in the mess. Cafy was still rocking on his chair, busy picking some dirt out of his arm's fur. Itha looked out of the window, attempting to evade the bear's look whenever possible. He did not have to fear this because Bedäi was not caring about him anyway, instead the bear went on eating. His teeth kept grinding the soft bread.

The wind brushed gently through the trees as a light breeze from the south blew over the forests that bordered by the plane of Ghere. The lush green prairie's rivulets and brooks all poured into River Shrellya, a broad, meandering river with a very large bed, full of sandbanks and small isles. The first trees of the woodland lined the western bank of the river where the flat land was replaced by uneven, rocky terrain, overgrown with low, light forests. There were small clearings everywhere where one could see forest creatures grazing in the sunlight, before they quickly flew into between the trees again.

The small town had been built on one of the largest clearings, at the side of a large boulder which looked as if a giant had dropped it randomly in the forest. A small brook flowed through and the small houses lined it on each side. Small roads led towards this spot, they quickly disappeared under the trees so that the town looked rather isolated amongst the woodland that surrounded it.

The inhabitants were going about their daily activities; children ran about, men and women readied their bows and guns for hunting. Tanned hides hung on wooden poles everywhere while some men were busy adding to them. The small forge's smoke rose into the sky.

Nobody had paid any attention to the sound of the wind as they were used to the rustling of trees, but it had gotten louder than usual.

The smiths was the first one to raise his head. Despite the loud noise of his workplace he had noticed something in the air and the rabbit raised his head and

pricked up his long ears, not quite sure if he had truly heard something. Then his fellow worker raised his head as well and he knew that something had to be in the air that was strange: The trees rustled a lot louder than they should and some other noise added to this. Perhaps it was the hum of an engine attracted the smith's interest, a rhythmical noise that got louder.

One by one the townspeople looked up, noticing the strange sound as well.

Then it crossed the line of trees. With the hammering sound of its engines, smoke and steam rising from exhaust pipes and broken cylinders, the airship went past the trees and came into sight of the town. A large patchy, mostly brownish balloon, held by a rig of metal cables, hovered above the hull of the ship. The hull was made of wood which showed just here and there as the round shape was almost entirely clad in metal, except for the bow. There was thick glass held together by metal bands protecting the bridge, but in this moment the glass just reflected the sunlight and glistened brightly. Leeward three exhaust pipes poured out smoke and steam, windward a windwheel turned slowly while three large propellers turned sluggishly at the stern; the rudders were hanging in their airstream. A band of reddish scriptures went round the whole of the ship.

The huge shadow of the ship hang above the town.

Most of the townspeople just stared at the airship. Most of them had never even seen a car, some had seen a steam tank, but none of them had ever set an eye upon any flying engine before.

The rabbit smith just stood under the low roof of his workshop. He held his tools in his paws while he stared at the airship which was hovering above the trees, slowly approaching the south side of the village. "Tremba....," he said huskily.

His co-worker was instantly by his side. "Yes, master?"

"Get the elders and tell the marshal.."

"Master Symokt?"

The rabbit turned around and saw the elderly fat beaver woman standing leaning on the side of his shop. "Marshall, I was just..." the rabbit began.

"Yeah, I saw it too," the woman replied instantly. "You got a gun?"

"Yeah, I'll go get it!"

The woman nodded and tugged at a band which held her own muzzle-loaded shotgun.

While the rabbit was gone, his co-worker, a young roe went to the beaver's side. Together they looked at the airship that manoeuvred above the town.

"Symokt told me to get the elders..." the young deer mentioned.

"Oh, I already informed them," the woman replied. "As if they had not noticed it anyway."

"What do you think they want?" the roe asked.

The fat woman shrugged her shoulders. "We'll see..."

They were silent for a moment.

"Do you have any idea what that those flags at the stern mean?"

"Oh...!" The beaver screwed up her eyes and stared at the two flags which she had not noticed before. They were hanging on the cables above the stern and

fluttered in the wind produced by the airship itself. There was a white one shaped like a triangle and a blue one in the shape of a long rectangle.³ “I have no idea,” she admitted.

“Here I am!”

The two of them turned around and looked at the rabbit blacksmith who had joined them again, a long sniper rifle in his paws.

“Let’s get going,” the woman said and she went towards the edge of the village, followed by the rabbit. The roe stayed behind.

“I didn’t know you had such a gun,” the beaver mentioned.

“Yeah, it’s my wife’s,” the rabbit replied. “She used to hunt with it.”

“No wonder she always got the biggest game,” the beaver said.

The rabbit just shrugged.

On their way, they were joined by more armed men and women, as well as other townsfolk which followed them until they were a really large group walking past the low wooden houses.

“Do you think it is a good idea for all of them to come with us?” the rabbit asked the beaver silently.

The beaver woman shrugged. “As if we could stop them.”

The rabbit pulled a face.

Finally they reached the southern edge of the town where another small group of furs had already gathered. Among them stood three old furs, two men and a woman. The marshal and his men greeted them respectfully.

The noise of the airship was much louder here as it had gotten even closer yet, slowly approaching the patch of free land which adjoined the village on this side. The flock of goats which had herded here had already fled into the forest; the owner chasing after them.

“I think, I have heard of this,” one of the elders, an aurochs stooped with old age and clinging to his walking staff, mentioned. “During the forgotten times⁴ they were said to have sailed the sky by countless numbers.”

The old woman by his side grunted. “As if these fairy tales’d make any difference right now.” She pulled a face. She was an aurochs too, but much smaller than the man even though she was still standing tall.

“Does anyone know what these flags mean?” the marshal asked and pointed towards the stern of the ship.

“That’s something you could know now,” the aurochs woman said. “That’d be useful.”

The old male aurochs just sighed.

“At least I don’t see any weapons anywhere,” the third elder, a hamster, said while carefully shielding his eyes from the sun.

“Doesn’t mean they don’t have got any,” the smith mentioned. “If they have something like this, what weapons could they possess?”

They were all silent for a moment and looked at the airship. It was now getting even slower and had clearly started descending. Its lowest point was now at the same height as the largest trees.

"If they really wanted to kill us, we would already be dead. They would not bother descending for that," the marshal stated grimly. "They could just throw something at us from above there."

"True," the hamster agreed.

"Doesn't mean they've got peaceful intentions," the female aurochs said. "Could still be slavers from the south⁵ or something..."

"You are an old worry-wart," the male aurochs said. "You always were."

"Well, the elders council already had someone for the story hour," the female replied.

"Thank the Holy Mother and all Spirits that you are on the council," the marshal said to the hamster.

"Hm-hm!" He smiled and nodded.

For a moment they were silent and kept on watching the airship again, by now they could feel its airflow in their headfur.

Suddenly there was a loud metal bang and a hatch at the stern opened.

The armed men instantly pulled their guns closer.

The hatch was perfectly dark. The airship swayed slightly in the airflow, now only as high as five furs tall.

With a deafening noise something shot from the hatch. Several men drew up their guns, aiming at the thing, but before they had had a chance to do so, the object already slammed to the ground, a large metal chain attached to it. It was an anchor.

"PLEASE, STAND CLEAR, WE ARE LANDING!" A voice shouted from above.

Now everyone was looking at the airship which was descending furthermore. Nobody could see who had spoken to them because the curved underside of the ship hid the deck and whoever might have stood there. Nevertheless everyone was looking upwards.

"STAND CLEAR! STAY AWAY FROM THE SHIP!"

The townspeople had kept a safe distance all of the time; nobody had any intention of getting closer to it.

The propellers were slowly coming to a stop. With a hissing noise, steam came forth from several small exhaust pipes all around the ship. For a moment it looked as if the ship was floating above a little white cloud, then the steam faded away and the airship's descent was getting slower.

The steam had cleared entirely. The deck of the ship came into sight and the first thing the townspeople saw was the fluttering ceremonial gown of a tall antelope who stood at the rail. Her dress waved around her, the simple ornaments just added to the effect of the mostly white cloth. She wore a simple cap above her horned head. Her curled headfur fluttering around her face just like her dress did around her body. Behind her turned huge metal gearwheels.

"Now that's an entrance," the marshal said.

While the airship was coming to a halt, still floating several feet above the ground, several men and another woman got visible. One of the men, a small bear, carried a large rope ladder. He unfastened a part of the rail and quickly

attached the rope ladder to something on the deck which the townspeople could not see.

As soon as he was done, a larger male bear approached the rope ladder and started to climb down. Finally he jumped down and landed with a loud thud. He stood by the rope ladder's side and held it steady, turning his back to the townspeople.

The marshal studied the huge man.

"He doesn't wear any weapons," the rabbit by her side whispered to her, as he had obviously done the same.

She nodded slightly. "At least none we can see," she added silently.

The woman in the gown climbed down next. She was careful and the bear helped her to get down the last few feet.

As soon as she was on the ground the antelope turned around and faced the men and women gathered on the spot. She smiled. "My name is Nekoi Devo-ya, Priestess of the Three Goddesses, guardians of the Moons and daughters of the One Holy Mother. We ask for you and your ancestors' approval for our short stay at your village."⁶

The hamster quickly exchanged a look with the marshal, before he stepped forward. "Welcome to the village of Tersla River Spring," he said formally. "It is quite an engine that you got there," he added casually.

The antelope looked at him in surprise, but then she started to smile. "Yes, it is a rare vehicle..."

"Indeed," the hamster nodded. "Quite a sight! But what brings you to our town?"

"We had trouble with our engines," the priestess replied. "We wanted to purchase supplies and some..." She waved her hand. "...mechanical stuff."

The hamster nodded again. "Do you intend to stay any... longer?"

"No," it was the bear by the antelope's side who replied. "We will leave as soon as we got what we need."

Once again, the hamster nodded and started to smile broadly. "That is very good, I hope we can help out with everything you need. Our town is small but we get stuff from all over the Midlands." He looked toward the marshal by his side who had lowered her gun as well by now. "Our marshal and his men can show you around."

The beaver woman smiled and nodded.

"Thank you for your kindness!" the priestess replied. "If you don't mind we will take advantage of your proposal right away, we are in a bit of a hurry unfortunately."

"Do as you please!" the hamster answered.

In the meantime Itha, Cafy and Meloy had climbed down the rope ladder as well. The goat climbed down last, still wearing his worn, dirty boiler suit.

"Do you've got a garage, forge or repair shop of some kind?" he asked as soon as he had set a foot on the ground.

"Here!" The rabbit raised his gloved paw.

“Ah...” Without hesitation the goat went towards the rabbit. “There is some rather particular stuff we need,” the goat said and instantly started to discuss lowly with the rabbit, who listened carefully to the mechanic, nodding thoughtfully.

For a short moment, everybody watched the two furs discussing, then Bedai looked at his men. “You know what you gotta do!”

Itha and Cafy just nodded.

“Get going, we haven’t got all day.”

“Anyone who can get me coke?” Itha shouted.

Nobody answered.

“Hard coal?”

Nobody moved.

“Anything like that?”

Several paws amongst the townspeople rose and Itha went over to them, while Cafy was already talking to some other townspeople with a long list in his paws.

The priestess looked at the busy men for a while, then she turned towards the elders again and smiled at them.

A woman who had stood next to them, suddenly stepped forward. She was a marmot and for a moment she just looked nervous. A dirty apron hung down from her waist. The three elders looked at her for a moment, then they lowered their heads. “I...” The woman’s voice trembled when she started to speak. “Reverend Priestess, we...” She gulped. “...there is someone at my inn who is in need of your... help... I... I mean, we would be very grateful if you could... just do anything.”

“Of course,” Nekoi answered. “Lead the way.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you!” the woman said quickly. “Our own priest is travelling⁷ and we... just don’t know what to do.” She blurted out the last few words.

She looked at the huge ursine male for a moment. Bedai just nodded shortly and pointed into a different direction. The antelope nodded as well and then followed the marmot and a few other people who were about to walk into the town again.

Slowly the group started to scatter. Some of the townspeople started to walk around the airship, looking at it from every possible angle, while the rest of them accompanied the new arrivals or simply walked back into town now that there seemed to be no danger about.

Jiddy had watched it from a distance.

The northern end of town was slightly elevated, so she had had a good view of the southern end and the adjoining strip of free land, while she was well hidden between the houses herself. She stood in a narrow gap between two of them, which was obviously used as some kind of storage space, because all kinds of

more or less usable junk leaned against the wooden walls, at least partly protected by the overhanging roofs.

She had been on her way to her resting place; a dry spot she had found in the forest nearby, but she had made a short trip to one of the small stores as she had wanted to purchase some dry matches. On her way back she had heard the strange sound of distant engines, but had not paid any attention to it, because she had expected it to be just some machine owned by the townspeople. It had not caught her interest until she had noticed the commotion among all the other furs who had started to run past her, drawn weapons in their hands. Then she had looked up and had seen the airship for the first time.

For a moment she had been paralyzed, staring at the metal and wooden hull of the ship, the huge brown balloon above it, both of them hovering above the trees at the far end of the village. She had seen many steam tanks, cars, automobiles, ships of the most different kinds, such as the boats in Dyamaar and the Tide Cruise Ferries. She had also seen kites large enough to carry a small fur, but never something like this. Still she had been unable to shake off the feeling that there was something familiar about it.

Having retreated to the gap between the houses, she had studied the airship from afar and had racked her brains, trying to figure out what this thing reminded her of.

In the meantime the townspeople had gathered down below and the airship had landed safely.

Jiddy had seen how some people had left the ship; from her position she had even been able to see what had happened on the deck. Waiting a little longer, she had observed how the townspeople had started to walk away again. She had sniffed and her hand took hold of the silver pendant that hung down from her neck. Carefully she had undid the leather strap it hung on.

Now she knelt down and held the Silver Arc down by the strap. Her hand trembled a little bit, while the index of her other hand slowly got closer to the silver fish which hung freely between the two bird-like shapes in the middle of the pendant. Carefully she prodded it and the silver fish started to spin around. For a short moment, the fish would not stop. When it finally came to a halt the fish's head pointed to the south west, in the general direction of the airship and the man who suddenly stood in front of her.

He looked down on her and she stared up at him for a very short instant.

As quickly as she could, she stood up again, turned around and started to fasten the Silver Arc's strap again. She felt slightly alarmed now, as she had not noticed the male fur's arrival, so she showed him her back, intending to leave as quickly as possible.

While tying the strap again, she noticed that there was too much junk in the passage for her to leave it in this direction. She turned around and started to walk towards the man. She had felt that he had observed her the whole time, but she did not raise her head to look at him now, she just wanted to get past him. But when he did not move at all, partly blocking her way, she looked up at him with a grim expression on her face.

To her surprise he was smiling at her.

Jiddy was certain that he was one of the men who had left the ship, even though she could not be sure about it, as the ship had been too far away to see precisely in broad daylight⁸.

She hesitated and suddenly pointed into the direction of the airship. "What's that?" she asked, felted hair hanging into her face.

"It's called an airship," the man said, observing how the lynx girl looked at the huge balloon in the distance. "One of the few which can still fly. It is built of machines from the Age of Dawn and the Mystic Empires, driven by coal and steam. It is probably the fastest vehicle on the face of this world."

"Where're you headin'," Jiddy inquired.

The man hesitated for a moment. "West, we are heading west, we... escort a priestess." He paused and waved his hand into the general direction of the west.

"D'you take passengers?" she asked and looked at him.

"You are a roamer, aren't you?" He wet his lips.

The lynx girl waited for a moment. "How much?" she asked simply.

"Sorry," he shook his head. "You could not afford that."

Her dark brown eyes were glistening. "I can pay, y'know!" she said with a low voice, the husky sound of it murmuring inside her chest.

He shook his head.

The lynx looked away, toward the balloon again and exhaled audibly.

The man studied the girl from her head to her feet: The pointed ears which flicked occasionally, her ragged clothes which stretched tightly over her muscled, androgynous body, the small fluffy tail which wagged restlessly above a firm backside.

"Listen...", he started.

Jiddy turned around and looked at him.

"The... ehr... I could ask the captain if he would, maybe, take you on board as a helping hand or something," he said and smiled at her. He got a little bit closer to her. In this moment he realized how unusually small she was for someone of her kind. "Maybe in return for... a favor..." He stretched out his hand and carefully touched the small spot where that strange pendant hung and her short vest revealed a small part of her light brown fur underneath.

She tensed instantly and beneath his fingers he could feel how the muscles started to quiver strongly, but ultimately she did not budge, instead she raised her face and looked directly into him.

Two slanted dark brown eyes in a face of straight lines, partly hidden by strands of hair glistened in the bright sunlight.

"I mean... you are a female, aren't you?"

The room was almost entirely dark except for a single candle in a small lamp which hung next to the door.

The moment the antelope entered the room she could smell the sickness: The distinctive odor of blood, unkempt fur, dirty skin, the bitter scent of urine and

feces. Instinctively she wrinkled her nose, but did not hesitate while she stepped towards the bed. It was almost entirely covered by a large animal fur which obviously hid the shape of a furr. It raised and sunk down very quickly, the best indication of shallow, irregular breathing.

There was a small stool next to the bed and the priestess sat down. She leaned towards the upper end of the bed where she could see strands of felted hair under the cover.

She spoke as softly as she could. "My name is Nekoi Devo-ya, Priestess of the Three Goddesses, blessed daughters of the One Mother. I am from the abbey of the Moons' Gardens in Seamerakis."

The fur moved a little bit and swollen fingers showed at its edge. With a painful slowness they pushed the cover aside.

Every muscle in the antelope's body tightened when she saw the furr underneath. She gulped the bitter saliva down which gathered in her mouth.

The furr must have been a badger, but now he was hardly recognizable anymore. Every inch of his body had swollen so extensively that there was not much of his face left, except for two small slits for eyes and a wide opened chasm where a gasp for breath passed by dry, bloody lips. There were no teeth and the entire inside of the wide opened mouth was covered by blood, which also dripped from the small black nose which stood out between swollen skin.

"Goddesses..." the badger said rasping voice which was so faint that the priestess was almost unable to understand him. "Goddesses..." The swollen paw slid over the blood stained bed into her direction. "Help... help me!"

Nekoi blinked and sniffed. She looked to the ground for a short instant, before she shook her head slowly. "I am sorry but it is not within my power to cure you..." She tried to avoid the trembling of her face. She had trouble speaking, seeing the badger as he was. Something inside her chest had suddenly drawn together. The antelope pulled her stool closer to the bed and took the hand which had approached her. Even though her hold was not strong she could feel how the fabric of the hand gave in to the power of her fingers.

The badger's head turned from left to right, his lips forming inaudible words.

In the dim light of the room the priestess could hardly see the sick man, but she did not take her eyes off him.

It was silent for a long time.

"I... I... beg you... why me, why?" the badger gasped. He was interrupted by a throaty noise which might have been a sob at any other time.

"I cannot tell you!" the priestess replied. "The Goddesses are the heavenly gatekeepers, the door and the key and I am nothing but a simple woman in their service." She shook her head.

The badger inhaled as deeply as he could and he choked suddenly, having swallowed some of the blood which had gathered in his mouth. The weakened, swollen body was suddenly shaken by desperate coughs and the priestess enforced her hold on the badger's hold.

"In times long ago, we were whole and all together under the One Mother's loving gaze. We are her lost Children. Now the Moons watch over us. The

Daughters are with us, crossing the sky, offering us their gentle light and their guidance when we are awake and when we sleep. We hear their voices in our dreams and they bring us messages from our ancestors who are all watching over us.”

While she spoke the coughing slowly subsided and the badger calmed again.

The priestess was silent for a while. It was perfectly silent inside the room.

“I... I don’t have... I wanted to see... my family,” the badger gasped. “I...”

“Shhh! Don’t talk about this. You did what you could.”

The lips of the man quivered and he turned his head a little bit, his entire body shaking while he did so. Something like a tear flowed down from the slit which had been his eye.

She could see that it was not a teardrop but blood. “Your family will know. They will know for sure. The Goddesses will open the door for their ancestors, maybe...” She fell silent and gulped strongly. The antelope leaned forward. She inhaled deeply. “I can see that the door is about to open for you. Do you want me to push it open?”

The badger trembled for a moment, his lips quivered and he gasped helplessly. Finally he nodded. “Yes... yes...”

With a nod the antelope leaned even closer to him. Her muzzle was almost touching the spot where his ear had to hide. “Speak after me...”

The lynx girl sat on the ground. She was completely nude, unlike the man opposite her who shared this small passage with her, which was nothing but a small storage space full of junk. There were many empty crates and baskets, one lying over the other that had obviously been quickly stowed into this narrow, dark alley. Long stalks of dark green weed grew in the shadows of the wooden boxes, except for the muddy spot where the ground had been churned up by several feet.

Jiddy had pulled her knees up to her chin and from behind her arms that she had folded she observed the man who was about to pull up his trousers. Mixed juices ran down between her thighs.

Having finished with his trousers he went on rearranging his clothes. He did not look at her. “Well, I... I will go talk to the captain and come back to tell you. Maybe it’s best if you wait here,” he said.

Her slanting eyes narrowed.

“I mean the inn. In the inn.” He laughed shortly and looked towards the narrow gap between the two wooden buildings. He looked at the lynx on the ground and for the first time he truly noticed what a strange pendant hang down from her neck. He had not noticed it before. Its silver caught the light and glistened from time to time. He turned away and said: “I’ll be back!” and quickly walked towards the end of the alley, carefully brushing over his clothes with his hands.

Jiddy did not look at him, instead her hand scratched over the ground, her extended claws gathering lumps of earth that she squashed up when her paw closed to a fist.

The bear looked up when the door opposite him opened. He stood up when he saw that the antelope emerged. Despite her demeanor he could see the strain on her face.

The priestess pushed her hair from her face before she raised her head and faced the bear.

Meanwhile the marmot woman who had been sitting at the same table as the bear approached the priestess. "Could you do anything for him?" she asked. She blinked strongly.

Nekoi looked at the woman and she did not speak a word as if she needed a moment to realize that she had been addressed. "He spoke the Prayer of Resolution⁹ with me," she replied.

The marmot stopped as if she was paralyzed and a moment later a sob escaped her. She turned away, covering her face in her hands. Her body rocked slightly while she cried inaudibly.

With a little sigh the priestess stepped towards her and lay her hand on the other woman's shoulder. "There is no need to cry, his suffering is over now. He has joined his ancestors."

"I hardly knew him," the marmot gasped, almost choking on her tears. "But..." She sobbed to strongly to continue.

"I know, it is a cruel disease," Nekoi stated. She looked at the bear and their eyes met.

The huge ursine suddenly stepped forward and put his hand on the marmot woman. "He was a traveler, he has travelled on," he said slowly. "I know our requests are not as grave a matter as this, but we need to hurry. If you could tend to our needs for supplies, we would be very grateful."

The marmot sniffed strongly and wiped some tears of with her handkerchief. "Of course, sir, excuse me."

"No need for an excuse, we are grateful that you can do what you can."

Once again the older woman nodded. She put the handkerchief back into one of the pockets of her dress, rose to full height and went towards the door. "I will take of it."

When the marmot had left, the priestess looked towards the man. She raised an eyebrow as if she wanted to ask him a question, but the bear did not move a muscle of his face.

"It's best if she believes that I give a damn about this poor sucker," he said and nodded towards the door of the dead man's room.

The antelope inhaled. "Pardon me, I have to..." She did not speak on; instead she closed her eyes and started humming lowly. Incomprehensible, mumbled words were interjected into the humming. Very slowly she rocked her head and suddenly her voice rose for a single note, then her chant became quiet again. A few more times she sung loudly, but finally her chant transformed into a mere whisper.

Bedaï watched her motionlessly. Sometimes he looked towards the door where the marmot woman had disappeared. He could hear the agitated whispering of the customers in the bar. Whenever the antelope's chant got louder they fell silent for an instant, resuming their conversations when the echo of the priestess' voice had faded away.

"...give yourself to him, as you are the key, as you are the door. Generous as you have proven to be, grant him access one last time, so that he can join his ancestors on the moonlit fields of your Mother's grace." The antelope bowed towards the east and finished her prayer. Then she looked at the bear again. "What about your men?"

A large group of furs had gathered at the border of the small brook which cut the clearing in two. All of them carried some sort of large bag and as soon as they had reached one of the small pools the brook had shaped they poured the bag's content into the water. Within moments clothes of many different colors floated everywhere in the water and the furs kneeled down, picked up a piece of soap and brimstone and started to wash their belongings. While they did so, they chatted noisily, laughed loudly and threw wet pants at each other. There were as many men as there were women, children dashed about and splashed around in the water.

A mouse came out of the bar and walked towards them. He stopped at the border of the brook and spoke to some of the furs which had gathered there.

Everyone fell silent, stopped doing their laundry and looked at the mouse.

Little by little all of them were silent, even the children fell silent, looking at their parents in surprise.

"He's dead."

Cafy turned around and looked at Itha who came closer. "Yeah, I expected that."

"Hm?"

Cafy nodded towards the river where the men and women paused. None of them moved at all for a moment, then some of them started to sing lowly, others joined in and after a moment, most of them were singing. It was no song of any kind, just many voices, each of them sustaining a note of their choice. The sounds of rats, squirrels, wolves, foxes, deer, raccoons and rabbits mixed to a strange incoherent sound.

"They are howling¹⁰...", Cafy stated. "Was it anyone important?"

The wolverine shook his head. "Just some roamer, as far as I've heard."

Cafy shook his head. "I can't believe they do that for a complete stranger."

Itha laughed shortly. "Middle of nowhere."

"I seriously doubt that," a third voice said.

The two mercenaries turned around to see Meloy walking towards them, carrying a small bag.

"You wouldn't get all of these screws and parts in a backwater town," the mechanic stated as he raised the bag in his hand and stopped by their side.

"Got everything?" Cafy asked.

Meloy nodded. "Yeah, pretty much." He opened his leather bag and showed the many different parts inside.

Curiously the raccoon reached into it and pulled out a huge screw. Its edges were sharp and even though the metal was tarnished it still had a copper-like sheen.

"The way that looks, it must be from a scavenged engine from the Age of Dawn," Meloy stated. "It should fit well with the parts we got. But it cost us..."

Cafy pulled a face and put the screw into the goat's bag again. "It's not like we can't afford it if we get over with this mission."

The goat closed the bag again and smiled for an instant. "If..."

None of the men wanted to reply anything to this and for a moment they were silent. Meloy looked over the clearing this village was built on and finally noticed the people at the brook who had now formed a circle, holding each other by their hands.

"What's going on there?" the goat asked.

"Some roamer died of a disease," Cafy replied.

"Hm..." The goat nodded. "Do you know what disease?"

In this moment the door to the bar opened and the three men turned around, seeing how Nekoi and Bedai exited.

"Let's get going," the bear said when he walked past his men.

All five of them walked past the simple wooden houses of the village, towards the spot where the huge balloon of the airship showed between the trees.

"Lady Devo-ya, you tended to the sick roamer?" Meloy asked the priestess.

She nodded in response.

"What disease did he suffer from?"

"Red water," she replied.

"Ugh!" The goat pulled a face.

"No wonder it was a roamer," Itha mentioned.

"Why?" the priestess asked.

The wolverine shrugged. "Plenty of chances to get it somewhere out in the woods," he answered.

"True," Cafy said. "When I was still in the Corronfray's¹¹ regiment we had had a whole patrol who got it somewhere."

"How many men?" Meloy asked.

"Twelve, only two survived," Cafy replied. "I married one of them." The raccoon smiled lightly.

"I didn't know your wife was in there," Bedai mentioned.

"Oh, yes, she was," Cafy said. He pursed his lips. "I did not know it either, she only told me about two autumns ago."

"Why?" Meloy asked.

"Why?" Cafy repeated in disbelief, he looked at the goat.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

The raccoon inhaled. "Those who survive sometimes suffer of... after-effects."

Meloy nodded.

“How did she survive?” It was Nekoi who asked.

Cafy inhaled deeply once again. “A priestess of the Holy Mother saved her by praying for her life day and night. My wife is a devout believer ever since and so am I.”

“All life is in the Mother’s gentle hands,” the antelope priestess said.

While they were talking, they had left the houses behind and had approached the huge strip of free land which adjoined the village. The airship floated steadily above the ground while loud noises came forth from its wooden and metal hull. The chimneys incessantly poured varying quantities of smoke into the near-by forest and the smell of coal and oil overpowered the smell of the fresh grass beneath their feet.

Bedai was the first one to be at the ship’s side. “Heyo!” he shouted.

A moment later Recha’s face showed above the railing and when she recognized them, she disappeared quickly and a rope ladder dropped down moments later.

The bear climbed it instantly.

“You must miss her,” Meloy mentioned while they waited at the bottom of the ladder.

“Oh, yes! Unfortunately, she has to take care of our youngest child. But she will be most proud if I bring home a decent trophy.”

The goat grinned at the raccoon and then quickly climbed the ladder.

During the remainder of the day supplies were being brought to the ship. Despite the lack of hard coal and coke, Itha had been able to purchase a large quantity of charcoal from several charcoal burners. Lokos had just grunted when he had seen it, before he had went on with the repairs he was able to do with the parts Meloy had purchased.

The charcoal as well as the rest of the new supplies, mostly food and fresh water, was brought to the ship by the townspeople. They set everything down on a small platform which hanged down from a small crane by the ship’s side. Berry, Itha and Cafy pulled the platform upwards and then started to stow everything into the storage rooms below the deck. In the meantime Recha constantly guarded the upper deck, Sty’s orders had been precise: He did not want anyone from the town on the ship.

Itha complained several times, because he did not like being stuck with this work and questioned the captain’s decision, but Bedai just shrugged as he stood on the poop deck, cleaning his weapons and keeping an eye on everything that went on down below.

The sounds of the engineers’ repairs could be heard all over the ship. The sound of their hammers mixed with the noise of the engines which were tested again and again. The inhabitants of the village glared at the airship from afar whenever they could hear it roaring. Instants later huge clouds of steam and smoke were billowing. Since there was little wind to carry the smoke away it hang around the ship and usually the men on the deck just stood around, totally

blinded for a few moment, their eyes watering until the smoke had cleared again. Itha's curses could be heard everywhere and the townspeople who stood down below, who were filling up the crane's platform and were safe from the smoke, snickered witnessing the downsides of this sophisticated engine from up close.

Sty came by several times, impatiently asking for the progress of the loading, just as he asked Lokos and Meloy about the repairs. Most of the time he was on the bridge, usually to everyone else's relief, because his bad mood worsened with every hour they needed to stay put. Ileeree and Abama were busy, drawing new charts for their journey and trying to find a way to make up for the time they had lost. They tried to find upcurrents the ship could ride on, but much of their planning was nothing but guesswork, because these airs were unknown to them. So they considered various routes, rejected them again, calculated distances and speeds and tried to estimate the heights of mountains which were marked upon the inaccurate, primitive maps they had. Silent Cry had retired to his quarters, getting some sleep because he was supposed to be at the helm for the night.

Fadr strolled over the ship, impatiently observing the progress. He observed Recha from a safe distance, but she pretended not to see him which was mostly possibly the best for the two of them. Therefore he did not stay on the uppermost deck for too long, but went on. Nekoi was hardly to be seen at all. She had retired to her quarters, praying for the dead badger she had helped on his way and meditating to regain her own inner peace as well.

Evening was getting closer when the last of the supplies finally arrived. Quickly they were pulled on board, then the crane was taken apart by Berry.

Having gotten word from Lokos that they could fly again, Sty had been eager to get the ship airborne as he had did not want to risk the a take-off in the dark of the night. Now he stood in the back of the bridge and observed the actions of his officers.

The sun had already disappeared behind the trees; its light had turned into a shade of red with long shadows stretching over the ground of the bridge.

Silent Cry leaned against the steering wheel. His long rabbit ears were hanging down lazily as he watched the townspeople who had gathered around the airship, although keeping a safe distance from the vehicle. As soon as they had heard the first sounds of the engines firing up again, they had come closer. He tapped rhythmically against the wooden wheel.

Ileeree looked towards her husband.

Sty noticed her look and nodded slowly.

"Stand-by!" Ileeree said loudly.

Instantly Silent Cry pushed himself off his support and took the steering wheel in both paws, while Abama spun around on her swivel chair and looked at her instruments. "Steady wind from the south-west," the prairie dog said.

"Raise anchor!" the vixen said.

"Raise anchor!" Silent Cry shouted into the voicepipe by the steering wheel's side.

"Raising anchor," the distorted voice of Lokos replied from the engines' room.

The rattling sound of a heavy chain echoed through the wooden hull of the ship.

Outside the curious townspeople were getting agitated when they saw how the chain which was attached to a heavy iron ball started to move.

“Rise to hold,” Illeeree said.

“Hold,” the rabbit shouted into the voice pipe and at the same time threw a gear lever next to it. The arrow of the brass structure switched from the brass letters which said “Stop” to the letters which indicated “Hold height”.

“Holding!” Lokos’ voice echoed through the voicepipe and in the same room, the sound of turning cylinders which started to move became audible. They creaked miserably as if they were trying to fight something off, trying to throw off a very heavy weight.

Sty pulled a face.

An instant later, a new sound arose. With loud creaks the huge gearwheels in the midsection of the ship started to spin and at the very back of the ship the propellers started to move accordingly, droning intensively. At the same time, the chain was still rattling as the last links were pulled into the ship, until it came to a standstill, the weight of the anchor holding it down.

“Lock!” Lokos shouted.

Silent Cry threw the lever to “Rise”.

Steam hissed, suddenly shot from the expulsion valves at the ship’s underside. Boilers boomed and the propellers were suddenly turned with full power. The whole ship vibrated.

The townspeople outside retreated, fleeing the steam that welled up everywhere around the ship.

The ground beneath their feet shook violently, deafening booms echoed throughout the whole ship.

Illeeree looked towards the captain: Sty’s features had hardened, he did not move.

Several more blows rocked the whole airship; the four furs on the bridge could hear the whistling of the valves in the engines’ room.

The man and women from the small village had ducked their heads instinctively to the powerful winds which came forth from the propellers of the ship. For an instant the steam had blocked almost the entire ship from their sight, but when they looked up again, they saw that the balloon was starting to rise slowly from the white cloud. The children cheered and many of the adults started to smile when they saw how the airship was freeing itself from the ground. With great slowness it rose, inch by inch while the sounds of its engines was almost deafening, the propellers having almost turned invisible due to their speed.

“Five... Six... Seven... Eight...” Abama counted.

Suddenly the chain started to rattle again and an instant later a loud impact indicated that the anchor was locked into a resting position again.

“Anchor in!” Lokos yelled through the voice pipe.

“Eleven... Twelve...”

“Get out of the range of those trees,” Illeeree said.

Quickly Silent Cry started to turn the steering wheel and very slowly the whole airship started to turn.

"Fifteen... Sixteen... Seventeen, trees, trees, trees... Eighteen, trees, trees... Nineteen and... trees passed!"

"Keep on rising," Sty said.

"Aye, captain!"

"Straight ahead at twentyfive," the fox added.

"Aye!" The rabbit leaned towards the voicepipe. "Ahead at twenty-five!"

"Twenty-one... Twenty-two... Twenty-three... Twenty-four and..."

Silent Cry reached out to the column where the gear lever was located on top. Except that his hand got hold of a small handle right underneath it and pulled it upwards. Using a small switch he locked it into position and when he did so, the droning sound of the propellers started to change; the airship was starting to progress.

The edge of the forest got closer and when Silent Cry looked down on the ground he saw the children running about on the clearing, waving their hands in the direction of the airship which was just about to go past the first line of trees. The rabbit smiled and waved his hand in the direction of the children. Then he looked ahead and observed carefully how his ship was moving forward, still rising slowly. The sound of the engines, the cylinders, the gearwheels and the propellers had changed to a constant, familiar droning.

For a moment everybody was quiet on the bridge. They could hear how Sty exhaled audibly.

"Course?" Abama asked finally.

"North-north-west," Illeeree replied. "Get us back on track!"

The prairie dog nodded, took her oversized geometry set square and leaned over the map in front of her.

"All ahead full," Sty said. "Or whatever he can get," he added with a grumble.

Silent Cry nodded. He leaned over to the switch at the column and pulled it upwards, while yelling into the voicepipe: "Give me what you can get out of it!"

"We give you as much as we can before the damn boilers blow up in our face!" Lokos replied.

In the distance they could see the last rays of the sun which was about to set behind a mountain range to the west. It shone directly through the large glassy front side and dyed the room in a red light.

"Next stop: Battlefield," Sty said while all of them were looking towards the north, where the darkness of the oncoming night was already about to let some stars shine through.

End of Chapter 15

Annotation 1: We would say “Dog does not eat dog.”

Annotation 2: There are many different schools of magic which have a slightly different view on that matter and differ in their usage and application of magic. No matter how much these different schools emphasize their differences, magic power is always one and the same thing.

Annotation 3: The flags are common signals for tradings vessels. The blue one symbolizes peaceful intentions, the white one signals the intention to trade. As the townspeople are not familiar with merchant shipping or shipping in general, the flags’ meaning is lost to them.

Annotation 4: The Age of Dawn and the time of the Mystic Empires

Annotation 5: In the Midlands slavery had been abolished during the reign of the Empire of Moles. In most southern lands it is still common and slavers’ raiding parties are sometimes invading northern territories.

Annotation 6: She is being extra formal here.

Annotation 7: She is referring to a priest of the Spirits who do not have a temple or a bound to a community but travel through a certain area, such as Nsimese (Chapters 2-5, 9).

Annotation 8: As a lynx Jiddy’s ability to see in full daylight is limited, contrary to her ability to see in the dark.

Annotation 9: The Prayer of Resolution is a prayer to the gods to relieve a dying furr of its mortal pains. Only priests know its precise wording and they are bound to share this knowledge only with those who are beyond any mortal help.

Annotation 10: Howling is a traditional way of mourning a deceased.

Annotation 11: Corronfray is a rural county at the southern border of the Midlands. Its different settlements are united by a common rule and a common military force.