

# Chapter 1

*Once upon a time, in a place far, far away from here. There lived a girl different from other girls.*

*We lived on the River that flowed yellow in Spring and red in the Fall and that rushed to the Sea at every low tide. By the time I was three, I could man sails and carry nets. By the time I was fifteen, I could handle the ship myself, even out to the great waters where the currents and rocks felt like hammers and the boat felt like a tiny insect on the back of whale. It was a good life. I never knew better. My people were all Water people, magical inside and out. The land-dwellers thought we were more animal than human, as it was impossible to drown us. They said that the Bai Yue could survive underwater for three days and were all half-water snake. No one disagreed with them. The River liked us. The Bay liked us. We were both freshwater and salt water and every day was much like the one before it. In the region that would become Guangzhou, we fished and napped in the sun and the world was good.*

*I didn't realize I was different until I was fifteen. The Water magic had always come easily. I could change the currents, sail upstream, bend the water to catch nets and protect the ship when we went on the Winter trips to the great Bay between islands. But almost everyone could do that. It came so easily to me that my father and mother made me Captain that year, but it was only unusual in that I was young, not the gift itself. Even the healing gift, rare among our people, seemed to be strong in me and the grandmothers taught me all they knew in the battling of disease and injury. All of it was effortless. I loved the water. Loved the feel of it on my skin. Loved the shape of it, moving through space. Loved the way you could almost see it's layers and history as it moved from place to place and time to time.*

*There had been rumors of shapeshifters in our tribe for generations. The last one was decades ago, according to the grandmothers. I wanted to be one. I'd already mastered all the local magic. The water and I were almost one thing. I couldn't see why I wouldn't be the next shapeshifter. I wanted it, but no one knew the way. No one remembered how to do it. And none of the grandmothers would talk about it. "Wait, child," they told me. "If it will happen, it will happen on its own. There is no need to force something that is not ready." Again and again. But I couldn't wait. I was the best mage our people had seen in four generations. I wanted it with a hunger that I didn't realize would start to change me.*

*The raiders came again in the summer of my seventeenth year. Land-dwellers who hated us, for some reason. Every summer, we passed through the neck of the river to get to the Bay, where the fish were cooler and more plentiful. The River filled with sediment and heat, running low and stagnant, pushing us out to sea. That year, the villagers were waiting for us. Fire and screams were all I remember. Metal cables across the water's mouth. Shouting in a language I didn't understand, but that seemed almost recognizable. I panicked and dove into the water, like many*

*of the tribe. I could see villagers dragging women and girls up like fish, hauling them into the forest by their hair. I dove down deeper and felt nets close around me, dragging me through the muck. I had never been that scared before. Never felt the kind of encompassing terror that ran through me at the thought of being captured and dragged into the forest. That gibbering panic snapped something in my head and suddenly the place between me and the water disappeared. My body was remaking itself, or rather, becoming something else. A water snake was nearby. I could feel it. Feel its steady heartbeat, the way its muscles pulled together, the shape of its spine. Its mind felt calm and still compared to the violence and fear above me. Without thinking, I just wanted to be it. Wanted it like there was nothing else in the world that could possibly matter. And just like that, my skin melted. My bones dissolved. The Water fed me all new materials for a body not my own and I saw through new eyes. Clear, self-healing membranes impervious to the mud now gave me clear sight of the net. Special scent glands told me where all the living things around me were, and delicate vibrational sensors in my new brain let me slip easily out of the net and course up the river to safety, with perfect magnetic directionality. Effortless.*

*I did not look back. I did not help my family. I ran, or rather, swam as far away as I could get.*

*I would not talk to another human being for almost forty years. My name is Ming Yue, though only one person still calls me that. Everyone else knows me as Tsuki – Moon.*

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*The woman was back.* Suki could feel her in an instant. On the dark, rainy battlefield, this woman was like a beacon of warmth and comfort. Suki's eyes followed her, distracted from the dead man underneath her hands. She couldn't save him, only help him to the afterlife with as much gentleness as possible. But the woman...Suki's hands stopped moving and she watched the woman move through the dead and dying. She had done this every night since the battle finished, just her, though. None of the other officers followed her into the darkness. She rolled a man over, checked his colors, and let him flop back into the mud, ramming her saber through his neck. *Guess he wasn't on her team,* thought Suki, in mingled horror and admiration. She could feel pain, terror, and sadness from everyone except the female officer moving through the bodies in front of her. From her, Suki felt nothing but strength. Equanimity. Purpose. She closed her eyes and inhaled, as if she could draw that stability and power in like air.

The woman stopped, swiveling as if she'd heard Suki's thoughts. Suki immediately Shifted into a small, black fox and lay quietly next to the dead man. Her nose was instantly filled with sickly sweet decomposing meat smell which made her regret choosing fox form. *Something without a nose would have been better.* But she held her breath as the officer went back to her butchering. Occasionally, she would find one of her own that was still alive and she would drag that one over to a small overhang nearby, where her army's healers were waiting. *Sparing them*

*the suffering of walking through a battlefield? Strangely compassionate of her,* thought Suki. She had never seen a female commander before. Much less a black one in any of the great Armies that passed through this portion of Asia. *But I am very far from home,* she thought. *Maybe here, women have different roles.* But the black officer was the only one she'd seen anywhere in the dozen or so years this stupid war had been going on. She and all the other healers were drawn to it, like moths to the flame. *Not as if anyone knows we exist,* she thought bitterly, slipping back into the darkness of the forest. *Commanders only see the living, not the wounded or dead. I suppose they just think soldiers grow on trees and that humans all want to die alone of infection in a foreign land and in excruciating pain.* She lengthened her stride a little, expanding her senses and leaping through the darkness. *Soldiers. All of them are monsters.* An image of the female officer popped back into her mind and she stumbled just a little. She pushed the image away and slowed, arriving at her burrow.

The heavy foliage blocked most of the rain, but she still shook out her fur and shimmered into her rabbit form, fluffing out her two layers of waterproof coat as she slipped into the hole. Immediately, she was warm and dry. The little hay she'd staged here during the day smelled sweet as she snacked and nestled into the comfortable lair. She let out a little sigh of relief. *It's also nice that I can't cry in this form,* she thought, letting all the pain and suffering she'd accumulated from her night healing mission drop from her mind, burying it in the dark space between her thoughts for later. *So many people crying out for help and all these generals just throwing them back into Death. Mad things, humans.* But the officer. Suki held the image back in her mind. Even in the dark, she could tell the woman's strength. Tall, muscled. Even in the cold, she was wearing only her kilt and leather armor. Her head was shaved and Suki didn't know how she knew she was a woman. She was almost indistinguishable from the other men, but there was something about her. Slender, strong, but her mind...Suki reveled in the sensation she'd pulled from her. *So calm. So stable. So warm.* She shivered a little at the new sensation of being interested in someone else. Most people were just balls of negative emotions, things to fix, pain to ease, but not this one. This one felt...like what? Suki didn't know. She'd been forgetting words for years, as a consequence of her lonely lifestyle. But this woman made her want to remember.

The next morning, the Army was gone. Suki was mostly nocturnal at this point, so by the time she had woken up and made her way back to the battlefield, the Army was gone. Crows and carrion-eaters were arguing over the dead things on the field and several miles away, the bivouac was cleared with the kind of callous disregard for the land that most men couldn't seem to help. *Savages,* she thought, sniffing at what was left of the burned meadow. They had left a pit latrine, blood, trash and death behind them, but at least they had left. Her fox nose twitched as she caught a scent of...something. Her ears pricked forward, as if she could catch a voice on the wind. *The woman. The officer.* She couldn't help but follow it. *What is it? It smells like...spicy, but almost sweet. Warm, maybe, but cool and cleansing. What is she?* It faded. She looked toward the long road of destruction and suffering leading west. She didn't really want to follow, but another waft of that scent flit passed her nose and she broke out into an easy trot. /

*have nothing else to do. Why not follow this for a moment? There will be healing work at the end of this road, if nothing else. Savages.*

She kept to the shadows and edges of the Army troop train. Thousands of soldiers blundering through the wilderness left a track a baby could follow, so it was no difficulty to move in and out of the trees through the column, trying to find Her. The officer. No one noticed the fox trotting along the edges of their vision for mile after mile. But the fox couldn't find the officer. There was no sign of her at the middle or rear of the column and the land was rapidly changing away from forest toward a kind of scrubby grassland that felt dry and uncomfortable to Suki. Her legs were tired and she kept feeling hungry animal eyes on her from something larger in the rocks. During a break, as she was snacking on a mouse, she reached out to touch that hungry mind. *Hello? What are you?* An image of a tawny, thickly muscled cat came back. She had never seen anything like it. It was huge, immensely powerful. She cleaned her paws and fur quickly and then Shifted into her human form.

She held the cat's mind with hers until she could find it in the brush and knelt down next to it. It was calm, with her steady comfort, and she stroked a hand down the long spine. *Beautiful*, she thought at it. The cat stretched in appreciation and laid its head on her lap for more scratches. *And charming*, she thought, smiling. She'd never seen anything quite like this creature and was immediately entranced. She let her mind investigate its biology from the inside out as she caressed its head and rubbed its tummy until she felt like she could replicate it in her own skin and delicately released the lioness, encouraging her to go hunt elsewhere in the long grass.

She closed her eyes and skimmed her human hands along her naked body, trying to feel fur and muscles in new places. The lioness's pattern moved from her hands to her spine as the Water melted her into something larger, stronger, and very, very fun. Suki opened her new eyes and would have chuckled if she could. *Oh, I like this form very much. Very much indeed.*

The days were hotter now. Much hotter and Suki refused to follow the Army during the day. It was only at night when she felt comfortable enough to move through the moonlight and grasslands of wherever they were. She didn't really have a sense of time anymore. There was only the night and brief catches of the spice on the wind until one night, when it wasn't spice, but blood. She got the usual sinking sensation that came with the advent of all human violence and ran silently toward the smell.

The battle was still raging. Fire and smoke filled the air, there were screaming villagers of some kind. She couldn't understand their words, exactly, but she could understand their thoughts perfectly well. The soldiers were tired and hungry and expecting this village to take care of them. The village hadn't cooperated. She leapt into the fray, feeling strong and powerful in the new body, dragging soldiers down and defending the villagers. She was just as tired of them and all their needs and wasted no time in snapping at them, scaring them away from homes, and giving them just enough pain to move them somewhere else. No killing. She didn't want to kill anything, but the waste and entitlement of the men was too much. And then, there she was. The officer. She was shouting orders and dragging men out of houses, throwing them onto the fire brigade line, beating some of them with her shield until they complied. She was magnificent.

Suki skulked in the shadows, Shifting into an owl to better see the woman and hear her.

“Get out! You! Back to the lines!” She dragged another man to the fire line near the well, only to have him spit in her face. She punched him with what could only be weighted gloves as he nose immediately erupted in blood and he howled in pain. “Move!” she hissed. “Or I’ll break more than your nose. Where’s your sergeant?” The man pointed shakily to another man, also hauling soldiers away from villagers and trying to get control over the company. “Good. Put out those fires, don’t touch any of the women. You understand?”

He nodded and she shoved him away, making her way to the sergeant. “Sergeant!” she shouted. “Where is everyone else?”

“Almost accounted for, sir!” he said, dragging another man with him. “Two more missing, the rest are on fire and clean-up. No more looting for this lot tonight,” he shook the soldier for emphasis. “Bloody assholes think they’re in the Lightning Second Company.” He slapped the boy, who was looking tired and considerably shamed. “This is Third Company, idiot. We have discipline here. You understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” said the boy. “Everyone else was—”

“If I’d wanted your opinion, I would have given it to you,” said the Sergeant, marching the boy to the recovery area. “Sorry, sir. One squad leader is still out looking for the missing men. We’ll have this cleaned up for you in no time.”

“See that you do,” said the officer. “Never again, Sergeant. You understand? We don’t do this bullshit. No looting, no raping, no pillaging. Anyone who gets out of line again will get my boot up his ass. You understand?”

“Yes sir. Move it, you,” said the sergeant, after saluting smartly. “Get the lead out, boy.”

The officer didn’t move, even after the men left. She stood in the smoldering village, as if she was listening for something. Suki craned her face down to see the woman’s face and hooted softly. It was remarkable. Cheekbones. That was the first thing Suki saw. Slashes of bones in her face that made her seem almost like a weapon herself. Incredible slanted eyes that seemed to glimmer with the flames, subtly highlighted in kohl – seemingly her one nod to femininity. Suki couldn’t see what color they were, but the reflection of the flames in them was enough to make her lose her breath. The woman pivoted, again, as if she had heard Suki’s thoughts, and Suki took off from the rafter in a moment of blinding fear. Silently disappearing into the nothingness around the village with her feather-soft wings as fast as she could go. *Terrifying. Just terrifying.* And yet, some part of her wanted to go back. *Insane. She’s a monster. There’s no telling what would happen if she caught you.* But the feeling didn’t go away.

The heat was terrible now, though Suki could smell the sea on the wind. They must have been traveling for months. There was nothing but the drag and despair of the army, occasional brief

battles or looting binges that made Suki sick inside and boredom. So much boredom. She hadn't seen the woman in weeks and hadn't had the courage to actually look for her in longer. She could feel the presence of more people relatively close by – a city, maybe. Or at least a place with women and children and there seemed to be a different attitude in camp. To her surprise, they stopped before entering the city and set up a bivouac near a lazy river, well outside the gates, and then just...stopped. For days, then a week. They did nothing. The soldiers drilled and fought each other with loud noises and stupidity, but that was it.

Suki wandered through the camp as a small mouse, listening, watching. No one seemed to pay her any mind day after day. And then, *her voice*. Suki heard her. Her officer. She was laughing, or maybe swearing, and Suki sped through the crowd to find her. There, in a ring, the beautiful black woman was destroying her opponent. She looked like she was dancing, all grace and lethal efficiency as one by one the men fell and were rolled out of the area. Dozens were in there, a crowd of soldiers, all to fight this one woman, and one by one, their bloody bodies were dragged out to be tended to by a very abused-looking young healer. But the woman was laughing and egging them on, taunting them one after another until finally, a big blonde man stepped out of the crowd.

“Alright, Minnie. You’ve had your fun. Time for a real fight.”

“Oh, with who? You? You haven’t won against me yet, Deus. Bring me your best shot then.”

Shouting and clashing erupted as the watching soldiers slammed their weapons into their shields or armor as if in encouragement. One side of the arena started chanting, “STRIKE HARD, STRIKE FAST” over and over again as the big man settled into the ring and smiled at the woman, giving her some sort of salute that made the arena break out into laughter and angry shouts. Boots stamped around her, blocking the view as she sped to one of the surrounding tents to get a better advantage. There was a roar from the crowd as she ducked and wove through the melee, finally racing up a tentpole to safety, but by then, the fight was over. Minnie and the blonde man were both down, blood was everywhere. Boos and catcalls echoed through the arena as one of the soldiers dragged Minnie up and the other braced the big man against his back. Minnie was laughing, coughing up a little blood as the big man got pulled out, limp and definitely unconscious. “Is there no one else?” She called mockingly into the crowd as her soldier braced her against his side. “IS THERE NO ONE ELSE?”

“Give it a rest, Captain!” someone yelled from the crowd. “You’re a beast!”

Minnie threw her head back and shouted, “PHOENIX THIRD COMPANY!” and a crowd of soldiers from one side of the arena roared back, “FIRE AND BLOOD!”

Minnie laughed uproariously as they hauled her into one of the healer tents.

*She’s insane*, thought Suki. But she didn’t leave.

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She waited until midnight. The days events seemed to have worn out most of the soldiers and the camp was quiet. There were still lights on in the healer's tents, but evidently, they had been having some kind of tournament and everyone was badly beaten and nursing wounds that night. There were some muted sounds of drinking, but there was a curious peace and stillness that was unusual for the soldiers. Suki had been around them long enough by this point to find that the tension had somehow been relieved and everyone felt much more serene and calm tonight. It was a pleasant change from most of the fear, despair, guilt, and repression that haunted most of the men at night.

They might have been calm, but she wasn't. Her heart was hammering and if she hadn't been in her lioness form, she was sure she'd be in a cold sweat. Lion always made her feel strong and confident and she needed that feeling now as she eeled her way between tents and drunk men, softly and stealthily making her way to one particular tent. One that she had been trying to find for a long, long time. A tent that smelled like clean spices and sweetness in the dark. She paused before going in. There was another scent there. This one smelled astringent, cleansing. The person was yelling at the woman, or at least making very strong statements undercut with a caring, exasperated feeling that was very pleasant to Suki's mind.

"You have to stop with the arena fighting, Captain. I know you like it and it inspires the men, but—"

"Shut up, Nicholas. You know I can't stop." There was a rustle and a small exhale, as if the woman was in pain. "I have to be the Phoenix Captain. That means fighting. That means proving that I'm not really a woman. All the rest of it."

"But you do that so often," came the plaintive reply. "Can't you take a little break, every once in a while?"

Minnie chuckled. "Nope. That's not how it works. The moment I show any weakness, those psychopaths will drag me down and drown me in my own blood." There was a pause and another rustle. "Don't worry, healer. I'll be alright."

"No, Captain, you won't." Suki could almost hear his scowl in his voice. "You are literally hemorrhaging blood. I think I got most of it stopped externally with the burn, but internally....You won't last very long like this."

Suki swallowed hard. *Then the healer is not a mage? He can't actually Heal her?*

"Don't worry, love. It's an occupational hazard. I'd rather go down like this than die of old age somewhere bored out of my mind."

"Stupid."

"I won't argue with you."

There was a long pause. "If you and Captain Deus would just go a little easier..."

"That's not how this works, healer. You know that. Who would follow us if we're weak?"

"Who will follow you if you are dead?"

Minnie laughed and something constricted tightly in Suki's chest. "Point, Nicholas. Point. Now, tell me what I have to do so I can get you out of this tent and fall asleep quietly."

There was a clink of metal and a gagging noise and Suki had to restrain herself to not burst in. *That better not be a blood thinner he's giving her*, she thought savagely, thinking of the terrible remedies the non-gifted thought of as medicine. *He'll kill her before the bleeding does.*

"Gah, that's horrible," said Minnie, breathlessly. "Are you sure you're not trying to kill me?"

"Hold your tongue. Idiot Captain," muttered the healer as he collected his things. Footsteps approached the tent flap exist. "I'll come by tomorrow morning, first thing. Try not to die."

"Aye aye," said Minnie, jokingly. "I'll do my best, sir!"

"Stupid, overcompensating, blithering idiot soldiers," muttered the healer under his breath as he stepped passed Suki, never even seeing her in the dim light. "Killing themselves for stupid publicity stunts and nonsense."

She felt a moment of kinship with the man, though they were from radically different worlds. *Humans are humans, after all. And soldiers are all idiots, regardless of what country they are from*, she thought approvingly after him. *I understand, brother. I understand.* She slipped into the tent.

Minnie was lying on her back, taking short, shallow breaths as if in intense pain. It looked like she had several crushed ribs and a long burn stretching from her right collarbone to well below the blanket the healer had put over her. She was lying on two mattresses instead of one, obviously the only luxury that her rank bought her and Suki felt her hackles raise that someone thought this woman was worth hurting. *Savages.* The woman, Minnie, was almost unconscious from whatever the healer had given her and never noticed when Suki slipped onto the mattress next to her in human form and started Healing her from the inside out. *I will not let you die, Minnie. Such a strange name for such a strong person*, thought Suki as she took Minnie's pain and injuries as her own and let the Water soothe them back into the shapes that they should be, seeing the memories and experiences that had made them in the first place with a little awe. When she had been younger, this had hurt, but years of battlefield healing had helped her move past that and actually pay attention to what had caused the pain, not just the pain itself. *Why do you do this to yourself, Minnie?* The woman stirred and curled into Suki as if comforted, even reaching an arm around her to hold her closer. It almost shocked Suki out of her spell. *How can someone so kind do things like this?* But Minnie didn't answer, just sighed in relief and held her.



It was the first time Suki had ever been held. The first time she had ever been touched. It felt like a metal pin had been rammed into her chest and anchored into the floor. *What have I done?*

Minnie survived the night. And the night after that. Suki couldn't leave her. Every day, before dawn, she would slip out of Minnie's tent and escape into the wilds, far, far away from Minnie and all the other soldiers, wipe her soul clean and stay with the animals and plants that were so much simpler to understand. But every night, she would come creeping back to Minnie. Sometimes, to curl around her as she slept, but sometimes just to watch over her and soothe her as nightmares made her scream and lash out in the dark. She listened to those screams, sometimes reaching into Minnie's mind to watch the dreams and push them far enough away or change them so that Minnie could sleep through the night. She didn't want her to hurt anymore. But it wasn't enough. Something was missing. She wanted more from Minnie, though she didn't know what.

And when the Army left, marching to Greece, Suki couldn't stay in the shadows anymore.

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Suki often infiltrated the healers' tents when Minnie was busy. There were always wounded and injured soldiers drifting in and out. She always changed her face or came at night when no one would notice a stranger. It felt good to ease the pain, both inside and out for them. Felt good to use her gift for people that needed it, but the Army was a bottomless pit of suffering and despair. All the soldiers could talk about was rumors of a Persian invasion and how they had been hired to stop the juggernaut. Everyone was nervous, anxious. Fights, rapes, brutality increased dramatically and the non-commissioned officers were regularly in the tents trying to figure out who had done what to whom and if they were going to remain in service or have to stay back and not get paid. "Is that what being a mercenary is?" she asked one of them, as she stitched up his arm after a knife fight with his tent mate.

The man shrugged. "It happens. We're all a little stressed. Can't get paid if you don't fight, but definitely likely you'll die if you fight. Makes everyone a little wild. And," he lowered his voice as if she didn't already know what he was about to tell her. "I heard that the Persians have *elephants*. How the fuck you fight an elephant?"

"I don't know," she said honestly and finished tying up his arm with just a touch of Healing magic to make sure it wouldn't get infected. "Good luck."

"Yes ma'am," he said, giving her a toothy smile. "Hey, any chance you would be..."

“No,” she said quickly. For some reason, most of her patients wanted to have sex with her. It was confusing and stupid. Some even propositioned the male healers. Healer Nicholas had basically shrugged when she’d asked him about it. “Go, if you want,” he’d said. “Just remember they probably won’t be coming back and they probably won’t be very nice to you during.”

She hadn’t understood that and didn’t want to.

The man gave her a little salute and left, seeming to not really care what her answer was and she washed her hands in one of the basins surrounding the edges of the tent.

She leaned out of the tent into the sun, stretching her face up to the light after all day being trapped in the stifling heat of the tent. *Minnie*. The Captains were all in the city proper, being fed and meeting with the city elders to determine the price for keeping Greece Greece. Suki couldn’t really understand what all the fuss was about. Greece and Persia seemed like basically the same thing. What did it matter what flag flew or what the name was when everyone was safe and content? She didn’t understand why people insisted on killing each other for the privilege of keeping their name. Seemed rather pointless. But Minnie knew. And Minnie was up there, in the keep, right now. Suki shaded her eyes a little to see the rocky outcrop with the beautiful building on its crest. She hadn’t wanted to move through all the crowds, feel all those emotions and fears crawling into her to go see Minnie, but it’d been days now. She missed her Captain.

*Ironic that someone like me, who doesn’t understand what wars are for and who hates violence has joined the Army just to be near one of its bloodthirsty commanders*, she thought, watching the sunset from her favorite camp lookout. She’d been in human form for much longer than usual and she missed the freedom and simple pleasure that came from one of the animal forms. She looked again to the keep. *Tonight. I have to see her tonight*. She needed something, though she wasn’t sure what.

She took the lioness form. Not because it was the most practical, as her paws kept slipping on the stone floor, not because it was the quietest or the best fit for sneaking through the city. Mostly, it was just because it made her feel powerful and confident. She wanted to show Minnie herself, her real self tonight. She didn’t want to just listen to her or sleep next to her or shield her from dreams tonight. She wanted to be a human and she wanted to be seen as herself. This was a new and scary thought for her, so she shoved it in the back of her mind and kept her lioness form, even when she had trouble fitting through the window. *Worth it*, she thought, controlling her leap to land lightly on the stone near Minnie’s bed.

She was there. Almost waiting for Suki. Her hands were behind her head, relaxed, terribly calm for a woman who had just watched a lioness leap into her bedroom window from the floor below. “Hello,” she said. “Can I assume you’re ready to talk?”

Suki didn’t want to talk. Her whole plan seemed stupid. She seemed stupid. Everything was ridiculous. She paced over to the bed, leapt onto it and put her head in Minnie’s lap, asking for comfort. Minnie scratched her ears and stroked under her chin obligingly, talking of nothing. Telling her about her new sword or saber or something. Mindless words that washed over her

and let her relax. Until she said, “Look, you’re a beautiful thing. But I know you’ve been coming to see me almost every night and I know you’re not a real lioness. What are you? Are you here to kill me? Spy for someone? What’s your deal?” Suki stopped purring and raised her head to meet Minnie’s intimidating cheekbones and Egyptian eyes. *Well. I suppose now is as good a time as any.* She Shifted, without bothering to leave Minnie’s lap. Naked, paws – no, *hands*, on either side of Minnie in what she belatedly realized could be a very aggressive posture for someone used to killing people for a living, she looked up at Minnie’s ebony clear skin shining smooth like carved rock in the moonlight and said, “Um, hello,” in a voice that felt like crushed gravel scraping her vocal cords. “I’m not here to kill you.”

“Oh good,” said Minnie, quietly, with heavy irony. “What are you here to do?”

Suki blinked, looking down at herself and then back at Minnie. “I have no idea.”

“I see,” said Minnie after a moment. “So you’ve just been following me for months now, healing me, because you’re bored?”

“Yes?” said Suki.

“Ah.” Minnie very gently leaned toward her. “Are you sure?”

“No,” said Suki.

Minnie nuzzled against her neck and brushed her fingers against Suki’s lips. “Do you want me to do something to you?”

“No?” said Suki, but she was shivering and very, very confused. It wasn’t unpleasant being this close to Minnie. Not unpleasant at all. And every time Minnie touched her, her mind seemed to stretch out and be wrapped in warmth and self-control from the other woman. Like Minnie could throw her off a cliff and she knew that everything would be alright, because Minnie had done it. Minnie was there. She was safe. Vulnerable. Her arms were getting tired, so she wrapped them around Minnie’s neck and folded her legs under her in front of the other woman, pulling her closer.

Minnie trailed a hand up and down her back, just like how she had stroked her in cat form and rested a hand on Suki’s hip as she slid her other hand to Suki’s jaw and kissed her. Suki tasted that same spicy sweetness wrapped up in body heat and kindness. When Minnie let her go, she asked, “How can you be like this and still be a Captain?”

Minnie shrugged. “I can be both. Do you mind? What I am?” Minnie had gone back to that soothing stroke and had somehow wrapped herself around Suki so that she was being almost cradled against her. It was intensely comforting.

“I don’t mind,” she said, breathing out. “Not at all.”

Minnie smiled and switched position, pushing Suki under her. “Good. I think you and I have some things in common. You want to give me a name? I usually like to start with that before making them scream mine.”

Suki frowned at her. “Suki, but you’re Minnie and—”

Minnie did something that was very alien and very nice and she forgot what she was going to say.

“Suki. That’s pretty. Special deal for you, lovely, you can call me Minerva.” Minnie did something else, opening her legs and sliding on top of her. “Though I am partial to Captain.”

Suki gasped.

## Chapter 2