



Migratory Birds
Chapter 17

TURBULENCE

Written by **kodayu**

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The crew

Sty, fox, the captain

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

Abama, prairie 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

and Jiddy



He hissed. She looked at his face and studied it for a moment, before she lowered her eyes down to the arm again which she held with one paw. The moment he had hissed she had stopped pouring ointment on the wound. Carefully and much more slowly she proceeded. The wounds were not as bad as she would have had expected: The teeth had not penetrated the vambrace, instead they had left nasty bruises. The haematomas covered almost the entire forearm and were quite visible despite his black fur there.

Her fingers spread the ointment before she reached out for a bandage which lay on the table, next to his sword. There was still blood on the blade which was about to dry.

The vixen wrapped the bandage around her husband's arm.

The two foxes were in the mess, just like Abama, Lokos, Nekoï and Recha. Unlike the two foxes they were not sitting at the table, but stood about the room, watching in silence as Ileeree took care of Sty's wound.

After a moment the door opened and Fadr walked in.

Sty's eyes narrowed while he stared at the mage.

The weasel did not look at him, just nodded and walked towards the opposite wall, keeping his head lowered all of the time.

Ileeree pulled the bandage a little bit tighter and finally fixed its end with a knot. Sty brushed over it, smoothing the uneven cloth while Ileeree put the small jar with ointment away.

In the meantime the door opened again and Cafy and Itha came in. Bedaï followed last, the huge bear's wounds covered in bandages as well.

Sty did not say anything, he pulled his shirt over his bandage and buttoned it slowly. "Nekoï?"

The priestess raised her head.

"Perform a scrying as soon as you can!" Sty said without looking at her.

The antelope nodded.

"Fadr? If you sleep through another attack on this ship I am going to kill you myself, if that will still be necessary." Sty talked very lowly.

The weasel pursed his lips but did not reply anything. He looked towards Nekoï, expecting her to smile, but she just quickly returned his glance and then looked at Sty again.

"Bedaï..."

The bear raised his head. Smaller bandages covered his torn and bitten arms, while a large one covered large parts of his face like a strange white veil. From underneath his eyes flashed when he looked at the fox at the table. "I told you that there was..." he said slowly.

"Nonsense, you know full well..." Sty interrupted him.

"I told you there was someone aboard and you did not listen," Bedaï said very loud, almost yelling at the fox.

"AND YOU KNOW FULL WELL THAT NOBODY DOES SOMETHING OFF HIS OWN BAT ON THIS SHIP!" Sty yelled.

"IF YOU HAD LISTENED NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED!" Bedai yelled back.

Sty slammed his flat hand on the table. "YOU STILL THINK YOU CAN STILL SHOW OFF HERE?"

The huge ursine stared at the fox, his eyes flashing at the smaller fox.

"Gods, just look at the state you are in..." Sty said more lowly, his voice still full of contempt.

The other man narrowed his eyes.

As Ilereee had finished her work Sty stood up from the table. "You, more than anyone else, should know: In case of attack, alarm the whole of the ship. I seriously wonder why you did not do it." He approached the bear even more. "We do not fight this alone! We will only have one shot at this: We do it together or we will all die when we are going to face the..."

"Ssst!" Nekoi hissed and interrupted the captain.

The fox fell silent, glared at the antelope for a moment, but he did not say anything and sat down on his chair again.

The whole of the room was silent, everyone looked at the fox and the bear, but nobody dared to say a word.

Sty looked at the crew, eyeing every one of them. The only ones which were not present were Silent Cry who was at the helm and Meloy and Berry who took care of the engines.

"This is the damn second time since Pensha's gone missing, that we face such a surprise and I am sick of surprises!" He hissed the last few words. "Our main target has not even raised its head yet and everything aboard this ship is going crazy..." He fell silent and pulled a face.

"Sir, couldn't it be that the lynx sabotaged us and pushed Pensha overboard..." Recha suggested cautiously. "I mean it could just..." She noticed that everyone looked at her and she fell silent and bit her lip.

"It would be more likely if she has gotten on this ship while we were restocking," Ilereee suggested.

Sty looked at her.

The vixen shrugged. "Nobody can hide for that long."

"I..."

Sty looked at Cafy who had spoken out. "Yes?"

The raccoon noticed that everyone was looking at him. For an instant his mouth quivered, then he just waved his paw and closed his mouth, looking at the ground.

"What's far more important is the question why the lynx was able to do what she did," Itha said. He leaned against the wall, his arms crossed and his tail hanging down behind him. "How could she be a match for our best fighters on this ship?"

"She could have had some training of her own," Recha suggested.

"Please!" Itha interrupted her. "Bedai and Sty are Weapons' Grandmasters. How can a girl her age attain such a level?"

Fadr moved slightly. "Sorry, but can someone explain this to me? I saw the lynx dashing around a lot. What was so good about what she did?" he asked.

"She was fast, she was really fast, even though her attacks were rather random. She mostly just tried to avoid getting hurt and she was good at that. When she was hit she always went with the blow. She wore her opponents out or at least tried to." It was lleeree speaking again.

"Doesn't sound very feline to me¹," Fadr interjected.

"Maybe not, but her attempts of going for Bedai's and Sty's throat certainly were," the vixen answered.

"But who does that?" Recha asked suddenly. Her high vulpine voice was full of a mix of surprise and indignation. "Who would kill someone with her own teeth? That's just..." She pulled a face.

"Crazy!" Itha finished her sentence for her. "She definitely rather behaved like some blood frenzy reptile," he concluded.

"Did she ever talk at all?" lleeree asked and looked at Bedai.

The ursine man leaned against the workplace of the mass, he had lowered his head and did not even raise his small dark eyes which hid among his furry face, he just shook his head.

"We should give her short shrift," Fadr said finally and when everyone looked at him he shrugged emphatically and returned the looks from behind the small pince-nez he wore in this moment.

For another few moments they were all silent in the mass. Outside the rain had resumed. Despite the constant noise of the engines they could hear the clicking of the rain drops on the windows of the portholes.

Bedai moved with scratching feet, stretching his injured body as well as he could in the low room, until he was a huge shape of dark fur against the wall.

Sty looked at him, the small vulpine eyes stared at the ursine for a moment until the other, larger man stood still again. The captain turned away from him. "I want to know everything! Whatever there is to know about her," Sty said quietly. He stood up and holding his sword in his paws as well as the bloody cloth he had cleaned it with. "Bedai, you take care of that." The fox started to clean his sword. "Dismissed!" he said shortly.

Without saying any word, the members of the crew started to walk out of the mess.

It was like a haze of toxic gases which surrounded her and threatened to suffocate her at any moment. In the distance she could see the flickering of a flow, but she did not even get there. It was as if she was trapped inside the engines of the ship itself, somewhere in the boiler, or the exhaust pipes, she could not get beyond the metal tubes and wooden outer shell which seemed to shift and transform into a ring of mountains and irons walls and then something hit her with such brutal intensity that she lost her focus entirely, forced her to open her eyes.

The antelope moaned from the deepest bottom of her chest and she gasped for breath while she stared at the candles on the small altar in front of her, her mind clung to them as she could still feel how her vision lingered at the edge of her perception.

“Lady Nekoi?”

She stared right into the white framed eyes of the spectacled bear who held her in her arms as she had obviously dropped down during her scrying. Her throat as sore and her lungs hurt as if she had been deprived of air for a long time. All the limbs of her body were cramped in strange awkward positions, her fingers clenched the hard piece of chalk which she had used, but it had almost broken under the tension of her muscles.

“Are you alright?” the bear asked.

“Just... just...,” she stammered. There were still colors dancing in front of her eyes and everything she saw felt just like yet another one of these colors, as if nothing in her surroundings was real at all: Neither the room, nor the young man who held her in her arms, despite the noises from the engines and the constant thumping which echoed through the wooden walls of the ship.

She let the chalk drop down to the floor and the chalk stained hand came down on her eyes. “Goddesses!” she exclaimed. “Goddesses, who glance over the shades of the forest and the deep of the seas, disentangle the branches, clear the water.” It was nothing but a rush of words which flowed from her lips. Instinctively she had started to quiver in order to overcome the painful tension of her body.

Berry helped her to sit up straight again, but the priestess did not open her eyes yet. She did not feel comfortable with her eyes closed either, but the alienation she had felt when she had seen her surroundings had instantly put her off. The afterimages of her vision were still haunting her mind and she tried to ignore them as well. She inhaled deeply and slowly opened her eyes again, instantly seeing the three candles that burned in front of her. Their subdued light eased her mind. It was as if warmth was slowly spreading inside her body.

Berry’s clothes rustled as he tried to walk away, but she quickly took his hand which was still upon her shoulder.

“Stay,” she said. The antelope tilted her head and gently rubbed her cheek against the furry hand of the ursine man. His presence was comforting.

“Was your scrying successful?” he asked cautiously.

The question startled the priestess and instantly she looked down on the spot where her hand had been moments before: On the dark wood were only traces of the chalk, a few lines, a few letters, it was hard to decipher them, but no matter the lines which stood for rivers and the spots which symbolized lakes, it was hardly more than the beginning of a sketch, far from being finished as there were almost no landmarks at all. The priestess shuddered and slumped for a moment. For a moment she tried to remember the pictures she had seen, it was like a whirl of chaotic shapes which had dragged her along as usual. Yet they had been different and far more powerful than before.

The antelope gulped. "Tell the captain, that our prey is still at the same spot where it was the last time."

Berry nodded and walked towards the door.

"And..."

The bear turned around.

"Will you join me in my room?" Nekoi's voice was trembling a little bit.

Berry hesitated for an instant, but nodded finally and then quickly left the room while the antelope put her head into her hands and closed her eyes, trying to create a comforting darkness. She stayed like that for some time as she felt nauseous. Her vision had not been anything but a chaotic whirl of pictures, sensations and feelings which had dragged her down. It had been too confusing to grasp, she was certain that she had spotted the currents of water which she had wanted to know about, but she had been unable to reach them. It felt as if some kind of dull pain had overcome her, but now it had vanished without a trace. She quivered.

Clumsily she got to her feet again. She had to hold fast to one of the crates which still occupied most of the room besides her small altar and as soon as she stood upright she could feel the full extent of her trance's after-effects, the strange alienation from her own body as if it was just a puppet, something she controlled from far away. It was as if her hand was not touching real wood, her feet not standing upon a real ground and everything she saw around her just an illusion. She tottered, but somehow she managed to reach the door, somehow she managed to open that and walk through the dark corridor, reaching her room in the very same state of disarray.

She stumbled inside and as soon as the door was shut behind her, she took hold of a chair and clung to it.

She inhaled and exhaled consciously, just focused on her breathing in order to get a feeling for it again. A revolting taste lingered on her tongue.

When she opened her eyes again she noticed for that first time that the room was not entirely dark as a single candle was burning. She could not remember if she had just lightened it or if it had been burning when she had entered the room.

For a moment she just stood in the dim light of her room and rubbed her eyes. She was convinced to feel the light of the candle on her body, but even stronger was the feeling of the moonlight which came in from outside. She did not have to see the moons in order to know which phase they were in: The golden moon was a decreasing crescent², a new moon would be there soon while the red moon was about to reach the maximum of its brightness², so it was appropriate to indulge in lovemaking. The black moon was as dark as ever. "The closed eye that sees best," Nekoi reminded herself, whispering lightly in the twilight of her room.

Slowly she undid her gown and let it down, revealing the curves of her body. Carefully she put it down on a chair and then she lowered her head and looked down on herself, carefully judging if she was ready to receive the male. It took an effort to recognize this nude body as her own.

For a while she just stood there and looked down on herself, over the curves of her breast and her slim belly towards her legs. Suddenly she lost her equilibrium and had to grab the back of the chair her gown hung on, in order to prevent falling down. She had not even noticed how she had zoned out for a moment. The pictures of her vision had come back for a moment and she shook herself to get rid of these afterimages.

In order to keep herself occupied she went to the closet in the wall of her room. There was a little casket inside of it. With a small key which was hidden in the back of the closet, she opened the casket and revealed a huge amount of jewellery: Silver, gold, orichalkum, mother-of-pearl, gems, richly decorated leather straps and straps of cloth. She was proud of the collection she had acquired over the years, most of them given to her by various lovers she had accommodated during her service in the monastery. They were a proof of her devotion, to live with her urges and to serve the Goddesses at the same. Wearing them filled her with pride and in this moment it called upon her memories. For some time she just stood there, holding a particular necklace in her paw and looking at it, while her mind started to wander. She twitched when she noticed what happened, as she was close to enter a trance again and that was exactly not what she had in mind, she should not give in to the pull of visions which were lingering at the edge of her mind.

With a new found haste she chose several necklaces which she hung over her head until they rested nicely upon her chest, accentuating her breasts. She put on some small earrings and a small jewel for her belly button, but she was not satisfied with that yet. From the chest she took several small bells each of them hanging down from a small silver ring, none the size of the other. Carefully she rose one after one to her antlers, those with the bigger rings first, which dropped down until the ring had firmly settled around her antler, then she took the next one with a smaller ring. She put on three of each on her antlers which started to ring lightly with every move she made. Their very light, melodic sound soothed her mind and finally she was satisfied with her attire as she wanted to be heard, she wanted the world around her to hear the sounds of her aliveness as it was a praise of the Goddesses.

Her paw reached out to take a small golden chain from the box with her jewellery and two long straps of very light, almost transparent silk. She fixed the chain around her belly and carefully laid the folded straps of silk over it, one covering her crotch, the other one covering her backside from just below her small tail. The long silk almost reached the ground, yet hiding just her sex and the fold of her behind while showing all of her legs.

The priestess raised her head and inhaled deeply. Slowly she brushed over her breast and her belly, she was ready to welcome her lover.

For a moment, she leaned on a chair. Instinctively her hand wandered to her face again and she rubbed her eyes. The room seemed to flow in front of her eyes as her eyes were too tired to grasp every detail, to keep track of them, while her gaze wandered across the room. Somewhere at the edge of her mind, she could

perceive the echoes of the airship's engines, but she was not really aware of it anymore.

She picked one last thing from a small bag in the closet, before she closed its doors.

The antelope turned around and took a small jar from the table, let some dried flowers fall into it before her hand reached out for the candle. She lit a small piece of wood which she dropped into the jar as well where the small flames quickly spread over the dried flowers. She watched the tiny fire for a moment until the flames had disappeared and nothing but embers remained. Her hand wandered over the jar again and dropped a small piece of incense into it where it fell down between the embers, as soon as the small knob met the red-glowing embers a small plume of smoke formed and rose from the jar until it reached her nose. Nekoi closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, the aromatic scent of the incense, the dried flowers and the wood mixing in her nose, eliciting memories of the monasteries, pictures of the ceremonies there, her fellow priestesses, the acolytes who settled in the darkness of the innermost sanctum around the threefold shrine. It was all attached to the scents of the prickling incense, the sweetish aromas of the flowers and the earthy nature of the wood which drifted around her muzzle and quickly surrounded her head.

She started when she heard a noise and spun around.

Berry stood in the opened door. "Erh... Sorry, I did not want to, ehr... I did not want to interrupt you, but you did not react to the knock, so..."

The antelope rose to full size again and blinked. Had he knocked? Had she not heard it? She exhaled, as she realized that it was of no importance. She smiled a little bit and stepped towards the man who was clearly ogling her half naked body and the thought that he did broadened her smile. "It does not matter," she said lowly and stopped right in front of him. Her hand reached out and touched his which was still lying on the door handle, her fingers wrapped around his and she loosed his hold, then she let go of his hand, took hold of the door handle and with a gentle push, she slammed it shut.

She looked up into his face, seeing the anxiety in his features as he looked down on her and saw the curves of her breasts and the other curves of her body, which were not hidden by what she wore at all. Her dark eyes glistened. Besides the constant noises it was almost entirely silent in the room, if not for the light sounds of the bells on her antlers. They rang lightly when her hands reached out for his crotch.

Her hands came down upon the leather which hid his sex and lightly she stroked the spot, which grew harder any moment.

He could feel her paws despite the cloths he still wore as his sex was already becoming touchy. He swallowed the saliva which gathered in his mouth and it seemed to taste different than before.

When she felt that his sex had become as hard as it could, one of her hands wandered upwards and lightly he touched his face. She stretched a little bit.

Berry wet his lips when he saw how Nekoi's head came closer, he closed his eyes.

She kissed him lightly on his lips, finding them rough, dry and uneven. They seemed to taste of soot, ash and oil. When she broke the kiss and opened her eyes again, she realized that in this moment her mind had not lost itself in any pictures or thoughts, the only thing which had mattered had been the lips of the ursine male which she had felt. She smiled lightly and turned around.

Taking his hands into her own, she guided them to her hips while she pressed herself against the shape of his body, her backside against his lap so that his sex settled between her buttocks. Quickly intense warmth started to gather beneath his hands and on the spots where she could feel the shape of the shaft. It gathered in her abdomen and she let go a little sigh as she could feel how her entire skin seemed to become flooded with hot blood which welled to the surface of her body, eliciting multiple reactions, the most noticeable the erection of her nipples.

Berry's breathe quickened when he touched the woman for the first time. She had guided him, she had brought him to his point, had forced him to touch her and he tried to relax, to cast aside his inhibitions, as he could feel how his excitement increased and the urges of his body became more demanding. The shape of her backside against his lap elicited light jolts all over his skin.

Once again she took hold of his hands and let them wander over her belly and its very smooth, short fur. The belly rose and sunk slowly while she inhaled, until his hands reached her breasts. She turned her head a little bit, not entirely able to see his face, yet able to see how he opened and closed his mouth, wetting his lips again and again until a light film of saliva shimmered upon it. "Come on..."

Hesitatingly his hands closed around her breasts and she exhaled in pleasure when she felt his large, rough paws around the sensible, touchy fabric of her breasts which seemed to grow under these fingers until they filled his palms entirely. A pleasant shower travelled down her spine.

Cautiously he moved his hands, suddenly aware of the difference of size between them. He could feel how they throbbed and moved, their softness fascinating him as he wanted to hold them just like this for as long as possible. Thus he hardly moved at all, just looked down on the antelope's light fur hardly aware of his sex which hurt inside his pants which had gotten very tight. He wanted to preserve this softness and to protect it and yet there were her large, flat, yet hard nipples on top of them which seemed to have a pulse of their own. Lost in caress of her breasts he did not even notice how he lowered his head until it touched her shoulder and sunk into the fur there. He inhaled and the fragrance of perfumes and her own natural scents rose into his nose. Beyond the scents of rose and sandalwood there were traces of something like honey, marigold and dry bramble.

His head being so close she turned her head towards him as well and inhaled deeply, inhaling his scent as well which stuck to his dark hair and lush fur which nestled to her body. She was not able to distinguish anything, except the powerful, exciting aroma of male musk which sunk into her body and seemed to open something deep inside her chest. His hands carefully kneading her breast,

his swollen sex against her backside, she wet her lips and said: "I can't wait anymore."

She freed herself from his touch, turned around on the spot, faced him and let her hands wander towards his chest.

He tried to look into her eyes but her gaze was focussed on his shirt which she started to unbutton. He allowed her to do as she wanted, just spreading his arms apart when she pulled his shirt off his body. She let it drop to the ground and instantly her hands were among his lush chestfur. He shivered in response when he felt the woman's hands wander over it, tracing the shape of his muscles and where they gave way to the typically ursine love handles of his belly, all of it covered under lush dark fur except for the beige markings of his species. Her hands did not stop until they met the edge of his pants.

For a moment he could see how her tongue showed up as she wet her lips, then she started to undo the buckle of his belt. The metal rang lightly, just like the bells of her antlers. Then the belt was opened and quickly she undid the buttons. She yanked the pants down, they dropped to the ground just like his loin cloth and exposed his erected sex, his balls and his thighs.

For an instant her hands just jittered in midair before she touched the shape of the black shaft with the flat glans.

He hissed. "Careful!"

For a moment she felt dizziness, the musk rose into her head. It was intense and further stimulated her excitement while she felt the rough, yet smooth skin of his member underneath her fingers. Despite having seen and felt it before she could not take her eyes, nor her fingers off it. Her fingers lightly ran over the mostly flat, smooth glans, over their edge and down the thick shaft which slimmed down before they grew thicker again as there were two thick rings which she remembered having felt intensely, before the shaft slightly slimmed down again before it joined with his body and his furred, ample balls. Its clearly pronounced edges, its broad top and the texture of the skin trapped her mind. She could have lost herself in these impressions if her body was not demanding to go further. She shivered in anticipation, her belly trembled when she inhaled, as she knew that she would feel this sex inside of her soon and the thought seemed to culminate in moisture which travelled through her abdomen until it reached the edges of her mons.

"Come," she said, let go of the sex and receded towards the bunk bed.

Along the way, the belly chain with the silken straps dropped to the ground, before she lay down on the mattress and raised her legs, showing him the curve of her hip with her sex hidden between her pubic fur.

The throbbing of his sex being almost painful, he exhaled. For a moment he blinked in the twilight of the room and as he inhaled again many different scents rose into his nostrils: incense, sandalwood, roses, his own and that of her arousal. He stepped towards the bed, took hold of her feet. She spread her legs and thus his sex was right above hers. He could not see it in the dim light and among the pubic fur but he could feel it closeness somehow, its warmth and moisture which seemed to be pulling at every fiber of his body. With his hand he positioned his

sex, her legs wrapped around him and with one fluid motion he sank down on her.

“Goddnesssssssss...”

Nekoi moaned from the deepest bottom of her chest, she bucked and her body froze in this position while she felt how his member parted her labia, glided right into her sex and then easily went deeper, parting her inner muscles, explored the wetness of her folds. The flat glans giving no preparation, spreading her so much right from the start before her inner muscles could settle around the length of it, her throbbing, bulging labia clinging to the uneven surface of it while it passed by.

“Ooooooooooh!” Berry escaped a long drawn moan, as he realized himself that he had not been prepared for the intensity of the feeling, for the impressions which overcame his loin and which rendered him totally helpless as he had to obey the call of his instincts. Powerful shivers ran up his spin and in his head they transformed into showers of excitement and pleasure while his sex went into her depths and he could feel them, more and more hot moisture and throbbing muscles surrounding his maleness with every moment, her soft labia welcoming him. He moaned once more, a moment later his hips met hers.

Nekoi as still paralyzed, but the tension of her muscles vanished slowly when he was not moving anymore. She adapted to him, to his sex which she contained deep within her body. She exhaled and a spontaneous yip of pleasure and joy escaped her.

Berry shook his head a little bit as he tried to position himself above her. He was resting upon his arms while all of his torso’s weight was resting upon her abdomen. Obeying his instincts he raised lightly the next time he inhaled and the feeling was so intense that he stopped almost instantly again, his sex sinking in to the hilt again.

Nekoi had gasped as well, not having expected him to move so soon. Her sex was so touchy that the caress felt almost unbearable and yet she craved more of it and when he tried to move again, she bucked a little bit again. “Yes, yes, give it to me...” She moaned deeply when he came down on her again.

Sweat shot from his pores, every muscle of his body seemed to be tense in order to be able to perform what he did. The impressions were still overwhelmingly powerful, but on the other hand short gasps of pleasure escaped him. He had firmly closed his eyes and tried to steady himself, to find a rhythm for his sinking into her soft, yet firm, smooth, wet folds which passed by every inch of his sex until his balls met her body and they were tightly joined for a moment before he rose again.

The weight of the ursine man’s body which came down on her in an erratic rhythm always elicited a reaction of her body, it reawakened its carnal instincts which responded with delay: She could feel him, she could feel how his sex glided deeply into her warm and wet folds which plied around its length, around the tight veins and the quivering hardness of his body’s powerful heartbeat. Yet it took some time until she could truly feel it, her body responded with slowness to it, she could feel those sensations crawling through her spine until a powerful shiver let them go freely and let them roam through every vein and every fiber.

Her hand ran aimlessly over his face and when he came down on her once again, it dropped down and closed to a fist as she moaned. “Yessss, just like that, just like...” Her voice died off as she inhaled and tightened, feeling his sex slowly slip out of hers, passing by her soft labia, his pronounced glans caressing her insides as they went by.

Berry had found his rhythm and became absorbed in it. It was like a fluid that slopped through his body, his heart was the engine at its very centre while his blood and his semen flowed around it, forward and backward, spilled into his head before he came down on her again and all of it gathered in his almost painfully tight member, propelled his entire lap until his balls slapped hard against the fabric of her hip, the power transmitting through both of their bodies, the flesh upon his muscles and bones wobbling, thus enforcing the feeling that there was something like a sea beneath his skin which followed its own tides of pleasures while he was making love to her the way he did. The feelings left little room for him thinking of her, despite him watching her and hearing what she said, just like the ringing of the bells on her antlers, it all mixed and vanished in the haze of their pleasure. All of this happened in a tiny space in his head which he ignored while he watched how her breasts moved, rocked by his movements, moved forward and backwards, visible to him despite the little light, clearly pronounced between her short fur and the erected nipples standing out on top of them and then he closed his eyes again and for a moment he just felt the pushes of his body and the woman beneath him responding to it, just like the bells on her antlers ringing lightly in accordance. They chimed when his sex slipped through the slippery tightness of her sex, when he could feel how it closed around the entire length of his member and the sound vanished one moment after his balls had met the moist skin and fur of her lap and when he opened his eyes again he could see how her body was still trembling in response to this, the little bells trembling but not making a sound. Her mouth opened a little bit when his hip receded as he followed the rhythm which had taken control of him, which was set by his body and the fluids which throbbed inside every vein and every fiber, keeping him moving.

Nekoi moaned in delight, she could feel that he had found his rhythm, as her body responded to it. Still she had to fight the urge of her lust to move on her own, but this thought only struck her mind when she could feel how his sex glided out of her body, let the unfulfilled satisfaction in her abdomen grow, but when his body, his weight and his sex moved closer again, his sex parting her wet folds which overflowed with sensations of pleasure which grew endlessly, it fed her lust and sparked new emotions of bliss. She opened her legs as wide as she could, her sex welcoming his without restraint, her powerless legs and feet lying on his backside mimicking his movements which she had given in to. “Give it to me, give it to me, give it to me, give it to me...” she breathed. “Come on, come one, come...” Her hand clenched a part of his fur which was within its reach. She raised her muzzle into the air, laid her head backwards and thus muffled the bells as her antlers were pressed into the cushion beneath her.

The bear panted and gasped. He could hear his own heartbeat in his small ears, it was the only sound he was still perceiving, everything else had vanished, he could see how her lips moved, but he could not hear anything else anymore, instead he was convinced to be aware of the noises of their bodies meeting again and again, how his loin slapped against her hip, how the wet fur down there sprayed drops of their mixed juices across the bed while her inner muscles tugged at the entire length of his sex, from the thick base, along the uneven shaft to the flattened glans whose shape which caressed her inside without any preparation, it was there: The moment the sex glided into her, parted her folds which clung to the shaft as the glans passed along until they settled around the fat base which was half-way trapped between her touchy labia which were almost too sensible for this. He was convinced to feel endless amounts of her juice flowing over his sex in this moment, unaware that it was the pleasurable quivering of her entire mons which triggered this feeling as her clit was trapped between her and him and his member that had settled in her depths. It vibrated with its on erratic rhythm, sending small shockwaves of delight through her body while the man moved and every one of his actions affected it and thus pleased his ravished lover.

“This is so good, this is so good! Goddesses, this is so good! Your dick feels so good...” She gasped, tensed and pressed herself deeper into the cushions, pushing her body against him at the moment when he was closest, their combined power fully pressing their body into each other for a short instant, before he raised his loin again and his sex slipped outside again. Nekoï moaned and quivered.

He tensed and used the full weight of his large ursine body when he moved in.

The power pushed her across the bed, against the wall of the bunk bed and instinctively she pushed one of her arms against the wall behind her head and put all of her power into her belly as she tensed to welcome his thrusts with belly movements of her own, moving it around his sex, allowing it to slip into her in different angles while he tried to keep up the pace and the power. Sweat gathered on his forehead, he could feel it while every pore squeezed, every muscle of his body tensed, just as the skin on his flesh, every hair of fur rose, just like his tiny tail. He could feel how his entire sex was about to be taken over by the feeling that it was about to burst at any moment and he gritted his teeth and slammed himself against her with full power and then groaned through his teeth as he tried to hold back, hold back another time while his sex ran through her folds, settled between them, held by them and her labia, her entire mons, her warm and wet abdomen, while he tried to go on, as fast as he could before...

The groan transformed into a deep moan and then his sex set off, he fell down on her, his member slipping in all the way before it grew in size as it was suddenly being flooded and he could feel this in every fiber of his body, every fiber felt the hold of her sex.

Nekoï pushed herself against him with all the power of her body. She was pushed down between the sheets, her legs closed powerfully around his rump, her thighs as wide apart as possible which triggered an overwhelming feeling all

by itself which was suddenly overcome by the feeling of his climax which she experienced like a powerful shock and she responded by bucking beneath him until her labia closed all around his sex and her folds closed around the rocking shaft and she was suddenly paralyzed. First she did not feel anything at all, it was as if her entire mind was being wiped empty for an instant, before pleasure, delight and countless fragments of joy rushed into her body, pulsed through her veins. She bucked, her muscles pressing her against the heavy man above her. "Yes, oooh, yeessss! Yeeesssss, oh, yeeeah..." Her words transformed into a wail. Deep inside of her the male sex throbbed and it felt as if a warm shower was all over her body even though it was nothing but the sex inside of her, releasing its seed.

Berry quivered and rocked, he rolled his eyes and his face twitched out of control while his sex, his loin, his legs and his entire belly was suddenly taken over by the feeling of a powerful strain while at the same time a calming sensation of warmth and tenderness clouded his mind. His eyelids fluttered and for a short moment he almost blacked out as the strain was becoming too powerful without losing any of its comfort which surrounded him while his body twitched and quivered above the antelope. Little by little the tension vanished and put his muscles and limbs into a state of powerless, comforting, satisfying dizziness.

"Oooooooh," Nekoi exclaimed softly. She had wrapped both of her hands around his backside, pressing him against her as strongly as she could as long as the desirable feelings of fulfillment lasted. She gasped for breath and opened her eyes again. The feeling of his sex within her was still overwhelming, her own sensitive sex perceived every weak movement of it and she could feel how their mixed juices flowed, found a way past her labia and ran down from her mons. She could feel how it had soaked her fur between her legs, just like she could smell the man and their mixed juices again. The scents were reaching her brain again and she shivered, feeling a strong yearn.

Gently she pushed the man upwards a little bit.

Berry rose rather instinctively. His sex slipped out of her and he looked down to her, surprised that she was moving further down beneath him.

A moment later, her head was between his legs and the intense scents which stuck to his sex engulfed her entirely. Casually she nibbled the wet fur of his balls before she rose towards his still half-erected member. The bells of her antlers chimed lightly when she raised her head.

Her lips wrapped themselves around his sex and instantly she could taste the bitter, musky taste of his semen which poured out of it as soon as her lips closed around it, it flowed into her mouth and filled it entirely. Her tongue twitched in excitement. The large, flat glans filled her mouth entirely, it was still quivering and trembling with the past power of his arousal and she allowed it to glide deeper into her mouth as every inch her lips squeezed, produced new drops of seed which mixed with her saliva and run down her throat and soon the shaft itself followed and overcame every resistance while it disappeared deeper and deeper inside her mouth. She was totally oblivious to the man above her while her head

rose to his loin and when she lowered herself again, her lips were tight around the entire girth, squeezing the smooth, wetted skin with the pronounced veins softly as it glided upwards again and soon she felt the glans against her tongue again and their taste which was all over her, had taken over her head.

Her mouth opened wide and the glistening wet sex came free again, threads of mixed juices connecting her lips and his member glistening in the dim light.

Nekoi gasped in delight and sighed, lying back in the bed with her arms spread wide apart. Her entire mind had been taken over by maleness, the taste and the scents which lingered in her mouth and her nose, the afterglow inside her abdomen, the irritable touchiness of her breasts, all of this mixed inside her body and cast everything else aside and left her in a state of pleasant, very physical warmth which contained her tiredness, allowed it to rise to the surface again without any repercussions, unpleasant after-effects or visions. Every fiber of her body felt like itself again. She reached out her hands and grabbed the man's fur and pulled him closer.

He came down reluctantly.

Nekoi wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you," she whispered sleepily. She could feel the exhaustion lingering in her body. His weight upon her was still feeling good, somehow she could feel something pulling at her mind, as if it wanted to force her to observe herself from above, but the man above her prevented that and thus her words were honest. She could feel how drops from his sex stained her fur and she enjoyed this even though that it meant that she had to wash herself the next day as she was sure that she could not expect a clean-up³ from him.

Berry moved his head a little bit. His eyes, framed by black fur, glistened in the dim light.

She raised her hand, took his head in her paws and gave him a kiss on his dry lips. "The Goddesses will certainly have enjoyed our love-making," Nekoi said.

Berry blinked shortly. "I thought this was meant to help you...?" he said.

The antelope smiled. "Well, every love-making is a praise of the Goddesses," she answered. Her voice was almost a whisper. "Just like the moons in the skies, our bodies are creations of the Holy Mother. Just like the turn of the tides, the phases and the movement of the moons across the sky, our bodies are meant to move, to touch, to feel, to change and to love. Just like the Goddesses praise the Holy Mother through their passing and their daily movement, so did we."

The bear looked at her for a moment, then he nodded.

"Besides that..." She paused shortly, then she moved a little closer. "You are not refined a lover as some acolytes I know, but I really enjoyed your vigor and the way you fucked me."

For an instant he tried to make out something in her face, but her expression had not changed at all. "Why did you ask me to do this?"

The antelope inhaled and for a short moment she looked towards the candle on the distant table while her hand absent-mindedly stroked a part of his shoulder. Finally she looked towards the ceiling. "Whenever I perform a scrying, I allow my

mind to merge with something else. It is like using magic, but much more intense. Where a wizard just tries to bring out the essence of something in order to imitate its powers, I try to become one with it for some time. Actually I don't really become one with it, it is more like..." She frowned for a moment, searching for the right words. "Imagine that you close your eyes and try to determine the wind just by the way that it brushes through your fur. That takes a long time and in the end you will feel very, very cold." She looked at him directly. "You are here to warm me again. To remind me that my body is here in this place, that it is like this with its desires and pleasures and not someplace else. Besides that I also want to thank the Goddesses for guiding me."

The bear looked into her eyes for a moment, then he nodded. "I am feeling tired," he mumbled suddenly, rose his paw, let it ran over his eyes and muzzle. "Sorry!"

The priestess nodded.

The bear rolled over to her side, his weight left her and for the moment it disappeared and she did not feel his warmth anymore she almost missed it.

He snuggled up in the blanket, showing her his back. He inhaled deeply, she could see how his body rose and then relaxed again. Then he lay still.

Deep down in the belly of the airship hammered the engines.

She raised her paw, laid it on his back, where it slowly dropped down from, her fingers brushing through his fur. She tried to focus on the slightly tickling feeling in her furless pads, then the candle suddenly reached the end of its wick and with a very light fizzle it extinguished and the last light in the room vanished.

She felt how the man by her side moved and then there was the feeling of cold that came along when two bodies separate. The blanket was cast aside for a moment and then the mattress moved a little bit when the male stood up. She went on pretending that she was asleep.

Berry looked around in the room and tried to find his clothes which had to lie on the ground somewhere, but the light of the morning was still far too dim to offer his ursine eyes any clear view. He searched around on the floor, got hold of several clothes which he picked up just to have a look at them. When he had successfully identified something as his own, he carefully put it over his arm, but he did not find his pants.

"They are under the chair over there!"

Berry looked up and saw Nekoi lying in the bed, her head resting on her arm while she looked at him.

"Sorry, I did not mean to wake you," he said quickly.

The antelope shook her head. "Doesn't matter, after having performed a scrying I am not able to sleep that well anyway. The visions keep on..." She waved her hands and fell silent.

The male bear looked at her for a moment, waiting for her to go on, but when he realized that she had not intention to do so, he quickly went over to the spot which she had indicated before and retrieved his pants.

When he bent over the priestess had a good look at him, studied his body, how his skin and dark fur stretched over his muscles as well as the rolls of flab that was so typical for ursine males. Despite this his backside was still mostly clearly defined and nicely visible due to the lack of a tail. When he bend over she could see the muscles moving underneath and it reminded her of his weight upon her, the pressure of his body against hers. She inhaled a little bit and with a quick movement she stood up from her bed, approached him from behind and when he stood up straight again, holding his pants in his hand, she embraced him from behind.

Berry stopped cold when he felt how the shape of the female antelope was pressed against his back.

Her hands moved over the fur of his belly and went on downwards until they got a hold of his sex.

"I would prefer if you stayed a little longer," Nekoi mumbled, her hand gliding up and down the shaft. She could feel his heartbeat in between her hands while she gently pulled the foreskin backwards and revealing the bright tip.

Berry shuddered instinctively, feeling how his sex rose in her hold. "I hafta go to the engines' room," he mumbled quickly and quickly walked towards the door.

The antelope almost fell down when the man she had leaned on went along. She had to catch her balance again and when she had finally gotten it back she saw how the door closed behind him. The priestess stood up straight again and let go a sound of angry disappointment. Slowly she turned around and pushed her hair from her face.

In the meantime Berry stood in the corridor and inhaled deeply. When he let his head hang down he realized that he was still entirely naked and that his sex was not only clearly visible, but also half erected. As quickly as possible he put on his pants.

In her room Nekoi sat down on her bed as she was feeling a little bit dizzy again. She closed her eyes in order to black out the daylight which came in through the windows. "I wish you were here with your gentle light to ease me," she mumbled and laughed shortly. "Your light upon my fur to guide me, you are my guides through the forests of life, you are the guides through the darkness. You offer shadows for the hunters and shadows for the lovers, light for the scholars and light for the lovers..." Her mumbling transformed into a light song while she pulled up her legs and sat cross-legged at the edge of her bed for a long time.

For most of the morning she meditated, sung chants and prayed, but it was hard for her to concentrate. She still felt very detached like being trapped inside a feverish dream, but she tried not to force herself too much. Her experiences with scrying had taught her by now that there was no sense urging herself, only time could help her, even though meditation eased the feeling and sex distracted her. When she had still been in training and performed her first scryings she had reacted with outbursts of desperate hysteria as the feelings had been so overwhelming, numbing her mind for days and she had not calmed down until somebody had taken her in her arms. When she had reached the age she had

started to have sex with those people, craving the moments when the power of lust forced her senses to obey her physical instincts and the joy made her forget about anything for some moments. Still she was not able to do much, she felt ill at ease all of the time and it was not just the after-effects of the scrying which bugged her. She was restless and soon she was not able to sit down patiently anymore. Finally she got up and started wash and to dress negligently. She did not have the patience to do much more than necessary and with messy hair and a simple gown she left her room.

Her first way led her to the mess where she ate some fruit even though she was not hungry at all and the sensation of having a full stomach created a feeling of wanting to vomit. Then she went on the main deck and let the winds blow around her. She ignored Sty, Recha and Cafy who were training there. But soon the winds tugging at her clothes and her hair got on her nerves as well. She could feel that her mind lacked sleep while her body craved for physical activity.

Suddenly the door to the main deck opened and Itha emerged.

"I found it!" the man yelled.

Instantly everyone turned around towards him and looked at the wolverine how carried a ragged, dirty backpack in one of his hands and rose it up high. Lokos was following him.

Even Nekoi was looking at the wolverine now.

Sty let his sword spin around in his hand and with one smooth movement let it disappear in its sheath again. He pulled off his shirt which he had tied to the railing and quickly dried himself with it. "Alright! Let's have a look at that on the bridge," he said. "Who tells Fadr?"

"I can do that," Recha said quickly.

Sty nodded, while Recha walked away. Sty looked towards Nekoi. "You better join us as well," he said.

The priestess inhaled, but nodded.

Lokos looked at her when he walked past her.

The antelope returned his look.

Soon they were all standing around a table on the bridge, Ileeree had joined them while they looked at the backpack which lay in the middle of the table.

"It was hidden in a recess in the very back of the leeward coal storage. She had cramped herself into the tiniest, most uncomfortable and dirtiest spot of the entire ship." Itha said.

Ileeree laughed shortly and wrinkled her nose with ostentation.

"It's pitch black in dere, no surprise that she was not found," Lokos added. "Besides stinking like a dump."

"So it was no wonder that we did not find a trace of her scent," Sty stated.

The wolverine nodded.

"Hard to believe that someone can hide in there for such a long time," Ileeree interjected.

The door to the main deck opened again and Fadr stepped into the room, followed by Recha.

Sty nodded towards him while the mage walked towards the table. "Alright, let's get on with that," he said and Itha who had already leaned forward, waiting for the captain's signal, started to undo the backpack. It was made of dark brown, very thick reptile leather, now stained with the remains of coal. There was a water bottle tied to it at one side. It looked damaged in a few places where someone had clumsily sewed on some patches. It was filled to the brim and despite its weight Itha turned it in his hands for a moment while everybody else watched him. Itha smacked his lips, opened the straps of its flap and turned it upside down.

A flood of objects fell down on the table and formed a small heap.

The furs around the table stretched themselves.

Itha threw the empty backpack to the ground.

Sty, Illeeree, Recha and Itha started to rummage around while Nekoi, Lokos and Fadr watched in silence.

Most of the stuff was ragged clothes in a miserable condition, dirty shirts, vests, torn pants, worn out feline spats, several torn pieces of cloth which looked as if they had been used as underwear and a large sleeping bag. Among these they found cans of food, loose matches, metal dishes, the stubs of candles. Itha found a small round metal box which turned out to be a simple compass. Recha found a flint, Illeeree an old metal lighter. She tried to use it, but it did not work anymore. Itha pulled out a simple rope while Illeeree found a large knife.

For a moment she studied the hunting knife with the long blade before she handed it to her husband who had already looked at it.

Sty took it in his paw: It had a simple steel blade with a coppery hilt which was wound with leather straps. He touched the blade's edge with his thumb and almost instantly it cut into his skin. The fox frowned. He looked up again and noticed that the other furs had watched him. "Anything else?" he asked while he laid the knife aside.

There was little stuff left, just a small heap of left-overs. There was a spool of thread, needles, a small leather bag with a few stones⁴, a metal cup, a crumbled paper bag, several small torn pieces of paper and more stuff. Itha pulled a large folded sheet of paper out of the remnants. It felt greasy between his fingers. He opened it carefully.

As he noticed that the other ones were watching him, he said "It's a map!" as soon as he had seen the first few symbols upon the paper. Carefully he unfolded it completely and laid it down on the table.

Illeeree moved around the table to look at it. She frowned for an instant, then her mouth opened while she looked at the signs on the map.

"That's My'an?" Itha asked, looking at the script on the map.

"Yes," Illeeree said while eyeing the map.

The priestess had tilted her head so that she could look at the map as well.

Sty observed his wife.

Illeeree bend over and stared at the map with her opened mouth: In front of her eyes were small graphic symbols for mountains and forests. They had once been

colored, but few of the original color was left as it had faded. The black lines which designated the course of rivers, roads, the coastal lines of lakes and oceans, the locations of towns and cities and the original inscriptions had blurred as well, but they were still quite readable. Ileeree wet her lips. She knew My'an, but she was not used to it. She needed a moment to decipher the letters. Her eyes wandered from the Silver Coast to the Northern Reaches where she could read the name "Northpoint".

"Abama!" the vixen said suddenly.

The prairie dog who had still been sitting at her desk turned around on her swivel chair.

"Could you have a look at this?"

Instantly the woman laid her tools aside, stood up from her chair and walked over to them.

Ileeree stepped aside, so that the prairie dog could have a better look at the map which was spread all over the table.

Sty watched his two navigators.

"Holy Mother!" Abama exclaimed after a short moment, she bent over as well, studying the map more closely like Ileeree had done.

"What's with the map?" Recha asked curiously.

Abama just shook her head. "This is... It's huge! I haven't seen a map like this is..." She threw up her hands. "Goddess, I can't remember having seen such a map before. Look there's even Ao⁵ down here!" she said towards Ileeree.

"But is that accurate?" Ileeree asked.

"As accurate as such an old map can be, I guess."

"Old?" Recha asked.

"Yeah," the older vixen answered. "You don't use something like this for mountains or forests anymore." She pointed towards a mountain range on the map which was nothing but a collection of drawn mountains on the paper.

"But there are still individual mountains there, you see!" Abama interjected. "Look, there's even Mount Caspenei⁶ with the Lispee Pass⁶."

"Yes, but it is too large in relation to the distance from Pillars of Xos⁷."

"Maybe, but the location is right and the trading routes are really as accurate as they can be. They respect the terrain as well as they can." The prairie dog's eyes wandered over the map. "Look! Look! There's even the Wasteland⁸! I have never seen such a precise location of that... It is much further to the north than I would have expected, almost the same latitude as Fingeran⁹."

"Yeah, but that can't be right. For all I know, the Wasteland is much further to the south-east," Ileeree contradicted.

Abama wiggled her head.

"Sorry!" Itha said suddenly. "What does this mean? What is it about this map?"

Ileeree looked at him. "This map is precious, very precious. I can't tell you how much it is worth, because you simply won't find anybody who would sell you something like that."

Itha blinked. "Okay! So how does this girl get such a thing?"

Ileeree shrugged her shoulders.

"Look!" Abama pointed towards the edges of the map. There were small holes in every corner. "It has hung somewhere."

"The lynx stole it?" Ileeree suggested.

Abama nodded slowly. "Can't imagine any other way to get something like this." She laughed shortly. "Goddess, I would steal that map if I saw it hanging somewhere." She stood up straight again.

Sty smacked his lips. "This does not get us anywhere!" he said. "No matter where she got that map from, it does not help us in any way."

"What about the knife?" Itha asked.

Sty took it in his paws again. He turned it slowly for a moment, then he threw it over to the wolverine who caught it skilfully. "Sharp as a cheeryo's¹⁰ tooth, but nothing special."

"Could she not have used that when she... fought Bedai," Recha suggested carefully.

Sty inhaled deeply.

"She is right, you know," Nekoi said suddenly. The priestess had not spoken since a long time, but had observed everything that had been going on around her. She stood erected, her arms folded, her hands hidden in the wide sleeves of her gown. "If she had been here in order to assassinate us, she would have used some weapons."

Sty grunted. "If you keep in mind how she dealt with Bedai, you know that she does not necessarily need any weapons." He inhaled. "This is not a coincidence. I am sure of that and all this rubbish..." He pointed towards the torn and ragged clothes they had searched and dumped on the floor. "...does not mean anything. It's useless! Let's see what Bedai gets out of her. Dismissed!"

For a moment the furs around the table hesitated, not entirely sure what they should do.

"Captain, if you don't mind, I would like to copy this map," Abama said.

The fox nodded.

Abama carefully picked up the map, turned around and went towards her desk again. Ileeree followed her.

Nekoi inhaled deeply. She looked at the captain for a moment, but the fox did not notice her look. Finally the antelope turned around as well and went towards the door.

Sty had turned towards Silent Cry who had been on the helm all of the time.

"Captain, what should we do with this stuff?" Recha asked and pointed towards the backpack and all the stuff which they had found inside.

The male fox just waved his hand without turning around. "I don't care, dump it somewhere!"

Recha looked at Itha. The wolverine grinned at her. The vixen rolled her eyes and kneeled down to gather all the stuff which they had dropped on the floor while Itha picked up the backpack and simply threw the stuff which was still on the table inside.

Nekoi had not taken the door to the uppermost deck as she had not wanted to go out in the open again. She was feeling something like a weak, indistinct headache, a throbbing somewhere in her head which grew stronger and got weaker, almost vanishing again. It was as if it was being influenced by something, but she did not understand what it could be, but she knew that she did not want to expose herself to the winds on the uppermost deck again and therefore she had chosen the way through the ship which led her past countless doors of storage rooms and parts of the engines which were connected to the gearwheels, the propellers or the exhaust pipes. There she walked past several pipes which were obviously very hot and most of them showed the damage the ship had suffered before they had been forced to land the last time. Jets of steams and smoke hot from the pipes shot into the narrow corridor which was not lit at all except for some foggy portholes here and there where the winding corridor approached the outer wall of the ship.

The sound of the engines was much more prominent here because the engines' room was right below. It droned in her ears which she flicked instinctively in order to get rid of the thudding noises, it annoyed her and for a moment she regretted having chosen this way because this kind of atmosphere did not help her irritated state. On the contrary it reminded her of her visions during the last scryings she had performed.

With a grim face she walked through the corridor and rushed past the doors and tried to get out of this place as quickly as possible.

She did not know what made her stop, maybe it was the loud banging noise, maybe it was the smell of blood. It was that kind of instinctive impulse that had turned her into a scryer and thus she followed it instinctively even before she had understood what it meant. The door handle was in her paw, she pushed it down and throwing most of her weight against the door she pushed it open.

The bear stopped instantly and turned around, the fresh blood dropping from his fist while his other hand kept on holding the lynx by her hair. "What do you want?"

The antelope just hang in the doorframe and needed a moment to grasp the situation.

The room was very small and most of it was crammed full with boxes and crates. It was almost entirely dark except for one single oil lamp hanging down from one of the wooden beams. It hung right above the stool at the opposite wall where the lynx girl was strapped to, her mouth wide opened while she coughed up clods of blood which flew against the bear's leather shirt where it disappeared among the other blood stains there.

The stench of blood was so intense, that it almost overcame the smells of sulfur and urine.

In this darkness it looked as if the entire fur of the lynx was either stained or drenched with blood. Despite this the lynx moved and very slowly the muzzle closed and nothing but the line of sharp teeth remained which tried to get closer

to the bear's arm which was just above it as he was still pulling at her hair, holding her in place.

The sounds of the engines seemed to fade away until nothing but the painfully hard breathing of the lynx remained.

"In the name of the Goddesses...!" the antelope breathed and stepped into the room.

With eyes as narrow as mere slits the bear stared at the antelope. His knuckles creaked when he opened his fist, more drops of the feline's blood dripped down from his paw. "I think this is none of your business!" he said very slowly.

The antelope was still looking at the girl but now she turned towards him and looked straight into his expressionless face. "This is going to stop this moment," the antelope replied.

"I don't think so!" the male replied.

Nekoi stretched as she looked at him.

In the dim light in the room his eyes disappeared entirely in the shadows beneath his frowns.

Instinctively she had released her magical powers and she could feel it flowing around her, a faint wind that brushed through her gown and her fur. Her hands assumed the gesture of a sign of prevention, one hand flat towards Bedai, two fingers of the other hand touching the palm of the first.

His frowns moved closer together. "You can't threaten me with your magical parlour tricks," the bear hissed and turned towards the lynx again. He glared down on the blood-stained face.

In his back the priestess said: "Maybe not, but I will surely put a geas¹¹ on you, if you don't step away from the girl now."

"The Goddesses' law is not..."

"Do you want to blaspheme in my presence, Bedai? Go on, I am going to enjoy the consequences!"

The bear's hands closed to fists. His rage let him tremble, he had to suppress the urge to go for the lynx in front of him right in this moment. He could hear the hammering of his heart which was held in a tight grip, he could also feel the rush of blood in his veins, but most of all he felt all-consuming desire to stretch his tightened muscles by burying his fists in the body of the feline or the antelope or both...

"Do you know what a geas¹¹ feels like?"

The bear let go of the lynx, spun around and leaned towards the woman.

Instinctively the priestess budged a little bit.

"First! I am entrusted with the security of the ship and I will do anything to ensure it. That is my mission! Second! The captain assigned me to get everything out of that little pussy over there and I want to be damned if I don't!" the bear hissed, his dark eyes glistened. "So what does the captain say about your intervention here?"

She could smell his breath as well as feel it on her face, but she faced him anyway. "Do you really think I will leave this girl in your proximity for any more moment?"

They looked into each others' eyes. She could see the throbbing of his veins in his frowns.

For a moment it was almost entirely quiet in the room, except for the heavy breathing of the enraged bear.

Suddenly the man turned away. "I will go get the fucking captain!" he exclaimed, pushed her out of his way, walked past her and a moment later the door behind him slammed shut with such power that it hurt in the antelope's ears.

Nevertheless she did not waste any other moment and went towards the lynx girl who hung on the chair, blood dripping from her opened muzzle. The priestess kneeled down and gently put a hand on the feline's shoulder.

Instantly the lynx' head shot forward, her bloody mouth wide open, snapping for the antelope.

Following her intuition Nekoi evaded instantly. Totally flabbergasted she stared at the attacking lynx who showed a line of sharp teeth, snarling very lowly. The one eye which was not yet overgrown by swollen flesh had taken the shape of a glistening slit while blood from a deep laceration on her forehead dropped down from her brow. The small body was trembling powerfully despite the straps which bound her to the stool.

The priestess hesitated for a moment which she used to study the lynx girl. In this moment the lynx' head dropped down again, her breathing rattled strongly and the muscles which had been tightened powerfully a moment ago suddenly lost all of their power. The lynx just hung on the chair and breathed on while blood dropped from the many wounds she had suffered.

"Listen, I am here to..." the priestess said and approached the feline again.

Once again the head shot upwards and a wide opened mouth with predatory teeth reached out for the other woman. Every fiber of the small body was taut to the very limit as she struggled against the hold of the straps which bound her to the stool.

This time the antelope did not retire, carefully she stretched out her hand and put it down on the lynx' eyes. "Rest!" she said.

The girl's jaw dropped down as if she was surprised, she tilted her head a little bit later and the small body slumped down on the chair. For a short moment the lynx tensed again, tried to raise her head, but then she let go a rattling sigh and was silent and motionless, only held by the straps.

The priestess stood up, she produced a small knife from her gown and quickly stepped behind the chair with the lynx.

"You can't go in there..."

Before the prairie dog could even finish the sentence the door to the captain's ready door was pushed open.

Ileeree had just about enough time to hide under the desktop.

Despite his hair and his clothes being in total disarray, the captain did hardly move at all, just turning his head to look at the bear who had just rushed into the room.

Bedai stared at the fox with the bare chest, while the other one studied the bear as well, noticing the blood on his hands.

Abama still stood in the door. "I am sorry, sir, I wanted to stop him."

"Yes, no need to apologize. There is nothing you did wrong," the fox said slowly.

"What is going..." the bear started.

"This is none of your business, Bedai!" the captain said harshly and leaned forward behind his desk. "What is it that you want and what's with that blood?"

The bear stepped forward. "It belongs to the lynx, sir," Bedai answered slowly, carefully emphasizing the last word. "I was about to interrogate her when that damned priestess..."

The fox cleared his throat when the other man cursed the priestess.

"The damn priestess..." Bedai repeated. "...stopped me."

"Why would she do that?"

Bedai's eyes narrowed. "Sir?"

"What is it with all that blood? Did you try to kill the lynx or what?" the fox asked sharply.

"I did was I was told, I damn tried to get something out of her!" the bear replied, almost shouting.

"By killing her or what?"

"By whatever means necessary," the bear hissed. The veins at his neck were bulging visibly. He leaned forward, no longer minding that he could see the half naked vixen under the desktop. "The lynx played dumb, so I did what was necessary, sir!"

"So what was it that you found out? Tell me!" the fox said and stood up from his chair, facing the bear directly.

The bear gritted his teeth. "I was just about to..."

"About what, about WHAT?" Sty yelled suddenly. "JUST LISTEN YO YOURSELF! YOU... YOU...! GET OUT OF MY FACE! OUT!"

"CAPTAIN, I WANT..."

"OUT! NOW!"

The bear retired a little bit, but did not move towards the door.

The fox glared coldly at the larger ursine. "Once again you... you... What is it that is going on with you? Do you ever think? I did not tell you to beat that lynx to death! We are not among ourselves on this ship! Do you ever think about what I would want you to do, instead of doing what you want to do? Is it that? Is it too hard for you to take one goddamn order and go along with it? Do I have to tell you every damn detail before you do something right?" He stared at the bear.

The bear stared at him as well.

For a moment the two men just looked at each other.

"I won't repeat it again: Get out of here! Now!" Sty hissed.

Behind his closed lips, the bear's jaw was locked. He was seething with rage. He spun around, pushed the prairie dog aside who had still been standing in the doorway, witnessing everything that had went on.

Sty fell into his swivel chair, he moved his hand towards Abama. She nodded in response and quickly shut the door.

"Please, get dressed again, I really don't want to anymore," Sty said towards Ileeree who had crouched under the table all the time.

The door to the upper deck opened with a bang.

Cafy and Itha instantly turned around and looked at Bedai who came out of the door.

Cafy stood up straight and went towards the bear who walked across the deck.

He dried his hands on his pants when he started speaking carefully: "Listen, about that lynx... I was..." He was not meant to speak on.

"While I was... they were fucking in the ready room! FUCKING IN THE READY ROOM!" the bear shouted suddenly. He did not stop as if he did not even notice the raccoon's presence, instead he went towards the door to the lower decks and slammed it shut behind him.

Confused Cafy stood on the deck and looked after him for a moment, then the raccoon turned towards Itha, but the wolverine just shrugged his shoulders.

The small feline was much lighter than Nekoi would have had expected. It was still difficult to carry her through the narrow corridors of the ship. She quickly summoned her magic powers to open the door to her own room.

Inside she quickly laid the lynx down on her bed and when she rose again, she looked down on herself and noticed that her entire gown was full of blood stains. "Goddesses!"

She turned around and started to undress, letting her gown down to the floor, before picking it up again, folding it neatly and putting it down on her desk. Except for her loincloth which hung down between her legs, she was nude now. She went to the closet, opened the casket inside it and chose some jewellery: A few necklaces, some light bracelets and little chains of copper, gold and darkened silver which she put on her antlers.

The antelope studied her appearance in a mirror before she turned towards the lynx again who was still unconscious, her fur an entire blood stained mess, her face disappearing beneath the felted hair and the slowly increasing swelling. There were already many increasing blood stains on the bed's sheets around her.

Nekoi kneeled down by the bunk bed's side and studied the lynx' face. There was not much to be seen there. Carefully she pushed the hair out of the girl's face, revealing straight angular features, a small reddish, but mostly dark nose. Her eyes were slanted. Nekoi studied them for a moment, as she had not seen that many furs with slanted eyes yet. The eyes were firmly shut in this moment and

the left one was locked by swelling and dry blood which had run down from a wide cut of her eyebrow.

The fur on her chest was a little bit lighter, but not that different from the darker fur of her back which showed a lynx' typical dark spots. Nekoi almost instinctively touched the sideboards which were soft, but between her fingers she could feel that they were stained and felted by the blood as well.

She let her fingers run through the fur and to her surprise she noticed that the fur was short but very thick above the skin which stretched firmly over firm, pronounced muscles. For a moment Nekoi petted the round curve of the biceps.

The wounds she could see were mostly lacerations, they disappeared entirely between the blood stained fur around them. There were many bruises as well, at least she could see a few of them. In several places there was already considerable swelling.

The priestess got up and went towards the closet in the wall again. She opened it, chose a small box inside of it and quickly pulled out some whitish cloth and a small pouch. She poured water from the jar on her chest of drawers in a bowl and sat down by the lynx' side again, starting to clean the wounds. Within no time the water in the bowl was red with blood.

When she turned the lynx on her back and washed the few wounds which she could find there, she let her fingers wander through the fur and over the skin there and started suddenly. She noticed the bulges of many long, prominent scars beneath the fur, stretching mostly from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. The priestess observed the lynx closely while her fingers explored the scars.

Her fingers wandered on, down the back and towards the round buttocks. She noticed that these were much more firm than any other buttocks she had felt before, even those of men. Curiously she let her fingers wander up and down the backside, enjoying the feel of it with the short tail and firm crack in between them.

Finally she started to put on bandages on the worst wounds, also applying some of the herbs she got from the pouch.

The priestess stood up again. She groaned and stretched, the kneeling position had hardened her muscles.

"Alright," she said to herself. "Let's see what the goddesses can do for you."

She pushed the lynx over a little bit and sat down on the edge of the bed. She took the small pouch and turned it in her hand for a moment. She felt the herbs inside and she could smell them: Club moss, snake grass, ground ivy, kidney-vetch¹² and many others. Healing spells were not a strong point of hers, but she had learned them during her formation and she tried to remember the right procedure while she turned her attention to the herbs in the small pouch. Within a few moments she could feel them with her mind, their brittle structure beneath her fingers. They started to grow and she felt how she was slowly starting to surround her and she sank between them, whispering the names of the Goddesses in an endless prayer. The pulsing lynx was beneath her and she pulled the powers of the herbs with her while she went on further. They spread quickly and dispersed and suddenly she noticed a profound darkness around her. She

turned around and suddenly perceived huge stone structures against a sky full of smoke which hurt in her lungs.

The unexpected pain made her loose her concentration. She gasped for breath and opened her eyes, loosing her focus entirely. She sat on the bed again, her hand lay on the bare back of the lynx girl, among herbs she had spread on the lynx' back. She inhaled deeply and tried to cast out the impression of pain in her lungs, when she noticed that she had unconsciously spread the herbs in a pattern on the lynx fur. The antelope blinked while she studied it: Obviously she had started to write the names of the Goddesses with the herbs.

Nekoi exhaled angrily and wiped the herbs of the lynx back, angry about the waste of her herbs and her inability to control herself. One last time she let her hand sink down on the girl's back who was still unconscious as she had been all of the time. Her breathing was steady and felt relaxed as far as Nekoi could tell. In the antelope's eyes the lynx did already look better even though her healing spell had been interrupted and would hardly have an immediate effect, but it would speed up the natural healing process. At least it looked as if the bleeding had stopped.

Satisfied with her work, the priestess stood up from the bed and went over to the closet to get herself a new gown.

There were traces of green of many different shades beneath them, but the green had started to mix with brown and red here and there. There were some trees which even had already gotten entirely golden and yellow and they shimmered from above with the moisture that had gathered on their leaves during the night and which was not evaporating anymore as even the brightest sunlight was not strong enough to make the drops evaporate anymore. Instead they shimmered and glistened when a breeze of wind passed by as the leaves moved and some of them were carried along, floated over the surrounding trees which were still all mostly green.

The airship had passed by a large lake whose surface had been so dark and impenetrable that they had been able to see the small spots of water birds on its surface which had rested on their journey to the south and when the large noisy shape of the ship had gotten closer, the birds had risen to the air as well, assuming a formation and in no time their shapes were visible against the horizon as they flew ahead, fleeing from the airship which was still floating over the lake, smoke and steam billowing from its exhaust pipes, pursuing its way to the north.

The lake had made Sty uncomfortable as every sight of water had alarmed him ever since he had accepted this mission. Furthermore his dispute with Bedai had made him restless. He had asked Fadr to join him while observing the surface of the lake. He did not necessarily trust the mage's abilities, but somehow he felt more secure having someone close to him who would have been able to counter a long-range attack, but as usual there was nothing at all and the fox leaned on the railing and just watched the surface of the lake where he could see fallen leaves on the surface.

He would not have been able to tell how much time had passed when he heard how the door to the main deck opened. He flicked his ears shortly in order to identify the rustling of the clothes which came closer. The soft sound of silk and the light chime of tiny bells told him who was coming.

Sty rose his head, shortly brushed over his muzzle and turned around, looking at the priestess who came closer just like Fadr did. He had anticipated this visit, it was long over-due.

The antelope stopped and inhaled deeply and for a moment she looked at Ileeree who stood at the helm, having replaced Silent Cry for the day.

Sty observed the antelope for a moment, then he stretched and rose to full height. One of his hands resting upon his sword's hilt. "Speak up!" he said.

"You already heard from Bedai...?"

Sty just nodded shortly.

The antelope let go an inaudible sigh. "The lynx is with me now. She is in my quarters, I will guard her. Rest assured, she won't be any trouble."

Fadr let go a derogatory grunt.

Sty looked at the weasel for a moment. "That is easily said, Nekoi," he replied. "What have you found out?"

"She has old scars on her back, they look like she has been whipped."

The fox nodded slowly. "So she is an ex-convict or escapee¹³."

The antelope nodded. "Furthermore she wears a shamanic pendant which is known as a Silver Arc. It is very rare, as far as I know there is only one place where one can buy it: A small settlement close to the Silver Coast."

Sty looked towards Ileeree.

"East coast of Lake Moonfire," the vixen said instantly even though she had not seen her husband's look.

"Could she come from there?" Sty asked.

The priestess moved her head. "I am not sure. Her slit eyes suggest otherwise. But I bet that she has been to the Silver Coast."

"Most of the writings on scraps of paper looked like My'an," Fadr interjected.

For a moment, the furs on the bridge were silent.

"It's hard to believe that a simple roamer should be from that far away," Sty mumbled thoughtfully.

"She could be the child of Caussian refugees¹⁴," Nekoi suggested. "I think that quite possible."

"And how do you explain that map she had...?" Fadr asked.

The antelope shrugged her shoulders. "No matter where she comes from, that map is a mystery. Although it could be some heirloom."

"Or stolen," the weasel said.

Nekoi nodded. "Considering the scars..., that is always an option."

Sty inhaled deeply. "Anything else?"

The antelope pursed her lips. "I..."

Sty looked straight at her.

"Could we discuss this in private?" the antelope asked.

The fox sniffed shortly. For an instant he looked at his wife, then he looked towards the antelope again. "Let's go upstairs!" he said. "Fadr, come with us!"

The antelope wrinkled her nose and stared to the ground, but she followed the fox who went ahead. The mage followed after her, he was hardly able to hide the grin on his face.

They went towards the deck and the weasel closed the door firmly shut behind him and then quickly stepped towards the antelope and the fox who stood at the railing.

The sun had come out between the clouds, but they were still all over the sky, large masses of foggy matter showing every possible shade of gray, heavy with moisture. The lake they had passed by had given way to the sparse vegetation of an extended marsh, small rivulets and ponds of dark water showed between the green of moss and reeds.

As soon as they stood at the railing the fox turned towards the priestess. "So what is this all about?"

The antelope pulled her dress a little tighter which flattered all around her body. "She was definitely touched by a spirit," the priestess replied.

The captain raised one eyebrow. "And what does that mean?"

It was Fadr who answered the question. "It means that she was not only in close contact with a spirit of some kind, but affected by its powers in some way. Usually priests of the Spirits show such signs."

"It could as well be a blessing as a curse. I can't tell," the antelope intervened. "I can't even tell if that happened long ago or during the last few days. Such traces do not fade. They are given or taken away."

The fox looked at the weasel and at the antelope, after a short moment he let go a grunt. "Is that why she went berserk?"

"No, I don't think so," the antelope answered quickly. "It could mean anything."

The fox pushed a strand of hair aside which had flown into his face. "You just don't know."

"She sees smoke," the wizard said. "She can't tell if it's an oven or a blaze. She just sees the smoke... or should I say steam?"

The antelope looked at the weasel from the corner of her eye, her lips slightly pursed.

Sty inhaled. "So give me one good reason why I should not throw her overboard right away?!" He looked at the weasel.

"Best thing to do," the wizard replied directly.

The priestess glared at him.

The captain noticed her reaction. "Do you know why I allowed you to drag that girl away from Bedai?" he suddenly asked the antelope. His silver, greyish hair fluttered in the wind.

For an instant the eyes of the woman opened wide.

"First of all I don't like this mess aboard my ship, there are certain limits, no matter what. But the security of this ship and its mission are my top priority and that leaves little room for idle kindness..."

Nekoi frowned.

“...but Bedai had no success at all. All he had in mind was payback. You already got further than him.”

Fadr hmpfhed.

Nekoi snorted. “And I say we need the Goddesses’ blessing more than anything to succeed at all. What if we anger them by killing an innocent girl?”

The fox stared at her for a moment, his ears flicked and he wrinkled the muscles of his muzzle. Then he looked at the clouds in the sky. “So what do you suggest?”

The antelope shrugged. “I am not sure. But I do know that killing her would be a grave mistake.”

“I don’t think that keeping her aboard is a wise decision...,” Fadr interjected.

“We can’t land the ship, it would take too much time,” Sty said.

“Yes, but I don’t see any reason why...”

“So you suggest murder,” Nekoi said.

The weasel looked at her. “I do not suggest murder. This is a legitimate way of dealing with blind passengers, especially if you take into account what she did last night.”

“Then answer me how I should ask the Goddesses for their support if I do not support this crew’s actions either?” Her antlers risen high, she returned his look. She turned towards the captain again. “I believe that I can get more out of her. She has not woken yet, but I believe that there is more that I can find out if she finally does...”

Fadr snorted.

The antelope glared at him. “She has every right to mistrust us, she was almost killed last night.”

The weasel raised his eyebrows. “It was her own fault, she is a blind passenger! Maybe she is even a murderer or worse...”

“Being touched by a spirit does not mean anything at all! She could just have watched a summoning¹⁵...”

“Just like it could mean that she is possessed¹⁶ and was sent by our prey,” Fadr hissed.

The antelope and the smaller weasel stared at each other for a moment, their eyes flashed.

Finally the antelope stretched herself and once again pulled at her gown which loosed itself in the strong wind which blew across the upper deck. “Captain, what do you think?” she asked without looking at the fox.

“I will decide about this lateron.”

“This is madness. If there is even the slightest chance that she is the tool of our prey, there...” Fadr interjected.

The fox interrupted him with a violent movement of his paw. “Later!”

“Then how do you explain a simple roamer going berserk as she did?” Fadr asked. “How do you explain that she defeated Bedai?”

The fox inhaled deeply. His hand tipped against the hilt of his sword. He looked at the mage who returned the glare.

After a moment of silence the fox turned towards the antelope. "I want you to find out more about this girl. If she has a connection to our target, maybe we can use it to our advantage."

The priestess inhaled and tensed, while the wizard gritted his teeth for an instant.

He turned away from them and screwed up his eyes when the sunlight shone directly into his eyes. He could feel its warmth in his fur. "Dismissed!"

The antelope gathered the edges of her robe, turned around and walked away.

The wizard accompanied her. "So what is your real interest in this girl?"

The priestess looked at the weasel.

"You can't tell me that you are only interested in her well-being. The Goddesses do not prohibit the punishment of a criminal. So what is your intention?"

They had reached the door to the lower deck again. There was a little stop when they were right in front of it as they were both about to step inside. After they had exchanged a short look it was Fadr who stepped aside in order to allow Nekoi to go in first.

So he watched the back of her dress when she said: "I don't think that you can explain the words of the Goddesses to me."

"Your naivety can kill us all," the weasel snapped, but not very loudly.

She ignored his comment and walked away.

Clouds rushed by and swirled over the horizon, before they disappeared behind the line of mountains which moved along, sometimes they gave way to larger valleys or plains, sometimes the airship flew over them. Then the ship was surrounded by fog and clouds which whirled around the metal and wooden casing, being scattered by the propellers while countless drops like rain fell down from the balloon overhead and the furr which guarded the top deck pulled its leather clothes tighter in order to escape this cold wetness.

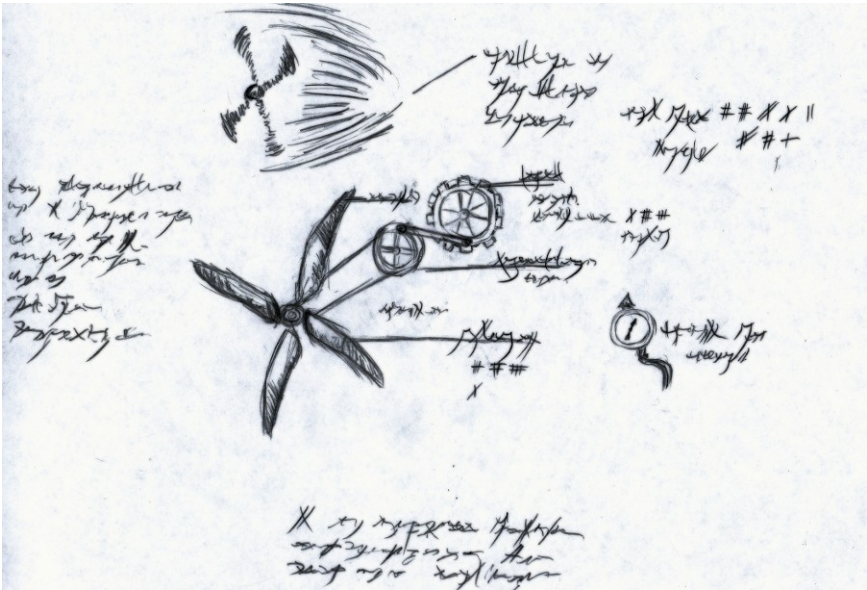
The trees of the mountains had already adapted distinct colors as the green faded everywhere as if it was washed off by the moisture. The blank rock shimmered wetly and reflected the sunlight if it got through the clouds, the distorted picture of the airship slowly passing over the surface of still lakes.

Carefully the crew observed every change of the weather, paid close attention to every body of water. They studied the barometer, the thermometer, the anemometer and the hygrometer and carefully noted the data in a thick book of wax paper which the navigators studied carefully when they set the course. They studied the landscape below, just like they took measurements with their sextants and the astrolabes.

Ileeree and Abama were constantly trying to adjust their readings, tried to align these to the inaccurate maps they had, where only rough outlines and imprecise locations were given. They had to adjust and readjust, scribbled on the maps and

put in new locations, corrected the course of rivers and the position of mountains while they tried to keep the course in accordance with the weather: Avoiding headwind, making the best use of tailwind, while at the same time evading any indication of rain they could find.

They instructed Silent Cry, the captain or whoever held the helm as often as they could. On their map they could see what every other passenger aboard the ship was hardly able to discern: They were following the course of a distant river. Sometimes they could see it through their telescopes, shimmering in the distance, but then they changed the course to stay as far away from it as possible, yet following it to the north.



She woke up with a start, but she did not open her eyes, nor move, as she could feel the presence of another fur, just like the pain of the wounds the bear had inflicted on her. She knew that she was not in the same room anymore, despite her nose being blocked by dried blood, she could smell that this could not be the storage room anymore, additionally she seemed to be lying in a bed or something similar, at least the soft cloth all around suggested something like that.

What surprised her most was the nature of her pain. It was not the stinging pain of open wounds, it was dull like after a great strain, except that it was worse than that.

Very carefully she tried to open her eyes, but soon she had to notice that she could only open one of them, the other one being covered by her swellings.

The only thing she could see from underneath her eyelids was a wooden wall. She had instinctively crouched while she had slept and retreated to the very corner of the sleeping place, now facing the wall. She pricked up her ears and she could hear the faint noises of another person present in the room: The faint rustling of clothes and low breathing. She was almost instantly convinced that it had to be a woman, she could not even say why, her nose was not in a state to distinguish anything specific, but nevertheless she was almost entirely certain that the present furr had to be female.

She had some kind of a headache. It was not surprising that she suffered from a headache, but just like the pain of her wounds, it did not fit the kind of pain she would have expected from what little she could remember of the past hours. Cautiously she raised one paw and looked at it: Most of it was covered with a bandage.

She knitted her brows for a moment and tried to think. She tried to think for a moment, but her mind was sluggish. Finally she concluded that the pressure she felt all around her body had to be additional bandages, wrapped around her head, her thigh, her belly and both of her arms.

Furthermore, lying in a bed, her wounds having been tended to in some sort of way, she knew that she had to be in relative safety in this moment.

Thus she decided to turn around and dare to have a look at her surroundings and that other person.

It took quite an effort to turn around as her muscles lacked most of their strength, she felt totally exhausted.

When she had finally managed to turn her head around she looked at a bare breasted antelope who stood a few steps from the bed, a long ceremonial skirt consisting of nothing but heavily decorated straps of cloth hanging down from her waist. She wore three long necklaces, each of them consisting of a different material but all of them, adorning her neck as well as her bare breasts. Two long, twisted antlers dominated the head with the curly brown hair.

"You have woken," the antelope said.

Jiddy just stared at the three necklaces, when she looked into the antelope's eyes again, the woman started to smile.

“You have already noticed my choosing by the Goddesses,” she said. “My name is Nekoi Devo-ya, I am a priestess from the Temple of the Moons’ Gardens in Seamerakis. You do not have to fear the bear or anybody else anymore, you are safe here. What is your name?”

The lynx girl did not answer, she just turned away.

The antelope briefly raised her eyebrows. “At least you could tell me your name when you lie in my bed.” She had not expected what came next: Despite her obvious weakness the lynx girl did her best to raise from the bunk bed, she almost fell out of it, but caught her fall. Her bandaged, wounded arm hurt when she did so, but she ignored it. She almost crawled over the floor into the next corner, dragging the blanket behind her. There she curled up again and hid under the cloth.

The priestess was taken aback by this and for a moment she just looked at the heap of cloth and fur that lay in the corner now. She wanted to say something but finally decided that it was no point.

The antelope went over to a chair where she had put down her gown and started to put off her skirt and put on her kimono again.

When she was fully dressed again, she had another look at the heap in the corner and when she was certain that it had not moved, she went for the door and closed it quietly. She locked it from the outside.

Two pointed lynx ears duly noted the turning of the key even though they were hidden under a blanket. The one eye which she had been able to open closed slowly.

The raccoon undid the straps which held the cloth together and pulled it backwards. Instantly even in the dim light of this early night a few sparks flew off the dark shimmering blade. The light which was reflected upon the rough metallic surface twisted in strange ways and came off in the strangest colors as if it had come to life upon the orichalkum¹⁷.

“Put it away again,” the bear said.

The raccoon obliged and started to wrap it into the cloth again, pulling the leather straps tightly around it once it had disappeared.

“I want you to carry the blade with you at all time in case we need it,” Bedai said to the raccoon, pointing at him with his finger.

Cafy looked up at him. “Do you really think that this is necessary?” he asked.

“You never know,” the bear replied and he rose to full size again, looking towards Itha who instructed Recha.

The wolverine guided the vixen’s movements with his hands while she observed him carefully, obviously paying more attention to him than to her own movements.

The bear pressed his lips together and turned away again, looking at the raccoon who had tied the blade in some cloth which he had finally fixed to his belt. Then Cafy picked up his staff again.

The raccoon firmly place his feet on the wooden ground while he enforced his hands' hold on the staff, getting back into his stance.

"Do you want to go on training?" Bedai asked him.

The raccoon did not answer instead he thrust the staff forward with one quick movement.

The ursine man turned his head away. "Do what you want!" he said, turned around and went towards the door to the lower decks.

It opened suddenly and Ileeree emerged, almost bumping into the large man. She carried her astrolabe.

The large ursine man looked down on the much smaller vixen,.

For a very short instant they looked into each other's eyes.

Then Bedai raised his hand to his mouth, opened it, put one finger on his tongue and licked it off with his tongue.

Ileeree's eyelids twitched and her lush tail which had been wagging slightly before got stiff. "Do you want to say something to your executive officer?" she asked.

For another moment the man was paralyzed, then he just shoved her aside and disappeared inside the corridor, slamming the door shut behind him.

The vixen stared at the door, her heart beating powerfully.

When she turned around she noticed that the three other furs on the deck were observing her.

The vixen pursed her lips and went towards the railing, preventing herself from saying anything, instead she raised her astrolabe and started to do her measuring.

"You know he is right..."

Ileeree sighed, put down the astrolabe and turned around to face Itha who had stepped away from Recha who was now training on her own.

"I don't give a damn about lynx either," the wolverine said and let go off his bow's string which he had pulled with one hand. It let go a dull sound.

Ileeree narrowed her eyes to observe him in the darkness. "Listen this has got nothing to do with the lynx..."

"It has!" he interrupted her.

The vixen frowned.

"Listen..." The wolverine scratched his nose shortly then, he raised his head and looked at her. "When I was still with the guild's expeditionary force, we once had to deal with troops from the Mechanic Rivers. They had a special unit of nocturnals. We didn't know about them. We had a few skirmishes with the regular troops. We pulled back and thought they were too stupid to pursue us, well... Our commander didn't know this was exactly the trap they had prepared for us. We set up camp for the night and after a few hours we are attacked from the darkness. At first we didn't know what hit us. They killed several of our guards and extinguished our fires and then they were all about, before we had formed ourselves for defense they were already gone again. They were damn fast..."

"Who was your commander back then?" Ileeree interrupted him.

"Jilleye After-Dawn," he answered. "That was when she lost her first husband."

"In that raid?"

"No, two days later. See, the whole thing was not that nightly attack. There were not that many losses, but it scared the shit out of us and it was just a prep for the day-time attack the morning after. It was a damn nightmare. For three days and nights we were under constant attacks, they had every chance to rest, sending in their nocturnal unit. They never inflicted much damage, but... you know..."

The vixen nodded.

"I have to say that it speaks for Jilleye that they did not wipe us out entirely. She tried to hold the whole force together and she succeeded more or less. There were some deserters anyway. But I doubt that those guys ever got far with enemy troops all around."

"What does all of this have to do with the lynx girl?" Recha asked. She had put down the short staff she had used for training and stepped closer. She pushed her sweaty hair out of her face.

Cafy coughed. He had walked away from the other furs, the sound he made reminded them that he was still there on the deck with them, but standing at the opposite rail.

"Cause lots of those nocturnals were lynx," Itha said. "Lynx and Leopards and Wildcats... That's why I think that those damn treacherous felines can all burn in the furnaces of Black Pit."

"You know how the captain decided."

"I thought there was a reason why there never was any feline scum on board?" he replied aggressively and stared at Ileeree.

The vixen raised her paws. "Let's not talk about this, alright? I am sick of this quarrel."

"Come on, you have to acknowledge that Bedai is right," he insisted.

"Bedai is one thing, but..." She paused for a short moment and wet her lips. "Do you really believe that I do not support my husband?"

"He is wrong! This lynx is a threat! I know it, you know it, everyone knows it... But what do we do? We sit around and pretend that everything is alright while our prey is getting closer by the moment." He looked at Recha, his eyes glistened in the darkness, catching the light of the stars and the moons in the sky.

The younger vixen inhaled and looked to the ground. "But if the priestess says that it is not right to..."

"Damn Nekoi!" Itha blurred out. "She is not serving anything but her own hidden agenda. It's the same with all priestesses of the Moons. They never tell you anything, they just play mysterious and..."

Recha cleared her throat. She was now looking straight at him. Her face showed an expression of anger.

The wolverine looked at her for a moment, but before he could talk on, the vixen turned around and walked away. "Recha!" he called after her. "Recha, listen! This is nothing about your belief, it is just..."

The vixen disappeared in the door to the lower deck. It was slammed shut behind her.

"Damn!" He turned towards the older vixen again.

One of Ileeree's hands rested on the rail while she held her astrolabe in the other one and watched the outlines of the landscape which showed in the light of the moons. Her long tail wagged gently in the airflow which surrounded the ship constantly.

"Come on, Ileeree! You know me! This is an important issue, you know the danger all of us are in. This damn kitty is another risk and we can't take any more risks. The mission is dangerous enough the way it is."

The woman inhaled deeply. "You know that I am nothing but the first navigator."

"Yes, but you are also our executive officer and you are the wife of our captain."

The vixen turned around and looked towards the raccoon who was still training at the opposite rail. "What is your opinion?" she shouted towards him.

The raccoon stopped and turned his head. His short hair fluttered in the wind. He did not reply anything, he seemed to hesitate. For a short instant he looked towards the ground, but then he just turned around and looked into the dark of the night.

"Oh, yeah! What a help he is!" Itha grumbled. "Whatever has gotten into him. He is acting strange ever since that rabbit disappeared." He let his bow pounce to the wooden floor.

Suddenly the door to the lower deck opened. The three furs looked towards it and saw Lokos coming up from below. He had a piece of bread and a mug in his paws. He seemed to smile when he saw them and walked towards them, chewing on his bread.

"Still up?" he asked and drank something from his mug.

Ileeree nodded. "How are things down below?" she asked.

The viscacha nodded. "Running smoothly considering da conditions. Da boiler is still trouble but holding up. We need loads of coal, will cost you someding."

Ileeree smiled at him. "If we get over with this, it won't matter anyway."

"Oh, yeah!" The engineer grinned. "Somebody's promised us a good fight! Dat makes me proud to be still on this ship!" He raised his mug and took a good sip out of it.

"We still got to fight it, Lokos," Itha said.

"Ah, come on. If we can fight dat damn engine day by day, you can fight dat ding. My money's on you, you know?" He laughed.

"Not just your money!"

Lokos chuckled. "Well, I've got faid in you, Bedai, Cafy and Recha. Wid help from da mage..." He shrugged his shoulders. "Piece of cake. It's just water, right? No reason to fear getting wet."

Ileeree smiled at Lokos. "Well, we certainly won't dare to let you down!"

"Fair enough!" Heartily he bit into his bread and ate on.

Itha looked at Ileeree in silence. She noticed his glare, returned it for a moment, then she turned away and looked towards the horizon again, studying the stars and the constellations as they passed by. One of her fingers tapped against the astrolabe she was still holding in her paw.

There was a light knock at the door and instantly the weasel was up on his feet, stepped towards the door, unbolted and opened it, so that the vixen could slip inside as quickly as possible.

In the same moment he had closed the door again, he reached out for her waist and let his hands come down on her hips while he leaned against her from behind. "I was wondering when you would come down," he growled seductively into her ear and let his hands run down the smooth curve of her hip which was still hidden beneath her clothes.

Recha wagged her tail and the weasel playfully snapped at it, tried to catch it with his teeth. She let go a sigh, turned around and embraced him, holding onto him with both arms.

As her tension faded away he could feel the weight of her body while she held onto him and he buried his muzzle in the fur of her neck and enjoyed its female scent while his hands resumed stroking her hips in a slow, comforting pace.

Recha blinked in the dim light of the room and just remained in this position, savouring the feeling of closeness and warmth that spread from his body. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I am just tired of all the quarreling."

"No need to apologize," he said lowly and gave her a light kiss on her neck. He raised one of his hands towards her cheek and stroked it gently with just one finger, allowing it to run over the curves of her features along the lines of her elegant vulpine muzzle.

"I am so tired, so tired," she said and inhaled deeply. "Now even Itha is putting down the Goddesses, while I am standing right there, next to him."

"I thought you did not like him."

"Yeah," she growled and rubbed her nose a little bit. She noticed his scent and she inhaled another time as she could feel how it calmed her. "You know he is just trying to get into my pants, but at least..." She exhaled. "I don't know! At least he tried to be nice, now he is not even giving a damn anymore."

"Everybody is under extreme stress these days," he mentioned.

"Yes, yes, we are... Still..." She hesitated for a moment, then she backed off a little bit so that she could look into his face.

He noticed the tiredness in her light brown, almost honey-colored eyes and smiled encouragingly at her.

They kissed and she made sure that it was a long one, as she enjoyed the feeling of his tongue in her mouth, the presence of his lips upon hers, the way his breathing became faster and more agitated and as his chest was so close to hers, she could also feel in her breasts against his chest how his heartbeat got faster. She renewed the kiss many times over. When she finally broke it she almost gasped for breath and he had to laugh because of that and this elicited a smile of hers as well.

"Just forget about all that," Fadr whispered. "Things will settle down before the big fight, I am sure of that."

She nodded. "I just fear that they are going to do something stupid before that..."

"Do you mean the lynx?"

She nodded again.

Fadr frowned. "I understand that you don't want any harm done to her, but under these circumstances, things are..." He could feel how she stiffened in his hold, the tension of her muscles instantly making her even slightly bigger than she already was in comparison to him.

"What do you mean," she asked and blinked. Suddenly the dim light in the room which came from just two candles on the desk and next to the bed annoyed her as she had to focus to see what was going on in his face.

He had lowered his face and looked towards the ground while pulling a face. "I know that you do not like the idea, but we have to think of our own safety first."

For a short moment calm returned to her body as her muscles relaxed again and she inhaled deeply, never taking her eyes off the mage who was not looking at her right now. She frowned while she studied him. "Are you really... You are really on Bedai's side, aren't you?" she asked.

Fadr looked up and straight into her eyes. "I already told your uncle what I am thinking and that is that we cannot run any risk because what we are going to do is already going to be..."

With a violent movement she backed off and turned around on the spot, showing him her back, but he did not need to see her face in order to know what was going in her head as he could see her tail being stiff except for some erratic shuddering. He had fallen silent.

For a moment none of them spoke and the sounds of the engines far beneath them in the hull of the ship took over the room.

Finally he approached her from behind. She did not react when his hands came down on her arms, she did neither resist, nor move accordingly when he turned her around with his hands, but when she faced him she looked straight into his eyes, just like he did. His hands were still on her arms.

"Why?" she asked simply.

"I love you and I want to protect you!" He said, his hands holding her arms with full power.

She could feel the physical pain of his hold, but she did not pay any attention to it. "You are not protecting me by killing an innocent girl!"

"How can you be sure about that?"

For a moment, the vixen and the weasel were looking into each other's eyes. They were both glistening brightly as if they caught even the faintest ray of light which came from the candle on the table.

"Let go of me, Fadr!" Recha said sternly.

The mage realized that he had been holding her with the full power of his paws. His hands dropped down. "Sorry," he said.

"I better sleep in my own room tonight!"

Fadr had lowered his head for an instant, but now raised it again. He stared at her for an instant, observed how she turned around and approached the door.

“Sleep well,” she said.

Fadr pulled a face, just nodded and did not say a word until the door had closed behind her. When the door had fully closed he let go a long sigh and let his head drop down to his chest, suddenly feeling a wave of physical tiredness washing over him.

She could hear her coming even before the door opened. The high chiming of bells announced her arrival long before the lock of the door creaked when it was turned and the door was being opened.

Nekoi stepped inside, carrying a plate in one hand. She put it down on the table and firmly closed and locked the door behind herself again. Then she turned towards the lynx on the floor who was almost entirely hidden beneath a blanket that she had wrapped around her body.

For a short moment the eyes of the two females met.

The priestess put the plate down on the ground and looked at the lynx girl who observed her in return. For a moment Nekoi did not move, then she suddenly picked up the plate again and put it down on the table instead. “I think you are well able to get it from here.” Nekoi sat down on her chair.

For a moment the feline just stared at her, but then she suddenly cast the blanket aside she had hidden herself in and started to stand up.

Nekoi could see that most of the lynx’ wounds were still looking fresh and her movements were not as graceful as she would have expected them to be. The lynx was still unable to open one of her eyes entirely as the fabric around it was still swollen.

Every one of her wounds hurt, she still felt every single one, it was as if her entire body was covered with burning cuts. Additionally all of her muscles were terribly stiff. Clumsily she got to her feet and instantly she could feel a surge of weakness coming over her, but she ignored it and staggered towards the table, not taking her eyes off Nekoi who observed her in return.

The antelope studied the girl’s body which looked very androgynous with her small breasts and the muscles which moved beneath fur and skin.

The girl took the plate and went into the corner again. An instinctive groan escaped her when she felt the pain in her belly when she sat down again. She rather fell to the floor instead of sitting down. For an instant she studied the content of the plate, the bread, the pieces of dried meat and the pickled vegetables. Without further ado she started to stuff it into her mouth with her fingers.

“I think it is about time that we talk,” Nekoi said.

The girl stopped eating for an instant and looked at the priestess.

“What is your name?”

Very slowly the lynx girl went on chewing, she looked at the priestess for a moment, then she looked at the plate and the food upon it. “Jiddy,” she mumbled. Her voice was as very raspy as the sound of a knife upon shale.

“Jiddy?” The priestess asked. “That sounds like an abbreviation of something.”

Very slowly she chewed on, the salty taste of the meat spreading on her tongue, while holding a piece of bread in her paw.

“Where are you from, Jiddy?”

Once again it took some time before Jiddy answered. “Jaulesse.”

Nekoi hesitated for a moment and scratched herself. “I don’t believe you,” she said finally. She raised her head and looked at the feline. “You have slanted eyes, you are from the east.”

Jiddy tore a piece of bread off with her teeth and chewed it with her mouth wide open. “Black Pit,” she said finally.

The antelope put on a mock smile for a moment, then her face instantly changed to a serious expression again. “You know that I could scry on you any moment,” she said. “The goddesses have given me this gift and I assure you that I could use it any time I want to.” She leaned forward a little bit and studied how the girl’s cheek moved while she chewed. “But because that experience would not be very pleasant for either of us I prefer asking you instead.”

Jiddy looked at the piece of bread in her hand.

“And I do not have to use scrying to tell you that the people on this ship would enjoy getting their hands on you if I don’t get some answers out of you.” The priestess’ voice was low, but hard. Slowly she rose again until she sat straight. “You do not have a choice there, it is just a question of how hard you want to make this for yourself.” She wet her lips and looked towards the window. She did not feel very comfortable talking that way, but a moment later she looked at the girl again.

The rhombic pupils flashed when Jiddy looked at her, but then she turned away and stared at the food in her paws. “Jaulesse¹⁸, Kastania City¹⁸, Dyamaar¹⁸, Tolassos¹⁸, Kendorhan¹⁸, pick one!”

They were both silent for a moment, Nekoi wet her lips. “So I take this that you are a roamer?”

Jiddy nodded.

“And you are on board because you wanted to get a lift?”

The lynx girl watched her paw and opened and closed it slowly. She nodded once more.

“Why did you pick this ship?”

“It’s goin’ west...”

“West?” Nekoi raised an eyebrow. “Who told you that we are going west?”

Jiddy looked at the antelope. Her eyes were wide open and she could feel how her skin tightened, the restrictions which her heart was suddenly trapped in when she stared at the woman.

“Who told you we are going west? Did you speak with one of the crew?”

Jiddy noticed that the expression on the antelope’s face had changed.

“Who told you? About us going west...” Carefully Nekoi observed the lynx girl: She had stopped chewing entirely by now, being almost entirely motionless. For a short moment the lynx looked down, her pupils wandering as if she was searching for something. Then her eyes rose again.

"Y'ain't goin' west?" Her features had transformed entirely, for a moment there was nothing but a young girl's confusion left. She had leaned forward a little bit.

Nekoi retired a little bit, she was surprised herself by this overt reaction of the girl. "No!" she said finally. "We are heading north."

The lynx eyes studied the antelope for a moment. Her mind raced, she looked around for an instant, tried to estimate the meaning of the statement which she had heard, but a part of her was not even ready to accept the truth of the reply. A cold shiver ran through her body and her hand reached out for the silver pendant around her neck. Her paw closed firmly around it until the metal cut into her fingers.

Nekoi's eyes had followed the movement of her hand. "What is this pendant?" she asked.

Jiddy opened her mouth: "Rrrrrs..." There was nothing but a growl coming out of her mouth. She gulped. "Silverr Arc."

"Where did you get this?"

"Blue Ridge Mountains¹⁹." She answered absent-mindedly.

"Alright, Jiddy!" Nekoi rose from her seat and looked down on the girl. "There is one thing I definitely have to know: Who told you where we were going?"

Jiddy did not answer.

The priestess knelt down right in front of the lynx girl and looked straight into her eyes. "Who told you where we are going?" she repeated. "How did you get onboard?" She put her hand on the lynx' shoulder.

The lynx suddenly bared her teeth and snarled at the arm on her shoulder.

Nekoi enforced her grip. "You have to tell me!"

Instead of answering the lynx girl glared at the antelope, her predatory teeth exposed. "Dorn't touch mer!" she snarled, her words hardly understandable anymore.

Instinctively the antelope retired and let go of the lynx. She stood up straight and when she was standing again, she realized that she was getting angry. "Alright! If you don't want to tell me, you might want to answer that question to Bedäi!"

For a very short instant Jiddy glared at her, but almost instantly she lowered her gaze again and pulled her legs closer and wrapped her arms around them.

"As you wish!" Nekoi said.

Bedaï lay in his hammock and observed the mage with half opened eyes. He raised his hand and started to pick his nose, pulled some snot out of it, formed it into a small ball and flipped it on the floor.

Fadr inhaled. This was the first time that he was inside the fighter's room which Bedäi, Itha and Cafy shared. It was obviously yet another storage room which had been turned into their quarters for this mission. Three hammocks, some stools and chests were the only furniture except for the men's personal belongings which

were scattered all round, mostly clothes and weapons. There was a certain very male, musky scent to the room.

Fadr had been observing the huge bear. "I know that you don't like me, let's not talk round that and I have little sympathy for you as well, but we both know that what the captain is doing right now is madness." The mage sat down on a chest which stood opposite Bedäi's hammock.

The bear was motionless.

The weasel's fingertips of each hand touched each other. "It might come as a surprise to you, but I am sharing my bed with Recha. I love her and I want to marry her if possible. That means that we have to survive this mission and I am willing to do anything to protect her. Anything!" He raised his eyes and looked straight at the bear again.

Bedäi did not move at all for a moment, then he opened his mouth and wet his lips, readying himself to speak up, but he waited for another moment. "What is your plan?" he said finally.

The weasel looked at the larger ursine and pursed his lips. "I want to perform an experiment. If it works as planned we will be able to deal with the lynx and our prey at the same time. We will have them both in the same place."

The bear turned around in his hammock and sat up, now being right in front of the mage and looking into his face. "Explain!"

"I don't like the look of those clouds," Sty said. He had been looking out of the small porthole's window with Ileeree for some time.

"Me neither," she confessed. "But the barometer did not indicate any weather change. I better go check," she said quickly and tried to turn around, but he kept her so close that she could not move. "Hey!" Playfully she struggled in his embrace. "What are you doing?"

Sty did not budge.

Once again she tried to free herself from his arms and wiggled her tail as much as she could, playfully hitting him with it.

The man was still not moving, instead he gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Will you let go of me?" she asked.

"No," he replied simply.

"I thought that you were worried about those clouds?"

"Yes."

She sighed, then she took hold of his arms and just pushed them upwards so that she could slip through underneath them.

The man let go a light sigh, looked at her and stretched himself again.

For a moment she looked at him as well, carefully studying how his slender body stretched underneath his leather clothes. His fur had never been a deep, perfect red, many of his ancestors had been silver and grey foxes, but in the light which came in through the porthole she could see that there were more grey hairs where red hair had been before, except for his headfur which had always

had a greyish, silvery color. She approached him and pushed a strand of it off his frowns.

He took her hand and kissed it.

"I better go and check on what the barometer says."

Sty just nodded, turned around, walked behind his desk and let himself fall into the chair behind it, putting his feet on the table. He gnawed on a claw while she left the room.

Ileeree walked through the bridge and noticed that Abama was standing at the helm. "Is Silent Cry still sleeping?" she asked.

"Yeah," the prairie dog woman replied. "But he should be up soon."

"Good, because we should consider setting a new course, Sty is worried about some clouds in the south-west. I am going to check the barometer."

Abama just nodded, not bothering turning around. Instead she looked out of the huge glass windows in front of her and started to hum again as she had done when the vixen had entered the room. "And under the red and golden trees we will meet,/ and there will be no words except the language of our hearts' beat..." she sang lightly.

In the meantime, Ileeree had left the bridge and walked onto the top deck.

As soon as she stood outside she noticed the increase of the wind and she raised her nose and sniffed. It did not smell like rain.

She noticed Cafy standing at the opposite end of the deck, holding a large spear in his hands. She nodded towards him, but she was not sure if the man had noticed her at all. Instead she turned around, towards the barometer which had been fixed to the wall next to the door. The vixen groaned slightly when she noticed the change of the scale. The hygrometer right next to it did not show very promising stats either.

She looked to the sky: Grey clouds had already taken over most of it, even though there were still some spots left where the sun shone through.

She turned around again and this time she saw Cafy looking at her. She raised her black paw to greet him, but the man did not react at all. For a moment she wondered about this, but then she just turned around and went back inside.

In the meantime Sty had joined Abama on the bridge and he turned towards his wife when she came back. "So?"

"Yeah." Ileeree nodded while she walked over to them. "There is going to be rain, I am pretty sure that we cannot escape this one."

For a moment the fox' eyelids twitched. Then he turned around and walked over to the helm. "Abama, I am going to take over," he said to the prairie dog.

Abama stepped aside and the fox took over the helm.

"Try to find us a new course," he said. "Even though some rain drops should not be that much of a risk, I really don't..." He paused. "Dear Sun²⁰, I am going to sound like Bedāi soon," he mumbled while the two women were about to get to their navigation table, took their pair of compasses, spacers and pencils and leaned over the maps on the table. While Ileeree measured the distances on the maps, Abama drew charts on notepad, calculating the strength of the wind and

the speed of the ship. Ileeree told her about the expected upcurrents and downwinds on the mountains they passed over. Soon the paper on Abama's notepad was full of numbers, quick calculations and random notes while the two women leaned over the maps and talked lowly about routes and thermal air flow between mountains, over woods and open land.

Beneath their feet the engines pounded, the wooden and metal shell of the ship vibrating lightly while the wind whistled around the ship, tore at it, so that the rigging shook endlessly. The balloon which held the ship in the air, constantly being filled with hot air from the engines droned, resonating with a strange sound which was so low that it was hardly noticeable most of the time, but whenever the winds got stronger, this sound added to the noises. Everything seemed to become much louder and the engines actually did, because they were running with full power, the propellers fighting against the airflow, trying to hold the ship on course, while they emitted sounds like a huge flock of birds, the clattering noises of the exhaust fumes adding to the cacophony which surrounded the airship which drifted towards a grey horizon full of heavy clouds, while down below an uneven high plateau of wet grass and bare rocks passed by, a herd of giant nalavaa lizards²¹ rose their heads as even they could perceive the noises of the strange vehicle in the sky.

"So...?" Ileeree looked up from the map, at Abama.

"Twenty-seven hours at least," the prairie dog replied without looking up from the notes she had written down on her notepad. "If the winds stay this way, which I doubt considering that we are being carried along by the currents over the plateau. As soon as we go further east we will probably have to fight the upcurrents at the windward side of the plateau's edge. That is going to take some time to get through that."

"Yeah..." Ileeree nodded thoughtfully. "I would have said two days at least."

Abama tapped her pencil against her notepad. "Yes, probably."

"I am really not sure about the currents in this valley, the maps does look accurate enough and then I would say the wind would take us further south, which is not such a bad thing considering that up north is the..." She did not speak the word, she just pointed where the blue line of a river could be seen.

Abama nodded slowly. "Yes, I see what you mean..." She raised her head and looked straight at Ileeree. "You tell him?"

Ileeree rose to full size again and nodded, before walking over to the steering wheel where Sty stood.

Her husband heard her footsteps and turned his head a little bit towards her.

"Two days at least. The winds are probably going to take us south as soon as we are past the plateau."

Sty raised his hand towards his mouth. One of his feet rested upon the steering wheel's lower end. He looked outside: Through the thick, blurred glass tiles the huge window in front of him was made of he could see the grass of the plateau, he could spot another herd of Nalavaa²¹, their grey lizard skin standing out among the green. "Two days..." he mumbled.

“At least,” the vixen added.

Sty sighed. “I just wished this journey was over,” he said suddenly without looking at her. “We have been on this track since the last new moon and it does not seem to end. I just wished we could finally get over with it. The Sun²⁰ knows the battle ahead will be hard enough.” He sighed once again and fell silent.

“So do we take the little rain or do we change the course?” Illeeree asked after a moment.

His arms resting upon the steering wheel, one foot resting on its downside, he gnawed on one of his claws and looked at the shifting masses of grey clouds.

The small piece of metal he had held in his paw fell down on the floor when he heard how the lock of the door opened with a little click. A moment later the second lock clicked as well and quickly he moved the bolt aside which had blocked the door.

He opened the door to the small, dark cabinet. The room did not consist of anything but the shelf opposite the door and in that shelf stood a dark wooden box with metal fittings. The fittings were engraved with old symbols which never had made any sense at all, he knew that they were considered to be magic as they were leftovers from the Age of Dawn, having been found on many old ruins, but their meaning had been lost a long time ago.

The weasel bent down and picked up the metal wire he had used as a focus, quickly he laid his hand holding it on the box and focussed on the lock again. He could feel that it was much more difficult than the door, the mechanics inside the box were much more complicated and it took some time before his magic found a way to deal with this. Finally he could hear a low crunch and quickly he emerged from his concentration and opened the box.

Inside the box were several fixtures lined with some cloth which once might have been velvet, but now it looked torn and dirty. Held into position by small leather straps were several clay jars which were sealed with wax. Quickly he reached inside, undid one of the jars, but it into a pocket of his coat and then he closed the box again, focussed on the lock which closed with another click and then he closed the door, so that the room disappeared in darkness again.

Finally Fadr turned around and faced the bear who had been standing next to him. The weasel nodded at him.

Bedāï did not say anything. He just pulled the straw he had been chewing on out of his mouth, let it drop down on the floor, turned around and walked away.

The weasel inhaled deeply and watched the big man, how he disappeared in the darkness of the corridor.

The sound of the engines was much more intense in this part of the ship because these storage rooms were much closer to the engines' room. The constant hammering of the pistons, the hissing and thudding of the boilers, the creaking of the gearwheels, it all mixed and became one constant sound which was hurting him in the ears while he looked around in the little light of the

corridor. He raised his paw to the wooden wall and let his hand run down on it, feeling the splints of the old dry wood beneath his fingers.

His heart beat fast as he was quite anxious, no matter how hard he tried to cast the shadows of doubt aside. Quickly he tried to remind himself of the spells he wanted to use if things would go as planned.

The huge paw of the bear knocked on the door.

He could hear a moan from inside.

"What is it?" somebody asked, the voice hardly recognizable through the thick wooden door.

"It is me," he replied. "Bedaï. We need you, it is an emergency."

There was some noise inside. "One moment, I have to put something on."

"Quick!"

He stretched himself and waited.

A moment later the door opened and the antelope emerged. For a moment he could have a look inside her room, he saw her deranged bed and a strange pile of cloth and pillows on the floor, but before he could get a better look the door had been closed again and the priestess raised her head and looked at him, her curly hair a mess that pointed into every possible direction. He could smell her being surrounded by the very female odour that had welled out when the door had been opened.

"You said there was an emergency," she said. Her voice was hoarse.

"Yes!" The bear looked down on her. He noticed that she was not wearing one of her complicated dresses, but a rather plain gown and no jewellery at all. "Follow me!" He turned around and walked down the corridor.

"What is it about?" she asked as she followed the large man who showed her his back.

"You will see," he said simply.

She followed him through the corridor, noticing that he wore even more than his usual armour and weapons. He even carried the heavy metal cannon under his arm.

A moment later he pushed the door to the upper deck open and they were surrounded by gusts of wind.

"I would rather know right now," the priestess said, she held her gown close to herself as the wind tugged at the cloth.

They walked outside and stood on the upper deck. There was strong wind and heavy, dark grey clouds floated across the horizon.

The bear looked around and saw Itha and Cathy standing at the opposite end of the deck. Instantly the bear walked towards him.

"Go down, I will take over the guard!" Bedaï said to the wolverine who had risen slightly when he had seen how the bear had gotten closer.

"But..."

"This is an order," the ursine interrupted him. "And tell Cafy to get ready, just in case."

For a short moment Itha looked at Nekoi who had walked closer as well, but kept a certain distance. Then the wolverine just nodded and walked away.

The bear followed him with his eyes until the door had closed behind him.

“So what is this all about?” Nekoi asked. Her face showed a stern expression, a vertical crease having showed up between her eyebrows.

Bedaï turned around and looked at her. For a moment he was silent, then he said: “I am worried about those clouds. There might be rain coming.”

The antelope was silent for a moment, then she stretched herself a little bit, her head rose and with a risen chin she glared at the bear. “Is that why you got me from my room?”

“Yes!” he replied.

For a very short moment her left eyebrow quivered. “This is ridiculous,” she hissed and turned around, walking away instantly.

“Hey, wait!” Bedaï said. “Wait!”

The antelope did not stop while she walked at the door.

Quickly the bear followed her and caught up with her. “You have to tell me if there is a danger for the ship.”

The antelope reached the door and took hold of the door handle.

The bear reached it as well and put his hand down on the door, he did not use any force just held his hand against the wood.

The antelope stopped and inhaled deeply.

“This is important,” he said to her.

“I really have no idea what you are talking about. This is ridiculous! You know very well, that the chances of an attack are minimal. As long as our prey is bound to its river, it cannot simply get here. Now let me through!”

Bedaï did not move.

“I will not repeat myself!” the priestess hissed through her gritted teeth.

She had started to move when she had heard the first noise, but when she had heard how the door had opened she had jumped instantly to a sitting position, pressing herself against the wooden wall, still mostly hidden under the cloth that she had covered herself with. Her narrowed lynx eyes glistened while she studied the weasel who was now standing a few steps from her.

Fadr smiled lightly. “I am sorry, it was not my intention to disturb you,” he said. “I am here to bring you something for your recovery.”

Carefully she observed how one hand of the weasel disappeared inside his gown. She knew that he had to be a mage, wizard or sorcerer of some kind because that was the kind of clothes that they usually wore and this had just quickened her heartbeat.

The hand reappeared again, holding a small clay jar that was sealed with wax. The weasel looked into her eyes for a moment and tried to smile, then he lowered his eyes again and opened the jar by ripping the wax off it.

She observed every one of his movements and with every breath she inhaled through her nose she tried to get an impression of his scent. There was still lots of

dried blood clogging her nostrils. What she could perceive was slightly musky and sweaty, but it was hard for her to distinguish anything, especially inside this strange room, between the other women's blankets and quilts she constantly rested in.

"Here, drink this!" he said and held the jar out to her. "It is for your cure."

The lynx girl looked at the jar in his hand and then she looked at him again.

For a moment the weasel could feel how sweat was suddenly shooting to the upside of his skin, making him feel cold from one moment to another. Another helpless smile showed on his face. "You do not have to be afraid, it is just some potion I made for you, to strengthen you. The captain asked me to bring it."

Jiddy's eyes narrowed a little bit more, she could feel her tail twitching, but not moving as it was trapped beneath her.

Fadr wet his lips, as he tried to cast away the thoughts which were suddenly invading his mind, the simple question what he should do if she refused him. He knew no answer and quickly he tried to smile again. "He rather did not want to come himself," he said and laughed awkwardly.

For an instant the blurred picture of a man came back to her mind. She could hardly remember at all, it was barely more than a general shape which was shooting through rain and wind. Dull pain on her face welled up from beneath her skin and at the same time she was convinced to taste blood upon her tongue. Instantly she lowered her eyes for a short moment, trying to get rid of the memory, but she knew that it could be coming back at any time and she looked up again and reached out for the clay jar, put it to her lips and tried to swallow the taste that had lingered on her tongue. Tasteless cool water ran down her throat.

As he saw how she drank from the clay jar, an inaudible sigh escaped him and quickly he rose and stepped backwards, one of his hands reached into his gown until it closed around several pieces of coal he had taken along. His eyes narrowed as he observed the lynx girl.

Having emptied half of the jar, Jiddy put it down again and inhaled deeply, wiping the last drops from her lips with her forearm. She noticed that she had been thirsty. Then she raised her face again and looked at the man, her eyes narrowed when she saw how he was standing opposite her, all tense and observing her very carefully.

For a moment the two furs just looked at each other.

It was all silent except for the usual engines' noises which echoed through the airship at any time.

In this silence they both of them could hear how a distant door was opened, they could hear the rush of wind which blew through that door for a moment and then there was the sound of the door being slammed shut again.

Jiddy looked at the door which was still opened behind the man and her ears flicked, when she looked at the weasel again: She noticed that he had been looking at the door as well.

Fadr almost instantly left his pose and approached Jiddy again. "Thank you, you do not have to drink all of it if you don't want to," he said, leaned down and

before she reacted he took the jar from her paw and stuffed it into his gown again and turned towards the door again as- just like her- he had heard steps coming closer.

Nekoi entered the room, stopped cold and stared at the weasel. "What are you doing here?" she inquired, her voice was full of hardly concealed anger. "What are you doing in my room?"

"I was just trying to have a word with her," Fadr said and pointed towards Jiddy. "Unfortunately you were not here and..."

"Out!" the priestess hissed and her antlers trembled.

"I am sorry," Fadr said. "I did not want to unsettle you."

"Out!" The priestess glared at the smaller male. "This moment!" Her voice was as sharp as a knife.

Fadr hesitated for a moment, then he looked up to her. A faint smile showed on his lips and while he made sure that the small jar was safely stashed away in his gown he walked past the priestess and out of the door she was standing next to.

Nekoi slammed the door shut after him and spun around, facing Jiddy again who sat on the floor wiping the last drops of moisture from her lips with her arm.

Fadr pulled a face, carrying the little jar in his hand hidden under his gown. He was still slightly agitated, quivering with unfulfilled anticipation. He had not been able to observe any reaction of the lynx girl, she had drunken the water as if it had only been ordinary water. She had not reacted to it at all, and while he walked down the corridor, he tried to remember any detail of this meeting, he hardly wasted a thought on Nekoi.

He was still deep in thought when he stepped into the mess, his feet had guided him there for some reason, but once he had looked up he knew that it must have been his nose guiding him.

Recha looked at him with big eyes.

"Recha..." he said instantly.

The vixen still had a piece of jerky in her mouth she had eaten on. When she saw him, she quickly wrapped the rest of the food into the waxed paper it had been in, put it back on the shelf where she had taken it down from and while pulling the top end of the stringy meat out from between her teeth, she grabbed her rifle and tried to walk past him.

Quickly he put down the jar and held her by her arm. "Recha, please, I..."

"What?" she asked with a sigh.

Quickly he stepped behind her and embraced her. "Recha, please, I know that we disagree about a few things, but, listen, I love you, I love you, I love you and I want to protect you, do you understand that?"

Recha had stiffened when she had felt his arms around herself. She pulled a face. "We do not just disagree about a few things, Fadr. We belong..."

“No, please, stop!” he said softly. “Please! I know that you are attached to your clan. Who wouldn’t be? But I became attached to you... I, I...” He stopped and instead of going on, he kissed her neck.

She tilted her head in order to prevent him from doing that, but as soon as his lips had touched her fur and the skin underneath, she started to shiver powerfully and warmth spread from that small spot throughout her entire body. “Fadr, please, I don’t see...”

“No, please, don’t say a thing.” He kissed her cheek and she allowed him to, savouring the caress. “Listen, I just tried to..., to verify something and I, I... I am willing to admit that you might be right.”

“Right? Right about what?”

“That I do not deserve you, but that does not mean that I am going to let you go anyway,” he whispered into her ear.

Recha laughed and started to moan in delight when she felt how his teeth started to nibble on her ear. “Listen, this is not a good moment, I have to go back on the upper deck, Bedāī has been jumpy all day.”

Fadr nodded without saying a word. “May I come with you?”

“No foolish things?”

“No foolish things!” he promised.

“Okay!” she whispered and turned around in his hold. She took his head into her hands and kissed him quickly. Then she freed herself from his hold. “Come!”

The vixen stretched herself and so did the weasel and they walked down the corridor as if it was just a coincidence that they were walking behind each other. Still neither could Fadr help himself watching her backside and the movement of her lush tail and neither could Recha help herself from grinning, as she knew that he did just that.

“What did he want from you?”

Jiddy shrugged.

The antelope inhaled slowly and tried to calm herself but to no avail. With quick movements she undid the yukata she wore and put it down, thus exposing herself again, except for the long loin cloth she wore over her lap. She noticed the lynx girl’s look who eyed her breasts. “You disgust me!” Nekoi said impulsively, still feeling the anger in her chest.

Jiddy looked up.

For a moment the two women looked into each other’s eyes. Nekoi reached out to the table and picked up the small silver, golden and copper bells which lay there. They chimed lightly while she fixed them to her antlers with trained movements. “You understood me correctly. Among all the girls I know, you are the most ingrate, ignorant hardhead I ever met.”

The girl pressed her lips together and her eyes narrowed.

“You have no respect for anybody! You just think that you can get away with anything, right? Don’t think that I am not smart enough to understand what your gaze means. But trust me, now I know this I will never be your lover. The

Goddesses taught us to be honest with our desires, but you are just a mess of... lies, half-truths, dirty secrets and... Goddesses, what do I know!" She had walked over to her wardrobe, opened it and started to examine the different gowns in there. "What is it that you are so afraid of telling?" She looked over her shoulder.

Jiddy had lowered her head even further, her eyes were just two shimmering slits under her messy hair.

"Is it that you are a runaway thief?" She observed the lynx, but Jiddy did not move at all. "Yes, I know. I have seen the scars on your back, I know that you must have been wiped at least once."

Nekoi chose one of the kimonos, put it down on a nearby chair and closed the wardrobe again. "I am going to tell you one thing..." She looked down on the feline from above and the bells on her antlers chimed. "There is only me between you and the rest of this ship's crew. They want to throw you over board as soon as they get their hands on you." She waited for a reaction, but there was none. "And little by little I start to sympathize with them," she added.

She leaned forward, supporting herself on one of the chairs while she stared down on the lynx. "You are here sharing my meals, sharing my very quarters and yet you refuse to even tell me your real name! Is that too much for you?" Nekoi saw that the lynx was breathing more quickly by now.

For a moment the two females looked at each other. Nekoi saw how Jiddy's ears flicked.

Finally the lynx opened her mouth and while showing her teeth she said: "Jiddy, my name's Jiddy and I don't give a fuck 'bout your kind. Y'never help, they never help'd me! No matter how much I begged, your kind just fucks 'round with words, tellin' me to be happy when I beggin' 'em, beggin' for damn help!"

For an instant Nekoi's expression changed as she looked down on the lynx in astonishment. It was a strange feeling that was suddenly coming over her, very similar to the moments when she came back from her scrying trance and saw the traces of chalk on the floor.

Jiddy lowered her face and raised her arm, rubbing her neck.

"Where was that?" Nekoi asked.

"Dyamaar," Jiddy mumbled.

"Dyamaar, you were really in Dyamaar?"

"Yeah..."

"So you were travelling from Dyamaar to the west? You were really going west?"

"I don't lie," Jiddy hissed.

For a moment the antelope studied the lynx, the angular features, the short messy hair which hid her eyes most of the time, the spots among her thick fur. "Dyamaar..." she said thoughtfully. "From there you went... west? That means you were at the Blue Ridge Mountains? Silver Coast? Lake Moonfire? River Pontelai²²? Fereau²²?"

Jiddy nodded three times.

Excitement came over the priestess and she smiled involuntarily. "Is that were you got that pendant?"

Jiddy lowered her head towards her own chest and looked at the Silver Arc around her neck. Its silver looked darker than last time she had looked at it, despite the constant contact with her fur, the metal was slowly getting darker, the two birds and the fish having lost most of their glow. She nodded.

"It is shaman magic, right? I have heard of them, but never seen one. They are rare and expensive." She watched lynx who had taken the silver arc between her fingers and had started to rub on the silver surface. "How did you get it?"

Jiddy stopped cleaning the silver pendant, looked at the antelope from beneath her frowns and glared at the older woman. "I've bought it!" she pronounced with a light growl in her voice.

"Hm..." Nekoi just nodded. "Just like the map you had with you?"

Jiddy looked upwards, straight into the eyes of the antelope woman who was still so close that the scents of her perfumes tickled powerfully in her sensible, feline nose. "What d'y'care? It's none of y'business! I paid for it, I damn paid for that fuckin' thin'! It's mine!" She had bared her teeth again.

"Jiddy, the way I see it, you barely own your own life right now and some flimsy little magic toy which has not kept you from getting into a dangerous situation even your abilities as a fighter could not get you out of."

"Do y'want to enslave me?" Jiddy growled dangerously.

The antelope did not even wink. "No! But if you have not noticed yet, this ship is full of some of the Midland's best fighters and several magic users. I admit that I might not be a match for you, but even you should be smart enough to understand that you need some real help to get out of the mess you have gotten yourself into." Nekoi paused shortly. "I could help you, Jiddy," Nekoi suggested. "But I tell you, I am not inclined to do that at all if you do not stop lying to me all the time!"

Jiddy looked upwards and glared at the antelope. "I don't lie and I don't want y'r help! I don't want it. Y' just want somethin' in return, your kind always does." Nervously she rubbed her nose several times. "I don't need help."

"I am already helping you, if you haven't noticed," Nekoi interjected.

The lynx threw her arms around. "You don't damn, fuckin' care 'bout me! Y' don't understand nothin', y' just act all high and mighty and then y' gonna... Fuck!" She spit out the last word. "Y'know nothin'!" Jiddy growled and showed the antelope her gritted predatory teeth, shivering from teeth to toe, her short tail lashing about from underneath the blanket that was still covering most of her backside. Her lynx eyes had narrowed to mere slits.

Being as close as the antelope was in this moment, Jiddy could smell every nuance of her scent and it did not feature any trace of fear. It was saturated with herbal perfumes, the smell of scented clothes and of candles, incense and oil which were almost entirely hiding the scents of her body, but there was certainly no trace of fear there.

The antelope studied Jiddy with her eyes screwed up. "You really think that, don't you? The Goddesses protect the knowledge of the world and I have done

my best to learn all I could and let me tell you, for instance, I know more about you than you might think.” Nekoi turned away and let go of the girl. “No matter that you think, that you can fool everyone on this ship, I do know a feral when I see one.”

Jiddy returned her glare for a short time, then her eyebrow twitched. Slowly her lips started to hide her teeth again, while her eyes opened.

The priestess picked up the kimono from the chair it was hanging on and quickly pulled it over her arms.

The lynx girl stared at the antelope for a moment, her eyes wide open. Her lips quivered and a shiver ran through her entire body as if cold water was running down her entire body. “What...?” she was finally able to ask. “A what...?”

Nekoi spun around on the spot. She fastened her obi. “Don’t believe, that I have not understood your little game by now. I am not that stupid!” She hissed the last few words through her flat herbivorous teeth.

“A what?” Jiddy asked again, her tail was lashing totally out of control by now. She stared at the antelope. A sudden, unexpected feeling of yearn had taken a hold of her. She could feel it in her chest, pulling at her. The lynx rose slightly.

Nekoi did not reply, instead she rearranged her hair.

“What did y’ call me? Tell me!” There was a tremble in her hoarse voice, while Jiddy observed every move of the antelope.

Suddenly the antelope stepped towards the door and opened it. “Why should I tell you, if you are not telling me anything?” With these words she stepped outside.

The very same moment Jiddy jumped up from the bed and dashed to the door as fast as she could.

But Nekoi was faster. She slammed the door shut. She could hear how Jiddy crashed hard against the wood and as quickly as she could she got the key from her gown and locked the door. There was the sound of claws against the wood.

“Y’ gotta tell me!” It was almost like a scream on the other side.

There was a long silence. “Prease! Preaze, terr mrrre!” The lynx’ voice had transformed into a hardly recognizable, whining howl.

Suddenly there was a bump again and then Nekoi could see how the door was about to get pulled on.

There was a hoarse yell on the other side, then there was a scratching noise and then something bumped hard against the wood again. Two times, three times, four times...

For a moment Nekoi just stood there and watched the door, an uneasy feeling of confusion gnawing at her mind, but then she pressed her lips together and spun around on the spot.

There was the sound of scratching against the door, but the priestess did not care anymore while she walked down the corridor.

The antelope made no effort to hide her anger when she walked through the corridors, climbed the small staircase and then walked straight into the mess. She headed directly for the cupboards with the supplies, not looking at the oven, the

workplace, the chairs and the table with the small clay jar on top. She tried to pull open one of the cupboards, but it was locked.

For a moment her anger was flaring up and she sang a few, dissonant tones, her hand lightly touching the cupboard. She could feel the resistance of the old wood, she almost physically felt it creaking, but then it was changed and gave in to the alien music, trembled shortly once more and then the lock busted open as if it always wanted to do so. The antelope observed it with a grim expression of satisfaction and did not hesitate any longer and got herself some food from the inside, dried meat, some apples, the vegetable called Myakin²³ with the thin green leaves like feathers and some caramels that she found hidden in a tin box. She took it all, slammed the doors shut and turned around on the spot. Instantly she froze by surprise.

"Nobody is expected to touch the supplies in there except Berry," Illeeree stated. She stood in the door and watched the antelope with the food on her arms.

Nekoi raised an eyebrow. "I know that," she replied coldly.

"So why are you doing this anyway?" the vixen asked.

"Because I cannot get this damn bear out of the engine's room and give me the food I need," she answered coldly.

The vixen seemed to be unimpressed. She walked slowly over to one of the tables. "I should tell that to the captain."

"Do as you please," the bigger antelope replied coldly and headed for the door, ready to exit the mess.

"Why are you protecting the lynx?" the vixen asked almost casually, looking at the thick dark clouds behind the window which gathered in the sky. There were some drops of rain on the window which were cast aside by the strengthening winds.

Instantly Nekoi hesitated. "What?"

"Don't play innocent, I know that you have a specific interest in that girl." The vixen pulled a chair closer and with provoking slowness and deliberately seductive grace sat down on it, laying her feet on the table. She eyed the antelope carefully as she did not want to miss any reaction of hers. "I want to know why."

If Nekoi was surprised she did not show that. She remained completely emotionless when she turned around and looked at the vixen. "What do you want to imply?"

For a while the two women looked at each other, none of them moving at all, totally oblivious to the sounds of the airship's engines or the sounds of the winds outside.

"I think you have specific reasons to protect that girl. You know something about her that you are not telling us," Illeeree stated.

"And what should that be?" the antelope said and leaned forward while doing so.

The vixen shrugged. "That is exactly what I would like to know."

For a moment the priestess looked down to the ground. She pursed her lips, then she raised her head again and the bells on her antlers chimed. From beneath her curly, black hair she looked at the vixen.

The vixen returned the glare. "You saw something the night the lynx fought with Bedai. You saw something which convinced you that it was worth checking it out later on and when you saw that Bedai was a threat to the girl, you protected her, as you are protecting her now. You keep her locked up in your room all the time. Why? It does not make any sense, unless you have a very special interest in that girl."

Casually the priestess blew a long strand of hair out of her face. "Yes, I fear that you will kill her," she answered and smirked shortly. "Bedai already tried to."

"What's so terrible about killing her?"

The antelope's eyes opened wide.

"No, honestly! Every law allows us to throw stowaways overboard."

"We are already planning to sin against the sanctity of life anyway, but killing an... innocent girl...!"

A short laughter escaped the vixen. "I can hardly believe that you are truly using that term for that girl. Innocent! A blind passenger! Who beats one of the best fighters on board! Almost killed him if my husband not had intervened! And wasn't it you who said that she had something to do with a spirit? So what's innocent about her?" She leaned back in her chair. "There is nothing innocent about that lynx. She is a cold-blooded killer."

"She is not!"

"Why not?"

The antelope inhaled deeply. For a moment she looked away. She was still standing in the doorway, holding the food on her arms.

"Why not?" Ilereee asked again. "She is a trained fighter and..."

"She is not!"

"Wha..." Ilereee stopped short. "Holy Mother! What is it that you are trying to hide here?"

Nekoi pressed her lips together. For a moment she hesitated as the thoughts on her mind went wild. She needed a moment before she answered: "It is of no importance what that lynx is, what is far more important is why she is onboard this ship." She looked straight at the vixen.

The vixen raised her eyebrows. "You know that? Tell me!"

"Because she thought that we were heading west."

The vixen hesitated shortly. "So...?"

The priestess came closer and let the food fall down on the table where it landed with lots of noise. The fruits rolled around on the table and around the clay jar that stood there. Supporting herself the priestess leaned towards Ilereee. "Who told her?"

Ilereee opened her mouth, then she closed it again. "Someone from the..." The vixen shut up again. "You mean that someone from us...?"

Nekoi just watched the vixen.

"That is insane! Everybody has sworn under oath that we would not talk about our mission, nor about our destination. Not one single word!"

The priestess waited.

The vixen's features hardened again. "Somebody told her."

"Somebody told her a lie!"

"And why should we trust her? She is just a..."

"Why should she lie to us? We could kill her any time."

The vixen looked into the antelope's eyes. "Listen, this does not make any sense! Out of nowhere there is this girl on our ship who almost defeats one of our best men and she is just some... stowaway who just happens to be onboard while we are hunting... hunting... that thing! Why did she choose our ship?"

The antelope tilted her head and the bells at her antlers chimed lightly.

"Alright, you say that somebody told her where we were going, told her a wrong destination... Why? Why did she get on board anyway? Just because somebody told her that we were going west?"

"Maybe it depends upon who told her that..." Nekoi suggested.

Ileeree's tail was stiff from her tenseness while she tried to think straight.

Nekoi stood up straight again and picked up one of the apples that she had put down on the table. "There is one thing I am willing to admit: It is not a coincidence that the girl is onboard." She bit into the apple and started chewing on it while its sweet and sour juice spread inside her mouth.

The vixen folded her hands in front of her muzzle and kept silent.

Nekoi chewed slowly and suddenly lowered her gaze and suddenly noticed the small clay jar that had been standing on the table the whole time, just in front of Ileeree. She stopped chewing. For a moment she just stared at it, entirely motionless. "Goddesses...!" she breathed. "Why is this here?"

Ileeree looked at her, saw her expression, noticed her stare and then noticed the clay jar as well. She froze. "Is this...?" She did not need to ask, nor did she need to hear an answer as she recognised the broken wax seal on top of it. There were still traces of the wax hanging down from it.

Ileeree jumped to her feet. "Is it here?" she asked. "Is the spirit here?"

"Ssssst!" The antelope intervened as quickly as she could when she heard Ileeree mentioning that term. "No, it should not be able to..." Nekoi whispered and put the apple down. "Unless..." She looked at the window and instantly she noticed the drops of rain against the glass of the window and the thick clouds which blocked the remains of the daylight.

The blow hit the ship with such brute force that the two women were thrown over as the ground beneath them rocked and the ship seemed to sway around them, their ears deafened by the intensity of the bang, the furniture flew around them. Ileeree yelped when she was hit by the chair she had been sitting on an instant ago and then they crashed on the ground, splinters of broken wood flew around, the interior crashed around them. The blow was still resonating through the hull as if the ship was a giant bell.

The small clay jar had been hurled off the table. The priestess could see how it flew through the air, spilling its content and it approached the ground with what

seemed like incredible slowness. Finally the jar hit the ground and shattered, the sherds flew all over the floor while a small puddle of water spread on the wood.

Then everything went dark as the two lamps which had offered light in the mess had been thrown over and except for the glow in the oven (which had thankfully remained intact) it was dark.

Despite her aching side where she had been hit Illeere was on her feet again and she unsheathed her sword even before she was fully standing.

The antelope could feel how her skin started to get goose bumps, a strong shiver wandered through her entire body and with a sudden surge of panic she tried to get on her feet again. "Merciful Goddesses, I think..."

Before the antelope was entirely on her feet again, the ground beneath them started to tremble and for an instant the two women were just staring at it. Splinters danced about, moved by the trembling and Nekoi instinctively tried to find hold on the fallen table. While the ground was still shaking a light emerged from the puddle of water, a faint bluish glow took it over and sparkles formed, threads of light swirled around, started to gather in a circle. Sparkling sensations started to mount into their legs while the two women stared at whatever was about to happen. Standing in the eerie bluish light that illuminated the mess they were paralyzed by the speed of this because- while they were still trying to make any sense out of this- the threads which had moved randomly started to move clockwise around a center in the middle of the room, a circle of blue sparks and equally colored threads of light. Faster and faster they swirled around, seemed to gather all the other light around a sphere of darkest blue in the center, gusts of unnatural wind pulled at their clothes and the light was still speeding up, the glow was becoming brighter and brighter.

"It is coming!" the vixen shouted. "It is coming!"

"Goddesses, protect us from the..." She started to recite.

"Get it..." the vixen cried at the same time and jumped towards the puddle of water on the floor.

But then the blue light suddenly gathered in the middle of the room as if it collapsed into itself and in the next moment one of the windows exploded and the power threw the women off their feet again, hurled them against the wall, splinters of wood shooting about them while they were pressed against the wall. The wood of the whole ship seemed to shriek and then the pressure was gone and the women fell down onto their knees while the rain from outside shot into the room.

Illeere looked up as quickly as she could. "The spirit," she gasped. "It's here, it's here!" she shouted while she stared at the thing that had taken shape in the room: It was a body made of all the water which had been there a moment before, all the spilled water and every drop of rain which had come in through the shattered window. It had taken the shape of a fountain that welled up from nowhere, constantly moving except the head which was made of crystal-clear ice, two icicles protruding from it like giant antlers, while two cold, blue flames glistened in the deep where the eyes of a normal creature would had been. And when the long muzzle opened, sharp teeth of pure ice showed while clouds of

cold and snowflakes blew out of this maw. The water that constantly rushed down thundered on the ground, the never-ending sound was like the drone of the greatest waterfalls. Four thin veils of water rose from the creature and spread apart like wings which caught and broke every light until everything that surrounded it was nothing but cold, shimmering light and the deafening thunder of water.

“Goddesses...” Nekoi whispered and an instant later, chips of ice hit, cut through her clothes which offered not protection at all. An otherworldly scream of pain escaped her throat.

With a yell Ileeree hit the creature with the next best thing she had been able to grab.

The pan slammed against the ice and the skull-like structure broke apart, shattered into a thousand pieces before the metal of the pan hit the fountain of water.

The power of the pressure tore the pan out of the vixen’s hand, it shot throughout the room, hit the ceiling and fell down again, the vixen fell backwards while the water at the top froze again, forming a new head in no time at all. The new icy antlers touched the ceiling and splintered there while the maw opened, exposed the teeth of ice while the creature blew freezing cold at the vixen it faced now.

The vixen had fallen over and tried to stand up again when she saw into the wide opened mouth. It was not only the cold which paralyzed her, even though she could feel the cold cutting into her skin with countless small crystals of fresh ice.

“Goddesses, protect us...” Nekoi was able to pronounce. “You are the gate, you are the door, you are the key! Help me...” Another scream escaped her when a jet of water pinned her to the wall. The power of the impact drove all the air out of her lungs and her scream transformed into a shrill yelp before it became a soundless, helpless gasp. Everything went black in front of her eyes for a short moment. She did not even feel how her limbs crashed against the wooden wall behind her, how the dishes from the shelves fell down all around her. When she was able to see something again, she saw two blue flames right in front of her while the water which had soaked her and her clothes froze, her body being caught in the spirit’s hold.

The antelope woman screamed in panic and pain.

Ileeree dashed forward, two blades flashing up in her paws. She hit the spirit with all that she had, but the metal just cut through the water without finding any resistance. Instinctively she rolled over to avoid any counterattack, but when she looked up again, she saw the antelope’s face. Nekoi was gasping for breath, her skin turning blue beneath the snow and ice which covered her fur by now.

“HELP!” Ileeree screamed at the top of her lungs. “HEEEELP! ATTACK!”

The head of the creature shifted and a moment later another jet of water shot across the room and hit the spot where the vixen had been an instant before. She had dodged just in time. She rolled over on the ground, managed to avoid the stools lying on the floor, but the water hit those with full power and they were

shot across the rooms. One of the stools hit another window which was shattered and more rain was suddenly spraying through the shattered glass.

Ileeree kept an eye on the creature, but she was not fast enough to see the lash of water that seemed to appear out of nowhere and hit her unprotected side. She tried to duck, but she was not fast enough, it hit her head and the vixen was thrown to the ground.

The impact was painful, but she gritted her teeth and grabbed a metal pot that lay right in front of her and hurled it at the water creature. It was distracted for a moment as it deflected it and the vixen used that moment, to attack again, her two swords pointed at the icy head of the creature. One of the blades pierced the ice with a crunching noise and the creature bucked with such brute force that the weapon was torn out of her hands. A split-second later the ice around that weapon burst apart and the blade shot across the room and disappeared beyond the door to the corridor.

Ileeree grabbed her weapon with all her power and let it fall down on the spirit, but instantly the creature shifted again and where was ice before, was nothing but rushing water the metal disappeared in. Once again the sword was torn out of her paws and this time it was swallowed by the spirit and lost itself within the rushing flow the creature was made of.

A jet hit her with full power.

The vixen screamed in pain and shock when her body was shot across the room as if it had no weight at all. She crashed into the oven, its hot contents hissed when the spirit moved towards the vixen and its water extinguished their coals in there.

Ileeree gasped for breath, her entire back had transformed into a numb pain which incapacitated her to breath. She inhaled with a whistling noise, stared at the ceiling above her with eyes wide opened in shock. But an instant later the sight was block by rushing water.

The spirit was just above her, the bluish eyes burned in cold fire beneath the skull of ice.

And then the water crashed in on her, her body was hurled against the wall, offering no resistance at all, she slammed against the wall while the water broke on her. Beneath the veil of her pain she could feel the water starting to surround her. She tried to fight it off, but her limbs were hardly able to move. She yelped in panic.

Nekoi lay on the ground and tried to concentrate. "Goddesses..." She was hardly able to speak properly as she was not able to feel her frozen lips. "Goddesses, help me in this hour of need, please!" Her voice transformed into a shrill yelp of desperation. "Help me, help me, your humble servant, send your light to guide me, protect me and my kind with your light! PLEASE!" Her voice trembled while the words started to form a twisted, encroached melody, ending with a scream.

Ileeree screamed in pain.

The antelope fell down. "Goddesses, help us, help us..." she gasped with the little power that was left to her. "Help, help..."

Then the vixen scream transformed into a gurgling noise as the water of the spirit was suddenly all over her muzzle. Within an instant she was unable to breathe anymore as water forced its way into her mouth and nose. The vixen struggled, every fiber of her body fought against the hold and panic hit her like nothing she had ever felt before.

Suddenly the antelope instinctively raised her head and she saw the lleeree's knife which was still drifting through the water creature and white-hot coal from the oven. "Goddesses!" she breathed. Quivering and exerting the focus that was left to her she tried to hold on to that picture. The woman slumped down, but the picture of the metal blade and glowing coal was imprinted in her mind. She could hear the gushing sound of lleeree struggling, but she did not pay any attention to it. For the wink of an eye she saw everything going black again and panic struck as she was convinced to loose consciousness again, but then she saw the moons with Tezu's glowing red circle.

Opening her eyes again Nekoi gritted her teeth. "Goddesses, give me the power!" she hissed.

Suddenly the knife inside the sword inside the creature started to tremble. The coal on the ground moved and suddenly it shot towards the metal blade, crashed into the flowing water and disappeared inside. An instant later bubbles started to form all around it, then steam shot through the gushing water and suddenly the watery shape started to waver. The frozen skull spun around for an instant, then it suddenly melted away, consumed by hot, boiling water.

With a gurgling noise the vixen was suddenly released from the hold on her body and she slumped down, crushing into the bent pieces of the water scattered on the floor.

Steam shot all around while the water creature was bubbling from within. The pillar of water collapsed and splashed onto the ground, for an instant there was a puddle of water, but it vanished quickly between the cracks of the wooden floor.

The white hot knife and embers dropped to the ground, vaporized the water all around it and charred the wooden floor.

Nekoi tried to get up, her wet clothes and fur felt like lead on her body. "lleeree," she gasped while crawling over the floor. "lleeree!"

She crawled through the shattered, drenched remains of the mess until she reached the vixen who lay motionless in between the parts of the oven.

"lleeree," Nekoi said and grabbed her face. "lleeree! ILEEREE!"

There were frantic footsteps behind her.

Nekoi did not care. She grabbed the vixen's head, pulled it backwards, pressed her hand against lleeree's nose and forced her breath into the vixen's opened mouth. Every time she inhaled again, she almost instinctively called out one of the Moon Goddesses' names and went on.

Somebody entered the room. "Goddess! WE ARE UNDER ATTACK! WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!"

Nekoi went on forcing her breath into the vixen's lungs, she just focussed on doing so. She could feel her own breath going deep into the vixen, suddenly feeling the weak pulse beneath the vixen's skin, the flow of blood in her veins.

The priestess inhaled again, came down on the vixen's muzzle again, feeling her lips against the lips of the vixen and she blew hard. The air left her lungs and she could feel the lightness of shortness of breath, colors danced in front of her eyes, taking the shape of blurry pictures. Instantly the antelope rose from the vixen's lips again and inhaled yet again.

Somebody was by her side. "What is wrong with her?"

"The spirit," Nekoi gasped. "The spirit is here!" She did not even look at the furr next to her, instead she went on giving lleeree artificial respiration.

"BATTLE STATIONS! BATTLE STATIONS!"

The vixen suddenly started to cough, water splashed from her mouth.

Nekoi lowered her head upon hers, almost collapsing in exhaustion while doing so. Her frowns touched those of the vixen. "Goddesses, thank you, thank you for helping your servant." She could feel how the vulpine body beneath her trembled while lleeree tried to force one cough after the other. "The Goddesses have not opened the last gate for you yet, you will be alright, you will be alright."

"Can you tell us where it is?"

Nekoi could feel a light hand upon her shoulder and turned her head: It was Recha looking at her. The priestess gulped and shook her head. "... I don't know, it seeped through the floor."

"What is beneath us?" Nekoi recognized Sty's voice.

"The quarters!"

"Recha, you stay here and guard Nekoi and lleeree! Bedai, with me! Cafy, tell ltha and Fadr to guard the engines' room, then you take the bridge! Do not engage, do not engage! Wait for reinforcement, we cannot take it alone! Go, damn! Go!" The captain hesitated for a moment, looking at his wife who was partly hidden by the antelope, but then he gritted his teeth and dashed out of the room.

As fast as they could the fox and the bear with the bandages ran down the corridor, their weapons in their paws. They dashed down a narrow staircase and while they ran past the doors, they kicked them open and looked inside as quickly as they could. They ran from door to door until Sty slammed into a closed one.

"What room is that?"

"Nekoi's!" the fox replied, pulled his gun from his belt and shot at the wooden lock. The shot echoed through the small corridor, almost deafened both of them. Despite the smoke Sty instantly kicked the door, the wooden frame gave way with a crunching noise and the two men ran inside.

They stopped cold.

"What...?" Sty said.

The entire room was soaked, dripping from water, even the ceiling was totally wet.

Bedai enforced his hold on his huge sword which he had held in his paws the entire time, just like Sty who enforced the hold on his gun's handle. For a moment the two men stood perfectly still.

There was too much noise all around them, they could hear the sound of feet reverberating through the ship, as well as the sound of engines down below.

It took some time before the captain noticed the shape of the lynx beneath the blankets of the bed. It was almost entirely hidden, there were just a few spots of fur visible here and there.

Without a sound he just tapped on Bedai's shoulder.

The wolverine looked up.

The fox pointed towards the lynx with two fingers.

Bedai just nodded.

The fox put away his gun and drew his long thin sword from its sheath. With the weapon in his hand he stepped forward very carefully.

The fox' eyes shot across the room, carefully studying everything, every drop of water falling from the ceiling catching his attention for a short moment while he approached the bed. With his blade he started to push the blankets aside.

Jiddy lay on the bed without moving. She was as soaked as everything else around her, her wet fur hanging down from her almost entirely lifeless body. She lay on her side, her mouth and her eyes wide open, but her pupils were turned upwards, her eyes did not show anything but the white. Where her skin showed it had turned blue, especially her lips. From time to time, her paw or her foot twitched slightly.

"Seems like even our little bastard kitty can't fight a spirit," the captain stated lowly. "I hope that you are..." He noticed movement in the corner of his eyes and instinctively looked over his shoulder. He saw how Bedai disappeared through the door, dragging a stool with him and then slamming the door shut.

"Bedai?" Sty turned around. "BEDAI!" he yelled and dashed towards the door, he slammed into it while the sound of it being barricaded with the stool came from the other side. With all of his weight the fox threw himself against the wooden door. "BEDAI! WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN? ARE YOU INSANE?" With both of his hands he hammered against the door. "BEDAI!"

There was only the noise of the huge man on the other side walking away.

"BEDAI!" Sty yelled at the top of his lungs.

He stopped cold when he was convinced to hear a sound behind himself. Very slowly the fox turned around and faced the unconscious lynx on the bed again. Breathing hard he studied every detail in the room, it looked exactly the same and yet the fox could feel how his fur bristled instinctively.

"Holy Mother!" he breathed.

Even though it was very low, there was the sound of running water coming from somewhere and the lynx started to move again.

End of Chapter 17

Annotation 1: Felines are best known for fast surprise attacks. Especially smaller felines avoid longer fights because they are rarely a match for the larger, heavier species.

Annotation 2: Tezu, the golden moon, has got clearly defined phases and is therefore the base of time measurement. Heya's phases are hard to perceive and Koda, the black moon, has got no visible phases at all.

Annotation 3: A clean-up means lovers licking each other clean after love-making. As most furs have sensible noses clean-ups are necessary as smelling of sexual activities is usually considered to be very dirty.

Annotation 4: Small gems, usually referred to as stones, are the most common currency.

Annotation 5: Ao, a jungle city in the far south.

Annotation 6: Mount Caspenei and the Lispee Pass are two important places, marking the border of the Midlands and the south.

Annotation 7: The Pillars of Xos are an important city in the south, built upon the remains of the Mystic Empire of Xos.

Annotation 8: The wasteland is a very hostile, mountainous semi-desert in the north east.

Annotation 9: Fingeran is a relatively large city and well-known city in the Norther Reaches, at the coast of the Frozen Sea.

Annotation 10: A Cheeryo Lizard is a large, fearsome, reptilian predator who can even be a danger to furs. It is known for its unstoppable bloodlust.

Annotation 11: A geas is a spell of binding and command, not unlike a curse. It is often used to enforce prohibitions. Lots of sages argue that they are not real magic.

Annotation 12: I did not make up any of those herbs, nor about their use for wound healing.

Annotation 13: Whipping is a very common punishment for theft and other crimes.

Annotation 14: Caussian was a nation in the east of the Midlands which was torn apart by a brutal civil war in the recent past. Lots of Caussian refugees have settled in the Midlands.

Annotation 15: Sometimes benevolent Spirits are being summoned by the Spirits' priests and priestess in order to accept offerings or bless rituals with their presence. This is a very rare event.

Annotation 16: Lots of people believe that spirits can possess furs and control them. Very little is known about this.

Annotation 17: Orichalkum is a very rare, very valuable, magical element, resembling blood-stone with a prismatic surface.

Annotation 81: Jiddy is giving the names of the cities in the east of the Midlands. Jaulesse was the town where she stayed for a short time, working in Ama's Café (see Chapter 15)

Annotation 19: The mountainside between Kastania City and the Silver Coast, Jiddy travels through it in chapter 1-4.

Annotation 20: He calls upon the Sun God, son of the Holy Mother.

Annotation 21: Nalavaas are large, four-footed reptiles which are often used as mounts and pack-animals.

Annotation 22: Nekoi is correctly guessing the names of a few places Jiddy travelled through, even though she acts on the assumption that Jiddy travelled south from Lake Moonfire, not crossing the Andeleau Mountains (which she actually did).

Annotation 23: A vegetable, resembling the mix of a tomatoe and a pumpkin.