



1999 - 2009
Migratory Birds - 10th Anniversary

Migratory Birds
Chapter 19

CRASH

Written by **kodayu**



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

The crew

Sty, fox, the captain

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

Abama, 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

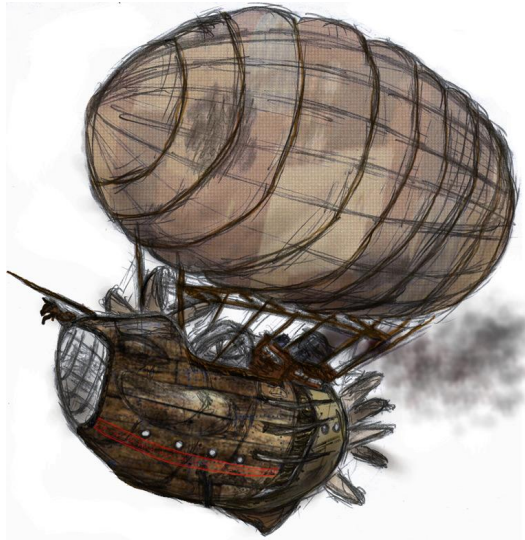
Recha, vixen, markswoman and Ileeree's cousin

Nekoi Devoya, antelope, priestess of the Moon Goddesses

Pensha, squirrel, Nekoi's acolyte

Fadr, weasel, mage

and Jiddy



She awoke from her trance with a gasp and instantly she fell to the ground, helplessly gasping for breath. In total panic she tore at her clothes, while she writhed on the wooden floor.

„Nekoi! Nekoi!“

The sound did not even reach her ears as she tried to inhale, but no matter how much she tried it did not feel like it was nearly enough to fill her lungs.

„Nekoi! Pull yourself together! Nekoi!“

A hand took hold of her and pulled her to an upright position, then a slap hit her cheek and send her to the ground again, where she was gasping for breath, her lungs whistling as she inhaled, her eyes twitching and shooting around erratically.

„May her Goddesses help me with this!“

A paw grabbed her head, took a hold on it, pressing a piece of paper against her fur and an instant later the paper caught fire and exploded in a short flash which echoed through the room with deafening intensity.

The antelope was pressed to the ground and hit her head hard, for a moment she lay on the ground in a strangely twisted way, then she collapsed entirely and lay still.

Fadr approached her slowly and carefully put a hand on her chest: He could feel how her breast rose slowly and regularly. Cautiously he turned the antelope onto her back, so that she lay in a comfortable position.

There were fast footsteps coming closer outside the door and an instant later it was kicked open when Bedai stormed into the room, instantly going down to his knees, holding his huge hand-cannon ready to be fired. It pointed at the weasel who was just about to stand up again.

„False alarm,“ the mage said. „I just needed to calm Nekoi.“

Bedai's eyes narrowed. „By doing what? Blasting a hole into the floor?“ He eyed the weasel, carefully studying the fresh wounds on his face which had begun to heal again, leaving red marks upon his face.

There were more footsteps running down the corridor and approaching the door.

Recha appeared on the doorstep, having leveled her rifle. Instantly she looked at Fadr. „Everything alright?“

„Yes!“ Bedai hissed. „False alarm!“

The vixen studied Fadr who noticed her alarmed expression, looked directly into her eyes and nodded covertly.

For a moment she studied him, then she put her rifle down, returning the same kind of covert nod.

Very slowly the huge bear lowered his hand-cannon as well. „Next time, you warn us!“ he said towards the weasel.

„Yes, if Nekoi is about to suffocate again, I will take the time to warn you first and afterwards I see what I can do for her,“ Fadr replied coldly.

The bear stood up straight again and glared at the weasel from underneath his kerchief. „Why was Nekoi suffocating?“

Fadr had turned away. „None of your business.“

Suddenly the bear seemed to get even larger as he tensed. The muscles around his shoulder and neck showed beneath his leather vest. „Listen, I am in charge of security here, there is no...“

„No, there is!“ Fadr replied angrily, spinning around on the spot and facing the bear again. „This room and everything that is in here, is my and Nekoi’s responsibility. We are risking our lives here, so I am not going to take orders!“

For a short moment the bear and the weasel stared at each other.

Beneath their feet the wooden ground vibrated lightly, resonating with the movement of machines that were in the engines’ room underneath. Their sounds rung in their ears.

The bear looked away, carefully studying the room before he finally turned around. „Have it your way!“ he grunted, now facing Recha. „Didn’t you hear? The mage wants this to be his responsibility. Let’s go!“

The vixen hesitated for a moment. She tried to exchange a look with the weasel again, but the bear in front of her blocked her view entirely, so that she gave in and walked outside.

The bear followed her and slammed the door shut.

Fadr sighed and turned around again. First he looked at the antelope priestess who lay on the ground. He could see that she was still breathing regularly, therefore his eyes wandered on towards the dark shape of a body: It lay inside a circle which had been drawn on the ground with white chalk. The circle showed stylized flames and sported countless magical symbols and carefully written invocations. At the edge of the circle was a rope which went all around the circle, which by itself was surrounded by a dozen of small cups with burning oil, between all of those lay large chunks of coal. The light of the burning oil cast eerie, swaying shadows on the walls of the emptied storage room and partly illuminated the lifeless, drenched shape of the lynx inside the circle, a small stream of water constantly flowing out of her mouth, slowly enlarging the puddle around her.

Fadr sighed once again and slowly sat down on the cushion again which he had been sitting on during all of his nearly endless watch. He folded his hands in front of his muzzle, feeling the itch of the wounds he had received.

„Does it still hurt?“

„No! My ears are still ringing though.“

„I am sorry; it was the only thing I could think of in that moment.“

The antelope nodded.

„So... What did you see?“

Nekoi inhaled deeply. „I will never do this again!“ she stated. „May the Goddesses hear my pledge!“

Fadr grunted.

Nekoi raised her head and looked straight at the weasel. „I mean it!“ she repeated. „I will never do this again!“ The antelope looked at him and when she



noticed that he had lowered his face her hand rose towards one of the bandages which covered most of her left face, her neck and her shoulder. She scratched herself there.

The weasel stared at the few, scrawly letter on the floor. „I still don't understand this,“ he said.

The antelope studied him for another moment, then she pulled a face and let go of the bandage which she had tried to rearrange a little bit. She stretched out her arms and her fingers started to trace the letters on the ground without touching them. „It is a name,“ she explained. „Seerye.“

„Seerye? What does that mean?“

„I do not know.“ She shuddered as she remembered her visions, the gravity of the pull that she had exposed herself to, the intense cold which seemed to suck every spark of life from her body, the pressure of weight and the desperation, the panic, the feeling of being entirely exposed without any escape. It overshadowed everything else, every clear thought or sensation. „It is an image,“ she said finally. „An image that overlaid everything else. Just like the moons are the faces of the Goddesses that they show the world.“

„Seerye?“ Fadr asked.

Nekoi nodded.

„What does it have to do with the spirit?“ Fadr asked.

Nekoi shook her head. „That's what I do not know either. Just like you I have never met somebody possessed by a spirit before, let alone scryed on someone. I...“ She paused for a moment.

Fadr raised his eyes and studied her.

The antelope slowly tipped on her lips with one of her fingers. „I think it has got something to do with the lynx though,“ she said finally. „I can physically touch the lynx, I cannot touch the spirit. There was never anything I got from my scrying on it besides the few details that we needed to determine its location. I am sure that this is not much different. I can trace the spirit, I can find it as there is nothing hidden to the light of the Goddesses. But I can't touch it... It slips through my fingers.“

„Like water,“ Fadr added.

„Like water,“ the priestess concurred. She nodded slowly.

Both of them fell silent for a moment while they looked upon the few signs that Nekoi had written on the floor during her trance.

„Do you know that name?“ the antelope asked and looked at the mage. „Seerye?“

Fadr shook his head. „I think I would remember if I had heard this one before.“

Nekoi nodded slowly, she turned her head towards the shape of the lynx girl who lay in the shifting light of the burning oil at the other end of the room.

The weasel's eyes had followed her movement and he looked at the small feline shape as well. „I am just happy that she has been calm. I am not sure if the circle would withstand a second physical attempt of hers to break out of it.“

„Isn't it strange?“ Nekoi asked suddenly. „She always attacked physically. It seems like...“

Fadr looked at her, waiting for her to go on.

The antelope was silent and paralyzed.

„What?“ he asked.

The antelope shook her head.

„Damn it, Nekoi, Speak up! This is no time for riddles.“

„I... I just thought that it never attacked us with its powers. I mean besides the... what happened in the mess. But since it has taken possession of the lynx, it has not...“

Fadr pulled a face. „The sun knows possessing her is all it needs.“ He interrupted himself and did not speak on, but both of them knew what he meant.

„Yet we could imprison it here.“

„Yes, it takes the full-time attention of a mage and a priestess to achieve that, that’s really easy.“ He paused for a moment. „It’s too easy...“

The antelope glared at him, her features contorted in an expression of sudden anger. For a short moment she abhorred the man. With a violent movement she pulled down her gown exposing the bandage which covered her entire shoulder. „Look! Have a good look!“ she exclaimed. „This is what it did in the mess. You call this easy? You did not feel anything but the lynx’ claws! It nearly killed me and lleeree!“

Fadr lowered his eyes.

„You have not seen what it is able to.“ Slowly she covered herself again as she had also exposed her breasts in this emotional outbreak. „The lynx is a formidable fighter by herself, sure, but...“

„What about the captain?“ Fadr exclaimed emphatically.

For a moment they were both silent, they looked into each other’s eyes, almost perfectly motionless while the floor beneath them reverberated with the powers of the engines.

Suddenly there was a little splashing noise and their heads shot around as they stared instantly at the lynx.

The feline’s hand moved, erratically sliding around on the ground as if the feline wanted to push something away. The rest of the body remained motionless.

„Is it starting again?“ Fadr rose to his feet.

Slowly the antelope stood up too, her movements being very clumsy as she wanted to prevent any pain in her shoulder.

Slowly the weasel approached the circle and kneeled down besides it so that he could have a look at the lynx girl who lay there. Carefully he studied the little cups with the burning oil too, making sure that all of them had enough oil left.

Nekoi stood on the other side of the circle and studied the feline shape as well. „It is as if she is dreaming,“ she said. „A nightmare I got caught up in the moment I scryed on her.“

The mage raised his face. „Is that possible?“

„Have you never magically touched another furr?“ she asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders. „I learned to close my mind on this.“

Nekoi snorted. „Yes, of course!“

Fadr shortly looked at her, but did not reply at all.

„Why her?“ He raised his head again and looked at the antelope who shook her head very slowly.

„I don't understand this...“

„There is too much we don't understand,“ Fadr replied. „At the beginning of this mission, we thought we were prepared for every possibility. All of it sounded so easy... Following the trace of a misguided spirit and destroying it.“ He fell silent for a moment, then he raised his eyes and looked at her. „Was it the bounty that blinded us?“

Nekoi shrugged.

Absent-mindedly he scratched his wounds again. „Sty was so confident and now...“

Both of them looked down on the shape in the circle again: It was hard to believe how small the feline was, hardly more than a bundle of wet fur in a puddle of water. She lay on her side so that her face was almost entirely covered by wet strands of hair. Her arms and legs were totally powerless, lying on the ground, just like her lifeless tail. Water dripped down from her lips.

„Listen...“ Nekoi slowly pushed her hair from her face as she looked at the mage opposite again. „Do you think you can watch her on your own for a moment? I want to see if anyone onboard knows about Seerye.“

„Do you think it is important?“

„I am not sure, but I think that we should try to find out as much as we can. The Goddesses teach us to seek answers and I think we would have fared better if we had followed this lesson earlier.“

Fadr hesitated, but then he nodded slowly. „Make sure that you return as quickly as you can.“

The antelope nodded and turned around on the spot.

„Cafy!“ The prairie dog started.

The man exhaled and leaned on the wooden console next to the steering wheel which he had approached without any sound, surprising the woman at the steering wheel...

Without her hands leaving the steering wheel alone, the woman scrutinized the raccoon who had suddenly showed up right behind her: She instantly noticed his bloodshot eyes, the rings under them, the hollow cheeks and the greasy hair. His bad shape surprised her as much as his sudden appearance.

„I am sorry...“ he panted breathlessly. „I really am.“ He supported himself as if he was about to collapse any moment.

„What's going on?“ Abama asked him instantly. „You look horrible.“

„That's nothing,“ he replied. „I was on guard duty last night.“

„Nothing? Cafy! We need every man. We need you more than ever before! Go to sleep.“

„Listen, I...“ The raccoon inhaled deeply. „I just...“ He sniffed and Abama stared at him as she was convinced to see tears shimmering in his eyes.

„Listen, Cafy,“ she said softly. „You can’t fall apart now.“

„Can I go into the ready room?“ he asked. „Ileeree is in there..., right?“

„No, Cafy, she does not allow anyone... In the Holy Mother’s name, you have to get some sleep. I beg you!“

The raccoon nodded slowly. „I just...“

She waited for him to go on.

He gulped. „How is the captain doing?“

The prairie dog woman hesitated, then she put her hand on his shoulder. „Listen, Cafy. Don’t worry about this, okay? Ileeree is with him, she is doing what she can. And Nekoï is looking after him as well, whenever she can. So don’t worry about this, alright? Go to bed!“

The raccoon looked at her and due to the bags under his eyes the mask of his fur looked even darker than usual.

She smiled at him. „Hm?“ She nodded.

He returned the nod.

„Who is on guard duty right now? Itha or Bedaï?“

„Bedaï!“ Cafy answered.

„Alright. We can spare you then. Go to sleep now.“

Once again the raccoon nodded hesitatingly. Very slowly he turned around and her hand dropped down from his shoulder while he walked over the bridge.

The woman looked after him, her hand firmly on the steering wheel; she observed his staggering and frowned. She gulped and turned her attention to the instruments next to her again: They had not changed course. Abama inhaled and looked out the giant front windows.

The light which came in through the portholes hurt in his eyes. The entire room seemed to blur and he did not even notice the sounds of the engines anymore, it was nothing but an indistinguishable drone in his ears anymore. The tiredness weighed upon him like lead as he had not been able to close his eyes ever since the apparition of the spirit in the mess. At first he had tried to exhaust himself, going on with his training, ignoring Bedaï’s orders to leave it alone for some time, but it had not helped him to find any sleep.

He rubbed his face with his paw as if it was possible to push off the tiredness just like that, then his hand came down on the doorknob and he opened the door to the main deck.

Wind rushed around him as he stepped outside again and the power of the gust brought tears to his eyes. The door slammed shut behind him while he walked towards the giant, rotating gear wheels in the middle of the deck. Above him the balloon fluttered in the wind.

„Cafy...“

He did not hear the shouts behind him while he staggered towards the gear wheels, his eyes transfixed on the rotating, brass-plate wood. The metal flashed in the light of the sun and attracted him instinctively.

„Cafy!“

The raccoon walked on.

Suddenly there was a paw on his shoulder and he started and looked around.

Bedaï stared at him.

„Are you deaf?“

„I am sorry, I...“ The raccoon moved his hand.

„What are you doing here? Why aren't you in bed?“ The bear stared at the smaller furr.

„I...“ Cafy hesitated. „I can't...“

The large ursine man frowned and studied the raccoon's face. „What...?“

„Bedaï?“

The bear turned around when he heard the female voice behind himself.

Nekoi stood a few steps away from the two men, her gown waved around her in the strong winds which reigned over the main deck.

The ursine man let go of Cafy and stretched himself as he saw how the antelope came closer.

„What is it?“ he asked.

A moment later Nekoi stood in front of him. „I have got a question... Does the name Seerye mean anything to one of you?“ She looked at Bedaï and Cafy who was looking at the new arrival as well.

Bedaï studied the antelope's face. „Seerye?“ he asked. „You do not mean Seeren?“

„No, no, Seerye!“ she insisted.

Bedaï frowned and studied the antelope carefully.

„Maybe it is a place or something. Have you ever heard of it?“ Nekoi suggested.

Cafy looked at Bedaï for a moment who did not move, then the smaller man wet his lips. „Like the weapons' grandmaster?“ Cafy asked her.

Bedaï's blinked shortly and then nodded slowly. He inhaled. „Yes, that is the only one who comes to my mind as well,“ he said.

„What...?“ Nekoi looked at both of them.

„I don't remember exactly,“ Bedaï said. „There was a renowned weapons' grandmaster of that name. He was from...“ The bear waved his hand. „Some place in the east.“

Nekoi looked at Cafy who opened his mouth as if he wanted to add something.

„I... I...“ he stammered and suddenly his jaw started to quiver.

As he had been standing behind Bedaï most of the time the antelope noticed the raccoon's bad shape for the first time: His hollow cheeks, the weary expression on his face, his light uncontrollable shivering as if he was cold despite the warm sun. „What's wrong with you?“ she asked bluntly due to her own surprise.

Bedaï turned his head and looked at the raccoon as well. „That's just what I wanted to find out as well...“

Cafy shivered and tried to smile. „Really, I... I just need some sleep.“

Nekoi stared at the awkward expression on the man's face. Without hesitating she stepped closer, raised her hand and put it on the man's forehead.

Cafy jerked.

„I...“ Cafy shook his head, tears shimmered in his eyes and he gulped.

The bear by his side grabbed his shoulder. „What’s wrong, Cafy? I have never seen you like this before.“

„He hasn’t slept in days,“ Nekoï stated while she took her hand down again.

With wide opened eyes the bear looked at the priestess. „Can you help him?“

Nekoï nodded.

„But I...“ Cafy tried to exclaim.

„Shhh...“ Nekoï raised her hand again and put it down on his eyes. „The Goddesses watch over you, their light is guiding you through the night. Accept their gift of sleep. Like in the arms of a lover, you are safe in their embrace.“ Her spoken words followed the pattern of a rhythm, before her voice changed to a light hum.

Suddenly the raccoon’s knees gave in and he almost dropped to the ground if not for the bear’s quick reflexes: He caught him before he hit the ground. Cafy’s eyes were almost entirely closed, his eyelids quivered as he tried to fight against the tiredness which overwhelmed him. „It’s my fault,“ the raccoon breathed, then his eyelids closed entirely and he became limp in the bear’s arms.

„That should give him some hours of sleep,“ Nekoï stated.

Bedäï nodded in satisfaction. „I will get him to his bed,“ he said. „I can’t allow him to fall apart now. By the way, you should ask Meloy about Seerye, he knows that kind of stuff.“

Nekoï nodded. „Thank you, I will seek him.“ For a moment she watched how the large ursine man dragged the raccoon towards the door to the lower decks.

A moment later they disappeared inside and Nekoï inhaled deeply, being all alone on the main deck.

She approached the railing and supported herself upon it, looking towards the horizon.

The air had become considerably colder in the last few days, yet the sun was still warm when it found a gap between the towering gray masses of the clouds which did not seem to move at all, just hanging in the sky. Beneath the airship the ground had changed into a landscape of rough, wooded hills with deep valleys in between. The conifers stood high upon ragged rocks, covering almost every spot as far as one could see and even the slopes of some high mountains in the distance which got closer every day, their tops hiding in the clouds. Birds rose from the trees as the airship passed by and the croaking of three-eyed raven and the call of birds of prey could be heard among the hammering, hissing and fluttering of the airship’s many different parts. The dark smoke that welled up from the ship’s exhaust pipes was instantly torn apart and carried away by the wind.

Nekoï raised her face in order to locate the sun, but it hid behind the ship’s balloon and therefore she could not see it, instead she looked at the pale shape of Tezu, the red moon, its large circle standing high in the sky, dominating the horizon in the east.

„Red as blood that flows within our veins, your light flows through the sky. Release the strength that we carry within us, release the power of our hammering hearts, strengthen our resolve and tell your sisters to do the same.“ She bowed

towards the disc in the sky, turned around and went to the door to the lower decks again.

As usual the engines' room was filled with exhaust, the fumes shooting from the leaky pipes which connected the boilers, the pistons and the vents. The noise was deafening and the priestess had to fight the urge to cover her ears while she climbed down the ladder to the floor of the room, walking past the lines of engines and rotating wheels.

She needed a moment before she got her bearings. She looked around searching for the man she sought, but she was not able to see him between all the engines. As she knew that shouting was no use in this noise, she started to walk around, carefully trying to avoid touching the oiled, dirty machines with her gown while she walked past them.

Neither by the firebox, nor the pistons or leaky pipes which had been fixed with nothing but waxed cloth and string, could she find the goat. She was already pretty sure that she would not find him down there when she noticed him: Meloy was busy applying oil from a large can to the mechanic wheels of the transition engine between the pistons and the propellers at the very end of the huge room.

He did not notice her until she stood almost right in front of him. When he did his eyes opened wide.

The priestess nodded at him.

„I need to ask you something,“ she said aloud.

The goat made a sign to follow her towards a small recess in the wall where they were shielded from the noises of the engines.

Even though the noise was still overwhelmingly strong the antelope exhaled.

The goat looked at her and blinked slowly, the oil can still in his hands.

„Have you ever heard the name Seerye?“

The goat hesitated for a moment. „Seerye...?“ He smacked his lips and started to pull at his goatee. „The name's familiar, but...“ The man raised his head and looked towards the ceiling. For a moment he was silent.

The antelope watched him carefully, blinking strongly due to watering eyes.

„Yeah... I think... Do you mean the weapons grandmaster?“ He looked at her with his stretched goat pupils.

The priestess shook her head and the small bells on her antlers rung, but their sound was overshadowed by the sounds of the engines. „I don't know. I have no idea what it refers to, but it might be important, so just tell me what you know about this...“

The man inhaled deeply. „Well, Seerye was a well-known weapons grandmaster from the Hundred Kingdoms. Several times actually, several times weapons grandmaster. Some might even say that he was living legend.“

„Yeah, I know that much already,“ Nekoi replied impatiently. „Bedaï told me. He said you knew more.“

Meloy put down the foot which had rested on one of the pipes. He pulled at his shirt. „Listen, there is not much that I can tell you, if you really want to know

about Seerye you better wait until we have returned to Rechwikk¹ there is nothing that I...“

„Please!“ Nekoi interrupted him. She had raised her hand and then shook it lightly so that her bracelets rung. „It is important; tell me what you know...“

Slowly Meloy stood up straight. For a moment he looked around in the small confined space between the hammering engines. „Okay, but I have got to say, everything I know is from the journals² and I am sure that half of that stuff is fairy tales.“ For a moment he rubbed his goatee, then he inhaled deeply. „What I know is that he was the commander of some kind of revolt, led by one of the many princes of the Hundred Kingdoms. At first this whole thing must have started out as an uprising against one of the many noble houses. It seems like the insurgents did have quite some support from other noble clans and the locals. But the leader of that insurgency was killed or captured or something, I am not sure. Anyway, Seerye took control of the whole thing and within a certain time the whole operation was suddenly something like a war tribe³. I really did not pay much attention to that part of the story, because the atrocities they were supposed to have committed...“ He waved his hand. „Fairy tales or propaganda or both. They were accused of burning down villages, killing everybody they could not sell as slaves and so on. This seemed to go on for several summers and Seerye was even nicknamed the scourge of Lake Hyakku⁴. At this point he seemed to have lost most of his support and several noble clans raised an army and routed all of Seerye’s forces. It was said that he was killed too, but I am not sure about that anymore... I really can’t remember.“

Meloy lowered his face and looked at the antelope who was frowning. „Is this what you wanted to know?“ he asked her.

She shook her head lightly and the bells on her antlers rung. „I am not sure... Do you remember if there was anything about winter in that story?“

„Winter?“ Meloy scratched his head. „No, really, I can’t remember anything about that.“

„Was he killed in wintertime?“

Meloy shook his head. „I really can’t tell you,“ he said. „I did not pay that much attention to it.“

„When did this happen?“

„I think I read about the news of his death maybe... four or five autumns ago? Those other...“

„Thank you!“ Nekoi said suddenly. „This is all I need to know. You were a great help.“

Meloy nodded. „Anytime, anytime!“ He looked after her as the antelope quickly walked away, trying not to touch the engines with her gown.

The goat rubbed his nose with his forearm, then he weighed the oil can in his hand and went back to greasing the wheels of the transition.

The door was opened and Nekoi stepped onto the bridge, powerful gusts of wind from the upper deck pulling at her gown when she entered.

Silent Cry and Abama looked up at her when they saw her coming in.

The helmsman had joined the prairie dog again and taken over the steering wheel while Abama was sitting by the navigation consoles. Silent Cry just looked at her shortly, before turning his attention to the world outside the main window again.

Abama rose from the chair at her panel. The prairie dog woman looked straight at the priestess who came closer. „Priestess, did you...?“

„Later, Abama,“ Nekoi said quickly. „First I need your skills as a navigator.“

The prairie dog blinked a few times. „Yes, of course,“ she replied and turned around and started to clean the table with erratic movements where a lot of maps and charts were scattered upon.

„It's...“ The antelope wet her lips. „The Hundred Kingdoms, do you know that place?“

„The Hundred Kingdoms?“ Abama looked at Nekoi with widely opened eyes, looking even more bleary-eyed than before. „Why? Yes, of course, I do... I just...“

„Have you got a map? Can you show me?“

Abama turned around and hesitated for a moment. Then she turned towards the priestess again. „I don't have a map of my own, but it is on that lynx' map.“

„Even better! Can you get it?“

Abama nodded and turned away again, walking to her panel where she got a tubular leather satchel from a stand where many of those were stored. She opened it quickly and pulled out the map which she had neatly rolled for safe storage. The prairie dog walked over to the table and spread it out. The old fashioned map covered most of the table with its faded color drawings of mountains, rivers, lakes, cities and its My'an letters.

Instantly Nekoi leaned over it and tried to get her bearings. She could feel a certain excitement and her hands anxiously brushed over her gown while her eyes flitted over the signs and letters. „Where are the Hundred Kingdoms?“ she asked, wetting her lips.

Abama pointed towards a spot in the east.

Nekoi came closer and leaned over the map, instantly deciphering what had been written there by an unknown hand a long time ago.

„It is not named here,“ Abama said. „Most people from the Hundred Kingdoms don't call it that way. But all of this...“ Her finger wandered over the map. „...is a part of it, everything that surrounds Lake Hyakku.“

There was a large lake in the middle of an area that was covered by countless signs and names. There were lots of cities and she could read names she had never heard of before: Principality of Unechago, Fiefdom of Sairaku, the Ikuraman Shires, Kingdom of Terabuko,...

„Lake Hyakku...“ Nekoi repeated mechanically and she allowed her eyes to wander. And as her eyes passed by mountains, rivers and forests, she discovered a name to the west of the area Abama had indicated to her: Kendorhan!

The name almost jumped to her eyes and she felt a sudden surge of excitement. She wet her lips again and gathered the edges of her gown as she leaned over even more, in order to get closer to the map. Her finger came down on the greasy paper and from Kendorhan it went westwards... Tolassos!

Following the northern border of Caussian towards the south-west, her finger went on to pass by the names of small towns and settlements until she met a large lake with one city scattered across the lake's many islands: Dyamaar!

Nekoi held her breath. Her eyes shot westwards and within a short moment she discovered another familiar name: Kastania City!

And in the west of this city she found another place she was familiar with: The Blue Ridge Mountains.

From there it was an almost straight line: Silver Coast, Lake Moonfire, Andeleau Mountains and a very small gathering of letters which had almost faded upon the greasy paper. She screwed up her eyes in order to read it, even though she already knew the name of the place she had discovered on the map, yet she wanted to be perfectly sure. As expected the letters read „Jaulesse,„

Abruptly Nekoi rose to an upright position, her mind raced because she was familiar with all these names as she had heard them before. „Dear Goddesses, it's true...“ she whispered to herself.

„What are you talking about?“ Abama asked her.

The antelope turned around and looked at the prairie dog. She had totally forgotten about the other woman's presence. „The lynx,“ she said. „What the lynx told me.“

Abama frowned. „What... What did the lynx tell you?“

„She told me a few names, names of cities she had been to and all of those are on the road towards the Hundred Kingdoms.“

„Wh-What?“ Abama shook her head and stared at the antelope. „You mean... the lynx is...“ She turned towards the map. „...from the Hundred Kingdoms?“ She looked down on the map, on the gathering of letters and signs around Lake Hyakku.

„Or a place close to it...“ Nekoi added.

„But... But that is... I mean that is such a distance, who would...?“ Abama shook her head again.

„I have seen it,“ Nekoi said. „I have seen it!“

Abama raised her head. „What?“

„What have you seen?“

Nekoi instantly froze when she heard the voice behind herself and spun around, looking in the eyes of Ileeree.

If Abama was in a bad shape, the vixen was in a terrible one. Her eyes were entirely red, the fur of her face was felted, her hair was in total disorder, her clothes were crumpled and stained and the bandages she had to wear only added to her desperate complexion.

„Is it something about Sty?“ she asked, traces of fear, hope and uncontrollable expectancy in her voice.

Nekoi had got to blink and looked away. „No, it's nothing about him...“ She gulped.

Ileeree raised her hand towards her face and covered her eyes for a moment. She did not say a word for a moment and everyone on the bridge was silent as they watched the vixen, even Silent Cry had turned around in order to look at the vixen who had come from the ready room in total silence. „Holy Mother, why did you leave us?“ Ileeree whimpered, she started to tremble and a sob escaped her throat.

The priestess could feel a cold shiver running up her spine and the bells on her antlers rung lightly. „Shall I have a look at him?“ Nekoi asked carefully.

Ileeree nodded. She took down her hand and looked at the antelope again, her eyes being even more bloodshot than before, if that was possible at all. „Please!“

Nekoi nodded, she hesitated for a moment, then she walked over to the door, passing by Ileeree who followed her slowly.

The ready room was almost entirely dark, except for a few rays of light which came in at the edges of the cloth which hang over the porthole and from a single oil lamp. It was filled with the scents of herbs, herbal oil, incense, blood, sweat and urine. The intensity of these scents was overwhelmingly strong and they seemed to waft around the two women who entered the room.

The desk which had occupied most of the room had been moved to the side, making room for a small pallet which stood on the wall opposite the door.

When Ileeree closed the door behind them it seemed to become dead silent inside the room, except for the breathing of the three furs inside, two women and the man hidden under the covers of the pallet.

Very slowly Nekoi approached the makeshift bed one cautious step after the other.

A feverish eye turned to meet hers.

„Hello, captain!“ the antelope said cautiously.

„Hello..., Nekoi,“ Sty answered. His voice was nothing but a weak, hoarse whisper interrupted by almost desperate gasps for breath. „Do you... have... more drugs? It still... hurts...“

The priestess shook her head and slowly kneeled down by his side. „I can ask the Goddesses to provide their help, but...“ She fell silent.

The injured fox showed something like a weak smile for an instant, then he seemed too tensed and Nekoi could see how he started to clench his teeth. For a moment he was completely stiff and Nekoi could see some new drops of sweat showing up on his forehead.

The antelope looked towards the vixen who had kneeled down by her side. She had gotten a small sponge from a bucket with water and herbs and started to clean her husband's brows. Her features were tense, but her tail lashed about.

Nekoi's bells rang lightly as she lowered her face towards the fox.

Fadr awoke with a start and instantly a feeling of panic struck him as he had not wanted to fall asleep. He was sitting up straight and stared into the dim twilight

of the room and tried to listen to its sounds while his eyes were still about to adapt.

His ears flicked: There was the sound of running water.

Instantly the mage got to his feet, shaking off the last remains of his sleep and walked towards the circle of cups with burning oil. The flames flickered when the mage got closer and the draft of his gown moved the air, dark sooty smoke rose from the flames into the stale air of the room.

The mage kneeled down and tried to study the lifeless body of the lynx on the floor. At first he could not make out much as the small feline shape was in a crouched position, the shadows of the different limbs overlapping and hiding away most of the girl's body as if they wanted to protect her.

The mage reached into a pocket of his gown and took out a candle which he lit quickly on one of the cups with oil, then held it closer to the lynx girl, trying to make out her face.

He started and retired instinctively.

The lynx girl's mouth was wide open and she spewed water regularly. He even noticed her head twitching every time she did.

„Damn, Nekoi! Where are you?“ Fadr whispered and rose to his feet.

Quickly he looked around and checked the cups with the oil: There were twelve of them and all of them were burning brightly. None of them seemed to get close to run out of oil anytime soon. At the same time, the pieces of coal which lay between them were unchanged and so was the rope that lay inside this circle and which surrounded the circle of symbols and incantations which enclosed the body of the lynx. Yet he noticed that this innermost circle was damaged: Part of the water that the lynx spew all of the time had erased some of the carefully crafted lines at the opposite end of the circle.

„Damn!“ the weasel exclaimed and slowly went around the circle in order to study the damage.

They had used grease crayons in order to prevent something like this. Fadr pulled a face and kneeled down again in order to study the damage: He held the candle out and studied the ground.

For a moment he wondered how the water could possibly have had removed the greasy, oily chalk, before he realized that it was not the water which had done this damage, but the lynx' arm which lay right next to this spot: It had moved over the ground, effectively smudging the chalk.

Fadr frowned. Had the lynx moved that much?

He raised his eyes and studied the girl for a moment and was surprised to see that she twitched from teeth to toe all of a sudden.

Instantly he rose to his feet, staring at the lynx.

She twitched another time, all of her body rocking and at the same time he could hear a faint retching noise and a whole gush of water was suddenly spit out. The water spread on the ground and as he looked around he saw that the puddle around her had gotten so large that it touched the cups with oil. There was a faint sizzling noise as some of the water evaporated when it touched the hot metal of one of the cups.

A feeling of dread came over the mage. „Damn you, Nekoi... This is not what we had agreed upon.“ He spun around on the spot and walked towards the door where a large hand bell hung on a hook. He grabbed it and started to ring it hard until the entire room was suddenly filled with the sound of the bell.

His ears rung while the sound slowly faded away.

„NEKOI!“ he screamed and turned around towards the lynx again.

He saw the lynx spasming on the ground, her small body shaken as if it was torn apart by convulsions. Now he could see the muscles on her body, tensing every time the body rocked and then there was the clear sound of the girl throwing up water which splashed onto the ground. The sizzling noises of evaporating water arose from all the metal cups by now as the water was about to spread all over the ground.

As hard as he could he rung the bell again. „NEKOI!“ he yelled at the top of his lungs. „NEKOI!“

The priestess raised her head and looked around.

There was the faint noise of Ileeree trying to suppress her crying right next to her while she clung to Seerye's hand, the wounded man trying to speak to his wife, but he was hardly able to move his lips in an attempt to pronounce single words. Most of his face was covered by bandages, some of them already soaked with fresh blood again.

Nekoi's ears twitched while she tried to listen to whatever had caught her attention and suddenly she felt how her entire fur bristled and at the same time she could hear the sound of running water as if a wave was suddenly getting closer, she was convinced to be able to feel the cool air that accompanied it upon her skin.

„Dear Goddesses,“ she exclaimed and instantly rose to her feet.

Ileeree turned her head and stared at the antelope, standing next to her, even Sty's eyes were fixed on her while she stood next to the bed, totally paralyzed by the feeling of incoming cold.

Ileeree gulped down her tears. „Nekoi, what is it?“ she asked with a feeble voice.

„It's...“ Nekoi stopped talking and listened to the sounds only she could hear: The first wave she heard was breaking and its sounds subsided but beyond it arose an ever deeper sound of an even larger wave.

„It's coming back,“ she gasped and without hesitation she spun around and rushed towards the door.

„NEKOI!“ Fadr rung the bell with all the power of his arm, then he threw it on the ground and dashed towards the edge of the circle.

With all of her muscles twitching, the lynx bucked and rolled around on the ground. Her small body spasmed and with an awful retching noise she spew water, regurgitating it from her deepest bottoms.

Fadr grabbed a piece of coal from one of his pockets and focused on it. He clenched his teeth in sudden strain. He could feel droplets of sweat upon his forehead.

And then with one sudden movement the lynx threw herself around with a powerful movement, her small body skidding half-way out of the circle, pushing over two of the cups and scattering the coal all around. The oil was spilled on the ground and instantly caught fire, setting the coal afire as well and the noise of evaporating water was all around.

„No!“ Fadr exclaimed, breaking his focus. In a sudden surge of panic he looked around, trying to find something he could focus on, now that the circle had been torn apart.

One of the lynx girl's arms suddenly hit the ground hard and even though she spasmed, spewing more water every time her muscles flexed and pushed her off the ground.

Fadr fell to his knees and grabbed the rope on the floor. Holding it in both paws he pushed it hard against his forehead and tried to focus, tried to ignore the noises of the rising lynx and the water that was about to soak his clothes. A moment later the rope started to tremble and jerk around as the mage tried to gain control of it.

The lynx was spasming again, her entire body was suddenly shaken by the power that built inside of her. She tried to keep her mouth shut and the power of the regurgitating water hit her head with such a power, that her arms slipped off the ground and she fell down on the floor again.

The rope shot around, stretched and then darted through the room, starting to circle the mage who pressed his teeth and his eyelids together.

With both of her hands the girl tried to keep her mouth closed. Her eyes bulged and water ran out of her nose. Another spasm rocked her entire body. The silver pendant around her neck caught the light and flashed up brightly.

With a shout the mage shook off the moisture that had soaked the fiber of the rope and then he threw himself around and the rope which he held in both hands, shot through the room again and hit the lynx girl, instantly starting to wrap itself around her, thus pulling her off the ground.

The lynx girl lost the hold on her own mouth.

The mage saw her spasming another time.

Instantly the rope lost its hold on her as it was suddenly thrown around by the power of a jet of water that shot from the girl's mouth, hurling the small body across the room, until it slammed into the opposite wall.

Like a wave the water slopped across the room, washing over the remaining cups of burning oil and spilling even more of that. The water hissed as it evaporated.

The mage struggled to keep standing, throwing his arms around and then he could see how a shape started to emerge from the water, an undefined pillar of flowing water that collapsed and re-emerged again and again.

„BURN!“ Fadr screamed and his hand cramped around another piece of coal in his pocket. Instantly the coal which had been spread across the room by the

water, exploded into small pockets of fire. Steam arose at every corner of the room and the sizzling noises took over.

The pillar of water struggled to keep its shape. But then it emerged slowly from a spot where the water was not yet touched by burning coal or oil, slowly starting to assume a regular shape.

It was suddenly torn apart by the lynx girl who jumped and shot through it, emerging on the other side, completely soaked, claws and teeth exposed, a bullet of wet fur.

The mage stared at the lynx and before he could do anything, the lynx had spun around again and pounced the emerging pillar of water again, getting no hold on it at all, yet still fighting it with teeth, claws, fists and feet. Her hands slammed into the water with full force, claws tearing every little wave of it apart, stirring it up as her fist slammed hard against the ground underneath. A high-pitched whine escaped through her gritted teeth as she fought her intangible opponent.

Water splashed all around, yet kept running through her paws and Jiddy screamed in frustration.

Burning oil and water shot all around, smoke and steam filled the air, pieces of burning coal darted around.

Fadr protected his face with his hands. „NEKOI!“ he screamed.

The door was thrown open, Bedai, Itha and Nekoi rushed into the room, just to see how the water suddenly gathered around a crack in the floor and with a high-pitched noise it shot through the tiny crack, leaving the room empty.

Uncountable lights from flickering flames of burning oil and coal illuminated the room in an alien light.

„What’s underneath us?“ Bedai screamed.

„The engine’s room!“ Itha replied and the two men ran off.

It was nothing but a drone in the mage’s ears who stood among the debris of what had once been boxes and crates. Little, bent metal cups lay on the floor and their brass surface caught the light, but the marten and the antelope just stared at the lynx girl who slammed her fists against the ground again and again, mindlessly hammering against the hard wood as if she did not understand that the water was long gone.

For a moment the two furs watched her as she hissed and growled aimlessly, her fists banging away at the wood.

Slowly Nekoi stepped closer to her, the antelope’s gown rustled slightly, a strange sound in this room which had been torn apart by torrential waters a moment before. She put her hand on the lynx’ head and for a short moment the girl seemed to realize that someone else was in the room as well as she stared into the face above her with widely opened eyes.

„Embrace the sleep the Goddesses are offering you,“ Nekoi said softly. „Like you would welcome the embrace of a lover.“

Her eyelids quivered and then they closed slowly. For a moment the girl tried to fight it off, she supported herself as she tried to keep sitting where she was, her paw moved over the ground as if she tried to grab something, then she slumped



down. Her small body quivered one last time, then it was taken over by the slow regular rhythm of her breathing.

Through the wooden floor another scream reached their ears as the large bear gave vent to his frustration.

Nekoi slowly raised her head and looked at Fadr.

The weasel returned her look and raised one paw, scratching his chin. „Another brilliant plan gone to waste,“ he said and lowered his eyes, looking at the arm he had raised, noticing for the first time that his gown was not only soaked by water, but also torn to tatters.

The sun disappeared rather quickly as thick, heavy clouds rose along the horizon and quickly blocked the rays of light. One of them shone brightly on a line of mountains the airship was flying to. For a few elusive moments, the sun illuminated the edges of deep valleys and canyons, as well as snow-covered slopes and the occasional bare rock which peaked out of the snow and ice, which glistened brightly in these rays, before they weakened and vanished entirely, disappearing as the sun disappeared behind the clouds. Slowly a cold, gray darkness took over which seemed to be driven on by cold winds from the west. The wind tore and pulled on the airship, pushing it slightly off-course, while it howled in the rigging.

By the time the night had fully arrived, there was nothing but clouds in the sky anymore.

After Nekoi and Fadr had bound the lynx in the storage room, Nekoi went to her quarters, feeling the urgent need to purify herself from the events of the day. The pictures of the ship's badly injured captain, the bound lynx and the presence of the spirit had made her much more uneasy than she had wanted to admit herself. The impressions mixed with the details of her failed scrying on the lynx and when she remembered it she could still feel the intense cold of the vision. While she walked through the corridor she wondered if everything that surrounded the spirit had to deal with cold and ice. The icy head of the spirit's physical form had exuded the same kind of chilling effect, something that seemed to be totally unaffected by clothes or fur, going straight under the skin.

Nekoi shivered when she opened the door to her room which was still very much of a mess. Having watched over the lynx the past two days and nights had not allowed her to get anything in order again, even though she had quickly cleared the floor and the bed somehow. Thus when she stepped inside she did not stumble over torn soaking wet clothes or broken candlesticks anymore. Yet she could feel splinters and tiny shards against the soles of her feet which were still there.

After having lit a small oil lamp, she exhaled from the deepest bottom of her chest, trying to free herself from these sensations. No matter the poor state of the room she felt safe and comfortable now and she wanted to share the moment with the Goddesses, as the moons had risen in the sky even though they were not visible at all, behind the thick cover of clouds that she could see through the

portholes. Yet the priestess could feel their presence and quickly she disposed of the gown she wore in order to feel the invisible light upon her skin and fur. She also pulled of the bandages which had covered her shoulder and parts of her face. She could still feel the contusions she had received during the fight in the mess, but the bandages seemed to retain the same kind of dirtiness which she wanted to get rid of.

Slowly she raised her arms and spread them apart, feeling a nice sparkle wandering from her feet through her legs and into her abdomen, belly and chest. Trembling lightly she threw her head around, lowering her head to her chest, her breath blowing over her bare breasts for a moment before she raised her muzzle again, opening her mouth at the same time and starting to chant light, fragile, improvised notes which hardly joined together to form a tune. She started to bob up and down on her toes, introducing a rhythm to her movement so that the tiny metal bells which hang down from her antlers chimed in the same rhythm. Little by little it took over the entirety of her body.

The light from the oil lamp flickered and cast an unstable shadow of her across the room which flickered over her messed-up bunk bed which had no mattress, nor blanket anymore as they had been too wet to use anymore. There was the small box with her herbs on the floor, now almost entirely empty as she had used most of them up by now, attempting to ease Sty's state. Her shadow passed over it as she started to move across the room in an improvised dance, bopping her head as she sang and whispered short prayers.

When she finally stopped again, she could feel the warmth of her own blood beneath her skin and she picked up a small broken, clay bowl and the oil lamp from the table (which was heavily damaged by the blows of a sword), sat down cross-legged on the floor and poured some of the burning oil into the bowl. With a small blade that she had been hidden in the girdle around her hips, she quickly cut off some of her hair and threw it into the burning oil in the bowl where it caught fire instantly and started to crackle lightly as it was twisted and distorted by the flames.

The priestess closed her eyes and started to meditate, feeling the comforting presence of the moons in the sky, even though she could not see them at all.

She was unable to tell how much time had passed when she opened her eyes again, but the very moment she did so, she could feel the emptiness in her stomach and her hunger made her rise from the floor.

Quickly she picked up the gown again and pulled it over her shoulders, not caring about any bandages anymore.

She opened the door and stepped into the corridor. The moment she stood there, she felt cold again or maybe it was nothing but the draft of air which moved from the doors to the main deck towards the lower parts of the ship where the engines' room was located.

Nekoi headed for the mess, her gown dragging on the wooden floor of the airship as she went through the narrow corridors and up the tiny staircases of the poop.

She could hear voices the moment she stepped onto the level of the mess and they got louder as she approached the room, just to die down the moment she stepped inside.

The room seemed to be even darker than usual, maybe it was due to the assembled men and women who looked up the moment the antelope joined them: Lokos (who looked very tired), Meloy, Berry, Silent Cry (the rabbit looked even worse than the viscacha), Recha and Itha. They stood and sat around the small table which was the center of the re-established room. There was still lots of damage to be seen though: The oven was mostly broken, despite Berry's attempts to restore it. Nobody had worried about getting all the shelves and cupboards back in place, but most obvious were the large scratches on the walls where powerful jets of water had frazzled the wood, leaving long marks like scars. In the dim light of the lamps which attempted to drive out the shadows and the darkness everything seemed to be even more battered.

The room was so silent that it seemed to the antelope as if her cautious steps were as loud as thunder. Very, very slowly she walked inside, feeling the eyes of the crewmen resting on her.

„Listen, we gotta know,“ Lokos said finally, after a long pause. „We wanna know what's going on. Not dat we could change anyding, but... still...“ The viscacha raised his head. He had been chewing on a straw all of the time, but had taken it out for the moment. With his dark eyes he looked at the priestess. There were dark rings around his eyes and to Nekoi he looked even more tired than during the time he and his men had to fix the broken engine a few days ago. It felt like it had been a very long time ago.

Very slowly the priestess approached one of the damaged cupboards and took a small dry bun which lay among the food the crewmen had scattered there. „It is hard to say,... I think I know as much as you do... The spirit is gone for the moment. We were not able to stop it and it has left the lynx girl and the ship. That's what I can say.“ She was so hungry that she bit into the dry bun without hesitation.

„Good! Let's do what we should already have done: Throw the lynx overboard!“ Everyone turned around and looked at Silent Cry. The rabbit spoke so rarely that none of them had recognized his juvenile voice. His lower jaw quivered as he spoke as if he was suffering from extreme cold. His hair was in total disorder, hardly kept in check by the headband he wore. His clothes were a similar mess.

Once again the group of furs fell silent.

„I...“ Nekoi gulped down the dry bread. She had a hard time to speak fluidly. „I... totally understand how you feel. I know... I know that after all that has happened, it is hard to accept this. But the lynx is... Well, the spirit could have possessed anyone of us. She was just unfortunate enough to be there when the spirit came along.“

„Why didn't we kill her when the spirit possessed her?“ the rabbit asked harshly.

Nekoi chewed on the dry bread and slowly shook her head. „Goddesses, I know that this is hard to understand for you, but...” She did not look at them, instead she made gestures with her hands, as if she could catch the explanations with her fingers. „We know that the spirit possessed the lynx. That is what we do know, but... but what we don't understand is... Look, I and everybody else would have expected the spirit to attack us even more brutally the moment it took control of the lynx. But it didn't. We don't know why, but it didn't. So we did not want to risk waking it. If we had killed the lynx, the spirit would have left the dead body and would have been free again. We thought we could fight it the moment it came back to life, but instead of setting up a fight, it just disappeared.“ Nekoi had raised her head and looked at the rabbit.

For a moment Silent Cry wanted to reply something, but then he pressed his lips together and lowered his head, returning to the shadows of the wall he had leaned on before.

„None of us has dealt with a possession yet. I have read... I have tried to learn everything I could about it, but this was... different. It was different from anything I have heard of.“

„If a spirit gains control of a furr, it gains the powers of the men and the elements,“ Meloy interjected. He raised his head when he perceived that everybody was looking at him. „That's what they say, don't they?“

„Yes, yes,“ Nekoi agreed. „Usually the spirit takes total control of the vessel, dominates it entirely, so that the spirit can do what it has not been able to do before⁵. But here... with the lynx... I just don't know. The lynx bucked and spasmed occasionally, but... She did try to attack us physically, but that's nothing we could not deal with. There was no sign that the spirit was in control. There was something happening there... There is darkness and eternal cold...“ She fell silent, holding her paw at her frown.

„This does not make any sense,“ Itha stated. The wolverine pressed his lips together and glared at the antelope.

„No, it doesn't,“ Nekoi agreed. „Yet, it is what happened down there.“

„Did you scry?“ Itha asked.

„Yes! Yes, I did. That is why I can be totally sure that the spirit was still in there somewhere. Inside the lynx. That's what I am certain of.“

Itha nodded slowly.

„And why did we not throw it overboard?“ Recha asked. „Lynx and spirit.“

„The spirit would have gained its freedom and we would have lost the small advantage that we had, knowing where it was for the time. Now it is gone again and we have no clue anymore.“

„So everything back to what we had before?“ Berry asked.

Recha shook her head. „No, we have entered its headwater region. We are getting closer to its source. It could attack us anytime though...“

„We are still hundreds of legds above da ground,“ Lokos said and showed a stubborn grin on his lips. „Dat's always been da reason for dis ship.“

„Where's the lynx?“ Itha asked.

„Still down in the storage room,“ Nekoi answered. „Bound and unconscious. She is not a threat to anyone anymore.“

For a moment there was silence in the room, when Itha suddenly slammed his fist on the table, the loud bang making most of the furs in the room start in surprise. Itha quickly raised his hand to his face again and rubbed his furry muzzle.

„Cafy still sleeping?“ Nekoi asked.

Itha nodded. „Bedäi’s taken over his guard duties.“

There was silence again for a short moment.

Nekoi was still feeling hungry and looked at the food which stood on the table, but she did not feel confident enough to approach it in this moment. She kept on gnawing on the piece of dry bread in her paw.

„So what now?“ Lokos asked and looked at Recha. „What does Illeeree say?“

The young vixen had kept her head lowered and when she raised it Nekoi could see that her eyes were blood-shot. She gulped. „She is by Sty’s side... She rarely leaves the room and she... I can’t really... say. „ The last few words died away on her lips.

The name seemed to drive out any other sound. For a short instant even the engines’ sound seemed to have died down and everything was quiet except for the sound of wind rushing past the hull of the ship and their own respective heartbeats. The flames of the lamps in the room flickered.

„You tended to him the last nights, didn’t you? How is he doing?“ Lokos looked at Nekoi.

Nekoi wet her lips and closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her eyelids, she said as calmly as she could: „I pray to the Goddesses any moment I can and I beg them to grant me the power to help Sty, but I fear that I am not strong enough.“ She could hear a suppressed sob and she did not have to see anything in order to know that it had been Recha. Slowly she opened her eyes again and the dim light inside the room triggered a strange ache inside her head. She looked around once again: Lokos’ face had turned to stone; Berry looked to the ground; Silent Cry was shaking, but did not make a sound; Itha’s knuckles cracked as he clenched his fists; Recha fought to retain her composure.

„I am sorry that I do not have any better news,“ Nekoi said. „His life is in the Goddesses’ paws.“

There was the low sound of whimpering and everybody looked at Recha, who could not hold back her tears, no matter how hard she tried. „How could this happen?“ she mumbled, trying to control her tears. „How could it go so far?“

„I am sorry, Recha,,“ Nekoi replied. „The Goddesses know how it came to this. Maybe...“ She stretched herself. „Shall we pray?“ she asked. „For Sty?“

The vixen nodded instantly, gulped down her tears and took her hand.

The other furs looked around and saw each other getting closer. One after one, they approached each other, took the paws of the one next to themselves, until they stood in a circle, very close to each other, holding each others’ hands.

It was dark inside the circle, very little light illuminating their faces, except the gleam in their eyes they could see from each other.

Nekoi with her antlers overshadowed them, in this circle the light chime of her bells was louder than ever before. She inhaled deeply and began to speak: „Goddesses, you are the gate, you are the door, you are the key. You who watch over us in the darkness of this night, let the power of understanding touch our minds, let the strength to overcome touch us, let the power of life heal the wounded among us. You, daughters of the vast ocean, rulers of night, guardians of all that lives, as long as we are awake and even in the times we rest, in our dreams, in the light of day, show us the path as we know that you are the gate, the door, the key.“ She felt silent for a moment and then her voice rose, first very lightly, a single note coming forth from her lips and slowly it changed into a simple melody without any words, just her voice rising and falling harmoniously, not one single note lost in the circle of furs holding hands.

The rabbit passed by the main deck when he returned from the mess.

He wanted to feel the wind in his fur for a moment, no matter how short as it never failed to refresh him, reminding him that his duties at the steering wheel were all about flying, something that he tended to forget when he was confined to the bridge for a long time. Therefore he went to the main deck whenever he left the bridge or whenever he returned to it, craving the cool air like a thirsty man wishing for a gulp of cold water.

The wind tugged at his long rabbit ears while he stood by the railing and spread his arms. The wind came from the north-west and in his mind he was already wondering about the correction angle he would need to stay on course.

A faint noise made him start and he looked around, seeing a huge shape standing at the opposite end of the railing. He recognized the shape of the bear who had pulled out a blade and was slowly tapping it against the wooden banister.

Silent Cry screwed up his eyes as he studied the huge man for an instant. His lips started to form a thin line and he lowered his arms which had still stretched out all of the time. The rabbit turned around on the spot and walked towards the door to the bridge which led him past the ursine man who he did not look at.

„Cry, if Abama’s taking a break, will you tell her to join me?“

The rabbit did not stop walking when the bear spoke to him, he just nodded once. He felt how the bear kept looking after him when he entered the bridge.

Abama stood at the steering wheel and turned around. Their eyes met shortly, before Abama turned around again, looking out of the main window, while Silent Cry climbed down from the balustrade and walked towards the woman.

Without a word he embraced her from behind and nibbled at her short ear.

The prairie dog laughed lightly. „Stop it,“ she said softly.

„Bedaï on the main deck,“ he said.

Abama turned her head around. „He wants to see me?“

Silent Cry nodded once.

„Okay...“ Abama inhaled. „Are you sure you want to take the helm again? You are still looking awfully tired.“

Silent Cry shortly pulled a face and then shrugged as he stepped up to her side and took the wheel with his hands.

Abama let go of it. She moved her head towards the door to the ready room. „They haven't budged in there. I haven't heard of him either which might be a good sign. I hope he is sleeping. Ileeree needs it too..." She paused. „I will be back shortly," she said, leaned over and gave him a kiss on his furry cheek.

The rabbit's expression did not change at all, but the prairie dog did not need a sign.

For a short moment her hand rested upon his waist while she turned around and it slipped off as she walked towards the door to the main deck.

When she stepped outside the wind blew powerfully around her. She had felt the rudders pulling at the steering wheel when she had held it in her paws moments ago, now she felt the same force pulling at her clothes.

She made out Bedai who stood by the railing. The ursine man rose to full size when he saw her, but the prairie dog turned away from him and made a few steps towards the thermometer, the barometer and the other instruments for weather observation which were fixed to the wall of the fo'c's'le.

She needed a moment before she had been able to decipher the values of the hands in the darkness, but when she did she finally turned around and walked towards the bear again.

„How is it?" the bear asked as the woman stepped closer.

Abama moved her head. „Lots of wind, but little chance for rain. So I think we are on the safe side for now." She could see the bear pulling a face in the darkness.

„How is the captain?"

Abama moved her head once more. „Hard to say. Ileeree is hardly ever leaving the ready room in order to tell us. As far as I can tell he is..." She paused shortly. „...not doing very well. His injuries are bad. There was little Ileeree and Neko could do for him. Despite the saturation... He is not bleeding that much anymore. That's the good news, I guess."

Bedai nodded shortly.

„So we are pursuing our mission despite the captain's state."

„Yes." The woman nodded. She looked towards the horizon, noticing that her eyes had gotten used to the darkness in order to allow her to distinguish the shapes of the mountains in the distance from the clouds in the sky. „That's what I have been told by Ileeree." She paused shortly, then she looked at the man who was almost twice her size. „Don't you agree?"

Bedai smacked with his lips. „I do agree. When we accepted the mission from the council we pledged ourselves to the killing of the river's spirit. We are soldiers, we don't back down when our commanding officer is injured."

Abama nodded. „Yes," she agreed. „We have a duty. Killing a misguided river spirit..." She paused again and looked towards the dark horizon again. Her curly hair fluttered around her face and she felt very tired for a moment as she realized the strain she had been under since the attack of the spirit. „...in its place of power, the source of the river that we are still searching for because there isn't

even a damn map of the area.“ The prairie dog turned her head towards the ursine male. „That was the plan, wasn't it?“

„Yes, it was!“ Bedaï agreed. „But sometimes plans have got to change. Especially if you can't choose the site of the battle.“

Abama inhaled and nodded. „Of course, sometimes they have to. But I really don't know, I don't see many options.“

For a moment the bear was silent, he looked at the mountains at the distance. „I saw something white up there... It's glaciers, right?“

Abama nodded, looking at the horizon as well, even though there was nothing to be seen there in the darkness of this moment.

„Then the spirit is going to be even more powerful than we expected.“

„It is a long, long river. What did you expect?“

The bear shook his head. „I wasn't wondering,“ he said. „I know this. I know what we are up to. Even without Sty we can still beat it. We have all the means we need in order to fight it. Even at its source.“

„We still have to get there,“ Abama added.

Bedaï shrugged. „The ship's still flying.“

The two of them were silent for a moment and listened to the fading sounds of a gust of wind which had blown over the main deck a moment ago. The clanking of the rigging started to subside again, the sounds of the spinning gearwheels took over again.

„We have to go down if there is going to be rain,“ Abama mentioned.

Bedaï turned towards her and his eyes had gotten smaller as he glared at her now. „We cannot go down. Up here is the only safe place in the spirit's headwater region.“

„I won't risk being attacked up here. We were lucky the spirit did not attack the balloon the first time, but if it did we would crash and die for sure before we could have a fight with it.“

„We can't go down,“ Bedaï repeated. „Don't you understand?“ His hand cramped around the handle of one of his blades.

„Let's hope it's not going to rain,“ Abama replied.

The bear inhaled deeply and pressed his large hand against his muzzle. Beneath it he pressed his lips tightly together.

For a moment they were both silent, still looking at the distant horizon where nothing could be seen in this moment, yet both of them had noticed the ice and the snow during daytime, they knew it was there. A cold gust of wind blew over the deck again and past the gearwheels, whistling as it slipped through the brass mechanics. The rigging banged against itself and the thick ropes which connected the hull and the balloon above it creaked.

„I have to get back on the bridge,“ Abama said.

The bear just nodded.

The prairie dog woman turned around and a moment later she disappeared behind the door to the bridge.

Bedaï turned towards it and glared at the door for a moment, before he reached to his side and pulled his sword from its sheath. The sound of the

unsheathing seemed to echo about on the empty wooden deck. Bedai lowered the weapon to the railing, so that the blade rested upon it while he looked towards the dark shades of the mountains in the distant night with the white-covered tops.

The sun struggled to find a gap between the clouds which parted occasionally, gave way to some dim reddish light to shine through, illuminating a line of mountains that had gotten closer during the night.

In these early rays of light the details of the rocks and the ice which covered the mountain tops were very visible, yet they disappeared when another thick cloud blocked out the sun again and the mountains were reduced to nothing but a dark shade again which was about to occupy a bigger and bigger place on the horizon as the airship got closer and closer, still fighting strong winds which blew the cold dew off the wooden floor of the main deck where the huge bear stood, clothed in heavy, thick leather and woolen clothes which made him look even more massive than he was.

When the sun rose above the horizon it illuminated him, cast little spotlights on his short hair and his thick fur, single strands which were not covered fluttering in the wind while the man raised his muzzle. His small eyes were framed by strong rings. He glared ahead, towards the mountains and his eyelids twitched while he stood immobile above the deck of the ship.

After some time the door to the poop opened and Itha stepped onto the main deck, walking up to the bear.

„Morning! Anything happened during the night?“ he asked. The wolverine was dressed in his usual light leather clothes, but he had his weapons with him, even carrying his quiver on his back, as well as his bow in his hand. His fingers enforced their hold around carefully carved red and brown wood when he saw the stance of the bear and did not hear him speak for a while.

For a moment the wolverine did not speak either, also looking ahead, towards the peaks which formed a line in front of them.

„Cafy, still sleeping?“ Bedai asked emotionlessly.

Itha scratched his muzzle. „Yeah! You said that I shouldn't wake him, so I didn't. Do you want me to?“

„No! You guard the deck now, I have to see Recha.“

„Recha is...“ Itha started, but Bedai had already turned around and walked to the door where the wolverine had emerged from moments ago. The wolverine looked after him for a moment.

The bear walked through the corridors which were too small for his size. „RECHA!“ the bear yelled at the top of his lungs. „RECHA!“

He pulled the door to her room open while the young vixen was still about to climb out of her hammock. She almost fell to the floor due to her haste. Her hand reached out to grab some shirt or something.

„Get up!“ the bear shouted at her. „Get up!“

Recha jumped to her feet and faced the bear, not paying attention to cover her breasts anymore as she wore nothing but a thin vest. The moment she looked into the face of the larger ursine male she could that his features were totally hard.

He glared at her and for a moment she did not dare to move at all, just trying to withstand this glare as well as she could. Yet she could feel her tail hiding between her legs.

His lower eyelids twitched and she could smell the scents of anger which his body seemed to give off while he just stood in front of her.

„Do you know where this ship will be going?“

Recha stared at him in surprise, totally confused as she had expected something entirely different. As she tried to make sense of the mess in her head, she did not answer, just helplessly opened and closed her mouth.

„Down! This ship will go down! And do you know why...?“

„What’s wrong?“

The bear was interrupted by these words and he turned his head to have a look at the door.

Fadr stood in the doorway and looked at the bear and the vixen and was about to push the cap he wore back to its place on top of his head. The mage was still about to adjust his clothes which he seemed to have put on in a hurry.

The bear did not say a word to him, instead he turned around to face Recha again. „Do you know why?“ he growled at her, his voice rattling in his huge chest.

„I... I...“ Recha stammered.

„Because this piece of a prairie dog up there on the bridge wants to kill us all, that’s why!“

Recha’s eyes moved across the bear’s face while blinking agitatedly. „What... what do you want me to do?“

The bear smirked grimly for a short moment, before he moved again, baring his sharp teeth as he spoke: „I tell you what I want you to do.“ He raised his index and pushed it against her chest, pressing it down between her chestfur, slightly pushing her with every word: „What I want you to do is get up there and talk some sense into that aunt of yours. Injured husband or not, she’s got to assume command.“

„But, but... Why?“

The bear inhaled deeply and the hot air blew out of his nostrils that she could feel due to his closeness. „Because we are will be going down, do you understand? We are getting closer to the river and the spirit by the moment and I want to prevent that.“

„Down? Why are we going down?“

Once again the bear showed his mock smile. „Exactly! Now would you be so kind...“

„Why are we going down?“ Fadr asked.

Bedai exhaled and turned towards the mage again.

The weasel had gotten closer and was now standing almost right next to the larger man. His small eyes were screwed up and he did not move at all when the bear faced him.

„Because the prairie dog fears that there might be more rain and the spirit might return with the rain. As we all know that it came on board with the rain. So in order to prevent a crash next time, we will go down.“ The ursine man’s eyes were mere slits in his face while he stared at the weasel, having gotten almost as close as he had gotten to the vixen.

Fadr remained motionless for a moment, then he sniffed and looked towards Recha.

The two of them exchanged a look and the bear noticed. He looked at Recha, then he looked at Fadr again.

„Listen, I think, Abama has got...“

„I don’t care about the prairie dog!“ the bear said firmly and looked at Recha again. „She is wrong! And she is endangering the entire ship and therefore your aunt has got to reverse her decision.“

„I think this is not a good time for Ileeree to...“

„Rubbish!“ The bear exclaimed and rose almost to full size as far as the low ceiling allowed him to. „This ship needs a commander now! We need to prepare for battle and if she can’t do that, she should assign someone.“

Recha hesitated for a short moment while she looked at him. For a very short instant her eyes moved towards Fadr, but before they had even finished this movement, she looked at Bedaï again. „If I am not mistaken she has, and that is Abama!“ she said. „Is it that she did not appoint you?“

„WHAT?“ the bear screamed at her. „May the Sun damn you, girl!“ he yelled right into her face. „I should never had allowed them to place you aboard this ship, you little nitwit! I did not ask you, this was an order!“

„My aunt is...“

„I don’t damn care! Now move your ass!“

„Bedaï, Bedaï, you...“ Fadr raised his hand and tried to lay it down on the bear’s arm, but the moment he touched him, the bear retracted the arm, spun around and faced the mage.

„What is it you want here anyway? You wanted to take care of your business, now let me take care of mine.“ The pupils in the bear’s eyes glistened.

Fadr inhaled. „Listen, let me talk to her, okay?“ Quickly he looked towards Recha and nodded at her, before turning to Bedaï again. „I will take care of this.“

Bedaï stared at the weasel for a moment, then he looked at Recha too, studied her disparagingly and then glared at Fadr again. „Alright,“ he said calmly. „Do it! I’ll be in my quarters!“ He turned towards the door. „Don’t muck this up, mage! Not this time...“ he yelled while he walked out the door.

Recha and Fadr exhaled a little bit, but started the moment the door was banged shut with such brute force that the echo seemed to shoot through the entire room like a shock wave.

She turned towards Fadr. „What was this about?“ she exclaimed, instinctively rubbing her chest where her heart beat hard and fast beneath fur and skin.

„I... I...“ Fadr tried to focus. He put his hand on his forehead. „Listen... Listen... He is right about going down, it is dangerous. We are in the spirit's headwaters. I am sure that it can bridge the gap between the ground much more easily than getting aboard through the rain.“

She studied him for a moment and exhaled, before she turned around in order to pick up her clothes which lay on the ground. „Okay, I will, but I don't promise anything...“

„Thank you!“ Fadr said. „Thank you!“

When Recha stepped onto the bridge, she saw Abama and Silent Cry.

Abama was on the steering wheel while Silent Cry sat on a chair and seemed to be asleep. Every sound on the bridge seemed to be muffled and Recha had the feeling that it took a long time for her to walk down towards the consoles and the steering wheel while Abama turned around and looked at her, having heard the opening of the door to the main bridge.

Her movement was equally slow and her eyes were closed for an instant while she raised her head and opened them in order to look at the vixen.

Recha opened her lips but did not say a word. She looked towards Silent Cry who was totally motionless. He had wrapped his bandana around his eyes, had stretched out his legs and folded his hands on top of his muscled belly.

Recha turned her head towards Abama again and made the last few steps into her direction. „Is Illeeree...?“ she asked quietly and made a gesture towards the closed door of the ready room, not finishing her sentence.

Abama nodded. „Hasn't come out in a while.“

Recha nodded. „Do you know how he...?“ she asked, not finishing this sentence either.

The prairie dog shook her head.

The vixen hesitated for a moment, eyeing the door and rubbing the side of her pants with her paws.

The other woman observed her without saying a word.

Lowering her head Recha turned her eyes towards Silent Cry and smiled a little bit. „How long as he been asleep like this?“

Abama exhaled. „Not long enough.“

Recha looked at her and noticed the rings under her eyes.

„I am grateful that he has finally managed to catch some,“ Abama mentioned. She blinked and quickly rubbed her eyes with one paw.

Recha nodded. She was silent for a moment and looked ahead out of the main window: The landscape passed by slowly. She could see many dark conifers on the ground beneath them, there were large boulders scattered between them. The landscape of foothills.

The vixen turned towards the door again and looked at it for a moment. Once more she noticed how silent everything seemed to be on the bridge. Even the sound of the engines seemed to be less noticeable, even though it was still there.

Inhaling deeply she walked to the door finally.

Abama looked after her for a moment, before she turned towards the window again, casting an eye over the instruments by her side and then turning the steering wheel a little bit.

Recha knocked as cautiously as she could.

She waited a long time before she dared to knock again. She had laid her ears back and her tail wagged erratically.

Nothing happened and she wet her lips.

Just when she was about to knock a third time, the door opened a little bit and lleeree's head showed up.

„lleeree...“ Recha said. „How is he doing?“

The other vixen did not say a word, she just moved her head a little bit and opened the door some more.

Recha stepped inside.

Due to the herbs the air inside the dimly lit room was intensely saturated with many different smells. They tickled in the young vixen's nose while she blinked in order to get adjusted to the twilight.

Finally she could make out the pallet Sty lay upon. There was not much she could see of him, as he was covered by a blanket, nothing but his head showed, but even this was wrapped in bandages. Some of them were stained by blood.

Recha started when she felt lleeree touching her shoulder. „He is asleep,“ the vixen whispered. There was a strange smile upon her face which showed relief, but also exhaustion and the lack of sleep.

For a moment Recha just stared at her, totally unable to take her eyes off the bags under lleeree's bloodshot eyes, the wrinkles around her muzzle and the deep furrow between her eyebrows.

The older woman noticed her look and exchanged a look with her niece, smiling some more. „You don't know how long it took for him... He was in such pain...“

Recha gulped and nodded.

„If his condition stays like this, he will... he will...“ lleeree fell silent. „Get better.“ she blurted the words hastily and then covered her mouth with her paw and looked at Recha. She tried to smile again.

Recha forced herself to smile as well, but then she looked towards the fox under the cover again and blinked quickly as she could feel how her eyes started to burn.

„Listen,“ Recha whispered. „I have to talk to you. It's about the course...“

„Abama is taking care of that,“ lleeree replied.

„Yes, I know! It's just...“ Recha inhaled and strongly wiggled her tail. „Bedai told me...“

„Bedai!“ She spoke the name with such emphasis that the volume of her voice rose to a normal level for a moment.

„It's Fadr too,“ Recha added. „They are concerned.“ She fell silent and looked at lleeree for a moment.

The older vixen exhaled and looked at Sty. She blinked. „Let's go outside and talk with Abama. He is asleep after all...“

Recha nodded and exhaled, letting her shoulders drop a little bit.

Very quietly the two vixens went for the door and stepped onto the bridge again. Ileeree did not close the door entirely.

A moment later they stood next to Abama.

Ileeree rubbed her eyes, not used to the brightness outside the ready room anymore. „So what’s with Bedai?” she asked.

Recha looked at her and at Abama as well for a moment. „Well, he and Fadr are concerned that Abama announced that she will take the ship closer to the ground.”

The prairie dog woman screwed up her eyes. „Yes, the bear has already tried to bully me.”

Ileeree shortly looked at her, then she looked at Recha. „Abama is in charge of the bridge as long as... as I can’t...”

„Yes, yes, I know.” Recha nodded. She had blushed a little bit. „They are just concerned about... See, we might be attacked if we are too close to the ground.”

„I told Bedai and I tell you too: It’s suicide if we are high above the ground and we get attacked again. It was a wonder that the spirit did not pierce the balloon. I won’t risk a crash. I’d rather say, let’s fight it out on the ground, no matter if Bedai likes it or not.” Abama talked without raising her voice but she spoke with emphasis.

„Yes, but... See, they are convinced the appearance of the spirit has had nothing to do with the rain...”

Abama puffed. „I see, if it wasn’t the rain, what has it been then?” She looked at Recha for a moment.

The vixen pulled at her fingers and remained silent.

The prairie dog pursed her lips for an instant. „I will stick with my plan as long as I don’t know any better,” she declared harshly. She was silent for a moment, tapping on the steering wheel, then she looked at the young vixen. „Look, I don’t blame you, Recha, but Bedai just pushes you around. He should not...”

„It was the jar!”

Recha and Abama looked at Ileeree. They had not paid attention to her anymore, but now that they looked at her they saw her widely opened eyes and the expression on her face.

„Jar? What jar?” Abama asked.

„The jar in the mess,” Ileeree replied. „The jar with water from the river that Nekoi uses for her scrying.”

Recha and Abama just stared at the vixen.

„Water from the river? From this river?” Abama asked, pointing out of the main window.

„Yes! It was in a jar on the table when Nekoi and I were in the mess. The rain came later. First there was the jar on the table. It...” Ileeree stopped talking and raised her hand to her face. „Holy Mother!” she gasped.

„The jars were in the steel case, weren’t they?” Recha asked. „How did it get into the... mess?” She lowered her head and her eyes twitched for a moment.

Recha raised her hand to her face and covered one eye with it. Her tail wagged frantically.

„Nekoi! She is the only one who dealt with them....“ Abama said.

„No!“ Illeeree contradicted and shook her head. „She was there with me, she was as surprised by the attack as I was and she has got no key. There is only one key. Sty had it with him all the time...“ Illeeree looked up. She wet her lips and gulped. „Abama, you keep the course! Recha, come with me!“

Abama nodded and looked at her instruments.

Recha's face was blank, but she followed Illeeree back to the ready room.

They entered as quietly as they could. For a moment they stood in the twilight and waited for their eyes to adapt to it, but then Illeeree noticed that Sty had changed his position and before Recha had even noticed the older vixen was already by the pallet's side. Now she noticed the weak retch for the first time.

„Sty, what's wrong, honey?“

Sty lay in a twisted position on his side, facing the wall with his head. He had almost torn off the bandages on his head when he had turned over. A part of it lay on the ground, a long white trail from the base of the pattle to the head of the man.

The blanket had dropped to the ground as well and thus his entire body had been exposed and for the first time, Recha saw the deep cuts on his stomach, blood having drenched the bandages so much that they had been torn apart when he had moved, thus she could see the flesh which was held together by crude threads which had been pierced through his fur and skin. Recha almost stumbled backwards, covering her mouth with her hand. She hardly noticed the splints on his arm and leg, the wounds on his legs and Illeeree's desperate words hardly reached her ears either. She just heard the pulse of her own blood in her ears, louder than anything else. She felt the flush in her head, feeling more light-headed than ever before and even though she had tried to keep standing she stumbled backwards now and supported herself against the wall.

„What's wrong? What's wrong?“ Illeeree pled with him, her voice choked with tears. „What's wrong, honey, tell me?“

Sty couldn't answer, he spasmed, his face drenched with sweat. He coughed up a dark ball of coagulated blood.

Illeeree turned around. „Get Nekoi!“ Her face's fur was tear-stained. „GET NEKOI!“ she screamed at Recha.

For a moment the young vixen was totally paralyzed but then she spun around and ran out of the door.

She struggled. It felt like a heavy shroud that enveloped her and at the same time she felt drained, powerless. Her entire body seemed to resist the awakening, but a nagging feeling of restlessness kept her going, fighting the dampening feeling of weakness that enveloped her. For a short moment she had reminiscence, something reminded her of this situation, but within a moment it had vanished and left nothing behind.

She tensed and felt her unwilling muscles bound and immobilized.

Instantly she opened her eyes, now in a sudden state of alarm that felt like a sparkle beneath her skin, her muscles twitched and tensed and the ropes around her arms and legs cut into her skin.

A foot suddenly showed up in front of her face and very slowly she raised her eyes.

The antelope looked down on her. The bells on her antlers chimed very lightly, her eyes glistened despite the dim light in the small room.

„Look, who’s there!“ she said.

Jiddy could hear the contempt in the priestess’ voice and most of all, she could smell the bitter scent of dry fur upon tightened skin. She tensed and in a sudden outburst of frustration she struggled against the ropes, but they were too tight. Moving hurt.

„Give up!“ the woman said. She kneeled down besides Jiddy and looked at the small, bound lynx girl: She was looking even worse than the first she had seen her. The entirety of her short fur seemed to be felted by now, her hair was a mess of knots and all over her body Nekoi could see the signs of her captivity. „I made sure that you are tightly bound, I don’t want to end up like Sty.“

Jiddy pressed her lips together and then she clenched her teeth and in a sudden outbreak of anger she kicked her feet. She hit the ground, her feet banging against the wood while she hissed and growled and then she threw her shoulders around and turned herself around despite the ropes. She kicked several times and pushed herself towards the wall until she was in a sitting position, facing Nekoi.

The antelope studied Jiddy for a moment. „You remember Sty don’t you? He was the fox who defeated you the first time... He is our captain and he was the man you and the spirit turned into a cripple.“ She paused. „You can be happy that he is still alive up to now. If he had died, you would not be alive anymore either.“ She moved closer again.

Jiddy glared at her with screwed up eyes.

Nekoi tilted her head and looked at the lynx. „You are too angry to speak?“ She raised her hand and slowly it approached the lynx and if it was Jiddy’s answer she snapped at the hand, baring her sharp predatory teeth.

Nekoi had quickly retracted her hand, anticipating the lynx’ movement. „Yeah, I thought so...“ She inhaled and stood up, turning her back to the lynx.

Jiddy glared at her backside as the priestess was nude except for a loincloth and jewelry.

„But I am sure that you understand me,“ Nekoi went on. „So, listen... The situation has changed. *Feral* or no *feral*, I am not going to risk anything for you anymore. So you better snap out of it.“ She turned around again and looked down on the lynx from above.

Jiddy blinked. There was something the priestess had said that worried her. She tried to recall the words, but they made no sense to her at all, yet she felt an overwhelming sense of urgency. Following her instincts she braced herself against the ropes again and then shook herself with all the power of her small body,

throwing her head around until she fell over and attired hard on the wooden ground again. The pain distracted her again and she calmed down for a moment, breathing hard. She raised her eyes when she saw a shadow closing in. She looked at Nekoi, suddenly being reminded of her presence.

The priestess kneeled in front of the lynx again. „Your presence distracted me for a while. But now I know that we must deal with the spirit first, before I can care about you.“

Jiddy's eyes shot about as she tried to make a sense of the woman's words, but being bound agitated her too much. The priestess being nude did not help either. She clenched her teeth until her jaw hurt.

„I still don't understand what happened. Why did the spirit go straight for you? Why did you attack Sty and were idle afterwards? Unlike the rest of the crew, I don't blame you for what happened.“ The antelope tilted her head and the bells chimed lightly once again. „But you lied to me when I was there to help you. I took risks with the crew and you are hiding something... I know where you are coming from now.“ She paused for a moment, as if she expected an answer from the agitated lynx girl, but then she went on as she knew that there would be none. „The spirit is just a matter of time. We are closing in on it and once we have scattered its essence, I will get clear answers from you.“ She glared at the girl. „I swear to the Goddesses, I will!“

Jiddy's lips twitched. For a moment she had had the feeling that she had understood some of the words, but within a short moment the feeling was gone again.

In this moment fast steps approached the door and it was pulled open without a warning.

Nekoi spun around.

„Lady Devo-ya!“ Recha stood in the door, totally breathless.

„What is it?“ The antelope jumped to her feet.

„My, my... Sty!“ Recha exclaimed. Her face was sweaty and she still tried to catch her breath as she had run so fast.

Instantly the priestess went for the crate her kimono lay upon. „Yes!“ she replied and she pulled the piece of cloth over her shoulders while heading for the door.

Jiddy tried to have a look towards the door. She could perceive the urgency in the voice of the vixen, she could even smell her sweat and that tinge of fear that had entered the room with her, but she did not understand a single spoken word. At the same time she realized that the antelope was leaving, even though there was still something amiss. In a sudden outbreak of frustration Jiddy slammed her head against the ground again.

Recha heard the bang and looked at the lynx for an instant while Nekoi walked past her into the corridor. „What's wrong with the lynx?“ the vixen asked while she locked the door again.

„I don't care!“ Nekoi replied and quickly headed down the corridor.

The mountainside the airship approached was still mostly a dark silhouette against the morning sky, which seemed to overshadow everything else as they got closer.

Nekoi and Recha paid no attention to it as they hurried towards the bridge.

As usual the sounds of the ship seemed to be less present on the bridge, where Silent Cry sat on a stool and Abama occupied the spot at the steering wheel.

The rabbit rose from his chair when he saw Recha and Nekoi arriving. Abama looked at them too, but she did not ask or say anything, she just observed how they went for the ready room, an expression of concern on her face. She turned her head towards Silent Cry and the two furs exchanged a look.

Meanwhile Nekoi and Recha entered the ready room.

„Nekoi!“ Illeeree exclaimed when she heard the opening of the door and waved her hand.

The antelope instantly stepped up to the pallet and saw down on the fox who lay there. An instinctive shiver ran through her body as she saw how Sty must have twisted and turned moments before as there seemed to be no bandage in place anymore, thus exposing the wounds underneath and when she inhaled in perplexity she could smell the typical scents of fresh, purulent blood.

Illeeree looked at the priestess with wide opened eyes while the antelope's eyes wandered upwards to meet the eyes of the injured man. Instantly she noticed how glassy they were and the sweat which had gathered on his forehead. „Sty?“ she addressed him. „Captain?“

The fox turned his head and tried to look at her, but then he rolled his eyes and moaned while his hands cramped into the sheets and pulled on them. A helpless growl escaped his throat.

„Nekoi is here, honey,“ Illeeree said and with a quivering hand she stroked his forehead. „She will help you. She will help you.“ The vixen looked at the antelope again and something like a smile showed on her face even though there were traces of tears on her cheeks and all over her face.

Nekoi's face was devoid of any emotion as she returned the vixen's look.

„You can help him, can't you?“ Illeeree asked, her voice faltered a little bit. „You can help him?“ There was something like a begging undertone to her words as she looked at the priestess with wide opened eyes.

Nekoi's lips quivered as she approached Sty some more. „Captain, can you tell me where it hurts?“

Once again Sty moved his head and once again the glassy eyes tried to focus on the priestess in her gown. His lips trembled as he tried to open his mouth, but there was nothing but a moan coming from his lips. He shivered and pressed his lips together, opened his mouth one more time in order to speak, but once again he was not in control of his body as he groaned. He pressed his eyelids together and tears showed underneath them as he pressed his lips together.

„It's the pain,“ Illeeree said. „We have got something to do about the pain.“ She looked at Nekoi.

All of them were distracted as Sty started to whimper, with all of his neck's power he pressed his head against the sheets which covered the pallet and quickly Illeeree took hold of it and tried to hold his head. Small reddish bubbles of blood formed on his lips and popped as his entire body cramped. Tears ran down his cheek.

Illeeree looked at Nekoi again. „You have got to do something.“ There was panic in her voice. „The pain is killing him.“

Nekoi gulped and opened her mouth. She hesitated and wet her lips. Her breathing faltered as she spoke. „It's not the pain.“

Illeeree looked at the antelope in bewilderment. „In the name of the Goddesses, do something,“ she exclaimed after a moment had passed and instantly afterwards, she sniffed strongly, trying to hold back the sob which was about to form in her throat.

Nekoi kneeled down by her and Sty's side.

„It's going to be alright,“ Illeeree said and turned towards Sty again. There were fresh tears running down her cheeks.

Nekoi leaned closer to the two of them, making sure that both of them could hear her, when she opened her mouth. „There is only one thing I am still able to do...,“ she said. „If Sty wants me to...“

Illeeree turned her head towards the antelope and stared at her again, her mouth partly opened. „What do you...?“ And then she let go of her husband and pushed the priestess backwards with all of her strength.

Nekoi fell to the ground.

„No! This is not true! You just want to... to...“ Illeeree's face was disfigured by rage, yet even this expression could not hide her tears. She turned towards Sty again and leaned towards him, raising her hand to his cheek and stroking it lightly. „Right? She is wrong, isn't she? It's not...“

Sty quivered, his shallow breathing was hastened and he closed his eyes and nodded.

„It's not...“ Illeeree's words died away. Then she fell silent. She started to quiver.

For a moment the entire room was perfectly silent.

„Nooo!“ Illeeree exclaimed. „It's not true, you can still get well, I know it. I know it! Right, honey, you can still... I know and so do you.“

Sty tried to open his mouth wide for a moment, then he pressed his lips together and suddenly he was shaken by another surge of pain that got a hold of his body. He struggled and whimpered while doing so, so that he could open his eyes again and look at his wife by his side. His lips quivered, but he forced them to mouth three little words...

„No!“ Illeeree exclaimed like a wounded animal. „No! I know you can get better. No! You just have... Nekoi has to...“ She spun around and tried to point at the priestess, but she stopped in the middle of the movement, pressed her hand against her forehead while her entire face cramped and suddenly new tears where running down her cheeks. Her jaw quivered and her entire body started to tremble.

She turned towards her husband and looked at him, seeing him as he threw his head around, retching.

He opened his mouth wide and guttural sounds escaped his throat. A moment later another glob of coagulated blood fell out of his mouth and he desperately gasped for breath.

„No, no, no!“ Illeeree whimpered. She wanted to embrace him, to hold him in her arms, but she did not know where to put her hands as there seemed to be nothing but bandages covering the wounds on his body. Finally she took hold of his face, her quivering hands brushing over the soft fur of his cheeks while she trembled from teeth to toe, more tears running down her face.

In this moment he spasmed again, bloody foam shot from his mouth.

„Noooo,“ Illeeree howled. „No, Holy Mother, no!“ She let go of his cheeks and tried to find his hands, her quivering paws wandering over his body until she held his paws, feeling their warmth and the gentleness of his furless pads as she held them to her chest, wanting him to feel the beating of her heart.

Yet Sty was thrown around by another spasm. He whined in pain, his teeth clenched, before the most intense passed away and his mouth opened as he gasped for breath. There were tears in his eyes as well, while he stared towards the ceiling. His jaw quivered and a shiver went through all of his body.

„You can't leave me, Sty!“ Illeeree exclaimed. „You can't leave me! I can't live without you! I can't, I can't, I really can't!“ Her words were muffled by her sobs.

The vulpine man tried to speak, his lips moved, his mouth opened and closed, but there was nothing coming from his lips and a moment later he threw his head around, clenching his teeth again. A gurgling sound escaped his throat and he shook his head, pressing his eyelids together, tears running down his cheeks.

Illeeree gasped for breath, her hand caressing his cheek. „Sty... Sty...“ she stammered. She started when she felt a paw on her shoulder and with panic in her eyes she looked at the antelope who she had forgotten about.

Nekoi's features were taut. „It is still time to...“, she whispered.

Illeeree shook her head, tears and snot running down her face. „No, no, no...“, she whimpered. „No, you can't... you can't...“ She started as another hand touched her other shoulder and she saw Recha standing by her side.

The young vixen's face was distorted as well, tears were running down her cheeks as well. „Aunt, we have to...“ she gasped and pressed her lips together in order to suppress a sob.

The older vixen stared at her niece for a moment, and then she was shaken by a powerful sob which rocked her entire body. „Nooo...“ Illeeree leaned forward and pressed her cheek against the cheek of her husband. „No, please, no! Please, no! Oh gods, you can't take him from me... I love you, I love you so much...“ She was shaken by the sobs which escaped her. She felt the warmth of his cheek again and pictures of the past shot into her mind and yet she could feel him spasming under the extreme pain that tore him apart. She could feel his pain in the deepest bottom of her chest and the mere notion rendered her powerless, hurt her. She did not want him to suffer, she did not want him to be in pain and she took his hand and held it with all the power that she had, pressing her face

against his muzzle, trying to be as close to him as she could. „I love you, I love you...“ she whispered. „I love you so much...“

And between the sobs, she opened her mouth again and attempted to speak. „Ne...koi..., you...“

She did not need to speak on as she could feel the hand of the priestess enforcing its hold on her shoulder for a short moment and then the antelope kneeled down by her side. „Sty, do you hear me? You don't have to speak the words out loud if you can't, you just have to mean it, do you understand? Try to speak after me...“

And the first words of the priestess were drowned out by Ileeree's wail as she pressed herself against her dying husband, rubbing her face against his, wanting to feel him as long as she could, feel the warmth she had wallowed in for such a long time, the mild fragrance of his body that was not tainted by the scents of herbs and drugs.

And she held on to his hand as long as she could.



The reddish shimmer of the morning was about to disappear, giving way to shades of gray of a cloudy sky, the backdrop of the dark mountains' silhouette which overshadowed everything else.

Abama raised her head from the maps and plans which lay in front of her. Clumsily she rose from her chair and approached the helm where Silent Cry stood.

„Are you tired?“ she asked.

The rabbit shook his head, but she could see the bags under his eyes, despite the sleep he had gotten earlier.

Both of them looked out of the main window and studied what lay ahead of them: The mountainside seemed to have grown during the night as they had gotten closer despite unfavorable winds. The peak in front of them seemed to be one of the largest ones, but it was hard to tell because all of the mountains were quite impressive. Their tops were covered under snow and ice which shimmered in the rays of sunlight which got through the cloud cover. The ice glistened as if it was afire, displaying the crystal clear blueness of a glacier.

Further down below the slope the snow and ice gave way to brownish rock which was marked and shaped by the presence of the glacier, forming steep slopes with ragged cliffs which overlooked the deep, round valleys which were all over the mountain, forming a rocky maze.

Even further down below began the tree-covered outlier which was cut apart by the bed of the river, a whitish line among the green which led them towards a crevice in between the rock, the steep opening of a canyon which the airship approached as it descended slowly, getting closer and closer to the ground.

„There is no reference,“ Abama stated. „Nothing in the maps at all. I can't even tell if we have got the right river. I just hope that Nekoi's last course is correct.“ She paused. „We will have to go there,“ she added and nodded towards the crevice in the mountainside.

Silent Cry looked at her for a moment, then he nodded and looked ahead again, blinking a little bit as the first sunlight broke itself in the glass of the main window and cast strange, multi-colored reflections all over the bridge.

The door banged open with such brute force that it seemed to shake all of the walls.

Instantly Abama and Silent Cry spun around on their spots and stared at the bear who stormed onto the bridge with all the physical presence of his ursine shape.

Instantly Abama walked towards him before he could get any further.

„Bedaï, what is it?“

„I want to see the captain or Illeeree *now!*“ And he walked towards the door to the ready room without paying any further attention to the prairie dog woman.

She stepped right into his way. „Stop, Bedaï!“

The large man stopped and looked down on her. „You don't tell me what to do. I am sick of having to listen to people who don't have a clue. This disaster ends here. Now!“ He held his index right under her nose.

„Well, you might want to listen to your commanding captain then,“ Abama said slowly.

The bear stared at her. „What?“

She rubbed her nose. „I am second officer. I am in command.“ She raised her face and looked towards him.

The bear's eyes had opened wide beneath the headband he wore. Then his eyes narrowed again and he bent over slowly, getting closer to the prairie dog without stepping closer until his large frame overshadowed the small plump woman.

The bear glared at the prairie dog woman and she returned his glare.

Slowly she opened her mouth. „There is no way I will let you in this room now, Bedai.“

„You are going down,“ he hissed.

„Yes, I told you I would. There is a canyon ahead where the river disappears in, we have to follow it.“

„We are going to be fully exposed.“ His entire face was contorted.

„Will you be able to defend the ship?“ Abama asked coldly.

With a sudden movement he raised his hand as if he wanted to strike her, but he stopped midway. „I am not going to discuss that with you. I want to see the foxes.“

„I told you, I won't allow you to enter the room. Over my dead body, Bedai.“

„What's more damn important than the security of the ship?“

Abama pressed her lips together. „How stupid can you be, Bedai?“ she asked and paused.

For a moment she could see confusion in the huge male's face as he tried to understand her question, but then his features hardened again and before he could say something, she added: „He is dying, Bedai.“

Very slowly the large frame of the bear stretched as he rose to full size again, after he had leaned forward to face the smaller woman. „You are willing to endanger all of us because of one man dying?“

Abama's face hardened as well. „Listen carefully! This is neither the hour, nor the place to question the orders of the commanding officer. I told you before what we were going to do.“

„And I told you, you are wrong...,“ he protested.

„Yes, you did and I tell you that I heard your complaints and that they don't matter to me.“ Her hand shot around as she pointed towards the main window and the distant sight of the canyon which got more visible by the moment, a shadowy crack in the rock of the mountain. „We have to go in there sooner or later. And I say: Now is the time! Because I won't wait until the spirit decides to attack us again.“

„You said yourself that you don't want a fight aboard the ship!“ Bedai howled, throwing his hands in the air.

„Yes, I don't! That's why you are here! To keep the spirit off the ship until we have reached the source and we can engage the spirit there.“ Abama tried to

keep her voice in check, but in this moment she could not help herself and raised it to the point where she was almost yelling.

The bear leaned forward again. His small eyes disappearing beneath his furrowed brows while he opened his mouth, showing his sharp teeth. „I see you opening your mouth, woman, but I can't hear you speaking, can you tell me why?“

Abama's jaw started to quiver. She pressed her lips together and her eyes got even smaller than they already were. A shiver went through her body.

„You have got an order, Bedai!“

Abama spun around and Bedai raised his head when they heard the voice. They saw Ileeree standing in the door to the ready room.

Despite her fur they could see that she was perfectly pale, her entire body seemed to have lost every ounce of strength, every muscle and sinew hang down. Her eyes were completely bloodshot and the fur of her face was matted by the tears that had flown down her cheeks. Yet, there were no tears to be seen anymore. Her expression was completely empty, devoid of any emotion.

For a moment Abama just stood there and stared at the vixen, as did the bear. Then the prairie dog woman shook off her stupor. „Holy Mother...“ she gasped and without hesitation she threw herself around Ileeree, hugging her with all the power of her plump body. „Holy Mother, it can't be true. He can't have left you! It can't be true!“ she whimpered.

Ileeree weakly returned the embrace, before she raised her face and looked at the bear again. „You have orders, Bedai,“ she said. „The command of the ship rests with Abama. I will replace my husband in the fight. I want to kill it, Bedai! I want it dead!“

The bear's lips moved, but then he just nodded, turned around and walked away.

Ileeree turned towards Abama again. „We will howl for him...“

„Yes!“ Abama answered, trying not to sob, swallowing down the tears. „Yes, we will.“

Occasionally the wind gained so much power that it seemed to roar around them, drowning out every other sound in their ears, while their hair fluttered around their faces. They kept on looking towards the horizon, observing the play of the clouds, how they hid and revealed the mountain ahead of them, uncovering parts of it and covering them again in whitish haze as they seemed to be torn apart by the ridges and the rocky pinnacles which overlooked the glacier which was hidden most of the time. Yet the ice caught a ray of light from time to time and it glistened for a short instant, sending a sparkle towards the ship which drifted over the dark green, wooded foreland.

„So the source is a glacier... Now we are the first men to travel all the way upstream in order to discover a glacier as the source of the river.“ He exhaled the cool air. „Damn!“

The raccoon by his side pushed the hair away which the wind kept on blowing into his face. „Yeah, seems like only the sun knew where the source really was after all.“

Itha leaned onto his bow and screwed up his eyes.

There were clouds in the sky, but they moved quickly, only the mountains ahead impeded their way and held them back, while they quickly passed by every other spot in the sky, thus allowing the sun to shine through and illuminating the main deck brightly.

The wolverine blinked a little bit and looked towards the ground. „It is just me or are we sinking?“

Cafy looked towards the ground as well. „We are,“ he said and pressed his lips together.

„Do they have totally lost their minds?“ Itha asked and looked at the raccoon. „This is like inviting the spirit to attack us.“

The raccoon just nodded. „Fighting is coming closer.“ He raised his hand and pointed towards a canyon which was ahead of them.

The ship had changed its course, no longer traveling alongside the river as it had done for such a long time. Now they were about to join the river's course, heading directly towards the canyon the river disappeared in. The river being a mountain stream in this place splashed foam all around as it shot over the giant rocks which marked its bed between the green of the outlier's forest. They could hear it roar and they could feel the cold wind which blew out of the canyon.

Itha turned his head and for a moment the wolverine studied the raccoon: Unlike him the other man did not wear anything but loose leather pants and a duty belt with nothing but a few blades. Itha wore heavy, studded leather with most of his weapons at his disposal. „Are you all right?“ he asked the raccoon.

Cafy turned towards him and looked at him. „Yes, I am,“ he replied. „I have slept enough.“

„Good, then you better get your weapons, all of them!“

The two men turned around and faced Bedaï who stood right behind them. The huge ursine man had approached them without either of them noticing him, fooling his massive size and the fact that the bear was armed for battle. There was his hand-cannon under his arm and he even carried the heavy bag with the balls over his shoulder, as well as his sword on his back.

Fadr stood behind him, showing a strange expression on his face.

Itha stood up straight. „Are we really going down?“ he asked. „Who ordered this?“

In this moment they started as they could hear sounds coming from the bridge. Itha and Cafy simultaneously pricked up their ears when they noticed. It was the sound of several voices mixing in a united cry. Its tone dropped a moment later to become a common howl from several voices.

Cafy shivered. Itha was paralyzed and looked towards the bridge.

„The prairie dog,“ Bedaï answered shortly.

A powerful gust blew over the main deck and the rigging above the men banged against itself.

Itha and Cafy looked at the other the bear who had lowered his face so that his bandana and his hair covered his eyes.

The wolverine raised his hand to his muzzle and rubbed it while he looked towards an undefined point on the horizon. Cafy gulped and looked to the ground, his blood rushing in his ears like the sound of an ocean right beneath him.

„With Illeeree’s approval Nekoi has performed the prayer of resolution⁷ with Sty.“

Cafy, Itha and Bedaï turned around in order to see Fadr standing behind the bear. The mage’s clothes waved around his slender shape.

Cafy gulped and for a moment it seemed as if he was gnawing on something.

Itha let go a short laughter and shook his head. He looked to the ground and scratched his face on the precise spot where the white patch of fur which surrounded his right eye gave way to the darker fur which covered most of his body.

„I just heard the news myself,“ Fadr added.

„And in the meantime, the prairie dog has decided to go down. So we must get ready to defend the ship,“ Bedaï added.

„So we are pursuing the mission?“ Itha asked.

Bedaï laughed shortly. „Of course, we are. We are going straight for the spirit’s source now. We can’t evade each other anymore, so we end it once and for all.“

Itha nodded. „Yes.“ He nodded and then laughed. „Damn, better to finish the mission than turn around just before the finishing line. Because this is the finishing line, right?“ The wolverine pointed towards the shape of the mountain which was just about to disappear behind a curtain of white haze.

„Yes, it is!“ Bedaï said. „But it will try to prevent us getting to its source, so it will attack as soon as it dares to.“

Itha started to smile. „I like that.“ He inhaled and his smile got broader until he grinned all over his face. „Finally the wait is over!“ He looked towards Cafy in order to get his approval.

The raccoon did not react for a moment, then he raised his face and looked towards a spot in the sky, far behind Bedaï or the rest of the ship. „Yes, it is!“ he said and nodded.

Bedaï looked at the raccoon and the wolverine and nodded. „Good! Illeeree will join us in the defense of the ship. We still have got some time before we are getting into the spirit’s reach. We will search for a way to follow the river and follow its course directly. As soon as we are above the water an attack might happen at any moment. Where’s Recha?“

Itha shrugged.

„I don’t care if Sty died or not, she is a fighter, she has to take her position.“

„I will go get her,“ Fadr said quickly. „I have to get some things from my room anyway.“

Bedaï nodded. „Cafy?“

The raccoon raised his head. „Go and get ready. Get the spear. The real one.“

Cafy nodded.

Fadr turned around on the spot without caring about the other men. He was convinced to feel Bedāī looking after him, but he did not turn around in order to check on this. Instead he walked past the gearwheels and eyed their shimmering brass surface for a moment, feeling oddly familiar with them. They felt different to him in this moment, as if the airship had changed: From a method of transportation to a battle station. Sty's death had changed the ship for him and no matter how the fight with the spirit would turn out, the ship would never be the same again for him. Thus walking through the corridors and descending the narrow stairs to the personal quarters felt entirely different as well. It wasn't the captain's absence, it was something different that seemed to have changed everything. Maybe it was the imminence of the fight, something he was not entirely familiar with, no matter how much he tried to compare the situation to experiences of the past. Unlike the mercenaries, Sty or Meloy, he had never served in a militia or a mercenary force and he had never had to deal with the outlook on a battle, on a situation which could cost his own life and the life of the one he loved. Unconsciously his fingers slipped over the wooden walls he passed by, the dry, uneven, splintery surface passing by his fingertips and the impression entering his subconscious.

He knocked at the door of Recha's room.

„Who's there?“ a voice asked.

He could hear the hoarseness of it and he gulped down the bitter taste in his mouth being reminded of the fact that she had just lost her uncle. „It's me,“ he said softly. „Can I come in?“ His fingers ran over his gown, cleaning it from any dust that might stick to it, as he anticipated taking her in his arms in order to comfort her, to let her know that he was there for her. Maybe it was the last time they had a chance to do so before the battle.

There was silence for a moment. Then he heard a bang. He started and looked at the door.

„One moment.“

Fadr inhaled, his hand rubbing the door handle.

„You can come in now.“

Fadr opened the door and stepped inside. It was mostly dark inside and he expected her to be close to her hammock, so he stepped towards it when there was a click behind him and the mage turned around to see what it was.

The same instant he felt the cold metal barrel against his forehead.

He looked straight into Recha's eyes.

Her jaw was trembling, her eyes were red from her tears, but she did her best not to start crying again. Her reddish brown hair hang down in wet strands. Despite her state her hand was perfectly calm. The barrel of the rifle against the mage's forehead did not move in the slightest.

„Give me...“ Her voice was close to cracking and she had to clear her throat. „Give me one... reason why I should not pull the trigger now!“ Her words faltered a little.

Fadr could feel blood shooting into his head. It was as if his skin was suddenly set afire from underneath while the rush in his veins and pumping of his heart got audible in his ears, almost drowning out the sounds around him. „Recha, I...”

„You got the jar from the storage! How could you expect me not to remember? I saw it! I saw it in your hands just before the spirit attacked!”

„No, Recha, please! I... I... Let me explain. It's not that simple. It's the lynx...”

„Don't you dare!” the vixen hissed. „Don't you dare to blame it on her! She was possessed!”

The weasel wet his lips. He had raised his hands a little bit, but he did not dare to move any more than this. „Listen...” He tried to shake his head. „I... I... did not know about what Bedai would, would... I just wanted to trap the spirit! I swear! You have got to believe me! I did not know anything about, about, about... It was never my intention to trap him in that room with it, I just thought that the lynx... I did not want to kill Sty! Believe me, Recha!” He did not dare to move at all, his voice was trembling while he just expressed the jumbled thoughts which rushed through his head. He looked into Recha's lovely face and he could feel something tearing at him deep inside.

„He is dead, Fadr! He is dead!” Recha tried not to scream at him, but tears were running down her furry cheeks again.

The weasel shook his head a little bit, looking into Recha's eyes behind the iron sight. Then he opened his mouth and tried to inhale, but the movement seemed to stop. He could feel something pulling on his gut. He started to quiver. He gulped in order to get rid of the dry feeling in his mouth. „I did not want that. You have to believe me! I did not know that. I, I just wanted to do what was the best for us. I wanted to get rid of the lynx, I wanted to protect you!”

„Don't you dare telling me you did this for me!” she snarled.

„I, I, I...” He could suddenly feel something hot on his cheeks as well, but he did not realize that he had started to cry as well. „I am sorry, Recha, I did not want this, I just...”

For a moment he could see that she was hesitating, for a moment her eyes were moving, but a split-second later they were transfixing him again. Her voice was calm: „You are coming with me now and we are going to finish this together!”

„No!” he breathed. „No, Recha, you don't understand. We have to...”

The gun dropped down and Recha grabbed his gown. She spun around and pulled him out of the room.

„Recha! We have to abandon the ship and the mission, Recha, please! There is no chance that we can... Listen to me! I don't want you to die! Listen Recha!”

She let go of him and spun around with the full power of her body and before he even noticed what happened the butt of her rifle was slammed against his head and send him to the ground.

He felt the heat of his own blood shooting from a wound on his forehead. Instinctively he raised his hand towards it and looked at the blood on his fingers.

Recha stood above him, tears ran down her face. She trembled from teeth to toe, struggling to prevent herself from crying out loud, but when he looked up

from below the expression on her distorted face said more to him than anything else could have done. He could feel his heart cramping.

Her face was completely disfigured, when she opened her mouth again: „I will finish this! You don't even deserve that I waste my time on you...“ And then she spun around and ran away as fast as she could, tears running down her cheeks. Every time she heard him calling out her name in the room behind her, there was another stab in her heart.

„Once we have entered the canyon the river will be right below us!“ the bear shouted. „The spirit knows we are coming and it cannot allow us to reach the source. So this is where it is going to attack us and we will have to keep it off the ship at any cost until we have reached the source. Understood?“ He inhaled deeply and raised his cannon. „We have got a long day ahead of us: Fighting off the spirit and once we have reached the source, kill it once and for all. This is where we are going to finish this!“ He could feel the rusty metal against his fingers. He raised his eyes towards the canyon the ship got closer to with every moment. He was convinced to feel the cold wind which blew out of the crevice in the rock and he enforced the hold on the hand-cannon he carried.

Itha, Cafy and Ileeree were looking at him.

The vixen was still looking terrible, but her entire body displayed inexorable determination. Her fluttering hair framed her face where the wind dried the remains of her tears while she looked at the bear, her hand rest upon one of her husband's swords which hung down from a belt around her waist. She observed the bear who was about to walk past the gearwheels, his large hands restlessly fingering the hand-cannon.

There was a shot.

The cannon fell out of the bear's paws and crashed onto the wooden ground of the ship. There was some kind of an impediment on his back and he tried to reach out for it. He gasped for breath and when he did he felt the pain for the first time. He stumbled forwards.

The three other furs stared at the huge ursine man who was suddenly staggering forwards. His feet were hardly able to carry his huge shape anymore.

He could not move one of his arms, instead he used the other one to reach out for his sword and tried to spin around, but he hardly could, stumbling to one side when he turned, yet he saw the reddish fur of the vixen and the smoking rifle she held in her paws.

„This is for Sty!“ she said and pulled the trigger a second time.

The shot hit the bear with full power and the power of the impact almost pushed the huge man off his feet, but instead he stumbled backwards and hit the railing. He almost fell over it, but instinctively his arms grabbed the wood and he held onto it. His fingers clenched around the rough wood with all of their might while he struggled to inhale.

Recha let the rifle down. For a moment she looked at the furs opposite her. „It was him,“ she said. Then she walked over to the ursine man who was still lying

on the railing. Her leather boots were instantly stained from the blood that had flown down from the two huge wounds of the man. She kneeled down and grabbed one of his feet and tried to lift it up. It was too heavy for her, she struggled just to get up again, but with all of her power she rose to her feet again, lifting up the man's leg in accordance and then she pushed her whole weight against him. She growled and groaned and with all of her strength she was finally able to shift his balance: The man fell over the railing.

The huge shape of the ursine man fell through the open air. Blood welled up from his mouth while his vision failed him, unable to breathe. Drops of fresh blood detached from his body and flew all around while the body sped towards the ground.

Recha turned around. All of her clothes and her fur were soaked with blood now, except her face which was wet with tears again. She saw lleeree standing between Itha and Cafy and slowly she stumbled towards her. „He killed him, lleeree,“ she said breathlessly. „It was him!“ She tried to wipe the tears from her face, but instead she just spread the blood on her black hands all over the white fur of her face. „He closed him in with the... the...“

lleeree stepped forward, she just stared at some distant place while she took the younger vixen in her arms and embraced her. „It is alright,“ she said, her widely opened eyes looking towards the mountain ahead of them.

The strength of the winds reached deafening heights when the airship floated into the canyon. For quite a while the entire ship seemed to stand still as the winds disabled all of the propeller's power. The rigging hammered against itself and the engines roared as they were working at the very limit of their capacities, the gearwheels upon the main deck spinning with such speed that the spokes disappeared in a blur of swirling metal and wood.

The four furs on the main deck held on to their clothes and pressed themselves against the strong currents, just trying to hold on while the ship had not passed by the edge of the canyon yet.

Itha still tried to shout something, trying to continue the discussion they had had moments before, but Ileeree did not listen to him anymore. The vixen stood in the middle of the deck and held on to the swords she had taken from her husband's stash and the various grenades she had gotten from Bedai's equipment. She knew that none of it contained any orichalkum which could hurt the spirit. Instead she would have to rely upon brute strength. She gritted her teeth and felt the tears the powerful winds pressed out of her eyes.

Next to her stood Recha, whose one hand was cramped around her rifle, the other one holding on to the leather bag with additional bullets which hang down from her shoulder, an addition to the bandoleer around her waist which contained even more paper casings of bullets she had crafted herself, carefully carving them out of the orichalkum she had gotten before the beginning of the journey.

„Where's Fadr?“

Recha could hear Itha's shout by her side, but she did not react to it.

Itha gritted his teeth as he was sure that the vixen must have heard him, despite the violent wind. He hissed a curse and tried to make a step forward, pressing all of his weight against the wind, holding his bow in one hand, a leather apron around his waist which contained countless different add-ons for the arrows in the quiver on his back. He wore a headband which covered most of his head and showed his eyes as a thin line. He lowered his head a little bit in order to escape the airflow, looking towards Cafy who wore his full leather armor by now, holding the richly decorated handle of his spear in his hands, the tip of it still being hidden under a piece of cloth.

They would be joined by Nekoi who was still on the bridge as she was not outfitted for the powerful winds.

Suddenly the sunlight disappeared as the ship suddenly passed by the edge of the crevice, the rocks casting their shadows on the ship which seemed to shrink in comparison to the cliffs which were framing it now.

Ileeree raised her head and looked towards the sky which was nothing but a patch of clouds above the edge of the canyon anymore.

Suddenly the door to the bridge banged open, it slammed against the wall with the full power of the winds which had gotten a hold on it and Nekoi stumbled out of it. Her clothes were instantly caught in the powerful currents and billowed all around her.

The slender antelope staggered on the main deck and then she tripped and the winds pulled her onward. She almost fell down, but instead of falling she rushed

all over the deck, trying to regain her balance and her bearings as she fought off her own clothing.

Ileeree shouted towards her, but the sound was drowned out by the winds.

Nekoi slammed into the wall of the poop deck and violently pushed down her clothes and then she shouted herself.

The other furs stared at her, unable to hear her words.

It was Ileeree who understood first. „It’s here! IT’S HERE!“ She screamed and pulled her swords from their sheath and in this moment everyone understood.

Within an instant the four furs had assumed a defensive stance, standing against each other’s back with Recha at the centre, the barrel of her rifle turning around as she scanned the surroundings from behind the iron sight.

Meanwhile Nekoi struggled to walk over to them, but the winds subsided as the airship gained momentum again, going deeper into the canyon where the winds were less powerful. The engines were still roaring though.

Almost tripping over her own feet the antelope finally reached the gathering of fighters.

„Where is it?“ Ileeree shouted at the priestess.

„I don’t know,“ Nekoi shouted back. „I have felt it. It is near, very near. I can feel it.“

The furs looked around, scanning the edge of the canyon with its steep rock face. It was still covered by small trees which grew on ledges, clinging to the little earth and the rocks with their roots, among the moss and the fern which grew by their side.

They could hear the roar of the water below them as well as the wind carried the echo from side to side and upwards towards the edge of the canyon, even though the river did not occupy the entirety of the canyon. The opening was wide enough to allow for green patches of land where trees grew. This alluvial soil was a flat strip of land where rocks stood out, left behind by the river’s torrential waters. Small trees clung to the protection of these boulders.

The ship drifted along, the rudders and the suspension of the propellers creaking as Silent Cry tried to navigate in between the rock faces, at an altitude three times the height of the largest trees down below.

Suddenly Recha saw something glistening. She spun around and fired.

The bullet pierced through the air and with a bang it hit the wall of the poop deck.

The other furs jumped up and dashed forward while the thin film of water by the poop deck’s door started to gather in a whirl of water. For a moment it shot upwards as a thin column as all of the water which had dribbled down from the balloon gathered in one spot, then it collapsed again and it shot through the gap beneath the door while an arrow hit the wooden wall where the column had been moments before.

„It’s going to the engines’ room!“ Ileeree yelled. „Recha, Itha, down there. Don’t engage, just drive it out! I’ll keep the...“

„I won’t go down there with her!“ Itha shouted at the vixen, pointing at Recha.

Ileeree stared at him.

„I'll go!“ Cafy shouted and dashed towards the door.

Recha hesitated for a moment, looking at the wolverine just like Ileeree did. „You know he deserved it...“ she hissed, but an instant later Ileeree grabbed her arm and pulled her away. „Go!“

„And you, Itha, to the bridge! I better hope you do right there.“

For a short instant the wolverine looked at her, but he said nothing and finally ran towards the door to the bridge, leaving Ileeree and Nekoï behind.

„What shall we do?“ Nekoï asked the vixen.

„We wait and hope that Cafy arrives down there on time,“ the vixen replied, pulling a grenade out of the bag by her side as well as a small metal lighter.

With a yell the viscacha threw a shovel full of burning coal into the direction of the spirit. Boiling water hissed and steam filled the engines' room.

„Back! Back!“ Lokos cried and pushed Berry who stood right behind him in the narrow space between the pistons.

With a rush the spirit rose from the steam, the water shot about and suddenly ice gathered inside and within an instant it had shaped an icy head wherein two blue flames flickered as it looked down on the two furs who were fleeing from it.

Lokos screamed when he was hit by a jet of water. The power of the impact sent him to the ground and he almost fell on the spectacled bear who ran on.

„Meloy! Meloy!“ Berry yelled.

The viscacha tried to get back on his feet but the moment he pushed himself off the ground the spirit shot towards him, the entire wave of water hitting him with all of its power. The viscacha screamed in pain, just before he hit the ground again, attiring hard while the water settled down above him.

With a scream a shovel impacted on the water scattering it all over the hammering engines as Meloy attack with the next best thing he could find. And with all of his power he hit the column of water again and again. Then he threw the shovel aside and grabbed the unconscious viscacha's arm and pulled him out of the water. He pulled him across the room as fast as he could, gasping due to the strain while he never took his eyes off the puddles of water which moved across the floor and gathered again.

„Fire, Berry, fire!“ Meloy shouted and let Lokos drop to the floor as he jumped to get a new weapon.

„I've got something for it!“ the bear yelled and Meloy spun around, seeing the other man pulling on a lever.

„No! Not the...“

With a scream a valve opened and hot steam shot towards the spot where the spirit was about to gather. The icy head hissed as it melted within an instant, the column of water collapsed, but then it shot upwards in a jet, towards the opened valve.

„Get away from the...“ Meloy yelled.

Berry spun around, but he was too slow, the entire pipe exploded, sending a shockwave of splinters and hot steam across the room.

Meloy was sent to the ground by the shockwave, his ears were ringing, yet he was convinced to be able to hear the echo of the small bear's scream in his ears.

Due to the steam he could not see anything, but he did not need to as he knew the room perfectly. He jumped forward, almost stumbled over Lokos whose presence he had forgotten about, but managed to grab the lever that he wanted and pulled it downwards, shutting down the pipes of the boiler.

He stumbled forward, his ears were still ringing, yet he was convinced to hear the sound of running water from somewhere. „Damn, we need help!“ he shouted at the top of his lungs.

There was a bang at the opposite end of the room and Meloy instinctively dropped to the floor, expecting an attack.

„What...?“ somebody shouted and a moment later a gust of wind shot through the room, dispersing a part of the steam.

„The spirit is in here!“ Meloy yelled, picking up a giant wrench which he had found leaning against the wall, then he spun around and dashed towards the spot where he could see the reddish shimmer of the fire box, positioning himself in front of it. He raised the wrench when he saw something coming closer, but an instant later Fadr emerged from the steam as he dashed towards the engineer.

„Where is it? Where is it?“ the weasel exclaimed and spun around.

„I have no idea,“ the goat replied. „I can see as much as you.“

„Where's Lokos and Berry?“

„Lokos got knocked-out, Berry was right next to the pipe when it exploded.“

Fadr looked at the goat. His eyes twitched, then the mage looked around and saw the coal on the ground next to the firebox and he dropped to his knees and stuffed as many as he could into the pockets of his gown, constantly raising his head again and again in order to have a look at the room.

The steam was about to clear, it started to gather everywhere and the two furs could hear countless drops falling to the tarred ground.

The weasel gulped and tried to breathe regularly. His heart was beating very quickly and despite the noises all around him, he could hear the hammering in his ears. „What happened?“ Fadr asked quickly.

„I don't know, it showed up out of nowhere. Lokos tried to scare it away, but it attacked him and Berry opened one of the valves, but the whole pipe exploded.“

Fadr looked around in the room. He saw the burst pipe which reminded him of a burst sausage, except that the pipe was made of iron and copper. Other pipes had been damaged as well, some of the pistons were not working anymore, as well as some of the engines' wheels were not turning anymore, there was debris and shards of copper all around, most of the lamps were not working anymore. There was no trace of Berry anywhere, but there was a huge puddle of blood on the floor.

„We will lose height,“ Meloy said suddenly. „It was one of the pipes for the balloon.“

Fadr looked at the goat. „You are bleeding.“

The man raised his hand and touched his cheek, noticing that it was all bloody when he lowered it again. „Why is nobody helping us?“ he asked.

Fadr looked all around the dimly lit room, noticing the hammering of the engines again. Their sound had changed, it was not as steady anymore, there was screeching and creaking added into it, as well as the dripping of water.

„I can't...“ There was the rushing of water somewhere and the mage spun around. He could not see anything, but now he noticed a leg which looked out behind a segment of the pistons. He screwed up his eyes. „I...“ He stared at it, because it looked somewhat strange.

„There!“

The mage spun around again, just in time to see water gathering in a column at the door at the opposite end of the room and before he could do something it collapsed again and he could hear a gurgling sound disappearing in the corridor.

„I will go after it!“ Fadr shouted and ran towards the door. „Just keep the engines running, we will deal with the spirit.“ His gowns fluttered around him as he dashed towards the door.

For a moment Meloy stood motionless. Then he blinked. „Berry?“ he shouted. „Where are you? Lokos? Lokos?“

She used every little ounce of power of her muscles to fight the ropes that bound her. Yet, the fiber did not give way, instead the knots seemed to tighten even further and in frustration she threw herself around.

Squealing she twisted and turned, rolling around on the hard floor, but hardly feeling it at all. It was the feeling deep inside her chest which absorbed her entirely. The feeling of something just beneath her skin, twisting and turning around her shivering heart, getting tighter with any moment, confining her breathing. Additionally the cool silver of the pendant around her neck seemed to spark whenever it touched her skin.

With all the power of her body she managed to attain a crouched position, her sweating face still lying on the ground. Her teeth showed as she gritted them powerfully and with a snarl she managed to inch forward, then she lost her equilibrium and fell down on her side again.

A hoarse scream escaped her and she puffed as she contracted again, pressing her shoulder against the wooden ground in an attempt to push up her body.

She breathed hard and sweat shot from the pores of her skin while she struggled to move forward in any possible way, before she was suddenly taken by a fit of rage, growling and throwing herself around on the floor, once again fighting the ropes and pushing herself off the ground in the attempt. A moment later she slumped down again and from her quivering head came a hoarse growl of uncontrollable fury.

In this moment the door was slammed open, a man rushed into the room and came down by her side.

„It's all my fault,“ he whispered. „I know, I know.“ He gasped powerfully while he tried to undo a knife from its sheath with quivering fingers. „There is no-one to blame but me. Forgive me, forgive me...“ The metal weapon glistened in his hand as he took a firm hold of it, quivering all over.

Even though he was in her back, she knew that he was there and instinctively she doubled her efforts. She threw her head backwards and bared her sharp teeth, but she even failed to show them to him. Then she threw her head around with all of her power, the momentum almost making her roll over, but the movement was stopped by the man's hand that came down on her head and pressed her against the ground.

She twitched the moment he immobilized her and then she struggled even more powerfully as she could feel the metal blade coming closer. She tried to bite the hand, to kick him or the ground, to do anything before he could as she could smell his fear and his desperation and it alarmed her even more.

„Calm, calm down!“

Jiddy did exactly the opposite and tried to throw herself around, but in this moment the blade touched her skin and she let go a hoarse scream of fury.

Suddenly the ropes around her ankles got loose and in a powerful movement, the fabric was torn apart as her hands broke free.

Her arms shot around her body, grabbed the man's hand on her head and her fingers and their claws dug deep into his arm when she pulled him off. He slipped off and fell to the ground, while the lynx pushed herself upwards and a moment later came down on him, even though her feet were still bound.

When he looked up he could see right into her contorted face. Her sharp teeth gritted powerfully while she growled from the deepest bottom of her small, muscled chest.

The raccoon breathed hard. „I know that I deserve it...“ he said and gulped. „I lied to you and I did not do anything to stop the others.“ He quivered as he tried to keep talking. „But you must believe me now: You must flee, you hear me! Get off the ship!“ Cafy tried to face her, but the moment he saw her screwed up, glistening eyes, he looked away again. „Forgive me! Forgive me! I should never have lied to you about our destination. Please!“ He mustered all of his strength and forced himself to look into her eyes again. „I broke my marriage vows,“ he said. „I broke them when... when I saw you in that town and I just thought that I could... I know I lied to you, but I would never have imagined that you would get aboard all by yourself... I thought, I thought...“ He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to focus. „Please, you have to trust me now: You have to get off the ship. There is nothing you can do.“ He looked at her and all he saw in her face was confusion. „Get off the ship!“ Suddenly he tensed. „GET OFF THE SHIP!“ he screamed into her face. „LISTEN TO ME, GET OFF THE SHIP!“ Tears were running down his cheeks.

The lynx stared at the raccoon. Her mouth twitched, her tail wagged powerfully as she tried to understand what the man had told her just now.

He used her short hesitation to free himself, grabbing the small lynx by her shoulders. „GO! Go! GO!“ he shouted at her, pushing her off himself. „GO!“ And then he jumped to his feet and grabbed the spear which had been lying next to him all of the time and dashed towards the open door and disappeared outside while the loud bang of an exploding pipe in the engines' room resonated through the entire ship.

For a very short instant, the lynx kept still, as she tried to figure out what the man had wanted from her. She pressed her paw against her forehead as she tried to think, but the first thing that came to her mind was something entirely different and instantly the urgent desire to know, to understand filled her mind again and she reacted even before any reasonable thought could cross her mind, rushing towards the open door, once again feeling the over-whelming presence that pressed down on her chest, infusing an intense sense of urgency. The silver pendant dangled around her neck and as soon as she hit the wall opposite the door, she jumped to an upright position and dashed through the corridor with all the speed that she could muster. Her feet hitting the ground so hard that it droned beneath her while she slammed against the walls and pushed herself off it, rushing around corners.

Jiddy hissed through her gritted teeth and did not feel the pain when she crashed hard against a wall.

Instead she used her momentum to drive herself forwards, following a faint scent in the air which she hardly perceived at all. It was all she needed to guide her, despite the stench of oil and smoke and she ran after it, through the corridors of the ship and finally up a staircase and into another corridor where she crashed into a door and pushed it open with the entire weight of her body as well as its power.

She rushed into the room, almost stumbling over her own feet, ready to pounce anyone she would find inside, but a split-second later, the time she needed to study the messy room with the bunk bed, the broken stool, the damaged table, the torn clothes neatly folded over a chair, the scents of scented oils and perfumes hanging in the air, she realized that Nekoï wasn't there.

„Back! Back!“ The raccoon shouted towards the vixen at the other side of the corridor, running towards her as fast as he could while glistening water gathered in the corridor right behind him.

„GET DOWN!“

The raccoon jumped away just in time. The jet of water crashed into the wood where he had been standing and in this moment the shot thundered throughout the narrow corridor. The glistening bullet pierced through the room like lightning and hit the watery creature. A flash blinded everyone as the bullet seemed to explode, illuminating the entire corridor in an unnatural light.

Water shot about as the creature pushed forward.

Recha tried to protect himself with her rifle. She jumped backwards and instantly Cafy was in front of her again. „DOWN,“ he cried and he jumped up, his spear in front of himself and in mid-air he pushed it forward, the tip cut through the air and the icy head of the spirit. The crush was deafening when some of the ice was shattered. Ice shards flew all around the room, crashing into the wall right next to Cafy. The raccoon tried to protect himself with his arm but the shards cut deep into his flesh.

Before the raccoon had been able to raise his weapon again a jet of water slammed into him. The man was pushed over and crashed against the ground, but then he was already rolling over again and he pushed his spear into the direction of the spirit and hit the pillar of water.

With a yelp Cafy swirled his spear around and with the full power of the momentum he hit it again and pierced it, he let the spear swirl around in his paws. With gritted teeth he tried to free it again, but in this moment he could feel how a powerful torrent of water within the creature was about to tear it out of his paws. „Damn!“ With all his strength the raccoon braced himself against the resistance. He cried out when he felt how the spear was about to slip out of his paws.

„DOWN!“ Recha cried, having finally reloaded her weapon.

The shot thundered across the room and this time she hit the icy head. The spirit bucked and Cafy cried out as the spear was pulled upwards, following the movement of the creature and the raccoon was thrown upwards as well, still holding the shaft of the spear in his hands. The raccoon crashed into the wall and blood splashed across the room.

„CAFY!“ Recha cried.

The mass of water gathered again, even without a head and with the speed of a waterfall the creature shot towards the vixen, a whirl of water and swirling ice. Cafy cried out, Recha desperately tried to dodge but there was no space within the small corridor. The vixen pressed herself against the wall and tried to tear a sword out of her belt but she could see that she was not fast enough: The glistening crystals were shooting through the narrow corridor and there was no place to run for her. Her hand at the hilt, pulling the blade out of the sheath she saw the ice and water incoming as if she was trapped in her movement. She prepared herself for being torn apart by the spirit.

The sound was deafening when it exploded right in front of her in a ball of blue fire.

„Get back! Get back!“

Recha opened her eyes and saw Fadr by her side, pieces of coal in his paws.

„Cafy, get out!“ the mage yelled and in this moment, he threw another piece of coal in the direction of the water spirit which had been hesitating.

The raccoon ducked as it exploded right between himself and the monster. The shockwave shot through the corridor, splinters, ice and water shot around the furs. Steam and smoke billowed through the room.

„Get out! I will drive it out!“ Fadr yelled as soon as the deafening noise had passed by. „Welcome it outside!“

„Fadr, it went to the engines' room...“ Recha shouted.

„I know, I was there!“ Fadr yelled. „Get outside!“ He ducked when a jet of water shot out of the smoke and impacted in the wall right next to him. He threw himself to the ground and grabbed some splinters on the floor and threw them into the direction of the spirit while Cafy tried to crawl over the floor.

The weasel quickly focused on the wooden splinters, imagining them burning brightly and faster than they normally would and for a moment the feeling was

almost tangible and when he looked ahead he saw them as flaming darts disappearing within the smoke.

The sizzle of evaporating water followed.

Recha jumped past the mage and grabbed Cafy's arm in order to help him, when in this very moment the spirit spilt forward like a huge wave of water, suddenly filling the entire floor, then shooting upwards in a rotating column of swirling water and ice.

Fadr grabbed a piece of his own gown and tore it off in a powerful movement. It caught fire while it was still flying towards the spirit and exploded in a flash when it hit the creature, the column of water collapsing again.

Fadr could see how Recha and Cafy reached the door to the main deck and jumped outside.

This moment of distraction was enough time for the spirit: The water around him started to foam and shot upwards all around him and an instant later he could feel it welling up around him, starting to cover him.

„No, you don't!“ he hissed and focused.

His skin instantly started to flush, his clothes started to crackle and the water shot off him, while tiny plumes of smoke arose from the spots where his fur was burned. He hissed, but ignored the pain. Yet in the same moment he could see how the water rose right next to him and before he could do something about it, it was an entire wall of water. He tried to grab a piece of coal, but his hand had not reached his pocket when the water hit him with full power: He crashed into the wall as it pressed down on him like a giant hand. He screamed as it shot past him.

There was a short pause and he slumped down and quickly struggled to get again as he was entirely soaked by now, slipping off the wet floor as he did so. The moment he was almost on his feet again, the water had gathered again and hit him with full power one more time. This time he crashed into the wall with even more power, numbing pain shooting through his head. He saw flashes dancing in front of his eyes as he slipped off the wall and started to fall down. He gasped and reached out his hand, trying to get a hold on something in order to get up again, but there was nothing.

The next wave hit him and washed all over him. He screamed and water shot into his mouth and lungs, the water pushing his head against the wall like a giant fist. He did not even feel the pain anymore, as he felt his consciousness fading away and the realization that the spirit was about to drown him any moment shot through his head, but it faded the very same instant as he felt blackness starting to overcome him. He moaned, expecting the impact of the next wave, but instead he noticed another creature on all fours standing at the other end of the corridor. Before he could wonder about it, he groaned and passed out, collapsing onto the floor.

Jiddy was on all fours and with her slanting eyes she observed the spirit which was about to reform on a spot between herself and the door to the main deck.

The icy head had reformed from the water again and the mock face turned towards her and the cold fire eyes looked at the shape of the small feline.

It was as if something cold took a hold of her entire body, Jiddy shivered instantly and she lowered herself into a defensive stance, feeling how her fur bristled in an instinctive reaction and the rush of urgency she had felt all of the time and which had driven her, was now succumbing to her instincts which grew stronger with every heartbeat that pumped in her veins.

Hissing through her gritted teeth her hand reached out for the pendant around her neck and the fingers clenched around the cold silver until the metal cut painfully into her skin. Jiddy had almost crouched down, her breathing was nothing but a hiss between her gritted teeth and saliva had gathered upon her lips and slowly dripped down, while her tail wagged so strongly that it shot from one side to the other. Her ears were laid back and the muscles beneath her skin twitched erratically.

The entire shape of the spirit was as motionless as it could be. The flickering blue eyes transfixed on the lynx.

A hoarse growl seemed to come from nowhere, but then Jiddy raised her face and growled from the deepest bottom of her chest until the sound filled the entire corridor and for an instant it seemed as if the shape of the spirit was trembling, resonating with the sound of the growl.

There was sweat upon her face. She hissed and growled, stepping from one side to the other, her ears lay backwards, fur bristled and her tail lowered between her legs, but still wagging strongly.

The spirit did not move, the lifeless mage lying right in front of it. Then slowly the shape started to undulate and rock in a slow rhythm, almost mimicking the movements of the agitated lynx girl. The water sloshed to and fro as the spirit moved.

For an instant the lynx observed the spirit, restlessly stepping to the right, to the left and back again.

The spirit kept on moving and then it moved forward a little bit and a split-second later she shot forwards and the spirit retired just as quickly. It shot towards the door, which opened as it was almost torn out of its hinges and the spirit water amassed on the main deck again, forming a pillar of water in front of the armed furs who stood there: Itha having a flaming arrow on his bow, Recha having couched her rifle, Ileeree with two swords in her paws and Nekoi standing behind them, her gown fluttering in the strong winds which shot through canyon the airship while the river roared below the ship.

The furs stared at the spirit on the deck which did not move at all and slowly Nekoi looked away from it and then she noticed the shape of the small lynx girl standing in the door of the poop. The antelope's mouth opened a little bit, she looked at the lynx girl, then she looked at the motionless spirit, then at the lynx girl again.

Jiddy was motionless, so were the spirit and the other furs.

„Goddesses...“ Nekoi mumbled to herself and she raised her eyes towards the spirit again, noticing that the large shape of water had not moved at all, as if it

waited for something and when Nekoi looked towards the lynx again she realized what it was. „Jiddy, you...!“ she exclaimed.

And in the very same instant, as if the words did not even matter to her at all, the lynx spun around and on all fours she dashed towards the ladder to the poop deck, towards the rear of the ship. Her feet and hands pushed her off the ground which passed by.

„NOOOO!“ Nekoi screamed. „Jiddy, no!“

Jiddy had jumped up the small ladder towards the top of the poop deck. In front of her the propellers of the ship seemed to spin slowly. Through her half-closed eyes she could see their movement, yet it did not mean anything to her. She almost crashed into the railing at the rear and she looked over it and even though she hardly knew what she did she could see how far above the ground she was and that there was nothing but the foam of a torrential river down below. Very slowly she turned her head and her screwed up eyelids she could see the shape of the spirit again and a gust of wind shot through the propellers and over all of the deck and it felt as if it was ice that cut into her skin and a sudden surge of panic came over her as her entire body trembled from the cold.

„JIDDY!“ Nekoi shouted from the other side. She could see the lynx shape standing motionless at the railing of the poop deck and the priestess held her breath.

Then the lynx dashed forward again and jumped.

„NOOOOO!“

The railing shot past her and she left the ship behind. For a moment its hull with the propellers, and the billowing smoke from its exhaust pipes shot past her and then they were gone as well as the small feline fell towards the rocks and the water of the river which got closer with every moment.

The air was jetting past her, her hair fluttered, she inhaled deeply and closed her eyes for a moment.

The antelope was standing behind the other fighters, staring at the spot where the lynx had been the moment before she had jumped overboard. She tried to breathe regularly, but she hardly succeeded as she was trembling so strongly. She gulped and saw that the spirit had not moved at all in the meantime.

„That’s what you wanted, right?“ the antelope whispered. „You wanted her gone...“

With wide opened eyes the antelope stared at the thing on the main deck and like a confirmation the shape of the spirit suddenly started to twist, its flaming blue eyes turning towards the five furs on its other side.

„FIRE!“ Ileeree yelled.

Recha’s rifle boomed and the column of water collapsed in order to escape the bullet, but it was still hit by a flaming arrow from Itha’s bow which shot through the water.

„Yeah!“ The wolverine exclaimed and put another arrow on the bowstring.

„Give me cover!“ Cafy shouted and rushed forward with the spear in his hand. „It’s you and me now, monster!“ he screamed and the orichalkum tip of his spear glistened in the sun when he aimed it at the spirit. He jumped the creature’s head, but the entire column of water collapsed again in order to evade him, shifted and an instant later it shot upwards again, hitting him hard.

The raccoon was thrown aside and crashed hard against the wooden ground, rolling over instantly, just to see how another arrow pierced into the water and parts of it evaporated with a hiss. A shot rang, but missed.

With a scream Cafy shot forwards again, holding the spear in both hands, he had almost reached the creature when he saw the tiny shards of ice shooting towards him. The pain was cold and hot at the same time when it hit him and pierced into his skin. He threw his head around in order to protect himself and fell to the ground.

„I am here!“ The spirit did not have the time to locate the shout as one of Illeeree’s swords crashed into the whirling water and dispersed more of it. With her free hand she reached out to the bag by her side and pulled out a grenade, but before she could do anything else a jet of water hit her face like a fist. She was thrown around and fell to the ground as well.

The spirit rose above her.

Another shot rang out and the creature collapsed for an instant, tried to reassemble itself and in this moment two burning arrows pierced into it. Water hissed, steam rose.

Cafy screamed as he shot towards the spirit again, ready to pierce its icy head, but suddenly the head submerged inside the water and the water rushed towards the raccoon as a huge wave. It took hold of him and shot across the entire main deck. Recha and Itha jumped aside while Cafy was thrown against the wall of the fo’c’s’le.

„Don’t let it on the bridge, don’t let it on the bridge!“ Illeeree shouted while she was about to get to her feet again and suddenly she started as she noticed the waterfall right in front of the ship’s bow. It was so close that the vixen could even feel the wind and the spray from it and the airship was just about to collide with it. „What the...?“

With painful slowness the airship rose and approached the edge of the waterfall. The wind carried drops of water along that splashed down on the deck and wet the gear wheels who swirled the moisture all around and on the bridge Silent Cry stared at it for a moment, an expression of disbelief on his face, watching how the moss covered rock where the water came down came closer and closer and the ship did not gain any height no matter what he did.

The impact hit the ship like a bolt of thunder and Silent Cry yelled when the steering wheel was suddenly thrown around in his hands. He grabbed it more powerfully and braced against the push while water splashed against the main window, light danced over the glass like will-o-wisps while the engines droned and hammered at the absolute limit of their capacities, but not drowning out the

sound of cracking glass and metal, the deafening screech as the rocks scratched over the main window of the bridge, at the bow of the ship. Water hammered down on it as well, transforming the ship into a part of the river while Silent Cry pushed himself against the steering wheel with all of his weight and power. Meloy cried something through the communication pipes but it was drowned out by wave after wave of water that washed over the hull while the rabbit tried to hold on to his stations and Abama stared at the pointers of the pressure gauges on the consoles, shouting the values across the room, holding on to a stool as the ship got more and more tilted.

Sweat shot from Silent Cry's frowns.

Emergency whistles from the engine's room screamed.

The rabbit at the steering wheel moaned while he pressed all his weight against the steering wheel, trying to stabilize the ship while Abama rushed closer and grabbed the handles of the vertical stabilizers, turning them blindly and with all of her power.

Another deafening screech boomed over the bridge.

They could hear the deep vibrations of the rigging resonating through the entire ship as the hull was almost torn off the balloon, the hull held back by rocks and a waterfall while the balloon pulled on.

There was a noise like a cannon ball shooting over rocky ground, a desperate scream which transformed into a shattering noise and Abama and Silent Cry instinctively looked up, instantly seeing the crack in the window and the water running through it.

Silent Cry and Abama just had the time to look at each other.

With a powerful boom the main window shattered as the crack shot through the glass in split-seconds, a long vertical line which was pushed wide open by jets of water.

Silent Cry cried out.

Then the window broke and Abama screamed in terror and grabbed the column of the stabilizers.

The water shot into the room, foam and surf shot forward as the avant-garde of the shockwave. The gush filled the room within a blink and the wave hammered against the wooden walls, washing around stool, steering wheel, consoles, columns and furr, while carrying along pieces of shattered glass which were propelled to such speeds that they slammed into the opposite walls and got stuck there while the water shot about.

While she held on to the column with all of her power, glass hit her shoulder with all of the water's power. Abama screamed and water filled her lungs.

And as the wave hit the bridge, the entire ship was thrown out of its balance, pushed backwards by the weight of the water which washed over the bridge and for a moment the entire hull swung freely, the balloon being pulled backwards as well. With incredible slowness the entire metal-clad wooden hull swung forward again and hit the edge of the waterfall again. The blow of the impact shook its entirety, deafening thunder rolling through the ship while it spew water from the broken window where the bridge had been, a gaping wound at the very front of

the ship which scratched over the edge and then was hauled upwards by the balloon, free from the rocks and the waterfall.

„BY THE GODDESS, WHAT DO YOU DO, CRY?“ Meloy screamed through the communication pipe, wet from the water which had shot downwards through the pipe.

There was silence for a moment and then a hoarse voice answering: „This is Abama, Silent Cry is... He is...“ There was something like a swallowed sob. „I’ve got the helm now.“

Meloy could feel how he turned pale and he stumbled backwards. „Holy Mother, protect the life you have given us. Holy Son, guide us. Holy Sisters, tell us that our hour hasn’t come. Our hour hasn’t come...“

On the main bridge, Abama clung to the steering wheel with all of her power, water sloshing around her feet, waving to and fro, carrying broken glass, maps, equipment, crushed rock and the blood which dropped from Abama’s injured shoulder along before it washed it all out of the broken main window. Debris from the ship falling down into the river which rushed through the widening canyon.

The prairie dog woman stared ahead, her hands cramped around the wood of the steering wheel, while she coughed up water from her aching lungs, the pain holding back the tears.

Another shot rang out as Recha fired her rifle, one of her arms wrapped around the railing. The bullet screeched as it pierced through the air and hit the icy helmet of the spirit’s form which was about to reform after everything on board of the ship had been thrown out of balance.

Itha’s scream still echoed in the vixen’s ears and before her eyes she could see the fall of the wolverine, falling from the poop deck where he had fled just before the impact. His muscled arms had been whirling around as he tried to get a hold of something, before he reached the gearwheels. The muscled man hit the brass surface with full speed, his head thrown backwards, blood shooting around and for a moment the vixen wished that he was already dead, but a moment later her wish was shattered as the shape of the man was thrown around by the spinning wheel, dragging it along and he screamed as he hit the ground and one of the men’s arms was torn off and disappeared below, carried along by the spinning wheel.

The twisted body had slipped over the wooden floor as the ship had swung freely, leaving behind a trail of blood before it had hit the railing and hang there on the opposite from the vixen who reloaded her gun and with a ferocious growl she shot again, but the bullet did not hit anything but water, leaving behind a white trace of boiling water within the watery shape which grew in size as more and more water gathered in one spot, water which had washed over the main deck the moment it had encountered the waterfall, the spirit growing in front of their eyes.

In this moment a richly decorated cloth fluttered around. Nekoi suddenly stood right in front of the creature.

„We know each other, we met in our dreams, don't you remember?“ the priestess said and from the surging water a head of ice emerged again. Eyes of blue, cold fire looking down on the antelope.

The bells on her antlers chimed in the wind. „You violated the sanctity of life, you know that, don't you?“

The icy head seemed to tilt.

„We can't allow you to go on. You are the Holy Mother's living breath, your power was given to you to protect life, not to destroy. But you chose to when you attacked the town of Rechwikk in the lower reaches of your course.“

The rocks of the canyon shot past the ship, for a moment everything seemed to be silent as the priestess stood motionlessly in front of the huge river spirit which was motionless as well, looking down on the small furr.

Wind shot over the main deck and the priestess gown fluttered all around her again.

With a loud bang the water crushed down on the furr and the priestess body disappeared in the mighty wave.

„FIRE!“ Ileeeree screamed. „FIRE!“

And an instant later the older vixen rushed past the younger one who screwed up her teary eyes, aimed and fired.

With flashing blades Ileeeree hit the spirit's whirling form. With gritted teeth and all of the power of her run-up her swords tried to hit something substantial within the water, but instead the power of the current almost tore the blades out of her hands. She screamed out and let go of the useless blades, let herself fall backwards and reached into her belt's bags, pulling out two grenades.

Then her face shot upwards and she saw a jet of water shooting down on her. She was paralyzed and just saw it getting closer.

Another shot rang out and the suddenly the top of the spirit was thrown backwards, shattered ice shooting around from where Recha's burning orichalkum bullet had hit.

Ileeeree could hear a triumphant howl from Recha while the jet of water pelted down on her like harmless rain. Her paw pulled a lighter out of a pocket and with quivering hands she lit the grenade's fuse. „CAFY!“ she yelled. „CAFY, NOW!“ She saw the fuse disappearing within the shell of the grenade and she threw it into the water, spun around and tried to jump away.

An instant later the explosion hit the entire main deck.

The pillar of water the spirit consisted of was torn apart by the explosion within itself as if its innermost was suddenly turned outwards. A powerful wave of water shot to every side except upwards where the icy head tried to hold on.

Yet an instant later Cafy came down on it, the raccoon's face distorted in his effort and his spear with the shimmering orichalkum tip shot downwards, hitting the head with all of his power as he pushed into the ice. He could see it cracking beneath him and then the water shot around and he was thrown off his balance. He yelled as he was hurled across the wood, pulled along by the rush of water from the explosion.

Recha covered her eyes with her arm, the water hitting her with the power of a truncheon.

When she opened her eyes again, she could neither see Cafy, nor Ileeree, nor the spirit and she jumped to her feet, reached into her bag and with skilled movements and despite quivering fingers she reloaded her rifle and stared towards the edge of the canyon which got closer and closer.

„Help me! Help me!“

She heard Cafy's voice, but her head shot around as she looked for Ileeree and the spirit and then she saw the other vixen, lying against the wooden wall of the poop deck, blood all over her, flowing freely from countless wounds where her body had been pierced by the grenade's shrapnel.

„Ileeree!“ Recha shouted and rushed towards her aunt who lay motionless.

„ILEEREE!“ Recha screamed and dropped to her knees, raising her paws in order to do something for her aunt, but instead she just stared at the female, vulpine body which was just covered by bloody rags which had been torn apart by the explosion, the water and the shrapnel. And beneath it there were gaping wounds like bloody craters. Half of her face was covered by bloody hair and fur, hiding what horrible wound could be underneath.

Recha's opened her mouth, but her mouth was too dry to speak and her jaw quivered too much.

Ileeree did not open her eyes anymore, but her mouth opened and she whispered: „I'll see Sty soon.“ and a smile started to spread on her lips while tears shot from Recha's eyes.

In the meantime Abama braced herself against the steering wheel, her small, plump body pushing with all of its power. Blood shot from the wound on her shoulder and she groaned in pain as she tried to keep the propellers and the rudders in place in order to be able to take the sharp turn in the canyon she had not seen until the very last instant. She could see light shining through the gap in the rock, she knew that they had to take this one corner in order to reach a place where she could maneuver more easily. Yet the wind howled in the small gap between the rocks and threatened to pull the steering wheel out of her paws. She could feel it more clearly than ever before as it blew through what was left of the main window and right into her face, so that she had to screw up her watering eyes which had also filled with tears of pain as the strain pierced into her wounded shoulder like a blade of hot iron.

A growl escaped from in between her gritted teeth, blood stained the floor all around her as the ship moved towards the gap, seemingly evading the rocks if she kept the ship on its course and with wail of pain she pushed her feet against the ground and pushed on.

Sweat shot from her frowns and dripped onto her short muzzle, every sound seemed to fade away, she did not even see anything anymore, she just felt the strain and the quivering of her muscles in her arms and legs, but she did not let go of the wheel, yet let go of everything else, thus she did not notice the rushing

noise until it had already reached the hole where the main window had been and when she opened her eyes in order to glimpse at it, they opened wide and she screamed as she saw how a wave of water washed over the wooden hull and onto the bridge, disobeying gravity as it was driven by a powerful will.

Abama tried to shout a warning, but the moment she opened her mouth the water was washing over her and filled her mouth, so that she stumbled, letting go off the steering wheel as she tried to free herself again, while an icy head formed within the gathering water and rose slowly.

Cafy held on to the edge of the main deck, his fingers and knuckles having turned white from the strain as he tried to hold on with all of his weight and the weight of the weapons he carried. „Help me!“ he yelled, but he was not sure if anyone could hear him as the engines seemed to be totally out of control, their sound having increased to such levels that they drowned out every other noise.

Sweat dropped from his brows and into his eyes as the male raccoon struggled to keep his fingers in place, to hold on to the wood as he hung from the edge of the ship.

He did not dare to look down, fearing what he might see down below.

His breath was hardly anything but hastened pants as he focused on the feelings in his fingers which held on to the smooth, wet wood of the board which separated the outside of the hull from the main deck while his feet hang in the air, the metal surface of the hull not offering any hold for them as he noticed once more, feeling them slip off again.

„Help me!“ he yelled, feeling more sweat breaking out of his pores and the ache in his fingers which did not let go of the board.

He could feel something hitting the ship, the not so powerful blow resonating through the hull anyway and at the same time gusts of wind took a hold on his body and pulled him downwards.

A growl escaped him as he gritted his teeth, feeling the additional power of the wind pulling him downwards, adding to the weight he was already struggling with.

His mouth opened wide as he gasped for breath, he pressed his eyes together and tried to overcome the pain in his fingers which told him to let go, to let go of the board and to drop, freeing himself from the burden of his own body's weight.

Something like laughter escaped him and his feet started to move around again as he tried to find a hold of any kind while the wind rushed around him, pulled at him with tiny fingers which seemed to get stronger with every moment and then suddenly a ray of light shot across the hull and he turned his head and looked around and he saw the edge of the canyon coming closer than never before, the hull about to hit it at any moment, shooting right past him. Moss-covered, gray, wet rock shimmering in the sunlight of an opening in the mountain the ship tried to reach.

Flashing, shimmering rock got closer as the ship was unable to take the corner and the moment Cafy could feel the first piece of fern hitting his back, he screamed.

The entire ship banged from the power of the blow as it hit the rock and all of it shook powerfully. The wood screeched as all of the decks were shaken, then there was the noise of the metal and wooden hull scratching over the rock face again. The wood creaked, the floor trembled, the metal of gearwheels and engines screamed and the rigging boomed as did the balloon above while the ship passed by the rocks, getting caught by sudden winds and being blown away from the cliffs again, unexpected sunlight pouring down on it.

Recha raised her head. There was blood all over her and she felt the still warm body of her dead aunt beneath her, the one thing she had held on to when she had gotten aware of the ship's immediate impact.

Her hair hang all over her eyes, felt by blood, gun smoke and wooden splinters while she looked ahead and her mouth opened as she saw ahead: Powerful winds carried the ship over a huge, crystal-clear lake which was supplied by a waterfall which came down an almost perfectly vertical cliff whose edge was occupied by the column-shaped pieces of the glacier which had given way to an opening where the waterfall emerged from.

Suddenly something blocked her view and then the main deck was shaken by another blow. She could feel herself trembling and sliding over the wooden floor. She screamed instinctively and threw herself over her dead aunt.

As she opened her eyes she saw it and she shook her head. „No... No...“ she gasped and she could see the tears flowing down her furry cheeks as a reflection in the icy head of the spirit above her.

Fadr was thrown around as wood and metal shot around him and the furr awoke as he was thrown through the air and hit a wooden wall an instant later.

The pain shot through his head and he could feel blackness trying to take over again, yet he tried to focus and with a groan he pressed his paws against the floor and tried to rise.

Despite the numbing pain in his head and his lack of balance he managed to get on his knees when the entire ship around him was shaken by another blow which felt like an explosion at the deepest bottom of the ship. The accompanying bang felt like something hitting his ears and he could not hear anything but a ringing anymore while he got to his feet, holding on to the wall in the dark corridor.

The floor beneath him shook and trembled, additional, less powerful blows affecting the entire ship.

„Recha?“ he shouted. „Recha!“

Everything around him seemed to be unstable, yet he tried to keep on his feet while he stumbled over debris he could not see, walking into the direction where he suspected the door to the main deck.

He crashed into the door as the ship was suddenly rocked by another explosion again and with quivering fingers he pressed down the handle of the door and stumbled onto the main deck, his torn clothes fluttering around him as he tried to keep standing among the ruins of the main deck.

It had been torn apart by an incredible force, the gearwheels having been ripped out of their sockets, opening a huge hole towards the engines' room at the very bottom of the ship.

Lacking any sense of direction Fadr wandered over the shattered planks and the ripped pipes and torn rigging. For an instant he noticed that on the leeward side the hull was not held by anything but three ropes anymore, the entire ship therefore being tilted, but he paid no attention to it as he went on.

„Recha?“ he whispered. „RECHA!“ he screamed finally. „RECHA!“

And then he saw a piece of red tail among the debris. „Recha! Recha!“ he yelled and stumbled over the planks.

He fell to his knees by her side and pushed the broken wood aside, uncovering the vixen.

„Recha!“ he exclaimed and took her in his arms. „Recha!“

He could feel the warmth of her body, yet he could feel a surge of panic pushing down on his heart to the degree that he had to hold his breath while he tried to find her artery with his fingers. He exhaled the moment he could feel the faint pulse.

Tears started to run down his face while he looked into her face, holding her gently. „Recha..., Recha, wake up...“ The tears left trails of clean fur on his face as they washed off the soot which had gathered there and which he had not noticed yet.

He held the unconscious vixen in his arms, her warmth affecting him more powerfully. „Recha, it's okay, it's...“

Something shot from the hole and with a deafening screech the ship shifted towards its right and everything upon the main deck started to slide across the wooden ground. The balloon above billowed while steam shot through newly-torn holes, additional parts of the rigging came down and crashed onto the main deck all around the weasel who held the wounded, unconscious vixen close to himself.

From down below the hole the spirit had torn the marten's ears reached a scream of agony. White hot steam shot from the gap between the planks. There was another scream, which stopped all too sudden. For a moment his mind went blank and in his ears there was nothing but the screeching noise of steam which shot from exploded pipes.

His mouth quivered, he could feel hot tear drops gathering in his eyes as the gearwheels beside him joined the cacophony of screeching metal and wood. The brass of the wooden wheels came off as some power tried to turn them again. Wire got loosened as the wheels were forced to turn and then the wire shot

about. With all the power of the huge engines they shot into the balloon above and then were torn towards the floor again and slashed into the deck, shattering the planks as if they were nothing but thin boards. Splinters shot into the air and suddenly they were caught in water which jetted up from down below, a huge fountain of water and bloody ice.

His breath became faster, but he did not dare to turn around yet, even though he knew that the spirit was right there, staring at him with eyes of ice.

Slowly his paw rose towards his lips and pressed a kiss against them, slowly he lowered his hand again and softly brushed his hand over Recha's soft lips, feeling her weakened breathing for a moment and tears shot from his eyes again. He hesitated for a very short instant, but then he jumped to his feet, his arms around the vixen, pulling her off the ground. Through the turmoil and chaos of falling rigging and holes in the ground he dashed towards the railing. He could feel her weight and with a cry he lifted her over the railing and let go...

For a moment that seemed to last longer than any other time in his entire life he saw the shape of his lover floating in the air, her clothes fluttering around her lifeless body, her beautiful hair framing the face with the closed eyes. She seemed to float above the surface of the lake down below while the airship seemed to rise, getting further away from her with any moment.

He stood above the railing, entirely paralyzed, trapped in his movement, but then he could feel grief and despair rise within him and he could not bear her sight anymore.

He spun around and faced the spirit again.

He almost stumbled backwards as he tried to grasp the enormity of it: The ship had risen within the canyon, followed its course and now he could see the mountaintop, covered entirely in white and beneath the very top there was nothing but the blue shades of ice which had carved deeply into the mountain's side, digging into aeon-old stone, shaping steep valleys for itself and the glacier it formed. And right in front of the ship was a high, vertical cliff and the glacier's snout at its edge, a jet of water shooting from it, a long and thin waterfall which fell down alongside the smooth stone and crashed into a small, deep lake which formed the head of a torrential glacier stream which shot through the canyon, foam and spray shooting to and fro between the stone walls with a violent roar.

And right in front of him, on the planks of the swaying ship was not the small pillar of water anymore, instead there seemed to be a pillar of torrential water, rushing past with the power of the waterfall, carrying ice along that fed the giant head at the top with its six antlers and five eyes staring down on him, glistening in the blue shades of pure, glacial ice.

Fadr's hand cramped around the few pieces of coal in his pocket that were left to him. His hair fluttered around his face as he stared at the spirit and a wry smile started to show on his lips which transformed into a grin of clenched teeth.

„You think you have got all the time...“ he hissed through his teeth. „You think, you can still get her, don't you?“ He made a step forward and splinters cracked beneath his foot. And then he started to walk ahead, rising his head in defiance,

glaring right into the huge river spirit's face. „You think you defeated us and that there is nothing that can stop you anymore...?“

The river spirit did not move at all, looking down on the small furr who came closer very slowly.

„You can't speak without possessing someone, but I know you understand me...“ the mage hissed, his hand endlessly turned the piece of coal in his pocket. „Therefore let me tell you two things: You won't get her! You won't!“ He shouted. „Do you hear me, YOU WON'T!“ A tear ran down his cheek. „And second... You made a huge mistake coming here, because, look around... All of this is wood...“

He could feel the smoldering beneath his skin, he could feel heat shooting to his head like a flush and suddenly his clothes started to crackle.

„And it BURNS!“

And with a scream he let go of it. Instantly he could feel it explode all around him: His entire body caught in a huge ball of fire and every piece of wood and coal and even metal, skin and bone and fur followed his magical suggestion, breaking out in spontaneous combustion.

Beneath blackened eyelids Fadr smiled while the fire jumped across to every ounce, every inch of the ship, every engine, every gearwheel, nail, every piece of rope and metal casing, reaching the balloon above and for a moment it billowed and then it exploded and its gaseous content poured down like liquid fire, engulfing the entire ship, transforming all of it into a huge ball of fire. The planks burst apart and the content of the ship's bowels erupted while the huge wooden corpse shot forward and with the screeching of metal and the roar of the blaze it crashed into the glacier snout, going off in explosion after explosion, their echoes ringing out over the edge of the mountain, before everything became silent again and the blackened, smoldering carapace started to fall down and with a last bang it crashed into the glacial lake, instantly heating it to the boiling point and then sinking slowly beneath the steam and foam of the foaming water.

End of Chapter 19.



Annotation 1: Rechwikk is a small city, a part of the Corronfray region which is known as a military power against the nations of the south. Rechwikk is known for its mills.

Annotation 2: Journals are *the* major source of any kind of news, as there are few other means to transmit them. Nevertheless journals have a notoriety of being unreliable and sensationalist.

Annotation 3: A war tribe is a tribe which has chosen to loot everything it encounters in its way. They are something in between a gang of robbers and a renegade mercenary force. Most war tribes are usually short-lived, but the damage they do is tremendous.

Annotation 4: Lake Hyakku is the centre of the Hundred Kingdoms as the many small nations the Hundred Kingdoms consist of, are situated all around the lake.

Annotation 5: A spirit is usually limited to the natural phenomenon that fuels its power, such as a river. It is firm belief that the spirits were not gifted by the Holy Mother as the furs were, as the spirits cannot communicate and are limited in their freedom, despite their huge power.

Annotation 6: Howling is a traditional way of mourning the recently deceased, letting them know who they belonged to as they join their ancestors.

Annotation 7: The Prayer of Resolution is a prayer to the gods to relieve a dying furr of its mortal pains. Only priests know its precise wording and they are bound to share this knowledge only with those who are beyond any mortal help.