



# THE PROPHET OF PANAMINDORAH

BOOK ONE - FAUNS AND FILINIANS

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## Prelude: Sing Muse

Hope died with the day in the city of Selbis. In the west the sinking sun bled color like a severed artery, etching the shadows of parapet teeth on the red stone walls. In a tower room of the great keep, the light fell across a man, a wolf, and a tree. The man sprawled on a branch-strewn couch. He held an enormous dagger, its cross-guard set with jagged fragments of pearl, a strange pale jewel in the pommel. His other hand clutched something on the end of a necklace. Sap oozed from the torn branches beneath him, staining his white silk shirt and black trousers. He lay as still as a waxwork, humming softly under his breath, his clothes ruffling in the breeze that blew through the open window.

A great black wolf lay on the floor, watching him through dull eyes. He wore an iron muzzle so heavy that he could barely lift his head. Blood glistened in the fur above his shoulder blades. Sometimes he offered a growl in response to the man's humming, but the sound came weak and muted through the muzzle.

The tree lay everywhere. It seemed to have passed violently through the window, leaving scratches across the walls and a dusting of loose mortar and fallen stone around the sill. The sticky brown sap had a sweet, sharp odor. It had pooled on the tiles and matted in the upholstery of the couch. The man's coal black hair had grown sticky with the tree's blood, yet he lay perfectly still and hummed.

At last, an eagle dropped through the window. Its wings shot out to stop its dive an instant before it the floor. The man sat up and sheathed the dagger at his belt. He had pale skin and eyes as green as the leaves of the tree. He smiled. "Morchella."

The eagle shook its feathers. Its form rippled and leapt up like an uncoiling spring. A woman stood in the bird's place, wearing a blue hooded robe. She tossed her head, throwing back the hood. The wolf managed a growl somewhat louder than before. The woman ignored him. She bowed at the waist. "They are coming, my lord. The battle went poorly today."

The man nodded. He did not seem surprised. "How near the city?"

"They will be here before dawn."

He stretched, graceful as a cat, and let go of the necklace. The chain hung down in a sharp V, but nothing appeared on the end.

"Gabalon," said the woman, her voice losing its formality, "the city is in a panic. I spoke with Denathar at the gate. He is trying to keep the curfew, but soon he will need to make good his threats. The citizens think the war is lost. They are desperate to flee."

The man twirled his dagger thoughtfully. "They must not do that. Tell him to start executing the worst offenders. They must fear me more than they fear wolflings."

Morchella inclined her head. "He also said that while the city panics, you have been wandering around the forest tearing up trees."

Gabalon laughed. "Yes, I have." He looked around in satisfaction at the half destroyed room. "Can you hear the music bleeding from it?"

The wolf was growling again. He managed to get to his feet, but he could not lift his head. “Poor Telsar,” murmured Gabalon, “he was never good at bowing, but he is learning.”

Morchella glanced at the wolf. “What else do you plan for him?”

Gabalon walked to his prisoner. The animal was large as a pony. It swung its iron muzzle, but Gabalon reached down and caught it easily. “Even now, he does not know how to run away.”

“You have what you need?” asked Morchella.

“I have.”

“Then, what—?”

He waved a hand. “I will know when I am finished and not before.” He kicked one of the wolf’s feet from under it, and the animal went down heavily on its belly. The muzzle made a sharp clink against the tiles. “Take him back to the dungeons. I’ll be down shortly.”

Morchella looked amused. “Will you not leave him sane long enough to see the destruction of his army? That is unlike you, Gabalon.”

“Oh, I think I’ll let him keep his sanity. His music is so strong. Perhaps I will need it again. His tongue, on the other hand, I can do without.”

The wolf jerked his muzzle, and this time he caught Gabalon on a shin. The man’s hand descended with reptilian swiftness to seize the wolf’s bloody ruff. Telsar clamped his teeth on a whine. “They are already lost,” said Gabalon, “all your wolves and wolflings. They think they have their teeth at my throat, but victory will turn to dust in their mouths.” He bent close to the wolf’s ear and purred, “I could not have done it without you.”

Morchella wrinkled her nose. “He stinks of blood and filth.” She was searching among the leaves on the floor. Finally she found the wolf’s collar and chain. “What of Archemais?”

Gabalon stood and straightened his sap-stained cuffs. “Ah, yes, you were not here this morning. We had an attempted theft.”

Morchella’s eyebrows rose. “Of what?”

“The Muse, of course.”

“I see you still have it.”

“Yes, and after this morning Archemais will be too frantic over his own losses to worry about helping the rebel army.”

Morchella gave a delighted laugh. “What did you—?”

Gabalon waved her away. “Take Telsar to the dungeon and my message to Denathar. I must begin the evening’s work.”

He turned and walked to the window, shaking the leaves from his clothes as he went. Without breaking stride, he stepped onto the windowsill and over the edge. An instant later, a huge winged shadow passed over the tower, blotting out the sun.

## Part I

## Chapter 1. Voices in the Walls

Historians have written chapters or even books about the night Selbis fell to the cliff faun armies. However, few historians devote more than a couple of paragraphs to that night a hundred years before when Selbis almost fell to the Durian wolves and wolflings. Lack of information partially accounts for their silence. It was a curious event—perhaps more legend than fact. However, some part of the story must be true, for the Endless Wood derives its name from this incident.

Some say the city floated. Some say it gathered about it a moat of blue flame. Some say that Gabalon polluted the air of the wood with a deadly plague. All agree on this: Durian wolves and wolflings entered the wood alive—and disappeared forever.

--Capricia Sor, *A Concise History of Panamindorah*

Corry ran a hand lightly along the library wall. The director's office was above this spot. He pressed both hands against the plastered cement blocks. Sometimes he could do the thing he was trying to do, and sometimes he couldn't. *Please work today.*

No one had ever let him read his file. Corry thought that was unfair, especially since he couldn't remember half of the events it contained. He could remember coming to the children's home, but that was back when his mind was still slipping. He knew he'd arrived almost a year and a half ago.

*That's almost all I remember of my whole life. But somewhere there's a file that tells more, and somewhere up there, someone is going to talk about it to strangers.*

"A potential foster home," the director had said. These people were not looking to adopt him. Corry didn't care one way or the other. What he wanted was that file.

Corry pressed his hands harder against the wall, probing for the tiny vibrations that would form... words.

*"...has never been physically violent to our staff, but I cannot promise that he will not become violent, which is another reason I will understand if you refuse."*

Corry thought that was the director, because he'd listened to her in her office before. He couldn't be sure, though. People's voices sounded different when he listened to them this way.

*"What's his name?"*

*"He told us his name is Corellian. We've been calling him Corry."*

*"What's his last name?"*

*"We don't know. He can't remember."*

The voice grew faint, and Corry shifted his hands.

*"...wearing strange clothes ...symptoms of shock."* The voices steadied and grew clearer.

*"His condition improved with regular meals and a calm environment. A few days after he arrived, he began trying to speak to us, but he spoke a language no one could understand. Now he seems to have forgotten it."*

Corry held his breath. Yes, that seemed right. He remembered being frustrated with people when he first came because they wouldn't answer his questions.

The foster parents asked about abuse. The director said she thought it certain. He waited impatiently while the people upstairs speculated about cults and children kept in solitude who invented their own languages. *That's not what happened to me*, he thought.

Finally, the director said. *"His records are full of incident reports. You can read them."*

*No, don't read them!* Corry almost said aloud. *Talk about them! You've got to talk!*

*"...no idea how to use zippers...behaved as if all foods were strange to him. Electronic devices... He loves books, and I think he's learned a lot of what's normal from reading. He asked me one day how we got all the letters to look the same shape and size. He'd never seen typeset."*

Corry sagged against the wall. He could vaguely remember some of that. For a moment he couldn't hear them and thought they might be reading.

*"What's synesthesia?"*

*"A sort of cross-wiring in the brain that causes some senses to trigger others. It's a rare condition. With Corry, his sense of smell seems most effected. It's mixed up with his other senses, particularly with his sense of sight. He talks about smelling and tasting colors."*

Corry bit his lip. He didn't really think he had synesthesia. At least, he'd never been able to find a description of the condition that matched his own. For one thing, his ability to smell and taste colors came and went in a way that he could not always control. And hearing vibrations? He hadn't been able to find any information about that.



They were talking about boring things now, things he already knew—how he didn't get along with the other children, how he liked animals, how he was small for his age, how they didn't really know his age for sure, but placed it between twelve and fifteen.

Corry felt an intense wave of disappointment. He took his hands from the wall. *They hardly know any more about me than I do.* He was still staring gloomily at the bookcases when the library monitor came to tell him the director wanted to see him in her office.

\* \* \* \*

He dreamed of a wood beneath a crescent blood red moon. Wolves. A pack? An army! Thousands, tall as ponies, preparing to rest now as the suggestion of dawn fanned across the horizon. Two-legged creatures walked between them, moving supplies, setting up tents.

A figure appeared—taller than the rest. In the pre-dawn darkness he presented little more than a silhouette with the suggestion of a cape and boots. “Where *are* you, Corellian?”

Corry moaned as he woke. He felt an aching in his sweaty hand. Bringing it close to his face in the dark bedroom, he saw that he was still clutching the cowry. His foster mother had given it to him. He'd seen the shell in a display when he walked into her house, and he couldn't help but stare. It was glossy orange-gold, and she'd laughed when he told her he couldn't accept it. Too valuable. She said it was worth only ten dollars. Corry felt foolish, but he'd taken it greedily and clutched it during the strangeness of supper in a new house with two other foster kids. The shell calmed him.

Corry opened his hand wide and saw the red indentation of the shell's little teeth in his palm. He sat up on his elbows, dropped his head in the pillow and clutched the shell in both hands as though in prayer. He could almost taste the acid frustration.

Dreams often troubled him, but it had been months since the images had been so vivid. Corry looked at the cowry again. Each time his eyes rested on it, something jumped inside him, and he could *almost* remember. When he first came to the children's home, his dreams had been clearer. He had had a strong sense that some wrong had been done him, that he'd suffered some terrible loss. *They said I spoke a different language when I came, but I can't remember it now. I know that I'm losing something important. No matter what I do, it just keeps slipping away.*

Corry rolled over and sat up. The glowing clock on the table read 6:30. Faint sunlight filtered through the blinds. The lump under the covers in the other bed was still rising and falling rhythmically. Corry could hear pleasant sizzling and clinking coming from the kitchen, along with warm smells of biscuits and coffee and eggs.

He rose and dressed, then tiptoed into the hall, through a door into the garage, and then outside. A five-foot chain-link fence ran along the back of the property, bordering an orange grove. Corry inhaled deeply, drinking in the scent of orange blossoms and the blue of the Florida sky.

He stepped onto the cool concrete sidewalk. Corry could not remember seeing orange groves until the drive yesterday from Orlando. The trees crowded close together in staggered rows, their deep green leaves contrasting with the pale gray sugar sand between. Corry found the

grove appealing. It reminded him of the cowry in a way he could not explain. He made his way along the sidewalk until he reached a gate.

At that moment one of the Tembril's cats came strolling through the back garden to have a dust bath on the sidewalk at Corry's feet. He smiled and crouched to pet her. Bent close to the ground, Corry could look beneath the first row of trees. To his surprise, he saw a pair of dainty hooves and slender legs. They looked quite small, and Corry wondered if it might be a baby deer.

Slowly he stood up. Although he could not see the hooves from this angle, he fancied he saw a trace of brown fur between the leaves. Corry maneuvered the gate open and stepped onto the sugar sand.

"Corry!"

He turned toward the voice. At the same instant, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shape bolt from behind the tree and away through the grove.

The voice was Patrick's, one of the other foster kids. "What are you doing?"

Corry said nothing.

Patrick eyed him with a frown. "Mrs. Tembril says to come in and help with breakfast."

Corry gave the grove another long stare before moving away. He was almost certain the shape had fled on two legs.

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"Mrs. Tembril, who lives in the grove?"

"I don't think anyone lives out there." She glanced at her husband.

He shook his head. “A juice company owns it. Pickers harvest the oranges, but they’re gone now. I don’t want you wandering around in the grove, Corry.”

Corry kept his expression neutral. “I thought I saw a deer out there this morning.”

Martin, who’d stayed in the house several summers, spoke up. “You’ll see plenty more if you keep your eyes open—raccoons, rabbits, armadillos, foxes. This area has a lot of wildlife.”

Corry nodded. “Wildlife. Yeah.”

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The Tembrils said Corry needed to earn his room and board, and they had an endless list of small maintenance items for their foster kids to complete. Patrick called it slave labor, but it was still better than summer at the children’s home, so nobody complained very loudly.

An hour or two before sundown, everyone was usually permitted free time. Patrick and Martin liked to watch TV, but Corry wanted time alone. He went for long walks, explored palmetto and scrub oak thickets, examined gopher turtles, startled armadillos, and chased the occasional snake through the long grass.

Every day Corry carried the cowry shell in his pocket, and he did not know why.

\* \* \* \*

One evening Corry wandered to the lake east of the house. It was an attractive spot, smelling of pine and leaf mold. In one direction a trail ran to the edge of the orange grove, where a break in the palmetto hedge gave a glimpse of the orange trees.

As Corry walked, he thought he heard faint music, like a flute or recorder. He thought it might be coming from the direction of the grove, although it was so faint he could not be sure. Soon after he reached the lake, the music ceased.

Corry paused on the shore, watching the minnows dart. As he squatted, his eyes strayed upward, and he froze. Above his own reflection, he saw a girl's face.

"Thul talsa?" he whispered. Corry did not know what the words meant.

This girl was older than he and had a wildness about her that was at once charming and intimidating. Her ears appeared to be pointed, though it was difficult to tell because they were also tufted with long, soft fur around the upper rim. A few locks of her thick hair cascaded over one shoulder, and she wore a delicate chain around her neck that dangled in a sharp V.

After a few seconds Corry reached out to touch the face in the water. Instantly it vanished. He scrambled to his feet, only to find she was already about ten yards away towards the grove.

The girl wasn't human. Her legs were covered in thick cinnamon fur and ended in split hooves. She wore a long tunic of brown cloth, belted at the waist. Corry was so interested in her hooves that he hardly noticed the rest of her. They were, in fact, deer hooves, as her legs were deer legs. Her skin was about the same color as her fur. For an instant, she remained as still as some delightful painting, one hand gripping the end of the chain about her neck.

At last Corry stepped forward.

The girl whirled with the fluid grace of a wild animal and bounded toward the grove. As she turned, Corry caught a brief glimpse of a six-inch deer tail beneath the flying skirt, snowy

underside turned up in alarm. Before he could run four steps, she was beside the break in the palmetto hedge. She hesitated, watching Corry as he raced towards her. Then she turned without a sound and vanished among the trees.

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The creature was called a faun. Corry found pictures of the mythical beast online. He lay on his bed for a long time that evening, still fully clothed, thinking. Patrick came in and got ready for bed. The lights had been out for five minutes when Corry terrified his roommate by leaping suddenly to his feet. “It means fauness!”

Patrick sat up grumbling, but Corry had already gone into the bathroom and begun getting undressed. “For just a moment,” he muttered, “I was thinking in that other language. Tulsa means lady...or something like it. And thul means fauness.”

## 2. Music in the Dark

They say it was a trinket in the Temple of the Creator for a thousand thousand years before it came into Panamindorah. They say he commissioned a shelt to bear it in his service. They say I lost it, which is not quite true. Gabalon stole it from me, but only because I was careless.

--Archemais, *A Wizard's History of Panamindorah*

From that day on, Corry spent every evening beside the lake. On the fifth day, he was trudging home near dark when he heard soft music. Moving furtively, he started back towards the opening in the palmetto hedge. Corry poked his head around a tree to have a look at the grove and something hit him between the eyes. Corry crumpled over. Through his pain, he was dimly aware that the projectile had glanced off him to land with a plop in the lake.

"No, no."

Corry squinted up at the voice. Through doubled vision, he saw a deer—bone white, like a ghost in the gathering gloom. Atop her back sat the fauness. As Corry watched, she hopped down. The fauness walked around him, scanning the sand. She took no more notice of Corry than she might of a toad.

His vision was beginning to steady. He tried to stand up. "What are you doing?"

The fauness stiffened and turned slowly. "What did you say?" She did not speak English. Her words seemed to Corry like the face of an old friend, half forgotten and somewhat aged.

"I said, what are you doing? What did you just throw at me?"

She looked as though she'd been hit with something herself. "How do you speak my language?"

"I don't know."

She smiled. "You speak strangely—in the old way. Perhaps it is a property of the music."

"What music?"

She shook her head. "What happened to the thing that hit you?"

"I think it fell in the lake."

She straightened up. "Oh. Good." She turned, took a running leap, and mounted her deer.

"Wait!" Corry tried to chase them, but every step made his head pound. For a moment he stood still on the gray sand. Then he turned back to the lake. By now he knew the surface like his own hands, and he could see a new hole in the blanket of water plants. It was several yards from shore. Corry hesitated a moment, thinking of alligators in the dark water. He'd never seen one, except in books, but he knew they were all over Florida.

Another moment, and it would be too dark to even contemplate a search. Corry stripped off his shoes and stepped into the water. He reached the spot while still only thigh deep, bent, and plunged his arm to the shoulder in the murk. His head throbbed. His fingers trailed along the slimy bottom. *Don't think of alligators, don't think of alligators.*

His fingers touched metal, a thin chain. Corry grabbed it and headed for the shore. He could tell without looking that the chain was a necklace, and it had something hanging on it. He slogged up the bank and sat down beside his shoes, shivering. Then he raised his prize. To his



amazement, he could see no object, although the chain hung down in a sharp V. Corry grasped at the point of the V and felt a solid weight. He blinked hard in the deepening twilight. He could see...*something*, traced in water droplets. He closed both his hands around the object. *Amazing!* He was definitely holding something, and he even thought he recognized the shape.

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In his bathroom at the Tembril's, Corry shut the door and turned on the sink. He placed his hand under the stream and watched as the water traced a shape out of the air above his palm. Corry reached into his other pocket, took out his cowry, and put it beside the sink. *I was right!*

The invisible object was shaped like a cowry. It had three holes either side of midline and a hole at one end. Corry remembered the music he had heard before seeing the fauness. *It's a little flute.* On one side of the flute, he found a loop, all of a piece with the instrument, threaded by the chain. *She was wearing it around her neck the first time I saw her.*

\* \* \* \*

The Tembrils did not require housework on Sundays. Lately, Corry had been packing a lunch and leaving for most of the day. One Sunday as he grabbed his backpack and books, Mrs. Tembril surprised him by saying, "Corry I wish you wouldn't spend all day outside, especially after dark. We're playing card games this evening. I think you should join us."

"Alright."

Mrs. Tembril kept looking at him. "What do you do all day outside, Corry?"

He met her eyes. "I walk."

“I saw you walking in the orange grove the other day. We told you to stay out of there.”

“I forgot.”

“Perhaps you need a day indoors to help you remember.”

Corry hated to beg, but he hated missing an opportunity even more. “Mrs. Tembril, I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m sorry I disobeyed you. Please let me go out.” He tried to hit the right note of contrition, but the lie stuck in his throat.

“Be back by three. If not, you’ll be grounded for a week. Do you understand, Corry?”

Corry nodded and was out the door before she could say more. He went to the lake, because that was the best way to get into the grove without being seen from the house. A stiff wind was whipping off the water, blowing his hair into a dark tangle as he entered the trees. Three o’clock. He’d wanted the whole day. He felt angry and sad and frustrated.

Corry tramped some distance into the trees, then crawled beneath an old, gnarled canopy of branches and made himself comfortable. The sugar sand drank sound as rapaciously as it drank water. The deep silence calmed him. He read for a while and ate his lunch, then played a bit on the flute. He thought he had the song almost right, but nothing interesting happened.

Corry opened his book again. The day was hot, and his meal began to make him sleepy. He never quite knew when he dropped the book on his knees and nodded off.

\* \* \* \*

Corry’s eyes snapped open. *How long have I been asleep?* The light had weakened, and long shadows stretched beneath the tree. Corry looked at his watch. *Four thirty?*

He nearly panicked. *Mrs. Tembril will never let me out the door again. She might even send me back to the orphanage!*

Formulating excuses furiously, Corry hefted his pack, clambered from under the tree, and started towards the house at a run. Sloshing through the sand, Corry counted the rows. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... How far did I go?* He stopped. *This can't be right. I should have reached the house by now.*

*T-thump. T-thump.* With only the briefest of warnings, three deer raced out of the trees, all brown, all bearing riders. Corry stumbled back as they jumped over him. The riders were fauns. The foremost wore a wide-brimmed hat with a long, green plume bobbing over the back.

Heart thumping, Corry stared after them. Then he heard another sound. Corry turned. Not five feet in front of him crouched an enormous gray spotted cat.

It was, of all things, a snow leopard. The cat didn't seem to see Corry, who jumped out of its path just in time as it bounded after the deer. Corry hardly had a chance to feel relief before a number of black leopards charged out of the trees after the snow leopard.

Corry didn't hesitate. He turned to follow them.

## Chapter 3. Laven-lay

Walking the streets of Laven-lay, one finds it difficult to imagine that this city has been embroiled in so many wars. It is a national capitol that looks more like a garden, sleeping in the sunshine, asking only to be left alone.

--Lasa, Tour the Endless Wood

Corry had not been following the smeared footprints for five minutes before he noticed something odd happening to the grove. The rows were becoming more crooked, the trees wilder. Corry rubbed his eyes. The world felt cluttered, overlapping. His ears rang with a sound on the edge of hearing, like wind in a door. He thought he saw things out of the corners of his eyes—taller trees, ferns and rocks, a whole forest. But when he turned, they were gone.

He knew he was coming to a wood. He knew it long before the rows vanished, before the sand became soil, before the last of the wild orange trees disappeared among taller, darker furs. Around dusk he lost the trail of the cats and deer, but he kept moving. Unfamiliar birds sang in the twilight. The noise in his ears had ebbed away. He caught the scent of the warm earth, perfused occasionally with the delicate scent of flowers.

Darkness fell and a mist rose. Corry found it difficult to see any distance. He thought uneasily of leopards. His shoes were full of sand, and he took them off to empty them. He sat still, letting the sweat dry on his body and listening to the strange birds and insects.

The moon was rising above the trees. Corry stared at it. The disc was blood red and about three times the size of the moon should have been. On the opposite side of the sky he saw

another moon. This one was yellow and smaller than Earth's. It shone in a golden sickle above the trees. Something deep inside Corry stirred. "Runner," he said aloud. He did not say it in English. He looked at the full red moon for a while and finally said, "The Dragon."

\* \* \* \*

"Rise slowly. No sudden movements."

Corry opened his eyes. Early morning sunlight dazzled off a cluster of swords pointed in his general direction. Front and center stood the faun with the green-plumed hat. The faun was shorter than Corry, slim and dressed in a dark green tunic and black belt. He had a scar across his right cheek and several more running up his left arm.

"Who are you and where do you come from? Be quick."

Corry sat up, wincing at stiff muscles. The faun with the hat poked him. "Answer me."

Corry scowled. He didn't trust his command of the language and wasn't sure what to say in any case. "My name is Corry."

One of the fauns behind him snickered. He heard someone whisper, "Half-wit."

The lead faun spoke again, slowly, as if to a small child. "What kind of *shelt* are you? Why are you *here*?"

"Perhaps he's drunk," offered someone, but the lead faun only snorted.

Still speaking to Corry, he said, "Why do you wear shoes and such outlandish clothing? Are you a wolfling? Where is your sword...or are you a female?"

Corry's head was throbbing with fragmented memories, brought suddenly to life by the fauns and the language they spoke. He wanted to tell them to be quiet and let him think.

The lead faun poked him again with his sword. "Come, little filly, tell us whose mother sent you to the market, and perhaps we'll let you go."

This time Corry's hand flew to the sword and closed around it. Blood welled between his fingers. "Beware you touch me again!"

The faun jump back as though at a snake.

Corry blinked and looked down at his own blood.

The faun darted forward, caught one of Corry's shoes, and wrenched it free.

Gasps of horror. "It's a wizard!" whispered someone.

But their leader shook his head. "A weak-blooded iteration, spying for the cats. If it had powers, it would have used them by now. Its threats are empty. Tie it."

Fauns swarmed forward and bound Corry, who did not resist. He felt stupid and sluggish. *Why did I provoke them? Why do they care about my feet?*

"Shall we hang him here, Syrril?"

Corry looked up sharply. Too late, he realized exactly how much trouble he was in.

Syrril shook his head.

"We take him back to Laven-lay. He will tell us what he knows, even if we have to torture it from him."

\* \* \* \*

They traveled all morning. If not for his predicament, Corry might have enjoyed the ride. The deer were larger than Earth deer, flying over the forest floor like shadows.

About noon, they stepped from the trees into a clearing in front of iron-banded gates in a white stone wall. The gates were closed and guarded, but they opened at Syrill's hail.

Beyond the wall, Corry saw grassy turf, dotted by clumps of trees and tiny pools fed by twinkling brooks. Deer grazed everywhere, and the faun soldiers turned their own mounts loose to join the others. Syrill took charge of Corry as they started up the road on foot. "Welcome to Laven-lay. Enjoy the sunlight while you can."

Corry wondered again how to explain himself in a way that made sense. The more he thought, the more panicky he felt. The grassy deer park gave way to dirt streets. The houses were predominantly wood with stone trimming. A canopy of trees, vines, and flowering plants covered everything. Fauns moved around him. Often they wore only shirts or vests. Their naked skin ended at their waists, and even though they wore no pants, their dense fur seemed to clothe them. Many of the fauns bowed to Syrill or touched their hats and made way for him. Youngsters playing in the streets stopped to stare at Corry.

At last his escort reached the city center. They crossed a paved drill yard and stopped before the steps of a sprawling castle. Syrill turned around, and Corry saw that all but three of the soldiers had peeled off. "Take him to the dungeons. I'll be there shortly."

The fauns took Corry inside and along several corridors as fast as he could trot. Then his guards halted briefly while one fumbled with the keys for another door. Whereas the previous

passages had been dingy, they were now standing on white marble in a hallway bright with sunlight. The air wafting from the windows smelled of flowers. The guard finally found the right key, and the door swung back with a leaden groan to reveal a windowless passage, leading downward. One of the soldiers took a torch from a bracket in the wall and lit it. Another took Corry's arm and propelled him forward.

*If I let this go any further, I'm lost.* "I'm not a spy!" Corry braced his feet. "I'm a guest in your kingdom! I refuse to be imprisoned without speaking to your king."

The fauns seemed surprised. From the forest until now, he had come unresisting. "You may speak to General Syrril about that," said one. "His orders—"

All three fauns let go of Corry so abruptly that he fell backwards out of the doorway and landed on his rump. A faun said something quickly that Corry did not understand. Then one of the fauns said, "Your highness, we are sorry, but the passage to the dungeons requires that we enter the castle at some point—"

"Who is the prisoner?"

Corry was still facing the mouth of the passage, but he went taut at the voice.

"An iteration of diluted blood, your highness. Syrril caught him in the wood and suspects him of spying for the Filinian army. Syrril intends to—"

"Turn him around."



“Of course, your highness.” The soldier pulled Corry to his feet, spun him around, and pushed his head into an awkward bow. “Give proper respect to the regent and Princess, Capricia Sor.”

It was the fauness! Corry felt weak with relief. She was dressed differently—a coat of pale blue over frilly, white silk, snug around her slender waist. Corry could see why the sight of her had startled the guards. She looked ready to devour someone. With a visible effort at control, she said to the guards, “I know this person. Release him.”

“But, your highness, Syrill said—”

“Syrill was misinformed. Release the prisoner to me, and go about your business.” With a scowl at Corry, the guards cut the rope from his hands and withdrew.

The fauness rounded on him. “Where is it?” she hissed.

“What do you mean?” Corry had been on the verge of thanking her.

“The thing I threw into the lake in your world!”

“Oh, the flute?” Corry reached into his pocket, but Capricia waved her hands.

“Put it away! You— You—! Why—? How—?” Her face turned a shade of lavender that did not match her dress. She seemed to be choking on something.

“Are you alright?” asked Corry.

“No!” she exploded. “You dare—? You had no right to take it!”

“You *did* throw it away,” said Corry. “You nearly brained me with it.”

She was still speaking. “How did you leave your world?”

“The same way you left it, I suppose. And anyway, it’s not my world. Didn’t you say yourself that I spoke your language? I came from this world, only...I seem to have lost my memory.” He watched her jaw working. “What’s so important about the flute?”

“Silence!” Capricia drew a deep breath. “The hall is no place to speak of this.” She took his arm as though she meant to have it off at the elbow and led him at an uncomfortably speed along a maze of corridors.

At last they started up the winding steps of a tower. Corry was panting by the time they reached the top. He saw a little room, lined on three sides with bookshelves. In the remaining wall, a large window gave an open-air view of the city. Before the window stood a desk, piled with books and serviced with a comfortable looking chair.

“Whose library is this?” asked Corry.

“Mine.” Capricia closed the door behind her and clicked the bolt into place. “Now tell me everything!”

#### 4. A Conflict of Interests

Of all the shocks in my life, only one could match that of finding Corry in Laven-lay. The second jolt was yet to come, so I believed I had experienced the worst.

--Capricia Sor, *Prelude to War*

“There’s not much to tell.” Corry stopped. “There’s not much I can explain,” he corrected.

“Begin to try,” growled Capricia. Her tufted ears were flat back against her head. They looked to Corry like little horns.

“I didn’t belong where you found me,” said Corry. “I belong here, in this world—Panamindorah.” He had not known the word when he started, but it came to him as he spoke.

Capricia seemed unimpressed. “Then why did I find you in the other place?”

“I don’t know. I was found by...people in that world, and they took care of me for...a year, perhaps. I’ve lost my memory. Can you understand that? It was taken from me somehow. Your language, the names of places, the fauns—it all seems familiar. I even remembered the names of the moons last night. The little yellow moon is called the Runner or sometimes the Wolf’s Eye, and the red moon is the Dragon.”

“Yes,” said Capricia. “Dragon Moon, Demon Moon—full last night. The superstitious would consider that an omen. The soldiers probably mentioned it to you on your way here.”

Corry shook his head. “No one told me.”

“Then perhaps you can tell me the name and color of the *other* moon, the one that was not up last night.”

Corry put a hand to his head. *Yes, there is another.* After a pause, he shook his head. “I can’t remember.”

Capricia did not seem surprised. “How did you get here?”

“I was in the grove where you found me, and I fell asleep. I had been trying to play the music that I heard before I saw you. When I woke up and started walking towards the house, I was nearly knocked down by a group of fauns on deer-back and some big cats chasing them. I followed their tracks into Panamindorah.”

“Regrettable,” said Capricia. “The music seems to work both ways. Perhaps it has bewitched you. You *think* you belong here, but you don’t, and you must go back.”

“No.”

Capricia laughed. “You can’t say ‘no’ to me. I am the crown princess and civil regent. I can have you imprisoned. I can decide that Syrril was right.”

“Yes, but you can’t send me back.” He watched her for a moment. “No one else knows, do they? It’s your secret. If you try to make me do something, I can show your guards the flute, as much as it can be shown. They’ll have to believe me.”

Capricia turned pale—mostly, Corry thought, with anger. “You can’t blackmail me!” But she truly did not know how to answer him.

While she simmered, he let his eyes stray to the desk. He was standing almost against it, and a battered volume lay open beside him, partially burned, with the ancient, blackened pages crumbling around the edges. *The city had a double outer wall, so that archers might herry any enemy who gained access to the first ring. Watch towers were set at—*

“What are you doing?” snapped Capricia.

Corry glanced up. He’d unconsciously run a finger along the words. “This book looks old. Is this about the flute?”

Capricia’s lip curled. “You can’t read that.”

He read it to her. After half a page, she interrupted him. “The meaning of that writing has been lost for a hundred years. You *cannot* read it.”

Corry cocked an eyebrow. “Do you really think I’m making it up—all that business about walls and towers? I can’t explain it to you, but I can read this. What city is it talking about?”

“Selbis.”

“Where is that?”

Capricia said nothing.

After a moment, Corry asked, “Why did you try to get rid of the flute?”

When it became clear that she would not answer, Corry glanced down at the book. “I could help you translate it.”

“No.” Capricia crossed the small room in two strides and shut the old book. Her bright, brown eyes bored into his. “Corry—”

“My name is Corellian.”

He thought he saw her flinch. “Corellian, if you have any honor or compassion or reason, listen to me: the flute is evil. Its music has bewitched you. Take the flute back to your own world where you belong and it can do no harm.”

Corry felt sorry for her, but he would not agree. “These feelings and memories and ideas were in my head before I ever touched the flute. I won’t go back.”

Capricia’s eyes flashed. Corry could tell she was used to being obeyed and certainly was *not* used to making an entreaty and being refused. “Very well. Stay. Someone will kill you within a year without my protection. Shelts here do not love iterations.”

“What *is* an iteration?”

“The misbegotten offspring of wizards and shelts.” Capricia was thinking. “Corry, I *can* have you killed by those who will not give you time for conversation. I *can* take the flute and make a better disposal. Your choice is simple. Go back or die.”

“Tonight?” Corry indicated the late afternoon shadows.

“In the morning. You may stay the night.”

“If I can’t change your mind by tomorrow I’ll go...if you will tell me some things about your world.”

Capricia looked wary, but nodded.

“What is a shelt?”

“Anything in Panamindorah that has a face like ours and walks on two legs is either a shelt, a wizard, or an iteration. But wizards and iterations are rare or extinct.”

“But if iterations are extinct, why did Syrril think that I was one? And how is a shelt different from a faun?”

Capricia opened her mouth, then closed it. “On second thought, there’s no reason for me to tell you these things. I think I have been more than generous in allowing you to stay the night, and now I must explain you to my father. We will leave as soon as possible in the morning.”

\* \* \* \*

“King Meuril will see you now,” said a sentry.

Corry and Capricia stood in a circular antechamber. Slanting windows curved around the domed ceiling, letting in cascades of sunlight. Two grand staircases ran up the walls on either side of the room, and a balcony overhung the center. As they stepped into the throne room proper, Corry was dazzled by the variety of plants and the play of sunlight skipping off green-veined marble. The throne itself was a massive wood seat with carved antlers spreading above it.

The king was not sitting on the throne, but pacing the room with several other fauns. Corry caught sight of Syrril and wondered whether they were discussing his upcoming interrogation. A moment later, he knew the idea was sheer vanity. Syrril was a general and must have more important things to discuss with his king.

As they drew nearer, Capricia took the lead. “A moment of your time, my lord.”

The king moved away from his councilors. Syrill's eyes flicked over Corry and away, and Corry knew that he'd been dismissed as an item of little importance. Close-to, Meuril looked frail in his rich green robes. He was bald, but had a thick froth of gray hair around his temples and small, keen eyes of the same color. "Capricia, what is this business about an iteration?"

"Father, allow me to introduce Corellian, an orphan from a village in the far west. On our last journey to those provinces I spoke with him and promised him refuge here because of the ill treatment he received from the fauns on account of his iteration blood. Recently wolflings attacked and burned his settlement. Corry alone escaped. He has journeyed far to reach us, trying to enter faun villages, but they reject him because he does not look like a shelt."

The king studied Corry, and his face softened. "I, of all shelts, ought to appreciate such a loss. My realm extends its condolences. How old are you, Corellian?"

Corry thought a moment. *I suppose it won't do to say I don't know.* "Fourteen, Sire."

Meuril smiled. "An excellent age to become an apprentice and adopt a trade." He paused. "You are strangely dressed, friend. Is it so different where you come from?"

"Very different."

Meuril nodded. "You may stay here as a guest of the princess until you find other lodging. If you have difficulties with my citizens, we will help you in what ways we can."

A servant appeared at Meuril's summons, but Capricia stepped forward. "Father, I will show him to a room."

\* \* \* \*



“I don’t like lying to your father,” said Corry as Capricia opened the door to a guestroom.

“It was necessary.”

Corry glanced at her. “Who are you afraid of? What would it matter if everyone in Panamindorah knew about the flute?”

“Hush! I told you, the hall is not the place to discuss this. And until tomorrow, I’ll take that.” She stepped forward suddenly, reached into his pocket, and took the flute. Then she shut the door, and Corry heard the click of a lock.

### 5. An Introduction to Wolflings

In view of the rapacious nature of the wolfling pack known as the Raiders, I, Meuril Sor, declare the usual bounty of three white cowries tripled for any wolf known to belong to a Raider, and the usual bounty of five white cowries increased to twenty speckled cowries for the capture or proven death of Fenrah Ausla. The bounty will be fifteen speckled cowries for the wolflings Sham Ausla, Sevn of Ivernees, Xerous of Palamine, Lyli of Palamine, Talis of Ivernees, Danzel, Hualien, or any additional members of the Raider pack.

Book of Bounty Laws, edict by Meuril Sor, Summer 1697

Corry woke to birdsong and a cascade of sunlight streaming through his window. *Capricia!* He had been angry the night before—as much at himself for reaching into his pocket earlier, as at Capricia for taking the flute—but now he felt only a vague panic. In the morning light, he could see that his window opened several stories above a landscaped courtyard. Corry gauged the distance to the ground, but decided that a jump would hurt him.

Fauns had brought him supper and a bath the night before, and he saw that they'd left him breakfast this morning. Corry dressed quickly, helping himself to the tray of fruit and bowl of deer's milk. Without much hope, he tried the door...and the handle turned. *Whoever brought my breakfast must have forgotten to lock it.*

Corry opened the door and stepped into the empty hall. He made his way through the airy, sunlit passages, trying to remember the route Capricia had taken. He met an occasional faun, but

no one stopped him. A few songbirds were beginning to flit playfully in and out of the rooms when he found a row of tapestries that he remembered. *I'm near the throne room.*

Corry hurried on, having some vague idea that he would talk to the king and tell him the truth. He soon came out of a passage and saw the silver banister and the staircase descending into the huge antechamber. As he started down, a faun holding a drawn sword burst through one of the doors below and bounded up the stairs.

The stranger was wearing a white tunic and purple cape. He was much paler than the other fauns Corry had seen. His curling, golden hair fell to his shoulders, and as he swept past, Corry caught a glint of blue eyes. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, he raced to the first window, put his hoof on the sill, and stretched out as far out as he could reach. Corry saw that he had curly white fur. "The roof! Hurry!"

A dozen other pale, blond fauns charged up the stairs. Corry pressed himself against the banister as they whisked past to follow the first, who had already disappeared. A memory stirred. *They're a different kind of faun.* It annoyed him that he could not identify them.

Corry started walking more quickly and reached the foot of the stairs. As he moved across the antechamber towards the throne room, he caught faint sounds from outside—shouts and the ringing of bells. *This is very odd.*

Then a shadow appeared in a patch of sunlight at his feet. He glanced up and was slapped in the face by the descending end of a rope. As he watched, someone dropped out of one of the windows around the dome and began to shimmy down. The sun was in his eyes, and he could not

see the climber clearly. About three fourths of the way down, the shelt let go and jumped, rolling away from Corry with a clatter of steel. Corry blinked at the sword.

The newcomer was two-legged and had tufted ears, but she was certainly no faun. She had large paws rather than hooves. Silver gray hairs flecked the cinnamon brown fur of her legs, and a thick, bushy tail bristled behind her. Her breath came quick and hard.

Something clicked in Corry's mind. He remembered how Capricia had explained him to her father. *She said that wolflings burned my village. This is a wolfling, a wolf shelt. Capricia is a deer shelt. That fellow in the purple cape is a sheep shelt. I remember!*

Corry held out his hands. "I'm unarmed," he said.

"Stay still," she rasped. She wore a sleeveless brown tunic, and a thin sword belt. Corry thought she looked no older than he and perhaps younger. Her eyes might have been golden, but now they were almost black, the pupils dilated with fear.

*BANG!* Doors flew open. Fauns poured down both staircases, while archers drew their weapons along the balcony. Fauns with swords and bows swarmed around the perimeter of the room. Corry caught sight of the faun with the purple cape.

The wolfling's eyes darted in one direction and then another.

Someone on the balcony shouted, "Don't shoot!" It was Capricia. She was glaring at Corry, but she continued. "You'll kill my guest!"

"Then tell him to get out of the way..." murmured Purple Cape.

Suddenly the wolfling bolted toward the only remaining exit—the main door of the castle. Fauns charged along the perimeter of the wall like giant pincers closing. Corry let out a long breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. A few arrows sang over his head and clattered along the floor, but none struck the fleeing wolfling.

For a moment Corry thought she would escape, but just as she reached the main doors they flew open. The wolfling was running too fast to stop, and she all but collided with the first faun through the door. Their swords were singing before anyone could intervene.

The faun was Syrrill. His hooves made little clicking noises as he ducked and dodged, the green feather of his hat dancing like an excited bird. The wolfling was obviously outmatched, and he pushed her steadily backwards.

The fauns had now formed a complete ring around the fighters. No escape. Soon Syrrill was fighting right next to the dangling rope. Corry saw the end twitch. He shouted, but no one was listening. The next instant Syrrill hit the ground, struck by a wolfling who had slid partway down the rope and leapt on him from above. The two rolled over in a blur of brown and gray.

They came to a stop, crouching. The wolfling had an arm around Syrrill's chest and a sword against his throat. Syrrill's sword had been knocked from his grasp.

The new wolfling was male and looked at least ten years older than the female. "Up," he breathed and jerked Syrrill to his feet. "Talis?"

"Sir?" answered the girl-wolfling, still watching the crowd.

"Are you alright?"

“Yes.”

The male wolfling nodded. “Walk.” He pushed a rigid Syrill toward the door, but fauns blocked his way. “Move!” he shouted. Some of the darker-skinned fauns obeyed, but not the pale strangers. The wolfling whirled to the faun in the purple cape. “Tell them to get out of my way, or I’ll kill him.”

The faun’s jaw was working, and he took a step forward. The wolfling pressed his sword hard enough against Syrill’s throat to draw a trickle of blood. “I’m not bluffing, Chance.”

“Move.” The faun called Chance growled the word. “Get out of his way.” His furious eyes returned to the wolfling. “I’ll have your pelt, Sham. But first I’ll hang you from the highest scaffold in Panamindorah.”

The wolfling ignored him and moved toward the doors. He was having some trouble with Syrill. Talis circled round to guard Sham’s back. Suddenly, Chance leapt forward, and his sword met Talis’s with a clash. She parried with such force that he staggered and her momentum carried her briefly into the crowd. The next thing Corry knew, he was stumbling backward with one arm twisted painfully behind him. He saw Chance backing away uncertainly. “Sham,” came Talis’s voice behind Corry’s head, “we’ve got another.”

The instant they were clear of the castle’s portico, the wolflings broke into a run. Corry could hear the shouts of pursuing fauns. Wolflings afoot would have been not match for mounted fauns, and Corry felt a flutter of hope. Then two enormous wolves shot across the plaza. They

were as large as small ponies, their teeth as long as Corry's fingers, flashing in their panting mouths. Corry dug in his heels, and Talis had to drag him the last few yards.

Sham was still having difficulty with Syrrill, who kept lashing out with his hooves, twisting, biting, and shouting. At last Sham struck him on the head with the flat of his sword. Syrrill staggered. Sham hoisted him onto the back of a wolf, then leapt up behind. Talis's wolf came up behind Corry, tipped its nose between his legs, and stood, letting Corry slide neatly onto its back.

Bells were ringing all over the city as the wolves left the castle complex. They fled through Laven-lay, making use of the parks and gardens. Talis pulled something like twine from her pack as they road and made a swift slip-knot around Corry's wrists, tying them in front. Her own hands were shaking, her breathing ragged against the back of his neck. She jerked the knot painfully tight.

At some point Corry realized that a third wolf and rider had joined them. She was older than Talis and her dirty blond hair hung down her back in a tail as bushy as any wolf's. "Danzel?" she growled.

"I know," muttered Sham. "He almost got Talis killed, and now we have hostages."

The new wolfling eyed Syrrill in a way that made Corry's hair prickle. "Kill them."

Sham shook his head. "Not Syrrill. Not without Fenrah's consent."

"Then leave them."

Sham shook his head. "We might need them again. This isn't over."

Corry saw the white outer wall of the city rising out of the trees ahead. Then branches slapped him in the face as the wolves plowed into a thicket. They stopped abruptly, and Corry saw a freshly excavated tunnel, the brush beaten down around it.

Sham sprang from his wolf and pulled Syrril to the ground. He threw away the faun's sword belt. As Corry watched, Sham rifled through the pockets of Syrril's tunic. He stopped suddenly and held up something small and silvery, then shoved it into his own pocket.

A new wolfling scrambled out of the tunnel. "We're almost ready down here. Lyli said that you have an unconscious faun. I've arranged transport."

"Sevn, have you seen Danzel?"

The new wolfling shook his head. "What's wrong?"

Sham sat down in the dirt. "Danzel wasn't at his post. I had a run-in with Chance, and he's got my hackles up."

"Chance!" Sevn flung a handful of rope out of the tunnel. "What's he doing here?"

"I don't know. This whole raid has been a disaster."

"Really?" asked Talis quietly.

Sham glanced at her and flashed a toothy grin. "We'll see."

Sevn was frowning. "Do you suppose someone told—?"

"No. Laylan probably found the diggings." Sham grimaced. "He's getting better."

A leaf crunched, and Sham spun around. On the edge of the clearing stood a small wolfling who didn't look older than ten. He wore a baggy, mud-stained gray tunic, weighted on



one side with a sword that looked too big for him. Corry caught sight of a bulging satchel attached to his belt opposite the sword. The child held his hands behind his back, his ears angled sharply backwards. His outsized paws pushed against each other nervously.

“Danzel!” Sham barked. Then, more softly, “Pup, where have you been? Lyli didn’t find you, and Talis had no way of getting off the roof. She was chased and nearly killed. We had to drop through the ceiling! Danzel, where *were* you?”

“I’m sorry, Sham.” His voice came soft and squeaky. “I just... I saw... There was this...and he had...and it...”

Sham took the youngster by the shoulders. “What happened?”

“I saw a faun with a satchel on his belt, and it looked heavy. It clinked.”

Sham let out his breath and put his head down.

Danzel continued. “And I followed him. And he went into a big house. I stalked him. I was so quiet! You would have been proud of me. I was so quiet!”

“Danzel!” growled Sham, raising his head and shaking the youngster so hard the satchel tinkled. “We didn’t come here for cowries!”

“How about gold?” asked Danzel cheerfully. “How about ten gold pieces, and I didn’t even count how many cowries. There’s silver. Pearls too!”

Sham opened his mouth, but then Danzel brought his hands from behind his back. “And I found this.” Danzel was holding a violin. He thrust it into Sham’s hands. Sunlight falling through the trees lit on the polished, gracefully curving wood and made it glow golden.

“It’s what I was looking for,” continued Danzel softly. “I couldn’t get the bow.” He looked anxiously at Sham. “But you could make that, couldn’t you?”

Sham stood up suddenly and turned around so that Danzel couldn’t see his face. Corry saw him cover his mouth with one hand, and shut his eyes. A single large tear rolled down over his fingers. Then he rubbed his hand hard over his face and turned around.

“What you did was wrong. You were not there for Talis when she needed you. We hold each other’s lives in our hands, and if you don’t do your part... Talis and I could both be dead.”

Danzel’s eyes clouded. “I’m sorry. I only wanted—”

“You must obey orders!” Sham took the violin in both hands and broke it over his knee.

Danzel flinched. His bushy tail dropped down limp behind him.

Sham dropped the broken instrument and pointed to it. “Our lives. That’s what almost happened to them.”

Danzel stared at the ground. “Yes, sir.”

By this time Sevn had already urged the three wolves down the tunnel. He cleared his throat and said softly. “We need to hurry. Lyli is keeping watch at the far end.”

Sham nodded. “Go and tell her we’re ready, Danzel.”

Danzel darted down the tunnel.

As soon as he was gone, Talis stepped over to the violin and picked it up. “This was a good one.” She inspected it minutely. “A very good one.” Sham turned away. “You didn’t have to break it,” said Talis.

“Yes, I did.” He would not look at the violin.

Syrill’s eyes were just beginning to flutter groggily when a sack went over his head. Sevn tied his legs to the line going into the hole. He gave a couple of jerks, and Syrill slithered into the darkness. Sevn followed him and Talis came behind. A moment later, Danzel appeared to say that Lyli had secured Syrill. She and Talis were on their way back to camp, and Sevn was keeping watch at the end of the tunnel.

Sham turned to Corry. “Make things difficult for us, and we’ll kill you—one shout, one snatch for a weapon, and you’re dead. You’re not *that* valuable. Do you understand?”

Corry nodded.

Sham cut loose his hands and pointed to the tunnel. “Crawl.”

Corry crawled. He could see almost nothing in the tunnel, and he went along hesitantly, feeling his way over protruding tree roots and clods of earth. Behind, he heard Danzel’s voice. “Something else happened this morning.”

“Oh?” Sham sounded suspicious.

“Laylan chased me.”

“What?”

“I think he found my tracks near the castle wall where I was supposed to be waiting. He must have followed me because when I came out of the faun’s house he nearly shot me. I ran, and he chased me all the way to the royal grain sheds.”

“Was he on Shyshax?” asked Sham. “Danzel, are you making this up?”

“No! He wasn’t on Shyshax. I ran into a shed. It was one of the smaller ones, only half full. I ran out before he could get behind the grain, and I shut the door. It locked!”

Sham began to chuckle. “You locked Laylan in a grain shed?”

“Yes.” Corry could hear the grin in Danzel’s voice. “It only had one window in the top.”

Sham was laughing hard now. “No wonder they haven’t found us. They probably haven’t even found Laylan.”

## 6. Raiders

The fact that the Raiders confused the plans of the greatest of planners should not come as a surprise. The Raiders were an anomaly from the beginning. They confused everyone.

--Archemais, *Gabalon: The Many Facets of a Tyrant*

Corry woke in darkened stillness. He remembered a long ride, the feel of wolf fur, wind in his face, splashing through a river. Then Talis had asked him to drink something—a drug probably, because he’d become very sleepy. They’d stopped somewhere. He’d lain down, and—

Corry opened his eyes. He was lying on the dirt floor of a cave. From somewhere nearby he heard the sound of rushing water. His wrists were tied behind his back, and one leg throbbed where a root had cut off the circulation. Dragon moon looked in at an opening above his head. By its light, he could see that the walls and floor were muddy, his clothes filthy. Corry braced himself against the slimy rock and got to his feet. He staggered to the wall and hopped up and down a couple of times below the cave entrance.

“You can’t reach it, not with your hands tied.”

Corry turned. In the shadows near the back something moved. “Even if you could reach the hole, there’ll be a guard outside.”

“Syrill?” Corry moved towards him. Syrill sat with his back against the wall. His feet were tied as well as his hands. Blood had dried around a cut on his cheek. His clothes, like Corry’s, were very dirty.

Corry sat down beside him. “You fought well with that wolfling. I saw the rope twitch and tried to yell, but no one could hear me. It was just bad luck.”

Syrill laughed bitterly. “I heard you. I just didn’t pay attention.”

Corry was surprised at his honesty.

“I should have left off when I saw it was a Raider. To think it was *you* she found, and all this time I thought it had something to do with them.”

Corry was lost. “She?”

“Capricia. She met you on the king’s tour of the western provinces two years ago, yes? You probably don’t know that the king’s party was waylaid on the way back by the Raiders. Capricia and her doe were separated from the main group for almost a day. When she returned to the castle, she behaved strangely. I see now it was you she had grown curious over, but at the time, I thought she’d found some clue to the Raiders’ den. I don’t suppose you can shape-shift?”

Corry shook his head. “Can most iterations do that?”

“Well, if you’ve got wizard blood, I suppose there’s always the possibility.”

“How do you mean ‘she behaved strangely’?”

“I wasn’t there for most of it, but I heard she’d developed an intense interest in the old language and the wizards. I seem to remember she worried her father by making unguarded forays into the forest. Of course, that all stopped when the war started.”

“What war?”

Syrill looked incredulous. “The war with Filinia—with the cats. Don’t you know *anything* about this part of the world?”

Corry had thought carefully about how to answer this question. “Capricia told me what happened to my village, but I can’t remember. I can’t remember anything beyond a few days ago. All I knew was that I had to get to Laven-lay and find her.”

Syrill grimaced. “Something happened to you on the way here. Fauns can be cruel to iterations they find alone in the wood.”

Corry half smiled. “Can they?”

“I was not cruel,” countered Syrill. “Besides, iterations don’t have the national ties of a shelt and some *do* spy for the cats. That’s why I picked you up, and when you couldn’t answer me coherently, I thought—”

“It’s alright,” said Corry. “I’d never have found Laven-lay without you. I was lost.” He sat back against the wall. “Do you call all wolflings Raiders or only this group?”

“You really don’t know anything, do you? And now I come to listen, your speech is strange. You don’t have any idea how far you came to get here?”

Corry shook his head. “Sham and Danzel were talking about someone called Laylan. Who is he, and who was that faun in the purple cape, Chance? Why are you at war with the cats?” Corry glanced at the long scars running up Syrill’s arm and under his sleeve. “Did a cat do that to you?”

“Yes—flipped me off my deer. I was lucky; Blix came after me. He’s a brave mount. That was the day I won my command. We were cut off, the army routed, most of the senior officers dead. I rallied the survivors. Afterward, Meuril put me in charge.

“As for the cats, they conquered Canisaria—that was wolfling country—and pushed the wolves and wolflings into our territory—the Endless Wood. We bounty wolflings because they kill deer and occasionally fauns, but they really don’t have any other place to go.” Syrril grimaced. “We should have helped the wolflings when they were fighting for their lives. Meuril thought the cats would stop in Canisaria, but they didn’t, and now we have to fight them. Most wolflings only hide and try to survive. Organized, troublesome packs crop up occasionally, but most of them are hunted down and destroyed within a year.”

“But not the Raiders?”

“No. Three years ago rumors crept into Laven-lay about a new outlaw pack. Their leader was a female named Fenrah Ausla. Fauns attached little importance to the name, even though Ausla is a royal Canid line. However, when the Raiders began exacting a heavy cowry count from our merchants, fauns took notice. Meuril tripled the bounty on Raiders. Fenrah, however, proved cunning. There were eight Raiders three years ago. There are eight today.”

“So who are Chance and Laylan?”

“I’m coming to that. You know, of course, that the cliff fauns think Danda-lay impregnable?”

“What’s Danda-lay?”



Syrill frowned. “It is amazing that you retain the ability to dress yourself.”

Before Corry could formulate a retort, Syrill continued, “Cliff faun capitol. Political and financial seat of middle Panamindorah.”

“Is Chance from Danda-lay?”

“Yes, he’s a cliff faun prince, King Shadock’s youngest. Like all of them, he has a certain arrogance about that city. You can imagine their outcry when the Raiders dared attack it.”

“Ah. So then Laven-lay’s problem became Danda-lay’s, too?”

“You would have thought the queen had been ravished for all their clamor. The raid came during a celebration: the spring festival of Lupricasia. At that particular festival Shadock was honoring Chance for a feat of bravery in battle. (Cliff fauns have helped us in the cat wars.) Chance’s ceremony was interrupted and a statue in his honor insultingly defaced.” Syrill grinned wickedly.

Corry could tell that Syrill wanted him to ask a question, so he asked it. “Defaced how?”

“The royal artisans had him depicted upon a stag. The Raiders gelded the statue, took the antlers, made a doe of it. Chance was livid.”

Corry smiled. “You don’t sound very sorry.”

Syrill shrugged. “No one was killed. The Raiders were only making a show. Chance, however, took it as a personal insult. He’s spent the last two years hunting Fenrah’s pack.”

“Who is Sham?” asked Corry. “I thought he was the leader. I never even saw Fenrah.”

“Sham is Fenrah’s second, her cousin. He’s also their chief healer. Talis is his apprentice. Chance has posted handsome rewards in addition to Meuril’s bounty for the capture of any Raider. Consequently, numerous hunters pursue them.”

“And one of those hunters is Laylan?”

Syrill nodded. “Laylan is a bounty hunter who appeared in this area about five years ago. His mount is a cheetah named Shyshax.”

“But I thought you were at war with the cats.”

“Cheetahs are outcasts,” said Syrill dismissively. “They were evicted from the council of Filinia years ago for treachery. They survive as a breed, but all the king cheetahs were killed, and they have no say in government. Laylan himself is not a faun. Some say he is half wolfling.”

Corry’s eyebrows rose.

“Laylan looks by his fur to be a fox shelt,” continued Syrill, “but foxlings are small of stature. Laylan is tall—too tall, some say, to be pure fox shelt.

“Whatever his pedigree, Laylan is the best bounty hunter in the wood. In his vendetta against the Raiders, Chance offered Laylan a fixed salary—a high one—if he would abandon his wholesale trapping and concentrate on Fenrah’s pack. So far Laylan hasn’t caught any Raiders, but he’s come closer than any faun and has saved many merchants their cargos.”

“What will the Raiders do with us?” asked Corry.

“Hold us for ransom. If they intended to kill us, they would have done so by now.”

Corry smiled. “You’re not angry that there was a raid on Laven-lay, are you, Syrill? You’re only angry that you were the one taken hostage.”

Syrill glanced sideways at him. “The Raiders hate cats as much as I do. They are the real enemy. If they hadn’t pushed the wolflings out of their own country and into ours, we wouldn’t be having this trouble. Fenrah is right: wolflings have nowhere to go.”

“And you really don’t think she’ll harm us?”

Syrill pursed his lips. “Fenrah is unpredictable. It is to her advantage to be so. But I can say for certain that she will do nothing that would hurt her struggling nation, and Filinian conquest might do that. I am one thing that stands in the way of that conquest.”

“What is she like?” asked Corry.

“Fenrah?” Syrill closed his eyes. “They say she dresses in black. Her weapon of choice is not a sword, but a huge dagger. She rides an enormous black wolf named Dance. Some even claim that he is a durian wolf.”

“What is a durian wolf?”

“A talking wolf. The wolves that most wolflings ride are called lupin wolves. They are like our deer—understanding some speech, but themselves incapable.”

“So Dance can talk?”

“I said that rumors claim he can talk. As far as I know, no faun has heard him. Cats can talk too, you know. It’s a skill that once existed widely among four-legged creatures, although many of them lost it under the rule of the wizard, Gabalon.”

For some reason Corry was not surprised to learn that the cats could talk. The idea made him think of something else. “Who was that snow leopard following you the day we met?”

Syrill turned to look at him. “How did you know about that?”

“I saw you in the wood. You jumped right over me.”

“I never saw *you*. The leopard was one of Demitri’s generals—Ounce. I led a scouting party to examine a village they had destroyed. We were discovered and pursued.” He frowned at Corry. “You are truly a fortunate iteration. You could easily have been killed by cats yesterday.”

Corry thought a moment. “So who is the cat king, and what kind of a cat is he?”

“The tigers rule Filinia these days. The lions were better, if you ask me, though the only good cat is a dead one. Technically, the king now is Demitri, but Lexis is his alpha cub. Demitri is rumored to be ill, and Lexis leads the army now.”

Before Syrill could say anything else a shelt dropped into the cave and moved toward them. “Wake up, you two,” came a deep male voice. “Chief is ready to see you.”

“They’re not asleep, Xerous.” Corry recognized Talis’s voice from the entrance. “They’ve been prattling like geese the whole time.”

Xerous was larger than either Sham or Sevn. The wolfling came close and peered at Corry. “Iteration... How interesting.” He turned to Syrill. “On your feet, faun.”

## 7. Fenrah

Fauns say I wear black to blend with the shadows. Wolfings know better. They say I wear black because I am in mourning.

--Fenrah Ausla

Corry staggered out of the hole just in time to see Xerous flip Syrril into the shallow river. Syrril came up with a yelp. Xerous fished him out at once, blindfolded him, then cut the ropes on his feet. Syrril had quite a lot to say about all this, but he was having trouble getting his curses out between his chattering teeth. "You were dirty," explained Xerous.

Meanwhile Talis ordered Corry into the cold river for a less abrupt bath. She blindfolded him as well, and they followed Xerous and Syrril. Soon Corry was forced to his knees and into a tunnel. After crawling for a short distance, he felt a cool breeze on his face. Then he was on his feet and told to remain still.

Next moment, he felt something strapped around his waist. Talis commanded him to sit, and Corry let out an exclamation of surprise as he sprang away from the ground. The movement soon ceased. Hands disentangled him from the harness and removed the blindfold. "Greetings!" came a cheery voice. Corry blinked at Sevn. "Welcome to the camp of the Raiders."

\* \* \* \*

The prisoners sat on a platform in the boughs of a massive tree, patch-worked with moonlight. Both were bound, although they were allowed the luxury of sight. Wooden catwalks led away in either direction, although Corry could see few details through the leaves and

shadows. Xerous stood guard over them, fletching arrows on the far side of the platform. In spite of the warm summer air, Corry felt cold in his wet clothes. He and Syrril had been in the camp an hour, and no one had paid them much notice.

Talis, Lyli, Sevn, and Danzel all passed occasionally along the catwalk. Once Talis hurried over to Xerous and asked him for some medical herbs. Finally, Sham strolled by with Sevn. Sham paused beside the prisoners and glanced at Xerous. “Have these two had water?”

Xerous thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“Sevn?”

“I don’t think that they have, Sham.”

“Gabalon’s teeth, what terrible hospitality. And poor Syrril is a mess.”

Sevn pursed his lips. “I wouldn’t say that the other looks like a dandelion.”

“I’ll ask Talis to clean them up. Then Fenny wants to see them.”

Sometime later, Talis arrived. She wrapped them in blankets and cleaned the cuts on Syrril’s face and the back of his head—a mass of bloody hair where Sham had struck him. Syrril peppered the nursing with comments about spoiling Sham’s handiwork and why didn’t they scratch both sides of his face so things would be symmetrical?

The prisoners had their hands retied in front and received a much-appreciated drink to which even Syrril made no protest. Talis brought food, but when it came, Syrril cried out in indignation. “Is this your idea of a joke?”

Talis reddened. “I forgot that you don’t eat deer meat.”

Syrill continued to grumble, but when she returned with vegetable broth he ate two bowls of it. Both prisoners were reasonably comfortable when Xerous returned and unfastened their feet. Talis took Corry's arm as before. Xerous got a good hold on Syrill, who kept eyeing the distance to the ground as they proceeded along the narrow boardwalk.

At last they came to the crotch of a very large tree, which formed a natural bowl. Moonlight washed through the leaves and threw shadows and shifting patches of light on the textured bark. Within the shadows of the bowl, Corry saw the silhouettes of two wolflings, crouching over a block of wood that had been set up as a table.

Corry heard Sham's voice, apparently in the midst of a mild argument. "What else was I to do? They would have killed her."

The response came too low to hear.

"Yes, I know, but Danzel wasn't there! It's not as if I *wanted* to take hostages!"

Corry heard an alto female voice. "I should never have sent that pup."

Sham sounded sad. "He did it for *me*, Fenny. I think I made him understand."

"I hope so."

Xerous cleared his throat. "Chief?" She rose and came towards them into the moonlight.

Fenrah Ausla had black fur and black hair, pulled into a bundle at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were large and as black as charred wood. He could distinguish no difference between the pupil and the iris. She wore a sleeveless tunic made of soft black leather and a cape and boots of the same stuff. Fenrah wore a sword belt, weighted with the largest dagger Corry had ever

seen. It had a narrow blade with a gold hilt set with jagged fragments of what looked like mother-of-pearl. A pale gold stone shown in the center of the pommel.

“General,” she said to Syrill, “you’ve lost your hat.”

Syrill scowled at her. “Among other things.”

“You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I apologize for any rough treatment.”

“You can keep your apologies, Fenrah. They won’t help either of us. Sham did a foolish thing. If you don’t release me, Meuril will have every soldier in Laven-lay after you.”

Fenrah frowned. “Don’t judge my cousin too harshly. Many would have advised he kill you. Instead he brought you to me. It was the right decision, but still problematic. You know as well as I do that I cannot simply release you. You are too valuable. Besides, for reputation’s sake alone, we could not possibly release a faun once we’ve caught him.”

She looked at him frankly. “You have done well in the war, general. The cats have tasted a little defeat at your hands, and if ever I had reason to be grateful to a faun, well...” Fenrah’s manner became brisk. “Meuril has been sent a ransom note concerning you, as well as the other.” She peered curiously at Corry. “He has been given two days. If we don’t get an answer by then, I’m afraid that I’ll have to kill you, as much as I will regret it.” She shrugged. “That’s as good as I can do. I sincerely hope that I can return you to your troops.”

Syrill tossed his head. “How much? Come, Fenrah, let me pay it myself and be done. The cowries will be at whatever place you specify before Meuril would have time to call a meeting.”

Fenrah’s dark eyes dropped. “What makes you think I’m asking for cowries?”



“Oh? What’s your price, then? Filinian pelts? I have those, too.”

She shook her head. “I’ve only asked one thing of Laven-lay, ever: no more bounty laws.”

Syrill was silent a moment. “I see you want to kill me after all.”

Fenrah shook her head. “Meuril is fond of you—”

“Fenrah, he won’t do it.”

“He may if you ask. I have a pen there, and parchment. Write him. I’ve never made a faun die the sort of death you keep for us. But if this will produce better results, so be it.”

Syrill stood very still. Finally, he said, “Surely you realize that in my profession, one must have the respect of one’s fellows. How will it be if the common shelts say, ‘Syrill begged for his life, and so now we must live with bandits and murderers?’ No, Fenrah. Meuril can make his decision on the strength of your own arguments. I’ll not cloud his judgment with pleading.”

She sighed. “Canids are not all bandits and murderers. I understand you work well enough with Laylan.”

Syrill shrugged. “I was referring to the common shelts. What I think is another matter.”

Fenrah stepped suddenly close to him. Corry caught the scent of leather oil on her clothes and the lingering odor of wood smoke. “General,” she half whispered, “I am not your enemy, and you are not mine. Help me in this.”

Syrill shook his head. “I can’t. I would if I could.”

Fenrah sighed and stepped away. “It’s not cowries we want. We’ll take them if that gets Laven-lay’s attention, but we’re not highway bandits. To ask for your ransom in cowries would

undermine the message I have been trying to send. I did not invite this hostage situation. This is the best I can think to deal with it.”

She turned away, and Corry thought that she had finished. Fenrah, however, had only gone to retrieve something from the block of wood. “Recognize this, General?”

Syrill leapt forward. Xerous seized him with both hands, lifting him a little in the air.

Fenrah was laughing. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’” She nodded to Xerous and Talis. “Take them away.” The object she held was a silver key.

## 8. Trouble for a Key

The average Filinian has a personal investment in battle which no faun leader can impart to his own soldiers. Deep in shelt territory, a thousand cats would be hard pressed to find enough game to feed even half their number. They must fight, for they must eat.

--Capricia Sor, *A Prelude to War*

“You can sit here in natural silence or you can lie here unconscious,” said Xerous. “You choose.” He let Corry and Syrrill drop to the ground. Their legs had been re-tied. Xerous sat down on the opposite side of the deck with his back against a tree trunk. He propped his hands behind his head and watched Runner’s yellow sickle winking across the trees. *The wolflings take their monthly calendar from Runner, which has a cycle of about fifteen days—a “yellow month.”*

Corry shook his head. *Why do I remember such a useless thing?*

High in the sky, Dragon was as full as ever. Corry thought perhaps the fauns used it for their months, but he wasn’t sure. He remembered that a red month was about sixty days. He also remembered the color of the third moon. *Blue moon, and it’s cycle is inconsistent. Shelts call it Wanderer.*

“Wake up!” Corry’s eye snapped open. Dew lay moist on his skin. Runner had set, and Dragon was well down the sky. Something kicked him in the ribs. “Iteration! Wake up!”

“I’m awake,” grunted Corry, scooting away from Syrrill’s sharp little hooves.

“They’re changing guards; Sevn had to be looked for. Hurry! We haven’t much time!”

“Time for what?”

“My hooves,” said Syrrill impatiently. “There’s a horn shoe—very thin, and a small blade inside—Laylan’s idea, very practical.”

“Knife?” Corry blinked at him. “You had a knife all the time?”

“Couldn’t get to it,” growled Syrrill, “Anyway, I *had* to know whether she had the key.”

Corry was already fumbling at Syrrill’s hooves—awkwardly, because his hands were tied behind. He found the shoe, secured with tiny nails. It had two pieces for each side of the split hoof. On the inside outer edge of each shoe, Corry found the slender strip of sharp metal. He worked one loose and began to saw at the ropes on Syrrill’s wrists. “Why is the key important?”

“It’s Laylan’s master trap key. It was the whole point of the raid. They wanted Meuril’s copy. They probably didn’t even know I had one. Hurry!”

“Laylan’s traps are keyed?”

“Yes. Only four copies exist. Chance and Meuril each have one, and Laylan has the original. Recently he entrusted one to me, because my soldiers have gotten caught in them, and I wanted to try the traps on Filinians.” Syrrill’s hands were free. He wrenched the other shoe off and started working on his feet.

“Can’t Laylan change his locks?” asked Corry.

“Yes, but it would probably take a yellow month. Wolflings could do a lot of damage in that time. Besides, *I* am responsible for the key.”

Corry saw the real issue then. “Syrrill, surely Laylan doesn’t expect you to keep it at the expense of your life.”

Syrill kicked free of the last of his ropes. He knelt behind Corry and expertly sliced through the remaining strands. Then he spun him around and hacked through the knots at his feet. “You,” he panted, “can run as you please.” He glanced up, a glint of scorn in his eyes. “No one would expect anything else of an iteration.”

Corry sat up straight. For just a moment, the world blurred, and his color-sense flamed—the dead reek of the darkness, the intoxicating wine of Dragon moon, the velvety richness of the leaves—then everything slid back into focus. Syrill was looking at him oddly—contempt giving way to uncertainty, almost fear. “What did you just do?” he asked.

“I don’t know. What did it look like?”

“I—”

*Creeeak!*

Corry felt the wood tremble as Lyli trotted out of the darkness. She gave a cry of alarm that broke off as Syrill slammed into her. She struggled to bring her sword into play, but Syrill had closed too quickly, and the two staggered back onto the narrow catwalk.

Corry heard a yelp of pain. Syrill was around her and gone. Lyli was holding her shoulder, and Corry realized that Syrill must have sliced her with his hoof-knife. She turned with a snarl to slash at Corry with her sword. He lunged backward, felt the blade cleave the air near his belly, lost his balance, and toppled off the catwalk.

Leaves and branches slapped him as he fell. Something was constricting his arms and legs, choking him. Corry reached out blindly to stop the strangling. Ropes, a pulley?

He halted, dangling. He'd just managed to keep himself from being hung. *This must be Sevn's device—that chair I came up in.* Corry risked a downward glance and was relieved to see the forest floor not three feet below, faintly visible in the predawn.

He landed with a soft thump and turned towards the sound of a growl. A wolf and a wolfling child were standing a few feet away. The wolf was black and enormous. *This has to be Dance.* Corry's forehead came only as high as his shoulder. The child stood only about half as tall as Corry. The wolfling did not give an instant alarm as Corry expected, but stood staring at him. Wild black hair hung thick to the child's shoulders. He had a thin, pointed nose and enormous black eyes.

Somewhere voices had begun to shout. There was a sound of running feet in the dry leaves. The small wolfling broke from Corry's gaze and darted away.

The black wolf began to growl. Eyes of yellow gold stared from a face of such obvious intelligence that for a full half minute Corry expected the animal to speak. At last, the wolf leaned forward, sniffing. Corry felt that his heart would break through his ribs. *Running is useless,* he told himself over and over. *Best to stay still.*

Corry felt certain that Dance understood that he was an escaped prisoner. He expected the wolf to roar or howl at any moment. Dance, however, remained oddly calm. Slowly the snarl died in his throat. His lips lowered so that Corry could no longer see his teeth. His ears came up. Then, to Corry's utter astonishment he whined, and his tail waved slowly behind him.

And the world sank away.

*Shadows. Stairs. Dark, dripping tunnels. Fear. A dungeon vault, and a hulking shape. Yellow gold eyes.*

*“What are you doing here, cub? Come closer. Let me smell you. Creator bless you, you smell of earth and stars and wind. No, don’t speak. You smell of freedom. Be still and let me taste that air one last time. You can’t free me. Brave cub, but this was foolishly done.”*

*An argument in whispers. The feel of fur through bars. “There must be a way. We need you, Telsar.”*

Corry bit back a cry. The vivid images in his head washed around and collided with the reality of the dawn wood. He stared into the yellow eyes of the black wolf. “Telsar?”

The wolf whined. Then he turned and bounded away, leaving a trembling Corry in the confusion of his half-remembered past. *He knows me! How can that be?*

Someone was shouting. Corry fled. He ran blindly, hardly caring where he went. He stopped when he saw Syrril. He’d caught the wolfling child. The others must have been just behind, for they appeared suddenly out of the trees, down the trunks, from swinging ropes.

“Stop!” growled Syrril, pressing the knife against the throat of the struggling wolfling.

Fenrah slid to a halt. Behind her Corry saw Sham, Sevn, Danzel, and Xerous. “If you come any closer, I’ll kill him,” said Syrril. “I’m sure you can understand hostage situations.”

Sham’s lips tightened. “If you make any scratches on that pup, I’ll patch them with your pelt!”

Fenrah raised her hand for silence. “What do you want, Syrril?”

“The key.”

“Alright.” Her tail rose behind her back and twitched to the left. Out of the corner of his eye, Corry saw Talis and Lyli moving through the trees to get behind Syrril. “But tell me, General, what will you do when you get it? We can easily recapture you on foot in the forest. We may kill you. If you stop right now, I’ll forget this ever happened. If not, Meuril may lose a valiant officer, and I will feel much regret at having helped Lexis—”

“Give me the key,” snapped Syrril.

Fenrah reached into a pouch at her belt, then extended both hands, one with the key, the other reaching for the young wolfling. “Let him go,” she murmured. “Come, Huali.”

The youngster waited with an almost feline, emotionless attention. Corry realized that during the whole episode he hadn’t made a sound, though he had bitten Syrril on the arm.

Syrril’s grip on the wolfling loosened, and he held out his hand. Corry flinched as he watched Lyli draw her sword behind him. *They’ll kill him before he takes five steps. I’ve got to do something.*

Without giving himself time to think, Corry leapt from behind the tree, yelled wildly, and ran. Xerous caught him in a matter of seconds, spinning Corry to the ground and pinning him with his sword. He could tell that Xerous would have dearly loved to kill him, but he deferred to Sham several yards away, who shook his head.



Meanwhile Syrrill and Fenrah were throwing up a shower of leaves. Corry realized that his diversion must have given Syrrill a chance to try for a better hostage. Lyli, Danzel, and Sevn circled them with drawn swords, awaiting an opportunity. Suddenly a huge black shape shot from the trees. Dance caught Syrrill and tossed him in the air to land with a grunt on his back. The dazed faun tried to rise, but the wolf was already standing over him, looking to his mistress for permission to kill.

## 9. Shift

It is on this day of all days that I feel in need of counsel, and I have none. My father has never been interested in the old books, and he would count all my work in that direction as folly. I need an ally. I am utterly alone.

--diary of Capricia Sor, Summer, 1700

Fenrah got to her feet behind Dance. "Sevn, do you have rope?"

"Yes."

"Hang him. Do it quickly."

"Fenrah!" came Xerous's deep growl, and Lyli cleared her throat behind him. Corry thought at first that they were going to argue in Syrrill's defense, but the way Lyli gripped the handle of her skinning knife made him think otherwise. "You said—!"

Fenrah glanced at them wearily. "Why torture him? Do you really think it will make any difference? I did not plan for this. It has gone far enough."

Behind her, Sevn was knotting a hangman's noose, while Sham advanced on Syrrill with drawn sword. Syrrill could not rise with Dance still bristling over him. He still gripped the little hoof knife in one hand, knuckles white around the key in the other.

*Do something!*

Just then, distant, but distinct in the crisp morning air came the sound of horns. "Xerous, get back up there and break camp!" barked Fenrah. "Danzel, Huali, help him. Dance, go

assemble the pack. Sham, Sevn, I want that key in my hand and that faun on a rope. Lyli, finish that one.” She jerked her head towards Corry.

He felt a rush of air beside him as Xerous sprinted away. He saw Sevn toss the noose around Syrrill’s neck without bothering to get the knife away from him. Dimly Corry was aware of Lyli uncoiling beside him, drawing back with her sword to kill him in one stroke.

Corry drew in breath, but something seemed to have happened to his lungs. Long after they should have reached capacity, he kept drawing air, filling and filling. The world blurred. He could see each of the shelts around him only as a red silhouette, more orange in the limbs and brightest red in the torso and head. Corry gulped, and a dizzying array of taste-smells flooded his brain. He seemed to have gained height. Lyli was standing below him, but he had difficulty distinguishing her sword until she moved it. Everyone had gone very still, and he wondered whether he had just died. Then someone screamed. There were shouts. The noises came to him like sounds underwater.

Lyli seemed to be running from him. Sham and Sevn were backing away. Fenrah held her ground a moment. Then he heard her breath one word. “Arrows!” All the wolflings turn and ran.

Next moment the world slid back into focus. Corry stood with his hand clutching his chest. “What happened?” he gasped.

Syrrill was grinning at him. “Why did you wait so long?”

He was running now, and Corry had to sprint to keep up. “That horn was my soldiers looking for us. With any luck, they’ll find us before the Raiders do. Make some noise.” He began to shout, occasionally whistling between his fingers.

Very shortly this sound was answered by a bugle-like snort. Corry nearly stumbled, but Syrill laughed aloud and whistled again. Corry heard hoof beats, and then Syrill’s stag bounded into view. Seconds later, they were on his back.

“What did you become?” asked Syrill as they bounded away. “I know you shifted, saw the blur as I turned, but at the moment I was afraid to take my eyes off Sevn.”

“Do you mean I changed shape?”

“Yes. Was it an accident? Panicked, did you?”

“I suppose. I don’t really know how I did it. You didn’t see me?”

“No.” Syrill sounded disappointed. “You still don’t know what shelt blood you carry?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Syrill didn’t seem to hear him. “Well, you’re no faun-blood. They’d never run from a deer. From their expressions, you’d think they’d seen a monster.”

“If I had faun blood, I would have shifted to a deer?” asked Corry.

“Yes, of course,” muttered Syrill, thinking. “Perhaps a bear? A very large one? No, I still can’t imagine her fleeing that way from a bear. Perhaps a...” He licked his lips in disgust. “A cat. They say an iteration lives a long life. Still, I’d have thought you too young, even for an iteration. Cat shelts were gone before my grandparents’ time.”

Corry sat silent while Syrrill discussed his possible lineage. “Syrill?” he interrupted.

“Hmm?”

“I saved your life back there, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“And I helped you get the key?”

“Yes.”

“Then do me the kindness of not telling anyone that I shifted.”

“Ah. Corry, it is not necessarily a mark of dishonor to have a wizard’s talents. It’s only distrusted, because wizards mistreated shelts in the past.”

“Until shelts killed them all?” asked Corry sarcastically.

“I think they mostly killed each other.”

“Whatever. Wood fauns won’t trust me if they know I can shift. The less like a wizard I seem, the better I’ll get on here. Syrrill, if I’ve been any help to you, do this for me.”

Syrrill inclined his head. “I will not disclose your talents without your permission. However, you should consider the possibilities. As you’ve just seen, the ability to shift could be very useful. I would not be at all opposed to having an iteration in my army...even if your true form is a cat. Yes, come to think of it, that might be most useful of all.”

Corry laughed. “Are you inviting me to become what you accused me of being: a spy?”

“They’re only bad when they’re on the other side!” quipped Syrrill. “Laylan has done some work for me. His cheetah’s tracks don’t attract attention from enemy scouts. The pay is

excellent. Of course, there are drawbacks. If you think the Raiders are fierce, then the cats may give you a green turn. We got a prisoner back last red month whom they'd tortured. He died yesterday. The cats had licked all the skin off one arm."

\* \* \* \*

Capricia Sor watched the sunrise from the window of her study, high in the tower where she'd taken Corry two days ago. A plate of breakfast sat untouched on a tray beside her. The pot of tea on her desk had received more attention. She'd drunk all of it and had not slept. Words and phrases run together in her mind—the scholarly commentaries, so scant and confusing, the partial interpretations of the ancient language, her own notes from interviews with a few very old cliff fauns, the last to have spoken with anyone who knew the old writing.

The princess was deeply troubled. "Corellian..." She rolled the name around on her tongue. "Yes, it is possible. I thought the pronunciation different, but it is possible."

*Boom!* A servant banged open the door without knocking. Capricia turned with an angry reprimand, but stopped when she saw the excitement on his face.

"They're back!" exclaimed the servant and then remembered to bow. "Syrill has returned safely, your highness, along with your iteration friend, Corellian. All Laven-lay is talking about him. Syrill reports that he could not have escaped without Corellian's help, and they have rescued the master trap key from Raider hands! They will enter the castle in a moment. Your father wants to greet them himself."

Capricia frowned as the messenger scampered away. *How will I ever get rid of him now?*

\* \* \* \*

Corry felt giddy during the parade through Laven-lay. The whole city seemed to be attending their progress up the street. He wished Syrill would hurry inside out of the press, but Syrill was preening and kept his stag's pace to a stately walk. They dismounted on the steps of the castle and entered the antechamber, carried along by the throng, only escaping when a cry of, "Make way for the King!" forced the crowd apart. Corry saw Meuril in the entrance to the throne room, beckoning them nearer.

Syrill strode forward, and Corry followed more hesitantly. "My dear general," said the King, "my nation's debt to you grows ever larger."

Syrill bowed. "I did no more than my duty, Sire."

"And you," Meuril turned to Corry, "your reception into my realm makes this act even greater. If I am to believe my general's message, he and the key would not be here but for you."

Meuril turned to the throng. "Friends, we have averted disaster because of this young iteration. Who among you would be so prejudiced as to deny him citizenship?"

A chorus of approving cheers erupted, and Meuril smiled. "Corry, you are hereby granted citizenship of Laven-lay and all the rights of trading, traveling, and protection it affords. To ensure that all shelts honor my decision I am entrusting you with a ring bearing the sign of my own house. Wear it, and you are one of us."

As Corry took the bit of gold from Meuril, he caught sight of two scowling brown eyes amid the smiles. Capricia.

“Do you want to get out of this?” Syrill bellowed over the noise. Corry nodded and followed him as he edged his way to one of the small side doors leading off of the antechamber. Syrill shut it, and the sound diminished instantly. “How does it feel to be a hero?”

“Safer,” said Corry, thinking of Capricia.

Syrill gave him an odd look.

“I mean,” Corry improvised, “now I don’t have to worry about fauns torturing me.”

Syrill grinned. “You had to turn the blade one more time, didn’t you? Well, that won’t happen again, Corellian of Laven-lay.”

Corry glanced at the circlet of gold. On one side it bore the leaf and buck’s head of Laven-lay, on the other side the image of a diving falcon. “The insignia of the House of Sor,” explained Syrill. “That’s Meuril’s personal sign. He’d never have given it to a faun, but prejudice against iterations is so strong I suppose he thought it was the only way to ensure your safety.”

They were in the garden now, moving beneath the living archways of flowering vines. Corry tried to put the ring on, but found it too large to stay on his finger.

Syrill chuckled. “You’ll have to have it fitted by a goldsmith.”

They walked for a moment in silence. “What’s your deer’s name, Syrill?”

“Blix.” Corry could hear the pride in his voice. “I raised him.”

“He’s magnificent.” Corry hesitated. “What will happen to the wolflings now?”

Syrill glanced at him curiously. “Nothing, I suppose.”

“But won’t the fauns—”



Syrill snorted. “We’re speaking of Fenrah’s Raiders, not common thieves. Of course my soldiers will follow our path of retreat and try to find them, but I’m sure they’ll fail. The Raider’s mobility is their most peculiar talent.”

“But they must have gone somewhere.”

Syrill shrugged. “The Raiders are very mobile. Some say they have no den. Others say it’s impossible to operate so efficiently, to stash plunder so well, and to disappear so completely without a permanent den.”

Corry looked thoughtful. *If the Raiders were involved with Capricia’s finding the flute, perhaps their den holds more clues about my past.* “I suppose everyone has searched thoroughly?”

Syrill laughed. “Of course! If the Raiders have a home, they can be trapped...along with the mountain of treasure they have supposedly accumulated. *If they have a home—*”

“They do.”

Faun and boy turned together. In the path behind them stood a shelt who had come up without sound of footfalls. *This has to be Laylan*, thought Corry. The bounty hunter had red-furred legs and black canine paws. His bushy, white-tipped tail hung a full foot below the hem of his brown leather tunic. He had red hair the color of his fur, pulled back in a loose ponytail that was oddly reminiscent of his real tail. A black, wide-brimmed hat threw a shadow across his face. From the place where other hats might have carried a feather, dangled a limp wolf tail.

“They have a den,” he said.

Syrill grinned. “Laylan! This is Corellian, the iteration who helped save your key.”

Laylan’s eyebrows rose. “You have saved me a great deal of trouble. Thank you.” He turned to Syrill. “I have news about Lexis’ movements that may interest you.”

“Certainly. Good day, Corellian.”

Corry watched them walk away—Syrill with his swinging gait and Laylan on gliding paws that never crunched a leaf.

## 10. The Agreement

A promise is always a shackle. Made well, it will anchor you to life and reason. Made poorly, it will be to you a ball and chain.

—Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Corry soon learned that Meuril had assigned him a suit of rooms in the castle. While he was exploring them, a servant arrived to return his backpack. Corry had not seen it since Syrril confiscated his possessions in the wood. Grinning, he brought out the orange cowry.

“Where did you get that?”

Corry turned to see Capricia in the doorway.

“I brought it from Earth. It’s money, isn’t it? You use them for money here.”

Capricia’s mouth twisted. “We...used to.”

“Ah. What do you use now?”

She didn’t say anything.

Corry sat down at a little table. “Aren’t you happy that I helped save the master trap key, Capricia? Or would you rather the Raiders have killed me?”

To Corry’s surprise, Capricia left the doorway and came to sit across the table from him. “No, of course not. You remember that I told our archers not to shoot at you.”

“It would have seemed odd to everyone if you hadn’t. Capricia, why don’t you want me here? I know that you say the flute could have given me the language, but you don’t really believe that.” He leaned closer. “Here’s something the flute won’t explain: Fenrah’s wolf

recognized me! After I escaped, I ran into him in the forest. He was friendly to me. He never said a word, but I know he can talk. I remember him. Or something about him.”

Capricia looked skeptical.

“I thought,” continued Corry, “that I’d skipped forward in time. I left Panamindorah and came to Earth, and only a year passed on Earth, but hundreds of years passed here. That would explain why I know your language, and yet it sounds a little strange to me. Languages change. It would explain why everyone says my speech is old fashioned, why I think cowries ought to be money.”

Capricia nodded wearily. “I understand what you think, Corellian, but—”

“*But*,” he continued, “that doesn’t explain Dance. How could he know me? How could Dance possibly have been alive long enough for the language to change?”

“By all reports, Dance is just a wolf like any other. No faun has ever heard him speak. He’s large, and that’s what started the rumor that he’s a durian wolf, but Chance and Laylan don’t think so. There are many reasons why he might have seemed friendly towards you. Perhaps your scent reminded him of the wolflings. You had been with them recently, after all. Perhaps you unwittingly gave him a signal that he recognized—a hand sign or a gesture that the Raiders use.”

Corry looked out the window, annoyed. “You’re wrong.”

Capricia started to speak again, but he cut her off. “I know the Raiders had something to do with your getting the flute. Did you really ‘find’ it, Capricia? Or did you steal it?”

She stared at him. “How did you—?”

“Syrill told me you began your study of the wizards after becoming ‘lost’ in the forest during a Raider attack. He thought it was me you’d found, but I’m sure it was the flute. I want to know how you got it. I’ll tell Meuril if you don’t—”

“You’ll find I don’t respond well to threats,” snapped Capricia.

“Alright. Don’t try to force me, and I won’t try to force you.”

A heavy silence. Then Capricia laughed. “There’s not much to tell. You’ll be disappointed.”

“I’m never disappointed with the truth.”

“When the Raiders attacked our caravan, my doe bolted. We were in unfamiliar country, and by the time I stopped her, we were lost. As we were finding our way back to the road, someone dropped out of a tree and tried to pull me to the ground. It was the smallest member of the pack, the one that doesn’t speak.”

“Huali?” guessed Corry.

“Hualien, yes. In the struggle, I caught hold of something hanging around his neck. I tried to strangle him with it. In the end, he broke free and fled, leaving the thing in my fist. It was the flute. I took a day finding my scattered traveling party. You see? Not a very revealing story.”

“But it’s worth knowing.” Corry thought a moment. “Is Hualien really one of the eight? I saw him in the forest, but I thought he was only one of their children.”

Capricia shook her head. “There are only eight Raiders. Lyli and Xerous are mates, but they have no living offspring. Hualien is an orphan, seven years old. Chance and Laylan have copious dossiers on all of them. The Raiders don’t have many secrets, except their den, of course. I’ve read everything available on them and come up with nothing to explain the flute. I concluded that Hualien found it or stole it, so I turned my attention to the wizards.”

“Do you think your father would have complied with their ransom demands?”

Capricia arched her brows. “Lift the bounties laws? Of course not. The wood fauns would revolt.”

Corry pursed his lips. “Fenrah makes these demands for her nation? There’s nothing she stands to gain, other than freedom to live in wood faun territory?”

Capricia sighed. “Fenrah Ausla is of royal blood. Chance believes she would be heir to the throne...if there was a Canid throne to claim, which of course there isn’t since the Filinian conquest.”

“I can see why Syrrill seemed sympathetic to the Raiders.”

“Syrrill lives for the present. He’s too young to have been involved in any of the wars with Canisaria before it fell. Wolflings and fauns have always been uneasy neighbors. My mother was killed by wolflings, but that is beside the point.”

Capricia stood and circled the table. “I spent last night looking at my books about the flute, and you will be gratified to know that there is some mention of...of stopping time, or—I don’t quite understand it—of traveling in time.”

“Then you believe me?”

“The manuscripts speak of moving forward, but *never* of moving back. Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps you *are* an iteration or even a wizard from Panamindorah. You certainly have a wizard’s way of meddling. Perhaps you *have* known fauns and wolflings and other shelts in a time when shelts and wizards still knew the ancient script. Perhaps you lost your memories in the process of changing worlds. However, you cannot reclaim your lost place in Panamindorah. You cannot solve the riddles you want to solve, because they would have happened hundreds of years ago to people who are all dead.”

Corry’s eyes dropped. He traced an aimless design on the table top. “Capricia—”

“Hundreds of years *dead*,” she reiterated, “and you can’t ever go back.”

“And your point is?”

“You can’t get back your lost place, but you can make a new one. My father is impressed with you. So is Syrril. You are a hero to the citizens of Laven-lay. You’ve drawn so much public attention to yourself that it would be difficult now to explain your disappearance. Very well. Stay in Panamindorah. Make a life for yourself.” She paused. “Of course, I would like your help to translate the old script.”

Corry’s eyes brightened. “I would very much like to—”

“However, the books are mine, and you will handle them only as I allow. Is that clear?”

“Naturally. What about the flute?”

“The flute is no longer your concern.” Capricia moved towards the door. “I will help you acclimate. Money, by the way, is still called cowries, even though we use coins. *Try* not to appear totally ignorant. Along those lines, the public and royal libraries here in Laven-lay may be of interest to you. First, though, I’ll send someone to take your measurements. You’ve been invited to the king’s table for dinner, and the...uh...*garments* you’re wearing will not do.”

\* \* \* \*

When Capricia left Corry’s room, she went straight to her own chambers and shut the door. Her attendants came running, but she ordered them all away and went out to her private garden. Her hands were trembling. *I had to let him stay. There’s nothing else I could do, except have him assassinated. If that’s even possible.*

She’d noticed uncharacteristic vagaries in Syrrill’s narrative of their escape. *There’s more to that story. I need to get Syrrill alone.*

Capricia glanced at the monument in the center of her garden—a white pillar about waist-high, crowned with golden wings arched in a protective shield around a kneeling fauness. Flames licked at the wings, kept alight by an invisible feed of oil from beneath. She had specifically requested that it remain unadorned with words. The servants said that she did so was because she was pious, and she let them say it. In reality, Capricia disliked inscriptions about the Creator. She’d never felt safe since her mother died, and the protective wings of the statue seemed like a mockery to her.



Capricia turned away from the Monument. *Probably the name in the old text is not Corellian's. Likely he's is just the son of some wizard that Gabalon deposed. In that case, I think I can handle him. I think.*

## 11. Aspects of a Dinner Conversation

This is a bright day for my enemy and for me one of the blackest.

--journal of Syrill of Undrun, Summer, 1700

Corry woke to see late afternoon sunshine streaming through his window. Capricia had sent an army of tailors, who'd measured him and taken away his clothes. He hoped they planned to bring more by the time he was expected at supper. Corry's eyes strayed to a leather-bound book beside his bed.

"*A Concise Illustrated History of Panamindorah* by Capricia Sor." He reached for it and began flipping through the pages. The characters were not the same as that of the old book in Capricia's study, yet he found he could read them.

### A Note on Terminology

Presently, the sentient beings of Panamindorah are divided into three groups: beasts, shelts, and iterations. These terms are more or less universal and require no explanation. More problematic are the terms for the three groups of shelts: fauns, nauns, and panauns. These are known by various slang throughout Middle Panamindorah. For this text, I will define a faun as a hoofed shelt, a panaun as a pawed shelt, and a naun as a shelt with neither hoof nor paw.

At the date of this writing, the only common panauns in Middle Panamindorah are wolflings. Fox shelts have grown uncommon, and cat shelts (known as Fealiday) are extinct. In Kazar, one may still find alligator shelts, but they rarely venture out of the

swamp. For practical purposes, the word “panaun” has become nearly synonymous with wolfling and has fallen out of use. However, when writing of times when other types of pawed shelts were in abundance, it is necessary to use the word in its original meaning.

Likewise, naun has become redundant with manatee shelt, because these are the only non-hoofed, non-pawed shelts living in Middle Panamindorah, and even they are an import. However, in the past, there was a greater variety. Even today, merchants from the western sea talk of selkies, seal shelts, living in on the far beaches.

The term faun is still in common circulation, since three types of hoofed shelt are in abundance—the deer shelts (wood fauns), the sheep shelts (cliff fauns), and the goat shelts (swamp fauns). Centaurs are source of dispute among taxonomists, but are generally classified with the fauns, as they do have hooves.

### The Beginning of Things

Unfortunately, the age of accurate scholarship in the middle kingdoms begins around the year 1440, after the great fire in Danda-lay. Stories of our history before this are based largely on oral tradition and grow more uncertain the further back one goes.

The reason is simple. The knowledge of the ancient picture language has been lost. It is said that this language was old even in the time of the wizards. The more wieldy phonetic letters were replacing it in both common and scholarly use in Gabalon’s day. Sometime after his defeat, scholars in Danda-lay grew concerned that the knowledge of

the old script was fading, and they translated large portions of important texts into the phonetic script. However, the great fire in Danda-lay destroyed the library in 1438.

Some of the originals of the very old texts were kept here, in Laven-lay. However, all of the translations burned. I have a few partially legible commentaries salvaged from the fire, but they are badly damaged, and no shelt whom I have been able to contact has a full knowledge of the ancient characters.

Corry drew a deep breath. “Yes, a picture language. What I was reading in Capricia’s study had only partial clues to pronunciation. The rest was memorized.” He glanced at the front of the book and found the year, 1695. “The library burned two hundred and fifty-seven years before she wrote this book, and I must have lived before that.”

He had just settled down to read again, when there came a knock at the door. Corry found a servant on the threshold with something made of brown cloth over one arm. The servant bowed. “King Meuril requests your presence at dinner.” He pressed the clothes into Corry’s hands. “The tailors have made you fresh garments. I will show you to the banquet hall when you are ready.”

Corry was impressed. He’d been dreading the arrival of the kind of long tunic the fauns wore, but instead he’d been sent linen trousers and shirt. There were no shoes, but it was warm enough to go without. “It’s the kind of clothes wizards were said to have worn,” explained the servant.

In the dining hall, smells of bread and spices mingled with the scent of flowers. Harpers were making music in one corner. Long, low windows looked out onto a garden winking with fireflies. Half a dozen fauns already sat near the head of the long table, and servants were coming and going, setting out the food. Corry's escort ushered him to the seated group. He recognized Syrill and was relieved when the servant directed him to a seat at the general's side. Capricia sat opposite Corry, although he didn't recognize her for a moment with her hair piled on top of her head, braided with tiny pink flowers and two enormous lilies. Her ivory robes were sleeveless, exposing her flawless mocha skin to perfection. He wondered if he would have dared to argue with her if she'd come into his room this morning looking like that.

Syrill was deep in conversation with Laylan, who appeared to be building something from his eating utensils. On Corry's left sat Chance, the pale, golden-haired cliff faun prince who had exchanged angry words with Sham yesterday in Meuril's antechamber. Looking at him more closely, Corry realized that Chance was younger than he'd first thought, surely not much over twenty. He was talking to Meuril at the head of the table. Capricia appeared to be listening to their conversation, though a faun to her left kept attempting politely to attract her attention.

"Shaddock believes it might have been an assassination," Corry heard Chance say to Meuril. "The centaurs have never been democratic."

Meuril shook his head. "You speak as though it were a coup."

"But that's just it! Targon was elected based on military prowess. He—"

Meuril held up his hand. "Hush now; here they come."

Centaurs were coming through the doorway. They were so tall they had to bend their human waists and stoop to enter. Their glossy bodies shown in the torchlight, muscled like draught horses, with heavily furred fetlocks. Their human bodies were dark olive, their ears small and round like Corry's. Unlike the fauns, the males had facial hair, which they wore in pointed beards. The mares wore a garment of a single piece of cloth, rather like a large scarf, brightly colored and tied in elaborate twists round their bodies. The stallions wore leather vests or nothing at all. Stallions and mares alike wore a variety of jewelry and practical items—gem-studded collars, bracelets on their ankles and wrists, belts with jeweled daggers and scimitars.

As the centaurs entered the room, the faun servants directed them to a section of the table without chairs, where they first knelt. This brought them low enough to eat from the table, though they were still head and shoulders above the fauns.

Servants began setting food before the diners. Syrril, who seemed to have finally noticed Corry's presence, leaned over and spoke in his ear. "See their battle whips?" Corry did, although he hadn't understood until now what he was looking at—long leather coils, with elaborately carved handles. "Good for bringing a cat to the ground," continued Syrril, "before you put a spear in him. I'm trying to negotiate for mercenaries. The centaurs have been in conference all day with Meuril. There's a new king in Iron Mountain, and he—"

"Eh-hummm!" The faun on the other side of Capricia cleared his throat loudly. "Your highness, I realize that the matter with the centaurs has kept you out of court this morning, but I have been waiting for some days to bring this item to your attention—"

Capricia turned away from Chance and Meuril's conversation with a bored expression. "Minster Erser, if this has anything to do with the furrier's guild, then you needn't bother. I've already ruled against the proposed tariff."

"But your Highness! Do you know how many cowries our furriers lost last year alone because of the swamp fauns?"

"I do. I also know what kind of fur I choose to have my own capes trimmed with. Two years ago, you were demanding royal guards for merchant caravans entering Kazar because of their swamp monster."

The minister reddened. "Only because that one incident threatened to strangle important trade routes with—"

"I would think," continued Capricia, "that contending with a swamp monster would prove more than enough handicap for merchants attempting to trade furs out of Kazar."

"But your Highness!"

"If our furriers want better business, tell them to work more in their tanneries and less in my courtroom. I will not pass a tariff to protect a vastly inferior product. However, I am working on a deal with the furriers guild in Danda-lay that would remove the embargo on cat pelts. That should please you."

Syrill had stopped to listen to their conversation. "What are they talking about?" whispered Corry.

Syrill shrugged. “A few years ago, the swamp fauns began exporting the fur of some small creature—a shayshoo—from Kazar. It’s lovely stuff, nearly as good as lynx or leopard pelts. The cats had agreements with all the fauns at one time that forbid the trade of cat pelts, and those concessions have died hard, even after the war started.” Syrill’s expression turned bitter. “No one wants to make an enemy of the cats if they’re going to win. Shayshoo fur sold so well, the swamp fauns established breeding colonies to increase their pelt yield. The wood fauns’ guild used to have almost a monopoly on furs, and they’ve been complaining loudly. They have cat furs by the cartload right now, but so far no one’s buying.”

Corry shook his head. “No, I meant the part about Capricia in court.”

Syrill raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t you know? As civil regent, Capricia has handled all of the internal affairs of the realm since the war with Filinia began. These days, I don’t think Meuril does anything except work with me as we attempt to drive out Lexis and his cats.”

Corry blinked. “Then how does she have time to go wandering around in the forest?”

Syrill gave him an odd look. “She doesn’t.”

At that moment a messenger came trotting in with a worried expression on his face. He went straight to the king, leaned over, and whispered something in his ear. Meuril rose and tapped the table for silence. “I have just received important news.” He waited until he had their full attention. “Demitri of Alainya is dead. Lexis of Alainya takes his place as king of Filinia,” he hesitated a moment and then added, “and all Filinian conquests.”



A babble of talking erupted. Corry turned to look at Syrril. The general sat very still, eyes fixed on something far away. Abruptly, he rose and left the hall.

Meuril followed him. Capricia hesitated for an instant, then got up to go after them. “Well this explains the lull in their fighting,” commented Chance, looking over Corry at Laylan. “Perhaps Lexis grew impatient.”

Laylan shook his head. “Demitri was ill. Lexis is too intelligent to risk his birthright when it was so obviously about to fall between his paws.”

Corry only half heard them. He leapt up and ran after Capricia. He caught up with her, already half way down the corridor outside. “Capricia, when did you meet me?”

She glanced at him, still walking fast. “Pardon?”

He lowered his voice. “If you’ve been holding court here while your father fights cats, how did you have time to go wandering around the forest with the flute? Or to write a history book? That day by the lake when I first saw you, and you ran from me...when was it?”

Capricia shot him a suspicious glance. “About three years ago, before the war started.”

“But it was only days ago to me!”

Capricia’s only response was to walk a little faster.

“Don’t you see?” asked Corry, trotting to keep up. “This shows that time really does pass more slowly on Earth than in Panamindorah. This explains how I might have been gone for only a year of Earth’s time, while hundreds of years passed here!”

“Will you please keep your voice down?” she hissed.

“We could figure out when I left...when I was *stolen* the first time. We could calculate it, you see? Figure out how much time passed in Panamindorah between our first two meetings and how much time passed on Earth. Capricia, don’t you want to know who I am?”

She said nothing.

Corry’s mouth opened slowly. “Or do you already know?”

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. “Corellian, listen to me: I have already made my decision—”

“Passed your judgment, you mean? This isn’t your courtroom, Capricia.”

“Do you know what would happen to most shelts if they spoke that way to me?”

“Well, you’ve already threatened twice to kill me. What’s a third time?”

She rounded on him with a snarl. “I have told you: the past cannot be reclaimed. What if you found you were someone bad? Someone evil?”

“Was I?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that you are keeping me from an important conference.”

“Will you at least tell me the date we met?”

“I’ll check my records tomorrow, when you come to work on those translations.”

## 12. Thief

I learned today that Corellian is missing. I wish I could help look for him, but as usual Lexis vexes me by consuming all my attention.

--journal of Syrrill of Undrun, Summer 1700

Corry waited next morning for Capricia's summons. He had dreamed all night of wolves in dungeons and felt singularly unrested and irritable. While he waited, he read her book:

Since I wish to write a scholarly work, I will omit details of the events before the fire until I am able to better understand the old manuscripts. The legend, then, in brief:

Some say the wizards came across the sea and our years are numbered from their coming. Others say they were always in Panamindorah, but they were not always evil. Some say that they are with us still, others that they are gone.

All say this: that a wizard called Gabalon gathered to himself the support of many nations, that he made his capitol in Selbis, that he made it mighty. They say he invited his fellow wizards to a great feast, and at the feast he poisoned all but seven of them. Those seven formed his inner circle.

It is said that Gabalon hated beasts and robbed them of speech, but that the cats were stronger and fiercer and Filinia too vast for his armies. He could not master them, and so they speak still.

It is said that Gabalon possessed a weapon of magic that allowed him to perform such feats. His weapon protected him during rebellions, the largest of which involved the

last of the talking wolves, the durians. The legend goes that they entered the Endless Wood and vanished, and that is why the wood faun kingdom is called Endless, because it swallowed them without a trace.

The cliff fauns and their allies finally overthrew the tyrant in 1388 (this date is well documented). In myth, they say the Creator sent a bird of fire, which went before the armies of the cliff fauns and terrified their enemies. Historians speculate that the fauns may have had the help of pegasus, perhaps the first Pegasus to appear in middle Panamindorah. Others say they had the help of the Unibus, who figure prominently in old stories, but purportedly disappeared into the Snow Mountains of Filinia during the time of Gabalon's tyranny. It is not now certain that Unibus ever existed. Their legends call them shape-shifters, and they may, in fact, have been some form of iteration.

That Gabalon actually existed is a matter of no dispute. The ruin of Selbis is with us still, and many manuscripts mention him. However, the details of his reign and fall are subjects of speculation, and it is this area to which I will attempt to bring real scholarship in my next work.

Meanwhile, we concern ourselves with the events since the great fire of Dandalay.

## Chapter 1. The Swamp Fauns

As any faun child knows, the swamp fauns figure prominently in stories of Gabalon's atrocities. They were the footshelts of his army and the muscle of his secret

police. At the time of the Great Fire, the swamp fauns were still under the military supervision of Danda-lay. Their monarchy was in exile, having fled across the desert.

A number of nasty uprisings convinced the cliff fauns that they ought either to annihilate the swamp fauns or set them on their feet again. Having no real stomach for genocide, the then-king of Danda-lay, Sansuel, began a gradual process of reinstating them—

“You concentrate too sharply when you read.”

Corry looked up. Capricia was standing on the other side of the table. “What happened to Gabalon?” he asked.

The princess shrugged. “No one knows. Some of the legends feature him flying away in the form of a dragon. Some say he fought the fire bird and was wounded. Others say he vanished before the armies even got inside the city. No story claims he was killed.”

Corry nodded. “So that’s why you tried to abandon the flute. You’re afraid he’ll come back for it.”

Capricia didn’t answer him. “My father is moving to the castle at Pyn-lay nearer the Canid border, so that he may help rally the troops there. I will be busy. I would like, however, to spend a quarter watch with you each morning working on the translation.”

“How long is half a watch?”

“There are four watches of the day and two of the night.”

Corry thought about that. “About four hours of Earth time in one watch, then.”

Capricia didn't seem remotely interested in how Earthlings told time. "I will meet with you in the library."

Corry caught a movement beyond Capricia's shoulder. Glancing towards the door, he saw the tip of a shadow fall across the threshold.

Capricia continued. "Otherwise, I advise you to spend your time learning a useful trade, since you seem so anxious to settle down in Laven-lay."

The shadow moved in a little further, then stopped. The door was open, but the shadow came across the threshold obliquely, and the creature casting it remained out of sight.

"Your knowledge of reading and writing would make you an excellent scribe, and I am willing to employ you here at the castle—"

Corry stood up and walked past her towards the door. The shadow disappeared. He quickened his steps, but by the time he reached the door the hallway was empty. He thought he heard the clop of heavy hoof beats on the stone floor. *A centaur?*

He turned to find Capricia at his elbow.

"There was someone in the hall listening to us. I saw the shadow."

"Probably just a nosy servant." But Capricia's voice had a nervous edge. She glanced up and down the hall.

"Why did you leave the door open?" asked Corry.

"I didn't." Capricia reached out and swung the door. The hinges were well-oiled and soundless.

For a moment, they both stood silent. The eavesdropper had been no casual passerby. He had taken the trouble to ease the door open. “I’ll get you a different suit of rooms,” said Capricia.

“That’s not necessary. I think it may have been a centaur. Aren’t they leaving soon?”

Capricia nodded. She didn’t say anything.

“What about your records? You said you would let me see them so that I could try to calculate the exact time that passed in Panamindorah while I was on Earth.”

“Oh, will you leave that alone!” snapped Capricia and strode from the room.

Corry glared after her. Outside his window, a group of soldiers passed through the garden, their long spears catching the sunlight. *Perhaps I should volunteer to go with Syrrill. He was friendly to me, and he is a friend of Laylan, who knows more about the Raiders. With Capricia, it’s all guessing and prying. She doesn’t want me to understand.*

Corry left his apartments and started in the general direction of the garden. He wasn’t sure where to find Syrrill, but he was hoping to catch up with the group of soldiers and ask them. *I wonder if I know how to use a sword or spear.* The idea of making such a discovery amused Corry. *Perhaps I should find out before I actually apply to fight.*

Corry took a passage that looked familiar. The further he went, the more certain he became that he had walked this way before, and yet he thought that the hall was angling away from garden. Then he came to a flight of stairs. *This is the way to Capricia’s study.*

**THUD! BOOM!** A distant noise, probably from the top of the tower. Corry was pretty sure he was hearing it through his feet—his vibration sense—and not with his ears. *What is she*

*doing up there?* He listened intently, but heard nothing else. Corry suddenly remembered Capricia's hunted expression when she realized they'd been overheard. *Maybe she was right. Maybe I'm the fool for not thinking it's important.* On an impulse, he started up the stairs.

He was panting by the time he came to the landing at the top. He saw the study was ajar and started to open it. Too late, he noticed the splintered wood around the broken bolt. By then, he was already staring up into the face of the creature coming out.

A centaur. Corry's head came only to his horse chest. Looking up into his face, Corry saw a mixture of surprise and uncertainty. Behind the centaur, Corry caught a glimpse of the study in disarray, papers and books strewn across the floor, a roaring fire in the hearth, bits of paper fluttering like wounded moths.

The centaur was holding something. Corry recognized the gold chain. With a swiftness that surprised even himself, Corry's hand darted upward, seized the chain, and jerked. The force of his successful snatch made him stumble backward to the head of the stairs. The flute swung and struck the wall of the tower. It rang like a bell.

Corry would have been surprised if he'd had time. He whirled and raced down the stairs. "Help! Thief! Help!" With a sinking feeling, he remembered the muted boom he'd heard earlier. *That was the sound of the door breaking. If it carried so poorly, how will anyone hear me?*

He could hear the sharp report of the centaur's hooves against the stone behind him. They sounded close, though the huge animal must be having difficulty in the narrow space. Corry could hear something else, too—a note on the edge of sound, throbbing. It seemed to bend



unpleasantly in the ear. The flute swung against his arm, and Corry realized that it was still vibrating.

Something whistled past Corry's head and slapped against the curved wall of the tower. *What's he throwing at me?* Then it hit the side of his leg and tangled in his feet. Too late, Corry realized what was happening. With a cry, he pitched forward. As the centaur's whip jerked his feet from under him, Corry's own momentum sent him sprawling headfirst down the steep staircase. Pain exploded in his chest, and he tasted blood.

## Chapter 13. The End of a War and the Beginning of a Grudge

Syrill has done an admirable job of winning this war, which made the blow of my decision harder. But I did what was best.

--King's Annals, Meuril Sor, Summer 1700

Corry opened his eyes. He could not tell whether he'd only just shut them or whether he'd been asleep for ages. He felt a little like both.

Somewhere off in the gloom, he could see the centaur. It looked uncertain. "What have you done?" it hissed.

"I don't know. Where are we?"

"You are as nearly nowhere as it is possible to be," said a new voice.

Corry turned and saw a wolf, big as Dance, his voice somehow gray as his coat. Corry's eyes were beginning to adjust to the dim light. He thought he saw trees. Almost, he thought they might be back in the orange grove. "Am I dreaming?"

"You may call it dreaming," said the wolf, "but those who dream thus never wake." Behind the first wolf, Corry saw more wolves than he could count. They slunk towards him through the gray world, their eyes sad and hungry, though not, Corry thought, for food.

"Wizard spawn!" roared the centaur suddenly. "Lift your curse, or I will crush your bones!" He sent his battle whip snaking through the air, but to Corry's amazement, the whip passed right through him.

“You can hurt no one here,” said the gray wolf. “You cannot hurt or be hurt. You cannot die; you cannot live; you can only *be* and barely that.”

The centaur gave a little moan. He pranced wildly for a moment, then fled, as though he might outrun the gray world.

“What is this place?” whispered Corry.

“It is his dungeon, the Otherwhere,” said the wolf, “but we thought it was forgotten. Has he returned to claim more victims, then?”

“Who?”

“Gabalon, the great wizard.”

Corry shook his head. “You’re them, aren’t you? The ones who disappeared—the durian wolves.”

Something like hope stirred in the wolf’s eyes. “Has our king sent you?”

“I...I don’t think so.”

Corry was becoming increasingly aware that he carried a nimbus of golden light around his person. It was very faint, but it was disturbing his night vision. Corry looked down and saw that the light was coming from something he’d clutched in his fist. He opened his hand.

Corry’s breath caught. He could *see* the flute. It was translucent gold, glowing faintly. As he opened his hand, the light increased, and a gasp went up from the wolves. Corry heard a hiss and looked down to see, not a wolf, but a child-sized shelt, staring up at him with dark, malevolent eyes. It had a hairless tail and skeletal feet. Corry jerked back with a cry of disgust.

He heard a muttering. “He has it! Help us, help us, give it to us, give it, help, help!”

Corry ran. The creatures ran with him, crying out in their many voices. The golden light struck a glint off something ahead—glass? He thought he saw a window standing unsupported in a frame, and beyond it a crumbling castle room.

Then he stumbled into a hole. He was sinking, drowning. The gray world vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Shyshax the cheetah was not having a good morning. In the small hours, he and Laylan had come upon Filinian tracks while scouting. This was nothing unusual. Filinians were deserting their camp in a steady trickle as the morning’s slaughter approached.

But these tracks were different. Shyshax recognized at least two scent signatures and suspected he knew the others. These tracks were left by Lexis and his officers. They had snuck through the lines in the dead of night and were heading towards Laven-lay. Shyshax wanted to be off at once to tell Syrrill, but Laylan had insisted they follow the trail for a short distance to be certain of the direction.

As it turned out, Ounce had lingered behind to discourage pursuit. Shyshax had always found the snow leopard the most intimidating member of Lexis’s cabinet. He was not the biggest, but he had a reputation as the most ruthless. He’d been lieutenant to Demitri, Lexis’s father, during the bloodiest years of Filinian conquest of wolfling Canisaria. Everyone knew he detested shelts and liked small cats hardly any better. Shyshax could only imagine what Ounce would do to a cheetah who worked with a shelt and spied on other cats.

He put on a burst of speed when he saw Ounce, but suspected he'd only escaped because the snow leopard did not want to get too far from his king. Shyshax and Laylan raced back to Syrrill's camp to bring the news of Lexis's flight. Coming and going from Syrrill's camp was a chore in itself. The fauns humored Laylan, but never entirely trusted him. They liked to nudge Shyshax with spears and make nasty jokes, and Shyshax tried to grin and joke back while the smell of the blood from the skinning made his hair stand on end. Capricia had finally succeeded in lifting the embargo on Filinian pelts. They were the loot of the battlefield.

When Shyshax and Laylan finally found Syrrill and told him their story, he leapt up in a frenzy and galloped from the camp with only the barest escort. And of course, Shyshax and Laylan had to follow him, even though they'd been up all night. Syrrill was their protection. They weren't entirely safe in the camp without him. At least Laylan managed to get a deer to ride so that Shyshax could travel a bit lighter.

As they were nearing the castle, they found a boy shivering beside a stream. He was apparently an iteration. Syrrill knew him and decided they couldn't leave him alone in the forest. The boy didn't know how to ride a deer, and since Shyshax could at least give instructions, he had to carry the creature. All in all, not a good morning.

"Aren't you the one who helped rescued our trap key?" Laylan asked the iteration. They were now in the very rear of the party and falling further behind.

The boy nodded. He was soaking wet in the chilly fall air and seemed dazed. "How far are we from Laven-lay?"

“At this rate?” Shyshax shrugged. “Maybe half a watch. What were you doing out here?”

Corry didn’t answer. He was fingering something on a chain round his neck.

“You left the palace without telling anyone,” said Laylan. “I heard the princess was...concerned.”

“Oh?” Corry seemed about to say something else, then decided against it. Shyshax felt a twinge of sympathy. *Being an iteration among shelts must be a little like being a cat and a foxling among fauns.*

\* \* \* \*

Corry’s mind seethed. *How long have I been gone? Dare I ask? Capricia must be alright from what Laylan said, but she could be in danger. Does Syrrill suspect me again? He seemed very angry.* Corry tried again to get comfortable on Shyshax’s bony ribs. The cat seemed friendly enough. Every now and then, he tried to coax Corry into conversation, but Corry couldn’t concentrate. *Why is Syrrill in such a hurry? What’s happened?*

They arrived at the gates of Laven-lay just at dawn. According to the guards, they were only a little behind Syrrill’s party. As they approached the castle, Corry rehearsed in his mind what he was going to say to Capricia. His thoughts were interrupted as they approached the castle doors. “That’s not possible! I demand to speak to him!” It was Syrrill’s voice. Corry caught sight of a small cadre of fauns in leather armor, clustered around the front steps.

“I’m sorry, but his majesty ordered that no one be admitted—”

“Do you really think he meant to bar *me*?” thundered Syrril. He managed to somehow loom, in spite of being a head shorter than the guard.

“Actually, he mentioned your name specifically.”

At that moment, the door opened a crack, and a sentry inside whispered something to the one outside. “His majesty says that he will see you now,” said the outer sentry, “but he asks that you go around to the west entrance and wait in the council chamber there.”

Syrril exploded. “Come in by the backdoor? Like an urchin looking for handouts? Deer dung!” He leapt forward and forced his shoulder into the crack in the door with such force that it flew open in the sentry’s face. Syrril’s officers, who had been watching uneasily from the bottom of the steps looked at each other. Syrril, perhaps, had license for insolence, but they weren’t about to risk a flogging. Corry, Laylan, and Shyshax, standing on the edge of the group, waited a moment. Then, when the sentries didn’t seem to be shutting the doors. Corry, slipped off Shyshax and went in.

Syrril was standing unnaturally still in the middle of the antechamber. The door to the throne room was opening, and already creatures were issuing from it. At the head of the party paced a cat who could only be Lexis—a white tiger, with eyes as blue as a summer sky. He glided over the marble floor like ice over hot stone. King Meuril strolled beside him. They were chatting amiably.

Lexis’s eyes met Syrril’s, and Corry saw the trace of a tiger smile. As he passed, Lexis’s tail flicked sideways to caress the faun’s leg. “Morning, Syrril.”

Syrill turned and drew his sword in the same movement, but a growl close to his ear brought him up short. Syrill had been so intent on Lexis that he had not noticed the snow leopard coming behind his king.

Meuril and Lexis turned at the sound of Ounce's growl. Meuril sighed. "Syrill, I told you to come around to the—"

"Sire—" grated his general, his voice shaking with rage.

"Go to my chamber and wait."

"How dare—!"

"I said go, Syrill!"

Meuril turned away. Lexis lingered for an instant, his eyes like a purr. Syrill mouthed something at him. Corry was certain it was not a customary response to "good morning." Ounce glided around Syrill without a backward glance, but he stopped near the doorway. Corry saw that Laylan and Shyshax had ventured inside. Ounce hesitated to growl something at the cheetah. Corry heard the words, "Faun-loving little dog-cat," to which Shyshax said something about "ice for brains." Lexis growled, and Ounce moved away. Then they were gone.

Syrill stood clenching and unclenching his free fist until the door closed. Then he sheathed his sword with unnecessary force and stormed into the throne room.

"Corellian!"

Corry looked up to see Capricia, last to emerge from the conference. "So the thief has returned!"



“Thief?” Corry glanced at Laylan and Shyshax, who were taking an interest in the conversation. The sentry at the inner door also looked interested.

Capricia reached Corry. “Where have you been?” she hissed. “Or, more appropriate, *what* have you been?”

“I didn’t steal it,” muttered Corry. “I’ll explain later. How long have I been gone?”

He was surprised and somewhat alarmed to see a delicate, but very sharp looking dagger in her hand. She shook her head at him, eyes narrowed to slits. “You’ve no idea what it’s like. Every deer that stops by my window, every burrow in the streets, every bird, every rodent...! I had a perfectly good hawk shot because he was sitting in suspicious attitude on my garden wall!”

“Why?” He was looking at the dagger.

“Syrill told me,” she whispered between clenched teeth. “You *can* shift.”

Corry’s mouth fell open.

“I’d like to know just one thing before I throw you in the dungeon. Why did you burn my books?” She looked at him with an expression of pain. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t! Capricia, there was a centaur—”

She shook her head. “Sentry,” she raised her voice, “fetch me four or five guards, large ones.” She glanced at Laylan and Shyshax. “What are you two looking at? You weren’t invited to audience. You may wait outside for Syrill.”

“Capricia, no!” Corry thought quickly. He fumbled in his pocket.

She took a step back, raising the dagger. “Keep your hands in front of you, iteration.”

Corry raised the chain and extended it towards her. He noticed that the flute was invisible again. “Capricia, I didn’t steal it,” he whispered. “I caught a centaur trying to, and I got it back, and I ended up in...another place, the gray world. They called it the Otherwhere.”

Capricia snatched the flute. She looked at Corry suspiciously. *She’s only trying to scare me*, he thought. And another part of his mind answered miserably, *It’s working*.

“Who called it the Otherwhere?”

“The durian wolves.”

At that moment, the castle doors opened, and Meuril and his cabinet came clicking and murmuring back into the antechamber, this time without the cats. A few of the fauns glanced at Corry and Capricia, but they seemed preoccupied, and Capricia had lowered the dagger beneath a fold of her cape. Glancing towards the throne room, Corry saw that the door was half open. He was startled to see Syrril sprawled insolently on the throne, one leg tossed over an arm of the seat, drumming his fingers impatiently.

The courtiers saw it too and began muttering disapproval, but Meuril held up his hands. “Friends, councilors, please leave us.” Capricia, who evidently did not think such orders applied to herself, remained. Meuril went into his throne room and shut the door. At that moment, the five requested guards entered and looked askance at Capricia. She hesitated, then shook her head. “There was a mistake. You are dismissed...for now.”

Corry breathed a sigh of relief. “Capricia—”

“Hush!” She looked towards the throne room. There was a sound of something hitting the floor hard. Corry guessed that Syrrill had jumped off the dais.

“You probably don’t want to miss this,” said Corry hurriedly. “You go join your father and Syrrill, and I’ll just—”

“You will stay where I can see you.” She took him roughly by the arm and started for the stairs at a trot. “Where are we going?” panted Corry as they strode onto the balcony.

“Archers’ chamber,” snapped Capricia.

She stopped at a little door on the balcony, took out her key ring, and unlocked it. She pushed him into the blackness beyond and shut the door. Corry could hear Syrrill’s voice, raised in anger, but he could not make out the words.

He felt the prick of the dagger at this back. “I remind you that I’m armed.”

Corry thought he detected something different in her voice. “Are you afraid of me, Capricia?”

She pushed him along the dark hallway. “Should I be?”

“When I went up to your study, a centaur was coming out. I snatched the flute from him and ran, but I fell on the stairs and woke in this other place, full of wolves and these weird little shelt children with hairless tails and bony feet.”

Capricia glanced at him in the gloom. He saw the whites of her eyes flash. “A rat shelt? You saw a rat shelt?”

Corry considered. “Yes, I hadn’t thought of it, but that would make sense.”

“They’re extinct.”

“I know. So are the durian wolves. How long have I been gone? It didn’t seem very long to me.”

“A red month.” Capricia stopped before a little door on their left. Corry’s eyes had adjusted enough to trace the outlines of a number of doors at regular intervals along the left side of the hallway. “We’ll talk about this later, Corellian. Be quiet now.”

She opened the door, and the voices beyond became clearer. Corry saw that they were in a little archer’s box that looked down on the throne room, a safeguard during royal audiences. From the dusty look of the box, Meuril rarely entertained dangerous envoys. Corry and Capricia peered through the arrow slits.

“—but he’s the worst enemy that this kingdom has ever known, more dangerous by far than the Canids!” Syrril was standing at the bottom of the dais in front of the antlered throne.

Meuril was still in the aisle. “Wolflings have always taken more deer than any other predator, Syrril,” he said calmly, “but that’s beside the point. Sardor-day-lore is a ruin. Canisaria lies empty, but not for long. If it is left open, the hills will be full of wolflings within a year. Demitri did us a favor by destroying them. Wait, now let me finish! Lexis came here with a proposal and quite an honest one it seemed to me. The cats will withdraw from the wood—”

“Of course they’ll withdraw! They’re loosing! I have him right where—”

“They will withdraw under oath never again to attack us as long as Lexis rules. They will set up colonies and inhabit Canisaria, keeping the wolflings out and helping to exterminate them

in the wood. He has made a formal truce, Syrrill—more than that, a treaty! Together we can annihilate the remaining wolflings.”

Syrrill glared at him. “This isn’t about the cats at all. This is about Natalia.”

Meuril straightened and seemed almost to lose his temper. “Leave my wife out of this. Creator deliver us, Syrrill, you of all shelts should be able to admit that wolflings are a problem. You were kidnapped only last season!”

Syrrill retreated a step and changed tack. “There is no such thing as safety as long as Lexis sits on the Filinian throne. I had him, Meuril! Of course he wants to be friendly—as friendly as a bandit with your knife at his throat. If it hadn’t been for you today, I would have annihilated the Filinian army. We could have been rid of them!”

“Yes, with wolflings right back on our northern border. It’s not worth that, Syrrill!”

“But, you can’t possibly believe that Lexis will honor such an agreement. He saw that he couldn’t take this place by force and now he’s trying to take it by guile.”

“And why do you think that? Whatever else he may be, Lexis has never proven himself untruthful.”

Syrrill crossed his arms. “I’ve been dealing with him for three years, and I’m telling you that he doesn’t give up.”

“But, Syrrill, it’s to his advantage! He won’t do something that would hurt his nation. He came here last night on peaceful terms, humbly, willing to bargain.”

Syrrill snorted. “Lexis has never been humble a day in his life.”

“Well, reasonable, then. Syrill, you’re not being fair.”

“No, I’m being realistic! He hates shelts, Meuril, shelts of any kind. It’s no accident that the cat shelts are extinct.”

“That’s only a legend, Syrill. If it did happen, it occurred long before Lexis was born.”

“Yes, but the wolflings didn’t. They thought the cats were their friends, too, but every year the cats wanted a little more and a little more. ‘May we hunt some of your best game? May we kill wolves who aren’t with wolflings? May we kill prisoners? And why not just give us your poor, your beggars? We think we should be able to kill shelts who don’t have a good excuse for whatever they’re doing.’”

“Enough!” exclaimed Meuril.

Syrill’s voice became almost pleading. “But that’s what they did to the wolflings! Don’t you remember? King Malic tried to stop it, but much too late. His predecessors had already been too greedy, sold too many rights to the cats, just so they could mine salt and gold and copper in Filinia.” He drew in a quick breath. “That’s it, isn’t it? Lexis offered you the mines.”

“Yes, he did, and we badly need the salt and tin, Syrill. *Lexis* did not do any of those things. Demitri did most of them and his father before him. Lexis wasn’t even born.”

“As the sire, so is the whelp.”

“I believe otherwise. Cats make terrible enemies, but excellent allies. I think that you’ll learn to like them.”

Syrill glared at him. “I will *never* learn to like *him*...or any of the rest of them!”

“You seem to get along with Laylan’s mount.”

“Shyshax? The cheetahs tried to assassinate Lexis. I suppose I could learn to like *them*.”

“Syrill! I have made my decision. I realize that you are unhappy because you were not present, but you were far away, and there was not time to summon you.”

“You mean, it’s acceptable that he went over my rank.”

“Syrill—”

“Well, that’s what he did. Listen, if Lexis is so honest and reasonable, why didn’t he come to me? One approaches the opposing commander with terms of surrender before one approaches the king. Why sneak out in the middle of the night?”

Meuril passed a hand over his brow. “Because you would never have listened to him. You would have shot him on sight.” Meuril turned and started for the door. “A notice has already been dispatched to call in the troops. The war is over, Syrill. Whether you like it or not, we are at peace with Filinia. More than that, we are on good terms.”

Syrill’s hands clenched at his sides.

Meuril’s words echoed through the throne room as he closed the door. “Get used to it.”

Part II

Chapter 1. Char

All creatures have their uses.

--Daren of Anroth, in a letter to his cousin, Rquar

On the muddy floor of a dark tunnel, a shelt strained against a cart. A greasy, malodorous torch flickered from a bracket in the wall, making his shadow writhe. The shelt was naked, his muscles as defined as an anatomist's drawing, but his fur was dull and thin. His curly hair lay damp against his temples.

Finally the cart came loose. The shelt's mouth relaxed into a straight line as he began to move again up the incline of the shaft. His long, furry tail hung behind him, curving just before it touched the ground. His claws clutched at the slimy earth. His friends called him Char for his dark gray coat, but he had no name on record, only a dog-shaped tattoo on his forearm.

Light winked in the tunnel ahead, and Char redoubled his efforts. He reached the exit and blinked hard. Above his head, a wall of rock rose sheer to some impossible height. Before him lay a swamp of twisted trees, whining insects, and tall razor grass. Several other tunnels opened at intervals along the cliff at the edge of the swamp, disgorging a steady stream of shelts onto the footpaths. Char moved into the general flow.

At the first major intersection stood a black-furred faun with a whip. Char saw several others and gritted his teeth. More of them than usual today. Why?



Other shelts joined him as paths converged on the broader road. The faun at the intersection spoke to each briefly before sending them off with an appropriate pass. “Diamond goes to block nine today. Yes, the usual with those stones. Quarry six will receive those supplies. Move along.”

At last Char worked his way to the head of the line. “Possible gem stones,” he said. “Request permission to visit gem inspection.”

The overseer glanced at the pile of debris in the cart. “Block twelve.” He slapped a green pass in Char’s hand. “Next?”

Char breathed a sigh of relief as he got the wagon moving again. As he neared a prominent inspection point the slaves became thicker, impeding his progress. Then he saw a group of soldiers. Banners flew above their heads, and a crier strode before them. “Make way! Make way for the officials of Kazar. Make way for her majesty’s royal consort!”

Char felt his stomach rise. *An inspection! Why did it have to be today?*

The workers on either side of him began to retreat, stepping aside into the mud. Char got as far off the path as he dared, but the heavy cart threatened to sink, and he was forced to keep the wheels on the boards. He stood still, the fur on his legs bristling with nervousness.

Soon the crier passed, and the officials began to walk by. Char saw their colorful clothes out of the corners of his eyes. He dared not look up, mustn’t draw attention. The number of fauns dwindled, and Char’s racing pulse began to slow.

He risked a glance. Not three feet in front of him stood a large, cinnamon colored dog. The creature stood about two thirds the height of a wolf. Its dark nose sniffed delicately. Char stood paralyzed, unable to take his eyes off the animal. He knew what it was: an anduin hound, bred on the estate of his Lordship, Daren of Anroth. The breed, said to be a cross between wolves and the wild desert dogs, had been created by the house of Anroth hundreds of years ago and honed for generations. It was the source of Char's tattoo—Daren's chosen sigil.

A shadow fell across the dog's back. "Come Doega. You must allow the slaves to work. Are you hungry, my friend?"

Char trembled as the hound drew closer. He dropped his gaze, felt its hot breath on his cheek. A black gloved hand moved into his line of sight, holding a morsel of red meat. The hound took it with its tongue and moved away. Char let out his breath slowly. His hands felt moist as he clutched the handles of the cart.

Suddenly a fierce baying erupted. This time Char was startled enough to turn around. The hound had left its master's side and was circling the cart. In one bound it leapt atop the pile of loose rock and began to dig. Char felt suddenly cold.

"Doega!" snapped the voice. For the first time that day Char turned to look at Daren. The royal consort stood in the center of the path, a trim figure immaculate in his pale blue tunic and black cape. His black hair swept back from his high forehead, close-cut in the habit of swamp fauns. He came over to the cart and put his black-gloved hands on the edge, watching his dog.

"You," called Daren to one of the overseers. "What's this?"

The overseer glanced at the pass card in Char's hand. "Suspected gem stones, sir."

"Mmm..." Daren ran a finger through the debris. "Empty it."

"Yes, your lordship." He turned to Char. "You heard him! Dump it!"

With trembling hands, Char struggled out of his harness and went to the back of the cart. He tried to think what to do, but his mind was a blank of terror. He slid the bolt, and the cart bed opened, loose rock spewing onto the planks. A flash of color caught Daren's attention. His dog saw it too, darted forward, and came up with a struggling mass of fur and skin.

Daren spoke, "Drop it."

His dog growled, its yellow eyes wild. Daren whipped his sword from its sheath and struck the hound across the top of the head with the flat of his blade. "DROP IT!" The dog yelped and released his catch. Daren raised the sword again. The blade was peculiar—a scimitar with a lobe-shaped piece cut out, giving it a fang-like appearance. The dog went down on its belly at his feet. Daren stared at it for a moment, then sheathed his weapon.

Char shut his eyes. At Daren's feet lay a girl shelt, tears of fright mingling with the grime on her face. She wore a ragged shirt, colorless with dirt. Her fur and hair might have been white.

Daren looked at the overseer. "What is this?"

The overseer fidgeted. "It appears to be a girl, sir."

Daren sneered. "'It appears to be a girl, sir.' I can see why you're still working traffic. Cart-puller, come here." Char could not move. Two guards stepped forward, took him by both arms, and dragged him before Daren. "Why was this creature hiding in your cart?"

Char gulped. He opened his mouth, but no sound came.

Daren turned and prodded the female with his hoof. “On your feet.” She obeyed shakily. “Now clean up this mess. You over there, give her a shovel.”

The girl tried, but at the first step her lips parted in a gasp of pain. She hobbled forward, favoring one leg. Daren knelt and felt the leg. “It’s broken. She’s useless.”

Char found his voice at last. “She broke it in the mine! She was following orders, and a section of the roof gave way. It won’t take long to heal. She’s a very good worker. Just let her rest a few days, and she’ll work harder than anyone!”

“Yes!” interjected the girl. “I work hard. Please give me a few days. You won’t be sorry.”

“That leg won’t heal before mid-winter,” murmured Daren as he crouched next to the trembling girl. He ran a hand over her dirty fur, then snapped his fingers. “Water!” Someone jumped forward with a bucket, and Daren doused her with it. He stood back, examining the dripping results. The girl’s fur and hair were now a pale cream. She had a pattern of leopard-like spots, broken only on one flank by a mark that looked like a bull’s eye. Like Char, she had a dog-shaped tattoo. “Beautiful! Really lovely,” said Daren. “Take her to block seventeen.”

“NO!” Char leapt against the fauns. His sudden courage took them by surprise, and he slipped loose. Char ripped the sword from the sheath of one guard and stabbed the other. Suddenly everything was noise and blood. Fauns tried to pin him, but Char was not finished. With strength forged in a lifetime of hard labor, he charged through the guards, knocking them aside like toys, and lunged at Daren. The royal consort watched the scene calmly and drew his

sword as the slave charged. For a few seconds Daren parried the onslaught. Then he turned his sword at an angle, allowing Char's weapon to enter the hole in the steel. He wrenched his sword to the side, jerking Char's blade from his hands and sending it soaring into the undergrowth.

Char stood blinking, weaponless. Then the soldiers swarmed forward and bound him. Char did not struggle. As suddenly as it had come, the rage went out of him, leaving him cold and frightened. He watched as they tossed the girl into a cart headed in the right direction.

"Who was she?"

Char dragged his eyes back to Daren. He had nothing left to lose. "My sister. Her name is Gleam." His own voice sounded tiny in his ears.

Daren nodded to an overseer, who raised his short lash and began whipping Char in the manner of a mildly bored professional. Daren continued speaking softly. "How long do you think you could have hidden her? Ninety days until that leg healed? Impossible. In the end all of your risks are for nothing, and you share in her fate. You would do better to obey our rules and turn her over to the guards. Do you think slaves can outwit their masters?"

Char did not answer. He felt the whip, but his mind was on the sword. *Where will he strike? How long will he play with me?*

Daren took a couple of steps back and forth. Blood trickled down Char's back and dribbled onto the wood. "So you will cut me to pieces? You do not have intelligence, yet you have courage—a rare thing in a race of groveling cowards. Tell me...did you really think that you could kill me?"

Char met his gaze, and for a moment his fear left him. “I didn’t think. I *knew*.”

Char expected Daren to kill him then, but the swamp faun only smiled. When the earth was beginning to swim before Char’s eyes, Daren held up his hand. “Enough.” The whipping stopped, and the slave swayed on his feet. Daren reached out to steady him with the tip of his sword. “Take him to block eleven,” he said to one of the guards.

“But, sir, he’s killed a guard!”

Daren raised an eyebrow. “Do you think yourself more expensive than a mine slave?”

Char did not hear what the guard replied. He could hardly believe what Daren had said. *He’ll not kill me immediately? What is he planning?* Char raised his eyes again as the fauns fitted a noose around his neck and fastened a restraint on his feet.

“What do they call you?” asked Daren.

“Char.”

“Well, Char.” Daren’s sword flicked out like a snake’s tongue and left a line of blood on Char’s cheek. “We’ll meet again. Try not to be so stupid next time.”

## Chapter 2. Laylan's Success

My nemesis seems to hold a peculiar power over everything that he touches. First Meuril, now Capricia!

--journal of Syrill of Undrun, 43rd day of summer, 700

"Poor Syrill." Corry glanced at Capricia, who stood frowning at the floor. "Did you hear what I said about the centaur?"

She nodded.

"Do you believe me?"

"I don't know. Why didn't you tell me you could shift?"

"Because I didn't know! I shifted in front of the Raiders because I was frightened. Syrill should never have told you; he promised he wouldn't." Before she could respond, Corry said, "What did Syrill mean: 'This is about Natalia'?"

Capricia's eyes flickered away. "My mother."

"And why would the treaty with the cats have anything to do with your mother?"

Capricia sighed. "She was killed by wolflings, Corry...shortly before Sarder-de-lor fell to Demitri. That's part of the reason father would never do anything to help them."

"I'm sorry."

To his surprise, Capricia laughed. "*You're* sorry for *me*?" Before he could answer, she turned and left the archer's box. "I believe you. I have to go now."

\* \* \* \*

True to their former agreement, Capricia found employment for Corry as a royal clerk, an occupation he discovered he enjoyed, because it gave him access to the royal library.

Unfortunately, the publicly available texts only went back about five hundred years, and Corry wanted to look into the more distant past. Capricia, however, said that most of her books in the old picture language had been burned the day he disappeared, and she would not let him view the salvage from the fire. Capricia herself spent little time in her study these days. Her efforts seemed all consumed in the tasks of the new Filinian alliance, in the political maneuvering between her father and Lexis as they worked out the practical details of splitting the former wolfing kingdom between them. Capricia spoke to Corry more and more rarely as he settled into his life at court, and there were times when he even fancied she was still angry with him.

However, Capricia's coolness towards Corry was nothing compared with Syrill's attitude towards the new Filinian alliance. He fumed. He raged. He argued. Corry concluded that Meuril must be either very fond of Syrill indeed, or else he felt at least a little guilty about the circumstances of the Filinian treaty, for his patience seemed out of all proportion to Syrill's worth to the kingdom. Laven-lay was not a big or formal place, and in time of peace, the city had no standing army. Syrill was nominally the captain of the castle guard, but he was so unfailingly rude to feline emissaries that Meuril did not encourage him to fill his role at political functions, and Syrill often did not volunteer.



For better or for worse, cats were becoming more and more common in Laven-lay. Corry saw them drifting in and out of the castle, and the feel of their eyes on him made his skin prickle. Lexis himself visited Laven-lay several times and stayed once for an entire red month.

He seemed to take a special interest in Capricia. One evening Corry was crossing a courtyard, when he saw the graceful bulk of the tiger approaching along the parapet above and to his right. A shelt was standing there, watching the sunset. Not until she turned her head, did Corry recognize Capricia. Curious, he backed into the shadow of the walkway and placed both hands on the wall. Their voices should have been inaudible at that distance, but contact with the stone brought them into sharp focus for Corry.

“Something troubles you, Highness.”

“Trouble is in the air, Lexis.”

“Do you discuss your troubles?”

“No.”

“Monsters grow largest when hidden.”

“Not my monsters.”

A soft laugh. “Do you keep them on leashes, then? Personal pets? I hope that tigers are not among them.”

Capricia’s rare laugh broke the evening’s quiet. “No tigers, Lexis.”

“Would you walk with one then? I am excellent protection against monsters.”

“Yes. I will walk with you.”

“Perhaps even talk?”

“Perhaps.”

Their voices grew fainter as they moved away, and Corry did not try to follow them. He had an idea that Capricia’s “monsters” had something to do with himself, and he was vaguely affronted that she would choose a recent enemy to confide in.

Capricia’s new confidence in Lexis was not lost on Syrrill. He began disappearing for long periods into the forest. It was after one of Syrrill’s prolonged absences in early winter that Corry woke to a bustle of excitement in the castle. The servant who usually brought his breakfast was late, and Corry could hear shelts whispering as they passed in the hall. He left his rooms early and went to the scriptorium, but he found only a half dozen of the usual thirty plus clerks.

“What’s happened?” asked Corry, approaching the conspiratory knot by the fire.

Several excited voices answered him at once. Corry caught the word “hanging.”

“Whose hanging?”

“Sham Ausla.”

Corry was surprised. “The Raider? Fenrah’s cousin?”

“The same,” said the eldest scribe. “Laylan caught him in a trap and brought him here last night. Chance came thundering in this morning.”

“Does Fenrah know?” asked Corry.

Several fauns shrugged. “They say Sham was alone when Laylan took him, and the trap was drugged, so there was no struggle. Laven-lay was closer than Danda-lay.”

“Chance wanted to take the villain to Danda-lay and make the execution a big affair,” said another, “but Laylan says trying to take Sham through the forest would be as good as releasing him, so Chance agreed to have the execution here. Cliff fauns been working on the scaffold since before dawn! There’s to be a great spectacle.”

Another faun harrumphed. “This will be bad for us if Fenrah retaliates.”

The elder scribe nodded. “I heard that Laylan advised against the show, but Chance is determined to make it public, since he feels the Raiders humiliated *him* publicly.”

Someone drew a delicate breath. “I heard Jubal came, and Shaddock didn’t.”

Corry looked from one face to another. “Who’s Jubal?”

“You don’t know?” asked someone, but another held up a hand.

“He hasn’t been here long enough.”

“It’s an old scandal,” began the eldest scribe. He hadn’t laughed with the others. “And an unproven one. No need to keep blackening the prince’s name after all these years.”

“Prince?” mocked one fauness. “You mean, might-be-prince?”

The older faun shot the others a reproving glare, but they continued anyway. “The cliff faun queen, Istra, didn’t approve of her lord’s treatment of the wolflings, said it was immoral how no one came to their rescue when the cats took Sarder-de-lor. Some of the royal advisors sided with the king, some with the queen. The court in Danda-lay was almost split over it. Rumor has it that she took refuge in the arms of a sympathetic young officer of the guard, Jubal.”

“Pure conjecture,” interrupted the old clerk.

“Barely!” exclaimed someone else. “Rumor is, they’re still lovers. Everyone knows the king and queen haven’t shared the same bed in years.”

“Court gossip,” muttered the elder scribe, but all the others were nodding.

“I don’t see what this has to do with Chance,” said Corry.

“Doesn’t his name say it all? That’s what Shadock called him, anyway. Good *chance* he’s not even of royal blood. Many say he’s Jubal’s get.”

“Apparently there’s also a *chance* that he isn’t,” said someone else. “If Shadock knew the child could not be his, surely he would have had the queen banished and Jubal hung. But apparently, there was some doubt. Shadock really can’t do anything without making the situation look worse than it already does. Cliff fauns put considerable stock in appearances.”

“And Jubal has come to the hanging?” asked Corry.

“Yes, leading a mob of cliff fauns. Meuril wants armed support. He’s afraid of what Fenrah might do to Laven-lay in revenge.”

Corry had a sudden thought. “Do you know where they’re keeping Sham?”

## Chapter 3. Interrogation

If you wish to discover the *what* of a creature, find out what he lives for. To know the *who*, you must discover what he would die for.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

As he left the scriptorium, Corry almost ran into Syrril. "I haven't seen you in a yellow month, Syrril."

Syrril offered no greeting and didn't slow down. "I don't know what Meuril is thinking to let Chance execute Sham here."

Corry fell into step beside him. "Do you think I could talk to Sham? I want to ask him what I looked like when I shifted."

Syrril snorted. "I doubt Chance's interrogation will leave him in a chatty mood, Corellian." He continued to mutter as they passed to ever lower levels of the castle. A torch was always kept burning at the entrance to the dungeons. Syrril took a cold brand from a bracket, lit it, and they started down the steps. A rat scurried at the edge of their pool of light, its claws hissing over the stone. At last they came to a metal-banded door with a sentry, who took one look at Syrril and opened to them.

Corry surveyed the low-ceiling room. The air held a trace of sewer smells. Meuril and Chance were conversing at the far end before a huge, cold fireplace. They turned as the door opened. "Syrril." Meuril looked him up and down. "Home for a visit?"

"Where is he?" demanded Syrril.

“In a cell, still unconscious.”

“Fenrah will want revenge.” Syrrill glanced at Chance. “No offense, but this isn’t Laven-lay’s quarrel.”

Meuril shook his head. “Not Laven-lay’s quarrel? Syrrill, they took you hostage just last summer!”

Syrrill opened his mouth to argue, but Meuril held up a hand. “Chance and I have been discussing cliff faun additions to our defenses.”

As Corry moved closer, he saw Chance’s face in the torchlight, exultant. He clasped his hands behind his back. “I am already having the city watched, and more soldiers are arriving every minute. Laven-lay is safe, Syrrill.”

At that moment, the door opened to admit Laylan. “You asked me to get you when the drug wore off,” he said to Chance. “He’s awake.”

Behind Laylan, Corry caught site of another faun, blond like Chance, but perhaps twenty years older. Laylan withdrew, and Chance moved toward the door. As he turned to leave, Corry caught the expression he shot towards the newcomer—pure loathing.

“Jubal!” cried Syrrill. “Welcome to Laven-lay. Perhaps you can give me some specifics on these cliff faun reinforcements you’re sending us.”

\* \* \* \*

When Chance stepped out the door, Laylan was already partway down the passage. “How long has he been awake?” asked Chance.

“Less than a quarter watch. He was groggy at first, hallucinating from the drug.”

“Did he say anything useful while he was hallucinating?”

Laylan thought of Sham muttering and twitching in the straw. “They’re coming, they’re coming, they’re coming.” *He means Shyshax and I*, Laylan had thought, *coming to claim him in the trap*. But then Sham had said, “Blood in the water, father. The big spotted one is at the window. He killed Auta. I heard her crunch.”

*This is long ago*, thought Laylan, *the fall of Sardor-de-lor to Demitri’s cats. Sham would have been seven*. “Blood is coming under the door,” whispered Sham. “Play louder, father. Play louder.”

*Useful?* “Not really,” said Laylan to Chance.

Chance frowned and quickened his pace.

“You won’t get anything out of him,” remarked Laylan.

“What?”

“Sham won’t tell you where to catch the pack. Maybe if we’d caught one of the youngsters, but not Sham.”

Chance sneered. “We’ll see.”

They came to a door, guarded by cliff fauns. Chance reached to open it, but Laylan put his hand on the door. “It won’t help to torture him.”

The faun’s eyes narrowed. “What’s the matter with you?”

Laylan shook his head. “I’ve worked as carefully as you have for this, and I don’t want him spoiled to no purpose. Set a trap. Use him as bait. She will come.”

Chance jerked the door open.

Laylan sighed. “But you’ve paid for my trouble, so do as you like.”

Two torches blazed in the cell, making the shadows jump and twist. The floor might have been stone, but one would have had to dig some distance to find it. Laylan doubted the cell had been used in a hundred years. A whip hung from a nail in one wall. It, at least, looked new.

Laylan found himself thinking of the contrast to Danda-lay’s dungeon. Chance could have gotten creative there, if his father had given him loan of the equipment. Danda-lay still had a few shelts who remembered how to use it. *Some of them have probably had recent practice.*

He saw that the cliff fauns had already been at work in his absence. Sham was no longer lying in the straw, but standing in the middle of the room, naked, tied by each hand to a ring in opposite walls. He held one paw a little off the ground. The trap had broken his ankle. Sham’s dark hair lay plastered against his brow, and sweat trickled down his neck from the unnatural fever brought on by Laylan’s drugged trap. His chin rested on his chest, and he did not look up when Chance and Laylan entered.

For a moment Chance stood in front of Sham, his blue eyes glittering almost red in the torchlight. *He looks mad as a falcon*, thought Laylan.

“I’ve kept my promise,” said Chance at last, “I told you I would hang you from the highest scaffold in Panamindorah.”



Sham raised his head. For a moment he squinted at Chance as though trying to decide whether he was real. He licked his dry lips. “What?”

“You will die tomorrow on public display, and your flayed and gutted corpse will dangle from a spike at the gates of Port Ory.”

Sham made a hacking sound. For a moment Laylan thought he was coughing, then realized he was laughing. “A party?” His voice was growing stronger. “I suppose it’s important to teach your little ones the higher forms of entertainment, but I’m trying to remember when you made me this promise.”

Chance’s face twisted. “Standing in the antechamber of this very castle, the day you took Syrill and a palace guest hostage, I swore to you—”

“Oh, oh, that.” Sham appeared to consider. “Strange as it may sound, I was preoccupied at the time. I have no idea what you said to me.”

Chance struck him backhand across the face. “I said I would have your pelt,” he hissed, “and hang you from the highest scaffold in Panamindorah. There will be several thousand fauns and cats present. If any wolflings appear, we may have more than one hanging. Two, three...eight.”

“You’ll have only one. If that.”

Chance drew his sword and brought it against the wolfling’s throat. “Where is she, Sham?”

Sham didn’t flinch. “Where is who?”

Chance struck him again. “Where is Fenrah? Where is your den? I can make this easy or difficult.”

Sham spat in Chance’s face.

Chance retrieved the whip from the wall and tossed it to one of the guards. “I will learn what I want to know if I have to drain the blood from your body.”

Laylan almost covered his eyes. *They have no idea what they’re doing.* It occurred to him that Chance had not been allowed to bring any of his father’s experienced interrogators from Danda-lay—that, or he’d been too proud to ask. These were foot soldiers who’d served under Chance when he fought in the cat wars. *They’re accustomed to interrogating cats, not shelts.*

Fortunately, Sham showed them the error of their ways by passing out before the faun with the whip had really gotten into his stride. Laylan decided to risk a comment. “Are you trying to soften him up or kill him?”

Chance glared, but after an inspection of the prisoner, he told the faun with the whip to hold back a bit. Sham sagged, his body now slick with blood. As he started to come round, he instinctively pushed his good foot into the straw, trying to relieve the pressure on his wrists.

“I’ll give you another opportunity,” said Chance. “Where is she?”

Sham flicked his tail, sending a shower of blood droplets onto Chance’s lily white tunic.

Chance scowled. “Whip him again.”

Sham stayed conscious longer this time. The faun with the whip showed a little restraint. Still, the wolfling made no sound, and at last he went limp. Laylan wondered how many days

Sham had been without food by now. *Two at least, likely three, perhaps more.* He was conscious again in seconds.

Chance paced around his prisoner like a tiger around a snow-bound deer. He ran a finger along Sham's shoulder blades and Sham let out a sharp breath. Chance regarded the blood on his fingers. "What will the Raiders do without their healer? When they grow weak and take fever? When they are shot or poisoned or stabbed? How unfortunate that their healer was not wise enough to keep himself well."

"They have Talis," muttered Sham.

"Your apprentice?" asked Chance lightly. "A fourteen-year-old bitch-pup? Oh, yes, I'm sure they need fear *nothing* in her hands." He reached down and fingered Sham's limp tail. "I would cut off his tail," he said to Laylan, "if I did not want to keep the pelt complete. Together with others, it could make a fine rug." He was talking to Laylan, but he said it in Sham's ear. Sham must have bristled, because Chance looked pleased. He let go of the tail.

"Where, oh, where? Is it in a tree perhaps? In a cave? Underwater like a muskrat den? Is it in a town or city...in the back of some easily-bribed faun's house? I'll make you a deal, Sham. You tell me what I want to know, and I'll kill you here and now. Quick. No more pain. No public execution. No crowds. None of that nasty strangling."

Sham turned his head to look Chance in the face. "Why don't *I* make *you* a deal. Stop this, and I'll ask Fenrah not to skin you *before* she kills you."

Chance circled back in front of his prisoner. “Now that’s an idea.” He ran the point of his blade lightly across Sham’s belly.

Sham didn’t move, but the line of his jaw tightened. “I thought you wanted to keep your promise.”

“Oh, we have shelts who could keep you alive until noon tomorrow.”

*I doubt that, thought Laylan. It’s wolfling medicine that works those kind of miracles.*

Chance toyed with his blade just long enough to be certain the threat would produce no confession. At last he let his sword drop and moved forward until his face was very close to Sham’s. “You’re certain you have nothing to tell me? Well then, I must bid you good evening.” As he said the words, he moved, holding his sword like a walking stick, and drove it straight through Sham’s good paw into the ground.

Sham’s face went nearly as pale a Chance’s, and for the first time he made a sound of pain, somewhere between a yelp and a sob. The guards winced, and even Laylan stood up straight from the wall. Sham scratched feebly with his broken foot. He looked into Chance’s eyes and gritted his teeth. “Go eat deer dung.”

Chance jerked his sword free and turned to the soldiers. “Set five guards around this cell tonight. Two inside and three out. Detail groups of two within hearing distance all the way to the exit and at every conjunction of the tunnel.”

“Yes, sir,” said the guard with the whip, and went out.

Laylan caught Chance’s arm. “You’re not going to leave him that way, are you?”

Chance looked irritated. “Why not? He’ll last until morning.”

“Maybe. It depends on whether you want him to *walk* to the scaffold.”

“He’ll walk if I say so. Leave him.” Chance pushed out the door and down the hall.

Laylan followed him out and waited. It wasn’t long before he heard the click of hooves and saw a pool of torchlight approaching. “Hello, Syrrill.”

Shyshax was with him. This was no accident. Laylan had asked Shyshax to find Syrrill earlier. The iteration, Corellian, was with them as well.

Syrrill strode into the cell and made a brief inspection. “Gabalon’s teeth, what a mess!”

Syrrill poked at the bloody straw. “A waste! It would take time, planning, perhaps trickery to break Sham. One night of brutality would never do it. Can Chance possibly not know that?”

“He does now,” said Laylan. *I think on some level, he always did.*

“The nobility of old Canisaria, perhaps the finest healer in Panamindorah,” muttered Syrrill, “and in *my* dungeon. Well, cut him down. He’s at least not spending the night like that.”

“Actually,” began the guard at the door, “Prince Chance ordered—”

Syrrill appeared to swell like a small and angry puffer fish. “Do you presume to give me orders, sirah? I will see to the protection of my city with my own personnel. If *Prince* Chance has a problem with that, I will be happy to discuss it with him. You are dismissed. All of you. Get out!”

The cliff fauns looked as though they might argue, thought better of it, and departed.

In a quieter voice, Syrill said to Laylan, “Corellian wanted a word with Sham if that’s possible.”

At the moment, it was not. Sham hung limp in his bonds as Laylan drew a dagger and cut the thongs. Syrill sent Shyshax for new guards and a list of supplies. Corellian came forward and helped to catch Sham so that he didn’t hit the floor. His skin was slippery, the fur below his waist saturated with blood. Laylan took Sham from Corellian and carried him to the back wall, the blood soaking uncomfortably through his tunic.

Sham’s eyes fluttered, and Laylan was aware of Corellian crouching beside him. “Sham, my name is Corry. Do you remember me?”

For a moment, Laylan thought he didn’t. Then, suddenly, Sham’s eyes widened. A look that was unmistakably fear flicked across his face. Laylan was surprised and curious. He’d never seen that look on Sham, not even in the trap.

Corellian glanced sideways at Laylan. He seemed uncomfortable. Finally, he focused on Sham. “You saw me shift,” he said softly. “I need to know what I shifted to.”

Laylan’s ears pricked up. Everyone in Laven-lay thought that Corellian could not shift.

It took a moment for Sham to grasp what Corellian was asking. When he realized he was not being threatened, he relaxed a little.

“I need to know,” persisted Corellian, “please.”

A bitter smiled twisted the corners of Sham’s lips. “We all need things we don’t get. Why should I help you, friend-of-my-enemies?”

Laylan watched Corellian. He could see the iteration considering a threat, but of what? Sham was afraid of his other form, but clearly Corellian could not shift at will. Besides, Laylan didn't think the boy had the stomach for torture.

"You'll find out," said Sham ominously. "One day, they all will."

At that moment Syrill reappeared with wood faun guards, carrying blankets, ointment, and water. Corellian withdrew as they began to dress Sham's wounds. When they'd finished and wrapped him in blankets, Laylan produced a packet from under his cloak and laid it in Sham's hands. "Meat," he said and added a jug of water.

Sham stared at the food, then pushed it away. *You'll eat it when I'm gone, though,* thought Laylan, *because you're a survivor, and you haven't quite given up.*

Syrill had already departed, and the wood faun guards were outside. As Laylan turned to leave, Sham called after him. "You could have made a good Raider, Laylan. Is there any particular reason you decided to become a traitor instead?"

Laylan turned slowly. "One cannot betray without first giving allegiance."

"You were born a Canisarian."

"Perhaps," said Laylan, "and were you born a Raider?" He went out and shut the door.

## 4. A Festive Occasion

*Sham is in Laven-lay, to be hanged publicly on the 42<sup>nd</sup> day of this red month, noon. I will do what I can if you get me word.*

—note found tied to the leg of a raven shot by a traveling swamp faun minstrel

Two days later, Corry sat in his front room, sipping a late morning tea and listening to Laven-lay gearing up for the execution. The sound of hammers and axes had fallen silent yesterday evening, but the tramp of guards had increased. Cliff fauns passed him almost as often as wood fauns in the hall, ruffled and squinting from overnight travel. He'd heard that at least a hundred cats had come. The inns were full of out-of-town wood fauns and even the occasional black-furred swamp faun with long, tufted tail.

Corry had already decided to watch the execution from the window of the scriptorium, along with half the other clerks. It gave a good view of the parade ground and would not be accessible to the press of common shelts. It would also be a safe place if something went wrong. Corry did not intend to become hostage a second time.

Flags flew around the perimeter of the parade ground—Laven-lay's leaf and buck and Danda-lay's white flower on a purple field. A breeze had come up, and the ensigns snapped and rippled. Most days, Laven-lay's parade ground was an open-air market, and many of the venders had come with whatever they thought appropriate for the occasion—food, mainly, and an assortment of wolf's fur trinkets.



A trumpet sounded, and cliff faun soldiers poured in from the nearby streets. They wore shining metal breastplates and plumed helmets, their tunic skirts flashing white against purple capes. Music filled the air as they executed their drill maneuvers. They entertained the crowd for a quarter watch, and then a wood faun minstrel stood on the first tier of the gallows and recited part of a long epic poem about the bad old days when wolflings ate fauns, and valiant hunters risked everything to protect their tiny villages from the ravening dark. Afterward, he sang a well-loved wood faun anthem, and the whole crowd joined in.

When he left the platform, there was a long silence. Somewhere in the distance a gong sounded. All heads turned in the same direction, and Corry followed their gaze to the castle. A door opened, and a procession of guards filed out, carrying naked swords. The shelts and cats parted for them, and the armed fauns formed an isle all the way to the foot of the scaffold.

Another guard emerged, leading the prisoner. Sham was naked except for a metal collar around his neck. Even from this distance, Corry could see that his skin was purple and green with bruises. He walked with an odd, shuffling limp. Another guard came behind, holding a chain attached to Sham's bound wrists. Behind the last guard walked Chance, purple cape ruffling in the breeze.

\* \* \* \*

Sham pressed his lips together to keep back a moan as the guard ascended the steps. His metal collar had an inner lining of spikes, so that the slightest tug bored into agonized flesh of his shoulders and neck. The guards had only to pull in opposite directions to bring the black spots

before his eyes. Sham's shattered paws were in their own private universe of pain. He'd lain in the trap half a day before Laylan found him, and the trapped foot was badly broken and swollen. But the other paw... He tried not to think about the layers of muscle and tendon that Chance's sword had severed, but the healer in him kept returning methodically to the finer points of a paw's construction. *Idiotic*, Sham told himself, *to worry about a paw, when they're about to have you up by the neck.*

Climbing the steps was a hellish business. When he finally reached the first tier, the guards turned him to face Chance. The crowd had gone very quiet. "Sham Ausla," he intoned, "I charge you, a wolfling, with trespassing in wood and cliff faun territory, of robbery and murder. Your sentenced is death by hanging."

The guards led their prisoner to the forward edge of the lower platform and brought him to his knees with one light tug on the spiked collar. Then the missiles started from the crowd. It was mostly light stuff—rancid food and dung, mud and small, sharp rocks. But after a short while, the crowd began to get out of hand. Someone heaved a brick. It struck Sham on the head and dashed the collar against this neck. His vision swam. Next thing he knew, someone had set him on his feet and was urging him towards the steps leading to the upper platform.

\* \* \* \*

"They're really going to do it the old fashioned way," said one of the clerks. "Haven't seen it done that way in years."

Corry watched Chance unlimbering his sword in fascinated disgust. He'd read about this. The traditional way to hang a wolfling was to intentionally set the noose to strangle, then disembowel him before he stopped kicking. The stated purpose was to decrease the odor of the rotting corpse (which was generally left on display) by removing the intestines and accompanying fecal material. Mostly, though, it was for punishment.

\* \* \* \*

As the guards unfastened their leashes, Sham looked down on the sea of faces. The cheering roared in his ears. He caught sight of Laylan, still standing in front of the castle door. As Sham looked at him, their eyes met and held for a moment. Sham remembered their conversation in the cell. *"And were you born a Raider?"*

*Perhaps I was,* thought Sham.

A tug on his collar brought Sham back to reality as they positioned him over the trapdoor. They fitted the noose around his neck and finally removed the hateful collar. The cheering ended in an abrupt silence. Sham scanned the distant city wall. He had tried not to think about it before, but now his thoughts tumbled. *Where are you, Fenrah?* He heard Chance murmur, "Good-by, Sham," and the floor gave way.

## 5. The Curious Construction of a Gallows

I had thought to be entertained today, but the actual event exceeded all expectations.

--Syrill of Undrun, 42<sup>nd</sup> day of red month, 700

Sham's body fell through the trapdoor and landed with an unpleasant thump on the lower platform. The crowd began to murmur. Chance stared through the opening at his feet. For a second nobody moved. Then several guards hurried up from below, carrying Sham back to the high platform. Chance was having a furious discussion with the executioner. "The rope's frayed," babbled the shelt. "Had nothing to do with me, sir. I only turn the lever."

Chance paced like a caged animal while a guard shimmied up the beam to re-knot the rope. They made a new noose and repositioned Sham. The murmuring crowd watched as Sham hobbled onto the trapdoor again.

This time when Sham hit the boards, he let out a yelp. Chance's eyes blazed, and he rounded on the unfortunate executioner. "Gabalon's fang! Are you completely incompetent?"

The faun shrank away. After a quick consultation with his subordinates, he reported that the medal ring that held the rope had come loose from the beam.

"Then tie the rope around the beam!" snarled Chance.

"It's tall; I'll give you that," commented Sham as he made his third arrival on the upper platform. "If you keep dropping me, it should eventually do the job."

Chance glared at him. "If you have anything to do with this, I'll—"

"You'll what? Kill me?"

The crowd was becoming increasingly restless and noisy. Some whispered the name “Fenrah,” but a hoard of murderous wolflings completely failed to materialized. The shelts on the scaffold re-knotted the rope. The crowd began to relax.

The executioner looked at Chance.

“Oh, just do it!” he snapped.

The lever turned.

Sham cringed.

And nothing happened.

Chance jerked Sham out of the way and bent to examine the trapdoor. The executioner continued to jiggle his lever, but without success. The guards slunk to and fro, trying to look busy. “Maybe it’s jammed,” offered Sham unhelpfully.

Chance turned slowly. “One more word out of you, and I will run you through myself.”

The guards began to tap the door with their hooves. “It’s not a baby faun,” grated Chance. “It’s a dead tree. Put some muscle into it.” He moved forward and stamped on the trapdoor, which opened with surprising ease. Chance let out a startled yell as his hooves slipped into empty space. He flailed and managed to catch himself before he followed Sham’s path to the lower level. Chance hoisted himself out, eyes murderous, face crimson.

A titter of laughter started in the crowd. Sham was grinning, but his face became serious as Chance’s eyes fell on him. The wolfling shrugged. “Seems to be working now.”

*Thump.*

“Sir,” stammered a soldier. “The door has...has fallen off, sir.”

Now the crowd was laughing loudly.

“We’ll fix it,” spoke up an officer desperately. “Someone’s already gone to get a ladder.”

At that moment the gong and the city tower bells began clanging wildly. Suddenly the entire central pole of the scaffold creaked and gave way. Sham wriggled desperately to get out of the noose, but he needn’t have worried. The rope was already falling free. As the timber struck the ground, a noise like thunder rocked the earth, and white smoke fountained out of the scaffold.

The crowd went mad. Another explosion sounded from somewhere in the castle grounds and then another. The smoke made the area around the scaffold impenetrable. Over all the noise rose a high, thin wail—a wolf howl.

Sham had not moved from his place on the top tire. His hands were still tied, and he could barely walk. His guards were running into each other in panic and confusion, and he could not longer see Chance. The smoke streaming from the scaffold had turned blood red. Through the ruined hole where the beam had broken, a figure emerged. She was black as night, and she went through the terrified soldiers like a scythe through wheat. She stopped beside Sham. “How many times have I told you to wear your boots?”

Sham grinned at her. “I like the smoke and thunder, but did you have to keep dropping me?”

Fenrah turned to block a blow aimed at her head. “Had to wait for the signal from the others. We stalled as well as we could. You can thank Sevn for the thunder. He’s desperate to

explain the process, and everyone else is bored of listening. It took two other packs and some irregulars to get you out of here.”

“Oh?” Irregulars where Fenrah’s term for sympathetic fauns. “I can’t walk very well, Fenny.”

“You won’t have to.”

Sham saw that another wolfling had crawled out of the broken beam. By the size, it must be Xerous. In seconds, he’d cleansed the platform of all remaining fauns. Another howl sounded quite close, and Fenrah answered. A moment later, two wolves bounded up out of the smoke. “Enden!” Sham threw his arms around the shaggy neck.

Fenrah and Xerous both got on Dance, Sham on Enden, and they reached the ground in two bone-jarring leaps. Then they were running through the clearing smoke, past hysterical shelts and cats, towards the wall and freedom.

\* \* \* \*

Laylan and Shyshax found Chance at the foot of the scaffold bellowing for archers. A dead faun hit the ground beside them. *If Fenrah comes off that platform and finds Chance, she’ll cut him to pieces*, thought Laylan. He grabbed the faun and half dragged him out of the smoke, back towards the castle, shouting something about finding more organized troops. At the entrance, they did indeed meet a small group of soldiers, still in some semblance of order.

“Wolflings!” gasped one. “Near the east gate. I think we put them to flight.”

“Idiot!” snapped Chance. “They were a decoy. The prisoner has escaped with Fenrah and perhaps another Raider. They’ll be on wolves by now. FIND THEM!”

“Yes, sir.” The faun scurried away before Chance could hit him.

Chance paced for a moment, then slumped against a pillar. “They’re gone.” He ran a blood-stained hand through his hair. “We can chase them all the way to Danda-lay, but we won’t catch them today.”

In the silence Shyshax made a little cough that sounded like “told you so.”

Chance raised his head slowly.

The cheetah grinned. “Hairball.”



## 6. The Road to Danda-lay

Fifty years ago, the wolflings competed with the centaurs for quality of weapons. What with their iron and tin and copper, some of it mined in cat-country. Wolflings sold some of the best swords in Panamindorah, plenty of them still around. But did their weapons do them any good when Demitri came calling? No, and the worst part of it is that the wood fauns stood around with wolfling steel in their hands and did nothing.

--Syrill in a letter to Jubal

The wolflings had escaped through a breach in the old western gate—a blast wide enough to drive a cart through. No one was sure how they had caused the explosions or rigged the scaffold. Laylan prowled the broken areas, collecting samples and sniffing. Chance set off for Danda-lay that evening, unwilling to face the jeers and accusations of the wood faun community. Four cliff faun guards had died fighting on the scaffold. A handful of wood faun soldiers had been wounded, and eight civilians had been trampled in their flight from the parade ground.

In the taverns, however, the event was hailed a success for entertainment value and well worth attending further installments, though perhaps at a greater distance. Syrill certainly thought so. His mood had improved considerably, and he chattered and joked more than Corry could remember since the feline ambassadors arrived in court.

The snows came two days later, and traffic through the city dwindled to a trickle. The drifts were chest-high in the forest. Bandits, both wolfling and faun, were reported on the roads and in the wood. The Raiders, however, were not seen again that winter.

\* \* \* \*

Char sat at a small table, staring morosely at a cup of tea. He had never drunk tea until last red month, and he still found the taste unpleasant. He was wearing clothes, too—an odd, confining sensation. His long furry tail twitched nervously where it hung down behind the chair. He was fairly certain he was the first slave ever to enter Daren’s private study. Beside the fire, Daren’s anduin hound growled softly. He wasn’t used to seeing slaves in here, either.

On the other side of the small table, Daren sipped his tea. “I am told you are acclimating to your new quarters. I trust the food is to your liking?”

Char’s eyes flicked away. He was unaccustomed to looking fauns in the eyes unless he wanted their attention, and right now Daren’s attention was making him uncomfortable. “Yes.”

“Good. And the sleeping arrangements?”

Char nodded.

Daren frowned and toyed with his tea cup. “Please don’t hesitate to tell me if anything is not to your taste.”

Char met Daren’s gaze for a moment. “Why are you doing this, sir?”

Daren smiled. “Do you really require a reason?”

“I—” Char bit his lip. “Yes.”

A pause, then, “You see that dog?” Daren motioned to the anduin hound.

Char nodded.

“What is he for, do you think?”

Char's brow furrowed. "Hunting?"

"Yes, and what are you for?"

"The gem mines," said Char meekly.

"Yes. I also have slaves for tracking, bred for their sense of smell. They're better than the hounds, actually, but slow and no good at bringing down the quarry once they've found it. The dogs have their purpose, and the tracking slaves have their purpose, and you have your purpose."

Char nodded. He could feel a familiar knot in his stomach. He had no name for it, but he didn't trust himself when it was there. Unconsciously, the twitching of his tail increased to lashing.

Daren smiled. "We breed our slaves for docility, but you're an aberration, Char. You have courage, spirit." He watched the lashing tail. "Anger. These qualities could be put to good use."

He stood up and leaned against the mantel. "Many fauns disagree with me. They think it's dangerous to breed fighting slaves." He glanced down at his dog. "Ah, but most useful things are dangerous, aren't they?"

Char shut his eyes and gripped the table. He was seeing red. "You want me to mate with that female in my quarters, don't you?"

"Do you dislike her? I have a few other specimens in—"

"It's not that." He was amazed Daren was allowing him to speak this way, but the lack of reprimand made him bolder. "It's...it's..." *What is it? He's given me clean, comfortable living*

*quarters, better food than I've ever had in my life, and a beautiful female to bed. All this when I tried to kill him.* An image leapt into Char's mind—his sister, dripping wet, her eyes frantic.

"Why didn't you include Gleam in your...your project?"

"Because she didn't fight back. I saw beauty, but no spirit. Her purpose was not—"

The knot in Char's belly had grown unbearable. "She was my *family*!"

Daren hesitated. Char was fairly certain that he'd never been interrupted by a slave who lived to tell about it. Daren took a deep breath. "Quite. Perhaps I should have brought her here. It would have been a small price to pay for your cooperation."

Char was stunned. It was the closest thing he'd ever hear to an apology from a faun. He hesitated. "What is your lordship's *purpose*?"

Daren laughed aloud. "Very good! You are able to think and also to attack. That is good. I want those qualities."

"You didn't answer my question," said Char, but another idea had come to him. "The dog was a desert dog...or a wolf," he said quietly, "and you made it an anduin hound."

"My family made it, yes, over many generations."

"And I am a slave, and you will make of me...what?"

"You are a gem mine slave, and I wish to make fighting slaves." Daren stood up and pulled a rope by the mantle. "You know what I want, and I'm not asking anything unpleasant. But the breeding season for your kind will be over soon. Do you understand?"

“My kind?” repeated Char. He thought he saw Daren hesitate. *He didn’t mean to say it that way.* A faun servant had appeared to take him away, but Char ignored him. He looked straight at Daren. “What is my kind, sir?”

“A slave,” said Daren with a stiff smile.

Char shook his head. “But you just said that was my purpose. What I *am* is something different, isn’t it? Your purpose isn’t to *be* a faun, anymore than the dog’s purpose is to *be* a dog. My purpose can’t be the same thing as what I *am*.”

Daren motioned at the servant. “Take him back to his quarters.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry looked up from the book he was copying. *Someone is trying to sneak up on me.* The scriptorium was cold and quiet at night after the others went home. The shelves were a shadowy labyrinth, his single candle the only light. He felt, more than heard, the vibrations of footfalls through the stone floor. *This is it. Whoever sent the centaur has sent someone else.* He let the intruder get a little closer, then jumped up and spun around. This time he had a sword. He’d been practicing.

Syrill raised his hands in surprise. He’d come in without a light, apparently following the gleam of Corry’s candle. Corry sheathed the sword, feeling foolish. “Syrill. I didn’t know you’d come back.”

“Got here early this evening. You’re a bit jumpy.”

Corry didn’t try to explain. “Are you home for a while, then?”

“Yes, I was wondering what your plans are for Lupricasia.”

Corry raised an eyebrow. Lupricasia was the spring festival in Danda-lay, said to be extravagant. He gathered up his tools from the table. “Come back to my rooms and we can talk.”

Syrill followed him, chatting about the weather and the condition of the roads. When Corry reached his rooms, he stirred up the fire, then rang for a servant and asked for hot drinks. “All three moons should be full next yellow month,” Syrill was saying as they sat down, “and the early flowers are blooming, which should please everyone. Fauns enjoy flowers for Lupricasia. You’re welcome to travel with me if you like.”

Corry looked at the fire. “I’ll think about it.”

Syrill seemed surprised. “I generally get excellent accommodations, and I know where to find all the best food and dancing. A stranger could get lost, and she’s a bit leery of an iteration traveling alone.” He hesitated. “Do you have other travel arrangements?”

Corry said nothing.

“Ahhh...” Syrill nodded knowingly. “There’s a fauness involved. Do her parents know yet? They may not be keen on the idea, but—”

“There’s no fauness,” snapped Corry. He turned to look at his friend. “Syrill, I want to know why you told Capricia about my shifting. You promised not to tell anyone; you gave your word.” He felt a burst of relief even as his voice flamed in anger. He’d been wanting to bring up the topic all winter, but had never found suitable opportunity.

Syrill’s brown eyes slid away from Corry’s angry green ones. “Oh, that.”

“Yes, *that*! I told her I couldn’t shift, and I believed it at the time. She was very angry when I came back, and I’m still not sure she trusts me.”

Syrill toyed with his drink. “Corellian, you disappeared for a red month. She was frantic to find you. I thought maybe you’d shifted and couldn’t shift back. You didn’t seem to have much control over it. I thought maybe you were ashamed, had run away.”

Corry sat back. It was a reasonable conclusion. *But you still lied to me, Syrill.*

“You never have told me where you went,” said Syrill.

“I had unfinished business,” muttered Corry.

“I thought you couldn’t remember anything before you came here.”

“My memory is spotty. I don’t want to talk about it. Besides, you’re the one who keeps disappearing this last year.”

“A good point.” Syrill took a deep breath. “So, while I may not be a good repository for secrets you hope to keep from the princess, I do make an excellent traveling companion.”

Corry sighed. “Alright, I don’t have any plans for Lupricasia.”

\* \* \* \*

They left eight days later. By then, Laven-lay was full of shelts and animals in transit. Syrill took only two mounts and no servants, but they would clearly not be alone on the road. It was still called the Triangle Road, although only this arm of the triangle was in current use. The road had been paved with large, smooth stones in the time of the wizards. It connected Laven-lay to Port Ory, where one could take tunnels to Danda-lay on the cliff. The third point on the

triangle was Selbis—the old wizard capital. No faun town lay closer than a day’s journey to the ruins. Corry had heard all kinds of ghost stories. Naturally, he was interested.

“Syrill, have you ever traveled the other arms of the Triangle Road? I noticed that they’re not on any of the newer maps.”

“They wouldn’t be. Fauns like to pretend that anything pointing to Selbis doesn’t exist, but I’ve traveled parts of them when I was in haste.”

“Are they still paved?”

“In places. When Gabalon fell, the wood fauns broke up the road and planted trees on it for half a day’s journey out of Laven-lay, but you can pick it up near Harn-Benge.”

Corry had heard of that place—a stone bridge, wizard-built, that spanned the Tiber-wan River where it passed through a deep gorge.

Syrill was still speaking. “You may have wondered why the western gate is called the Wizards’ Gate on old maps? Well, that’s where the road from Selbis came in.”

“I *thought* the western gate was large for a minor gate.”

Syrill nodded. “The doors are so big we hardly ever open them. It’s considered a weak point. Fenrah’s raiders chose it for obvious reasons when they rescued Sham.”

That evening, Corry and Syrill stopped at an inn. They unloaded their gear and left the deer to forage in the lush grass, cultivated behind the inn for that purpose.

In the noisy common room, they sat down to a meal of stew. “Syrill, I have a question,” said Corry as they ate. “Capricia’s mother—Natalia—I’ve been trying to learn how she died, but



the clerks in the scriptorium have told me conflicting things. They all agree that she was killed by wolflings on her way home from a visit to her family in Ense.”

To Corry’s surprise, Syrill’s expression grew animated. Usually, Corry had to work to get shelts to talk about the queen, but Syrill didn’t look like he needed much prompting. “My views probably won’t mesh with the others. Meuril, particularly, doesn’t share my opinion and would not appreciate me sharing it.”

*But when has that ever stopped you?* Corry just waited.

“First, you should understand that this happened about three years before I was born, during the summer of 676. As you’ve probably been told, the queen went to visit her family in Ense and was waylaid during her return to Laven-lay. Two interesting things about the incident: no one survived and the bodies were not discovered until two days after the attack. This was high summer, so you can imagine the state of the carcasses when they *were* discovered. Two wolves and one wolfling were found dead nearby, presumably killed by the queen’s guard. All the bodies were accounted for except the queen herself.”

Syrill lowered his voice to a near whisper. “Meuril has made an attempt to hush this, but his soldiers were not the first on the scene, and there are still common shelts who can tell you what they saw. They say there was the remains of a fire and...*cooking*.”

Corry didn’t understand.

Syrill scowled. “Gabalon’s teeth, Corellian, can’t you see? She had been eaten. Not by wolves, but by wolflings, by shelts! They found enough *pieces* to confirm her identity. Long ago,

it is said that panauns ate fauns, just as wolves still eat deer. But shelts have considered the practice of eating other shelts an abomination for hundreds of years. For wolflings to eat the queen was the most flagrant and painful insult—not only to kill her, but to desecrate her body. They say that Meuril half lost his mind. Capricia was only two years old and thankfully with her nurse in the castle.

“The queen’s signet ring was the only important item never recovered. Meuril still offers a huge reward for the ring and it’s become a kind of fabled treasure among bounty hunters. They search every wolfling they catch and every den they uncover, but so far, it hasn’t turned up.”

“I don’t suppose Laylan thinks the Raiders...?” began Corry. “But they would have been too young.”

Syrill nodded. “Fenrah would have been three years old, Sham five, both of them living at court in Sarder-de-lor. This was before the city fell. Lyli and Xerous are the only Raiders who would have been old enough to participate, and as far as I know, Chance’s research puts them firmly in Canisaria at the time.

“A number of other important things happened that summer. Canisaria was needing help in the worst possible way against the Filinians, and Meuril had been on the verge of honoring their pleas. However, after the bandits devoured his wife, he never again considered helping the wolflings. In fact, he put a bounty on them soon afterwards. Shadock’s queen was also urging Shadock to help Canisaria. They quarreled, and she started spending a great deal of time with the captain of her guard, Jubal. Chance was likely conceived as a result the same summer. Sarder-de-

lor fell a year later, unhelped and unmourned by Shadock and Meuril.” Syrill sat back. “That’s the story as it’s commonly told.”

Corry considered. “I knew the part about Shadock, but not about Meuril. Interesting.”

Syrill watched him. “Isn’t it?”

“Seems an odd thing for the wolflings to do—insulting Meuril when they needed his help so badly.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I mean, they must have *meant* the whole thing for an insult, else they won’t have eaten the queen and then left the cooking where she could find it.”

“No one ever claimed the attack was officially sanctioned by Malic, the wolfling king,” said Syrill. “In fact, Malic swore he knew nothing of it, and I think Meuril believed him. However, many of Meuril’s advisors urged that the savage attack on the queen showed the true nature of wolflings, the kind of thing we could always expect with them as neighbors.”

Corry nodded. “Seems a stupid thing to do, though, even if they *are* savage.”

“Perhaps wolflings are stupid,” said Syrill.

Corry frowned. “You know that’s not true.”

“I’m only telling you the ideas that went round at court.”

Corry could almost *feel* the bent of Syrill’s thoughts. “The wolflings had nothing to gain and everything to lose. The cats, on the other hand, had everything to gain.”

Syrill grinned. “I’m glad you see it too.”

“You think they framed the wolflings?”

“I’m sure of it. How convenient, when Demitri was tightening his death grip on the throat of the wolflings, for the wolflings to give affront to their most likely ally. The bodies of the queen’s party had swollen in the heat, so it was difficult to analyze the wounds. A slash from a claw and a slash from a sword may not look so different after days in the sun, and any maulings would have been attributed to wolves.”

Corry shook his head. “The dead wolves and wolflings.”

“Yes.” Syrill smiled. “What about them?”

“Someone like Fenrah or Sham would never leave companions behind, dead or alive.”

“Exactly. Those wolves and wolflings didn’t die fighting with fauns. Cats killed them and left them behind as a decoy.”

“And the cooking?”

“The cats came in at suppertime, did the deed, tore the queen to pieces, ate parts of her, dropped the rest in the cooking pot. Easy as that.”

Corry shook his head. “Surely tracks—”

“Two-day-old tracks on leaves and loam don’t tell much, Corellian, certainly not the difference between a cat paw and a wolf paw.”

Syrill leaned forward. “I believe that Istra, Shaddock’s queen, knows the truth as well. She and Natalia were girlhood friends. They were very close. I do not know her, have never been

alone with her to ask the question, but I cannot imagine she would have supported the wolfling cause if she had believed they killed her friend.”

“So Meuril’s queen and Shadock’s queen were close? That’s interesting.”

Syrill wasn’t listening. “If Meuril had helped Sarder-de-lor twenty-two years ago, the Demitri would never have had a chance to attack us. The cats tricked him, devoured his wife, and lived for three years on the bodies of his fallen soldiers. Then, instead of letting me kill Lexis, Meuril parlayed with him, made a treaty, rewarded him for his deceptions, and let him off without a scratch!”

Syrill realized how loudly he was speaking and lowered his voice. “You see why I have some sympathy for the wolflings?”

“Yes, but—”

“But what?”

“But Meuril’s actions make sense if he really believes the wolflings killed his wife. He was on hand to examine the evidence, after all, and you weren’t.”

Syrill flushed. “I can assure you that I did not come to this conclusion over an evening’s bottle of wine. I have spoken with many eye-witnesses.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing for the last few months? Building your case?”

Syrill’s eyes flicked away. “To a degree. I had the outline, but I have improved it.”

“Even if you’re right Syrill, it would be Demitri, not Lexis, who did all this. You can’t put Lexis on trial for something his father did.”

“He *must* have been told about it,” growled Syrril, “at least by the time he came to the throne. He used the deception, just like his father used it.”

## Chapter 7. Port Ory

*Your idea about the stone from the Triangle Road has been tried, but shelts fear buildings made from wizard stone. At the last guild meeting, one member reported having harvested stone from around Selbis itself, and the house collapsed the day before the family was to move in. Customers were frightened.*

--Chief of Laven-lay's Guild of Masons to Danda-lay's Guild Chief

Corry had an idea that wine had made Syrill more talkative than he intended, because the next morning he was uncharacteristically quiet. They rode along, listening to the twitter of birds and the clip of deer's feet on old stone. Corry watched the other travelers—mostly wood fauns, with an occasional cat—and he noted with interest the busy little towns they passed. Toward evening they came to the bank of a broad river. “The Tiber-wan?” asked Corry.

Syrill nodded. “Not far now to Port Ory.”

The road paralleled the river. Soon Corry caught sight of a barge moving with the current, piled high with crates. Fauns moved to and fro on the deck.

Corry squinted. “Syrill... What's that in the water?”

He looked where Corry pointed. “I don't see anything.”

“Beside the barge, there's something swimming.”

“Oh.” Syrill looked away. “Just a Cowry catcher.”

Corry shook his head. “I've never heard of them.”

“There aren’t many in middle Panamindorah. They’re manatee shelts, native to the sea and the jungle streams of the Pandalon mountains. I’m told that fauns use them at sea to find cowries. Here they’re used for catching fish, towing small loads, boat maintenance, that sort of thing.”

“Used?” echoed Corry.

Syrill had the grace to look embarrassed. “They’re slaves...all those in Middle Kingdoms, at least. I suppose there are free ones in the Pandalons.”

“I thought slavery was illegal in Middle Panamindorah.”

Syrill shrugged. “Yes, well, we don’t extend that courtesy to deer and burrows. We buy and sell animals that can’t talk.”

“Cowry catchers can’t talk?”

“No. I’ve been told they can’t make the sounds of our language. They seem to understand it well enough. I’ve never owned one, Corellian, and I’ve never lived on the riverfront.”

Corry shook his head. “But not even wolflings are sold as slaves!”

“No?” Syrill raised his eyebrows. “And what do you think happens in the deep forest when a faun farmer comes upon a den with a couple of strapping youngsters? He could collect a few dozen white cowries in bounty for their tails. Ah, but perhaps they could work for him? Then he keeps their secret and they keep their lives.”

Corry said nothing, but his disgust must have shown on his face.



“Some would call it merciful,” said Syrill, “on the part of the faun, I mean. He does run a risk. He could be heavily fined. The wolflings, of course, stand to lose a good deal more.”

“But that’s not the same,” persisted Corry. “I know it happens, but it’s not legal, like what you’re describing with the cowry catchers. They’re shelts, aren’t they? What’s the difference between making slaves of them and making slaves of wolflings?”

Syrill sighed. “Nauns—they don’t look as much like us, do they?” He allowed his buck to a canter. “Blix has been trying to tell me for the last quarter league that he wants to run.”

The smell of spring was in the air, and the deer *were* anxious to move. They only stopped running when Syrill judged the crowd too thick, which was a good deal later than Corry would have judged it. The deer were far more agile than horses and liable to shoot straight into the air when they encountered barriers in the form of other riders and wagons. Syrill only chose to slow when Corry’s doe landed *inside* a cart, nearly on top of a number of ragged children. Corry shakily offered the cart’s owner his apologies and several cowries, but the owner only shook his head, watching Syrill wide-eyed over Corry’s shoulder.

“I’m the dashing cavalry commander,” said Syrill out of the corner of his mouth. “I’m *supposed* to be reckless.”

“Well, I’m the stuffy royal clerk,” panted Corry, “and I don’t want to kill any children on my way to Lupricasia.”

Towards evening, Corry caught sight of a stone wall which continued on the other side of the Tiber-wan. “What good is a city wall?” asked Corry, “if anyone can come through the river.”

“Inspections,” said Syrril, “tariffs, that sort of thing. Port Ory is a merchant city.” He laughed. “Who would want to attack it? Everyone does business here.”

As they drew closer, the traffic thickened, and Corry saw a gate swung wide and shelts with merchandise lined up for inspection. He and Syrril were waved through with barely a glance. Beyond the wall, narrow streets wound between tall buildings, all hung with garlands of early flowers and colored paper. Colored lanterns winked in the dusky twilight. Booths on wheels came and went, trailing smells of food. Corry could hear flutes and tambourines and the thump of dancing feet. Children yelled back and forth across the rooftops.

Syrril kept stopping to talk and laugh with shelts Corry had never seen before. Quite a few of them were female. At last they reached a gaudy-looking hotel on the waterfront, called the Unsoos. The lobby was paved with dressed stone, and the rugs were large and elaborate. The roof turned out to be a park-like deer garden, complete with trees and small waterfalls.

Syrril requested a double room at roof level. As soon as they were inside, he dropped his pack and said, “I’m going out. Are you hungry?”

Corry had an idea Syrril didn’t want him along. “No, I’m tired, actually.”

“Well, if you change your mind, there’s a common room downstairs. The food here is excellent.” Syrril slipped out the door without another word.

Corry found his way to a lavishly appointed bedroom with windows opening on the deer park. He took off his boots, lay down, and dozed off almost at once. When he woke, the night was full dark, but he could hear distant sounds of merrymaking through the window. He didn’t

think he'd been asleep very long, but he was ravenously hungry. Corry got up, put his boots back on, and went out into the hall. Voices, music, and the odor of food drifted up the staircase and he followed them. On the ground floor, he paused beside the common room entrance. He could see a fire and something roasting over it. Shelts were eating at tables, talking and laughing. Corry hesitated. He reached into his pocket. *I have enough cowries to buy food outside.* He didn't feel like trying to make conversation with strangers right now.

In the street, Corry bought a warm, thick drink and an unidentifiable hunk of meat on a stick. Chewing and slurping happily, he started up the incline of the street. All three moons were up and nearly full—Dragon high overhead, Runner a little below, and blue Wanderer just visible between the buildings. Dancers and acrobats were performing here and there. He saw minstrels and fire-eaters and magicians and even a cat who could balance knives on his nose. Gradually he noticed the streets he walked were rising higher. Finally the road came out on a massive stone bridge. Near him, a larger-than-life statue of a cliff faun in battle dress atop a magnificent ram reared against the velvet sky. On the far side of the bridge, stood a similar stone image of a wood faun on a stag, illuminated by flaming torches. Flags of Laven-lay and Danda-lay flew from the tops of their spears.

Far below the artificial layers of the city, the Tiber-wan delivered its never-ending death-roar as it plunged over the abyss. Corry stopped to admire the view. He could see the gushing, hissing turmoil of whitewater churning around a lattice of vertical iron bars, anchored in the belly

of the bridge and the riverbed. All of Port Ory spread out below him—the river full of boats at anchor and the walls and buildings winking with red, green, orange, and purple lights.

Corry dragged his eyes away and moved to the outer side of the bridge. Beneath him the river appeared to plunge into a sea of cloud. It was like the end of the world.

“Pretty, eh?”

Corry turned to the speaker. “Shyshax. What are you doing here?”

The cheetah laughed. He had his front paws on the side of the bridge, but now he dropped to all fours. “Same thing everyone else is doing, I suppose: eating and dancing and filling up on new wine. How do you like Port Ory?”

“It’s beautiful.”

Shyshax smiled. “You haven’t seen Danda-lay yet, have you?”

“No. Listen, I never got to thank you properly for carrying me back to the city last summer. I was distracted, and I’m afraid I behaved ungraciously. You were very kind.”

The cheetah’s wide amber eyes twinkled. “It was no trouble. How did you end up wet and lost in the wood anyway?”

*I was chased by a centaur assassin into some kind of dungeon dimension full of extinct shelts and animals. Lucky for me, I somehow popped up in a river a month later than I left.* Corry almost wished he hadn’t brought it up, but he liked Shyshax and had been wanting to thank him. “I’m not sure. I have these spells sometimes where things happen, and I can’t remember.” *That sounds almost worse than the truth, coming from an iteration.* Corry could have kicked himself.

*Laylan knows I can shift. He probably told Shyshax. Now he probably thinks I turn into something horrible and kill people.*

But the cheetah only looked at him curiously. “Well, take care of yourself at Lupricasia. Lots of shelts here would like you not to remember what happened to your money belt.”

Corry smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Happy hunting.” Shyshax turned and moved away.

As they talked, Corry had been looking at the statue of the ram behind Shyshax, and without really thinking about it, he noticed a lion and leopard approach and stand in the shadow cast by the torchlight. Now as Shyshax trotted to the other side of the bridge, Corry noticed them step away from the image and glide through the crowd in the direction Shyshax had taken.

*They’re following him.* He walked quickly to the far side of the bridge, but of course the cats were gone. Corry didn’t like it. He could imagine what some Filinians would like to do to a cheetah who’d spied for Syrril during the wars. Still hoping to see Shyshax again, Corry left the bridge on the opposite side of the city. For a time he wandered among the shelts, but he grew tired of the noise.

Finally he strolled down to the banks of the Tiber-wan and walked along the riverfront, looking at the boats. He heard a splash. Corry glanced up in time to see a wide ripple well out in the river. *Big fish*, he thought, but the ripple did not go away. Something was moving in the water, making an arrow against the current. Corry walked forward along a wooden peer, trying to get a better look. *Must be a cowry catcher.*

The creature swam in place for a little longer, then moved towards a stretch of sandy beach several yards away from Corry. A head appeared. It was a shelt's head, but it had no tufts on its ears. Corry had grown so used to looking at heads with furry ears that the site seemed somewhat repulsive. The ears were naked and slight fleshy, pointed, and folded against the head. The dripping form came up slowly until the figure seemed to be sitting in the shallows. Then it stood. Corry took a step back. *Definitely not a cowry catcher.*

Something rose out of the river beneath the shelt. Corry gasped. It looked like an extremely ugly dragon. Corry realized that he must have made a noise, for the shelt whirled in his direction, stared a moment, then dove back into the river. The monster sank and disappeared.

Heart pounding, trying not to run, Corry trotted back to the base of the peer and up one of the paths that led to a road. He managed to slow to a walk as he reached the first building. Just before he turned the corner, he stopped and looked back. The river flowed dark and smooth and undisturbed.

Corry walked back toward the bridge. The night had gone sour. He felt like all of the shelts he passed watched him and whispered things that he could not hear. Instead of seeing the brightly colored lanterns, he saw the shadows they cast. Not nearly soon enough, Corry found the bridge, crossed without stopping to look down, and headed for the Unsoos.

He was nearly back, shouldering his way along a particularly crowded road, when he almost ran into a large snow leopard moving in the opposite direction. "Excuse me," said Corry, then stopped. *That was Ounce, Lexis's lieutenant.* He turned just in time to see the leopard stop

beside a figure in a side street. The shelt stood in shadow, yet something about the form looked familiar. It turned, and Corry caught a flash of gold chain and the silhouette of long, thick hair.

“Capricia?” But she was already gone.

## Chapter 8. The Sluice and the City

Danda-lay, Danda-lay,

city ancient, hunter victim, benevolent tyrant, pearl of the sky

--old wood faun poem

“Watch the road, Corellian! By the hoof! One would think *you* were the one who stayed out all night, and *I* was the one who went to bed early!” In the gentle wash of morning light Port Ory looked like a different city—calmer, emptier.

Syrill was giving a tour. “Up that lane is the official meeting hall for the guild of tanners, as I’m sure you can tell by the stench. Furs and skins pour into Port Ory every year to be processed. Fauns grow food along that side of the river, also on their rooftops. See the gardens?”

A fauness glided passed them, carrying a wreath of flowers, and Corry did a double-take. Her fur was long and faintly curly, white like a cliff faun’s, but her skin was the nut brown of a wood faun’s.

Syrill grinned. “That woke you up!”

“What is she?” Corry asked in a low voice.

“A satyr—half wood faun, half cliff faun.”

“Oh...” Corry had read a few oblique references to satyrs, and he gathered they were a cross between to different shelts.

“Half-breeds can’t usually have children,” continued Syrril, “but they’re often beautiful. In fact, the unofficial ‘Guild of the Ladies’ is here in Port Ory. Families, especially old ones, frown upon mixed marriages for the obvious reason that such unions produce no fertile heirs. Most satyrs are illegitimate. This city is full of them, and the Guild of the Ladies attracts them. My home province is cliff-side, and I know a few from back then. If you like, I can introduce you this evening.”

Corry was looking desperately for a change of subject. “Are there any nauns at this festival?”

Syrril cocked his head. “Nauns?”

“Yes—shelts without hooves or paws. I saw something last night that looked like...I don’t know what it looked like, but not like a faun and certainly not a wolfling. It had legs, so it wasn’t a Cowry catcher.”

Syrril looked curious. “Someone told me yesterday that we have alligator shelts at the festival this year. They don’t always come up for the festival. But when were you out last night?”

Corry breathed a sigh of relief. *Alligator shelts. Of course. Not a dragon. An alligator.* He remembered now that he’d read about these shelts—“lizard riders,” the fauns called them. They lived in Kazar swamp, technically citizens of the swamp faun nation, but the lizard riders were tribal and kept to themselves.



“I got hungry and decided to get food from a street vendor,” Corry told Syrrill. “I saw an alligator and its shelt swimming in the river. They startled me.”

“Oh. Did you see anything else interesting?”

“Well...” Corry thought about the lion and the leopard following Shyshax. He thought about Ounce and Capricia. *No good talking about cats to Syrrill, though. He’ll get angry, and I’m not sure there’s anything to get angry about.* “I saw a faun and fauness painted blue and green.”

Syrrill laughed. “Yes, they do that sometimes. It’s the rutting season, you know.”

Corry did not know and wasn’t sure he wanted Syrrill’s explanation, so he kept quiet. As they rode to higher and higher street levels, Corry recognized the bridge ahead. His eyes widened as he caught a glimpse over western side. This morning the air was clear, and he could see the suggestion of a horizon far away.

When they reached the bridge, Corry stopped near the outer edge and dismounted. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the drop. Syrrill looked amused. “When you grow up in a cliff-side town, you get used to it.” He followed Corry’s gaze. “All that green and brown near the foot of the cliff is Kazar Swamp. It rises into savanna along that greenish, goldish area, and there...” he made a broad arc with his arm, “is the Anola Desert.”

Corry stared at the sea of golden brown, stretching away and away to the horizon. Here and there tiny dots and ripples broke the desert’s monotony, but one point stood out above the rest. “Iron Mountain?” asked Corry. The dark spike reared like a tooth from the distant sand.

“The largest centaur city. Incidentally, Targon, their new king is supposed to be present for the festival. It will be his first meeting with Shadock and Meuril.”

“Are those mountains in the distance?” Corry squinted.

“Yes, the Pendalon range. Pegasus and their shelts live in the Pendalons, but they haven’t sent representatives to the festival in the last few years on account of their war with the griffins and Grishnards. Beyond the mountains is an ocean—a desert of water.

“This bridge,” he continued as he turned away, “is a monument to cliff and wood faun alliance, erected less than a hundred years after the wizard wars.”

Corry turned to the inner side of the bridge, overlooking the city. “What are those?” he asked, pointing to two dry shoots opening off the main river.

“Those are the alternate falls. Every few years, the cliff fauns turn the river into those channels and repair the cliff which the water has chiseled away.”

“And what’s the portcullis-looking-thing under the bridge?”

“An emergency measure to stop large boats. I once saw a ship sucked into the falls. All the fauns got off in time, but they couldn’t save the ship. It broke apart and went down to Dandalay in pieces. Little boats go over frequently—stupid kids playing betting games. There’s been a push for years to double the number of bars in order to save smaller boats, but it costs money that so far the city council has seen fit to spend on other things.”

After an uncomfortable moment of staring into the churning water and wondering what it would be like to sail over the edge in a small boat, Corry got back on his doe. Syrill led them

down through the other side of town until they came to a dry sluice that angled away from the river. A flight of steps took them to the bottom. They walked along the sluice, together with quite a few other travelers, until it turned into a tunnel. A round stone door stood open to the traffic. Two cliff faun guards stood beside it, flashing in their gilded breastplates. Corry recognized one of them.

“Jubal!” exclaimed Syrrill. “So they’ve put you on gate duty today?”

Jubal smiled. Like Chance, he had golden curly hair falling to his shoulders. However, Corry could see no other resemblance. Although all cliff fauns had paler skin than wood fauns, Jubal could have been called dark beside Chance, and he had a natural, easy charm that could not be less like the stiff angry prince.

Jubal put his hand on Syrrill’s shoulder in greeting. “This year’s feast has drawn unusually large crowds. Can you believe all the shelts? And the cats! Maybe it’s just the rebound from the war years when we couldn’t have any cats.”

Syrrill snorted. “I suppose letting in the rabble does enlarge the crowd. A question of quantity over quality.”

Jubal burst out laughing. “Forgive me! I forgot that I’m not suppose to say the word *cat* around General Syrrill. A thousand pardons, your honor.”

For all he appreciated the sentiment, Corry was surprised that Syrrill didn’t fly into a rage. Instead, he almost chuckled. “Corellian, I don’t think you’ve been formally introduced to this

troublemaker. Jubal is from my hometown. I remember him chasing Blix out of his bean sprouts before Blix grew his first set of antlers.”

“I remember chasing *you* out of my little sister’s bedroom,” rejoined Jubal, “before you got your first—”

“And then,” interrupted Syrrill with a cough, “Jubal went to seek his fortune in the big cities and so did I.”

Jubal shook his head at Syrrill. He turned to Corry. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Corellian. I saw you at the Raider hanging fiasco, and of course I’ve heard of you. Welcome to Danda-lay.” He indicated the tunnel, and Corry and Syrrill led their deer inside.

The tunnel walls were polished so smooth that Corry thought water must have been the original architect. Lanterns lined the passage. Corry also noticed what looked like trapdoors in the walls. Instead of handles, a wooden paddle protruded from each. “What are those?”

“Water gates,” answered Syrrill. “If Danda-lay is ever attacked. The river is their ultimate protection. They can open the sluice gates to this channel and another on the opposite side of the Tiber-wan.” He pointed to the paddles. “These are designed to catch the pull of the river and open. They connect to underground portions of the Tiber-wan and would supplement the initial burst, making it very difficult for a would-be attacker to damn the river from above. Danda-lay is designed to withstand almost endless siege.”

The passage had begun to wind and slope steeply downward. Corry began to hear, and also to feel, a dull rumble through the stone. The sound grew louder, until Syrrill had to shout to

be heard. Finally Corry saw a speck of daylight ahead. The row of lanterns ended. A fresh breeze mingled with a fine spray of water hit Corry in the face as he reached the threshold of the tunnel.

Huge stone steps fell away at their feet, curving left. The sluice itself went on into an enormous pool. Above their heads, the waterfall plummeted into this reservoir, sending up a constant spray and thunder. Looking out towards the cliff's edge, Corry saw the tallest buildings he'd yet encountered in Panamindorah—heaps of elaborately ordered masonry, homes built upon homes and carved from other homes, all agleam with polished rock and precious stones. To his right, stood what must be the palace—a series of even more elaborate buildings carved into the cliff face and curving in a half circle around the waterfall's pool. A wide radius of smooth rock around the pool separated it and the palace area from the city and reminded Corry of a much grander version of Laven-lay's parade ground.

Syrill was shouting in his ear. "Danda-lay was originally built on a natural shelf of the cliff," he bawled, "but as you can see, it's outgrown itself. Some of it is inside the cliff now, and other parts have just piled up."

Corry nodded. Statues of fauns, cliff sheep, deer, cats, centaurs, and unrecognizable creatures crouched or reared from the walls and parapets. Gemstones glittered in their eyes. Everywhere he looked, Corry saw the purple flag of Danda-lay with its white flower. As they descended the steps, he noticed something else in the wide plaza between the pool and the entrance to the main street: a Monument. As they drew closer, Corry couldn't help but stare at it. The enormous pair of wings gleamed golden, beaded with moisture from the falls. *They can't*

*light it, of course, in the spray*, but as he drew nearer, he saw that the wings shielded a flame on the city side, apparently fed by a supply of oil from the base of the statue.

Syrill stopped beside the monument. The wings towered fully thrice the height of Blix's antlers. "It's huge," Corry said, now far enough from the falls to speak in a normal voice.

"Largest in Panamindorah," said Syrill. "Very old, too. The scholars claim that it predates the Wizard Wars, but it still has a part in the festival."

"Oh?"

"They douse it with oil and light it on the final day," said Syrill. "Very pretty. They say in ancient times, the Prophet used to light the fire. Now the king does it."

"Prophet?" asked Corry. He'd never read about this.

"Yes, the Prophet of Panamindorah. In the time of Gabalon, they say the Prophet went bad, and we haven't had one since."

"So this ceremony predates Gabalon?" Corry was more attentive now.

"Oh, yes," said Syrill. "Very ancient, Lupricasia."

He glanced at Corry's doe, who was fidgeting and rolling her eyes. "Forest-bred deer don't like this city much. Perhaps we should put them in the palace gardens before going out."

"Our deer have quarters in the palace?" asked Corry in surprise.

"As do we," chuckled Syrill. "Where did you expect I'd stay? Shadock provides accommodations for all the royal officials."

The palace at Danda-lay made Laven-lay's castle look like a glorified hill-fort. After they had left the deer in a small but beautiful garden, a servant led them through a maze of halls, chambers, and courtyards. The palace had been built up and built upon and enlarged and enhanced until it was practically a city unto itself. Washers, cooks, tailors, smiths, butlers, and maids came and went in a steady stream, carrying supplies and messages and talking loudly to each other with a general air of festivity. Corry was dazzled by one carved ceiling after another, some of them overlaid with gold and silver and mother of pearl. Plush draperies and intricately woven tapestries adorned room after room and hall after hall. Fine wool and goat-hair rugs covered the dressed stone floors. Statues lined many of the courtyards and council rooms. Some of them made Corry blush. Syrill noticed this and amused himself with a running commentary.

"And this statue depicts the fabled hero, Clarion the centaur, who took an enchantress to wife. She made love to him in the form of a—"

"Syrill, I can *see*," snapped Corry.

"Not if you keep looking at the floor. I thought you were a shelt for the arts, Corellian."

"I'd rather visit the library," he mumbled.

Finally they left the busiest part of the castle and started up a tower stair. The servant stopped at a door on one landing. Corry caught the faint odors of sandalwood and cedar. "Your room, sir," he said to Syrill. "We've supplied two beds as you requested. We'd house your guest separately, but accommodations are tight during the festival."

“I’m sure this will do,” said Syrill with a wave of his hand. The apartment was not nearly so flashy or large as that in the Unsoos, but Corry suspected the pictures on the walls were priceless antiques, and the gold edging on the wash basin was probably not paint. A glance out a window told Corry that they were high in the air, a little to one side of the waterfall, allowing them a view over the roofs of the city to the far away desert.

The servant cleared his voice. “Sir is wanted in Council this morning. King Meuril asked me to remind you.”

“Oh.” Syrill frowned.

“That’s alright.” Corry was still looking out the window. “Just point me towards the library.”

“It’s confusing. You’ll need a guide.” Syrill tossed the servant a coin. “I’m not in yet.”

The servant tossed it back. “King Meuril begs me to remind sir that he will have sir’s ears if he is not at the meeting.”

Syrill rolled his eyes. “Another thing about Danda-lay,” he said to Corry. “They call everyone by the same name here. You can’t hardly figure out who they’re speaking to.”

The servant sighed. “He saw you come in, *Syrill*.”

Syrill ground his teeth. “Alright, I’m coming. Corry, I’ll be in the meeting hall almost directly below this room. We came through on the way here. You can’t miss it: long wood table, tapestries include the love affair of the nymph and the dragon prince.”

Corry gave Syrill a twisted smile. “You never quit, do you?”



“I bet you remember the room now.”

“I remember it.”

For several minutes after he left, Corry stood at the window, listening to the throb of the waterfall. He could see shelts and animals coming and going in the courtyard. He saw soil in some of the carts and surmised that it had to be imported. *I'll bet none of the sewage goes to waste here, either.* It was not a pleasant thought before dinner. Traffic picked up as the sun rose towards noon. Corry spotted several centaurs strolling around the pool. He had not been wearing his sword, but now he got it out and put it on. He'd seen other shelts armed wearing dress swords. Surely no one would look twice at his.

Noon came and went, but still Syrill did not return. Corry's stomach growled. He wondered why the meeting was taking so long. Late afternoon shadows had begun to stretch across the plaza when he heard voices on the stairs. *That doesn't sound like Syrill.* Suddenly the door flew open, and Corry saw two tiger cubs—youngsters whose heads came only to his waist.

Their chattering voices stopped abruptly. The cub in front was white with black stripes and blue eyes. The other was a more traditional orange and black with green eyes. “I told you I saw someone come up!” hissed the orange cub. He turned and fled.

“Tolomy!” the white cub called after him. She glanced at Corry, then bounded from the room.

“Wait!” called Corry. “Who are you?” He trotted down the steps in pursuit of the cubs. After several flights, he stopped hearing their voices, and by the time he reached the hall where the servant had brought him up, he was forced to admit he had lost them.

Corry sat down on the cool stone step to recover his breath. He was lightheaded, having eaten nothing since breakfast. Along the hallway to his left, he could see massive wooden doors—the entrance to the room of questionable tapestries. He could smell food somewhere nearby. *Will they never finish that meeting?*

At that moment, the doors opened.

## Chapter 9. A Meeting of the Inner Council

We've introduced the players each

Although it's yet to be seen

Which will prove to be the pawns

And which will be the kings

--faun nursery rhyme

Her eyes were slitted, like his sister's. Slitted eyes had grown rare among the slaves, and Char liked to watch them grow round when she was excited. She had been a house slave and lacked the calluses and dead expressions of those from the mines.

Being with her reminded Char of the time before—of his first family. He couldn't remember his mother, but he could remember his littermates. They'd been four—two male and two female—playing in the sun by day, sleeping all in a heap at night. Then the fauns had taken away the smallest, and they had been three. Soon after, the largest of the litter had been taken as well. Char was sure he'd gone to the quarry, and the thought still made him shudder. The biggest quarry slaves turned the heavy windlass that ground the stone used in the construction of the great houses. They grew so strong and dangerous that the fauns blinded them and kept them chained to their poles day and night. They did not live long. Char hoped that his brother had not grown big enough to turn the windlass.

He felt fortunate to have been chosen for the gem mines—hard work, but not crushing. More importantly, the slaves were both male and female, and he and his remaining sister were

kept together. Last fall, some of the males had tried to breed her, but she had fought, and he had fought with her. Once the cycle started, she would be forced to bare two to three litters per year until her body collapsed. Breeding females didn't live much longer than the windlass slaves.

Daren's choice of mates for him was different, though. She was considerably older than he and yet had born no litters, which Char thought remarkable. In the dark, when her eyes were round and bright, she would whisper to him things that made his heart race. She talked of shelts other than swamp fauns and other than slaves. She had seen one once, though her mistress had beaten her for it. She had watched at the door while the stranger stood in the library and talked to her lord. "The stranger's leg-fur was the color of cream and very curly. His hair was golden and his skin fair."

There were other shelts too, she said. Once she'd seen huge hoof prints in the dirt yard—a solid hoof like a burrow, but many times bigger. "I heard their deep voices, but we were locked in our kennels, so I couldn't see. I know this: they were not swamp fauns. They were *other*, and they were free. We are *other*, too, Char. What the fauns do to us is wrong."

Char had never considered whether his condition was *wrong*. Today was better than yesterday, or it was worse. But the duties of house slaves had not been so backbreaking, had included more talk, had given her time to think. She was called Crimson, for the deep red of her hair and the red-gold of her fur.

Gradually Char stopped wondering who was listening at the door, stopped leaping up at every sound. Their jailers came and went at predictable times. They were even provided with

good food and a few simple games—cards and a board with pieces. Crimson knew the games and taught him how to play.

Char had heard of a wedding and vaguely recalled that it had something to do with a union of swamp faun houses and generally meant that the gem mines would be inspected and a great many slaves beaten. Crimson had a different idea about weddings. She'd seen more of the details in a house where her lord and lady took no more notice of her than of a dog. Except, of course, when she was alone with the lord. "He taught me things I did not think I wanted to learn," she told Char, "but it was not so bad. At least I did not grow old in my fourteenth year with bearing litters. My lord even made me happy sometimes, when it pleased him."

She made him stand with her and braided their tails together with a piece of ribbon and made a great show of drinking from the same cup of water that she said was their wedding wine. But once he'd decided to take her, Char cared nothing about swamp faun ceremonies. He made the show to please her and then became so nervous that he tangled the ribbon in their tails. Crimson giggled while he tried to unravel the mess. That calmed him a little. Then she pounced, sent them tumbling across the floor, and he forgot about the ribbon.

When she began to grow round with young, Char felt a surge of pride and protectiveness. At times he thought he could almost forgive Daren for murdering his sister. *He was right. She would not have survived the summer. And he gave me Crimson.*

And then a day came when the guards entered at an uncommon hour. Char and Crimson were playing a card game. They'd been talking and stopped in mid-sentence.

Daren came in behind the guards. Char's stomach rose at the sight of him, though he'd thought he was through hating. Daren looked around serenely. He glanced at his kennel master, who'd come in last. "A lovely arrangement. You say we've got half a dozen like this?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Build a dozen more. I've already got some dams in mind, and my chief overseer has at least two sires on his list."

His eyes fell on Crimson, sitting with her eyes downcast at the little table. Daren strolled over and placed one hand on her round belly. He glanced at Char. "Well, done. If these whelps have your courage and her temper, I'll be pleased."

He glanced at his guards. "Take him to block seventeen."

Char gaped. "B-but, my lord! Why are you—? I have done as you asked!"

Daren took two steps and stood nose to nose with him. "Indeed." Then he hit Char so hard across side of the head that his ear rang. Daren hissed into the other ear. "Did you think that I would ever allow a slave to draw a sword on me and die in his bed? Brave you may be, but still a fool, more so to think I'd forget. Now go join your sister."

The guards dragged Char from the hut. Over their shoulders, he glimpsed Crimson's pale face, heard her scream his name. He thrashed, roared, bit, but they had him secure, and as they loaded him onto the wagon a paralysis descended. *Daren knew all the time what he planned to do with me. From the moment he whipped me on the plank road. He didn't think I had enough to lose then, so he gave me something. Just so he could take it away.*

Colors seemed to drain from the world. Even smells had less meaning. *I am already dead*, he thought. *The earth is already forgetting me*. His children would never know him, perhaps never know Crimson. *How many generations will Daren want between his soldier slaves and me?* His offspring would be bred and then discarded, and probably theirs and theirs after.

Much later, as the wagon was passing through the ugly iron gates of block seventeen, as the gray buildings appeared like poison mushrooms from the swamp, as he caught the first smells of blood and death, Char thought of something else. *A shelt who has nothing left to lose has nothing left to fear*.

\* \* \* \*

Corry stood back and watched the council members stream past. The first had to be Shadock. The king was tall for a faun, broad-shouldered, with dark hair only faintly grizzled. He must have been as old as Meuril, but he wore his years better. His clothes were ornate—a cape of purple samite lined with wolf fur over a light wool robe, white and slashed with purple silk. A dress sword in a jeweled scabbard hung from a silver belt at his waist, and a slender crown of white gold encircled his temples. His family came behind him. The crown prince looked very like his father, except that his hair was still ink black, and his cheeks full and smooth. Two girls and five more boys followed.

Chance came last. Among all the royal children, he was the only golden head. Corry knew the fact must contribute to the rumors about his pedigree. Most cliff fauns were fair-haired. Dark hair ran mainly in a few noble houses.

Queen Istra, however, was also golden. She walked behind the last of her children, talking to a cliff faun Corry did not recognize. Istra was beautiful in a faded sort of way. She had Chance's pallor and also his defiant tilt of the chin.

Meuril looked plain in his blue and green robes. He was talking to Shaddock. Capricia trailed a little behind Chance. She looked tired, Corry thought, but beautiful in fur-trimmed cream silk with dagged sleeves so long they nearly swept the floor. Her hair fell down her back in a cascade of cinnamon curls. Syrril was walking with her and talking earnestly, his green plumed hat his only nod to Danda-lay's fashions.

Corry saw a dark fauness walking with Capricia and Syrril and decided she must be Sharon-zool, the swamp faun queen. She had smooth, straight black hair, cut short to her chin in the swamp faun fashion, just visible under an ornate headpiece that Corry recognized from books as the swamp faun badge of royalty. It looked more helmet than crown—iridescent scales, said to be dragon skin, that lay smooth against her head and cascaded down to her shoulders. They caught the light with every turn of her head. Her clothes were white leather worked with scales of lapis lazuli that matched the turquoise and green of her crown, and she wore breeches rather than a dress according to swamp faun custom.

The centaurs came behind, dwarfing the fauns. Corry knew their king at once. Targon walked with the fluid movements of a deer in spite of his bulk. His fur was blood red—almost the color of the centaur flag. His bobbed, glossy black tail swished restlessly. On his human torso, he wore only a short black cape with red trim and elaborately embroidered high collar,



which covered only part of his heavily muscled belly and chest. His human hair was the same color as his tail—black with no trace of gray. He had sharp, deeply intelligent green eyes and a neatly trimmed goatee. Corry noticed that he wore a coiled battle whip as shelts might wear a sword.

Lexis was talking to Targon, and for once he looked small, his head coming only to the centaur's horse shoulders. Other cats walked behind him, all of whom Corry recognized: Ounce the snow leopard, Nolfie the black leopard, Liliana the lioness, Loop the lynx, and Cleo the ocelot. They were the same council members who'd fled with Lexis to Meuril in the dead of night to broker a treaty, and they'd been frequently in and out of the wood faun court since then. A number of other fauns milled around the edges of the party, each wearing chains of office.

Corry's eyes kept returning to Targon. *Something about him is familiar.* He looked nothing like the centaur Corry had left in the Otherwhere, but still... The almost-human head turned, and Corry ducked back into the shadow of the staircase. He didn't know why, but he didn't want to be seen. He breathed a sigh of relief as Targon moved into the next room.

"Corry!" Syrril had spotted him. "You must be starving!"

Over his shoulder, Corry saw a palace guard leaving the meeting hall. It was Jubal.

## 10. Furs and Filinians

A Filinian throne may be inherited, but Filinian loyalty never is.

--Demitri of Alynia to his heir

Liliana the lioness swerved into a passage and set off at a brisk trot, the noise of the other councilors fading rapidly behind her.

“Lily.”

She turned. The ocelot had followed her. Cleo’s eyes were green-gold and they filled her exquisitely marked face. The eyes looked soft and shy, but the voice had claws. “Where are you going?”

Liliana’s lip curled. “Attend to your own affairs, slant-eyes, and let me attend to mine.”

Cleo’s voice dropped to a hiss. “If your *affairs* threaten my life, I will most certainly attend to them!”

“Have a care, Cleo,” rumbled the lioness.

“No, *you* have a care. Listen to me: he won’t do it, not if you let it be. We can all live. Do you hear me? *Let it be*. Otherwise, you will get us killed!”

Liliana took a step towards her, stiff-legged, lips pulled up in a noiseless snarl. “You stuttering mouse-catcher, I was gutting deer when you were still kneading your mother’s belly, so don’t talk to me about killing! We’re dead, right now unless we *act*.”

Cleo backed off a pace. “Lexis is not Demitri.”

“Pough!” Liliana spat. “You know nothing. He’s his father’s cub, and his father had impeccable timing. This festival is it. Have you seen the way Syrill looks at him? The war debts aren’t paid. You can wait to be spent like a cowry if you like; I won’t.”

They parted growling. Cleo was nonplussed as she emerged again in the foyer by the council chamber to see a palace guard. She glared at him, half inclined to ask how much he’d heard, then thought better of it and trotted away.

Jubal watched her, frowning.

\* \* \* \*

“This,” said Syrill as he and Corry stood on a wide, stone-paved walk, “is Chance’s famous statue, commissioned in honor of his promotional ceremony after fighting bravely with us in the cat wars. I think it was the first and only time Shadock paid him any attention.”

Corry looked at the statue—a life-size image of Chance in full battle dress, atop a stag. “They’ve repaired it, of course,” continued Syrill, “but you can still see the line where the wolflings gelded the buck and took off the antlers.” Syrill laughed. “I doubt they even knew who Chance was at the time, but he’s made sure they know since.”

Corry and Syrill were strolling on the Sky Walk—a scenic Broadway along the very brink of the cliff. A waist-height wall ran along the edge, fashioned from the same warm, rose-colored stone as the pavement. Syrill had wanted to catch the sunset before dinner. Other shelts and animals came and went around them, enjoying the view or selling things to those who were.

A cliff faun child, one of a number of urchins, sidled up to them. He was dressed in a ragged tunic that might have once been yellow. He held a stringed instrument that looked like a cross between a banjo and a violin. “Would sirs like a song?” He noticed Chance’s statue and added, “Perhaps the Lay of the Prince’s Magical Gallows?”

Corry shook his head. He had heard the Lay of the Prince’s Magical Gallows in more versions than he could remember. The song had grown popular in Laven-lay, where minstrels were less careful to veil their references to Chance. The most recent version Corry had heard made the observation that “princes with small towers are like to build high gallows” and finished with the cunning remark that, “like a certain statue in Danda-lay town, the prince’s tall gallows came tumbling down.” The statue, of course, had never fallen, but everyone knew what part of it had.

“We’ve heard that one a few times,” said Syrrill.

Corry could tell Syrrill was about to send him on his way, but he felt sorry for the child. “What’s popular in Danda-lay?” he asked. “Something we wouldn’t have heard in Laven-lay.”

The young minstrel-hopeful considered. Corry doubted he’d ever been anywhere near Laven-lay. “The Unicorn Maid and the Monster?” he hazarded.

Syrrill rolled his eyes. “Yes, there’s one from my childhood. They only sing it cliff-side to frightened children away from the swamp. It’s classic, though. Sing away, kid.”

“Very good, sirs.” He settled himself at the foot of the statue and began.

*In the dark of the moon in a time long ago—*

“I was wanting to ask you something,” said Corry. “While I was sitting in our room, two cubs came running up the stairs.”

“*Cubs?*” Syrrill bristled. “As in, feline cubs?”

*--a maiden rare, with eyes of gold and silver hair—*

“Yes, and they—”

“In *my* room?”

“Syrrill, just listen to me. They didn’t know the room was occupied. They ran when they saw me.”

“They’d have run a deal faster if I’d been there!”

*But the guide he sent to bring his bride*

*Lost his head where the bandits ride*

*And a storm blew up the mountainside*

*And darkened the all halls.*

“They were tiger cubs,” continued Corry patiently, “one orange, one white.”

“How typical,” muttered Syrrill, “for him to let his brats run wild in the palace.”

“They belong to Lexis then?”

*—wandered far, she wandered wide,*

*lonely steps on the mountainside,*

*fleeing the place where the bandits ride*

*until she slipped and fell*

Syrill was still grumbling. “And he’s brought both of them! That striped cur is determined to bathe the wood in blood. And they were prowling in *my* room! Shaddock will hear of this.”

*Until his ears bleed*, thought Corry. “I wouldn’t exactly call it ‘prowling,’ Syrill. How can two cubs running around at Lupricasia bathe the wood in blood?”

*Deep in the swamp where the trees crouch low*

*hard in the dark of the moon,*

*the unicorn maid crawled into a cave*

*And found she was not alone.*

*Oh! She found she was not alooone!*

Syrill shook his head. “It’s an old Filinian custom. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

*—saved her from their fearful jaws,*

*He shattered snouts and crushed their paws*

*And carried her away.*

*‘But worse than lizards prowl the swamp.’*

*The stranger came to say,*

*oh, the stranger came to saaay!*

“Traditionally, the tiger kings separate their alpha litter as soon as the cubs are weaned and rear them in different parts of Filinia or at least in different parts of the palace. They never see one another until their second birthday, when they fight to the death, one by one, tournament

style. Whoever's left standing is the heir. Often, the second and even third litters are kept separate in case the winner dies of wounds."

*And some say the stranger had her to dine*

*And some say he had her to wife.*

*But all agree, nevermore she*

*walked in the realms of the light.*

The minstrel finished, and Corry and Syrril stopped their conversation to give him polite applause. He stood and bowed. "Would sirs like another?"

"No thanks, kid. Go find someone else to strum for." Syrril tossed him a white cowry and turned back to Corry. "I told you that you wouldn't understand."

"That's barbarous, Syrril. I hope Lexis ends the practice."

"A barbarous practice for a barbarous race. The wisdom of the ancients is behind it. Lexis has so far refused to separate these cubs, and it will mean trouble. Filinians are notoriously hungry for dominance. This will mean civil war."

"I would have thought you would be happy about cats killing each other."

Syrril snorted. "If only it stopped at that! But civil war in Filinian always means trouble for us. Losers and refugees come to hide and hunt in our forests. Poor game-management in Filinia creates famine there, and raiding parties from both sides descend on our deer and our children. No, Lexis's indulgence of his cubs is only kindness on the surface. Underneath lies a callous disregard for the lives of all the shelts and cats who will die because of his 'kindness.'"

*And if he'd acted according to custom, you'd call him a monster for that, too, wouldn't you, Syrill?* "What are their names?" asked Corry.

"Leesha and Tolomy. Creator be thanked, there were only two. The white female is the true dominant, or so I hear. The male, Tolomy, is afraid of his own shadow." He laughed. "Their father's personality split down the middle: the tyrant and the coward!"

Corry winced. He glanced around to make sure no cats were passing nearby and noticed a welcome distraction. "That vender looks unusual."

Syrill squinted. "Mmm... Looks like he's coming from the market."

The swamp faun pushed a booth with a brightly painted canopy. A number of fur garments dangled from the corners. Corry walked over for a better look.

The merchant stopped when he saw him. "Fine, warm furs," he boomed. "Most are waterproof. I've raw pelts, as well as ready made hats, gloves, muffs, capes, and cloaks." He frowned. "Unfortunately, I'm nearly sold out. If you come tomorrow at the market, I'll have a better selection."

While he talked, Corry examined the merchandise. The fur was extremely soft and dense. "I've needed a good cap all winter," he said, taking one. The swamp faun smiled. "Ahh! You have an eye for quality. That is Shay-shoo fur. Very fine."

"Shay-shoo?" commented Syrill, showing interest for the first time. "There's been a bit of talk about that. Some creature from the northern jungles? I hear that you're starting a breeding facility in Kazar."



“Ah, yes. We have lowered the price. This fur is twice as warm as pelts of the same thickness. It sheds water well and will not freeze.”

“Like good quality cat pelts,” chirped Syrill, making Corry cringe again. “Since the embargo on cat fur, I hear Shy-shoo has really become popular. Too bad about the embargo.”

“I’ll take the cap,” said Corry, mostly so that Syrill would shut up.

The merchant gave him change in marked salt cakes. Like many cowries, they had a hole for stringing. Corry had seen them occasionally in Laven-lay, though salt had grown so rare in the last few years that most had been ground up for use. He walked away, fingering the downy cap. It was cream and sand colored with scattered leopard-like patterns.

“You should have bargained more,” grumbled Syrill. “He cheated you.”

Corry settled the cap on his head. “And have to walk away and walk back and shout and call him names? I’d rather just pay the extra cowries.”

“Whatever you were before you lost your memory, it wasn’t a merchant.”

Corry laughed.

Syrill plucked the cap off his head and examined it. “There’s a pattern back here that looks like a bull’s eye. Bound to be poor luck in battle. You could have used that for leverage.”

“When am I going to be in battle, Syrill? Let’s find something to eat.”

## 11. Salt and a Book

*There are fundamental differences between animals and shelts, and they ought never to forget this when dealing with each other. Shelts often conclude that, because beasts do not deal in currency, beasts are at a disadvantage. The truth is quite the opposite.*

--Archemais, *A Wizard's History of Panamindorah*

"It's a pegasus!" Corry couldn't stop staring.

"Or a very large and ugly stork." Syrill put down his glass of hyacinth wine.

Corry stood up to get a better view. "I've never seen one before. I thought they only lived in the Pandalons."

"Oh, there are a handful living in exile here. I used a couple for surveillance during the cat wars." Syrill sighed. "The ones I used were both killed. I should have left them on the cliffs."

Corry was still staring at the animal in the street across from their cluster of tables. "Do you know him?"

"I know everyone."

"Will you call him over?"

Syrill stood up and whistled. The pegasus turned his head, then started towards them. Syrill sat back down. "He's not likely to be happy to see me. I got his brother killed."

But the animal seemed amiable enough. He was big as a centaur, but not so bulky. Closer, Corry saw that he was a dusky gray, with a blaze of striking scarlet on his forehead. The pegasus was completely feathered. A crest of long primary feathers formed his "mane," which

rose and fell in oddly expressive gestures as he talked. His tail had a bone like a horse's tail, so that the feathers did not all start from his rump. The down of his body lay so smooth that it looked like fur from a distance, and his fetlocks were thick and shaggy. His wings were huge, even folded, and their joints jutted out in front. His ears were like a shelt's—long and tufted.

The pegasus came through the press at a hop, and Corry saw that he was missing a front leg. "Hello, Syrill!" He had a pleasant accent. "Who's your friend?" He took a sniff at Corry's head and wrinkled his downy nose. "Better, *what's* your friend?"

Syrill smiled. "Corellian, this is Merlyn. He was doing reconnaissance for Shaddock when I was still chasing rabbits on the cliff. Merlyn, this is Corellian, the iteration who saved Laylan's trap key...and me."

The pegasus's eyes widened. "Iteration, eh? That's why he smells like nothing shelt-ish."

Corry reached out a hand, which sank deep in the down of Merlyn's neck. He was surprised at how bony the animal felt, the skin warm beneath the cool feathers. "You must look half as big wet."

"Oh, yes," chirped the pegasus, "and these bones are hollow." The long joints of his wings buffed Corry gently on either side of the head. "But that doesn't mean I can't break a skull with one of these."

"Or those." Syrill gestured to the pegasus's hooves. He swirled his wine. "A pegasus is a formidable enemy for a shelt, but not, unfortunately, for a big cat."

The pegasus's eyes glistened. "I've killed a cat or three."

“I’m sorry about Eryl, Merlyn.”

“The leopards did that, Syrill.”

“They wouldn’t have if he’d stayed on the cliff.”

“Mercenary’s luck; you didn’t make him come. We’ve all got to die sometime.”

The pegasus glanced at the table and saw the change from their meal lying there, including two more salt cakes. “Now there’s a story in a picture,” he said.

“Yes,” said Syrill bitterly. “A story Meuril needs to read.”

Corry looked at the salt cakes. One was old and gray, pocked where moisture had chiseled at the stony salt. The other was new-minted, almost clear with a trace of red magnesium. The new cake bore the buck’s head stamp of Laven-lay. Corry tried to make out the stamp on the old salt cake, but it was weathered. He thought he saw a half moon and some kind of bird.

“Should I know this story?” he asked warily, wondering if Syrill was about to say something that would insult the lion two tables away.

Merlyn and Syrill glanced at each other. “This,” Syrill tapped the new salt cake, “paid for his meal.” He jerked a finger at the lion.

Corry shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I mean,” continued Syrill, “part of our treaty with the cats included access to the salt works in Canisaria. Salt was growing dear as silver before the war ended. It had almost left circulation as coin, but now it’s coming back, and not bearing the wolfling stamp. Now it bears our stamp.”

“Which doesn’t bode well,” put in Merlyn, “considering what happened to the wolflings.”

“So how does that pay for the lion’s meal?” asked Corry.

Syrill spread his hands. “Simple. The vendors keep track of all Filinian sales and give the bill to Meuril.”

“Or Shaddock,” put in Merlyn. “He’s wanting a slice of the orange now, too, from what I hear. Talking to Lexis about re-opening the gold mines in the Snow Mountains. There’s tin up there, too, that the centaurs would give their eyeteeth to get their hands on.”

“A cat will stand in an open door,” Syrill quoted a proverb.

“And you won’t see till the last minute which way he means to jump,” muttered Merlyn.

Corry was beginning to understand. He knew that gold and silver coins constituted only the highest denomination of currency in Panamindorah. The fauns used cowries by common agreement, salt because it had uses in practically every industry, and gems, as well as bartered goods. The only large gold mines were in the Snow Mountains—cat country to which no shelt had had access for years, and the cats themselves certainly weren’t going to put the gold into circulation. The largest salt works were in cat-conquered Canisaria and in old Filinia. “So, Meuril pays the vendors the Filinian bills and is allowed to mine a certain volume of salt from Filinian territory?”

Syrill nodded.

“Makes sense—” began Corry.

Merlyn snorted. “The wolflings thought so, too. Canisaria was a rich nation before it fell. They had salt treaties and gold treaties with Filinia, paid the cat-debts at Lupricasia right up until the last one they attended. For Meuril, the treaty with the cats may have been about revenge for Natalia. He thought the wolflings ate his wife, so he turned the cats loose to eat wolflings all over the wood. But for the wood faun nobility, the treaty was all about greed.”

“Right now,” growled Syrril, “the treaty gives us access to salt works and guarantees feline aid in the extermination of wolflings from the wood. The cats may hunt any beast other than deer in the wilds, but they are not to hunt anything but wolves and wolflings less than one king’s league from a faun town or city and half a king’s league for a faun village.”

“That’s the treaty *now*,” said Merlyn, “but it won’t last. Merchants are greedy. The wolflings were. The fauns are no different. Soon they’ll say, ‘We’d like a piece of those silver mines too, Lexis.’ And Lexis will say, ‘Certainly, but we’d like to hunt a bit closer to your towns.’ And the fauns will think, ‘Where’s the harm in that? The cats protect us from bandits and wild beasts.’”

“And then,” continued Syrril, “one day, the fauns will want more salt or gold, and Lexis will say, ‘Certainly, but we’d like to be able to kill deer not kept by fauns in your wood. After all, we kill them in Canisaria.’ And the fauns will say to themselves, ‘Well, they’re not *our* deer. The cats have to eat...and then there’s that gold.’”

“And,” Merlyn continued, “a few years later, when the fauns have gotten used to seeing cats in their streets and having their dens in their backyards, shelts will start disappearing. Slaves

at first, criminals working in Filinian mines. Then strangers—swamp faun visitors, outsiders, orphans, urchins, wandering minstrels. That will go on for a few years and no one will much mind, and the fauns will get richer and form more lucrative trade agreements, and their neighbors will become jealous and quarrelsome, but they'll snub their noses at those neighbors because they have Filinian treaties. And pretty soon the Filinians will be their only friends."

"And then one day," said Syrill, "the cat king—maybe a new king now—will suggest that faun criminals should be given to them. They're to be put to death anyhow."

Corry looked skeptical. "I can see where you're going, but—?"

"And *then*," continued Merlyn, "the cats will suggest that any shelt beyond a league from a city without a legitimate reason is fare game. The king will argue for a bit, but then the cats will threaten to withdraw access to their mines, perhaps point out that neighboring kingdoms would pounce at the chance to do business with the cats and so be revenged on their wood faun rivals. And the wood faun king will give in. He's made too many enemies now, has too many jealous neighbors, maybe has some wars to pay for."

"That's what happened to the wolflings?" asked Corry.

"Over several generations, yes," said Merlyn. "But by the way the cliff and wood faun merchants are running to offer themselves to Lexis, it won't take that long here."

Syrill nodded. "There's a reason all the cat shelts are extinct. Cats are treacherous, and they kill shelts, always. The wolflings were little better than kept-burrows before the end. They were wealthy burrows, but Demitri regulated their every move. King Malic tried to stop it."

“He put his paw down,” said Merlyn. “He dared to tell Demitri not to kill shelts anymore in Canisaria, but by then it was too late. The cats were everywhere. They knew the country too well. Sardor-de-lore held out for several years, but without help, it was bound to fall.”

“The cliff fauns were jealous of wolfling wealth and the wood fauns were smarting over the incident with the queen,” finished Syrill. “The wolflings had grown too arrogant in their wealth, and no one came to help them. When Sador-de-lore fell, it was red slaughter.” Someone else shouted to Merlyn. He turned, saw someone he recognized, and hopped off.

Syrill watched him go. “Don’t let that grin fool you. Any pegasus living on the cliff has seen black times. It’s the mountains they dream of until their dying day, and this cliff isn’t the same. He can’t ever go home.”

Corry stared into the black sky. *Like me. Only his home is far distant, and mine is far past.* Then he remembered something. “Syrill, what was the song about? The song the little minstrel sang on the Sky Walk. Something that happened in Kazar?”

Syrill laughed. “In Kazar, yes, but I don’t know that it ever happened. The Unibus disappeared four hundred years ago, probably got finished off by Ounce’s kin. The swamp monster, now, he’s alive and well, if you believe all the old faunesses cliffside.”

“Unibus,” repeated Corry. “Ah, yes, the Unicorn Maid.” He had read about Unibus—unicorn shelts. They were creatures of legend, said to know something of magic. The last survivors had fled into the Snow Mountains, deep in Filinia in the time of Gabalon. Corry had



heard tales of sightings by snow leopards, but never by fauns. *The Unibus would have been alive in my time*, thought Corry.

Syrill was still speaking. “Every time a shelt or animal goes missing in Kazar, they blame it on their monster—a monster made of quickslime and alligators most likely. No one can agree on what he looks like. Some say he’s a shelt—a wolfling or a lizard rider or even a cat shelt. Some say he’s a wizard or an iteration. If he exists, he must be either very old or very prolific, because mothers have been frightening their children away from the swamp with his stories since my grandmother was a babe. They say he keeps a pet cobra—a huge snake big as an alligator.”

Syrill stood and stretched. “I suppose you’ll want to see the library?”

“Yes!”

“In council, they mentioned a new book on display. Some history that was found in a secret room. Everyone’s in raptures because it has a drawing of Gabalon.”

Corry’s eyes widened. “By someone who actually saw him?”

“Why else would scalars be slaving over it? We’ve got hundreds of drawings of Gabalon!”

“But none by an eyewitnesses. Yes, I want to see the book.”

\* \* \* \*

“It is wonderful, isn’t it?” burred the librarian. “Incredible condition for being so old.”

“Incredible.” Syrill leafed through the small, brown volume. “Who is the author?”

“Someone named Archemais,” said the Librarian. “He wrote his name both in the old pictographs and the phonetic. We’ve no record of him in our archives, and some scholars suspect the name is a pseudonym for the great travel-writer of the high wizard period, Artanian Lasa. The author of this book claims to have produced both the illustrations and the text—a feat few shelts could have managed at that time. From his sparse use of the phonetic and what we know of the pictographs, this book is a travel guide to Selbis in the height of its power.”

“Impressive,” said Syrrill in a voice the clearly indicated it wasn’t.

Corry had to admit that the book did not look like something to get excited over. It was about the height of his hand, with a plain leather cover, similar to many other volumes in the library. The pages were slightly yellow, written mostly in the old picture language. He read some of the text to himself, but found only a very technical discussion of Selbis in the time of Gabalon—its economy, geography, law, sewer, prisons, courts, etc. Corry wasn’t sure exactly what he had hoped to find, but this wasn’t it.

The illustrations were not much better than the text, just map after map of Selbis. Even the picture of Gabalon was disappointing. It showed a man in loose trousers, shirt, boots, and cape. He had flowing dark hair. One hand rested on the hilt of a long sword, and a dagger hung in his belt. Corry studied the picture minutely while the librarian babbled. *There’s nothing familiar about it*, he decided at last. *He just looks like a man. That could be me when I’m grown.*

Syrill seemed to have the same thought. “I suppose Gabalon didn’t sleep alone,” he muttered, glancing from Corry to the picture. “Probably had all kinds of shelts in his bed. You could be some great great grand son, Corellian. He looks kind of like you.”

Corry snorted. “As easily as you could, Syrill.”

“Nah, I’m not tall enough.”

Corry thought the library itself far more interesting than the book. The complex of buildings were at least ten times the size of Laven-lay’s library, full of the rich aromas of leather and ink and illumination paints. Furtively, Corry slunk away. He’d been rambling happily for an eighth watch when he rounded a corner and came face to face with Laylan. His hat with its long wolf tail looked oddly out of place in this establishment of culture. “I’ve come to see this famous book,” he said. “Any idea where I could find it?”

Corry grinned. “I’ll show you. Syrill is probably ready for me to rescue him from the librarian.”

Syrill stood in the same place when Corry returned, hunched over the pages. “Have you learned all the hidden wisdom of Panamindorah yet?” whispered Corry.

“Getting there. I just noticed something interesting. See anything familiar?”

Corry looked down and saw that they were back to the drawing of Gabalon.

“No. Syrill, are you still trying to make him my sire?”

Syrill smiled. “Seriously, Corellian. Look closer.”

Corry obeyed, but he still didn’t see anything new.

“That’s Gabalon?” Laylan was staring at the drawing.

Syrill glanced at him. “You see it, too?”

Laylan bent close over the page. Corry realized that he was holding his breath.

Syrill began to chuckle. “Nice, eh? Fitting.”

Corry was lost. “What are you talking about?”

Laylan looked at the librarian. “You’re sure this is Gabalon? You’re positive?”

The scholar looked uncomfortable. “Well, we’ve no documents to compare it with, but the author claims it was drawn by an eyewitness, and his accounts match—”

Corry heard the sound of claws clicking against stone and turned to see Shyshax come round a bookcase. He sighed with relief when he saw the shelts. “Laylan, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Laylan’s attention remained on the book. “The details, the weapons—the artist saw them too?”

“Laylan?” Shyshax nosed his leg.

“Yes,” said the librarian. “Funny you should mention it. This book reveals an interesting story behind that dagger he’s wearing. Supposedly, the gates of Glacia, the city of the Unibus, where made of one solid pearl, and when Gabalon attacked the city, he—”

“Laylan—”

“Not now, Shyshax!”

“—broke the gates and set some of the pieces in the dagger. He took the blade and stone in the pommel from—”

“Laylan!” Shyshax jumped up impatiently, “someone is trying to kill me!”

Laylan turned his full attention to his mount. “Shy, I told you to stay out of the wine.”

The cheetah growled. “I’m not drunk! Twice today strange things have happened. A stone came loose from a roof and smashed into the street not five paces from me. Only moments ago someone tried to push me off a bridge, and now I think someone is following me.”

“He’s right,” said Corry suddenly. “About being followed, I mean. Last night after you talked to me on the bridge in Port Ory, Shyshax, I saw a lion and a leopard follow you away. I thought then it looked odd.”

Laylan sighed. “The Filinians haven’t forgiven you, I guess. I’ll talk to Meuril about it. You’d better stay with me from now on.” He glanced at the picture one more time. “I’ve got to go see Chance and tell him that—” He stopped, then tapped the picture with his index finger. “That’s it. *That—is—it!*” Then he was running from the building, Shyshax at his heels.

Corry looked at the picture again and at last he saw what they were talking about. The large dagger Gabalon wore at his hip was familiar.

“Unicorn gold,” sniffed the librarian, who apparently resented being interrupted. “Legends say that the base and core of a unicorn’s horn is made of gold that has peculiar qualities, some of which survived in Gabalon’s dagger.”

Corry grinned. He had seen that stone before—bathed in moonlight and nestled in black fur. “I remember now, Syrril. It’s Fenrah’s dagger.”

\* \* \* \*

Chance stood by a window in his tower chamber, watching the throngs of merrymakers. He used to enjoy these festivals, but lately snickers followed him wherever he went. Only a few moments ago, a street minstrel had dared to sing a particularly insulting version of “The Prince’s Magical Gallows” right in the royal plaza. The minstrel has been a wood faun and likely didn’t know he was under the window of the prince in question.

Chance had sat on his windowsill and listened, and when he’d heard enough, he added a well-placed arrow to the feather in the mistral’s cap. The crowd had ended laughing at the mistral, who fled, leaving a puddle on the stone. Chance, however, did not miss the looks they shot towards his window as they dispersed. *They despise me*, he thought. *And now they fear me. They laugh or they fear, but there is nothing in between.*

He thought of his father. *If the minstrels were singing insulting songs about Barek or Martin or Galen, he’d have it stopped. Someone would bleed for it. But for me...he probably laughs along with the rest.*

*Bastard.* He might as well have the name tattooed on his forehead. The older he got, the less he looked like the other princes. His father had bastards aplenty. They received honors and lands. Ah, but he was different. He was the queen’s bastard, and that was shameful—the more so because everyone pretended not to see it.

Chance clenched his fist. If only they would open their eyes, they would see he was Shaddock's son. Everyone knew that Jubal had favored the wolflings in the war. Chance had never favored wolflings. He killed them at every opportunity, was jealous for the pride of his city, but it did not matter. All the court saw was his golden hair.

Chance put down his bow. If he hung onto it, he knew he would shoot another minstrel and not through the cap this time. He went into his study and picked up his violin. Now *there* was music. Why did the street minstrels have to sing at all? Words only got in the way. He went back to the window and started to play. Chance played for a long time, one melody after another, played until he could not hear the festival outside or the minstrels or the voices of the nobility.

Suddenly the door flew open. Chance whirled, his hand dropping automatically to the sword he always wore. "Laylan. You might try knocking."

Laylan was panting. Somehow he'd put his hat on backwards. The wolf tail hung in his eyes, which were glittering with excitement. "Chance, I've found it. I know where the Raiders are hiding!"

## Chapter 12. A Rendezvous Arranged

Certain events in history resemble a stone dropped into a pool. The stone sinks into oblivion, yet the ripples go on.

--Archemais, *A Wizard's History of Panamindorah*

"Some pages are missing." Corry pointed to a ragged edge along the gutter of the book.

"No, it's in perfect condition. We examined—" The librarian stopped. "Well...how odd."

Syrill was looking, too. "Looks like someone filched from your treasure."

The librarian sputtered. "That...that is not—" He stopped. "I *was* called away briefly—"

"By whom?"

"A lioness wanted access to our old Filinian records."

"Well," Syrill patted the deflated scholar on the back, "don't worry. It will probably hit the black market and turn up in some library in the wood within a year. When it does, I'll have it sent to you."

"Do you remember what was on those pages?" asked Corry.

The librarian frowned. "Only maps of Selbis."

On their way back towards the palace, Syrill insisted they stop to participate in the ancient spring dances. In order to provide more room for dancing in their crowded city, the cliff fauns had built terraced platforms in the main plazas. The highest of them rose several stories off the ground. The best dancers preformed at the top where all could watch their liquid twists and turns,



while the more awkward fauns danced on the lower levels. Musicians sat everywhere and every which way, differing in talent as much as the dancers.

Syrill went to the top level and soon forget about Corry. After embarrassing himself sufficiently to be certain that he was not going to remember how to dance, Corry found a place along the edge of the top platform with other bystanders. He was on a level with the third story of buildings, hardly more than a long stride from the balcony of the nearest. Up here, Corry could see far out into the crowded streets, over the rooftops and beyond beneath the brilliant moons. *They'll all be full tomorrow night.* He was just making himself comfortable on the boards, when he saw something that made him stand up again. On the balcony walkway of the building opposite, a figure emerged from a door and ran towards him. She was cloaked and hooded, so that it took him a second to recognize Capricia. The fauness stopped directly across from him. She was so close, he could smell her light perfume, made pungent with sweat. Capricia glanced over her shoulder, then back towards the dancers. Her eyes focused on him.

“Corellian?” she asked in a shouted whisper.

“Yes, what’s wrong?”

“I’m in trouble.” Her glance took in the shelters behind him, and Corry turned too, but no one was paying attention to them.

“What sort of trouble?”

Capricia hated to show fear. He could see her working to calm herself. “I need you to do me a favor.”

“Come up here,” invited Corry. “We can talk.”

“No.” She paused. “Meet me in Port Ory at sunrise tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“What hotel did you stay in last night?”

“The Unsoos: by the river, red carpets, silver—”

“Yes, Syrill likes that one. Meet me on the roof. Alone.”

“But can’t I at least—?” Too late. She had gone back the way she came. He could see lights somewhere inside the building and surmised that a party was going on there too. On the balcony one story below, a snow leopard emerged like a shadow from the direction Capricia had come. *Ounce. He was following her that night in Port Ory, too.* The leopard stopped once, glanced back, then disappeared inside the building.

Corry stood, debating. *I should try to catch her, tell her about Ounce.*

Then someone pushed him off the platform.

## Chapter 13. The Stone is Tossed

The delicate scent of flowers, the freshness of dark earth, the cool of shade, and the warmth of color are the hallmarks of Danda-lay's gardens. They are the most peaceful places in the world.

--Lasa, "Tour the Sky City"

Corry's hands flew out instinctively, and he managed to catch hold of two bars of the railing of the balcony on which Capricia had stood. He could feel his fingers slipping. Someone was shouting behind him, and the next moment hands grasped his legs from below, and fauns he didn't recognize hauled him onto the lower balcony. They were all patting him and making sure he wasn't injured and saying things like, "Well, that was a near miss" and "No more wine for you, young sir!"

Turning, Corry saw Syrill leaning over the edge of the dancing platform.

*Someone just tried to kill me.* Corry had felt no fear while hanging from the balcony, but now he began shaking all over. *Someone tried to push me over the edge.* Looking down, he saw that, even from this story, the ground was deadly distant. "There, there," an old fauness was guiding him to a bench. "Have a sit, and then go back to your room and lie down. I always said they should put railings on those platforms. A few shelts fall every year."

*I didn't fall. I was pushed.*

Several moments passed before Syrill was able to bull his way through the press up to the balcony. By the time he arrived, Corry was sitting alone. "Corellian, are you hurt?"

Corry shook his head. “Someone pushed me, Syrill.”

Syrill didn’t seem to hear. His face was pale. “Come on. Let’s get you back to the room.”

The long walk back to the palace helped Corry to calm down, and by the time they reached the room, he was no longer shaking.

“Syrill, someone tried to kill me!”

“I know,” muttered Syrill.

“Did you see who did it?”

“No. There were all kinds of creatures up there—cats, fauns, alligator shelts—”

“Centaurs?” asked Corry.

“I don’t remember seeing any.”

“Syrill, someone is trying to do something to Capricia. I had just finished talking to her when they tried to push me off. I think it may have happened *because* I was talking to her.”

“Capricia?” Syrill’s head came up sharply.

“Yes, she told me she was in trouble and that I needed to meet her tomorrow on the roof of the Unsoos at sunrise. She was afraid to talk in the plaza, and now I can see why. After she left, I saw Ounce following her.”

Syrill’s expression turned black. “I *told* her to stay away from them! Now they’re...they’re blackmailing her, perhaps. Or worse. If Capricia were to die, Lexis could perhaps maneuver a more cooperative or more stupid faun onto the throne. And if he were to

hold her for ransom, Meuril would give practically anything.” Syrill began to pace. “Did she say anything else?”

“She said to come alone.”

“Hmmm... Do you know how to handle a sword, Corry?”

“A little.”

“Ever against a cat?”

“No.” *Or a centaur, either.*

“Would you be offended if I offered to come with you?”

“No, I’d be relieved, but Capricia—”

“Listen: you go tomorrow just as she said. I’ll take a walk of my own, earlier. Then I might just happen to drop by the Unsoos. If you get into any trouble, yell.”

Corry smiled. “Thank you, Syrill.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry slept fitfully that night. In his dreams, he was being attacked by an enormous blood-red centaur. It had wings like a pegasus, and all he had to fight with was a unicorn’s horn, which kept shrinking until it was no longer than a needle. He woke to the sound of Syrill’s voice. The faun was standing by the bed, fully clothed. A single candle burned on the bedside table. The drapes were still drawn, and no hint of light came from around their edges.

“I’m leaving now, Corellian.”

Syrill hadn't been gone more than a few minutes when Corry started out of the palace. When he reached the courtyard, the water clock told him it was only a half past the second night watch—almost two hours until dawn. He passed a few merchants preparing their shop fronts. Corry could see lights in a few windows, and one or two street vendors were setting up in the pre-dawn chill. Corry could smell bread and pastries baking, but he still felt alone.

When he reached Port Ory, he found that a thick fog had risen from the river. Street lanterns and lighted windows inhabited fuzzy hallows of brightness surrounded by dense gloom. Corry was glad he had left early. The Unsoos sat on the bank of the Tiber-wan, and he passed it three times in the fog before he recognized it. By the time he found the door, the sky had brightened to a pearl gray, and the mist had sunk so that he could at least see the outlines of roofs above his head. Corry opened the door to the foyer and stepped into total blackness. "Hello?"

No one answered. *They ought to keep some kind of light at the front desk. Is there no night clerk or watch shelt?* Corry waited uneasily for several minutes, but when he heard no sound from the room and his eyes had adjusted enough to catch the glint off the banister, he let go of the door and groped his way to the stairs.

*Click.*

Corry stopped, heart pounding. He had distinctly heard the sound of a key turning in a lock. *It came from one of the rooms,* he told himself. *It's just a guest locking his door.* But he knew better. The sound had come from the main door. Almost running, he bounded up the stairs,

flight after flight until he came to the top. Corry pushed open the door to the roof and stepped out into the deer garden.

Instantly, the soft light of dawn broke around him. Up here, the mist was not nearly so thick. Corry shut the door with a sigh of relief and looked around. *I should have made her specify where on the roof it meet*, he realized. Corry wandered along the garden paths, becoming increasingly impatient. At last he called, “Capricia! Capricia, where are you? It’s Corry!”

His voice seemed to fall heavily in the moist air. The hair along the back of his neck rose, but when he turned around, he saw no one. Finally Corry rounded a corner and found himself on the edge of the building. The guardrail came only to his knees, and he stared past its polished surface into the misty city. He turned again to the garden. “Capr—!”

Not ten paces away stood a black leopard, head low, yellow eyes fixed on Corry.

At that moment he heard an answering call, soft, but urgent. “Corry? I’m over here. Keep your voice down. I think that we’ve been foll— AAAEEEEHHHHH!”

Her scream made him jump. The cat sprang.

Corry dove to one side and pounded into the trees, shouting. “Syrill! Anyone! Help! Capricia!” He could hear a commotion somewhere to his right, and Capricia screamed again.

Corry blundered out of the shrubbery onto a footpath. Only then did it occur to him to draw his sword. Cursing himself, he ripped it from the scabbard and looked up and down the path. The leopard was nowhere in sight, but he could hear something in the underbrush. Then he saw Capricia. She was running down the path towards him at top speed with Lexis not six paces

behind. Corry brandished his sword, but the tiger and the fauness shot past him. Capricia glanced over her shoulder. “Get out of here, Corellian! Go to Meuril; hurry!”

*That’s lunacy, Capricia, you’d be dead by the time I get to Meuril!* Corry looked back and saw Syrill sprinting after them with drawn sword. “Corry, get down to the street and get help. This is not going to end well. Go on, or you’ll be killed.”

Corry shook his head. “I think they’ve already locked us in. I heard—”

Another ear-splitting scream, followed by a great roar and snarling. Syrill sprang towards the sounds, and Corry followed. The faun was quicker, and Corry soon lost sight of him. Seconds later, he broke from the trees, again on the edge of the building. A short distance in front of him Corry saw Syrill and Ounce. The faun had drawn his sword, and the snow leopard’s lips rose above his gums, baring his long white teeth. Round and round they went, the cat lashing with its claws and Syrill with his sword.

Corry didn’t know what to do. Then a movement to his left attracted his attention. Lexis stood in the open grass between the railing and the trees. His white and black ruff bristled, and his lips rose in a snarl. Between his huge paws lay Capricia. Even from this distance, Corry could see that she was very still. Her brown hair fell in a cascade about her body like a broken doll’s.

Corry charged towards them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the black leopard emerge from the shadow of the trees. He tried to turn, but the cat was already in the air, and then it’s weight punch into him. Corry felt the back of his knee smack the guardrail. The leg crumpled under him. He had a brief moment of satisfaction as he felt his sword enter flesh. Then it was



jerked out of his hand as the leopard pushed away snarling, and he lost what little balance he had left. Corry got a brief, whirling image of several upright shapes hurtling out of the trees. Then he toppled backwards over the side of the building.

He had only enough time to wonder one thing: *Am I over the river or the pavement?*

Then he hit the water. Corry was conscious of scraping the bottom of the river, of turning over and over in the blackness, of swimming desperately for the surface and hitting his head on the bottom of a boat. Then he could no longer decide which way was up. He was drowning.

Next moment his head broke the surface and he gagged and spit water and gulped air. He was clinging to the slimy chain of a boat's anchor. Gratefully, shivering, Corry began to climb up the chain. Something struck him in the kidneys, and he fell back with a cry. Corry caught a brief glimpse of a long, scaly tail. *An alligator.* Then it hit him again, and he lost his grip.

Corry slipped once more into the current, but this time he kept his head. He had already lost his boots, and he was able to tread water. He tried to swim towards shore or at least get hold of a boat or anchor chain, but each time, the alligator cut him off and sent him spinning back into midstream. It did not attempt to attack him or to bite him, but it would not let him gain the shore. The river looked much broader from eyelevel than it had looked from the bank, and the fog was dense. "Help!" he shouted. "Somebody help me! I'm in the river!"

But either no one heard him or no one could find him in the fog. The current quickened. Corry heard a gushing hiss, growing ever louder.

*No! I didn't come through all this to die now.* He struck out hard for the shore, cutting across the current. He could just see the bank. His mind's eyes described for him the things he could not see in the fog: the bridge arching over the river high above him. Perhaps even now shelts stood there talking as he and Syrrill had talked yesterday morning.

Confused lights danced along the shore. Soon he would be in sight of shelts and then surely the alligator would not dare to keep harassing him. The creature was just playing with him. It was a joke, a cruel joke, but not a serious one. Perhaps it would even tow him to shore now that it had him so close to the waterfall.

*Smack!*

This time it picked him up bodily in its jaws and flung him back into midstream. He thought he saw a shelt rise out of the water on its back, and he thought he heard a voice float after him, "Give our regards to Danda-lay, iteration!"

And then he saw the bars. Looming up out of the fog ahead, the water seething white around them. *Yes, the bars,* thought Corry. *I'll grab one as I go by. Soon the sun will come up and burn off this mist, and then someone is bound to see me.*

He steeled himself, trying to quiet his body in the chilly water, flexing his fingers. The bars were much larger than they had looked from the bridge, big around as the mast of a ship. Closer. Corry's hands shot out. He wrapped his arms around a bar, then his legs. The current tore at him. He gasped. He could feel slime on the bar—slipping. "Help!" he shouted and got a

mouthful of water. He clenched his whole body, but the current was prying him loose as a child might tease a shellfish off a rock.

Then Corry was free in the water, his muscles spasming. For the third time in two watches, he fell from a deadly height. This time no one caught him.

THE END

This story is continued in:

*The Prophet of Panamindorah, Book II: Wolflings and Wizards*

Find the PDF's and the audio podcast of the whole story at [www.panamindorah.com](http://www.panamindorah.com).