



Migratory Birds
Chapter 16

AIRBORNE

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Edited by **Raid the Revenge**



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The crew

Sty, fox, the captain

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

Abama, prarie dog, second navigator

Silent Cry, rabbit, helmsman

Lokos, viscacha, first engineer

Meloy, goat, mechanic

Berry, spectacled bear, mechanic/girl friday

The mercenaries

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

Cafy, raccoon, mercenary/lancer

Itha, wolverine, mercenary/archer

Recha, vixen, markswoman and Ileeree's cousin

Nekoi Devoya, antelope, priestess of the Moon Goddesses

Pensha, squirrel, Nekoi's acolyte

Fadr, weasel, mage



Night had fallen. A steady wind from the north-east had blown most of the clouds out of the sky, so that the stars could shine brightly. The golden moon showed a diminishing crescent, while Tezu, the red moon, gave off its strange constant reddish light, showing no phases at all, just a huge circle of dark, almost brownish red amongst the stars. The texture it showed the world beneath looked like frozen whirls on an even surface, as if someone had thrown many small stones into a perfectly clear pond which had frozen an instant after they had submerged beneath its surface.

The black moon was high in the sky as well, perfectly dark and almost invisible except that it concealed the stars.

On the uppermost deck of an airship which flew through the darkness stood an antelope. Despite the noise of the ship's engines, thudding, hissing and creaking, she sang. Sometimes a few words could be distinguished, but most of the time she was just warbling and humming. The yellow and orange dress she wore fluttered around her, just like her curly hair which whirled around her antlers. Her eyes were closed as she moved her body in an instinctive dance oblivious to the world which surrounded her when she raised her head and opened her mouth wide to sing wholeheartedly.

Her voice was carried away by the wind and it was as if the sound of the vessel's machines provided the rhythm for her wordless song.

She started to sway her hips and raise her arms, humming along. She made a careful lunge and her other foot reached out, drawn an invisible crescent on the floor before the movement of her hip propagated itself throughout her body. She shook her head and lowered it. Her long hair fell down and covered all of her face while her hands turned outwards. Slowly her humming faded away.

Spiritedly the priestess threw her head backwards again, throwing her hair out of her face. She smiled a little bit while she readjusted her headdress. Finally she reached inside her long gown and produced a small cap the same color as her dress and put it on her head again.

When she turned around she noticed the young vixen who stood on top of the poop deck. The young woman smiled towards the priestess and greeted her with a sign of her hand.

The antelope responded with a simple nod, smiling as well before she turned around and walked towards the bridge.

The bridge was dark except for a few dim oillamps which brightened the navigator's workplace, the broad consoles at the rear of the room which were full of navigational instruments and maps. Abama, the prairie dog second navigator, dozed, her head hidden between her arms which rested on the console. She snored a little bit.

Silent Cry stood at the helm, his long bunny ears flicking occasionally while he stood there. He yawned from time to time and looked at the binnacle next to him, turned the huge ship's wheel a little bit.

Sty stood next to him. He watched the dark landscape which passed by far below them: The seemingly lifeless woods, the small brooks and the morass

which surrounded them, these were the few spots where no trees grew at all. They were passing by the endless woods of the Midlands, heading towards the North.

Sty turned around when he heard the rustle of cloth approaching. He nodded towards the priestess who came closer.

“Captain?” she said lowly. “You wanted to speak to me?”

“Yes! The moons are up if I am not mistaken. I want you to perform a scrying. Our little detour yawed us.”

“Do you think this necessary? I performed a scrying three nights ago.”

The fox pursed his lips. “Do it anyway!” he replied after a moment. “I want to be absolutely sure about this. Our prey won’t forgive us any sloppiness.”

The priestess nodded. “There is...”

Sty raised an eyebrow.

“Now that Pensa is...” the priestess said and fell silent. Her eyes wandered and she raised her hand as if she wanted to touch her face but her hand stopped half-way while she looked to the ground, her mouth opened. “I...” She shook her head and pulled herself together. “I would need someone to assist me,” she said finally.

Sty blinked. “Well, I think Abama can...”

“No,” the priestess interrupted him. “I would prefer a male.”

The fox looked at her in surprise. “Well, I think Berry is still in the kitchen preparing tomorrow’s meals.”

The priestess nodded. “And I need the key.”

“Yes, of course.” The captain instantly started to get a key from from one of his pockets which he handed to the antelope woman. “Anything else?” he asked.

The antelope shook her head. “I will let you know about the outcome.”

“Good!” the fox stated and turned away from her.

Without any further ado, the priestess walked off the bridge again, passing by the dozing prairie dog. This time she took the door to the lower decks and walked through the dark, narrow corridors, walking around many corners, passing by several doors, descending two small staircases before she reached the rear of the ship where she turned left and into yet another, larger corridor. From a wide-open door light came into the dark corridor.

The antelope stepped right into the mess.

Berry, the small spectacled bear sat on a small stool, his two paws full of dough he had been kneading in a jar.

The antelope shortly smiled at him. “The captain told me that you were available.”

“Erh... Well, in a few minutes. I just have to finish up with the dough,” the young man replied.

“Very good, the captain wants me to perform a scrying and I need someone to...” She hesitated shortly. “...assist me,” she added finally.

The bear smiled shortly. “But I am not initiated¹ or...”

"That won't be necessary," Nekoi replied. "I will tell you what you have got to do."

The spectacled bear nodded hesitatingly.

"I will get what I need for this. You can finish your work in the meantime," she suggested.

The bear nodded once again and the antelope left the room again, leaving the bear who went on kneading the dough, but hurried to finish up. Berry was just about to clean his paws when the priestess returned, putting away the key she had used to fetch the small sealed jar she carried in one hand. It was made of painted fireclay and showed strange letters which went around the whole of the jar. The jar's opening was sealed with a cork which was additionally fixed with sealing wax. A signet which Berry could not see very well had been imprinted upon the wax.

After the key had disappeared into the safety of her gown's hidden pockets she turned to the young bear. "Are you ready?"

He nodded and rubbed his nose.

"Let's go to the hardware storage room, I set up everything there." She turned around and walked out the mess again.

The young man followed her. The two of them walked through the dark corridors, taking a staircase to the lower segments of the ship where they were closer to the engines and could hear their noises more distinctively, most especially the hissing of the steam engines' valves. The priestess finally opened a small door to their right and they walked through it into a perfectly dark room.

After a few moments the antelope had found a candle which had been standing on a shelf next to the door. She lit it and instantly the many crates which occupied most of the room became visible. The crates, the wooden braces and pillars cast deep, dancing shadows in the weak light of the single candle. There was still some free space opposite the door where the floor showed a chalk drawing consisting of many circles and calligraphic inscriptions. A small, very simple altar stood behind the chalk drawing, in front of the wall.

The priestess walked over to the altar and put down the sealed jar she had been carrying.

"What should I do?" Berry asked while the priestess knelt down to light three candles which stood on the altar.

"Nothing much," she replied. "First and foremost you are here because I need a counterweight. I am going to immerse in meditation which can be risky in many different ways. You are here to watch over me and to help me come back. If you notice anything strange, you simply wake me from my trance."

The bear nodded slowly. He did not really understand what she meant.

"As you might know I do this to pinpoint our destination and I will do this by drawing the result of my mental search. You are here to make sure that I do not accidentally erase all that again." She finished lighting the third candle and then blew out the candle she had used first, so that only the three candles on the altar were still burning.

The antelope stretched herself a little bit before she sat down cross-legged. She sat in the middle of the chalk drawing, occupying most of it while she faced the altar. The wooden floor in front of her was empty. She took a piece of chalk from the altar and placed it in front of her. Then she took the sealed jar.

“Are you ready?” she asked the spectacled bear.

“Yes,” he replied watching the antelope without moving at all.

“Good!” she said and pulled the jar closer. She exhaled audibly. “Goddesses, protect me!” she mumbled. “Goddesses, guide me! Goddesses, allow me to pass!” She grabbed the jar’s wax covered cork and forcefully pulled at it. The wax broke apart and she pulled the cork out with a thud. Instantly she put the jar to her lips and drank all of its content, liquid ran down her furry chin and drenched the hem of her gown.

The young bear observed her. He needed a moment to understand that the liquid in the jar was water. He gulped.

After she had swallowed the last drop of water, the priestess gasped and put the jar down, focussing on the three candles in front of her. “Goddesses, protect me!” she mumbled., her long hair falling into her face. “Goddesses, guide me!” Her hand reached out for the piece of chalk. “Goddesses, allow me to see what your light illuminates.” And then she started to hum. First it was perfectly monotonous, before she opened her lips and allowed the notes to change. Her tongue started to move, she babbled and bit after bit the sounds from her mouth started to form strange words Berry could not understand.

Her eyelids twitched while she stared at the three candles, their light slowly taking over her entire field of vision.

Words flowed from her lips like a warm breeze. The antelope could feel how her body relaxed as a feeling of freedom ran through her. The sound of her voice transformed into a hum which surrounded her entirely and took her away. She had the exhilarating feeling of being engulfed by a tone which resonated through her body and instinctively she arched her back, rising her head towards the sky, feeling the presence of the moons she did not see.

Suddenly a powerful, almost painful twitch went through the whole of her body and she opened her eyes, gasping for breath. She was confused for a moment. She stared at the three candles in front of her and at her hand which held a piece of chalk. Its dust had painted her fur in white. While she looked at it in surprise she dropped forward like a lifeless bag.

With a loud thud her head hit the wooden floor.

“Lady Devo-ya?” the spectacled bear asked her with concern. He was still standing close to the door, he did not dare to approach the antelope, even though he was frozen in a pose which suggested this.

“Don’t...!” Her head hurt where it had hit the ground. Clumsily she sat up again. She would certainly sport a nice bump for the next few days, but she was already composed enough again to warn the ursine. “Don’t step into the circle!” she said, while she rose slowly from the ground.

The man made a step backwards. “Everything alright?”

The antelope supported herself on one hand while the other one carefully touched the swelling bump on her forehead. "I don't know," the priestess said absent-mindedly. "This is..." She did not go on as her own fingers' touch hurt. She started instinctively. After a moment she shook herself and readjusted her gown. "I will try again," she said.

Berry leaned against the door again.

Her words became a mere whisper while she went on with her prayer. She tried to focus, but there was something which bugged her. It was a nagging feeling, as if there was something close by. She closed her eyes and tried to shake the feeling off, but it was too strong, the more she tried to ignore it, the more powerful it became. It was as if something flickered in the corner of her eyes. She shivered and lost the thread of her mantra. She opened her eyes again and stared into the storage room.

"How much time has passed?" she asked.

"Erh..." The bear hesitated. "A few moments...!?" he suggested.

The antelope frowned.

"Goddesses, guide me!" she repeated once again and inhaled deeply while she closed her eyes. Darkness welcomed her once again. She tried to focus on her breathing, allowed her body to relax. Beneath her eyelids her pupils flickered erratically. She started to move her head around and once again she spoke the words of her mantra, her head moving about in accordance to the strange melody of her recital. Once again, she could feel how her surroundings faded away, the sound became more prominent on her mind. She swayed, pricking up her ears, listening to sounds she was certain of perceiving beneath the omnipresent tone which surrounded her.

There was nothing but redness around her, her body floated freely. She was carried away by a strong current, she could feel it pulsing in a slow rhythm, while she drifted along. She twitched when she touched solid materials, rough wood, cold metal and billowing clothes. But none of these touches lasted for long as she was instantly carried away, through narrow passages where the current became stronger and into wider places without any fast movement.

She exhaled the last air which was left inside her body and was carried away.

Her clothes, her body and everything her surroundings were made of were left behind, while she floated over the edge and was suddenly in free fall. She fell for a long time before the current hit the ground and then rushed forward, gushed through trees and washed over rocks, shot over the land, taking the priestess along. The antelope was thrown around, turned inside the powerful stream, sounds left her lips like small bubbles in the powerful gust of sound which droned all around her.

She was thrown around, she turned and went head over heels. She could not see anything at all, she did not feel anything but the current which carried her along as if she was a part of it.

Finally it went over the edge of something and instantly she fell again and this time the flow sped up, got faster and faster, transformed into a jet as it was about to reach its goal which waited at the bottom.

The priestess shivered, opened her mouth wide, gasped and through herself around. The current pulled at her body with all its weight, forced her to follow it while it was getting even faster, ready to strike in.

With a yelp the antelope reached out towards the light above and suddenly she could feel how the current went past her, washed down from her while she turned around and was thrown upwards. Her eyelids quivered while she felt like the last drops fell from her body. Then she opened her eyes and for an instant she saw nothing at all, then there was a dark sky full of smoke, the crumbling walls of ruins, shadows moving and then there was only darkness where she would have expected moonlight.

She shivered erratically, still without control over most of her body. Her head twitched powerfully while she stared into the oncoming darkness and then fear rose inside her mind in a tidal wave of panic. It struck her a few moments later and took hold of her heart with strong, cold bands. Her mouth opened wide. Silver flashed up.

“Lady Devo-ya, Lady Devo-ya!”

The spectacled bear shook the twitching female body he held in his arms. “Lady Devo-ya!” he cried.

A last twitch went through her before her body was still. The eyes of the antelope were wide opened and stared at the dark ceiling while she hung in the spectacled bear’s arm.

She needed a moment to recognize that there was not only darkness above her, but the wooden beams of the ceiling. She inhaled deeply, trying to get as much air into her lungs as possible. Confusion was still reigning most of her mind, but slowly she started to noticed her surroundings again. She saw the ceiling, she heard the drones of the working engines, she smelled the wood, the candles and the present bear, she felt how he held her.

“Lady Devo-ya?”

The antelope raised her head a little bit and looked at the bear. Her eyes were still wide open as if she was surprised to see him.

“Are you alright?”

The priestess turned her head and looked anxiously throughout the room until her eyes found the three candles which burned upon the altar. Their light shone warmly.

“I lost my focus,” she said hoarsely, her voice full of surprise.

“I... Ehm... Are you okay?” the bear asked. “You were... gasping for breath, it sounded as if you were... suffocating. I was worried, but at first I did not dare to disturb you.”

The priestess turned her face towards him and looked at him for a moment. “I...” She wet her dry lips, her eyes searching for the three candles again. “No,” the priestess said finally. “You did the right thing. It was... I had...” She tried to find the words to describe the panic which had struck her when she had approached the darkness at the end of her trance.

She raised her arms a little bit and tried to get in an upright position so that she did not hang in his arms anymore.

Berry helped her as well as he could.

In this moment she noticed the piece of chalk in her hand. Instantly she looked to the ground, a short feeling of anxiety striking her, but it faded away when she saw the white scribbles on the floor. They were hardly readable, strange lines and hasty letters scattered all over the ground in front of the priestess.

The bear gulped. He was leaning above the priestess, having risen halfway when she had sat up.

The priestess looked at the scribbles for some time. Then she noticed she she was still holding the piece of chalk. She hissed when she tried to open the cramped fingers. It hurt and her hand trembled when she put down the rest of the chalk. "I think I got it nonetheless," she said.

The young man nodded. "It's hard to read, but I think I understand most of it," he said. "I think that is supposed to be the river, isn't it?" He pointed towards the largest of the lines among the scribbles.

The priestess swallowed the saliva which had gathered in her mouth. In this moment she noticed for the first time that her gown had dropped down and that her chest was totally bared. She looked at the man who was still above her and noticed that he forced himself to study her scribbles. "There is paper and ink in that shelf over there," she said.

Quickly Berry turned around, careful not to look at her directly. He took a sheet of paper, a penholder and a small jar of ink from the shelf next to the door. When he turned towards her again he saw that the priestess was about to get to her feet again, but she swayed dangerously. Quickly he hurried towards her and took her arm, helping her to stand up again.

"Thank you," she said. Her hair was hanging into her face, her fur showed droplets of sweat, but he tried not to look at her at all, because her breasts were still bare. When she was standing she pulled her gown over her shoulder again.

Berry put down the sheet of paper on a crate, opened the jar with ink, dipped the pen into the black liquid and began to copy the scribbles.

"Is there anything else I can do?" he asked while he copied the first few letters.

The priestess sniffled while she readjusted her long, curly hair. "Yes," she answered. "After you brought the map to the captain I want you to join me in my cabin."

"In your...?" The bear looked up from his paper, his face showing doubt that he had understood her correctly, but when he raised his head he looked directly at the key the antelope held out to him.

"Yes!" she said simply. "I want you to share my bed tonight. Do not think that there are any romantic feelings attached to this, this is a matter of balancing." She pushed the last strand of hair from her face and then turned towards him, looking straight into his eyes. "After all, I cannot ask Pensha to do this, now can I?" Her voice had gotten very low, her face was devoid of any emotion. The last few syllables faded away and for a moment it was almost totally silent within the room.

Wondering if she was sad he took the key from her hands.

The priestess turned around. "Bring the map and the key to the captain," she said. "I will be waiting for you." Her steps were very slow, but nevertheless rather unsteady when she approached the door.

The vixen scurried through the dark corridor. She stopped at one of the doors to the private cabins. She knocked cautiously.

There was no reply, but a moment later she could hear how the bolt inside moved and she could open the door.

"Come in quickly!" Fadr said.

Recha did not look around but slipped inside and closed the door, bolting it again, before she turned around. Her eyes opened wide when she saw the weasel sitting on the ground.

The room was only dimly lit with two candles but she instantly noticed the white chalk drawing on the floor, a complicated pattern of interwoven letters and symbols. Fadr sat in the middle of it, entirely naked except for short trousers.

"What are you doing?" the vixen asked. She laughed a little bit.

"Please step into the circle!" he replied.

"You want me to... what?"

"Just step over the outer ring of the circle, please." He reached out with his hand.

The vixen hesitated for a moment. The ring was not really large, on the contrary it had certainly not been made for much more than one person, but he had used most of the floor as the small cabin did not offer much more space. Finally she made the step he had asked for and instantly she took her by her hand and pulled her closer and into a sitting position. She was instantly directly opposite him, their faces mere inches from each other.

She tried to find a position she could sit in despite the limits of the circle. "What are you doing," she asked lowly, not daring to speak up. The tranquility of the room and whatever ritual he was performing impressed her despite her uncomfortable position.

"The priestess is performing a scrying," he said. He had adapted her low volume.

The vixen knitted her brows.

The man quickly rubbed his nose. "It is not very enjoyable for me," he explained while he let his hands take a hold of her body.

"Have you always done this when she made a scrying?" Recha asked.

"No. At first, I thought that it would not affect me that strongly but..." He scratched his cheek. "It is as if..." He searched for an explanation for a short time. "It's as if someone is running through your room all the time. She has to search for our prey, so she has to go past everything that surrounds her and... Well, I can feel her doing this." He had gotten closer to her and with a gentle pull of his hands he encouraged her to get closer.

His mouth opened and he gave her a short kiss on her lips. She replied the kiss and then instinctively licked her lips which had started to tickle.

"Besides I fear that she might notice us being here together," he whispered and kissed her again, his lips wandering over hers when his mouth closed. He opened it again an instant later and she did the same, for an instant their lips moved over each other and it felt as if they melted in their hot breath.

His hand stroked her side, wandering under her leather shirt and running over the fur beneath it. The weasel moved even closer to her, one of his hands wandered up her back and gently pulled her closer so that he could embrace her, their furry cheeks rubbing against each other while he tilted his head so that he could give her a light kiss on her shoulder. His other hand was resting on her thigh and it did not move except for his thumb which was restless above the leather pants which were tightly stretched. She had risen one hand as well, but it was just quivering in the air a little bit while she inhaled deeply and experienced another one of his light kisses, this time on her cheek.

"I hope Lady Devo-ya doesn't..."

"Hush!" He moved his head and silenced her with a kiss. "Don't talk about it, trust my magic."

She opened her mouth when he receded and he noticed it and reacted instantly, approaching her again, their tongues reached out and touched before their lips did. For a short moment the only thing they could feel was the roughness of their tongues, cautiously running over each other, strange tastes spreading upon their surfaces before the softness of their lips met as well and they closed the kiss. She trembled a little bit. His hand wandered up and down her thigh.

"You are taking advantage of the situation," she whispered, extended her canine teeth and grazed his muzzle with them.

"As if I'd need any pretense," he whispered. "I'd do you all over the ship if I had a chance to do so." He approached her again.

"Thank the Goddesses you can't!" she answered and gave in to his movement.

They kissed again. Their lips joined. His ones were firm and while hers were very soft and he enjoyed how they ran over his own while their tongues glided over each other. The weasel could feel a strange quiver wandering down his sides. Their saliva mixed and flowed through their joined mouths, spread between their tongues and wound its way through their lips when they renewed the kiss. When they broke the kiss, he exhaled deeply and a tiny thread of saliva connected them for a short moment before it was broken and all that remained was tickling feeling and the taste upon their tongues.

She nuzzled him, rubbed her cheek against his and he returned the caress which tickled upon his skin. One of his hands reached out for the buttons of her shirt.

Recha twitched a little bit but then she stopped nuzzling him and instead looked down on herself, observing his hand which was about to undo her shirt.

He leaned a little bit forward so that his mouth was right next to her vulpine ear. She could hear his excited breathing.

"I want to take you all night long," he whispered.

A smile spread upon her lips. "I feel like I am in heat²." She giggled and watched how his fingers loosed the fifth button. Her breasts started to show.

"You are so gorgeous, so desirable, the most beautiful woman on this ship and to me you are far more than that."

She saw how her chest heaved when she breathed and when he undid the last button and the leather parted she could feel cool air of her surroundings flowing around her breasts which were dominated by her erected breastwarts which were as hard as they could be. In the moment they were freed from the confinement she noticed for the first time how sensitive they were. Their nervous itch transmitted itself through her body and she leaned forward herself so that she could into his ear as well. "Prove it!" She grinned and when his hands reached out to touch her bosom she arched her back and let go a little moan of satisfaction.

His fingers closed around the soft flesh which was covered by even softer, whitish fur except for her teats which were perfectly bare and showed nothing but tender skin which rippled in excitement. Gently his paws took entirely hold of them by their side and pressed them against each other so that her chestfur was trapped in between them. His thumbs run over the hard knobs of her nipples and she responded with an irregular breath as she did not want to interfere with the pleasure of his caresses which spread warmly through her, from her chest to her shoulders and down to her abdomen.

Fadr leaned forward again and she closed her eyes and let him kiss her again, holding her breath as long as his hands were caressing her chest and his mouth was joined with her, their tongues engaged in yet another dance around each other until she had to break the kiss in order to catch her breath.

"Getting breathless already? We have not even started yet," he whispered and gently nudged her cheek with his nose.

"Oh, then I better relax and let you do all the work."

Fadr laughed and she smiled at him.

His fingers caught her nipples and he started to rub them between his furless tips. The teasing movement seemed to further tighten the skin of her breasts. It was not only their skin anymore which responded to it, she was convinced that it was the entirety of their fabric which reacted to his hands' presence.

"Alright! But don't complain if I wear you out," he whispered.

"You are welcome to try," she replied and an instant later she moaned when he lowered himself and his tongue reached out to lap at her nipples, the soft, wet and slightly rough surface running over the sensitive, aroused skin which stood out from her breasts' short fur. It did not feel like a tongue at all, but rather like some fluid which washed over it, adoring this particular spot of her form. From time to time she quivered erratically, watching how his tongue reached out again and again, the feeling returning, until his mouth came even closer and his lips made a grab for it, catching it so that he could kiss it and suck at it, before his tongue licked it again.

Recha gasped lightly and then she saw how the white of his teeth flashed up and an instant later their hard surface scraped the sensible flesh. Instinctively her

hands reached out for his head while his teeth left a mark of hot, irritated skin. Her nipple was shortly caught in between them and suddenly her blood shot into it. It was not pain she felt that spread in it, just like her nipple which he squeezed strongly at the same time. It felt like a thousand hot, tiny needles piercing simultaneously into it, going entirely through it. She hissed a little bit and arched her back even further, her hands around his head.

His sharp teeth let go and instantly a warm itch shot throughout her chest. His hands took hold of her breast again, squeezed them, massaged them until his fingers caught her nipples again and pinched them with the same intensity. It was as if his fingers wrung the entirety of her breasts' skin, pulling it closer together.

Heavily breathing she looked into his shimmering eyes. She grinned at him, just like he grinned at her.

"You like that, don't you?"

"It isn't half bad," she replied with a trembling voice.

They kissed again, this time only their lips touching lightly so that he could continue to tease.

"Why don't you try your skills further down below?" she suggested after they had broken the kiss. "I am wet," she mouthed and as if she wanted to prove her point she spread her legs.

Instantly one of his hands let go of her chest, wandered through the whitish fur of her belly and then over the tight surface of her leather pants, the fingers slightly pressing into it where her mons had to hide underneath. His touch instantly gratified her with a feeling of unexpected contentment which spread from her abdomen throughout her body, yet could not overshadow the sensations of her mons being overflowed by her own juices which gathered between her netherlips. She knew that it could not be true, but she felt as if her pants had to be soaked by now and when she inhaled the scents of her own arousal were so strong that she knew that he had to be affected by it too, her eyes instinctively reaching out for his loins which were still hidden under his short pants, but there was a visible bulge over there. For a moment her fingers caressed the long, round shape beneath his pants and he responded with a quiver that went from his shoulders to his loin. Quickly her hands undid the leather strap which held the pants in place and an instant later she could touch the smooth tip of his curved sex, it strengthened his arousal and he moved backwards a little bit, so that she could not distract him anymore.

With a slick movement he lay down on the floor, his face looking up between her thighs. "Now let's have a taste from this," he said and grinned.

Recha shivered and her hands went down in a hurry, for an instant she stroked his face and he leaned against her fingers, touched, nibbled at them with his lips, but the vixen was too excited for these subtleties and she undid the leather straps of her pants. Her dense pubic fur got visible and an intoxicating scent emerge from it and Fadr's muzzle sank right into it as he inhaled deeply.

It tickled and Recha laughed, rather out of excitement than amusement. She could feel his cool nose brushing through her pubic fur and touching the hot skin underneath, being so close to her sex which was still hidden under the leather of

her pants. Not being able to bear that any longer, she pushed him away. He looked at her with a smile, noticing how her arousal sent her into a hurry. She rose slightly and pushed down her pants. He helped her to get one leg out of her pants, but did not worry about the other one anymore, as her hands were already at the back of his head again and pushed him closer to the sex which was now exposed right before him.

“All for you,” she mumbled, the words fleeting her lips.

Even in the dim light of the room he could see the glistening of the wet surface. He had to grin to himself, seeing the wonderfully soft, bright flesh, the lines of her labia surrounded by the white fur of her lower body with the bare outer labia having grown considerably in size. He felt drawn to it as if it was magic, yet he knew that this was no magic at all, it was just his instincts being called upon by her. He closed his eyes and buried his face in her lap.

Recha sighed heartily when she could feel how he was getting closer and a sudden, erratic giggle escaped her when his lips touched her labia. It was nothing but a single kiss and yet for a moment she was completely lost in the feeling, mostly because she also knew that things would progress from there and with this notion on her mind she could feel the moisture of her abdomen flowing even stronger, it was an almost ticklish feeling which could only be...

She moaned deeply when his tongue dug between her labia, it was upon the sensible fabric of her sex and the pleasure of this was overwhelming in these first moments of ecstasy and her moaning became much longer when the tongue moved upwards and lapped all over her sex, passed over her clit and disappeared inside his mouth again, where he let it linger for a moment, enjoying her taste. It was as strong as an overripe fruit which was almost about to rot again, yet its sweetness was all that he wanted to taste and he shivered a little bit and decided to have some more of that, starting to lap her sex with sudden urge. His tongue ran over her sex again and again, caressed the entire surface of her outer and inner labia, passed over her opening and teased her clit.

“Hooo!” She shivered and giggled, she did not even notice how tense she was, how every muscle of her body had contracted while her hands lay on the back of the weasel’s head, her fingers holding his hair with all strength while the tongue went on.

Fadr interrupted his licks with little kiss before he let his tongue dig deeper, it pressed against her opening and slipped in a little bit. Recha laughed in response and he could feel how even more of her juice spread upon his tongue. Greedily he sucked it up. He kissed the insides of her thighs for a change, appreciating the muscles beneath her skin and fur, before turning towards the softness of her sex again. His tongue sank down between her labia again and continued to move up and down, caressing the irritable fabric. He used his fingers to spread her outer lips apart and then he used the entire flat side of his tongue to lap at her.

“Goddess, Fadr...” the vixen moaned.

The weasel interrupted his caresses for a short smile.

She pressed herself against the wooden floor, her hands still clenched around his head without applying too much pressure. She knew that she should not be

too forceful and despite the pleasure which rose and ebbed within her she had enough control. Her eyelids were half-opened and fluttered while her abdomen quivered, driven by the inner fire of her delight. Everything inside her body, her muscles and her skin had contracted and she could feel how her sensitive spots tickled in anticipation, but for the moment nothing was more important than his caresses and how his tongue slipped over the skin of her sex. She gasped when he started to pay special attention to her clit, freeing it from its hood, exposing it to the cool air before he covered it with his tongue and its rough surface ran over it and it triggered such a strong sensation that Recha just could not stop herself from laughing totally out of control. Her laughter died away in an almost whining sound and she hissed strongly when his tongue fully touched her clit again.

The delicious fluid of her sex flowed around his tongue while he went on. Lustfully he consumed as much of it as he could and elicited a laughter from her this way, which instantly transformed into whine when his tongue flicked over her clit again. He teased the little knob with the tip of his tongue, it tipped it, it swept past it. To her it felt as if it was all around it, it was omnipresent around her sensible spot and she shuddered powerfully. She moaned and giggled and the weasel grinned to himself when he saw how she reacted to his salacious caresses. But he instantly hid his teeth again and kissed her netherlips with his mouth's lips, meeting her softness with his own, his saliva mixing with her lubricant before he lapped it all up and enjoyed its taste upon his tongue before it got busy again.

The vixen yipped and her hands wandered aimlessly through his hair. She felt him as a hot, heavy body of dense fur and twisting muscles between her legs, the different feelings uniting in her lap, inside her hot and wet mons. Recha had to laugh again, her twisting and elusive associations mixed with the indulgence and the intense contentment of her body. She was appetent, lascivious, lewd, vibrating in excitement and blissfully enjoying his endeavors and before she knew what happened she suddenly felt a sudden strain inside her body as if a muscle had suddenly contracted. There was a moment of complete calm and then she broke out laughing which suddenly transformed into a long moan while her hands cramped in Fadr's hair. She did not even notice how the weasel whimpered as she was entirely consumed by the warmth and pleasure of her climax. Beneath her fluttering eyelids she gasped several times, uttered something and then relaxed, her body slowly letting go of the male. She had not even noticed how she had wrapped her legs around him and how her hands had held onto his hair.

Fadr could feel how the powerful grip of her hands and legs gave way to weakness and after quickly lapping up the last drops of her juice, he rose and looked at her with a messy hair. He came closer again (getting rid of his pants while doing so) and he lay down on her and kissed her on her lips. She responded weakly and smiled at him, while biting on her lips.

Gently he rose on her leg of her and moved around it, so that he was next to her, she rolled a little bit to the side and he lay down behind her.

For an instant she could feel his hand between her thighs and a moment later she gasped when she felt how his sex slipped between her sensible labia. His loin pressed against her backside and his member slipped in deeper, parted her sex

and finally came to a rest when it was entirely inside of her. It happened so quickly. She could feel the urging power in his loin pressing against her body. Her sex was still very touchy, a little bit of strange sensibility mixed with the pleasure of the sensation, but at the same time his arms wrapped around her and suddenly she felt how she was inside his embrace.

For a moment she just quivered and lay there in his arms. His sex now inside of her, inside her lap, between her netherlips and between her wet inner folds, Recha tried to hold onto this feeling and the mere thought triggered a rush of blood to her head. She tensed instinctively and as a result she was suddenly getting an even stronger impression of the male member inside of her, as her inner muscles seized it entirely, all of its shape, its length, its girth and even the small movements when it hardened even further in accordance to his heartbeat. She inhaled sharply through her teeth and let the tension fade away, enjoying the mellow feeling which was caused by nothing but the presence.

“Oh yeah, this is just right,” she said breathlessly.

“Yeah?” he grunted into her ear, too excited to say anything more than this as he had to control himself not to shake too strongly, not to rush his movements like all of his instincts told him to. They were an uncontrollable voice in his hand, they lingered in every part of his body and urged him to make love to the woman in his arms. The building tension which arose from his sex which was trapped between soft, wet netherlips gave way to sudden spasms inside his loins which were intense to her as not only was he getting closer than ever, his sex glided yet deeper into her, settled and what it found there was yet an even stronger impulse which spread inside and circulated in her abdomen which relaxed in response, becoming all softness and wetness, except for her labia and her mons which seemed to contract even further due to the blood which flowed through these areas, culminating in her clit which stood above all of it, the small knot occupying much space on her mind than it ever could upon her body. Beneath it the male sex twitched again and smooth glans advanced one more time before the weasel relaxed again and the sex glided back, returning to the folds which had gotten used to its pleasant presence.

“Fuck me already,” Recha whispered.

She could hear him inhaling in response and an instant later she was overcome by the first strong movement of his body, his loins now really pressing against her backside, while small droplets of her juice flowed down her labia as her body was getting ready for what she passionately yearned for.

The inner muscles around his glans quivered erratically, with the juice that surrounded it, he had the impression that his sex was entirely immersed in a liquid, but this feeling was fleeting as an instant later it would tighten again and stimulate him with the strength of its hold. He felt a dryness in his throat while inhaling deeply, answering the urge to increase the tension in his loin. He even pressed his legs together until he felt how their muscles twitched in exhaustion and yet it was not nearly enough to satisfy the yearn to get even closer to her, her soft buttocks resting upon his pelvis.

He could smell the scents of their bodies: the saltiness of their sweat which drenched their joined furs, releasing the specific scents of these as well, the dry, tickling scent resembling hay, which was not getting all wet again. His hand ran down her sides, slipping over the coated fur, from the side of her shoulder, to the slim waist and to her wider hips while his member went in deeper inside of her, dipped into the depths of her body, her labia and the entirety of her sex infolded the hard male limb in different layers of hot, wet flesh. He pressed a kiss against her throat and she moaned his name, feeling the shaking of his tensed loin against herself and how its echo was the trembling of his sex in the hold of her own which did not let go, never eased its grasp.

“More!” she gasped. “Givemore!” And the weasel instantly tensed even further, pressed himself against her even more powerfully before he retired and her own body responded instinctively as she did not want to let him go, not to let go of the feeling of hotness that radiated throughout her, coming from her abdomen which enclosed him. His hand held her hip more powerfully, partly hindered her from moving too strongly while he tried to establish something of a rhythm, but he always ended up at the farthest point, his sex quivering at the top of its power, the tip embedded in the wet depth. Recha could feel this clearly, the burning hot spot of her pleasure and yet it felt as if it was getting too hot, tingling in irritation while her anticipation grew with every moment, her desire to feel this intensity all over was overwhelming.

She took his hand and readjusted her position, forcing him to rise a little bit (the mere change of position and the movement of his sex this caused made her gasp) and an instant later she lay on her belly and he came down on her from above, his sex slipping into her again, parting her again, gliding in on the smooth wetness of her folds as if it had not been there before.

“Ooooooh!” She groaned in delight and he heaved a sigh as well when he felt how the muscles of her backside responded to this.

“Oh, Recha...!” the few words transformed into a short gasp, before his urging loins started to move instinctively.

The vixen hissed in approval and lay fully down on the wooden floor, her sensible erect nipples pinching almost painfully when they came down on the hard underground. But this way she could brace herself for him, with a stiff highly rosen tail her pliant backside met the pushes of his pelvis which drove his glans through the responsive labia, past the sensible fabric until their sweaty furs and skins met and her tight grasp transmitted all of these powerful motions, her entire sex moving accordingly, her prickling clit overcome by sparks of pleasure. She wallowed in delight, hardly consciously aware of him anymore, except that his presence surrounded her with his scents and the physical presence of him, except for their renewing physical union of their joined sexes which moved inside and around each other, driven by the urges of their craving.

Fadr opened his mouth wide, exposed his small, yet sharp teeth and with his eyes closed he enforced his movements. “Just like that, just like that...,” gasped the vixen breathlessly and little twitches run throughout her body, rising it against his hips which mets hers again and again.

Now everyone of his thrust pressed her hard against the wooden ground, she felt like she was being pushed over it, her breasts were squeezed hard underneath her own weight and despite the pleasure of this, she arched her back and rose her head so that she could reach out to touch his buttocks whose muscles signaled every move which pushed her further across the ground, the male sex at the deepest point of its penetration before it receded again. Sweat dropped from her fur, she drooled and droplets of her juice flowed down and wet the floor, she did not care because all that she wanted was to go on like this forever, to feel Fadr above her, his weight and his muscles giving her the joy she felt in these moments.

“Yeah,” she gasped. “Yeah...” And her sensitive nipples slid over the hard wood while her entire belly wallowed in the feeling of the incoming movement. Fullness and emptiness mixed inside her abdomen. A shot of heat was released into her bloodstream whenever she felt him rise, his sex slipped through hers, passed by the most sensitive spots until the wider glans were trapped just underneath her clit which responded to its closeness.

The weasel started to groan, sweat dripped from his frowns and had entirely soaked the fur of his skin. Every pore of his body exhaled the intense excitement of his sexual drive. “Yeah, yeah, yeah...!” He could feel how the moisture of her sex welled up whenever his member glided all the way into her again and then he met the firm resistance of her backside, the curve of her buttocks pressing against his loin. The tension which pervade his entire groin was getting more powerfully and he did not even open his eyes anymore, as by now he knew the sight of her highly rosen tail and how her buttocks rocked whenever they met his pelvis. He pursed his lips and exhaling he rose his head and focused on that spot of light which he imagined to see, while his movement became violent and entirely unrestrained.

A moment later she could feel how his sex grew in size deep inside of her and before she understood what happened, all of her power left her and for a moment everything got black in front of her eyes as she fully collapsed on the wooden floor, gasping uncontrollably.

“There, there...!” His hands pressed her buttocks together while he held his sex at the deepest point, shaking powerfully all over his body, feeling strangely light and the pressure of his powerful heartbeat throbbing throughout his entire body. It felt as if countless tiny teeth were gnawing at his skin and this reminded him of the impression he had when she had done something similar on a different occasion. This souvenir floated through his mind while he could feel how his sex twitched inside her hold and the drain inside his groin. All of this mixed and for a moment he was completely sucked into this whirl of these violently pleasant sensations while the vixen growled and hissed beneath him, being torn away by her own orgasm which had started off in her mons and had now taken control of her entire body which seemed to be trembling from the very same sensations which had overcome the boundaries of her abdomen and were now running throughout her. It felt as if she was taken completely by the male sex while her

entire body released the sweet juice of her love and she rippled just like the folds of her sex and felt their warmth while she gasped his name.

He pulled his sex out of her and the twitching member spread stains of semen on her back and her backside while Recha moaned a little bit as her sex was about to contract again without finding any resistance anymore.

With a moan the man let himself drop down on the floor besides her. Recha turned her head towards him and smiled and instantly he returned the smile without even thinking about it, it was just her smile which seduces him to do so.

“You marked me³,” she stated. “It’s all mine now!” She grinned.

Feeling as exhausted as he did he just chuckled shortly, he did not feel able to reply something.

She moved a little closer. “Tomorrow morning you will have to give me a thorough clean-up³,” she said, biting her lip while doing so, trying to keep her broad smile under control with little success as she shortly giggled anyway.

Fadr poked her with his nose and she responded by bringing her head closer to his and a moment later they were kissing again, renewing their kiss again and again. The tastes of their mouths mixed with the saltiness of their sweat and the musky bitterness of their passing arousal. Their lips teased and caressed each other for a long time.

While kissing Fadr reached out behind him. For a short moment his hand wandered around aimlessly before he was finally able to grab the edge of a blanket which lay on his bed and he pulled it down.

Finally they broke their kiss to get comfortable in the blanket they wrapped around themselves. The vixen settled in his arms and he embraced her, holding her tight, while kissing her softly from time to time.

They lied on the floor and Recha’s eyes wandered wearily over it where she noticed the flickering shadows of their bodies and the chalk drawings on the floor which were now mostly gone, the chalk having been smeared all over the floor by their entwined bodies.

“You just tricked me to get in this circle with you, didn’t you?” she teased him and poked him with a finger.

Fadr just smiled.

“If my parents knew about that, they would possibly strangle you.” She laughed.

The weasel rose an eyebrow.

“Or my uncle for that matter.” Recha giggled.

The man who held her hmphed.

Recha knew that he did not really appreciate this small joke of hers. “Don’t worry, as soon as this is over my parents won’t be able to say much. They won’t like the idea that their grandchildren might be crossbreeds, but you will have proven yourself in battle and that is what is important to them.”

“We still have got to make it out of that alive,” Fadr sighed.

Recha rose her head and looked at him with an expression of surprise and alarm on her face.

The man saw her expression and tried to smile. "Sorry! Don't listen to me!" He kissed her cheek. "I am awfully tired. It was a long day," he said. "Sleep tight," he whispered into her ear and enforced his embrace around her.

She moaned happily in return and once again snuggled up in the warmth between the quilt, his arm and his chest.

He was perfectly still while he listened to her breathing getting slower. He stared into the dimly lit room and finally got aware that there was still one of the candles burning. He focused, gathered some of the air around him and with a small whispered spell from his lips the candle was blow out from nowhere. While the glowing wick was still visible in the darkness the mage embraced Recha even more strongly, shielding her from the night.

The young bear had left in the early morning and Nekoi had simply pretended to be asleep until he had left.

She had not gotten up for a long time as she was still able to feel the events of the last night in her limbs. The feeling of lightness, of being disconnected from her body did not cease to unnerve her every time she performed a scrying. She knew that this feeling was not harming her, but she dreaded it anyway and it was comforting to feel the closeness of somebody else's body as long as it lasted. It reminded her of the here and now.

Despite this she was happy that Berry had left.

She had to perform her duties, taking leave of the moons for the day and welcome the new day.

From her bed she watched the sunlight creeping over the floor of her small cabin.

When she finally got up she sat down naked on the wooden floor and started to meditate, allowing the pictures of her vision to come back into her mind, but this time she did not allow them to take full control of her. Her whispers spoke silent prayers until she entered a light trance.

She did not leave her cabin the entire day. Her sense of hunger had disappeared a long time ago and as she did not want to meet anyone, nor dress at all. The thought of putting her clothes on repulsed her. She spent the day meditating, praying and chanting.

When the light of the moons started to fill her room again, she already felt much better. She welcomed Heya, Tezu and Koda with a long chant, her body slowly swayed to the sounds of her voice.

It was in the late afternoon the next day when she finally left her room again. The first steps she took had still been slightly unsteady, but after she had gotten some dried fruit from the mess, eaten it and drunken some sour milk she had felt better. She went to the upper deck to get some fresh air.

At first she was blinded by the bright light. Slowly she could make out shapes which whirled around, spun around themselves and then suddenly halted and changed their directions. They held something in their paws.

Nekoi shielded her eyes from the sunlight and was able to make out their fighters who were about to train. From a safe distance she watched the three men and the woman. Their styles were totally different. Itha's movements were fluid, he was very agile and constantly ducked blows from invisible opponents. He used two medium-sized blades, they reminded Nekoi of machetes, but of course they were anything but as crude as that. These weapons had a fine blade which was slightly curved, even though their tip looked nasty as well.

Cafy on the other hand used nothing but a long rod. It was obvious that he only trained defensive blows which were intended to get his adversary off-balance. It took quite some strength to handle the staff, but he did not need much power to get a result. With little movements of his hands he could swing the weapon very accurately. Nekoi knew that he was a lancer, but he had never seen him using a lance before. Cafy used the rod every time he practiced his moves. Among the men he was the one who needed most space upon the deck because his weapon was so difficult to handle.

Recha trained with a much smaller rod than Cafy did. It was obvious that this was nothing but a replacement for her rifle. She was not meant to fight in close-range combat, but she had to defend herself somehow if she was under attack. The way she threw her replacement around showed that she was not comfortable with this, certainly not the way the men were. Her movements were graceful but lacked the men's agility and power who trained every move with the full momentum of their power while Recha was not that much into it. Nekoi knew that she was an amazing markswoman, she had seen Recha doing some tricks with her rifle before they had went aboard and the calm hand of the vixen had stunned almost every other man or woman who had watched her. She had had no problem to hit a moving target at a distance of more than one hundred paces. She was a natural born hunter, not necessarily a fighter.

Bedaï did not worry about training combat moves. He just used his very large two-handed sword to train his muscles. He raised the sword with deliberate slowness, even from afar the priestess could see the bulging muscles. It took him several minutes to raise the sword above his head and then it suddenly dropped down with incredible speed, the bear moved as if he was anything but a large man at all, changing his stances almost instantly. The blade was hurled downward in strange curves too fast to percept and it stopped mere inches above the ground, never touching the wood, no matter how fast it was. The veins upon Bedaï's muscles twitched from this strain. But once again the bear started to raise the blade again, so slowly that it seemed as if he did not move at all.

"Impressive, eh?"

The priestess turned around and looked at Ileeree.

The vixen had approached her in silence. Now she stood next to the antelope. Her hair was a little bit greasy and she had heavy bags under her eyes. "I have just finished my shift," she said when she had noticed the priestess' curious look. "Getting a little bit of fresh air before I go to bed."

The priestess nodded without saying a word. She pushed some hair out of her face.

"I heard that you shared your bed with Berry."

The antelope laughed shortly.

The vixen screwed up her eyes. "You do not look like someone who is very touched by the death of her lover."

"What has one to do with the other?" the antelope asked and looked at the vixen. Her necklaces and the small rings upon her antlers glistened in the sun, just like her eyes.

Ileeree inhaled.

"No matter what you think of me. Pensa shared my bed, but there was no further attachment. He was an acolyte the abbey assigned to me for this mission. He did his duty." She inhaled deeply. "And if it comes to my mourning... I have my own way of doing this, trust me on that! I performed everything as it was required... These rituals were quite painful for me and I think I did my share of mourning for someone I hardly knew." The antelope tilted her head a little bit. "Which makes me wonder how the rest of the crew mourned for the loss of one of them. None of you ever asked if they could participate in one of the commemorations."

Ileeree lowered her gaze.

"Or maybe you never thought of him that way."

The vixen's ears flicked. "You are right, we did not," she admitted. "I don't know much about the inner sanctums of the Goddesses. I was never initiated¹."

The antelope pulled at the edges of her gown. "This is not about the mysteries of the Goddesses, this is about loyalty."

The vixen inhaled deeply. The cool air invaded her lungs and she felt refreshed despite her tiredness. She looked over the railing and saw the trees far below. Many of them did not show the fresh green of summer anymore. She was convinced to see some brown shades here and there, but maybe that was just a trick of the light in the distance. "This journey is so strange. It feels so different from every other mission I participated in. It is not because of our target, but rather... To me it seems as if the Goddesses themselves do not know what to do with us."

"Theirs is the journey and the path you walk upon. Theirs is the horizon and what is hidden behind the veil." The antelope's voice had gotten softer when she had cited the words. "They do know but they do not necessarily share that knowledge. Not even with me. I am grateful that the scrying goes as planned. I had feared much more obstacles."

Ileeree had watched the antelope for a moment, now she nodded and turned away again, looking at the training men again. Bedaï had finished by now, he seemed to criticize Recha. Itha had obviously come to her verbal defense, but the young vixen did not even look at the wolverine. Cafy went on with his training, grimly fighting the exhaustion which showed on his face.

"Damn, Cafy! Stop this now!" Bedaï said out loud. "You have done more than enough." The bear had turned away from Recha for the moment, but now he

glared at her again. "You should know full well, that we don't know what it will throw at us. Close combat is still very likely."

"Yes, I know!" Recha said and returned the larger male's look. "And I am the gunner of this team and first of all I must have a steady hand and a calm breath."

"I am your commander for this mission and when I give you an order I expect you to follow it," the bear growled, glaring at the young woman.

Itha gave the bear a nudge.

"Don't bug me, Itha!" Bedai said to the wolverine.

The smaller man exhaled and noticed that the vixen was glaring at him as well. He just grinned at her and shrugged his shoulders.

"It is not my duty! It is not my field of combat," the vixen said to the bear. "Besides it is still more likely that the whole ship gets torn apart and then what will I do with this *stick*?" She held her replacement weapon up high.

"You are not only training for this mission, you are training for *life*." The bear's eyes had narrowed even further. Suddenly he bared his teeth. "Maybe that impresses you more than getting a direct order from your commander!" he hissed.

The vixen hesitated, then she gulped and turned her head away.

"Go on with the training!" the bear ordered. "DAMN, CAFY, STOP IT!" he shouted across the deck towards the raccoon who was still whirling his rod across the deck while sweat dropped off his fur.

Cafy spun around himself and propelled the rod forward one last time. He could feel the strain in his shoulder when the full momentum of his movement pulled at his arm. But this time he let the rod's tip drop to the ground. For a moment the small furr just stood there and panted. When he turned his head around, Bedai made a sign with his head that he should follow him and Itha. Cafy nodded shortly. Carefully he laid the rod on the ground and then he walked over to the railing spread his arms and let the airflow dry the sweat in his fur.

In the meantime Bedai and Itha walked towards the rear entrance which led to the personal quarters and the mess.

"By the Sun, who does she think she is, that dumbass!" the ursine hissed angrily while the two men walked through the corridor.

"Give her a break, Bedai, it's her first mission."

"She would not even dare to get so uppity if she wasn't Sty's damn niece. I should never have allowed her to come on this mission."

"Yeah, but she is a damn good markswoman."

"She is dead meat if she doesn't learn how to defend herself. Damn, I can remember times when she would have been flogged for this." He spit out the last few words.

"Aren't we all happy that this does not happen anymore?" Itha replied.

"Damn you, Itha! You would not give anything about this if you were not after her bum. I am sick of it!"

The two men arrived at the mess and stepped inside the small room. They were greeted by Berry who was about to prepare some food. Meloy was sitting

on a stool and greeted the two arriving men as well by rising his cup. The goat finished his drink and then stood up again.

"Sorry, gotta go back to engines' room, we still gotta fix lots of stuff down there."

"How's it going?" Itha asked casually.

Meloy pulled at his beard. "Ah, well... Most of the stuff is working ok, but we have to get to a permanent solution, after all this trip is going to last some more time, isn't it?" He put down his cup on the small board where Berry was working, then he gave the small spectacled bear a powerful spank on his buttock. The sound of the blow banged through the small room. The goat grinned at the surprised small ursine and walked past Bedai and Itha, leaving the mess.

The larger bear and the wolverine sat down at the table and watched Berry who rubbed his backside shortly and then went on peeling the vegetables.

"I am preparing a stew," he mentioned. "But it will take some time."

"Don't worry," Itha replied. "We were just having a break."

The spectacled bear nodded slowly, laid his knife aside, turned around and opened the cupboard next to him, and started rummaging around in it.

At this moment Cafy walked in the room. The raccoon was just about to pull his shirt over his head.

"Did one of you take any of the cans?" Berry asked.

"No, why are you asking?" Itha replied.

Without looking around Berry shrugged his shoulders. "I am missing some stuff."

"Couldn't you have misplaced it?" Cafy suggested while he sat down on a chair.

The spectacled bear shook his head and skewered another sweet potato with his knife. "There is only two places where I store this stuff. The cupboard..." With his knife he pointed at the cupboard next to him. "...and the storage room on the leeward side. But it's not that important, I was just wondering." The bear pulled a dirty piece of cloth from one of the bars which hung down from the ceiling above the workspace of the mass and wiped his hands clean. "After this last stop we have more than enough provisions." He was about to walk out of the room when the voice of the larger ursine stopped him.

"What kind of stuff exactly?" Bedai asked.

Itha and Cafy looked at the bear who had not spoken since they had entered the room.

Berry turned towards Bedai and shrugged. "Nothing important, just a few cans with... stuff."

The large ursine man at the table pressed his lips together. He hesitated for a moment and then got to his feet, pushing the table aside as if it had no weight at all. "Show me!" he said.

Berry hesitated for a moment, but then he walked towards the cupboard again. He opened its door and pointed inside of it. "There...! I store them there!" Instinctively he made way when the larger man came closer.

Bedaï walked up to the cupboard and finally leaned inside of it. For an instant he scanned the interior which did not look any different from what he knew of it. Carefully he sniffed and instantly the many different scents of the stored food got into his nose. They were far too intense to make out anything different than the herbs, dried meat, flour and spices. He stopped it and turned around again.

“Anything?” Berry asked him.

The larger man just shook his head, turned around and walked towards the table again.

Itha looked at him curiously, but the bear did not say anything, he just sat down again, put his arms onto the table, clasped his hands and rested his muzzle against them. The wolverine exchanged a look with the raccoon. Cafy just shrugged.

Nekoi looked up and stretched her chest while doing so. The bells that hung down from her antlers rung.

The huge male bear stood in front of the door he had just walked through. His eyes were almost fixated on her breasts. He was convinced to have never seen them more clearly before: How the short hair of her fur stretched over them, it was so short that it perfectly followed the round curves, never distracting from the form which culminated in her bare-skinned nipples.

The antelope did not move at all, she sat cross-legged on the floor and watched him.

Bedaï did not move at all he just looked at her. The strange scents in the room made him feel nauseous. At least he had that impression. Suddenly he blinked strongly, becoming aware that he had screwed up his eyes all of the time. He opened them wide again and suddenly the brightness of the room flowed into his eyes again and he felt almost blind.

“What do you want, Bedaï?” the antelope asked finally.

The man focused, gathered his senses as if he was about to expect a fight. His eyes narrowed again while he looked at the antelope’s elongated face. “You have to perform a scrying!”

The priestess blinked. “I just did one two nights ago... What...?” For a moment there was something like confusion on her face. Then her ears flicked suddenly, she screwed up one eye and she looked at Bedaï again. “Did the captain tell you that?”

“No,” the bear replied. “I have to verify something!”

The antelope’s lips closed. Her head lowered a little bit while she looked at him from below. “You interrupt my meditation because you want me to perform a scrying for you? Just like that?”

The bear could feel the priestess’ refusal. He stretched in an attempt to get the strange atmosphere of the room off his mind. “Isn’t that what you are here for?”

For an instant she was motionless, then she shivered a little bit and the bells on her antlers rung loudly. “I know that you are a follower of the Sun⁴, but you

should know that much about the Moon Goddesses and *why* I am here.” She pronounced the words with a low, distinctive growl.

“This is of no impor...”

The antelope glared at him.

“...no importance,” he finished the sentence. He caught himself looking at her belly now, which was decorated with a thin line of cloth which was wrapped around it.

The antelope inhaled deeply and stood up. She was a little bit clumsy while doing so, but tried not to show it too much. When she was standing, she turned away from the bear and towards her desk. There were several small candles there which had burned down and the wax had joined them to each other in a large heap of cold wax where the wicks looked out. Some of the wax was still soft as the candles had not been extinguished that long. She wanted to light them again and the thought about getting the matches to do that crossed her mind. But she did not want to turn towards him again. She closed her eyes and focused on the smoke which was still in the air.

Without a sound the flames on the wicks reappeared, first hardly visible at all, then growing bigger by the moment as they started to nurture on the wax.

When the priestess let go off her focus, she had to supported herself on the desk and almost instantly she regretted having used magic instead of having gotten the matches.

“Do you do it now?”

Nekoi pressed her lips together. She gathered some strength and firmly said: “No!”

The bear lowered his head and glared at the half-naked priestess. “Scrying is...”

“I am not obliged to scry for you, Bedai! There is no reason why I should do this.”

“I am...”

“I do not care! First of all I am hardly in the shape of performing another scrying as I have not even recovered from the last one,” she said quickly. When the bear was silent she inhaled deeply and added: “And second, I have no reason to do so. You have shown me nothing but contempt since I put a foot on this ship and even though I do not expect you to share my belief, I think I deserve some respect as the priestess I am. If I am not mistaken that is one of the teachings of the Sun God’s priests as well, isn’t it?” She turned her head towards him.

“My personal beliefs are of no importance.”

The antelope turned away from him again. “They are! And they are the reason why you are here and they are the reason why I am not inclined to perform a scrying for you even if I could.”

The bear did not speak for a moment. “I am listening.”

“You have nothing but contempt for the Moon Goddesses, am I right? And therefore you have no understanding for the Goddesses’ way. Do you know the saying: *You know where the sun is rising, but you will never know the place where the moons will be?* That is the answer to your question. The Goddesses give us many different ways so that we may choose our own path.”

The bear grunted snidely. "I have heard my share of stories from the nuns⁵."

Nekoi shortly pulled a face. "If you refuse to listen, I hardly doubt that a scrying is what you need," she said harshly and turned away from him.

His head was lowered, his eyes had almost disappeared beneath his frowns, but now he rose his head slowly so that his eyes emerged from among his fur again and while he stretched to full size, he looked down on the much smaller antelope, his paw slowly forming a fist.

"I would prefer to be alone now," she said.

His head almost touched the ceiling, but the priestess did not see that, she just watched the window, hardly noticing the clouds which passed by.

She started when the door slammed shut behind her with such force that the noise ringed in her ear for quite some time.

"Goddesses!" she exclaimed and inhaled deeply. With her paws she rubbed her face, closing her eyes to the light for a moment.

She wanted to get back to the trance she had been forced to give up when the bear had abruptly entered her room. The thought appeased her, but soon she noticed that she was not able to, Bedai's unexpected visit had upset her too much. It was in moments like this that she missed Pensha most, because he had known what to do to ease her mind. But now the thought of the late rabbit whose smashed corpse lay in a forest countless miles from the place they were flying over now just added to her uneasiness. "Goddesses, guide him to his ancestors," she mumbled quickly, her face looking towards the ground. She could not feel the soothing presence of the moons' light, there was nothing but the hard light of the sun shining through her room.

The antelope stood up from the place where she had been sitting during the attempts to resume her trance. Instinctively she rubbed her face with a paw. She felt empty and lonely. As she had shared her cabin with Pensha she was now getting fully aware how much his presence had rendered things on this ship much more comfortable for her. She came to the conclusion that he had been a good acolyte while she undid the small bells which hung down from her antlers.

Taking out a light kimono from a wardrobe, she quickly put it on and adjusted her long, thin black hair. With skilled movements she gathered it in a simple plait which she fixed with three long needles, one made of white bone, one made of copper, one made of dark wood.

Gathering the edges of her kimono's wide sleeves she left her cabin and walked towards the main deck.

A fresh breeze welcomed her and a powerful gust of wind pulled at the antelope's gown and for a moment she stumbled, catching her balance just before she was about to fall.

Almost the very same instant Recha was by her side. The vixen had just been standing a few feet from the door and had rushed forward when she had seen how the priestess had stumbled. Instinctively Recha had tried to catch the antelope in order to prevent her fall, but she did not finish the movement when the priestess stood up straight all by herself.

“Are you alright?” the vixen asked.

The antelope pulled her gown closer around her body. “Yes,” she replied almost instantly. “I am just a little bit unbalanced these days.” She looked at the vixen and offered her a small smile. Enjoying the fresh air in her lungs. “I miss Pensa. He has been important to me.”

The vixen returned the smile. “He must have been dear to you,” she said and her smile transformed into a mischievous grin.

The antelope’s face did not respond to this. “Not the way you might think,” the priestess said. “He was my acolyte and I am in need someone to act as a counterbalance to the scrying I do.”

“I attended our abbey’s academy,” the vixen mentioned.

“I know.”

The vixen was silent for a moment and smiled while she looked to the ground. “I always wanted to be initiated. But I was never able to study for it.”

Nekoi looked up. “You did? I did not know that.”

“The acolytes have always impressed me.” She grinned a little bit, her tail wagged slowly.

The antelope also noticed her ears being fully turned towards her. “You wanted to become an acolyte?”

For a moment, the vixen just smiled and looked down to the ground. Beneath her fur her blush got slightly visible. “I thought it was cool.”

“Not everyone is made for it and after having been initiated it is still a long way. You would have had to attend all of the new moons⁶.”

“I know, I guess it was just a child’s dream.”

“Striving to get closer to the Goddesses is never *just a child’s dream*,” Nekoi stated.

“Of course not, excuse me.”

“No harm done. But I can understand that you have gone a different way, very few people have the possibilities it takes. If I did not have had the talents I have who knows if I would have been able to attain priesthood.”

“How did you... I mean, I don’t want to pry on anything, I am just curious...”

The priestess had looked at the distant sky: The clouds were dark and heavy, there was certainly rain going down somewhere, but they would certainly have been gone the moment it reached the spot where they were now. Abama and Silent Cry tried to avoid rain whenever they could, they had told her that the additional weight of the rain slowed them down. The antelope looked at Recha again and smiled.

The vixen saw this and smiled as well, lowering her head. “I am sorry. I don’t want to be disrespectful.”

“On the contrary! You show what it takes to be a true follower of the Goddesses. You strive for understanding. That is something you should keep dear to your heart.”

“Thank you,” the vixen mumbled. She raised her head again and wet her lips for a moment. She rose her rifle for an instant and put it down again while she

looked over the railing. "There is so much that I do not understand yet. That is why I always wanted to be initiated. I always wanted to have answers."

"Of course!"

"I have to admit that today I could never picture myself as an acolyte," she said lowly, she blushed again.

The priestess laughed a little bit. "I could not picture you as an acolyte either, I have to admit that too."

"When I was young I always wanted to be an acolyte. The way they dressed, wearing so little but yet moving with the greatest confidence, carrying the candles and the censers, performing all the chants and dances and... all the other stuff, helping the priestesses to perform the masses and lunar ceremonies. They always impressed me more than the priestesses."

The vixen laughed and the antelope smiled too.

"I understand your fascination. I felt similar when I was young and I am painfully feeling right now how important they are. Even a priestess like me tends to forget that sometimes."

Recha kept quiet for a moment, watching the antelope who had tightly closed her lips for a moment. The small bells which decorated her antlers shook lightly in the wind.

"If Pensa was here, I would certainly not have the nightmare I have right now," the priestess finally went on. "His presence would force me to focus on the here and now, instead of..." She waved her hand.

"You are having nightmares? Should you not tell the captain about that?"

Nekoi sighed. "No, there is enough troubling the mind of your uncle. I am quite certain that these nightmares are not related to our mission. They are entirely different from the visions I had when I scried for our prey. I have been meditating about them for quite some time now, but I am totally unable to make any sense of them. But I cannot shake them off, it is as if they are right here with us."

The vixen listened without saying a word or even moving at all.

"It is as if my nose is full of smoke and I have a metallic taste on my tongue."

The vixen nodded. "This does not sound like the water... our prey."

"You better did not want to say what I believe you wanted to say!"

"I am sorry!"

"Do not forget that this is not what we are hunting. It is misguided. It has lost its focus. We deal with what it has become."

"I know! I am sorry!" The vixen lowered her head.

"Do not feel sorry, Recha! This is a difficult task, I know it as well. No matter how one turns it, it is a test of faith, but that was the reason why the council has chosen your uncle and his men to perform this. They are veterans, having been in the battles they have been in, they know what it takes to get through a fight where every moment of doubt can mean death. We are different from that..." She almost whispered the last few words. The priestess looked towards the horizon where large gray clouds had gathered and concealed a mountain range.

“Do you think that this was the reason why Pensa...?” the vixen asked very cautiously, but regretted having mentioned it the moment the words had left her lips.

The priestess did not answer. She just stood still for a while. “I think I will go back inside,” she said finally. “I feel cold and I want to perform a chant. The Goddesses are going to rise soon beyond the horizon⁷. I should welcome them.”

The vixen smiled at her. “I will see you later.”

“Yes,” the antelope returned and went towards the door to the lower decks.

For a moment the vixen watched the larger woman walk away. She turned away when the door closed behind the priestess.

She started.

The huge shape of the bear stood almost right in front of her. She had not heard him coming, nor had she been aware of any other sign on his presence.

Bedai did not even look at her. Instead he studied the door where the priestess had disappeared as if the door was about to answer his questions.

“What did she say about her dreams?” the bear asked.

The vixen just stared at him, her heart still beating fast by the surprise of his sudden appearance.

He looked down on her. “What was this about her dreams?”

“You were spying on us?” the vixen was finally able to ask.

“I could not help to hear your conversation. What did she tell you about her having nightmares.”

“Why don’t you go ask yourself?” Recha snapped, suddenly mad at him.

The bear blinked for a moment. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“I...” The vixen searched for words. “This was a private conversation, this was not meant for your ears. I have no reason to tell you.”

“Listen, this could be related to whatever got onboard this ship!” he hissed, glaring at her.

The vixen stretched herself. “What are you talking about?” She pressed her lips together, her ears turned into his direction she stared at him over her slim vulpine muzzle.

For a moment the bear did not even react at all, then he asked with a very low voice: “So you want to be a priestess’ pet⁸!”

Recha froze while she could feel how the muscles of her chest tightened all at the same time. The blood suddenly seemed to pulse more powerfully inside her veins. “Unlike you I have never adhered to the Sun!” she spit at him, releasing the tension of her body, took up her rifle and quickly went away, disappearing behind the gearwheels, getting out of his sight.

The large ursine man stretched. His features showed no reaction at all. Then he shortly tipped his black nose with one of his fingers while the fingers of his other hand kept on tapping the sword’s hilt by his side.

While the airship had flown on, the air had changed around it. The warm and dry

air which had carried by a steady wind from the south had changed little by little. The airship had been forced to fight new winds from the northeast which carried along the moisture of distant lands of ice and snow. The small clouds which had been torn apart by the southern winds and which had been scattered all over the horizon had given way to huge gray masses which had floated over the sky. The rays of the sun only pierced through the gaps the clouds had left.

The fighters on the main deck had been forced to put on warmer clothing during their training sessions. Except for Cafy who had still been fighting as grimly as before, sweat dripping from his naked frame while he practiced with his substitute weapon.

Beneath them the terrain changed as well: The lush forests changed to a large swampy areas.

“Ürütya Bog,” Abama had stated when the crew on the bridge had seen the dead trees standing in the yellowish moss which formed a whole plane of small bulges with countless still ponds whose surface was perfectly black from above, like the countless eyes of a gigantic spider. There were small hills standing out from this wilderness, showing bare rock.

The priestess had become much more reclusive in these days. She was convinced to feel the presence of a powerful spirit or maybe even several ones of them. But she assured the captain that there was no danger for them as long as they flew at such an altitude. Neither would their prey dare to interfere with the powers which ruled the bog-land beneath the airship.

For several days there were no larger animals seen at all. A few birds seemed to have hidden in the bushes of fern and reed, but there was no deer at all which they had gotten used to see in the forests they had flown over.

“They said that this bog was already here during the Age of Dawn,” Fadr had stated when he had watched it from above and he had thrown a small thread down from the railing he had been leaning on. Suddenly the falling top of the thread had ignited and within a few moments the fire had shot upwards, following the line of the thread until it had almost touched Fadr’s paw. But the weasel had let go of it in the very last moment. The burning piece of thread had slowly fallen down and the last remaining black ash had been carried away by the wind.

“Isn’t that a little bit dangerous?” Bedaï had asked harshly.

The mage had just shrugged and looked at the larger man who had been holding his sword in his hands, his hair a greasy mess upon his head. The bear had constantly been alerted to something, his tension had been visible to everyone on the ship. He hardly talked these days.

Everyone had seen him wandering through the corridors of the ship, his nose close to the walls and the floor as if he had tried to find some specific scent.

“This stench on this ship is beyond description,” he had snarled at Lokos when they had met in one of the corridors one evening.

The small engineer, tired from a long day he had tried to deal with the countless flaws of their provisional repairs, had just shrugged. His instincts had told him fear to fear the ursine male, but he had too many other problems to think

about than the restless bear. So when Meloy had told him that Bedaï had demanded to get access to the rooms where they stored their replacement tools and spare parts, Lokos had answered with an immediate "Goddess, no!"

Lokos, Meloy and Berry knew quite well how much a chaos these rooms were in these days and they did not want anyone to interfere with their work right now, even though Berry had known quite well that Bedaï would certainly let him feel his anger soon enough as his duties were not limited to the engines' room, which meant that he had to face the larger bear sooner or later. He had tried his best to avoid a meeting with Bedaï for the next days.

For a few days Sty had joined the fighting training on the main deck. Just like Bedaï the fox preferred a sword as a melee weapon, but unlike the huge blade of the bear the sword of the fox was much smaller and their style of fighting differed strongly from one another.

When the captain had been present Bedaï had not spoken at all.

Sty had noticed this and had kept quiet as well, but finally he had given up training with Bedaï, Cafy, Itha and Recha. Instead he had spent most of his time on the bridge.

He had replaced Silent Cry on the helm several times, enjoying the feeling of the steering wheel in his paws and the trembling of the engines between his feet.

The crew usually had met during the evening hours, while they were about to get something to eat in the mess.

On one of these occasions, an unusually large number of them had met there: Ileeree, Abama, Silent Cry, Bedaï, Cafy, Itha, Recha, Fadr, Lokos and Meloy had sat around in the mess, either eating or about to get something to eat.

Itha, Cafy, Lokos and Meloy had been talking with each other for quite some time, when Itha had suddenly said: "Well, the biggest danger right now is Cafy getting a cold because he is training too much."

The raccoon did not say a word, he just pulled a face.

"Come one, everyone has been noticing that. It's no good, your wife is not here to pamper you when you get sick." Itha grinned.

Cafy opened his mouth and cleared his throat. "She would have no reason to do so right now..."

"Do you fear she had found someone to replace you while you are gone?" Lokos asked ironically.

"We have taken our oaths," Cafy replied and gulped. "She is faithful to me."

"I never understood this, what is the harm of a lover as long as nobody is in heat?" Itha asked.

"You are not married," Meloy stated.

"Neither are you!" Abama said who had listened to their conversation for some time now.

"And the Holy Mother knows I never will, after all I have heard about marriage," the goat said and laughed.

"Have you been married?" Itha asked.

“Nono!” Meloy replied. “But I know about marriage.” He smirked. To give you one example, just one...” Meloy sipped his drink, put the mug back on the table and leaned back. “It is not that much of a story actually. I have been working for a family of deer merchants from Enchau Lao⁹ who lived in Corronfray¹⁰...”

“The Su’an Ti?” Lokos asked.

“Yeah, them! I had been repairing their steam engines and steam tanks and they even had some cars for a short time, but- honestly!- they were not worth the trouble. So well, it was a good job for the time it lasted. They had lots of money and were no misers either. But things started to turn sour when the oldest daughter took over. The mother had been sick for a long time. I had no idea what she had. I never asked either. There was no doctor who could help her and in the end she became very, very devoted to the Spirits. She was convinced that they had cursed because of something she was involved in. Anyway, her praying did not help much and she died finally.” He paused shortly making a movement with both of his paws as if he was about to smoothened something down.

“Why didn’t her husband take over¹¹?” Silent Cry asked.

Meloy raised his finger. “Getting there! See, the whole point was that she was not married yet. She had had lots of suitors, after all her family was rich, so the men were all around her, at least those who could offer the right qualifications¹¹. But she had never decided about anyone of them, she played around with them, shared her bed with one of them for some days, then she shared it with a different one. She always got rid of them quite quickly again. But after her mother’s death she was suddenly in desperate need to get a husband. So she married some old suitor of hers. Actually he was usually a rather nice guy by the name of Tuphen Nai, a rather nice guy most of them time. He could get nasty, but... I am getting there. So she married him, he was from a merchant’s family as well, not as rich as hers, but he had everything it needed, or so it seemed. They married and for some time everything looked quite good. We were all pretty excited about this, because it seemed like she had made the right choice and that we had gotten the right boss.”

“But it did not last?” Silent Cry asked.

“Yeah, something of that way.” Meloy chuckled suddenly. “The point was that Fay Ren, that was the daughter’s name, did not stop it, see...”

“I can imagine where that is heading,” Abama grunted.

“No, no!” Meloy laughed. “It is much better, trust me!” He tried to calm himself, pulled at his goatee while trying to remember where he had left off and resumed finally: “The point was... For some reason he was not able to get her pregnant. Some of us said that he did not even sleep with her at all.” He laughed suddenly. “He spent most of his time, trying to get his bearings in the business and he did not prove to be very good at this either. See, he was a nice guy, but he was hardly anything besides that. So the woman...”

Lokos groaned.

“You know the story, do you?” Meloy asked the engineer.

“No, go on!”

“Okay! Alright, things being as they were, she was pretty unhappy there and of course she started to share her bed with someone again.”

“Who would blame her?” Ileeree asked.

“Yeah,” Meloy replied. “But she shared it with his younger brother!”

The vixen rolled her eyes.

The goat mechanic laughed. “I mean at least, she was really trying to keep things together as they were. I mean, she took care of bloodlines, didn’t she?”

“That is some twisted logic!” Fadr stated. The mage had been totally silent up to now.

Meloy laughed. “Well, obviously she was having fun and the brother came over to her house¹¹ more and more often. At first her husband did not show that he knew what was going on there, but he became more and more irritable. At the same time several deals of his turned sour, so he was under a lot of pressure. Several members of the family openly disapproved, but they did not say a word about that. They just complained to the likes of us. Then the strangest thing ever happened: His younger brother, who was already sharing the bed of his wife started to get involved with the business. You can imagine how the poor man had to feel...” Meloy laughed. “Officially the brother was just an aide, but pretty soon it was obvious that he got involved with the day-to-day business.”

“How? How could he do that?” Abama asked.

All of the women and men in the mess were listening by now. The light outside had subsided considerably and now they were sitting in the light of the lamps which hang down from the roof and listened to the laughing goat who sat on a stool next to one of the tables.

“Well, you have got to see...,” Meloy said with a huge grin on his face and playing around with his goatee. “...most of the business was all about keeping the books in order. How much does it cost to buy something at the Mechanic Rivers? How much does it cost you to get it to Corronfray? So what is the price you can ask for one piece of it while making some money with it? So the husband took care of the books most of the time, he just gave orders to the guys who did the actual trading, the caravan handlers and those who drove the steam tanks down to the Mechanic Rivers to buy this and that. Basically he did not get out of the back room. But there was suddenly his younger brother talking with the guys *before* they even entered his room. His younger brother told them what to get and where to go. See, the handlers mostly work on their own, they are just taking an order from time to time when they feel like *doin’ some movin’*, that is the...”

“What about the husband?” Cafy asked suddenly. The raccoon had kept quiet most of the time up to now as he had not talked very much these days.

“Yeah, right!” Meloy cleared his throat. “So I don’t know this myself, I did not witness anything of that, I have been told that it happened that day... So! One night, when the Autumn Solstice was approaching, the poor stag finally had enough and wanted to deal with his brother. He had gotten a sword, a really impressive blade, I have seen that myself. I had no idea what he had planned to

do with that, but well I guess his brother could have been lucky if he had lost his manhood that night..." Meloy exchanged a grin with Itha.

"Spare us the details!" Ileeeree said.

"Alright! Well, so the husband hid in his office that night and waited until everyone was asleep or most of them. His younger brother slept in an outbuilding, so when he heard the noises coming from there, he was convinced that it was his brother about to go into his wife's room. So the husband left the office and started to go after the noises... Now you have to imagine this being a really large building and he did not know where the two lovers would meet, so he just followed those noises, up the stairs, down the stairs, through corridors... He had no light because he did not want to wake anybody. He just went after the noises. Well, deer have excellent hearing, but the Goddess knows she did not give them good eyes for the dark." Meloy's grin was getting even broader. "So after having followed the noises the husband realized that he did not know where he was anymore. The building was huge, built for the entire clan, lots of storage rooms everywhere and very old as well. So he was lost but still followed these noises and finally he heard them stopping somewhere and..." Meloy leaned forward a little bit. "...he was still lost, did not know where he was right now. He tried to get his bearings again, but it was no help. He had no idea where he was, he was still convinced that his wife and his brother were near. So he went on, turning around corners, getting into new rooms and finally into a large one where he saw something that looked... well, as if it moved." His voice was very low now. "Convinced that he finally has found the place he attacks with his sword." Meloy suddenly threw his hands over his head as if he was holding that sword himself and yelled loudly. "He stormed into the room, strikes whatever has been moving there and suddenly he gets caught by something. He fights back and fights back and fights back!" Meloy swung his imaginary sword. "...and fought and fought. Something has taken a hold of him and hits him every other time, the blows coming from every direction. He can't believe it and fights even stronger. Maybe it is his brother, whatever!" Meloy laughed out loud. "Some of the storage guys found him in the morning. He had strangled himself in a storage room where they had hung bacon and dried meat and other stuff from ropes on the ceiling. They were all around his antlers and head and neck and in the corner laid a dead pet lizard one of the younger girls kept, struck down by his sword." Meloy laughed out loud, leaning back and wiggling on his chair while he went on laughing.

Almost everyone in the room was chuckling or smiling, except Bedai who stood up with sudden force.

The huge frame of the bear almost threw over the table he had been sitting behind, it banged about while Bedai almost ran out of the room, glaring at Meloy with such hatred that the goat instantly stopped laughing.

An instant later the bear had disappeared and the laughter in the room had seized entirely. Everyone was silent.

Meloy looked at Lokos with an expression of disbelief on his face.

The viscacha engineer exhaled.

The goat looked at the faces of the other men and women which had gathered in the small room. They were all avoiding each other's eyes. Recha had visibly blushed, Fadr pulled a face, Ileeree looked towards the door where Bedaï had left, Abama was looking from one to the other, Itha cleaned his claws with a small knife, staring to the ground.

"I am sorry if I..." Meloy started and fell silent again. "Damn! This was not about him, now was it?"

Lokos stood up, emptied the last drops which had remained in his mug and then walked towards Meloy. "Come on, Meloy! Let's get back to da engines room, we still have to have got to fill da combustion chamber for da night."

Meloy stood up and pushed his greasy hair out of his face. "Honestly! This is ridiculous."

"Yeah, we know dat, come!" Lokos replied.

"I would not have guessed that it is that bad!" Silent Cry stated after Meloy and Lokos left the room.

"Please, let it be, Silent," Ileeree said.

"Well, I know why he reacts this way," Itha stated suddenly.

"Let's not argue about this," the vixen replied.

"Is that an order?" the wolverine asked.

"As long as we are on this mission? Yes!" Ileeree answered. "And I am speaking for the captain here, just to make this clear."

Itha nodded, he let go a short laughter, then he shook his head, lowered his head again and went back to clean his claws.

"We should ask Nekoï for some advice here, I am sure she would have some smart remarks for a situation like this." Fadr grinned and instantly got a glare from Recha. The weasel lowered his head.

"*And her anger was the flame that ignited her kingdom as there was no one who did not burn with love for her*¹²," Silent Cry said.

Abama started laughing. "That does not even remotely match here."

The rabbit laughed too and shrugged. "Does that not make it perfect?" He grinned at the prairie dog woman.

Abama raised any eyebrow.

Silent Cry just waved his hand. "Forget about it!"

He had not slept well. He had to fight the feeling that something around him was not in order at all. It was the sense which had saved his life many times and he trusted it. But these days when he could not find the origin of that feeling, he was in a constant state of alarm.

With a powerful leap the bear jumped out of his hammock. The wooden floor boomed and creaked beneath his large feet. Itha who occupied the hammock next to him, started in his sleep.

Bedaï did not pay attention to the wolverine. Instead he grabbed his sword in its sheath which hung down from a nail just above his bed. It had been the first

thing he had done on this ship: Putting a nail into the wood just above his bed so that he could grab his sword instantly. He grabbed his shirt that lay on the hammock as he had slept on it and while he put it on he walked straight out of the quarter.

The door slammed shut behind him with a loud bang and in the corridor cool, fresh air welcomed him.

He could feel his fur rising while he walked through it and suddenly he bumped into Lokos.

With a loud bang Bedai's hands slammed against the wall.

The viscacha lay on the ground, as did Bedai's sword, but the huge ursine man kept standing, his hands firmly locked to the wall, supporting him while he leaned above the smaller engineer.

"Ouch!" Lokos complained and slowly got on his feet again. "I am sorry I did not see..." The engineer raised his face to Bedai and looked at the ursine man, who just glared back. Lokos fell silent and inhaled deeply, no longer willing to finish his apology after he had seen the expression on the bear's face.

Bedai just stared back and then slowly moved around to kneel down to get his sword.

The bear stopped cold. He was perfectly still, just one hand slowly reaching out for the ground.

Lokos was about to walk away, but then he hesitated and looked at the bear for a moment. "What is it," he asked finally.

The bear kneeled, his hand touching the ground next to the pawprint. None of his muscles moved, but when they did they relaxed instantly. The rush of blood got audible in his ears. His hand was perfectly still besides the paw print. He hardly dared to blink while he looked at it. A moment later his hand grabbed his sword and instantly Bedai rose to full size again. "Nothing," he said.

"Too much dirt on da floor?" Lokos suggested and chuckled.

"I have got to see the captain!" He tensed his huge body and walked down the corridor, his heart starting to beat faster. He gritted his teeth.

The viscacha blinked a few times before turning around.

"We should have searched the moment the priestess' boy-toy took some flying lessons," the bear said.

Sty studied the ursine man's face for a moment. The captain sat behind his desk in his ready room and studied the bear who had walked into the room a moment before. Sty could smell the bear's excitement, as well as see it. Bedai's eyes glistened brightly, deep set in the bear's skull.

"We had more important stuff to take care of. We can thank the Sun⁴ that we did not go down that morning," he declared and stretched himself, looking up at the other male.

The bear did not say anything at all.

Sty just looked at Bedai with his eyebrows raised high. "So what?"

The ursine exhaled. "Do I have permission to search the ship?"

"Just because some cans are missing and... what was it again?"

The bear gritted his teeth. "A paw print! A feline paw print in the corridor in front of the mess!"

Sty hesitated.

The bear slightly shifted his weight. "If I am correctly informed you need the success of this mission more than anybody else," Bedaï said. "I have heard that the maintenance of this ship has cost your clan more than it earns from it."

For a short moment the smaller fox did not react at all. "Listen, Bedaï, if you want..." he hissed.

"I just want to search the ship," the ursine interrupted him. "After all we already lost one crewman under suspicious circumstances, didn't we?" The bear was leaning on the table, his head slightly tilted while he looked at the smaller man.

Sty inhaled deeply. He raised his hand and then let it drop down again. "Do as you think necessary," he said after a while.

The bear pushed himself off the table with vigor. "Thank you, captain! Much obliged!" he said emphatically, turned around and walked out of the room again.

Sty let himself drop down in his chair again and folded his arms while the door to his room slammed shut.

"Get up! I want this ship searched right now. You stick your noses into every damn hole there is! And take your weapons!"

"What?" Cafy mumbled, still more asleep than awake, while he tried to get up in his hammock.

"I will take the quarters. Cafy, you take the lower front and all the storage rooms there. Itha, you take all the lower back, the engines room and every adjoining room, Recha will do bridge and all the rest."

"What are we looking for?" Itha asked while he pulled his shirt over his arms.

"Anything that moves and is not a member of the crew. Make sure that nothing gets out of the rooms while you are searching them, take your weapons."

While he got into his trousers, Itha tried to exchange a look with Cafy, but the raccoon was too busy putting a belt with knives around his waist, which he intended to use instead of his large javelin.

Bedaï observed his men.

"Get going!"

"Why is it so urgent now?" Itha asked.

Their commander did not answer, he just watched them putting on their clothes, then he waited while they walked out of the room and followed behind them. When they were all outside Bedaï slammed the door shut, got a piece of chalk from his belt and marked the door with a white cross. Then he broke the chalk into three parts and handed one to both of his men, while keeping the last piece.

"Should we get our weapons?" Itha asked. "The real ones?"

Bedaī hesitated for a moment, looked at Itha's two short sabers and Cafy's set of knives. "No!" he said finally. "But let's get on the bridge and get the horns. If you find anything, do not engage, alarm the rest instead."

Cafy and Itha nodded.

"Let's get Recha first!"

The three men walked through the corridor, down a small staircase and finally stopped in front of a small door at the very back of the ship.

Bedaī stepped inside without knocking. "Recha..."

Except for the hammock and clothes scattered on the floor the very small, dark room was empty.

"She must already be getting breakfast or something," Itha stated.

"Whoever meets her, tells her to search the bridge," Bedaī said. "Let's get the horns and get started!"

He knocked at the door.

"Who is there?"

"Open the door!"

"I do not want to be..."

"Open the door, I have the permission to search the ship. *All* of the ship!"

It took a while before the door opened and without hesitating he pushed the door fully open, almost pushing the smaller antelope out of the way as well.

Her messy hair showed that she must have been sleeping moments before. The priestess was not dressed at all except for jewelry she wore, but she did not mind showing him her naked body.

For a moment his eyes were focused on her pubic fur, but he did not waste any thought on this and turned around towards the bed.

"Do you think I have hidden some secret lover between my sheets?" Nekoi asked. Despite the joke there was no trace of humor in her voice.

The bear did not say a word while he searched the sheets, pillows and blankets which were still warm from her body. The woman's scent rose from them, being intensified by the warm cloth. He threw them into the corner of the bunk bed again and started to open the cupboard.

Nekoi glared at him, her eyelids twitching while he went on. "I would never allow anyone to search my ceremonial gowns," she said very low, her voice full of contempt.

Bedaī did not react to this comment either while his hands shoved the different gowns, robes and parts thereof aside. Carefully he let his fingers glide all over the back of the cupboards, before going for the next. In the compartment above the bed he found a strange heavy bag.

"You will not open that!" the priestess said.

The bear looked around and instantly he met her glare, her dark eyes glistened. She had raised her head, her long slender antlers almost touching the ceiling. She had crossed her arms in front of her chest, not to hide her breasts but rather to

stop the nervous movements of her hands, some of her fingers were still twitching.

The bear put the bag down to the ground and searched the rest of the compartment.

Thereafter he looked around in the room, but as there were no more cupboards or anything similar there, and the desk was not large enough to hide anything, he went for the door. When he turned around, she looked straight at him, her arms no longer hiding her breasts. For an instant he looked at them, noticed their full, elegant curve again. They were emphasized even further by her necklaces and the chain around her belly.

He nodded and stepped outside.

She slammed the door shut behind him with all the power she could.

The bear just painted a cross on the wooden door with his piece of chalk.

When he turned around again, Recha's head was curiously looking out of the next room's door which belonged to Fadr.

The vixen noticed him as well and as fast as she could she stepped outside.

The ursine knitted his frowns. He walked down the corridor, his huge body occupying most of it.

Recha observed his approach, her features seemed to express dismay. With her mouth wide open she watched the bear getting closer until he stood right in front of her, his huge frame blocking most of the light in the small passage.

"What have you been doing in Fadr's room?" the bear asked. "We have been looking for you."

"I... I..." The vixen stammered. "I... have just been checking..." She had laid back her ears.

The bear tilted his head. "Did you search it?"

"What..., I..." The vixen hesitated and looked into his face. "I mean, yes!" she replied quickly.

The bear blinked for an instant, then he looked towards the closed door. "Fadr is in there?" he asked.

The vixen gulped. "Yes, he wanted..."

"...to be present while you search it?" he finished her sentence.

"Yes," she answered instantly and looked towards the ground.

"Who told you to search his room?" He put a hand against the wall above the door.

"Why... I... I mean, Cafy did." She had gotten into an upright position and quickly put on a smile while she tried to look at him, but the bear was still looking towards the door.

"You are appointed to the bridge, not the quarters."

"Sorry, I..." Recha just nodded.

Bedaï pushed himself off the wall and turned around. "Go on, search the rooms at the front of the ship, everything near the bridge. Do it thoroughly!" he said while he walked away.

"Yes," the vixen replied and flicked her ears. She tried to calm her wagging tail and her hammering heart for a moment. She looked at the closed door for an

instant, but she resisted the urge to walk back into the room. Instead she walked into the direction of the bridge.

Bedai turned around and put a white chalk cross on the mage's door.

Tezu, the red moon was just about to rise above the horizon. The huge reddish disk hovered above the forests in the east while the rest of the sky had already darkened considerably. Heya had already risen higher, but Koda was nowhere to be seen. The land beneath the airship was already entirely dark, no details could be made out anymore. It seemed as if they were sailing a sea of darkness.

The winds from the north had eased a little bit and thus the airship was getting faster.

Ileeree stood on the main deck and carefully watched a small barometer which hung next to the door to the bridge. "I really don't like this," she mumbled to herself and knitted her frowns.

A door slammed shut and she turned around.

Bedai came out of the opposite door, he was accompanied by Itha and the two men stepped towards Cafy and Recha who had already been standing on the deck.

"Did you search go through all the storage rooms?" the bear asked the raccoon instantly.

The other man nodded.

"All of the bridge?" he asked Recha.

"Yes, I think I..."

"Don't think! Did you or didn't you?" he asked harshly.

The young vixen stretched herself. "I did!"

"Then I want you to check in the rooms adjoining the engine's room..."

"We already were there," Itha moaned.

"Then we will go there again!" Bedai shouted.

Itha groaned. "Cafy, please..."

"Damn, this is an order!" The huge ursine man shouted at the wolverine.

"Bedai, please, there is no need to..." Cafy started.

The bear spun around and glared at the raccoon's black and white face.

Cafy exhaled. "At least we are sure now."

For a moment the bear glared at the much smaller raccoon, but Cafy did not turn away. He just blinked a little bit.

"Can I go now?" Recha asked unexpectedly.

"Yes, you can," Cafy said before Bedai had been able to open his mouth.

"Okay. Good night!" The vixen turned around and walked away the very same moment.

"Damn, she is in a hurry to get away from us," Itha stated, he looked after the vixen, not paying any attention to Bedai and Cafy anymore who were still standing right next to him, glaring at each other.

"Come on, Bedai, let's get something to eat before you have to start your guard duty?"

“Is it Bedai’s turn?” Itha asked.

“Yes,” the raccoon answered.

The bear finally turned his head away. He stretched to full height and looked down on Itha.

The wolverine smiled a little bit. “Hey, at least we are sure now,” he said and shrugged.

Bedai turned his head towards Ileeree who was still standing at the door to the bridge. He glared at the vixen.

Ileeree turned around and went inside, leaving the men alone.

“Are you coming, Bedai?” Cafy asked, he was already standing at the door to the lower deck where Itha had already disappeared.

The bear grinded his teeth, turned around and followed Cafy.

The three men went to the mess where they got themselves something to eat. There was still some kind of stew left which Berry had made. It was cold and very greasy, but the men ate it anyway. They did not talk much during that time.

With a piece of bread between his teeth Itha left right after having finished eating his stew, leaving Cafy and Bedai alone in the room which got darker by the moment.

The bear lit the lamps and then walked out of the room without a word. A little bit later he returned with huge, obviously heavy objects clad in dirty cloth in his arms. He let it drop down on the table. It gave off a very deep metallic noise when it met the wood of the table.

He undid the cloth and uncovered a portable cannon made of dark, stained metal. He pulled a few tools out his pocket and threw them on the table.

Cafy watched him. “I hope you do not intend to use that on your search.”

“If I have to...,” Bedai grunted.

“If you use that weapon inside the ship, we are all dead,” the raccoon stated. He stood up and put his dirty dishes aside.

The bear had knelt down in front of one of the small cupboards. His huge paws were almost too large for it when he reached inside. He pulled out a huge piece of cloth. He stood up straight again. “By the way...” Bedai tore a small piece off the cloth. “During the search, did you tell Recha to search Fadr’s room?”

Cafy blinked and shook his head. “No! I thought you assigned her to do the bridge and the adjoining rooms,” he replied.

“So I did,” Bedai answered and threw the large piece of cloth aside. “Doesn’t matter,” he added and sat down at the table again.

Cafy stood in the mess for a moment. He hesitated. After a moment he turned around. “Good night!” he said simply.

Bedai just nodded, not taking his eyes off the huge metal cylinder he had started to polish. For a moment he listened to the sounds of the raccoon walking away, then he flicked his small ursine ears and focused on his work again.

The weapon was called a cannon, but it was rather a mix of a hand-cannon and a portable mortar. Bedai had used this weapon many times before because he had always been one of the few men large and strong enough to carry the heavy metal weapon. At the beginning he had despised it. It was a long range weapon

and it had offended his sense of an honorable fight. But on the other hand he had always known that the days of honorable duels were over, no matter how much he had trained his swordsmanship and his abilities as a duelist.

His huge, thick ursine fingers loosened the small metal tube for the fuse. He studied its burned insides for a moment before he took a piece of cloth and started to clean it by pushing the cloth through the opening.

Twelve winters ago he had finally learned to appreciate the weapon. He had been assigned to carry it, handing it over to the man who was supposed to fire it when necessary. One evening he had stated his dislike of the weapon and the man, a fat bunny, had been unable to understand his dislike and had started to explain the workings of the cannon to him in detail. Bedai had still not liked it, but he had always been interested in weapons of all kinds. Some days later they had been cornered in the ruins of an old temple. Their adversaries, a huge tribe who had been accused of slavery, had driven them into the ruins. This had been the moment when the bunny had finally gotten his chance to prove his weapon's full potential. During their fallback retreat he had blown up parts of the ruins, the huge stones collapsing onto their adversaries, blocking their way, killing a few, injuring even more. When they had gotten out of the temple Bedai had spent more time with the man, learning as much about the cannon as he could. When he had come back from the mission he added one to his own personal arsenal. It had taken him a long time before he had found the perfect weapon. It had a moderate weight, was well-balanced and fired metal rounds no less the size of his own fist.

After lying the fuse tube aside he took another piece of cloth, soaked it with a little bit of oil and started to clean the fuse hole, his fingers gliding over the black metal the cannon was made of.

It was a crude design, showing no decorations of any kind, but the man who had sold it to him had been a veteran soldier and had vouched for the weapon's efficiency. The ugly dark steel from Black Pit hid the weapon's true qualities well. He knew that his mastery of this weapon was the reason why Sty had signed him on for this mission, his qualities as a swordsman, his abilities as a leader, his countless experiences over the years, nothing of this mattered. All that mattered was his ability to carry a huge metal tube which fired metal balls at even the greatest opponent, such as the one they would be facing soon.

The bear stood up from his chair and leaned over the table. He cleaned the cannon with the oily cloth.

Suddenly he stopped cold. His eyes narrowed.

There had been a very faint noise, the wooden floor in the corridor had creaked.

It had not been the sound itself which had alarmed him. It had been the way it had creaked: It had sounded as if some weight had been applied to it in a very slow manner such as by a very careful paw.

The bear stood up to full size, his head almost touching the ceiling of the low room. "Anyone there?" he asked.

Silence followed. Nothing could be heard, but the sound of the airship's engines.

He stood perfectly still and pricked up his ears.

There was no sound.

The ursine man licked his lips, looked down on the table and his eyes were quickly attracted by a small metal chip which had probably stuck to his cannon and had fallen off during the cleaning. He picked it up and flicked it through the opened door, into the corridor.

The chip disappeared from his sight, struck the wooden ground with a predictable sound, ricocheted up to fall down again. In this instant he heard the very faint noise of something rustling.

With full power he pushed the table to the side, grabbed his sword which had been lying on the chair next to him and dashed straight out of the mess, into the corridor. He saw the door to the main deck close and ran across the corridor as fast as he could.

He slammed it open again and instantly he was surrounded by strong winds. The rain poured down on him and flowed down his leather clothes while at the same time drenching his fur.

The bear could not care less about the weather. He was solely focused on the small furr who stood half-way across the deck, next to the gearwheels.

With a bent back the furr had turned around and looked at him.

He knew instantly that this could not be any other member of the crew. It was too small and the shape was unfamiliar to him. He could not see much of it, but the way its two pupils shimmered in the very dim light which was reflected by the metal parts of the ship he knew that it had to be some sort of a feline.

"Got you," he hissed to himself, a grim sense of satisfaction rising in his chest.

The small shape of the feline retired while the bear approached.

Their eyes glistened whenever the light came through the storm and lit their faces. The cold rain flowed down their muscled bodies.

What he saw looked like a small lynx with androgynous features and wet fur which stuck to a muscled body just like the wet clothes.

Bedäi took the sheath from his side, grabbed the large hilt with his huge paw and then slowly pulled the blade out which shimmered unnaturally in the darkness as if sheet lightning danced across the silvery metal. His eyes reflected the blade's shimmer when he fully unsheathed the huge sword which seemed to have no weight in his broad hands.

The lynx was still retiring. He could not see the face very well, he did not know what expression it showed, but it did not matter to him in this moment. He saw how the feline retreated instinctively until meeting the wooden wall of the foc's'le.

He tilted his head a little bit and swung his sword. The blade caught the flickering light of the ship, the drops of rain flowed down the smooth blade.

With satisfaction he noticed that the lynx was about to breathe faster, that he started to press himself against the wall and crouched slightly.

"Now, I've got you," the ursine rumbled. The bear could feel the anxiety of a fight rising, warmth spread through his limbs while his body relaxed, allowing him to use every single one at full strength. Adrenaline washed through his veins, set them afire and the pressure strengthened while he focused on the feline. His feet slipped over the slick ground until he got the right stance.

They focused on each other. Their eyes shimmered.

Rain poured down on them, washed over their faces, soaked their clothes and their furs. The gearwheels spun endlessly, resisting the storm which pulled at the ship, making it sway in the night while the wind howled around the metal and the wood.

None of them moved. Their eyes glistened in the cold of the surrounding night.

A gust of wind swirled over the deck, the raindrops danced in large waves in the light of the few, dim lanterns, circled around the spinning gearwheels, rushed through their small openings and then shot past the shimmering wet ground, tore at the clothes of the two shapes, the large one twice the size of the smaller one, an equally large blade in his paws.

He saw that the lynx' lips twitched and for an instant the whites of the sharp teeth flashed. The muscles on the feline's neck had tensed, just like his fur had bristled as much as it could in the rain.

Bedaï did not move, except for his eyes, he was oblivious to the cold and the rain. He felt nothing but an intense calm he had missed for many days.

The feline made a bolt to the side.

"You are not getting away now!" No matter how fast the lynx was, he had just waited for this move and his blade shot forwards and slammed into the wood of the deck, blocking the way."You are not getting away anymore!" he screamed.

The lynx seemed to slip while the bear shot forwards to grab the small feline. He got a clumsy hold of the feline. He felt wet fur, muscles, cloth and small breasts. This unexpected realization did not matter to him at all, he tried to get his sword into position, but the female lynx struggled. He had no real hold on her wet fur. A hoarse yelp escaped the small feline.

"Hold...!" the bear hissed, but before he could finish the sentence teeth became buried in his arm. Bedaï screamed as the unexpected pain shot through his body like a bullet of heat.

He did not let go, enforced his hold and suddenly the lynx pulled herself upward in his arms. Claws cut into his arms. Feet with equally sharp claws spun around when the lynx turned over despite his hold. With the speed of this turn the feet came closer and Bedaï let go off the lynx who fell to the ground while the bear retired.

The lynx turned and the bear used the moment to charge.

With a shout Bedaï dashed forward, shifting the sword in his paws, the blade directed at the chest of the lynx which got closer. Water washed down his forehead and into his eyes, it hurt and he did not care as he saw who the motionless lynx was getting closer.

The lynx jumped while the bear slipped on, almost losing his equilibrium when he tried to stop his advance. His momentum drove him on, while the feline

was almost pushed over in the air as the wind had gotten hold of the small body and the lynx struggled to get to safe ground again while Bedaï swirled around. She landed clumsily and with a growl the bear hurled his heavy blade around and the feline ducked the blade which seemed to cut the raindrops which splashed all about. The female dodged but his fist shot forward as well and hit her right into her face and she was pushed over by it, flew backwards, crashed into the ground and then glided over the slick ground, slamming into the wall at the entrance to the lower decks.

He rushed after her, raised his sword high above his head and with a cry he pushed it downwards where she lied, but struck nothing but wood as she had already rolled over and for a moment he was unable to understand how the lynx had been able to cope with his punch so quickly, but the feline spun around on the ground and the foot kicked his leg. For the shortest instant he wanted to laugh about this as the lynx would never be able to push him over but then he remembered that these feet had claws too and the pain from beneath his slashed boots shot into his head.

The sword crashed into the railing where the smaller fur had been. The wood splintered beneath the power of the blow. With a scream of pain and force he spun around to his opponent again who was now lying by his side, having rolled over. With his free foot he simply kicked the lynx on the floor. There was a cry of pain while the small shape slipped over the ground and Bedaï charged again, gliding over the planks. His teeth gritted as he held the sword up high.

But suddenly the lynx went head over heels and was instantly on all fours and with a growl she slammed into him, faster than anything he would had expected. All of a sudden there were claws all over his face, cutting into his skin, she tore his clothes apart, there were teeth, the sour breath of a growling animal and he just slashed all around to get rid of this bestial attacker and his hands got hold of something but before he had been able to do something the lynx was gone again.

He could feel blood running down his arms and he turned to face the feline again who was kneeling in the rain, the small body trembling, sharp teeth shimmering.

Faster than ever before he dashed forward and the huge blade in his paws swished through the air. But the lynx ducked beneath the sword while it shot over her and as soon as the blade was gone she jumped up, but the bear had expected such a move and hurled his huge arm in the opposite direction of his sword and thus he hit her fully into her side. But this move had prevented him from using all his strength. He could hear a gasp when she was sent to the ground once again.

Bedaï drew back his other arm to strike with his sword once more and this time he made it as fast as possible. With a growl he slashed the sword downwards hitting where she had been instants before, splinters of the wooden ground flew all around him as it was torn to pieces by the power of his blow.

The bear looked upwards, his eyes following the feline shape who had rolled over as if it had been the most natural thing to do. Then the small feline body had propelled itself into the air and for an instant the lynx seemed to floating in

between the rain drops just above the sword, a small feline, nothing but tense muscles, teeth and claws.

The blow had droned through the whole ship. Its echo had drowned out every other sound for an instant and instantly the captain was up. He knew every sound of his ship by heart and he had gotten used to these, did not even notice them anymore when he was aboard. But this sound had alerted him instantly and he had awakened with a start. He jumped to his feet, performing his trained duties before he even knew what he did. He had been dozing in his ready room and now he made a rush for the bridge, grabbing his sword when he ran past it.

“What’s up?” he cried out when he came out of the door.

The lights of the ship’s night mode blinked lightly. Rain poured down against the main window.

“No idea, sir!” Silent Cry yelled when he saw the captain coming in. The rabbit stood at the helm like he was supposed to but in this moment he had been busy with eying the ceiling that still seemed to be resonating with the blow.

“Must be coming from main deck,” Illeeree shouted. She had been resting at her console but just like the rest she had been awakened by the sound.

“Status?” The captain rushed over to his wife.

“All systems go, we are right in the middle of the storm, strong winds from west, drift at least two leagues per hour, but we’re stable,” the vixen replied automatically.

“Silent Cry, keep on going on the same course, we’ll go check upstairs,” the fox instructed the rabbit while he was already climbing the ladder to the main deck as fast as he could. Illeeree was right after him, her own sword in her paws.

“Aye, aye, captain,” the rabbit shouted.

The storm was instantly upon them and took all warmth away, tearing at their clothes and surrounding them with rain and howling noises when they opened the door. The fox screwed up his eyes, trying to get used to this turmoil but despite the few lanterns which fought against the wind he could not really adapt to this.

“Over there!” Illeeree shouted at his side and pointed towards the rear.

And there he could see them too: Two shapes, an extremely huge one and a small one, spinning around one another, a huge blade cutting through the air, water splashing all about, the wind tearing at their bodies.

Several other members of the crew stood at the opposite door to the quarters and observed the fighters.

Sty’s hair fluttered around his head while he observed the battle with total amazement. Finally he was able to pull himself together. “Stop this!” Sty yelled at the top of his voice while he ran down the slick stair and towards the fighting.

This time Bedaï was too fast for her and his sword superficially cut the lynx’ thigh. She growled in pain and the bear used this distraction of hers to raise his sword again but then she was on the move again, a hoarse cry escaped her throat. She was down on all fours and then jumped forward, slid over the wet

ground, water splashed around her. The sword came down and suddenly the lynx dropped to the ground, slipped over the ground on her back, shot past him, turned around, her feet hit the deck frantically and suddenly propelled her forwards again and onto the bear's huge back. Claws shimmered in the flickering light and she buried them deep in the cloth of his vest, piercing through it as hot pain shot into his back when she penetrated the skin.

He cried out and swirled around to throw the lynx off. Although it worked she did not need more than a moment to be up again. With a cry of fury he was ready to stab her but when he thrust forwards the blade just hit the wood again.

"Stop it!" the captain yelled, trying to drown out the noises of the storm. Nobody noticed him.

Having anticipated this Bedai yelled furiously, while he dropped to the ground himself. With his free hand he got a hold of the feline's short hair and with rage-fuelled power he tore her around and flung the small body against the railing.

She crashed into it. For a moment the feline did not move at all and the bear rose to full size again. The man exhaled.

"DIE!" he yelled and dashed towards the feline on the floor, the blade behind him so that he could hit her with full strength.

He did not see anything at all except for a flash of brown fur.

A weight slammed into him with full force, knocking him off his feet. He screamed in pain when his injured back slid over the uneven planks, the wood cutting into the wounds she had already inflicted there. A trail of blood was left behind on the ground until the huge man crashed into the railing around the gearwheels. Everything was black in front of his eyes for a moment, but when he opened them again, everything he saw were the teeth of a widely opened maw about to burrow into his flesh.

The blow pushed the lynx off the bear. A hoarse cry escaped her when she slid over the wet wooden ground. Despite this she was instantly on her feet again and her narrowed eyes glared at the captain who stood in front of Bedai, protecting the wounded bear.

The fox was breathing heavily as he had not been prepared for this, he was hardly fully awake. Like he expected she did not leave him any time to ponder these circumstances.

Her mouth wide open, showing her sharp teeth and claws again she dashed towards him. She was not even running, she was on all fours and jumped him with the full power of her legs, her speed far beyond anything he had ever witnessed before.

When he tried to dodge her, she pounced into his side, threw him off his feet (he could hear somebody crying his name) without wounding him and instantly he was on the ground, rolled over and jumped to his feet again and drew his sword.

For a split-second he had lost her from his sight and this was all she needed to attack again. Instantly there were claws all around him and he could not help himself but scream when they shredded his clothes and cut his skin. They cut into his face's skin. He cried out and the same moment he saw her wide opened

mouth with her bared predatory teeth incoming and with a cry he slammed his fist right into her face, sending her to the ground again. He jumped forward and grabbed her from behind. A husky cry escaped her when he tried to get a grip on her. But she was totally wet, her entire fur and her clothes were nothing but a wet mess and his fingers just slipped off. When he felt how he lost his grip, he spun around, using the momentum to send her to the ground. He observed how the lynx turned over herself, rolling over instantly to minimize the damage.

He enforced the hold on his sword which he had been unable to use. "Surrender!" the fox cried, the blade pointing at the lynx.

The lynx shot around the sword as if it was not there at all. Mere inches from his face sharp claws snapped at him while Sty dropped backwards. The fox dropped to the ground and rolled over.

When he looked up again he saw the lynx as a dark shape against the night sky, coming in from above.

"SURRENDER!" He threw his blade upwards but he was too slow.

The lynx crashed into him, white teeth flashed.

The fox hit her with his elbow and used all of his force.

Claws touched him for a split-second but then the small body was thrown aside.

Instantly Sty was up on his feet again, firmly grabbing his blade.

The lynx rolled around and rose to all fours, a lacerated wound on her forehead stained the fur of her face. From the deepest bottom of her chest came nothing but a deep hoarse snarl.

"Give...!" He was not even meant to finish that sentence because the lynx pounced him once again, but her movement was clumsy. He evaded her easily, she landed behind him, he spun around and saw how she tried to do the same, but the small shape staggered while doing so, almost losing its equilibrium. Nevertheless she tried to jump at him again. He hit her in midair again, the feline crashed into the ground, rebounded several times, her limbs thrown around, before she slammed into the railing yet again.

"Surrender!" Sty said, pointing his sword at the feline. He breathed heavily and eyed the feline carefully, noticing every twitch of her muscles, every turn of the sinews he saw despite the blood and the torn clothes which covered her fur. "Surrender!" He could see her hardly moving at all, except for the quivering.

For a moment everything seemed to be quiet, he knew it was not. Some part of him perceived the yells of his comrades, the noise of the engines and the weather. He paid no attention to any of it, he focused solely on the lynx while he approached further. "Surrender!" he said once again.

He heard Ileeere's scream. He did not need it to alarm him, but the feline's agility and speed surprised him anyway. He had just time to raise his arm in defense and in the very same moment the predatory teeth buried themselves in his arm brace. Pain shot through his arm and into his head as the strong jaw pressed the teeth through the thick leather. For a split second he could see the face up close: Angular features, totally contorted, the eyes nothing but dark slits.

Another split second later the fist of his free hand hit the lynx' head with full power. The teeth did not give in.

"Give up!" he hissed and hit her again. He could feel the impact of his own fist being transmitted into his locked arm. The pain was intense and he hit her again, sudden rage fuelling his power. "GIVE UP!" he yelled at the feline and punched her with full force again and again. "GIVE UP ALREADY!"

Blood from the wound on her forehead shot about and was spilled over both of them.

"Give up!" he panted, hitting her again.

The feline hang down from his arm, her jaw still firmly locked even though the rest of the small body was totally powerless.

He slammed her hard, hit her again and again, panting in exhaustion. Blood covered the entire feline's face now.

One last time his fist slammed into her forehead. A fountain of blood shot from her wounds and he could feel how her jaw gave in, lost its grip. Sty moaned in pain when the teeth were suddenly gone and the full extent of the pain shot throughout him.

Totally lifeless the lynx dropped to the ground and lay there, nothing but a bundle of torn clothes and blood.

Everyone was silent and stared at the captain for a moment., before Ileeree walked towards him and embraced him without saying a word.

Tired he let himself sink into her arms while they stood in silent embrace above the lifeless lynx body, the wounded bear leaning against the distant wall, the rest of the present men standing next to them while the engines worked endlessly and drove the airship through the dark windy sky.

End of Chapter 16

Annotation 1: Besides simple followers, the cult of the Moon Goddesses knows three different ranks. Initiation is the lowest one and means access to the abbeys of the cult besides the masses and ceremonies and it is a condition for further becoming an acolyte or a priestess.

Annotation 2: All of the species have a time of higher fertility, usually called "heat". Most furs are also much more sexually active in that time.

Annotation 3: Marking and clean-up are two sexual techniques. Marking means that a male spreads his semen on his partner, thus visibly showing his bond to that one. Cleaning-up means that men and women remove the traces of their love-making which usually involves oral sex of some kind. This is sometimes being considered necessary because of other furs' good sense of smell.

Annotation 4: "The Sun" stands as synonym to the Sun God who is traditionally seen as an antagonist to the Moon Goddesses.

Annotation 5: As the cult of the Moon Goddesses is organized around abbeys, their priestesses are sometimes referred to as nuns.

Annotation 6: Only Heya, the golden moons, shows clear moon phases, so the new moons refer to its cycle (such as all of the lunar calendar). The followers of the Moon Goddesses celebrate them with elaborate, nocturnal rites which not everyone is being allowed to participate in.

Annotation 7: Rise of the Goddesses means the rise of the moons.

Annotation 8: Bedai is referring to the acolytes here. "Priestesses' pets" is a common insult for them as they are supposed to be servants during the rituals and the priestesses' assistants.

Annotation 9: Enchau Lao is a large settlement southeast of the Midlands, also known as the Golden Valley, due to the riches of its grain fields.

Annotation 10: Corronfray is a rural county at the southern border of the Midlands. Its different settlements are united by a common rule and a common military force.

Annotation 11: Traditionally women own all houses and shops while their husbands are supposed to manage those which means that most marriages are mostly economically motivated and sometimes arranged by the clans in order to guarantee the upkeep of the business.

Annotation 12: Silent Cry is citing the "Legend of the White Princess", an epic tale which is supposed to have taken place during the Spirits' War.