



# THE PROPHET OF PANAMINDORAH

BOOK TWO - WOLFLINGS AND WIZARDS

ABIGAIL HILTON

## Part I

## 1. The Ripples Begin

How rude of them to start a war without telling us.

--remark attributed to Kietsis during the wizard wars

Just as the sun was growing strong on the walls of Danda-lay's palace, an astonished doorsheft admitted a bloody, bedraggled wood faun, dripping with sweat and mist water. He was still wearing his hat with a green plume.

"Syrill? What happened to—? Wait! You can't—! At least let me announce you—!"

By the time Syrill arrived at the dining hall, he was trailing half a dozen palace shefts, all politely dissenting. Pleasant voices, laughter, and the clink of utensils died as the dignitaries caught sight of Laven-lay's general. He walked to his king and spoke into the stunned silence. "Meuril, Lexis has taken Capricia."

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"How can you be sure the Raiders are in Selbis?" In the dawn light, Chance hefted his pack onto his deer.

Laylan grunted. "All kinds of things." He was busy dusting away the last traces of their night's camp on the old Triangle Road. They had not yet reached sections of intact paving, but bits of broken stone pushed up here and there through the leaf mold. "The dagger that belonged to Gabalon is Fenrah's," continued Laylan. "Where would she have found such a thing?"

"That doesn't mean Selbis is their den."

Laylan mounted Shyshax and they all started west. “Fauns think the place haunted and never go near it. I’ve searched the city before, but only for obvious clues—wolf scat and tracks. I never found anything, but I shouldn’t have expected to.”

Chance frowned. “You never told *me* about it.”

“I didn’t think you were employing me to trouble you with my every false start and wrong turn. I thought you wanted me to catch them.”

“I do.”

“In that case—” began Shyshax. Laylan reached down and clamped a hand around his muzzle. The cheetah’s tail twitched a couple of times.

Laylan cleared his throat. “I suggest you go back to Lupricasia and let me do my job.”

Chance shook his head. They had been over this the night before. “I’ve let you alone for the past two years, and you’ve not—”

Shyshax’s tail was lashing furiously, and even Laylan nearly lost his temper. “If you had done as I advised, Sham would be dead now, perhaps all of them!”

Chance inclined his head. “That’s true. I was wrong.”

Laylan released Shyshax’s mouth in surprise.

Chance continued. “This time, I will do as you suggest, which I suspect will mean killing them on the spot. I want to be there. I want to see this den. Now, please, tell me why you discounted Selbis before.”

Laylan hesitated. “I had a notion the Raiders were in a faun city. They’re getting expensive equipment from somewhere, and the few bribes I’ve traced were extravagant. They’re

also distributing fine weapons, medical supplies, and food to other packs. The sum total of their known raids can't account for even a tenth of the value. Also, the Raiders disappear completely during the worst months of winter—a time when other packs are most vulnerable. The Raiders don't seem to need to hunt. I suspected they had a wealthy faun patron, probably in Port Ory, who was also their host. Once, I even suspected Danda-lay."

Chance stared at him. "You mean a cliff faun is—?"

"Selbis, though..." Shyshax interrupted. "That's more like our lady."

"Your what?"

It was Laylan's turn to lash his tail. "He means Fenrah. She doesn't like to hide under faun protection if she can help it. Selbis would be a city all her own, a haunted fortress. It's large enough to store quantities of food and supplies. If you look at their raids, look at the pattern, you can see Selbis is the hub. They never attack the closest towns because they don't want to draw attention in that direction, but none of their attacks came more than three day's journey from the city. Laven-lay is two days away, one if you push. Port Ory is the same distance, and so is Danda-lay. The Tiber-wan and all its traffic are an easy day's travel. Selbis makes a perfect den, though I still suspect a wealthy faun patron."

Chance ground his teeth. "I want that faun. Perhaps the den will give us some clues." He thought for a moment. "So, you think we can catch them? Only the two—" He glanced at Shyshax with distaste. They had never gotten along. "Only the three of us?"

Laylan pinched Shyshax's ear before he could say anything. "We must surprise them to have any chance at all. No pun intended."

Chance didn't smile. Puns on his name never amused him. "But even if we did surprise them, eight wolflings and their wolves against two shelts and a cheetah are poor odds."

"I didn't mean we could take them all in a fight," said Laylan. "All we need to do is kill Fenrah. If that happens, I think the Raiders will fall apart."

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"Syrill, what are you saying?" Meuril had gone very pale.

"I *saw* it, Sire! Lexis tricked her, trapped her, and abducted her."

"Dain," Meuril spoke to one of his aids, "go see if the princess is in her chambers." The king folded his hands. "What happened, Syrill?"

"Corellion the iteration traveled with me to Lupricasia. He is, as you know, a friend of Capricia's. Yesterday evening she contacted him, saying that she was in danger. She seemed frightened and wanted Corry to meet her privately. He asked for my help, since he is not a skilled fighter. I agreed to come, but secretly, since Capricia had requested privacy.

"The following morning I went to the arranged meeting place: the roof of the hotel Unsoos on the banks of the Tiber-wan. The roof is a garden, and as I walked through the trees, I stumbled across the body of Capricia's doe. Her throat at been mauled. Of course, I was immediately worried. I began calling for Capricia. She answered me from across the garden, but before she could reach me, the cats found her. I heard screaming and growling.

"By the time I found her, Lexis already had already done something to her. She was on the ground at his feet. I tried to reach her, but Ounce attacked me. At that moment Corellion appeared and tried to help the princess, but a black leopard charged him and knocked him over

the railing. He seems to have fallen into the river. The fall should not have been fatal, but I searched for him briefly on my way here and couldn't find him.

"I saw Lexis lift Capricia in his mouth, and at that point Ounce overpowered me. I hit my head against the railing and lost consciousness. I couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few minutes, but when I woke, they were gone."

A heavy silence. Meuril looked suddenly very old.

Dain reentered the room. "Sire, the princess is not in her chambers. The palace watch reported a cloaked shelt, possibly a fauness, having left this part of the building shortly before dawn. I have sent runners throughout the city. So far no one has located Capricia."

Meuril rose. "Find Lexis and bring him here at once."

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Tolomy Alainya lay curled in a sunbeam. The orange and black tiger cub stirred in his sleep, pawing the goat hair cushions beneath him. The room had been chosen and adapted for cats: a low drinking bowl, large windows not far from the ground, and a profusion of cushions spread about the floor. The doorknob had been removed from the door.

It swung open as a white cub bounded into the room and landed on Tolomy. He let out a spitting hiss. "Hush!" growled Leesha. "I'm not killing you, Tol. We've got to leave right now."

The orange cub went limp. "You know it scares me when you—"

Leesha rolled to the floor. "Everything scares you. Let's go!"

Tolomy rose and stretched. "Go where?"

"Into the forest."

“Why?”

“Father told me.”

“Where’d you get the chain?” He stared at the delicate gold links around her neck. “Is that what hit me in the ear just now? It felt heavy.”

“I’ll explain later.” She grabbed his scruff and tried to march him towards the door, but he was considerably larger and pulled away easily.

“Leave Danda-lay? Whatever for?”

“Because Father said so!” Leesha was nearly spitting with frustration. “Haven’t you been listening? Hurry!”

“Leesha, did Father really say this or are you just playing? If you’re telling the truth, why isn’t Ounce or Loop here to escort us? Father wouldn’t send us off alone.”

Leesha leapt forward, grabbed her brother by the scruff, and shook him. She almost managed to get his feet off the ground. Tolomy growled, then cringed and hunkered down.

“Now listen to me, brother. I don’t have time to explain everything. You and I have to get out of Danda-lay. Father’s in trouble, and we have to help him.”

Tolomy stared at her. She *sounded* serious.

Leesha started away at a run. Tolomy followed her through the hall and down a flight of stairs. As they reached the outer door, it opened to admit a black-furred faun. The stranger’s hand moved swiftly beneath his cloak, and Tolomy caught a glint of metal.

Leesha charged between the faun’s legs, and her brother followed—out the door, down the steps, and into the sunlight. “Leesha, I think that faun was trying to—”

“Kill us,” she finished. “Keep running, Tol.”

\* \* \* \*

Meuril paced the dining hall while Shadock stood silent at a window. Outside, a furious search was in progress. Shadock cleared his throat. “Meuril, sit down. You’re tiring to watch.”

“You’re not watching,” snapped Meuril, but he sat down at the end of the table.

Shadock came to sit diagonally. They were nearly the same age, but as different as two shelts could be. Shadock had been a devilishly handsome youth—tall and broad, with the dark hair of the royal house and brilliant blue eyes. Age had peppered his hair, but his presence had grown, if anything, more formidable. He liked tournaments and strategy games and public display. Meuril had always been small and never handsome. He kept an informal court and liked to think his subjects could invite him over for tea.

“She can’t go far,” said Shadock. “She’s a lone female—on foot if we are to believe that her doe was killed.”

“Why would we not believe her doe killed?” asked Meuril icily.

Shadock spread his large hands on the table. “Well. Capricia has had a propensity to wander in the past. I believe she was ranging through the woods unescorted when she brought that iteration home—the same one they’re looking for now.”

Meuril focused steely gray eyes on Shadock. “She did not bring him home. Syrril did.”

“Well, met him, then.”

“My daughter has not run away!”



Shadock demurred. “Of course not, but she might have taken a walk away from the city, even with Lexis—”

“Syrill does not lie!” Meuril exploded. “Capricia does not ‘take walks’ from the city without telling someone. Something bad has happened, and I want her found. You may have dozens of children to lose, but I have only one!”

Shadock went rigid. He took several deep breaths, then tried again. “Meuril, Capricia could not be made to ride unconscious, and no cat could walk through the gates of Port Ory carrying her in his mouth. We’ve no reason to think shelts are involved, and as long as that’s the case, she must still be in the city. They would have killed Syrill if they were planning to kill anyone. They wouldn’t kill Capricia, not if they wanted something from you, and no other reason for the kidnapping makes any sense.”

“It doesn’t make sense anyway,” whispered Meuril. He put his head between his hands.

“Capricia is a resourceful fauness,” continued Shadock, although the reference to his family had taken all the warmth out of his voice.

As if to illustrate the reason, Jubal came smartly into the room “Sire, the palace has been scoured, and Danda-lay and Port Ory are in the process of an exhaustive search. Neither Lexis nor any of his staff have been located. However, a night watchshelt saw a small group of cats leaving Port Ory early this morning. The descriptions match those of Lexis and his officers.”

Meuril heard the news with admirable composure. “Shadock?”

“Yes?”

“Permission to put every Filinian in Port Ory and Danda-lay under temporary arrest?”

“Permission granted.”

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At the orphanage once, Corry had seen a video of three men skydiving. He remembered how the people opened up their arms and lay spread-eagle on the air. He had asked the supervisor what would happen if their parachutes didn’t open, and she had said they would die instantly. A boy beside Corry had piped up and said that his father had jumped off a twelve-story building and he *bounced*. The boy wasn’t sure whether he died on the first bounce or the second. Corry had thought at the time that if he ever fell from a deadly height, it might be prudent to fall headfirst in order to die on the first bounce.

The thought returned to him with crystal clarity as he shot from the falls over Danda-lay. He tried to tuck himself into a dive, but he wasn’t sure which way was down. Then he was in a cloud, and the world was dark and full of water.

And then nothing happened for a while. Corry wasn’t sure if minutes or only seconds passed, but eventually his stomach started to settle. *If I’m going to die, I might as well enjoy the ride*. Instinctively, he uncurled in the air, reaching out and out, breathing slowly and carefully so as not to inhale water.

*Perhaps if I angle my arms like this...I could move away from the water of the falls.*  
*There, that’s better.*

*Oh!* A warm draft from below. His stomach did a little flip. Now he wasn’t sure whether he was falling or rising. Next moment he struck something so violently that he thought he’d hit the ground. But, no. It was some kind of air pocket. Now he was definitely rising.

Corry giggled. He knew he was riding the cusp between panic and exhilaration. *I bounced.* Then the mists cleared, and he saw trees rushing up to meet him.

## Chapter 2. Selbis

We should respect our enemies. To do otherwise is foolishness. It is when we begin to admire them that we must beware.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

A pre-dawn glow had barely put a sheen on the frosty ground when Laylan woke the next morning. He had called a halt within a quarter watch's journey of the walls of Selbis. He and Chance had made no fire with supper. He missed the fire worse now than he had the night before, but he was reasonably sure they had gone undetected.

For a moment Laylan stared at Chance, still curled up asleep in his cape. The doe stood browsing a few yards away. She seemed at peace, and Laylan decided the two were safe alone for a moment. Walking quietly, he started into the forest. He'd not gone thirty paces before Shyshax appeared. "For shame, Laylan. Leaving our poor employer to fend for himself."

Laylan frowned. "You were supposed to be at watch."

"I stayed close. Didn't miss you waking up, did I?"

Laylan started to reprimand him, then decided it wasn't worth it. "Anything stirring out there?"

"Nothing nearby. South of the ridge, I came across the trail of some fauns—quite a few of them. I think they were headed in the same direction as we are."

"What's so unusual about that? There's a town south of here."

"Yes, but they weren't headed toward the town. They were headed toward Selbis."

"I doubt that. How many?"

“They were traveling in formation, so I couldn’t say exactly. Perhaps four hundred.”

Laylan’s face registered his surprise. “Shyshax, surely—”

“I’m only telling you what I saw and thought. You’re a better tracker than I am, so you may disagree, but I have a nose, and I know this: they were fauns, and they were not farmers. Laylan, doesn’t it strike you as odd that anyone going to Selbis wouldn’t use the old road?”

“Shyshax, no one is going to Selbis except us...or the Raiders. Wherever that group was headed, it wasn’t Selbis. In fact, I’ll bet they give the ruins a wide berth. Any sign of wolves?”

The cheetah grinned. “Scat and tracks. Fresh ones.”

“Wolfling?”

“No. Just wolves.”

“Sounds about right. You didn’t go near the city, did you?”

“Within sight of the walls.”

“Shyshax!”

“No one saw me. I was a shadow of the wind! Anyway, the outer walls are as deserted as a hermit’s grave.” Shyshax glanced towards the camp. “It’s time Chance sent that doe home. I can smell her from here. I’m surprised she hasn’t attracted wolves before now.”

When they got back to camp, Laylan told Chance what Shyshax thought about the deer. At first Chance objected. “I’ll be without a mount. What if we need to escape quickly?”

“It’s a chance we’ll have to take. The doe is large and has a strong smell and is likely to take fright at the scent of wolves. She’s more handicap than help.”

“Very well. I’ll send her home.”

Chance insisted on jogging the rest of the way to the city, in spite of Laylan's offer of a ride. Shyshax didn't look sorry about the decision.

The forest had once been clear for a half league around Selbis, but now it grew right up to the gates. Even so, Laylan, Shyshax, and Chance were still some distance off when they sighted the crenellated parapet. They drew nearer until Laylan stopped them directly in the shadow of the walls. The main gate had been entirely demolished, giving the hunters full view into the arched tunnel that led into the city. The length of the tunnel bore mute witness to the breadth of the wall.

"From what I remember," said Laylan, "there are two rings to the inner wall, and three to the wall around the castle. The gates are staggered, and the corridors between are overgrown. Look for signs of wolves or wolflings, and if you see any, get my attention, but don't make noise unless they've already seen us."

The trio moved forward under the tunnel arch into a forested corridor between the two walls. Here, if the area had been properly cleared, an intruder would face a rain of arrows as he tried to find the next gate into the city. Of course, it would not be directly across from the first. A rough game trail lead off to the right. They followed it on a winding route through the underbrush until Laylan caught sight of a gate in the far wall.

Even after they passed into the city, visibility remained poor. The outlying buildings had been made of wood and had long since given way to forest. In three hundred years, the trees had grown quite large. Only the city roads seemed in reasonably good condition. And, of course, the wall. Its spike-like guard towers rose crumbling in the distance, smothered in vines.

Here and there, evidence of the old inhabitants remained—bits of walls, a well, the remnants of an overgrown forge, half-visible foundation stones. As they neared the city center, more buildings appeared to have been made of stone—first their foundations, then their walls. The hunters began to glimpse frescos and etchings around the lintels and cornices of some dwellings and then on interior walls. The architecture became more elaborate, the rooms larger, until they were definitely walking, not in a forest, but in a skeletal city.

At one point, they encountered a curious anomaly: heavy marble columns loaded on a wagon in the road. The body of a wood faun in peasant dress, half decayed, and scavenged by small animals, had been harnessed to the shafts of the cart. Laylan walked around it a few times, looking from every angle, and then motioned them to continue.

At last, they snaked their way around the castle hill and arrived at the first wall. As Laylan had predicted, there were three, and this time no trails to follow through the undergrowth within the first ring. The second corridor did offer a track, but Laylan took one look at it and struck out in a different direction. It took them until nearly midday to find their way into the inner fortress atop the hill.

They emerged into a series of courtyards and buildings, half devoured by fig trees and vines. Up here above the forest, the wind made an eerie music among the chinks and towers. Echoes carried and amplified, and ancient windows gaped like watchful eyes.

Laylan spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. “The best place for a den is here in the castle. The only way we can hope to cover enough ground to find them today is to split up.”

“Laylan!” sputtered Shyshax.

“Their wolves must run somewhere,” said Laylan. “It can’t all be snared.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Chance.

Shyshax scowled at him. “There were four deadfalls back there. Didn’t you see them?

And Maijhan hook snares and tripwires and Creator-only-knows what else.”

Chance looked at Laylan. “Is this true?”

Laylan shot Shyshax a glare that stifled his outraged snarl. “Yes, of course, and it’s good news. It means they’re here.”

“I’m no tracker,” said Chance slowly. “Without a guide—”

“The traps were mostly in those last two rings of wall. I didn’t see much down in the city—just one deadfall near that cart. Fauns say there’s a curse on treasure taken from Selbis. The Raiders probably set up displays like that to maintain the superstition. I suspect they have a tunnel under the castle walls. They set most of their snares in the circles of the inner wall—a place neither they nor their wolves actually go. I kept us together until now because the risk was too great, but I think we’re past the danger. Time to start covering ground.”

Chance thought about that. “Alright.”

“Pay attention to your feet,” warned Laylan. “If you see anything that doesn’t look three hundred years old, avoid it. Chance, take the outer ring of the wall. Shyshax, concentrate on the middle rooms, and I’ll try to find the center. If anyone gets into trouble, make as much noise as you can, and we’ll find you. We meet back here a quarter watch before sunset.”

\* \* \* \*



Laylan gestured off to the right and Shyshax left him without arguing, only to double back and pick up Laylan's trail a moment later. *What game are you playing, boss?*

Sending Chance around the outer wall didn't make sense. It was the most likely place to encounter traps if there were any to encounter. Shyshax would have been the first to admit that he found the idea of Chance in a deadfall not entirely unpleasant. However, letting one's employer die was not professional behavior. It didn't encourage the trust of the community, and if there was one thing a Canid and a Filinian needed living among fauns, it was trust. If Chance died under remotely suspicious circumstances, there would be hell to pay.

*Besides, thought Shyshax, the wall is the longest stretch. I could search it much faster.* The logical choice would have been to send Chance into the center to cover the smallest area, put Shyshax on the outside, and let Laylan search the middle where there was more likelihood of success. *He's done it all backwards. Why?*

Shyshax had a suspicion. He had been following Laylan's trail for only a short distance when he heard voices—faint and easily confused with the moaning of the wind and the echoes of the old ruin settling. Laylan's trail ran towards the voices. Shyshax thought he recognized them.

“—not saying it's useless, but—”

“—if we were—”

“Oh, that's likely!”

Someone laughed.

Shyshax was padding along a marble walkway, the portico sagging and completely caved at one end. Laylan crouched behind the blind, peering through a chink. Shyshax slunk forward,

until he was close enough to look over Laylan's shoulder into the courtyard beyond. Fenrah and Sevn were standing there, examining something that looked like the unhappy union of a plow and a siege engine. "I admit I need to streamline it for practicality's sake," Sevn was saying.

"Streamline it?" Fenrah was dressed in a loose brown tunic and no boots. Both wolflings were armed, but they looked thoroughly at ease. "Sevn, you need to put it out of its misery."

"No, no! It'll be useful. Great labor-saving device: stop a whole cart full of fauns without doing any real damage."

"The only fauns who'll walk up to this will be thrill-seekers wanting a free demonstration."

"Ah! That's another idea. We could—"

"No."

"But then we might—"

"No."

"But you haven't even—!"

"Sevn, how are you even planning to get it to the road? Ask Xerous to toss it in with the supplies?"

"As I said, it needs a bit of streamlining."

She laughed out loud. "How big are the nets again?"

"We could use any size, but the one I've been playing with could easily compass a cart. My experiments lead me to believe—"

Shyshax's whiskers tickled Laylan's ear, and he spun around.

Shyshax jumped back to avoid the blade, silent, already naked in his master's hand. They looked at each other for a moment. Then Laylan lowered his sword.

"You already knew where they were!" hissed Shyshax.

"I had a guess," muttered Laylan.

"More than a guess."

"Alright, yes, I heard their voices when we came in. Very faintly."

Shyshax sniffed. Canids had extremely good ears, even better than cats.

Laylan turned back to the chink in the blind. Fenrah had climbed on top of Sevn's contraption and was apparently fiddling with things best left alone. Sevn was shouting at her to get down. A second later, a net large enough to cover the floor of a cottage exploded from one end of the device sent and Sevn to the ground in a tangled heap.

Fenrah grinned. "Alright, so it works."

Sevn was trying to explain through several folds of dense weave how she might have achieved better trajectory.

"Now," muttered Shyshax in Laylan's ear.

Laylan shook his head.

"Now!" insisted the cheetah. "He's trapped. She's off balance on top of that thing. No better time."

Laylan didn't move. He was watching Fenrah. Shafts of sunlight dappled the floor of the courtyard, making her dark hair gleam. She was free and easy and laughing. *We really do have*

*her, thought Shyshax. She has no idea we're watching. Laylan never really thought it would happen. Maybe he never wanted it to.*

Shyshax moved his head so close to Laylan's ear that his whiskers crinkled. "You can walk away. Chance will never know."

Laylan's jaw tightened. "I was hired to do a job. I took money, and I made a promise." He bent down and began methodically untying the crossbow.

"He doesn't have to know," persisted Shyshax. "He likes his old hunt anyway. He—"

Laylan's fingers shot out and closed gently around Shyshax's muzzle. "Stop."

*You're not talking to me, thought Shyshax. You're talking to yourself.*

Laylan let him go. "Get Chance. Quietly."

Shyshax looked at him long and hard. Then he turned and went.

## Chapter 3. A Turn of Tables

I'll freely admit that few people's agendas match my own. However, I've found that I can adapt almost anyone else's plans to compliment mine.

--Daren of Anroth, in a letter to Sharon-zool

In spite of his order, Laylan had not expected Shyshax to accomplish his task very quickly. He was surprised when, only a few moments later, a small sound made him turn, and there stood Chance. He came and hunkered down beside Laylan, his breathing quick with excitement. "You've really done it, haven't you?"

"What would you like me to do next?" asked Laylan, his hand resting on the loaded crossbow.

Chance considered. "Shoot Fenrah. We'll try to take Sevn for questioning. If we end with even one of the pack alive, I'll be content."

Laylan turned, positioned his weapon in the chink, and sighted along the quarrel. After a moment he took the bow down, noting a slight imperfection in the fletching, and began again. Chance waited with mounting impatience.

"Drop your weapons and stand up. Don't turn around." The voice came from behind them. Laylan glanced sideways at Chance. Neither of them moved.

"I said, stand up and drop your weapons or I'll have your heads in a basket. FENRAH! We have guests!"

Laylan whirled so fast he nearly hit Chance with the crossbow. He saw what he had expected: Sham with his sword drawn. A few yards behind him stood Danzel and the diminutive

Hualien. Laylan fired at the Raiders without bothering to aim. He didn't hit anything, and he didn't expect to, but the diversion gave he and Chance time to draw their swords and scramble around the blind that would have trapped them.

Sham bounded after them, shouting another warning to Fenrah. In the instant it took Laylan and Chance to get into the open, Fenrah and Sevn had already drawn swords. Sham launched himself at Chance, leaving Sevn and Fenrah to deal with Laylan. The youngsters circled, waiting for an opening.

Laylan engaged them with reluctance. He knew that he and Chance could never hope to outfight the whole pack. He was looking for a quick way out. He needed Shyshax, but the cheetah did not appear.

Fenrah and Sevn had no intention of giving him space for thought, and Laylan had to turn his attention more and more to surviving the next few seconds. He retreated continually, trying to keep them from getting behind him. He would have liked for Chance to guard his back, but Sham had already worked Chance over to the far side of the courtyard.

Fenrah stepped back suddenly and gave two brief, but ear-splitting howl: a rally call. *We've got to get out of here soon. Otherwise, she'll have the whole pack on us.*

Then Laylan tripped over a twisted root, lost his balance, and fell backward. He caught himself with his hands, but nearly dropped his sword. Fenrah brought her paw down on the flat of the blade, pinning it to the ground.

They were all panting. Laylan froze, looking at Fenrah. Slowly he released the sword hilt. Fenrah's eyes narrowed as she wiped her brow with the back of her hand and then retrieved the weapon without taking her eyes off Laylan. "Tie him," she said to Sevn, "*tightly*."

"With what?"

She glanced around, saw a bit of netting from the ungainly weapon, and tossed it to him.

Sevn pulled Laylan's arms behind him and jerked him to his feet. He reached to take the netting from Fenrah, but stopped with a gasp. Fenrah saw the expression on Sevn's face and darted forward, but Laylan caught the wolfling as he fell and swung him around in front. He supported the limp body in one hand and held a slender dagger in the other. He brought the drugged weapon against the unconscious wolfling's throat.

"Stay!" he warned, and Fenrah stopped, eyes snapping. "Tell Sham to hold off," continued Laylan, "and give me back my sword."

Fenrah didn't move. "Did you really think you could come in here and take us alone? That was stupid, Laylan. The fauns will never know what happened to you. Wolves will consume your body, and their pups will carry away the bones."

"Then they'll have Sevn's bones as well. Come on, hand it over. SHAM AUSLA!" he barked across the courtyard. "Lay down your weapon, if you value your friend's life."

Sham and Chance paused to look at Laylan. Chance's mouth twisted into a smile. He watched Sham with undisguised pleasure as he looked from Fenrah to Laylan. Finally Sham took a step back and lowered his sword.

Chance leapt towards him, but Sham's blade came up in an instant. "Not so fast! You may have bought your own lives, but that's all."

"You heard him," growled Chance. "Lay down your sword."

Sham gave a tight little smile. "Ah, but you see: if I lay down my sword, you'll kill me, and then you'll kill Sevn. If I don't lay down my sword and you still kill Sevn, I'll be very sad, and then I'll gut you and leave you for the wolves. Either way, I lose Sevn, but at least the second way I get the consolation prize of your teeth on a chain."

A noise from the walkway made them all jump. *Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.*

Hunters and hunted watched in astonishment as a shelt in a pale blue tunic and rippling black cape stepped from the eaves and strolled toward them, smiling and clapping black gloved hands. A long, curiously wrought scimitar sword hung at his side.

"And we end in a draw!" crowed the newcomer. "Beautifully done. Very pretty fighting. However, this is where I take over." He removed one glove, snapped his fingers, and armed swamp fauns stepped from every doorway.

Their leader spoke again, "Put your weapons on the ground, and keep your hands in sight. Anyone who resists will lose their hands, feet, and head in that order. Any questions?"



## Chapter 4. Another Interrogation

One must admire courage where one finds it.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Chance frowned. "Daren? Daren Anroth? We were told that you were sick and unable to attend Lupricasia." He blinked as a swamp faun took his sword.

Daren gave a bow. "A brief illness. Fortunately, I am fully recovered."

Behind him, the swamp fauns were tying Laylan, Fenrah, and Sham, and even Sevn where he lay unconscious. Two more soldiers appeared, each dragging a small wolfling. Danzel was cursing and growling as he fought. Hualien made no noise at all, but his guard had been bitten rather badly.

Daren waved his hand. "Tie them."

He turned back to Chance. "Our meeting here was unplanned, but not unwelcome. The fact is that I've been interested in you for some time."

Chance eyed him warily. "In that case, you would make a better impression by returning my sword."

Daren smiled. "All in good time. You've missed a few Lupricasias of your own. Let me see, the last time I saw you was...ah, yes, three years ago at your decoration for bravery during the cat wars. I seem to recall something unfortunate happened to your statue." He gestured at the wolflings. "I suppose *that* is what this is about?"

"*This* is about the honor of my city," snapped Chance, "and about bringing outlaws to justice. Your help is not needed, and if you plan to take them from me and claim the reward—"

Daren's laughter cut him short. "Peace, dear prince. I'm not here to steal your glory. Not that there's much to steal from a queen's bastard."

Chance's body went rigid.

Daren continued in a lazy drawl. "The first time I was in Danda-lay, I remember you were about six, and I saw you in the royal train. They made you march with your mother...even though princes of Danda-lay normally join the king in the procession at age four. Ah, I see in your eyes that you haven't forgotten that slight. You were an angry little thing even then.

"And later, when your father couldn't tuck you in corners any longer, standing up there with all those dark heads, well, you stood out. You've provided the minstrels with an entire new genre of jokes! And after that incident with the hanging—"

"Are you coming to a point?" snarled Chance.

"*Your* city?" purred Daren. "You call it your city? I wonder if she misses you just now? Out here risking your life for her honor."

He leaned forward. "Chance, your city despises you, and nothing—no military feat, no risk, certainly no capture of outlaws—will ever change that. At best, you're a joke, at worst an embarrassment. The ballads and rhymes and ribaldry—those are what last. The rest is chaff in the wind of history."

Chance hit him. He hit him so hard that Daren staggered, and then he followed it up with a punch to the gut that made the swamp faun double over. The guards were on Chance in an instant, and might have killed him, but Daren, still half-bent and coughing, held up a hand and shook his head. They held Chance tightly while their leader got his wind back.

Daren was chuckling through his grimace. “I invited that.” Finally, he straightened up, massaging his jaw. “So... We know what we think of one another. But you know I’m right, Chance. You don’t belong in Danda-lay anymore than I do. You don’t belong anywhere.”

Chance was panting with rage and stood tense in the grip of the guards.

“If you die out here, they won’t even notice you’re missing for days. Do you think Shaddock would even bother to mount a search? Do you think even Jubal would come looking?”

Chance looked like he might try another punch. Instead, he made an effort to control his voice. “You presume too much, mud-eater.”

Daren smiled. “More than you dream. But not without good reasons. I *know* more about you than you do. I know that *this*,” he gestured towards the Raiders, “isn’t about statues or hangings or honor. This is about Shaddock turning his back on the wolflings and your mother wanting to help them. If your mother and your king hadn’t disagreed so violently, she might never have gone to Jubal, and you might never have been born.”

“Shut up,” spat Chance.

Daren glanced at the bound Raiders and rocked on his heels. “Wolflings. Can’t live with them. Couldn’t have *been* without them.”

“Shut *up*!” Chance elbowed one of his guards in the belly and almost got loose.

Daren looked pleased. “You’re angry because I said it to your face, but isn’t that better than saying it behind your back? Like everyone else?” He hit Chance suddenly—hard, but without anger, across the face. The shock made Chance still for a moment.

“Wake up! You can never win. You can never prove your birthright by fighting wolflings. No one will ever give it to you. If you want it, you’ve got to *take* it.”

Chance stared at him. “Don’t understand,” he said thickly.

“You want to call Danda-lay your own?” asked Daren. “Want to defend and improve her? Want to save her honor and preserve her treasures? You’ve got no chance at that throne by succession, but Danda-lay’s luck is coming to an end. While Shaddock drinks at the festival, swamp faun armies are gathering to invade. We have many allies, but we could use another.”

Chance almost sneered. “Don’t waste your breath.”

The corner of Daren’s mouth twitched. “Look around you, Chance. Does this look like a hunting party?” He leaned closer. “We have cats. Do you think they’ve given up on owning the wood? From the Snow Mountains all the way to the edge of the cliff? A true empire?”

Chance’s face looked a little paler. He shook his head. “I would never turn traitor.”

“Traitor to what?” sniffed Daren. “Chance, you’ve nothing to betray! You have negative value to your king, and your country despises you. I’ll tell you something else: if we take Danda-lay by force with cats and swamp fauns, it will be bloody slaughter. More than half of the citizens will die, and we’ll sell most of the rest to the centaurs and to our own gem merchants for the mines. Ah, but if we had a cliff faun to put on the throne—someone of at least arguably royal descent, things might be different. The cliff fauns might be more corporative. You could save thousands, Chance, to say nothing of the civic buildings, the art galleries, the libraries. Without a defender, they’ll all go up in flames.”

Chance shook his head. “I don’t believe you have the army you claim...and even if you did, I will not write myself into the history books as the faun who betrayed Danda-lay.”

Daren shrugged. “You of all shelts should know the little ways in which reputations are built and maintained. Be a tyrant, rather than a savior, if you prefer. Be feared by every faun this side of the desert. At least, they will not be laughing at you.”

“I don’t believe you have an army that could take Danda-lay. The city is impregnable.”

Daren cocked his head. “Oh? Not only do we have an army, Chance. We have a way *in*. Or, at least, we have a good idea.” He took out a couple of vellum sheets from an inside pocket of his jacket and showed them to Chance. “A book was discovered before Lupricasia. It had some useful maps of Selbis.”

Chance eyed the maps uneasily. “I see you’re a thief. That proves nothing.”

“We know the book was found in a room that marks a secret entrance into Danda-lay—an entrance that bypasses the water tunnels. We even know the approximate location of the tunnel’s exit in the forest. We know that you, as one of the royal family—despised though you are—were privy to that information.”

He leaned so close that Chance could smell the light scent of mint on his breath. “So, what will it be, Chance? Will you write yourself into the history books? Or will you be the bitter, self-absorbed weakling that everyone takes you for?”

For a fraction of a second, something flickered in Chance’s eyes. He opened his mouth—and kicked Daren with both hooves. It caught all the swamp fauns off guard, not least the two

who were holding him. They staggered under his full weight, and he twisted free. For one moment he was clear, backing away, looking for an escape.

Daren had one hand on his solar plexus, and this time he did not look amused. “I had hoped the potential advantages of your situation would be evident to you. Perhaps I need to make clear the potential *disadvantages*.”

He gave a slight nod, and a faun behind Chance let fall a long coil of whip. He stepped forward, sent the lash curling around Chance’s legs, and brought him to the ground with one jerk. One guard pulled him to his feet and two others started to hit him. The first punch brought a yelp, but after that they knocked the breath from him. The faun with the whip had been joined, meanwhile, by another. After a few moments, Daren stopped the beating. The guards tied Chance’s hands behind his back, then let the other two fauns toss coils of whip around Chance’s neck from either side.

Chance remained unsteadily on his feet, fighting for breath and balance. Daren shook his head. “The street performers were right about you.” He flicked the clasp of Chance’s cloak, then jerked it off his shoulders. He took a handful of Chance’s tunic and sliced it open. In seconds, the cliff faun stood naked and shivering in the evening twilight.

Daren sneered. “No prince of Windar ever looked so pitiful. I asked you nicely, and now I’ll command you, bastard: where is the secret entrance to Danda-lay?”

Chance said nothing. The fauns with the whips were beginning to pull in opposite directions. Chance’s face was going red with blood. “You should have done your executions our way,” quipped Daren, “not so much equipment to malfunction.”

Chance's breathing had become an audible wheeze. His blue eyes looked fever bright in his red face.

"Where is the secret entrance to Danda-lay?" asked Daren. "Trouble talking? Just nod when you're ready."

Chance didn't move. Suddenly his knees sagged, and he sank to the ground. Daren waved a hand at the guards. "Loosen those cords; get him up again."

## 5. Jubal Investigates

A suspicious mind can be the most priceless of assets.

--Archemais, private reflections

In a dusky courtyard that adjoined the outer wall of Danda-lay's palace, queen Istra stood alone, hands knotted in her handkerchief. She'd bitten one nail to the quick, and it was bleeding into the white silk. She turned as light spilled from an opening door. Jubal stood there, his officer's hat in one hand. "M'lady, I am sorry. I tried to come yesterday, but my duties—"

"It doesn't matter." She came to him quick as a cat across the courtyard. "Tell me. What's happening? Have they arrested anyone? Does this have anything to do with—?"

Jubal's face looked drawn. "With us? No. But the news is bad all the same."

She drew him to a bench, and they sat down. Jubal told her the official line: that Lexis had taken Capricia to complete his conquest of the wood via a bargain. It was feared because of his silence that Capricia had been accidentally killed during the abduction. Meuril had declared war after the search yesterday produced neither his daughter, nor Lexis. Only one of Lexis's officers had been taken—Loop the lynx, and so far he wasn't talking. The festival was disintegrating amid the disaster. Many guests had left, including Targon and his centaurs, along with the swamp faun queen and her entourage.

Gossip had replaced singing in the half empty taverns. Fauns were arguing over what should be done with the four hundred plus cats now imprisoned in Danda-lay's dungeons. Some thought that they should be summarily executed. Others urged they be kept for bargaining.

"And what do you think?" asked Istra.



Jubal hesitated. “I think if you look at a shadow thinking of cats, that’s what you’ll see. I visited the moratorium where they’re holding the body of Capricia’s white doe, Sada. They’re preparing her for burial in Laven-lay—a burial fit for a queen, based on the assumption that she died defending Capricia.”

“You don’t think that’s what happened?”

“Perhaps, but not from cats. I examined her throat carefully. It had been mangled by teeth and the whole body mauled by claws. The wounds were so obviously cat-inflicted that I don’t think the wood fauns looked any farther. I did, and I can assure you: Sada died from a cut to the throat—deep and smooth. Cats never slice so clean. A sword did that.”

\* \* \* \*

For several hours Leesha and Tolomy kept up a steady jog, traveling deeper into the forest away from Port Ory. Tolomy thought he detected his father’s scent on the ground and grew hopeful that they might actually meet. Then the pair encountered what looked like the scene of a fight: bloody earth, cat tracks, hoof prints, and four dead leopards. “Leesha,” whispered Tolomy, nosing carefully over the grass, “you have to tell me what’s happening. I smell Father here and...swamp fauns, I think, and perhaps a few centaurs? Leesha, those leopards were part of the royal guard, and those are sword wounds.”

“I know, Tol.” She sounded a little panicky, running back and forth among the bodies. “Can you tell which way he went? Father, I mean?”

Tolomy tried, but neither of them could find a clear trail. At last, Leesha said, “Father wanted us to keep going.”

“Where? To whom?”

“Home.”

Tolomy stopped and stared at her. “*Home*? You think we can go all the way back to Filinia? By ourselves? With no guards through faun country? With shelts trying to kill us?”

“Tol, we don’t have a choice! Father said—”

“No!” he snarled. “Father would never have said that! You— You’re playing with me! Or someone else is. They’re probably making our supper right now. With a warm fire and soft pillows. They’re probably looking for us, Leesha.”

“Yes, so they can kill us! All because of this *thing*.”

“What thing?” demanded Tolomy.

“This— Oh, you can’t see it. Come here.”

“I’m not coming anywhere near you. You’re acting crazy.”

They were still arguing when something large passed over their heads and plummeted into the forest.

\* \* \* \*

Jubal took several hours to track down Syrill. He was not in his apartment in the palace, and the newly appointed wood faun guard declined to comment on his whereabouts. Fortunately, Jubal had known Syrill long enough to have several guesses at where he might be.

Three satyr’s homes later, Jubal found him—just leaving. Syrill was wearing a heavy travel cloak, and he stared at Jubal for a moment as though he didn’t recognize him. Then he

gave a brisk nod and shouldered past. “Evening, Jubal. I’m surprised to see you on this street. Thought you got everything you wanted in the palace.”

Jubal stifled a retort. It wasn’t like Syrill to make remarks like that. *He’s trying to provoke me.* Jubal took a few swift steps and got in front of him. “Syrill, we need to talk.”

Syrill’s eyes were fixed on the street beyond. “No time now, officer.”

Jubal wanted to shake him. Instead, he said, “Syrill, I know you lied about what happened on the roof.”

Syrill’s face went uncharacteristically blank.

Jubal continued. “Sada was killed by a sword. There were fauns on that roof other than you and Capricia.”

Syrill started walking again. Jubal strode beside him. “Listen to me, Syrill. *Talk* to me. I’m not denying that Lexis was involved, but there is more too it than that. If you don’t tell us, how are we supposed to find Capricia?”

“You can’t,” whispered Syrill. “No one can, except maybe me.” He started to run. Jubal shouted after him, “Syrill, where are you going?”

When he didn’t answer, Jubal continued, “As an officer in my own city, I order you to stop.”

“Arrest me!” shot Syrill over his shoulder. Jubal kicked a stone and cursed. Then he turned back towards the palace.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Meuril left Danda-lay with some three hundred hastily assembled wood faun soldiers. “We march at speed,” he told his advisors. “I want to reach Laven-lay tonight. Send messengers ahead. I want the city alert for possible attack. Oh, and find Syrril. I haven’t seen him all morning, and I need his advice.” But no one could locate the general.

## 6. Daren's Proposal

After extensive testing, I've concluded that strangulation is the best way to kill a shelt without damaging the pelt. It requires no skill or blades. The slaves can do it themselves.

--Daren Anroth to his cousin, Rquar

Chance passed out three times as Daren asked the same questions. Each time he fainted, the guards beat the air back into his lungs before slowly strangling him again. By the third time, Daren was showing signs of irritation. "I offered you wealth and power," he growled. "Now I'm only offering you your life. Talk to me about the tunnel, and I'll let you live. If not," he motioned for a guard to toss him a whip, "my next offer will be a speedy death. You'll beg for it before I'm finished."

Chance looked at him through glazed and blood-shot eyes. "There is...no...secret—"

Daren stepped well back and sent the long coil purring through the air to make several turns around Chance's waist. He gave Chance one horrified moment to realize what he was about to do, then jerked hard with both hands on the whip. There a soft "umh" as the last ounce of air left Chance's lungs. For one sickening moment he hung suspended, his legs dangling, pulled in three directions. Then Daren let him drop.

Chance rolled over and began to retch. The guards moved forward to loosen the cords, but the tortured muscles of his throat took a moment to release. When he finally managed to vomit, the material that burst from his lips was streaked crimson.

Daren moved a finger, and the guards hoisted the shuddering cliff faun to his feet. This time Chance could not stand, and they held him up. “Is it enough, Chance? I confess, I never thought you’d last this long. No one could look at you and think you helped us willingly.”

Chance lifted his head. He’d had no spittle before, but now he could taste blood on his tongue. He spat a mouthful of it into Daren’s face. Quick as a snake, Daren planted a fist in Chance’s belly. “So you like spitting blood? You’ll be doing a lot of it before we’re through!”

Chance didn’t hear him. He had already fainted. The guards let him drop. His pale skin was beginning to purple, and a dark line marked the place around his belly where Daren’s whip had caught him.

Daren sniffed in disgust. “You thick-skulled sheep shelt.” He gave the limp body a kick. “No matter. We will take your precious city anyway! We have another way in. Your suffering is of no consequence.” Daren waited a moment, but there was not even a twitch from the cliff faun.

Daren’s soldiers were beginning to light torches in the dusky courtyard as he turned to the rest of his captives. “Ah, the great hunter. Tell me, Laylan: where is your spotted friend?”

Laylan’s fixed gaze left Chance’s corpse-like body and settled on Daren.

Daren reached up to finger the wolf tail dangling from the edge of Laylan’s hat. “A cheetah tail might look attractive as part of a head piece. Oh, don’t look at me as if you’d never thought of it before. He’s got a beautiful pelt. Shall I keep the whole together for a rug? But I am thinking ahead. The skin cannot be half dry yet.”

He moved to stand in front of Fenrah. “So you are Fenrah Ausla. I’ve tried to contact you, but never received a reply.”

Fenrah regarded him from the fortress of her black eyes. “Perhaps that’s because we smelled something unhealthy in your advances.”

“Unhealthy?” murmured Daren. “What could be more healthy than making a good impression on the future rulers of the Endless Wood?”

“I distinctly heard you identify those as Lexis and his cats. Exactly what part of that is supposed to please me?”

Daren shrugged. “It’s true that the cats will take the wood as their prize. However, they are playing a subordinate role to Kazar. No decision has yet been reached about the wolflings. As for Lexis...” Daren gave a shrug. “I doubt he’s still alive.”

He cocked his head. “You know as well as I do that if the cats have free access to the wood, they will eradicate the rest of your race. Already, their treaty with Meuril is making heavy inroads. They can track wolflings far better than fauns can, and they hunt more frequently—for food as well as for sport. If they rule the wood, your wolflings—clinging to their existence by their fingernails—are doomed. If you make enemies of we swamp fauns, you’ll burn your last bridge. Help us, and I can arrange asylum, not just for you, but for all the wolflings.”

He watched her face carefully. “I know you feel responsible for them, Fenrah. You’re the last of the royal house. You’re the true queen. They are *your* people. Their fate is in your hands.”

For the first time, her eyes flickered. Daren waited a moment, then added another morsel. “I suppose your cousin would like his revenge.” He cocked an eyebrow at Sham. “Your great tormentor lies smothering in his own blood. Want to finish him? I’ll wake him up for it.”

Sham looked tempted. “Untie me.”

“First, I want proof of your loyalty. You must acquaint us with your dens in this ruin—the places where you’ve stashed weapons and supplies or set traps.”

Fenrah raised one eyebrow. “Right now?”

Daren shrugged. “I want maps. I’m sure you don’t carry those on your person. However, you can give me another show of good faith: call your pack, the wolves, too. I want them all in this courtyard. If you do this, I know that you trust me and that I can trust you.”

Fenrah shrugged. “Shall I send your message now?”

“Send away.”

Fenrah gave a long howl. She followed it with several shorter ones and was still in mid-cry when Daren said sharply, “That’s enough!” He glared at her in the flickering light of the torches. “I thought rally cries were short.”

Fenrah’s face was a mask of shadows. “Who told you that?”

He stepped nearer. “Don’t tempt me, wolfling. You saw what I do to my enemies.”

“I saw,” grated Fenrah, “what you do to your *friends*.”

Daren slapped her.

“That smell,” said Sham loudly, “the unhealthy one? I think it was carrion. You’re nothing but a common traitor, no more friend to wolflings than any cat or wood faun.”

Something about the comparison seemed to incense Daren. His lip curled. “Are you trying to distract me, Sham?” He took a step backwards and, without even looking at her, seized Fenrah and twisted her onto her knees in front of him. Fenrah struggled, but she’d been caught by surprise. He put a knee in her back, her hands still bound behind her, then began to twist her



right arm up against the pressure of his leg. Sham started forward, but the guards held him.

Fenrah stopped struggling and winced. Daren jerked her arm harder and she made a tiny sound.

“Tell me, Sham, where is your main den? Where in this city do you keep your supplies, your weapons? I’m afraid that if you don’t speak soon, her arm will break.”

Sham’s face had gone ashen. “Fenny—”

She raised burning eyes to him. “No.” Daren gave her another jerk, and she yelped, but the next words out of her mouth were, “No, Sham!”

Sham looked away, trembling.

“Are you afraid of giving away others?” asked Daren. “Whom do you value more? Them or her?”

Sham spoke in a faint voice, “Raiders do not betray Raiders.”

Everyone heard her arm break. Fenrah let out a sharp yelp, then moaned as Daren let her to crumple to the earth. “You disappoint me, Raiders. I thought that you had brains, but I see you are just as stupid as the wood fauns. Perhaps there’s a good reason you’re going extinct.”

At that moment, one of the swamp fauns bellowed in surprise. Hualien and Danzel had been sitting together, bound, and now they both shot up and away in different directions. Danzel was not quite quick enough. Two swamp fauns caught him on the parameter of the courtyard and dragged him back, but Hualien slipped through them all and into the night.

“Who searched those two?” said Daren in a soft, dangerous voice.

“I did, sir,” said one swamp faun nervously. “I’m sure they didn’t have a blade.”

Daren didn't even look at him. "Northain, take that faun's name. As for you," he grabbed a handful of the Danzel's shirt and dragged him to his feet. "Want to play the hero, eh? How does martyr sound instead?"

Fenrah spoke suddenly. She was still on her knees, but her voice had regained its icy calm. "Leave him. It's me who's insulted you. He's only following the orders."

"Do you care enough for his safety to give me what I want?" asked Daren.

Fenrah hesitated. "In the eastern corner of the city, there's an silo with a green roof. The building has three levels of basement, and in the bottom one you'll find supplies."

"If you are lying," said Daren, "you'll fair worse than Chance."

## Chapter 7. Laylan's Bargain

The last Wizard War did not begin, as is commonly believed, with the invasion of Port Ory. It began the day before in dilapidated Selbis. Appropriately, the first to suffer were an unlikely and mutually hostile company of wolflings, a cliff faun, the son of a gypsy fox shelt, and a cheetah.

## --Capricia Sor, Prelude to War

The swamp fauns formed their prisoners into a line and searched them one last time for weapons. As they prepared to leave, Fenrah glanced at Gabalon's dagger, lying among the confiscated items. Daren bent to retrieve it. "You should have listened when I offered my sword, Fenrah. I don't ask twice." He tucked the weapon into his belt.

"Better carry those two." He motioned towards Sevn and Chance, but as the soldiers moved to obey, Chance revived and started to struggle. "Get your filthy hands off me." He staggered to his feet, swaying. "I can walk...(cough)...by myself."

A look of genuine astonishment flicked across Daren's face, followed immediately by a sneer. "Let the idiot walk. Northain, lead the way with your guard. The rest of you, get to work. We're behind schedule."

The prisoners and their escort left the courtyard and started down one of the dark corridors. As they entered the passage, Danzel tripped over a pile of stones and staggered sideways into Daren.

Daren grabbed him by the shoulders. "Watch it, you little wretch. And that reminds me: Melcross, assemble a hunting party and go after that wolfling who escaped. When you find him

cut off his head and bring it to me on a pike.” He shoved Danzel away, chuckling at his horrified expression. “Keep marching, runt! You’ll join him shortly.”

Daren consulted his stolen maps as the fauns guided their prisoners down a long flight of steps into deeper blackness. More of the soldiers lit torches, sending orange light licking across the ancient stones. Chance had a scalp wound that was turning his golden curls crimson. He had to keep shaking the blood out of his eyes, but he kept walking. His determination seemed both to annoy and fascinate Daren, who occasionally tested his tenacity with a burst of speed.

At last the party stopped in a narrow, winding tunnel with a low ceiling. One of the swamp fauns unbarred an iron door with a tiny, grated window. Daren entered the cell first and glanced around. “This will do.” There were metal rings in the walls, well above head-height. Daren ordered the prisoners’ hands tied to them. “Because we wouldn’t want you killing each other before I get around to it.”

Fenrah let out a hiss of pain when they forced her broken right arm above her head. Sevn’s body hung limp from his ring. When they went to tie Chance to the wall, Daren stopped them. “Don’t you know a freshly beaten prisoner should never be tied standing? He might be dead in the morning, and that would be unfortunate. Freshly beaten prisoners should *stay down*.” He gave Chance a sudden punch in the stomach. Chance crumpled like a leaf before a flame.

Daren turned and strode from the room. The cell door squealed shut, and gradually the scuttle of feet faded in the passage.

\* \* \* \*

Corellian sat up, clutching his chest. He kept dreaming he was falling. Or flying. Or both. He reached for his pillow and found only a handful of something prickly. *Leaves?*

He sat up. *This isn't my room.*

He was in the woods, with Dragon moon full overhead and Runner not far behind. Corry tried unsuccessfully to remember how he'd gotten here. Dreamlike, he recalled the events on the roof of the hotel. *I fell. Then I swam. Then—* He groaned as he remembered the alligator.

Corry looked around with renewed interest. *How am I alive?*

Then he saw the eyes—two pairs, reflecting green from the shadows ten paces away. Corry froze. It took all his self-control to remain perfectly still until he was able to make out the silhouettes of two cats. *They're small*, he reassured himself. *If they had wanted to kill me, they would have done it while I was sleeping.* Concentrating, he tried to smell the colors—the heat of the colors. *Orange? White? Stripes?*

He got unsteadily to his feet. “Who’s there?”

The eyes winked out, and Corry saw the silhouettes turn and retreat a short distance before stopping to watch him again. He heard indistinct whispers.

Gaining confidence, he called, “I won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt me. Did you bring me here?”

“Bring you here?” came a female voice. “You brought yourself here, monster.”

*They must not like iterations.* “And where is here?”

Another fierce session of whispering. This time, Corry heard some of the words.

“—should get away right now before it kills us!”

“I don’t think—”

“—wounded, that’s the only way they’re not dangerous.”

“Well, we needed an escort anyway!”

“Leesha, are you crazy?”

*Leesha?* “Are you Lexis’s cubs?” asked Corry. “Tolomy and Leesha?”

An abrupt silence. “You know us?” The female cub came towards him. As she passed through a sheet of moonlight, Corry saw clearly her white and black stripes.

“I’m Corellian, the iteration who lives and works in Laven-lay’s court,” he said. “I’m well-known in that city. I met you both yesterday on the stairs to my room in Danda-lay’s palace. I tried to speak to you, but you ran away.”

Leesha had come to within two paces of him now, while Tolomy still hung back. Even Leesha was taking no chances. She moved close to the ground, poised to flee.

Corry’s eyes widened. She was wearing a familiar chain around her neck. “You have it,” he whispered.

She was watching his expression. “Yeah. You gonna kill me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“I’m not sure, but several others have tried today.”

“Centaur’s?”

“No. Fauns.”

“Leesha, who gave you that chain?”

“My father.”

Corry felt sick. *So Syrill was right. I wonder if this is a trap.*

Tolomy was beginning to slink forward. Corry took a step back. “That chain and what’s hanging on it belong to the Princess Capricia, not to you and not to Lexis.”

Leesha shrugged. “Father said she gave it to him to protect, but he wasn’t sure he trusted you, because of Syrill. They went to meet you in Port Ory. Looks to me like you betrayed them.”

Corry’s mouth went dry. He was remembering something—upright shapes running out of the trees just before he fell from the roof. *Fauns. Did Syrill know they were there?*

Corry ran a hand through his black hair. He had thought he knew what happened on the roof. Suddenly he wasn’t sure. In his mind’s eye, he saw Lexis standing over Capricia’s motionless body. *What if Lexis wasn’t attacking her? What if he was trying to protect her?* He remembered Syrill, going round and round with Ounce. *Could Ounce have betrayed his king? Could he have brought the fauns who were after the flute?*

Aloud, he said, “You still haven’t told me where I am.”

“The wood near the edge of the cliff, just south of Danda-lay.” Leesha cocked her head. “How could you not know that?”

“The *top*? But— I went over the waterfall! How could I have ended up on top?”

Leesha’s voice came out dry and flat. “You flew.”

\* \* \* \*

Laylan’s head jerked up. He was not the sort of shelt to forget where he was while he slept. He’d been chasing his predicament through his dreams. *I’ve got a strip of flint in the heels of my boots. Chance could take them off, strike a little flame, burn through the ropes...*

He blinked hard to clear his vision. The flickering light of a single torch still fell through the barred window, and although he heard no sounds from outside, he knew there must be guards. Chance lay exactly where he'd collapsed. Sevn was still unconscious as well. Fenrah and Sham were both looking across the cell towards Danzel. Laylan followed their gaze. Danzel had flipped up and over, so that he was crouching *on* the wall. His arms and hands were stretched out in front of him, supporting his weight, his whole attention focused on his fingertips. Laylan saw a glint of metal. *He's got a knife!*

Laylan's mind raced. *If he gets loose, the wolflings will kill us. I could shout for the guards. On the other hand, if Chance and I stay here, Daren will kill us.*

Laylan felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He looked back across the cell and saw Fenrah watching him. *I should shout. I should do it now.*

*Clink. Thump.* Laylan looked back to see Danzel standing cautiously on the floor. Laylan saw the weapon clearly now. It was Gabalon's dagger. For a moment, he did not understand. Then he remembered: *Danzel stumbled against Daren in the courtyard. Daren had tucked the dagger into his belt, and Danzel must have tripped on purpose. Clever little thief. Daren was raving about spearing Hualien, and all the while Danzel was getting the dagger.*

At the sound of Danzel hitting the ground, there was a stirring outside the cell. Sham hissed loudly. Danzel tucked the dagger into the back of his belt and stepped against the wall, hands over his head, grasping the metal ring. A face appeared in the barred window, lingered a moment, then disappeared. *They've got a torch outside, thought Laylan, they're looking into a darkened cell. They can't see details.*



Danzel was stepping away from the wall again, cautiously watching the window.

Laylan's eyes flicked from Sham to Chance to Fenrah. *Fenrah is injured, and Sham isn't. If Danzel lets him lose, the first thing he'll do is kill Chance, then probably me. On the other hand, Fenrah is his pack leader.*

Danzel went to Fenrah. She bit down on her sleeve as he cut her free, then lowered her broken arm slowly. Sham was making impatient motions with his head, but Fenrah didn't even look at him. Instead, she crossed the cell to Laylan, Danzel on her heels, still holding the dagger.

Standing in front of him, leaning so close that her lips brushed his ear, she whispered, "Gambling more than usual, aren't you, Laylan?"

He looked sideways at her and felt the cold steel kiss his throat.

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't open you like a deer in a snare."

He thought for a moment. "I'll give you a hundred and three."

"A hundred and one. We sprung those two traps along the Wyke south of Ense." Fenrah reached inside his tunic and found the chain with the trap key. "I hope you weren't planning on bargaining with this, because," she jerked hard and broke the clasp, "I already have it."

Laylan was beginning to think he'd overplayed his hand. "I could shout."

He barely had the words out before her elbow crushed the wind from his throat. He could feel Danzel playing the point of the dagger down his chest, settling it between two ribs. "It's a bit late for that," hissed Fenrah.

Laylan's back arched in a spasm. He wanted to kick her, but mastered himself.

Fenrah continued in his ear. “I’m curious, Laylan. What do you think you can offer that I can’t already take?” She removed her elbow from his throat and let him gasp painfully.

“Fauns,” Laylan managed, “listen to me.”

She eyed him suspiciously.

“Syrill,” continued Laylan, trusting her to lip-read as much as to hear him, “is a friend. Meuril listens to his general—”

“What are you offering?”

“I’ll see what I can do about the bounty laws.”

Fenrah’s eyebrows rose.

“I can’t promise I’ll succeed, but it’s just possible I could arrange a bargain that would keep your shelts off the gallows. That *is* what you want, isn’t it?”

“Assuming you could even arrange such a thing if you wanted to, why should I trust that you’ll do something that would endanger your own livelihood?”

Laylan could not move much, but he pulled his head back as far as possible to look her squarely in the face. “I keep my promises, including the one I made to protect my employer. This bargain includes Chance. Kill him, and the deal is off.”

Fenrah stepped back. She studied his face for a moment, then motioned for Danzel to follow her back across the cell to Sham. Laylan noticed that Sevn was beginning to twitch. *He’ll start moaning when he comes around, and that may bring the guards again.*

Danzel had cut Sham down. Fenrah seemed to be having an argument with him. Laylan could guess what it was about. At one point, Sham pointed to his paws. They were both

scarred—one from Laylan’s trap, the other from Chance’s sword. Danzel was evidently worried about the guards. He kept glancing sideways at the barred window. Finally, he went to Sevn, who was beginning to lash his tail and make little whining noises. Danzel reached into Sevn’s tunic and came up with a tiny satchel.

Laylan perked up his ears. “That wouldn’t happen to be thunder powder, would it?”

Danzel glanced at him.

Fenrah and Sham stopped their argument to listen.

“Because if it is,” continued Laylan, “I have flint to strike a spark.”

## Chapter 8. In the Dark

The combined knowledge of two parties is greater than the sum of their parts.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Sevn woke to a muffled *Boom!* His first thought was, *Bloody thunder, I thought I had that stuff stabilized.* When he realized the sound hadn't come from his own powder blowing him to bits, he opened his eyes.

He needn't have bothered. Sevn was lying on his side in complete darkness. A thumping pain had started in his temples. He opened his mouth, and a garbled slur came out.

"Sevn's awake!" *Danzel's voice.*

"Don't be too sure," came another voice from the darkness. "He may be dreaming."

Sevn stiffened. "Laylan," he said thickly. "You bastard, have you blinded me, too?"

A mirthless chuckle. Fenrah's voice, "Then again, perhaps he's perfectly lucid."

"I didn't give him much," said Laylan. "Headache?"

"Yeah," growled Sevn. He sat up. "Where am I?"

"The dungeons," said Fenrah. "Imprisoned by the swamp faun, Daren Anroth. He turned up while we were trying to deal with our first two guests."

"How do you know he didn't come *with* them?" asked Sevn.

"Because they tortured Chance," said Danzel. "Wanted him to tell them about a secret tunnel into Danda-lay." Danzel was sitting close against Sevn in the darkness. The others seemed to be moving about. From the sound of their voices off the stone and the stillness of the air, he guessed they were all in a small room. He heard the sound of someone digging.

“We just now got ourselves loose,” explained Fenrah. “We used your powder and a flint from Laylan’s boots to blow out the door and take care of the guards. Now we—Sham and Laylan, that is—are trying to dig out.”

“What about you?” asked Sevn. He didn’t like the sound of her voice—strained, as though from pain.

“Daren broke her arm,” came Sham for the first time. He sounded winded, but Sevn knew him well enough to recognize anger as well. *Cooperating with Laylan was not his idea.*

“Is Chance still alive?”

Laylan answered, “Yes.”

It took them another quarter watch to clear the door. The explosion hadn’t been a powerful one, but the stone was old and crumbly. By the time they finished, Sevn was helping them. “The headache will go away quickly if you move about,” explained Laylan.

“You would know,” muttered Sevn.

“Yes, I would. I tested it on myself.”

As they worked, Fenrah explained what had happened while Sevn was unconscious.

He interrupted her near the end. “You told Daren about that storage room?”

“It’s only *things*,” answered Fenrah, “well worth Danzel’s life.”

“That’s not the point. I’ve snared the place so that a flea couldn’t reach the bottom alive.”

“I know.”

“But if you hadn’t gotten out, Daren—”

Fenrah's voice sounded impatient. "Sevn, Daren would kill us eventually regardless of what we did. Still, I didn't think he's such a fool as to try for that storeroom in the dark. He will wait for daylight, and that gives us a little time."

"What *are* they doing in our city?" asked Sevn. "We're a day's hard ride from Danda-lay. What do they have to gain from basing themselves here?"

No one had an answer.

"Daren had a map of Selbis," said Fenrah after a moment. "He said he took it from a book in Danda-lay."

Laylan answered her. "Yes, but I don't think he stole it himself. Someone must have done it for him. The book wasn't on display until a few days ago at Lupricasia. The cliff fauns found it recently in their library. There was a picture of Gabalon with that dagger. Did you know it was his, Fenrah?"

"No."

There was a moment's strained silence. Sevn had known Fenrah and Sham since they were all children, and he could feel their mutual hostility like an odor in the air. *They've had an argument about Laylan and Chance, and now neither of them wants to admit Laylan into the discussion.*

If Laylan noticed the tension, his voice didn't show it. Next moment, he spoke again to say that he'd opened a space into the passage and that the tunnel seemed to be blocked in the direction Daren had brought them in. Soon they were all walking down the passage in the dark,

trying not to trip over each other. Sevn wondered if Chance was unconscious. In that case, Laylan must be carrying him, because none of the wolflings would have done it.

He was startled, then, to hear another voice, so guttural that it took him a moment to realize it was Chance. “Did you notice anything interesting about those whips, Laylan?”

“Interesting?”

“They weren’t faun whips. Didn’t you notice? The handles were as long as his forearm?”

“You probably got a better look at them than I did.”

“They were centaur battle whips.”

For a moment, Sevn didn’t get it, but then his brain caught up with his ears. “Are you saying the fauns are stockpiling weapons here for *centaurs*?”

Chance didn’t answer him.

“I hope you’re wrong,” said Laylan.

“I’m not,” whispered Chance.

They padded along for several seconds before Chance made another disjointed remark. “Daren was lying about Shyshax. If he had a body, he would have produced it. He’s like that.”

A long silence. Laylan spoke again, his voice barely audible. “After Shyshax brought you to me, did you see what happened to him?”

“I found you on my own.”

“But I sent Shyshax to get you—”

“The last time that I saw him was when all three of us split up. My finding you was coincidental. I never saw Shyshax.”

\* \* \* \*

Corellian sat under a thicket of branches, listening to a light rain pattering on the leaves. He shut his eyes and leaned back against the tree.

“You’re sure you can’t do it again?” asked Leesha, who had lost all fear and was curled against his side. Tolomy sat a pace away with his tail tucked around his paws.

“Positive,” said Corry. He felt weary, having recounted the story of the hotel to the cubs with frequent interruptions. “You have a better idea of what I look like when I shift than I have.”

“You’re rather large,” offered Leesha unhelpfully, “and you’ve got wings. You could have been a pegasus or a griffin or...” She and her brother exchanged a glance.

“Or what?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me what—”

“It’s too bad you can’t shift,” Leesha interrupted. “It would help us get down to Kazar.”

Corry sat up. “Kazar?”

Leesha looked at him with unwinking blue eyes. “To rescue my father. It was a swamp faun who tried to kill us this morning. A lizard rider tried to kill you in the river, and they might as well be swamp fauns. You saw some sort of shelts on the roof—probably more swamp fauns. Tolomy smelled swamp fauns in that bloody patch where father stopped and fought them. He wasn’t killed, or we would have found his body or at least more blood, and he didn’t leave on his own, because we couldn’t find his trail. They’ve taken him somewhere, and it must be Kazar! You’ve got to help us get him back.”



Corry sat up even straighter. “What makes you think I’d do a thing like that?”

“You want to help Capricia, don’t you?”

Corry said nothing.

“The wood and cliff fauns were turning Danda-lay and Port Ory upside down even while we were slipping out the gate,” continued Leesha. “They think cats kidnapped Capricia, but you know that’s not true. Whoever’s got our father has got your princess.”

Corry massaged his temples. “So, she really has disappeared.”

“Yes,” said Leesha, “so you’re coming. As soon as it’s light, we head for Walback pass. If you can’t fly, we’ll have to walk down the cliff.”

#### Chapter 9. A Warning Proves Well Founded

It is a well-known fact that Gabalon had a way of turning up suddenly in places where he could not possibly have got to. This lent to his myth as a wizard, but he deserved the praise more often as an engineer.

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

After Shyshax left Laylan, he stopped to drink from a basin in the adjoining courtyard before beginning his search for Chance. As the cheetah raised his dripping muzzle, he was surprised to see another cat, this one about half his size with golden eyes and richly spotted coat.

*Ocelot*, thought Shyshax. He thought, too, that he recognized her scent.

She spoke before he could move. “You don’t know me, but heed my warning: you were followed here by those who wish to kill you. Flee now. Go to Laven-lay, and tell them that it’s the swamp fauns they need to worry about. Tell them to expect an attack and soon.”

“I’ve seen you before,” said Shyshax. “You’re one of Lexis’s cabinet—Cleo, isn’t it?”

She flicked her ears. “What of it?”

Shyshax sniffed. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a long conversation with another cat. “A warning from one of you is like...like...” He couldn’t think of the right word, so he said instead, “I’ve always been curious: what *is* the official position on me?”

The ocelot smiled thinly. “You mean, on cats who spy for the fauns?”

Shyshax’s hackles rose. “No, I mean on cheetahs who owe their lives to shelts.”

“Oh, you mean on cats who call a Canid their master.”

Shyshax snarled. “I mean, cats who are loyal to the only friend who ever gave two cowries whether they lived or died, you arrogant sack of—”

“I didn’t come here to measure claws with you, cheetah!” The ocelot had risen to her full height, back arched, bristling to look taller.

“Then what did you come for?” Shyshax considering how quickly he could close the gap between them, savoring the fact that for once he was larger than his tormentor.

Cleo’s words seemed to stick in her throat. “I came to pay a debt to those long dead.”

At that moment Shyshax caught a quick movement out of the corner of his eye. As he turned his head, Cleo threw herself at him, sending them both into the pool. Shyshax came up sputtering, at eye level with an arrow quivering in the earth beside the water.

Both cats streaked from the pool as more arrows zipped from the shadows beneath the eaves. When they reached the far end of the courtyard they came face to face with two black leopards and a lion. Shyshax veered into a passage and kept running. He glanced back once and

saw the ocelot still behind. When he stopped to get his bearings, Cleo leaned against a pillar, struggling for breath. Shyshax listened, but not an echo returned to him from the dim halls.

“Who are they?” he hissed. “Why are they trying to kill me? What did you do to make yourself so guilty you had to come after me?”

Cleo shook her coat back into place. “Those cats were Liliana and her subordinates. They have betrayed Lexis to the swamp fauns. I was with his party when we were ambushed.”

Shyshax thought about that. “So the lions planned a coup?”

“Yes. They used to be the kings of the Filinia, long ago in the time of the wizards. They’ve always thought they knew better than the tigers.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

Cleo snorted. “You’re just a crumb from an old meal to be licked off the floor. Come on, let’s find your ‘master’ and get out of here.”

Shyshax hurried after her. “Tell me what you mean!”

Cleo talked softly, checking around each corner before she stepped out. “You’re five years old this spring, aren’t you? Yes, I can see it coming.”

“See wh—?”

“You know what happened to the cheetahs in Filinia?”

“I know they don’t sit on the council. I know there was a bloodbath, and I know Laylan found my mother, dead with a cub beside her. My eyes weren’t even open. Cats did that to her.”

Cleo looked at him sidelong. “They were accused of an assassination attempt on Lexis when he was still an alpha cub. He had already fought his brother and won, and Demitri had no

second litter. There was a real possibility of Demitri dying without an heir if anything happened to Lexis. The crime was so serious and came so close to success that Demitri had the entire clan of Mergers executed. Many of the common cheetahs fought and died with them.”

“Mergers?”

“King cheetahs,” Cleo explained, “a different breed. The common cheetahs are permitted to live, but they have no voice on the council.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“You are a Merger.” She ignored his hiss of disdain. “A king cheetah doesn’t get his final coat until about four years of age, so the other cats didn’t start noticing you until recently. You don’t attend most of the festivals, and you aren’t around other Filinians often, so for a time you escaped attention, but not forever. See how your spots blend to stripes along your shoulders and back? Your ruff is black! Surely that must have seemed strange to you.”

Shyshax shook his head. “No.”

“Yes.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does. They’ll kill you for it.”

“Laylan won’t let them. I don’t want any part of Filinian. I don’t want to sit on your precious council. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I know the Mergers were innocent.”

Shyshax stared at her. Then he spat, “You knew that—? And said *nothing*? You watched while—?” He looked for a moment into her beautifully lined eyes and thought he might pick her up and snap her back with one shake.

Cleo took a step away from him. “Yes, I knew. Liliana did it. She hoped to upset the succession and give the lions an opportunity to step into the gap.”

Cleo watched Shyshax. He was trembling with rage, with the bitter pain that he so rarely thought about—a lifetime of loneliness and isolation. “Are you going to kill me before I finish?” she asked.

“Tell me you were blackmailed—” he said between clenched teeth.

“I wasn’t.”

“Then *why*?”

“Because I thought Liliana might be better for Filinia than Demitri. I thought she might end the wars with the shelts, might not—” Cleo’s eyes dropped. “When the plan went wrong, I stood by while the cheetahs took the punishment for it, hoping there would be another chance.” Her eyes rose. “But I was wrong. Lexis was not like his father. Demitri left him a high and dangerous path to walk, but Lexis walked it with grace and skill, and he walked to peace.”

“Lexis is dead?” cut in Shyshax. “This...this *individual* you sold my whole family for?”

“To kill him, I sold them,” corrected Cleo. “Lexis is hard to kill, but I have little hope for him now. There were centaurs in the party that attacked us. Only three, but centaurs in battle dress are more than a match for one tiger. I didn’t follow the centaurs. I followed Liliana here. She came with a force of swamp fauns. When I picked up your scent, I knew she would try to

kill you. She was already murmuring about you in Danda-lay. The cheetahs share a home-range with the lions—one more rival she won't risk."

"Hush," interrupted Shyshax. His ears were twitching.

They were standing in a passage lined with yawning doorways. Shyshax moved to the nearest door, looked once more up and down the hall, and entered. Cleo followed. They were in a long, dark room with no other exit. Shyshax changed his mind immediately and turned to go back into the hall, but a crushing weight landed on his back and blotted out the light. As he fought, he heard Cleo yowl and felt a sharp pain in his back. Shyshax stopped struggling, pinned beneath the bulk of a male lion. The lion shifted, and he was able to see again.

Cleo lay on her side under the paws of a black leopard. Blood was spreading on the floor around her, but she continued to peddle her back paws and bite at his legs. Shyshax caught sight of Liliana, sneering down at Cleo. "Stupid little mouse-catcher. What are you doing here?"

"I made a mistake five years ago," panted Cleo, "I came to correct it."

"How tragic," murmured Liliana. "You came too late." She turned to face a swamp faun in the doorway. "This is the bounty hunter's mount and one of Lexis's stray officers. I will deal with them."

The faun nodded. "I will tell his lordship." He hesitated. "Don't tear them. Daren wants the pelts." He disappeared down the passage.

Liliana nodded at the black leopard. "Kill her." The larger animal gripped Cleo by the scruff, rose, and shook her. He ended with a twist that sent her high in the air.

Cleo came down heavily, and Shyshax thought she was dead. However, a second later she stirred and tried to rise. The leopard crouched, tail twitching. Shyshax had played the game hundreds of times with squirrels. It had only one ending. At that moment he sensed the lion's weight shift, his attention focusing on the entertainment.

Shyshax exploded from under his capturer, reached Cleo in one bound, and lifted her in his mouth. Unable to get through the door, he fled to the far end of the room.

"Bravo," purred Liliana. "The fleet one will give us some sport. Your face-spots are familiar. I think I may have played this game with your mother."

Shyshax retreated, looking for an opening, until he felt the grill of the huge fireplace beneath his back paws.

"Put her down," murmured Liliana. "Put her down, little dog-cat. We both know your claws aren't sharp. What fun will you be if you don't even use your teeth?"

Then several things happened at once. First Cleo came to life in Shyshax's jaws and tried to fling herself at Liliana. The lioness sprang, and Shyshax leapt back further, pulling Cleo with him. In doing so, he touched something with his paw—something that *gave*. A grinding noise ripped through the old building, and the floor surged. Shyshax lost his balance, dropped Cleo, and fell headfirst into the ancient soot. Then everything quieted. Shyshax raised his head and opened his eyes. To his astonishment the room was empty.

## Chapter 10. Ambush

Who are you that stand tiny, weak as the white cliff flower?

We are fawns of the fauns. We are descendants of power.

Who are you to look proudly? What right so boldly to claim?

We are descendants of kings. We stand upon names upon names.

What can you know of battle? What glorious charge have you led?

We are the lips that are silent. We are the arms that are dead.

And what has become of your captors?

Ahh, they have fled, they have fled!

--ancient chant sung by cliff faun children across the roof tops of Danda-lay

Corry was dreaming again. In the dream, he had returned to Danda-lay at Lupricasia. The city was subtly different—smaller perhaps, or cleaner. He was standing in the plaza with a great crowd of shelts and animals before the huge statue of golden wings. He caught sight of pegasus in the crowd—unmated, with wings of royal purple and scarlet, and they had shelt riders, with feathery legs and tails. He saw a unicorn, its slender horn a translucent gold, like the gem in the handle of Fenrah's dagger. He saw bears with their shelts, and little rat shelts, no taller than children, with dainty hands and little clawed feet. He saw cat shelts—little ones with slitted eyes, standing with bobcats and lynx and ocelots, taller ones with round eyes, standing with lions and tigers and leopards. Altogether, they made a splendid sea of color. Their beauty had a knife-like quality. It hurt him; he could feel tears in his eyes.



They were watching the golden Monument. Corry felt that he ought to know what was about to happen, but he couldn't remember. Then something reared behind the Monument—milk-white, reflecting prism rainbows where the light touched it. The thing was a dragon.

\* \* \* \*

For several moments, neither Shyshax nor Cleo moved. Finally the ocelot groaned and raised her head. “What happened?”

“I don't know.” They were lying in the fireplace in a room very like the one they had just left, yet the smell was different. Shyshax scrambled to his feet. “The fireplace moves!” No sooner had he said it, than the cats felt the floor rush upward and watched as the chamber vanished from the top down. The fireplace stopped in another crumbling room. Shyshax could see through a large window that they were several stories up.

“Like a water wheel,” murmured Cleo. “Lots of fireplaces that rotate in a circle like buckets. Why did it shift again?”

“Liliana must have found the trigger. Come on; the higher we go, the fewer choices we'll have about where to run.” He ran to the windowsill, then glanced back at the fireplace.

“You go,” Cleo said. “They'll be more confused if we split up. She was still lying where Shyshax had dropped her. They looked at each other. *Fool*, he told himself, *fool to bother about her. She's as bad as the others. Besides, no healer can save her if that lion broke her back.*

He came anyway, and just as he reached her the fireplace began to move. Shyshax lifted her like a kitten, but he noticed that she did not curl her back end reflexively like a kitten. Cleo's

hind legs smacked dully against the stone as he landed on the windowsill. Then, as the fireplace disappeared completely, he sprang for the neighboring roof.

It was not a long jump, but the sun was in his eyes, and Cleo was an awkward deadweight in his mouth. Shyshax barely caught the crumbling lip of stone, but as he scrambled up, he congratulated himself. Then, without even a shudder of warning the entire roof collapsed.

\* \* \* \*

When Daren left his prisoners, he traveled back through the maze of tunnels to the surface. He was giving orders about the encampment of the army, when several cats broke through the fauns. “We have an emergency,” growled Liliana.

Daren finished what he was saying, then turned to her slowly. “Where are my pelts?”

“The cheetah escaped,” snapped Liliana. “He was warned by one of Lexis’s officers, who seems to have slipped through your hands—an ocelot named Cleo. You told me the other cats with Lexis were killed!”

Daren’s eyebrows rose.

“The cheetah fled through a mechanical device of the wizards,” continued Liliana, “a fireplace that moved between rooms. We tried to follow him, but he leapt through an upper window onto a neighboring roof, which fell.”

Daren frowned. “Does he still live?”

“I don’t know. He may have died in the collapse of the roof, but listen: this is more important!”

“You do not have my pelts?”

“Hang your pelts!” Liliana pushed past him and began to pace. “When we reached the ground and tried to follow them into the building, we crossed fresh tracks. I know the print and the smell. It was Ounce!”

She made a low hiss. “You promised me, Daren. You told me Ounce was dead! Do you know what this means? It means no one is safe. I’m not sure the four of us could kill him.”

“Did you even look for the cheetah’s body?” asked Daren coldly.

“The cheetah? With Ounce on the prowl? I thought it more important to inform you. Send thirty fauns after him at once. You’ll regret it if you don’t. Go now while the trail is fresh.”

She continued to pace and talk, but Daren turned away. Calmly he took a bow from the hands of a nearby soldier. He fitted an arrow to the string and drew back the shaft as far as it would go. His movements were so casual and the other fauns so unexcited that the cats hardly realized what was happening until it was too late.

The shaft buried itself up to the feathers in the side of Liliana’s chest. She staggered and hit the earth. The lioness convulsed briefly, blood welling from her nose and mouth.

The male lion leapt to his feet with a roar, but instantly, a dozen swords hovered at his head, and slowly he sat back down. “Skin her,” said Daren to the soldier whose bow he had borrowed. “If I can’t have a cheetah pelt, a lion’s will have to do. You, leopard, come here.”

One of the black leopards stepped forward with only the hint of a tremor in his paws.

“What is your name?”

“Nolfee.”

“Very well, Nolfie. I want you to find and bring back that cheetah. I promised his pelt to Laylan. I trust you will not make a liar of me.”

The leopard bowed his head.

Daren smiled. “You will bring back the snow leopard as well. If you don’t, I may get a craving for black furs. Remember: I will soon control the bounty laws in this wood. Desert me, and I will make you a fugitive from every hunter this side of the Snow Mountains. Serve me well, and no creature will dare to raise a hand or a paw against you. Now go.”

\* \* \* \*

When Daren gave orders to Melcross to put a hunting party on Hualien’s trail, the swamp faun took ten archers and started after his quarry. They brought a dog and tracked Hualien without difficulty over piles of debris, down the long, winding castle corridors, through a tunnel beneath the triple castle wall, and at last into the streets of the city. The trail stopped at the entrance to a tower. The wolfling had gone inside, but Melcross doubted he had had time to come out. He left two archers and the dog hiding near the doorway and went in.

As he started up the steps, he heard the thin note of a horn. Up and up they went, round and round the inner tower, and all the time the horn sounded above their heads. At last they came to an iron door. Melcross pushed, and the ancient hinges cried a warning.

The sound of the horn stopped as the soldiers burst into the tower chamber. Bits of furniture leaned drunkenly around the room, and piles of rusty sword hilts, broken arrowheads, and old bones had been stacked along the walls. In front of the single window the fauns saw their

quarry, hunched against the faint glow of the departed sun. The figure stood rigid, looking at them over his shoulder and clutching an instrument of heat-crafted horn.

Melcross ran forward. Hualien made a dive, not away from the fauns, but toward them. Bending low, he caught the handle of a trap door in the center of the floor and descended, but not before Melcross's hand closed around his tail.

A jerk. A frantic scuffling.

Then the astonished faun stood with the tail in his hand. *Clever, desperate little beast!*

He wondered even as he flung the tail aside why there was no spray of blood, but he hadn't time to examine it. Down he went with the archers on his heels. While the previous stairs had led around the outside wall of the tower, these led down the center in a tight corkscrew. The passage was completely black, the descent far steeper than the previous staircase. The air was fetid and stank of rodent droppings, yet Melcross was encouraged by the sound of the wolfling's footfalls just below him. At last the tunnel widened a little, but something was bothering Melcross. He was almost certain they had reached the bottom of the tower and were still descending. *If the wolfling leaves by another exit, he will escape the dog and the archers in hiding. There are probably other wolflings in these ruins. Could he be leading us into an ambush of his own?*

In the path ahead he saw a patch of light: a grating. Melcross began to relax. They were only just beneath the street. A wall of stone loomed in front of them and against it crouched the wolfling. Evidently he could not loosen the iron bars of the grate and had trapped himself.

Melcross advanced with his sword up. His soldiers fanned out to either side. They had reslung their bows and brought out the long knives that swamp faun archers carried for close combat. As Melcross came nearer, he saw what looked like a thin tail on the wolfling. *But that's impossible. He left his tail in my hand; he cut it off.*

The wolfling hissed and kicked off his boots, crouching against the wall, legs spread, hands up, ready to fight. His nails looked unusually long in the shadows, and his paws... Melcross blinked hard. In the dim light, Hualien's feet looked skeletal, and there was something rippling and crawling around them. The hair along Melcross's neck rose, and a visceral sense of disgust made him suddenly queasy. One of the soldiers gasped and then cursed. "They're rats!"

*Rats! Of course.* Melcross's brain was scrambling for something that made sense. *The things on the floor are rats, and his feet are just, just—*

Several of his archers yelled at once. Melcross felt hot pain in his leg. He shook the rat loose, but his hoof came down on moving bodies. They were like ants; they were everywhere. His fauns broke suddenly in every direction. They slashed with their knives, trying to clear a path to the stairs. Melcross swung his sword, flinging rats off his legs with his free hand. One escaped his fumbling grip. When it reached his throat, he lost control, fell, and began to scream.

## Chapter 11. Ounce

Cats love only their mates and their masters.

--Demitri of Alaynia

*Water.* Shyshax smelled earth and trees. And *water.* He opened his eyes, but could see very little. The gurgle of a stream sent him nearly wild, but he held still. His body ached, promising something worse if he tried to move. Without raising his head, Shyshax began to make out the outlines of branches against starlight. Thirst clawed at him, and at last he rallied himself to stand. It hurt even worse than he had anticipated, every breath drawing fire through his chest. He thought his tail might be broken. He could not lift it properly.

Shyshax crawled from the underbrush and looked around. He tried to remember how he had come into the forest. He looked back and noticed that branches had been pressed down and draped about his resting place. *Someone hid me.*

Groggily, he remember Cleo and Liliana, the leopards. *Did I walk here? Did Cleo drag me?* A scent in the air made him uneasy, but he was too disoriented to place it. All that mattered was the stream, just within sight through the trees. Limping, Shyshax made his way to the water. He thought it was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted. He was considering wading in and lying down in the shallow flow, when he heard a soft noise—something between a trill and a growl. At the same instant, he smelled blood.

Shyshax raised his head quickly enough to send a dart of pain through his bruised shoulders. A few paces upstream on the opposite side stood a cat. He looked huge in the starlight, three times Shyshax's size, and he had a shelt's body in his mouth. The head dangled

by a flap of skin, dribbling blood into the water. Shyshax thought he might be sick. The next second, he saw the hooves and knew the shelt was not Laylan.

The cat dropped its kill when he saw Shyshax. The body landed with a plop, sprawling in the stream. One leg was gone. Shyshax thought the fur might be black, but it was hard to tell.

*I'm done*, thought Shyshax. He knew he could not run any more. He felt oddly calm, satisfied that he'd done everything he could, both for Laylan and himself. Then he *saw* the cat, really looked at him for the first time, and his fear rose again. *Ounce*. Shyshax remembered the times they'd exchanged insults and wondered what Ounce was going to do to him. *You'll not grovel*, he commanded himself. *Die on your feet!*

But his legs seemed to fold of their own accord as the snow leopard came towards him until his belly was flat against the ground. Shyshax's ears pressed tight against his head, his eyes rolling up until the whites showed. His broken tail tried to tuck beneath him, but only sent a stab of pain through his rump to his flanks.

Ounce lowered his head to sniff noses with Shyshax. "Peace, little dog-cat. I'm not hunting you tonight."

Shyshax's eyes flicked to the faun and back again.

"Yes. I'm hunting fauns." But there was no blood-joy in his eyes or voice.

Shyshax tried to speak, but his voice would not obey.

Ounce seemed to read his thoughts. "I brought you here out of the city."

"The ocelot," managed Shyshax.

"Dead."



“Oh.” Shyshax thought a moment. “Did you come with her?”

Ounce looked surprised. “No. We were all scattered when fauns and centaurs attacked.”

Shyshax noticed that the fur of Ounce’s left shoulder was bloody—dried blood, too high to clean. Shyshax felt a little bolder. “She came to warn me. She said the cheetahs were innocent, that Liliana was the one who tried to kill Lexis. She said I was a king cheetah.”

Ounce turned away dismissively, rumbling as if to say, *Was that all?*

Shyshax felt piqued. “If she was right, then my family died without a reason!”

Ounce shook his head. “You know nothing. Eat. You’re weak.”

Shyshax got shakily to his feet. “Did you all know? Every one of you? And did nothing!”

Ounce turned his pale eyes back on Shyshax. “Not all of us. Stop mewling like a shelt. Come and eat.”

Shyshax followed him, grumbling, “Why did you rescue me if you detest me so?”

“I thought I owed it to Cleo. We have served long together. Also, Lexis expressed concern earlier.”

This startled Shyshax into momentary silence, but when Ounce identified the faun as dinner, Shyshax found his voice again. “I’ve never eaten shelts! Not even wolflings! My master wouldn’t have it.”

“Your *master*,” sneered Ounce. “Did he muzzle you, too? Lead you on a rope like a burrow?”

Shyshax bristled, though he was so sore he could feel the individual hairs as they rose.

“You have a master, too,” he spat.

All the snarl when out of Ounce's face at once. "I *had* a master." He turned to the body of the faun and began ripping away flesh from bone as easily a shelt might peel a fruit.

Shyshax felt suddenly both ungrateful and unkind. "Cleo thought he was alive." *She didn't think it likely, but she thought it possible.*

Ounce was ripping, but not really eating. He stopped for a moment, the cloud-gray fur of his chest crimson. "When I first came down out of the mountains, I pledged myself in service to the house of Alaynia. Demitri was young, then, and so was I. He was a good king. He did the things that had to be done without flinching, without looking back. He was also—" Ounce seemed to be searching for an uncommon word.

"A friend?" prompted Shyshax.

Ounce glanced at him. "That, yes. As much as Demitri could have a friend."

*Or as much as you could,* thought Shyshax.

"I did all that was required of me," continued Ounce, "all that was...*asked*."

Shyshax frowned. *Something was asked that he didn't like. Was there really any work too dirty for you, Ounce?* Shyshax was reminded of the way that Cleo had stumbled over her words:

*I thought that Liliana might be better for Filinia than Demitri. I thought she might end the wars with the shelts, might not—*

"I watched Lexis grow up," continued Ounce, "but cats do not change masters easily."

Shyshax nodded. He understood this.

“I thought Liliana would get herself killed, thought Demitri would do it before Lexis had a chance. But Demitri died, and Lexis is....” He seemed to be searching for an even more difficult word than “friend,” and this time Shyshax wasn’t sure what to volunteer.

Ounce shook his head. “He is unusual. I thought I would not have a second master.”

*Or a second friend.*

“I was wrong,” finished Ounce. Then he tore into the faun and really did eat.

\* \* \* \*

Laylan heard the horn. He did not think that Chance could hear it, for the sound was of a pitch for Canid ears alone. The wolflings began talking at once.

“Well, Fenny, if your call didn’t alert the others, that should finish the job,” said Sham.

“I hope Huali’s alright,” muttered Sevn. “Fauns can hear that horn close-to.”

Fenrah sniffed. “I’m not worried about Huali, not in Selbis.”

Laylan wanted to ask about the horn, but they had shown little inclination to speak to him and none at all to explain. Chance was becoming heavier against his arm. *Soon I’ll have to carry him. I doubt they’ll slow down for me.*

Sometime later, dim light began to illuminate the passage, and Laylan knew they were approaching the surface. Shortly afterward, Chance fainted again. Laylan got an arm under the faun’s legs and lifted him. Fenrah’s arm might be broken, but there was nothing wrong with her legs. He was beginning to wonder how he would keep up, when help arrived.

Laylan smelled the wolves a second before he saw them—just shaggy hulks in the gloom. They whined and yipped in welcome as they greeted the wolflings, tails wagging furiously.

“Fenrah?” A deep male voice—Xerous.

“Here!” Fenrah was on Dance now. “Hualien—?”

“He’s with me,” said Xerous, “so is Talis. The fauns are spreading out over the palace area. Hurry or we’ll be tr—”

Fenrah cut in, “Is Barbet with you?”

“I think so; why?”

“She’s large and she’s got a mild temper. I’m hoping she’ll suffer some unusual riders.”

“Unusual?” All the hackles had risen in Xerous’s voice.

“Yes. Laylan, come here. Sevn, please explain things to Xerous.”

Laylan came, listening to the choking sound Xerous was making as Sevn explained. Behind them, Sham was speaking with Talis, his young apprentice. “I brought your pack, Sham—the smaller one. Huali said Chief’s arm was broken.”

Fenrah had jumped down beside Laylan. “This wolf will not like you,” she said, “but I think she will humor you.”

She coaxed the she-wolf to his side, inviting her to sniff him, then to lie down on her belly. Just as Laylan was about to mount, he saw something that made him forget the wolf and even Chance’s limp body. He reached for the place where his sword had hung before he remembered it was gone.

Hualien had jumped off his wolf. He had lost his boots, and the feet and legs below the hem of his tunic were hairless and dainty with long toes. His tail curved behind him, completely hairless like that of a skinned animal. Laylan heard a soft chittering.

“Yes, yes,” said Fenrah in a tired voice. “He’s a rat shelt. Now get on the wolf.”

\* \* \* \*

In the top of a huge old tower, Daren lay under a pile of furs, lulled by the drumming of rain on the roof and the warmth of Ermina’s body. He’d debated whether to bring her, but he was glad now of his decision. Sharon-zool had taken so much of his time these past months that he’d barely seen Ermina. He missed her child-like kindness. It somehow affected him as his queen’s passionate attentions could not.

Daren buried his face in her sweet-smelling curls and let sleep take him. He had spent the night making the camp secure; his officers should be capable of handling the morning.

*Bang!*

Daren bolted up. A messenger stood dripping in the doorway. He sketched a nervous bow. “Sir, the prisoners have escaped!”

Daren’s angry reprimand died in his throat, but his bloodshot glare had already set the messenger to trembling. “Officer Northain begs me to tell you, sir: part of the passage collapsed, sir. Guards presumed dead, sir. Melcross and eight of his company are dead and the small wolfling still loose, sir. Two archers waited for them outside a tower for a quarter watch. They finally went in and found them half consumed by rats,” he gulped, “sir.”

Daren drew a ragged breath, clenching and unclenching his hands beneath the coverlet. Beside him, Ermina stirred and sat up, her small, sensual body only a suggestion in the gloom.

The messenger did not look at her. “Officer Northain begs me to ask—”

“Yes, I know,” snapped Daren. He rose and began throwing on clothes. “How long ago?”

“The escape, sir? Half a watch, perhaps less.”

Daren scooped up his sword and belt. “Tell Northain that I want him to assemble the best trackers we have and go after the—” He hesitated. “No. Get my hounds and my personal guard. I’ll go after them myself.”

## Chapter 12. Mist is an Impartial Aid

Medicine in Panamindorah lost its best practitioners when Canisaria fell. Wolfling healers owed the beginnings of their status not to greater insights, but to their diet. Casual familiarity with anatomy and with corpses lead to greater freedom in the treatment of their own dead. From ancient times wolflings practiced autopsy, from which faun healers shrank in disgust. Their noses are also keener, allowing them to sense corruption in a wound days before their faun peers. When Canid libraries burned, the loss was incalculable. The last vestiges of that great body of knowledge survive primarily in the heads of a few fugitives; no one now knows how many. Bountied and despised, they carry with them the knowledge of the ancient craft of surgery, the art of infusion, the skill of cutting for the stone—all these things sleeping in rags and in ditches.

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

The wolflings emerged from the labyrinth of underground Selbis into a world of mud, wet stone, and slippery paving. Rain fell in sheets from the dark sky, and a fog had risen. The water muffled smells and sounds and reduced visibility to a few paces.

To Laylan, the cold rain boded ill. Chance was already shivering as he floated in and out of consciousness, though his body had begun to feel unnaturally warm. Laylan had little in the way of extra clothing for him.

The Raiders, however, were pleased by the rain. “I told you the Creator loves us,” Fenrah said to Sham as they started towards the wall of the palace. “No one could track in this. We’ll be half a day from the city before Daren even begins looking.”

Sham seemed less ready to celebrate. In the mouth of the tunnel he demanded that Fenrah stop and let him set her arm. Laylan was sure he had given her distillation of willow bark to chew for the pain. He would have liked to get his hands on Sham's medical bag for Chance, but he knew that was a pale hope. Xerous had brought extra weapons, but the wolflings made no offer of any to Laylan. His mount growled periodically and snapped at him when he tried to take hold of the fur near her head. *I'm more her prisoner than her rider.* For one moment he missed Shyshax so badly that his eyes burned in the cold rain.

Distraction came soon enough. Chance began to groan. He sat up, tried to say something, then began vomiting over the side of the wolf. Laylan's nose told him that the vomit was mostly blood. A moment later, Danzel rode up beside them and offered a water skin. Chance drank desperately, but seemed no better for it. When they were just beyond the palace walls, he asked Laylan to stop. When Laylan hesitated, Chance tried to clamber down himself, and Laylan jumped off to help him.

Chance staggered towards a gutted building, but didn't make it to the wall before something dark began running down his leg. Laylan realized it was bloody urine. To Laylan's surprise, Talis jumped off her wolf and came to help. Chance still had enough presence of mind to be acutely ashamed of soiling himself, but Talis worked quickly. With a rag and the help of the rain, she and Laylan got him cleaned up and back on the wolf in short order.

When the pack had reached a point well away from the larger buildings, Fenrah stopped, leaning into the wind. "I smell fauns." She paused. "And something else."



One of the wolves whined and bared his teeth. Far down in the maze from which they had come, the company heard the faint but unmistakable sound of baying.

\* \* \* \*

Jubal of Undrun sat in his office, writing furiously. A candle burned low at his elbow. Night fog drifted in from the window and through his open door. Jubal had tried the night before to get a private audience with Shadock. He'd kept trying all today, but without success. Shadock's attention had been consumed by political tension derived from Capricia's kidnapping, as well as the countless difficulties involved with the disassembly of Lupricasia. Still, Jubal knew the king could have found time for him. Ignoring Jubal's requests was one of Shadock's thousand little ways of showing his distaste for his wife's rumored lover. The king seemed to enjoy watching Jubal's frustration as he stood at guard in the back of the royal courtroom that afternoon, waiting in vain for a chance to speak while Shadock held audiences.

Afterward, Jubal had waited in his own office until the second night watch, knowing that Shadock sometimes conducted business late, hoping that he would receive a summons. Now another day had ended, and still Jubal's news and his suspicions had gone untold. He dared wait no longer. *If Shadock will not hear, perhaps he will read.*

While the candle burned into a puddle, Jubal set down the things he had learned from the body of Capricia's doe, their implications, and his suspicions. He finished a little before dawn by the water clock. Jubal was exhausted, but still had the presence of mind to seal the letter with the generic palace seal, rather than his own. *He won't know until he begins reading that it's from me. If he still wants to ignore it, any blood that results is on his own head.* Blearily, Jubal took the

letter to the palace night clerk with instructions for its delivery. Then he went to his own chambers, lay down in his uniform, and fell instantly asleep.

\* \* \* \*

The wolflings reached the outer wall of Selbis and set off along the old wizard highway that ran eventually to the gates of Laven-lay. They did not hear the baying of the dogs again, but Fenrah continued to pushed them hard. Around noon, they reached a place where a stream crossed the road, and Fenrah called a halt to confer with Sham, Xerous, and Sevn.

Laylan watched them through tired eyes. Chance had vomited twice more, smaller quantities, but almost entirely blood. Every time seemed to leave him weaker.

Sevn turned his wolf and came towards Laylan, the apparent delegate from the conference. “There’s a holt near here, a cave where we can hide and rest.”

Laylan nodded. “You can blindfold me,” he offered.

Sevn smiled. “That won’t be necessary. It’s not all that secret, and we don’t use it often.”

The holt turned out to be a large, artificial cave, dug among the roots of trees. It was well off the road, and to enter it one had to wade through the hock-deep water of the stream. The wolves walked in the stream all the way from the road, and Laylan felt sure the rouse would stop most scent-trackers, though it would only delay a determined hunter. Inside the cave, the ground rose to dry land, and light fell through many small openings in the roof. Trees grew up through the cave, their roots forming fantastic, twisted cages.

“We rest here for a quarter watch,” Fenrah announced. “No fires.”

Laylan got his first good look at Hualien as the small shelt hopped off his wolf. *He's not a child at all. I wonder how I ever missed it.* A rat scampered out of Hualien's pouch and nestled against his neck. Laylan felt a jolt. *Hualien's rats! They must have rigged the scaffold at Sham's hanging. I thought the wood and ropes looked gnawed and couldn't account for it. In the courtyard at Selbis, Danzel and Hualien got loose, not because they had a weapon, but because a rat chewed through the ropes.*

Most of the Raiders were lying down with their wolves to sleep. Laylan pulled Chance off Barbet and tried to lay him on the ground. Chance immediately protested that he couldn't breath—his throat was swelling—so Laylan propped him against a tree root. The faun was shivering, his wet skin warm with fever. His neck looked bad, the darkening flesh like a collar on his alabaster skin. His middle looked worse—the bruise a spreading purple.

Laylan tried to think of a way to get him dry. He was actually considering rubbing him down with dirt, when Fenrah walked by, took off her wool cape, and put it around Chance's shoulders. Laylan followed her with his eyes as she moved toward the cave entrance. He glanced at the sleeping Raiders and at Chance. Then Laylan got to his feet and followed Fenrah.

He found her outside the cave and across the stream, hunkered in a thicket of fern and brambles that gave a view back toward the road. She was tying together the pieces of rope with which the swamp fauns had bound them—awkwardly, trying not to move her broken arm.

Laylan thought she hadn't seen him until she spoke without looking up. "Don't stand; it defeats the purpose of a sentry."

He crouched in the nest of ferns. “Is there only one Hualien, or do you have several rat shelts playing the role?”

Fenrah cocked her head as if to say, *That’s an interesting idea*, but said only, “Go back to the cave, Laylan.”

“At least tell me where Lyli is. I may be able to help.”

Fenrah did not look as though she thought it likely, but she answered the question. “Lyli was hunting outside of Selbis. Hopefully, the howls and the horn alerted her and the other wolves.”

Laylan nodded. “And you’re watching while the others sleep. There are nine shelts here. I assume someone is going to relieve you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She gave an enigmatic smile. “Because I said so, and *I* am the leader.”

Laylan sat back and wrapped his tail around his legs. “Let me.”

Fenrah looked at him and said nothing.

“I’ll wake you in an eighth watch.” He picked up the rope that she had been working on.

Fenrah hesitated, then gave an almost imperceptible nod. She made a nest right there in the leaves and curled up with her one good hand on her dagger. “An eighth watch.”

“Where is Dance?” asked Laylan.

“Hunting.” She closed her eyes. “They have to eat.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry woke hungry and wet. He and the cubs started west in the dreary rain and mist, slogging over the spongy forest floor until the gray sky appeared through the trees. Corry was about to lead the way onto the edge of the cliff when Tolomy hissed and hunkered down.

“Something moved out there.”

“Stop being a kitten,” admonished his sister. “It’s just the rain making everything jump.”

“No, I saw shelts beyond the trees on the edge of the cliff.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Shhh!” Corry held his finger to his lips. “Look there.” He was pointing at a silhouette beyond the last of the trees. “Is that a shadow or—”

Leesha sucked in her breath as the shape rose and walked away. Then, before Corry could grab her, she was gliding forward, belly almost on the ground, long neck craning forward to see through a gap in the trees.

Corry whispered as loudly as he dared, “Leesha!”

Her tail gave a brief, hard flick. Tolomy pressed against Corry’s leg, quivering.

After a long look, Leesha came back to them. Corry caught her by an ear, and she grimaced, twisting away from him and setting a paw against his arm. Claws half the length of his fingers emerged from her creamy paw, and Corry wondered for a moment whether she would flay his arm to the bone.

She didn’t. They froze like that, him still holding her ear, neither of them making a sound. Corry could hear the tramp of feet now, marching. After a moment, he bent close to her free ear, aware every second of the proximity of her claws to his face.

“Don’t do that again,” he whispered. “If I go with you, then we’re a team. We consult before we risk our lives. Do you understand?”

A terrible pause. Leesha’s claws came out a little farther, and Corry was reminded forcefully of Lexis and the fact that he was probably holding the future queen of Filinia by her ear. At last, her claws withdrew, and she dropped her paw. Corry let go of her ear. Leesha shook herself and hissed at him, but her eyes held a new respect.

Corry opened his mouth to ask what she’d seen, but she shook her head and motioned away from the cliff. Leesha would not speak until she’d brought them out of the trees much farther along the cliff.

Then they all saw the shapes in the foggy twilight, emerging from the pass in a steady stream. “It’s an army,” breathed Tolomy, “swamp fauns from Kazar.”

“Yes,” said Leesha, “the fog will cover them completely as they get nearer the river, nearer to Danda-lay.”

## Chapter 13. Another Bargain

Those who know best how to heal also know best how to kill.

--Gabalon, *Essays*

Fenrah came awake with a start. The gray rain was the same. The earth was still wet. The light was still hazy, but some inner clock insisted it was wrong. She felt Laylan's eyes on her and turned to glare at him. "It's been more than an eighth watch."

"Has it?" He concentrated on the rope he had almost finished.

She shook her head. "At least a quarter."

"Perhaps. I've no timepiece, and rain makes the light lie."

"Lie indeed," muttered Fenrah. "We need to leave. Why didn't you wake me?"

"I forgot." He stood to brush the leaves from his clothes.

"I don't need your favors," growled Fenrah.

"I know." Laylan turned and waded back through the stream towards the cave.

\* \* \* \*

Laylan found Chance huddled where he had left him. The whites of his eyes had turned crimson, strange against the pale blue of his irises. The pupils were dilated. His skin was the color of chalk wherever it wasn't bruised black and blue. He stank of vomit and blood and death. His voice came husky, like a shelt who had smoked too much pipe weed. "Laylan, I'm dying."

"No, you're not." Laylan bent to lift him, but Chance pulled away.

"One of us must get a message to Danda-lay."

Laylan was reminded suddenly of Chance's age—fully ten years his junior. Chance had seemed frequently irksome, but never young until now. Laylan sat back on his haunches, “Chance, I said from the beginning that you should not go hunting alone with me. Do you remember I said that?”

Chance's gleaming blue eyes seemed to float in blood. “And I said I trust you.”

“There are plenty who don't, and there are plenty more who wish me ill out of jealousy. If you die, no faun will ever be able to vouch for what happened here. They will say that the Raiders bought me, and I led you into a trap. Do you know what they do to Canids who kill princes of Danda-lay?”

Chance thought for a moment. Then he fumbled with something on his finger—his signet ring. “Give me a scrap of something—cloth, anything—and something to write with.”

Laylan stared at him. He hadn't believed it would come to this.

Chance motioned impatiently. “Take the note and my ring, and get to a garrison. Have a message sent—” He struggled to suppress a spasm in his throat. “—to Danda-lay. They will believe the writing and the ring.”

Laylan shook his head. “I won't leave you here for Daren.”

Chance glared at him. “I don't want you to leave me here. I want you to finish me.” He caught Laylan's arm as the fox shelt pulled away. “If Daren gets hold of me, he'll torture me again. Don't you understand? I don't trust myself!”

“What's to give away?” asked Laylan in exasperation. “There's no secret entrance to...” He trailed off.



“Yes,” rasped Chance, “there is. Kill me. Otherwise I’ll slow you down and get you caught, and I’m a liability if Daren catches me.”

Laylan shook his head. “That’s not how I operate.”

“If you won’t do it,” said Chance. “I know there’s someone here who will.” His voice had fallen almost to a whisper.

Laylan raised his eyes. Chance was looking at Fenrah, standing a few paces away. Laylan became suddenly aware of all the Raiders—watching, coming nearer. He looked for Sham and found him beyond Fenrah, almost invisible against one of the root cages.

Chance spoke again. “Whatever deal Laylan made with you, I can revoke it. Of my own free will, I can give up its protection. Get Laylan safely to a garrison as quickly as possible, and you can be rid of me.”

“No.” Laylan stood up, but Xerous pinned him before he could take a step. Laylan fought, but Xerous was armed and easily a head over his height.

Fenrah sighed and spread her hands. “Alright. Someone give him something to write his note. Then he’s all yours, Sham.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry, Leesha, and Tolomy waited in the brush until the last of the swamp fauns disappeared into the north. Then there was a brief discussion as to how they should get down the cliff. It now seemed unwise to take Walback pass—the most traveled route, sure to harbor stragglers and messengers from the army. In the end, they decided to continue south in hopes of finding another path. Corry had seen several labeled on maps in Laven-lay’s library. The three

skirted a small cliff faun village. Corry entered briefly to buy food and water. The place was almost empty with so many still in Danda-lay for Lupricasia, and he got away without being seen by more than three shelts.

Near midmorning, they came to a well-marked, though narrow, cliff path. Corry had to step carefully over the wet rock. A cruel wind drove straight through his soaked clothes. As they walked, he had to keep reminding himself that they were making progress, because the view never seemed to change. His thighs and calves began to ache. After a time he gave up raising his eyes and concentrated on his steps.

Sometime during late afternoon the rain stopped, but the weather remained overcast and cool. Corry was startled and pleased when he finally glanced up and discovered that they were significantly lower. He could hardly see the desert now. Finally the setting sun broke from under a cloudbank. The hot orange light felt like a welcome caress.

When Corry looked up again, the sun had almost set. What had seemed only a dark strip from the walls of Danda-lay now appeared to be an immense swamp, steaming and hooded even in the light. Its voice had begun to reach them—bird calls that Corry had never heard before, croaking frogs, and whining insects.

An eighth watch later, they reached the level of the treetops and descended into the humming world beneath. The path ended in a strip of rocky soil which melted quickly into lush islands surrounded by treacherous mud and water. Gnarled trees grew on the islands, hung with moss, their roots twisting like snakes in the brackish water. Evening shadows painted deformed figures on the razor-edged marsh grass, and Corry noticed a stink of sulfur and decay.

Tolomy shivered as the weird hunting cry of an animal echoed through the swamp. His whispered words were the unspoken sentiment of all three: “I want to go home.”

## Chapter 14. Sham's Revenge

Proponent of vivisection: All who probe the secrets of the body may be called healers.

However, some favor looking into a living body and others into a dead one. I understand the ethical dilemma, but I ask: if you were badly injured, which would you rather have for a friend, a healer who studies living bodies or dead ones?

Proponent of autopsy: The question is not which kind of healer you would rather have for a friend, but which you would rather have for an enemy.

--Anonymous debate, school for healers in Sardor-de-lor, Case Studies and Notes

When Xerous pinned Laylan, Sham felt the need to do something. He could feel Talis's eyes on him, confused, questioning. He could feel Fenrah's and Danzel's and Xerous's—each like a separate voice, a separate question. Sham remembered what Fenrah had said to him when they'd argued about Chance in the prison cell. *"He is the way he is because of us, because of what others have sacrificed for us!"*

*"And what about us?"* Sham had demanded. *"Haven't we suffered? Can you even begin to measure our hurts against the pampered whining of some slighted prince? And yet we don't use what the fauns have done as an excuse for cruelty."*

Sham thought, *And how will I excuse what I'm about to do now?*

Slowly, he came forward and made a motion that Talis understood. It was wolfling tradition that healers operate in pairs. One dealt with the patient—restraining, anesthetizing, or comforting—while the other worked on the wound or illness. Talis crouched beside Chance. She removed Fenrah's cape, then maneuvered him away from the tree until she was sitting behind

him. She looped one arm through his elbows behind his back, her free arm across his chest. This was a common posture of restraint for an examination that might prove painful.

*But, thought Sham, do I intend to examine him?*

Chance made no resistance when Talis moved him, but he began to tremble. *He thinks I'm going to kill him, thought Sham, torture him, even. Stop this.*

The healer in Sham was crying out that he could not kill an unresisting, wounded faun. The wolfling in him insisted that Chance, given healing, would return to murdering wolflings at the first opportunity. *To heal him is to hurt others*, said the voice of reason. *Kill him quickly and cleanly. This is all the mercy you can afford.*

Another voice, however, was stirring in Sham—the voice of neither wolfling nor healer. He looked down at the purple bruise across Chance's belly and thought, *I could put my sword right through him into the ground—just like he did to my paw.* His own thought chilled him.

As if at a distance, he heard Xerous say, “He'll scream and bring the hounds. Do you want me to cut him quiet?”

*Does it show on my face what I'm thinking?* Sham looked at Talis and saw that it did. Her eyes were round and dark. He knew she needed him to say something, to tell her that there was some sense in what he was about to do, that all he'd taught her about mercy had not been hypocrisy. “Talis,” he began, “you may one day need to treat a faun, and you will find their physiology somewhat different from ours. You may as well begin learning now.”

Talis swallowed. *She thinks I mean a live dissection.* He glanced at the faces around him and saw Laylan unnaturally pale. *They all think so.*

*Tell them that's not what you mean!*

But he felt as though someone had jammed a fist down his throat. He shifted position and pain lanced up through his paw—the pain that might never go away. He had taught himself not to limp—not to betray weakness that might get him killed in a fight, but the pain remained.

*Fenrah, stop me, thought Sham. Be my conscience for once.*

Sham looked at Xerous and saw the eager, predatory expression, the black hole of anger that could never be filled. Xerous pulled out a hunting knife and tossed it. Sham caught the knife over Chance's body. He noticed without looking closely that the faun's trembling had gotten worse. *You're only doing this to frighten him. You won't really do it. You're being cruel. Stop.*

Sham reached a hand toward the bruise on Chance's belly. As his fingers brushed the skin, one of the faun's legs uncurled with blinding swiftness, and Sham felt the impact of the hoof squarely in the center of his chest. The blow sent him backwards, and he landed hard on his rear. Even as his eyes watered with pain, Sham knew the kick for what it was—the reflexive response of a faun barely in control of his terror.

Before he could open his eyes, Chance had begun to babble almost incoherently.

“‘msorry’msorry’msorry—accident—please—Ididn’tmeanto’msorry.” He was shaking violently.

Sham looked Chance in the eyes for the first time and felt ashamed. “Stop,” he said, but his voice came out in a low croak, his wind gone from the blow. *What kind of monster do you think I am? To punish you for not lying still while I—? What kind of monster—?*

Chance was still babbling. “Ididn’tmeantoIdidn’tmeanto—”

Sham crawled to Talis and tried to put his hand over Chance's mouth, but the faun flinched away from him. Finally, Sham motioned Talis away, put his arms around Chance and buried the faun's head against his shoulder. "That was my fault. I won't punish you for it. I won't hurt you." Chance's hands, now free, grasped compulsively at the fabric of Sham's tunic. He was sobbing like a child. In the end, Talis did the examination.

## Chapter 15. Two Points on the Tiber-wan

To consider something worthless, then to lose it and discover that it had value, is hard.

--Archemais, private reflections

“The strangulation is bad, but I’ve seen worse.” Sham was all business now, speaking to Laylan as easily as to a concerned relative. “The sickle bone in his throat is probably fractured, but that bone doesn’t solidify until around age thirty. How old is he again?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Yes, I think that will be alright. His belly is something different. I haven’t treated anything quite like it before. I would guess he’s got a pre-existing ulcer in his stomach, and Daren ruptured it, which would account for the amount of blood he’s been vomiting. Did he have stomach complaints before this?”

Laylan shrugged. “Chance doesn’t speak about his health.” He thought for a moment. “I have seen him taking charcoal tablets.”

Sham nodded. “His bowel is probably bruised, but he doesn’t smell like a shelt with a ruptured bowel. His spine is definitely bruised. He’s got some numbness and tingling in his legs, but rest should heal that. His kidneys are damaged, and that will want watching. He needs to drink a great deal of water for the next few days. Mix a little salt with it at the beginning. I’ve got Talis giving him some now. If we were in a position to light fires, I’d give him an infusion.”

“What about willow bark for the pain?”

“Willow bark causes bleeding, and he can’t afford to lose any more blood. Best medicine for him right now would be to lie quiet in a dry, warm place. He’s suffering from what wolflings



call thira—a potentially deadly reaction to stress or injury. Fauns are especially prone to it. He needs cool clothes—ice if it can be had—around his throat.”

“What about his eyes?” asked Laylan.

Sham shrugged. “The redness? A common side effect of strangling. He’s ruptured small blood vessels; that’s all. I once treated a wolfling whose eye had popped out of the socket during a hanging. We saved him, but he lost the eye.”

Laylan was curious. “You’ve treated quite a few hangings, I suppose?”

“Yes, most of them left for dead. We found a female wolfling a few years ago, hanging on a postern gate. They’d done it in the square and then moved her to the customary display at evening. Whoever strung her up at the gate got one of her arms caught round her head. Somehow, she’d survived the hanging, and that arm took enough pressure off her neck to keep her alive until we found her that night. She lived just long enough to tell us where she’d left her three-year-old son, Danzel.”

\* \* \* \*

They were moving again in an eighth watch. The wolflings had found enough extra clothing for Chance, and he was no longer shivering. They had given Laylan a sword. *We’re going to be alright*, thought Laylan. He still wouldn’t allow himself to think of Shyshax.

The wolves hadn’t been trotting for more than a quarter watch when they froze, listening. Then everyone heard it: high yips and howls from behind. The animals began to run.

Laylan noticed the rising grade of the road. *Harn-beng. I haven’t been this way in a season.*

The wind picked up, lashing the rain across their bodies and driving leaves and small branches in its wake. Thunder rumbled in the distance. At last Laylan heard the rush of water above the beat of the rain. He saw gray sky beyond the trees ahead, and suddenly they burst out onto the brink of a precipice.

The Tiber-wan flowed through a gorge here—a small mountain that rose gradually all the way to old Canisaria and sank again as one approached the cliff. The river had carved itself a low road, deepening the chasm until it lay like a wound on the landscape. The walls of the canyon were steep. At the bottom the river roiled in its narrow cage.

Over this expanse leapt the magnificent arc of Harn-beng: the ancient bridge of the wizards. Two stone dragons arched their heads in the center as if in combat, their noses nearly touching over the bridge, their wing tips reaching almost to either end.

Dance led as they started across, with Enden close on his heels, followed by Xerous's wolf, Jaunt. Loaded down with two riders, Barbet came last.

A streak of lightning lit the northern sky. Laylan saw the water gushing off the stone on either side of him. Through the pouring rain, he could barely discern the opposite forest. Then he looked back and saw the hounds. They were running onto the bridge. One dog was well ahead of the others. Laylan watched it come. He had seen Anduin Hounds only twice in his life. They were a little over half the size of a wolf, leaner, shorter of coat like the desert dogs.

Looking ahead, Laylan saw that the first wolflings had reached the far side. He looked back at the hound and knew he would never outdistance it. His wolf was looking over her shoulder, too. He felt her slowing, tensing for the inevitable battle. Laylan gripped his sword. *I*

*will have to stop and kill this one.* He was only a little past the center of the bridge when the hound closed the gap and sprang.

\* \* \* \*

Fenrah turned Dance in a shower of muddy earth on the far side of the bridge. “Arrows!” she shouted to her pack. “Pick off as many as you can before they—”

The words died in her throat. In the fury of the storm, she could just make out the hound bearing down on the last member of their party. As the wolf turned, she caught a glimpse of the black hat with its flying wolf tail. The Raiders, now all on the far side of the bridge, watched as the hound slammed into Barbet, dislodging one rider and setting the other off balance.

Fenrah caught the brief flash of metal as Laylan lashed out at the dog, but then he was on the bridge, trying to protect Chance. Fortunately for him, the dog went for Barbet, who threw it back easily. Still, the rest of the dogs were closing in. *Hurry, Laylan!*

In the heat of the battle a wave of wind-driven rain completely obscured the bridge and drowned all sound in a deafening thunder clap. It cleared just in time for the Raiders to see Barbet fleeing toward them out of the tempest with the hound on her heels. Xerous shot the dog within ten paces, but Barbet was rider-less.

The other hounds had already reached the center of the bridge, but not a shelt could be seen on the pinnacle of wind-swept stone.

Fenrah heard Sham speaking, yelling to be heard. “I don’t see them!”

Xerous shook his head. “No, but I see mounted fauns coming out of the trees. Arrows are no good at this angle; the wind takes them away. Better to lay a hard trail while the storm holds.”

“Fenrah!” shouted Sham, pulling on her arm. “Fenny, they’re gone. There’s nothing we can do. We’ve got to save the pack. Fenny, come on!”

\* \* \* \*

Shortly after midday Shadock stood by a window in his palace, staring into the rain. On the windowsill lay an open letter. Absently, he crumbled bits of the wax seal between his fingers—crushing and reforming, crushing and reforming.

A clatter of hooves, and he turned to see a panting messenger. “Your Majesty?”

“Yes?”

“Lord Terrance wishes to inform you that an exceptionally large number of fauns, have been sighted around Port Ory. The reports are vague, but his lordship was adamant that I—”

“How many?” The king leaned forward, his face fierce.

The messenger took a step back. “No one knows, Sire. Two runners were sent to ask their business and neither returned. The river fog was thick this morning, and it was difficult to—”

Shadock strode forward with an abruptness that surprised the messenger. The letter in the king’s hand all but vanished in his balled fist. “Tell Terrance that he has my order to evacuate Port Ory. Leave those who will not come. They have a quarter watch. Then flood the tunnels.”

The messenger gaped at him. “Sire, do you mean—?”

“I SAID FLOOD THEM!”

\* \* \* \*

The Raiders were just turning to flee when a commotion began on Harn-beng. Two dogs stumbled. One slipped off the bridge, while the second lay writhing on the stone. One of the

swamp goats reared and threw its rider. A long howl floated across the gorge, and a ragged cheer went up from Fenrah's Raiders.

"Lyli!" exclaimed Sevn. "And she's with the River Gorge pack!"

Lyli's party was shooting from upwind. The swamp fauns could not even return fire against the force of the gale, and the cheering Raiders did not hesitate to cut down the dogs and riders who made it across. The rest of Daren's company lost their momentum, wavered, and finally beat an undignified retreat back the way they had come. They left behind them a trail of wounded which Lyli systematically finished off as she worked her way across the bridge to the other Raiders. When she finally reached them, the wolfling sheathed her sword and dismounted. "What was that about? What are you *doing* here?"

Fenrah leaned wearily against Dance. "It's a long story. For now, I think that we'd all better find a safe hiding place."

She glanced at the other pack, watching uncertainly from behind Lyli. Every wolfling admired the Raiders, but no one wanted to draw the attention of their hunters. "You all go home," she told them. "Stay in your dens for the next few days. Something bad has started and it's going to get worse. Spread the word: the fauns are fighting among themselves. They're likely to be roaming the wood, armed in more than usual numbers. There're cats in it, too, and perhaps centaurs. Tell the other packs."

When they were gone the Raiders divided the results of Lyli's hunting among the available mounts. The rain had almost stopped by the time they started away.

"What do you think, Sham?" asked Fenrah, "will Daren give up that easily?"

Sham snorted. “I’ve heard those dogs are the pride of House Anroth. How many did we just kill? Half a dozen?”

“Eight,” said Lyli.

“It’s too bad about Laylan and Chance,” said Sevn.

A long silence. Sham looked up through the leaves in the spring twilight. “I’ve been thinking about what Daren did with that whip. Something like that could easily kill a shelt. He could have broken Chance’s back. He could have ruptured organs so that Chance would have died within minutes. He pulled just hard enough to wound, but not kill.”

Sevn looked at Sham sidelong. “What are you thinking?”

Sham shrugged. “I’m a healer. I know a lot about shelt anatomy, and even knowing what I know, I don’t think I could have done it. I think I would have killed him first try. Daren wanted his questions answered. He didn’t intend to kill Chance just then.”

Sevn pursed his lips. “You don’t think Daren was gambling. You think—”

“He’d done it before,” finished Sham.

Fenrah stirred. “I don’t see how. The swamp fauns haven’t been at war with anyone in Daren’s lifetime, so I doubt he’s interrogated prisoners.”

“What about slaves?” asked Sham.

Fenrah pursed her lips. “I think fauns occasionally sell their criminals to the swamp fauns to work the mines. I suppose he could have learned such things disciplining slaves.”

Sevn shuddered. “Harsh discipline.”

“It wasn’t discipline,” said Sham, “it was torture...and Daren is expert. Something’s wrong with that. Something is very wrong.”

He glanced at Fenrah, expecting her to comment, but she was quiet. Sham remembered the expression on her face when she’d seen the empty bridge. He cleared his throat. “The wolfling community won’t miss Laylan. Still, I always said he would have made a good Raider if things had been just a little different.”

“Yes.” Her eyes lingered on a distant star, the first to appear between the trees. “I think he would have.”

## Part II

## Chapter 1. Secret of the Bridge

Old shelts say there are mysteries along the Triangle Road, but mysteries without economic value are seldom remembered these days. The arm of the Triangle between Laven-lay and Danda-lay is well maintained, but unremarkable. The most interesting part of the Triangle is the leg between Laven-lay and Selbis, including Harn-beng—a magnificent structure that is falling into disrepair. If there are mysteries on that haunted road, no one wants to find them.

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

Corry and the cubs agreed that staying near the pass would invite unwanted attention, yet they could not decide which way to go. As the cubs combed the ground for clues, Corry listened to the hum of the insects and began to slap at the first stings. It was almost dark, and he could not help remembering the young minstrel's song about the swamp monster.

"I'm going to climb that tree," announced Leesha, "the one that's leaning. I smell faun on it." Quick as a squirrel, she scampered up the twisted trunk into the branches.

"Do you see anything?" called Corry.

"No, just— Oh!" Leesha came partway back down. "There's a plank road up here."

Seconds later they stood staring at a slender bridge, cunningly disguised among the branches, running from tree to tree as far as Corry could see in the twilight. There was nothing to do but follow it.

\* \* \* \*



When the charging hound hit Laylan on the bridge, he struck with his sword and forgot to hold onto Chance. The faun was thrown to the leeward side of the bridge. He seemed to have difficulty getting his feet under him. When Laylan leapt off Barbet, he understood Chance's problem at once. The wind was fierce, and he skidded on the wet stone, slippery with lichen and mold. The sword clattered from his hands and went whirling into the abyss as he caught himself on the dragon's stone claw. Laylan struggled out of his boots, trying to gain purchase. His paws helped stop his skating, but Fenrah's rope fell from his shoulder and became tangled in his legs.

Chance saw that Laylan was having trouble and tried to get nearer. Just as he reached Laylan, the wolf and hound crashed into them along with a gust of wind and rain. Chance slipped over the edge. Grappling for some part of the statue, he got hold of Laylan's tail instead. Laylan clutched at the air as he fell. To his surprise, his hands closed on something.

*Whamp!* Laylan bit his tongue and tasted blood. He opened his eyes, nose to nose with the stone. He was clutching the rope, which he realized had tangled in the claws of the statue. Laylan risked a glance over his shoulder, but turned away quickly. Far below, the Tiber-wan roared between the walls of the canyon. Pain was lancing up his flanks, and he realized what had happened to Chance. Laylan looked down again—not over his shoulder, but straight down between his arms. “Chance?”

The faun looked pale as death.

“I’ll try to climb up. Don’t let go.” *He can’t hang on for long*, thought Laylan. *It’s a wonder he can hang on at all*. At least they were in the lee of the bridge. Laylan could see they

were hanging at least two thirds of the way down the side. He realized then just how deep Harnbeng was—at least the height of six shelts.

As he started to climb, Laylan caught a blur of dogs on the bridge overhead. He heard hoof beats. *If they happen to look down, all it would take is one arrow.*

Chance's voice came in a rasp. "Laylan?"

"Yes?"

"I think I could stand up."

"What?"

"I think there's something under my feet, just a little below me."

Laylan felt the pressure on his tail give way. *He's gone.*

But then the voice came again. "Look down, Laylan."

Chance *was* standing on something. Looking to his right, Laylan saw that the dragon's tail extended all the way down the side of the bridge at such an angle that a careful shelt might walk along it. Laylan inched down the rope until he stood on the ledge beside Chance. To his further amazement, he saw that the tip of the dragon's tail separated from the bridge before curving out of sight below. *As though it were made for someone to walk under the bridge.*

He turned to Chance. The faun had closed his eyes, back flat against the stone. "Don't move; I'll be back." A dog slipped off the bridge, narrowly missing them as it fell.

Moving as quickly as he dared, Laylan inched his way along the thread of stone until he came to the place where the tail separated. He bent and followed it, crawling under the bridge.

Wind and rain lashed him in the face, but what he saw made him smile. A hairline crack outlined

a square section on the underside of the bridge. Bracing himself against the stone tail, Laylan put his shoulder to the square and pushed upward. It gave. He pushed it aside and stood up, chest high in the still air of the space inside the bridge.

## Chapter 2. The Note Brought by a Dead Messenger

*The wood fauns produce crops and timber. The swamp fauns harvest gems, peat, quarry stone, and furs. Filinia and Canisaria contain salt and gold and other metals, along with vast tracts of arable land. The centaurs have their steel works and gambling dens. But what do the cliff fauns have? Only a sheer drop with villages clinging to the stone. They can grow few crops, never enough to sell. They've had marble for hundreds of years, but it is very difficult to harvest.*

*One may say the cliff fauns' asset is their location. Throughout the centuries, they have exploited their position athwart the trade routes. No merchant takes his goods up or down the cliff without paying a toll. Tolls come in all currencies, from all lands, and naturally the cliff fauns developed into bankers. Danda-lay maintains its position by making sure that everyone owes them something. They don't like war, because war is bad for trade.*

--Lasa, Tour the Sky City

Laylan and Chance examined the inside of the bridge with interest. The thick walls muffled the sounds of the storm and the rout of Daren's forces. As Laylan's eyes adjusted to the dim light coming through their entrance, he saw that only their tracks marked the thick dust on the floor. Torch brackets lined the walls, but it was evident that no light had shone here for a long time.

After a rest, they started along the dark tunnel. Chance wanted to walk, and Laylan let him, stopping frequently. At last the passage narrowed and dead-ended in a flight of steps.

Laylan climbed up first and found a covering similar to the one they had entered by. He pushed, but the stone cover remained firm. *Something's probably fallen on it.* He knew they had long since left the bridge behind, but where they might be in the forest, he could not say. He pushed harder and succeeded in lifting the block a few inches, but it fell again with a solid *chink*.

*Perhaps we should go back to the bridge.* The idea of inching up that thread of stone was not appealing, but it might be the only way out.

"Is it stuck?" asked Chance from the bottom.

"Yes. I don't think I can—" He stopped, ear pressed against the stone cover. "I hear something outside."

"The hounds?"

"I...I don't know." Laylan heard the sound of digging and a grinding of stone over stone. He made a swift decision and pushed once more. This time the cover gave easily. Laylan brought a hand to his face against the light. He heard an exclamation of surprise, and something about the voice made him open his eyes. He saw a feline face, haloed in brilliance. It was Shyshax.

\* \* \* \*

Cliff fauns swarmed through the streets of Port Ory, galvanized by orders to evacuate. Twenty soldiers were required at each tunnel entrance just to keep the citizens from stampeding, yet within the watch, all who were willing had fled. Many chose to stay.

The rain had just stopped when a large contingent of swamp fauns stormed the gates of Port Ory. Cliff faun archers met them with a hail of arrows, but the port was not designed for defense. Within minutes, the cliff fauns abandoned the outer wall and began a measured retreat.

Soon the sluice gates opened, and the Tiber-wan crashed into its flood channels. Shaddock's soldiers stood panting by the basin in Danda-lay, exhausted but satisfied. "Let them try to follow us now."

\* \* \* \*

At the top of the waterfall bridge, Sharon-zool and her officers stood watching swamp fauns soldiers herd terrified citizens back into their houses. She frowned in disgust when a runner told her the tunnels were all flooded. "We must send Shaddock our terms of surrender."

"How?" asked Rquar, one of her lieutenants and Daren's cousin. "With the tunnels flooded, we can no more talk to him than we can attack him."

Sharon-zool smiled. "Can't we?"

\* \* \* \*

"Captain! Sir, please wake up!"

Jubal opened his eyes and looked blearily into the face of one of his young subordinates. "Officer Neville needs you on the north side of the basin. He says it's urgent."

Jubal saw morning light coming through his window and reckoned he hadn't been asleep more than a watch, perhaps less. He glanced around for a uniform before remembering that he was still wearing one. "What's that noise?"

"The flood tunnels, sir! His majesty ordered Port Ory evacuated around sunrise. The mud eaters took the port, but thanks to his majesty's quick thinking, all who would take warning had fled."

Jubal rubbed his temples. "And he hasn't asked to see me?"

The messenger looked puzzled. “Who?”

Jubal shook his head. *Quick thinking indeed!* “Never mind. Where’s Neville?”

He found his officer on the edge of the parade ground; the falls made it impossible to be heard next to the basin. Officer Neville fitted the profile of a palace guard. He was cheerful, stocky running to fat, looked intimidating in mail, and was good at keeping his mouth shut. Jubal had found that nothing much rattled Neville. The sight him looking pale and queasy did not bode well for the morning.

“Sir, something came over the falls a little while ago. It took us a bit to fish it out, but when we did, I thought you should have a look.”

Jubal followed Neville into the spray of the falls. The opening of the tunnels had cut the quantity of water coming from above by about half, but the noise was still deafening. They walked around the basin for a while, and then Jubal spotted three more guards standing close to the wall. They were soaked from being so long in the spray, but Jubal thought they looked uncomfortable for some other reason.

As he got closer, he saw crimson stains on the wet pavement, and he guessed what they were looking at. By the time he was standing next to the guards, he’d ascertained that the three dead fauns at their feet were in more than three pieces. One of the guards gestured into the pool. Jubal looked and saw more bodies—he couldn’t be sure how many. Another guard drew his attention to an oil-skin pouch, tied tightly around the neck of one faun. Jubal cut it free and opened it. The paper inside was dry. He unfolded it and read:

To Shadock Windar,

You have refused me audience, but you cannot refuse your citizens. They are coming to you as my messengers. My terms are unconditional surrender. You have until sunset tomorrow. If I have to pry you out, many in Danda-lay will not see the end of Lupricasia week.

Her Majesty Sharon-zool of Kazar

Jubal refolded the note and put it back in the oil skin, taking care that his hands did not tremble before the anxious eyes of his command. He looked over them and selected the one who looked quickest—a youth of noble birth, if remarkably unfortunate appearance. He folded the note into the teenager’s moist palm, then leaned close to his ear and bellowed, “Deliver this to his majesty. To no one else! Tell him I would like a word with him.”

With the youngster hurrying away, Jubal took off his cloak and spread it on the ground, then motioned the guards to begin moving the bodies onto the cloak. He had them cover and wrap their own cloaks around the result. *No sense terrifying every civilian we pass.* He glanced back at the pool and the other bodies, bobbing like ghastly buoys. *We’ll be all day fishing them out.* Was it his imagination, or had the water taken on a faint red tinge? He thought of the all the shelts who took their bathing water from pipes that came directly from that pool. *We won’t be able to keep this a secret for long.*

\* \* \* \*

Sharon-zool peered into the Tiber-wan as an unlikely figure scrambled onto the quay beside her. He was short and muscular, less slender than a faun, but every bit as lithe. His sleek



hair was silvered, not by age, but by nature. He had webbed fingers, and his legs were clawed and scaly. A thick tail hung down behind him. He wore a tunic of supple leather, loosely tied at the waist and dripping wet. The alligator shelt shook his head, sending water droplets flying.

“We can do it,” he said. “Where there is water, there is a way.”

“Danthra, I hope you know that Kazar is depending on you. Do not disappoint us.”

Danthra laughed. “Or you’ll mangle me like those fauns? The army of Kazar would better employ its time worrying about its own fighting abilities. We lizard riders will do our part. Do you want us to go now? We can have you in before midnight.”

Sharon-zool shook her head. “Shadock has until this time tomorrow. He will not open to us, but we will wait all the same.”

Danthra’s toothy grin flashed white. “Is that your version of honor, majesty?”

She did not look amused.

“A jest! Only a jest. We lizard riders have no honor to worry about. When will we receive payment?”

Sharon-zool untied a large satchel from her belt. The heavy bag jingled as she laid it in Danthra’s hands. “As agreed. Many of the houses contain valuables. Take what you like, but keep your promise to me. On that point your honor is your life, Danthra Michweer.”

## Chapter 3. Encounters by Night

As a child reaching for a spoon may seize a knife, so Corry and his companions found something both more useful and more dangerous than they sought.

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

For a full watch Corry and the tiger cubs followed the plank bridge into Kazar swamp. They had been hiking all day and were very tired, but stopping for even a moment brought a cloud of biting insects. Around midnight Tolomy pulled up suddenly. "I hear something ahead." Corry was surprised. The falling and rising cadence of frogs and insects made night loud.

Leesha hesitated, sniffed, then nodded. "I hear it too. I *feel* it."

Corry didn't have to ask what they meant. He'd moved forward to place one foot on the next section of board, and the message came through his vibration sense. Something was walking towards them over the plank road. "We need to hide." He looked around, knowing already there was only one possibility. "Quickly—over the side."

"We might be able to climb higher," suggested Leesha, but Corry shook his head. "I'm not a good climber. You two can try if you like."

Tolomy lead the way down. Corry managed to grope out enough handholds to descend without falling into the waist-high grass below. Fortunately, the water only came to his calves. The cubs crouched in the water, exposing as little flesh as possible to the vicious insects. Only the prospect of spending the rest of the night hiking in wet underwear prevented Corry from doing the same.

In the gloom, he made out a shadowy line of figures passing across the slats overhead. They stopped just past the trio, and someone barked a command. A shelt dropped a rope ladder from the bridge, and the group descended. Once on the ground, they started away at a fast trot along what must have been a known trail. Soon they were no longer even a whisper among the noisy music of the swamp.

“Were they prisoners?” Corry wondered. “I thought I saw a chain.”

“They didn’t smell like fauns.” Leesha started towards the place where the group had left the plank road. After a moment, she called, “There’s solid ground here.”

Corry and Tolomy waded toward her. Leesha was sniffing the earth. “Smells like fauns and...something else.”

Tolomy joined her.

“If they’re prisoners—” began Leesha thoughtfully.

“They might lead us to where the fauns keep prisoners,” finished Corry. *And*, he added privately, *they might lead us to water*. They’d had a thirsty hike, and his water skin was low.

“If we’re to follow them, we’d better hurry while the trail is fresh,” said Leesha.

Tolomy looked at his sister. Corry could see the whites of his eyes flash in the gloom.

“Into Kazar...in the dark...without a guide...without a trail?”

“We have a trail. Come on, put your nose to the ground and help me.”

\* \* \* \*

“Captain, what’s this about?” Shadock’s voice was smooth and formal.

*He’s not even going to mention my earlier message*, thought Jubal.

They were standing in one of the smaller audience chambers. Half a dozen advisors waited next door, but for the moment Jubal had gotten his wish: he had Shadock's full attention.

"She sent it over the waterfall, Sire," he said aloud, "tied around the neck of a faun."

"Your messenger said as much; if that's all—"

"The faun's arms and legs had been cut off," continued Jubal. "He was one of perhaps thirty. We haven't recovered all of them yet. They appear to have identical notes."

Shadock did not easily show surprise, but Jubal thought he was rattled. "This is a kind of terrorist tactic."

"Yes. The fauns show no other signs of violence." Jubal waited for Shadock to make the next jump.

"They were *alive* when she did this?"

"We think so," said Jubal.

"In the name of all that's sacred, why—?"

"To release the maximum amount of blood into the water. At least, that's what I think."

Shadock's lips pressed together until the blood left them. *You don't know how to fight this*, thought Jubal. *You're a courtroom warrior. You defend your country with policies, not swords. You thought staying out of the cat wars would mean you never had to face something like this.* "Sharon spent some time with my chief engineer during the festival," said Shadock at last. "She was so politely curious. Go and talk to him about which cisterns are fed directly from the pool. Its use should be discontinued for a time."

Jubal nodded. *And now to complete this happy interview.* “There is another matter. We’re having some trouble chasing down all the bodies. All the...pieces. Fauns are beginning to ask questions. Many of them have family up there. What shall I tell them?”

This time, Shadock did not have to think. “Post guards to keep them away from the pool. Have the healers clothe the bodies and embalm them for burning before their families come.”

Shadock turned to leave, but Jubal could not repress the question that had pounded in his head all day. “Sire, about my message—”

Shadock turned, his eyes a studied blank. “Yes?”

Jubal wanted to slap him. *Do you think this is revenge? Who are you hurting besides yourself and your city?* “Never mind, Sire. I’ll see to those bodies.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry made no attempt to decipher the trail once they were off the boardwalk. Clouds and tree limbs hid the moons, and just staying upright amid the roots and water and slurping mud consumed his attention. Thorny vines whipped across his arms and face. He was muddy and bloody and itchy and so sleepy that the saw-blade grass was looking comfortable.

To make matters worse, Tolomy kept commenting that the trail was next to impossible to follow, and he didn’t think they were on it anymore. Leesha persisted. Every time Tolomy proclaimed them hopelessly lost, she started up with, “Here’s a broken grass stem” or “Look at this clump of fur.” At one point she called them all to a patch of mud. “Isn’t that a paw print?”

Tolomy crouched in the gloom until his nose brushed the mark in question.

“Could the prisoners be wolflings?” asked Corry.

“That would make sense,” returned Tolomy, “even though I don’t remember hearing about many wolves this far west.”

“There ought to be claw marks if it’s a canine print,” said Leesha. “Wolflings can’t retract their claws.”

Tolomy studied the track again. “The mud must have covered them.”

“But the rest is so clear.”

“Maybe the fauns removed their claws.”

Leesha stood up with a growl and moved on.

Corry was too tired to invent theories about Leesha’s track. The blood-thirsty insects had started to gather. He had an idea that the horrible little things might go away at dawn, and then they could all sleep for a while. It was the only thing he could fix his thoughts on now.

And then the cubs lost the trail. This time even Leesha could not find a reason for saying otherwise. In vain they roamed in ever widening circles, looking for any clue. At last they stood still, shaking their ears at the insects, too exhausted and discouraged to move. The giddy *erp-erp-erp-erp* of the frogs seemed to mock them.

“I’m thirsty,” muttered Leesha.

“We drank the last of the water half a watch ago,” said Corry.

“We could cover ourselves in mud,” suggested Leesha. “That might stop the insects. Or we could lie down with everything underwater except our noses.”

Corry had thought of both these things, but some vestige of common sense remained. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to sleep in the open at night without anyone on watch. All kinds of creatures hunt in Kazar. Besides, we’ll only wake up thirstier and no closer to water.”

Leesha sighed. “So... We keep on moving until dawn?”

“I think we’d better. Maybe we’ll get lucky and stumble across a spring.”

They started off again, now with not even the pretense of a course—on and on through the noisy swamp. Corry started out of his waking dream when he nearly tripped over Tolomy, who *had* tripped over Leesha. She hissed and cuffed his ear. Looking beyond them, Corry could just make out a form in the shadows. The shape moved.

Leesha’s voice came out weak, but steady. “Who are you?”

“That depends,” came a soft male voice, “on who *you* are.” He was very tall for a faun and wore a cloak.

Leesha took a step back. “We are travelers. We were following a trail and got lost. Would you direct us to the closest faun settlement? We need fresh water and food.”

“Is it fauns you want,” asked the stranger, “or water?”

“Water,” said Corry immediately. “We can arrange payment if you take us where we can purchase provisions and lodging.”

A long silence. “Why did you come here?” asked the stranger at last.

Corry felt frustrated. He was about to speak when Tolomy jumped in. “We came to help someone. Stop playing with us, shelt. You clearly have plans for us. Do it and be done.”

Corry glanced at Tolomy. If he had been more awake, he might have guessed then what he learned later. In his groggy state, the idea fluttered and was gone.

“You came to help someone,” echoed the stranger. “Who?”

Leesha’s patience was at an end. “Why are you asking *us* all these questions when you haven’t answered any yourself. Who are *you*. Why are *you* here?”

“I’m a traveler.” Corry could hear the smile in the stranger’s voice. “And I am here to help someone.”

Leesha started to growl. “Who?”

“You. Come.”



## Chapter 4. The Hedge of Thorns

It is the possibility of failure that makes the difference between leisure and adventure.

--Archemais, private reflections

The stranger moved quickly, leaving Corry and the cubs little time to consider anything except keeping pace. He stopped once for them to rest and to give them a welcome drink from his own water skin. When he noticed the cloud of insects gathering, he produced a dark jar of pungent oil. He poured some into his hand and whipped it over Tolomy's fur and ears, then handed the bottle to Corry. "A little on your skin and clothes, then see to your shy friend."

"I'm not shy," growled Leesha, but she was staying well away from him. "You smell like something dead. You're using that stinking oil to cover it up."

Corry could discern no such smell, but he did not doubt that the cubs sensed something odd. Certainly, the oil must mask their guide's natural scent.

"It keeps the blood-suckers away," observed Tolomy. "They've stopped biting my ears."

Just as dawn was beginning to touch the eastern sky, the stranger stopped again, this time at the foot of an enormous tree. He touched a place on the bark and a trap door fell open. "Rest." Even Leesha was too tired to argue. They stumbled into a dark, but comfortable chamber with a carpet of soft, dry moss. No sooner had Corry put his head on the ground, than he was asleep.

\* \* \* \*

About midday Corry woke to a ray of sunlight and the smell of cooking food. The stranger's head appeared in the doorway. By daylight, Corry could see that their guide had hair not quite as dark as his own, graying at the temples. He held out a piece of freshly cooked meat.

To Leesha and Tolomy, only half awake, he handed two hunks of raw flesh. “Eat and go back to sleep.” He set a full water skin on the ground, together with several clay cups.

The trap door closed, leaving them in pleasantly dappled gloom. Corry drank and ate greedily. He had barely finished before his eyes drooped and he lay down to sleep again.

\* \* \* \*

When Corry woke the second time, the ray of daylight had grown hotter and yellower, and he knew it must be late afternoon. The cubs were already awake and had just finished the second meal their guide had left for them. “Nice flavor,” said Tolomy. “I can’t say that I’ve eaten it before. What do you think, Leesha?”

She cocked her head. “Reptile, maybe. It reminds me of an exotic dinner I attended with father in jaguar country. They served iguana.”

The opening of the trap door interrupted them. “Are you rested?” Their guide had thrown his hood back. Corry saw a face that might have been handsome once. Perhaps it still was, but in a sad way—the brow and mouth creased more by frowns than smiles. His eyes were cat-green in a beam of sunlight. “Ready to go again?”

“Yes, thank you.” Leesha was feeling more charitable today. “I don’t know how we can repay you.”

“You can’t.” The stranger withdrew his head.

Leesha scowled at the empty doorway.

“He’s only being honest,” said Corry. “Let’s not fight today.”

Leesha pelted the stranger with questions as they started off, but he completely ignored her—a response, Corry thought, calculated to infuriate her. He soon left them with little breath for questions. His brown cloak melted into the swamp like butter into warm bread, and they were hard pressed to keep him in view. Corry had his wits sufficiently about him this morning to notice their guide's trousers—something almost unheard of in middle Panamindorah—as well as moccasin boots. Corry saw no sign of a weapon.

A little after sunset, in the last blue light of evening, they came to a dense thicket of thorns. The wall rose well above the slouching trees, and the spikes were as long as tiger claws. Their guide led them along the hedge for some distance until they came to a stream, flowing swiftly from inside the wall of thorns. It looked deep.

The stranger waded to the center, where the water reached his armpits. “We must walk in the stream to get under the hedge,” he explained.

When Corry reached midstream, the water came to his chin. Tolomy hesitated. “It will be over our heads.”

“Oh, Tol, stop being a kitten.” Leesha plunged in, but she had to paddle back and forth to keep from washing downstream. The stranger reached out and caught her in his arms. Leesha hissed, unsheathing her claws against his shoulder.

“Softly, little sister. I don't want you to drown. Get the other one, Corellian.”

Corry stared at the stranger, who had already turned his back. *How did he know my name? I don't remember telling him.*

He caught Leesha's eyes over the stranger's shoulder. She was obviously thinking the same thing. She darted a glance at the stranger's neck, only a hand's breadth from her teeth, but Corry shook his head. He wanted to keep faith with their benefactor, but more than that, he had a sense of menace—an idea that, despite all appearances, their guide was armed.

Holding Tolomy, Corry advanced towards the hedge of thorns. He could feel the cat's tense, wet body against his own, the small heart hammering. He was impressed that Tolomy managed to keep his claws sheathed. He felt certain that Leesha would have been pricking him whether she wanted to or not.

The stranger ducked out of sight under the thorns. Corry hesitated. Then he saw a few inches of air above the water. He took a deep breath and ducked under the thorns. Corry was able to stand up almost immediately. The vines had been trimmed to form a tunnel. He could see light at the far end and the silhouette of their guide. Laboring against the current, Corry followed him out the other side, where a violet evening sky broke over their heads.

Soon they all stood dripping on a strip of grass dotted with flowers. Before them a gentle rise led up to the shores of a little pool, whence flowed the stream. A small waterfall spilled over the knoll beyond. Large trees dotted the clearing, tracing elegant shadows on the grass. Fireflies hovered over the glassy water. Corry could smell jasmine and mint. The wall of thorns surrounded the entire clearing like soldiers beating back the swamp.

"It's beautiful," whispered Tolomy.

Their guide smiled. "Few see it," he murmured, "and live to tell."

## Chapter 5. Syrril

That excruciating moment when we realize that we have been used, that our plans were all but a piece of someone else's, that we have been mocked and bought and sold—that moment of anguish is more punishment than all the courts in the universe could assign.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

In the quivering light of a desert afternoon, a centaur sentry noticed a speck moving over the sand to the north. He paced the parapet, watching with interest as the speck drew nearer. Soon he could distinguish a burrow and rider. Just as the sun's rim started to dip, the burrow topped the last dune and stopped, foaming, before the metal-wrought gates of Iron Mountain. "What's your business?" called the sentry, toying with an arrow against his bow string.

The traveler turned a sweat streaked face upward. His sun-dazzled eyes seemed to focus on the sentry for a moment, then pass through him as cleanly as a blade questing for a vital organ. The burrow slumped beneath him. The rider stood as the animal collapsed. "I must speak with your king," he rasped, then dissolved in a fit of gritty coughing.

The sentry shrugged. "His majesty is not receiving guests at present."

The newcomer leapt away from his dead burrow with a snarl. "Do I look like I came for tea? Tell Targon it's Syrril; I think he'll see me!"

The sentry's eyebrows rose. Turning, he addressed two young guards who'd been listening from the far side of the wall. "Open the gate and escort this faun to King Targon."

One hesitated. "His Majesty is interrogating prisoners this afternoon."

The century shrugged. "He left special instructions regarding this faun."

The guards nodded and began to turn the windlass that opened the gate. Ordinarily it was always open, but these were not ordinary times. “Follow me,” said one of the guards.

Even in his exhausted state, struggling to keep pace with the centaur, Syrril noted the city’s eerie silence. Iron Mountain was a trade hub for spices and metallurgy and a stopover point for the merchants coming from the jungles of the far Pendalon Mountains. Cowries, pearls, furs, whale bone, gold, and lapis passed through this city, as well as darker things—drugs and poisons from the deep jungles and the great salt sea. Centaurs were also lovers of sport, and their kings allowed forms of entertainment forbidden in faun territories. A shelt with a taste for gambling could bet on almost any kind of fight in this city.

Syrril noted the empty streets and silent taverns with dismay. Where were the throngs of shelts and centaurs? Where was the endless dull roar from the pits? Even the lull during Dandalay’s Lupricasia could not account for the shuttered windows and closed shops.

They left the commercial district and entered the mountain fortress. If the activity outside the keep had ceased, activity inside had doubled. Centaurs came and went around him, some pulling carts loaded with supplies that seemed to Syrril’s addled mind all weaponry. Gradually, the crowds thinned as they moved to higher streets. Then they were inside the mountain, passing along torch-lit corridors, the guard waving aside each checkpoint with barely a break in his stride. At last, they came to an area where bars replaced rails, and holes replaced windows. Syrril had burned with heat above, but here a chill seeped into his bones. They entered an enormous underground chamber, and Syrril recognized the king’s private fighting pit. He’d been here years

ago with Meuril. Cages opened off ground-level of the pit, and he caught a glimpse of what might be next day's show—a handful of griffins pacing in the shadows.

A patchwork of rectangle iron gratings dotted the edges of the room, each the mouth of a smaller pit. One was open. A centaur stood beside it with his back to Syrrill, heavy muscles sleek and gleaming in the torchlight. He held in his hand a long battle whip. When Syrrill saw him, some of the furry that had carried him through the swamp and across the desert flared to life and melted the growing knot of ice in his belly. "Targon!"

The centaur turned, but before Syrrill could continue, his escort jumped in. "Your Majesty left orders that Syrrill of Undrun be brought to you if—"

"WHERE IS SHE?" Syrrill bounded forward with more energy than he would have thought possible when he left his dead burrow at the gate.

The escort came after him with a guilty start, but Targon motioned him away. "You may go." Then to Syrrill, "Where is who?"

"Capricia! Why was she brought here? She was not to be *hurt*! And when was it decided that we would use real cats? I never agreed to kill Sada!"

"You're overwrought, Syrrill," murmured Targon. "You must have ridden hard to arrive here so quickly. Peace. Danda-lay should be ours within the hour." His smiling eyes drank in Syrrill's horror like a butterfly in the deep neck of a flower.

"I've left a note," breathed Syrrill, "telling Meuril everything. They'll find it when they return to Laven-lay, and when they do—"

Targon cocked his head. “Everything? I really doubt it; you haven’t lost that much pride. A note. Inside your deer’s shoe? Oh, Syrril, you’re so predictable.”

Syrril’s face had gone the color of bone. He tried to speak, but Targon continued.

“The deer-keeper would have found it, of course, when he inspected all the deer back in Laven-lay. But, Blix won’t have made it back to Laven-lay. Shelts probably think he went with you. Alas, no swamp faun is likely to report the body of a buck at the foot of the cliff, if any swamp faun even recognizes it. A fall like that leaves so many pieces.”

In Syrril’s mind, all the doors and windows were slamming shut. “No.”

“I had to do it, Syrril. I knew you’d lose your nerve, but, you see, I’ve saved you. You’re still in the winning side. I’ll give you apartments in Danda-lay if you like, any apartments; you’ve earned them.” Targon’s voice slid from honey to vinegar. “But I wouldn’t pick a place far from the garrisons. Traitors are never popular with the common shelts.”

“I’ll show you traitor.” Syrril’s hand went to his sword hilt, but even as the steel rang from its sheath, Targon’s long whip lashed hissing around Syrril’s waist. Syrril just managed to get his arms up before they were pinned to his sides. The leather of centaur whips was said to come from nearly invincible wyvern hide. Instead of slashing at it, Syrril dropped his sword and grabbed the whip with both hands. When Targon gave the jerk that should have broken his back, Syrril was merely dragged along the floor.

Targon yanked him forward and reared, drawing Syrril into his lashing hooves. Syrril changed tactics and ran forward, around and behind the centaur, taking advantage of the slack whip to try to free himself. Targon dropped to all fours and gave a powerful back kick.



At the furthest end of his reach, Targon's hoof clipped Syrrill on the side of the head. It was enough to bring the faun to his knees. Through a gathering mist, he saw Targon bending over him. The centaur gave several jerks on his whip, but Syrrill had locked his fingers around the woven fibers of leather and steel. He did not let go.

Targon lifted him from the ground, suspended on the whip, and shook him. He drew a dagger from a halter belt, then hesitated. "No. There is one who deserves this pleasure more."

With these words he lowered Syrrill's limp body into the shadows of the pit. Yet even when Syrrill lay on the stone at the bottom, Targon could not shake his whip free, and at last he shrugged and dropped it. "Good riddance. It was ill-weighted." Then he turned the crank which slid the metal grate into place. "Good-bye, Syrrill."

Through his dizzy half-faint, Syrrill heard the hoof beats fading away. In the shadows on the far side of the pit, a paler shape moved. Targon, Syrrill remembered, had always been fond of irony.

\* \* \* \*

As evening settled on Danda-lay, the fauns of the royal court congratulated each other on their king's swift thinking and their invincible city. They laughed shakily at their own nervousness and lifted toasts in praise of Danda-lay's splendor. No one saw several large shapes burst from the flooded tunnels. No one noticed the ripples of water disturbed by powerful tails. And no one saw the reptile forms slip soundlessly out of the basin and into the city streets.

\* \* \* \*

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Leesha. "Are you saying you plan to kill us?"

The stranger had started up the slope towards the waterfall. “I doubt it.”

“What do you mean, ‘you doubt it’? Don’t you know what you think?”

“Don’t *you*?”

“How should *I* know what you think?”

“My point exactly.”

Leesha ran her claws through the grass. “I think we should leave,” she hissed to Corry. Her hackles were so high she looked half again as big as Tolomy, who’s fur lay flat and smooth. The tom cub spoke, “I think we should stay, but I don’t think we should tell him who we are.”

Leesha tossed her head. “Well *of course* we shouldn’t tell him that. But, Tolomy, he’s dangerous. Can’t you smell it? I’d give half my tail to know what kind of shelt he is.”

Tolomy kept his eyes on the stranger’s retreating back. He should have been much too far away to hear their lowered voices, but the cub whispered anyway. “Whatever he is, he wants something from us. If he didn’t, we’d already be dead. What we need to do is figure out what he wants and then see if we can barter it for information about father.”

“Let’s be realistic,” sniffed Leesha. “It’s hardly possibly that he could *not* know us. I mean, Tol and me. Maybe not you, Corellian, but two cubs—one white and one orange—in this part of Panamindorah? Who else could we be?”

“Shhh!” hissed Tolomy.

Leesha rolled her eyes. “He’s half way around the lake, Tol. He can’t hear us.”

“What if he’s got servants?”

“I don’t smell any.”

“What if the wind’s wrong?”

Corry held up his hand. “If he can hear us, then we’ve already given ourselves away. He used my name just now, so he knows that much. If he knows who you are, then he’s decided to play along until we choose trust him. It’s just possibly that he doesn’t know if he’s a hermit, if he lives in total isolation. He’s done nothing but help us, and I think we *have* to trust him for now.”

“We can’t—” began Leesha.

“We *can*’t find your father or Capricia on our own! We *can*’t survive in the swamp unaided! We’ve got to have a guide, Leesha. This shelt looks like our best chance. Maybe our only chance.” Corry stood up and started after the stranger. As he approached the lake, he glanced back and saw Tolomy close behind him, Leesha somewhat farther back.

He felt guilty because he knew that although he might have convinced the cubs, he had not convinced himself. The stranger might or might not be the best path to Lexis. Corry no longer cared. He *had* to know who and what this person was. At that moment, he would have followed the stranger into fire.

## Chapter 6. The House Behind the Waterfall

Fauns exhibited mixed attitudes towards the tiger hegemony in Filinia. Tigers are the largest of the cats and therefore the most potentially dangerous. However, they are generally of milder temperament than lions. The continual civil wars of the lion kings had created poor game management and famines in some parts of Filinia, and the wolflings complained constantly of poaching on their borders. Occasionally hungry raiding parties strayed as far as wood faun territory. The other cats, especially the little ones, took part with Angamor and his

tigers. In five bloody days, they swept the lions from their throne, never to return. Five generations later, some of the lions have not yet forgiven them.

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

Corry already knew where their benefactor's house would be. Like a fairy in a children's tale, he lived behind the waterfall. Beyond the curtain of mist, they found a natural cave. The walls were rough stone, beaded with moisture. Their guide waited until even Leesha had come into the cave, then said loudly over the falls, "Forgive me, but I can't leave this door standing open. My books get damp." He opened the door and ushered them through it. Inside was a small chamber with a closed door opposite.

*A kind of airlock*, thought Corry.

The stranger shut the first door, and the sound of the waterfall dropped to a low murmur. Then he opened the second door, and they entered a well-appointed study. He hung up his cloak and went to work on the fireplace. He did not remove his boots.

Tolomy gasped. "The lights," he whispered.

Corry looked at the lamps bolted to the walls. It took him a moment to understand. *They're electric!* He could have kicked himself for not noticing immediately. For all his time in Panamindorah, he was still part Earthling. *And maybe he is, too*, thought Corry. *The feet under those boots could look like mine.*

Glancing down at the cubs, he saw that they had leapt to a different conclusion.

"Wizardry!" hissed Tolomy.

“I told you we shouldn’t have come here!” snarled Leesha.

“No!” Corry groped for a way to calm them without saying something he would regret.

“It’s not magic. I’ve seen it before. It’s...technology.”

Without taking her blazing eyes off their host, Leesha spat, “Seen it where?”

Corry was not opposed to going into the whole story with Leesha, but not here, not in front of this unknown element. “Trust me. It’s not magic, but it’s very clever. Where did you learn about electricity, Sir?”

Their host glanced at them and said nothing. Corry tried again. “We’ve trusted you this far. At least give us your name.”

The stranger almost laughed. “You’ve *come* with me this far because you had no choice. Trust me, you certainly don’t.” He ignored their scowls. “Through that door, you’ll find a pool of warm water and towels. It comes from an entirely un-magical spring. You’ve heard of springs?”

Leesha rumbled in a way that made her sound much larger than knee height.

“While you’re scrubbing away the swamp, I’ll get dinner ready. Then we can talk.”

He exited through the only other door in the room—the one he had not indicated. Corry noted that even beneath his cloak he wore a long chestnut cape. It had an odd symbol on the back, a V-shape with two ovals at the points. The ovals were dark in the middle and surrounded by a tan border. *I’ve seen that mark before*, thought Corry, but he couldn’t remember where. The symbol was not something he associated with good. It gave him a chill.

They heard an audible *click*.

“That’s the first door we’ve seen here that locks,” muttered Tolomy.

Corry noticed that the handles of all the doors were the flat kind, easy for an animal to use. The door the stranger had indicated lead to another airlock and beyond it, a bathing room. A passage led out of the room, and from the breeze, Corry guessed it went outside.

“We should leave the door open to spoil his books,” said Leesha nastily, but Corry closed it. He stripped off his mud-caked clothes, slipped chin deep in the warm water, and leaned back. He closed his eyes. Whatever else the stranger did to them, *this* was a kindness Corry would not quickly forget. After a long time, he sat up. He thought he might have been dozing. Tolomy had gone, but Leesha lay on the floor a few paces away, strikingly white.

Corry passed a water-wrinkled hand over his face. “Where’s Tolomy?”

“Drying. But we didn’t want you to drown in your sleep.”

Corry smiled. “Thanks.” He thought for a moment. “Leesha, there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you about our scuffle on the cliff.”

Leesha looked at him narrowly. They’d not spoken about their near-fight after spotting the swamp faun army. “You’re still dirty,” she hedged.

Corry nodded and fumbled for a scrub brush. He had been wanting a moment alone with Leesha to talk about this. “I know why you ran out there and risked being seen.”

“Your face,” she continued stubbornly. “It’s got grime right down the middle.”

“You want me to think you did it out of reckless courage,” continued Corry. “Maybe you even think so yourself.”

He’d finally gotten to her. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me you know better, *scribe* Corellian?”

Corry refused to be piqued. “You did it because Tolomy was right and you were wrong. He’s the one who kept us from walking straight into the swamp faun army. You mocked him for it, and when you saw he was right, you had to do something immediately to distract us—something so dangerous it could have gotten us all killed.”

For a moment Leesha was speechless. Then she started to sputter.

Corry cut her off. “I’m telling you this because you will probably rule Filinia one day. You may rule it now, but that makes you a target. Your survival and perhaps mine, too, depends on your being *smart*. Tolomy is valuable. You need to stop competing with him and *use* him.”

Leesha’s wet fur stood out at every possible angle. Her tail was lashing furiously. “I am not the queen of Filinia! My father is not dead!”

He opened his mouth to say he hoped she was right, but she didn’t give him time. “And I do not pick on Tolomy! Don’t you know that ordinarily the alpha cubs fight to the death? Tolomy would be in a vulture’s belly long ago if I didn’t love him, didn’t protect him!”

“I didn’t say you wanted to kill him,” said Corry, but Leesha had already stormed out of the room.

Corry finished his bath and dried himself. He paused at seeing a set of clothes laid out for him. The clothes were a little small, but they fit. *They’d definitely be too small for our host. Where could they have come from?* This led to unpleasant reflections about those who might have seen this clearing, but never “lived to tell.” Corry left by the passage Leesha had taken. After a short tunnel, he emerged into the night air. Lavender crunched under his feet and released its satiny odor. All three moons were up, even blue Wanderer, peaking over the hedge of thorns.

Corry cast about until he noticed a pale object by the stream. She was deeply shrouded in the low branches of a tree. Corry had to crawl to get to her. Leesha made no attempt to move away, only stared at Runner's fragmented face in the coiling water. Corry sat down beside her and propped his elbows on his knees. For a moment they were silent, then, "This is the tree the bug juice comes from," said Leesha. "I can smell it."

Corry nodded. After a while, he said, "You're a terrible color for camouflage."

"I wear coal dust when I'm hunting." Her ears drooped. She spoke softly. "I never meant to hurt him."

Corry chuckled. "I hardly think you hurt him. This isn't about Tolomy. It's about you, the future queen of Filinia, who will soon be too large to grab by the ear." On an impulse, he reached out and pulled her into his lap. She was much too big, perhaps thirty-five or forty pounds, but for one moment, she relaxed completely and he was able to cradle her head against his chest. He stroked her head as a mother cat might lick a cub.

"Father's not dead," she whispered.

"Perhaps not, but you're still the one who's free. The future of Filinia rests with you."

Her ears flattened. "You don't understand. *If* father were dead, the first thing that would happen is the lions would try to take the throne. They've never forgotten they used to rule, and they're far more numerous than we tigers."

Corry frowned. "Would the other cats let the lions kill you?"

"I don't know. They would be afraid. Most of the ones who tried to help us wouldn't really be our friends. They'd be doing it because they aren't strong enough to rule on their own



and would think they could rule through us.” She hesitated. “We could use that—their greed. I suppose it’s what my grandfather would have done.” Her voice had turned bitter.

Corry was surprised. A moment’s reflection told him that he shouldn’t have been.  
“Demitri.”

“Yes. He was a monster, but he was good at getting things done. Father doesn’t rule that way. He doesn’t treat us the way Demitri treated him.”

Corry thought he’d heard the whole gamete of emotions from Leesha in the last two days, but this acid bitterness was new. “What do you mean?”

“Father won’t make me kill Tolomy. He wants everyone to live peacefully. He even saved the lives of a couple of wolflings during the sack of Sardor-de-lore when he was only a cub. He told me once. And he stopped the war. He didn’t even want to keep killing fauns.”

“I thought Syrill stopped the war,” said Corry carefully, “or Meuril making a deal with your father.”

Leesha tossed her head. “Never would have happened if father hadn’t *let* it happen. He planned it because he wanted peace and didn’t know any other way to make the cats stop fighting. Demitri started the war, but father stopped it.”

## Chapter 7. In the Dungeon Pit

Why did Targon leave Lexis alone with Syrill? Several answers have been offered, varying from the preparations of war to complete disinterest. The scholars give Targon too little credit. He was a keen student of character. He left only because he knew Lexis would never perform for an audience.

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

The air in the dungeon pit had grown so still that Syrill could hear the crackle of the torches above. Lexis stood no more than five paces from him. Syrill could see the individual whiskers around the moist, black nose and the fine contours of the muscles. He could also see crimson stains in the white fur, and Lexis's first steps had betrayed a limp.

*But he's not crippled*, thought Syrill, *and he could kill me even if he was*. Syrill glanced at Targon's whip, still in his hand. He had never used such a weapon, and even if he had known how, the centaur lash was far too long and heavy for a faun. Nevertheless, Syrill knew it was his only hope. He should think of some way to use it, some way to— *No*. He dropped the whip.

A rumble, and Lexis' muzzle crinkled. "Don't you dare!" He lunged.

Syrill stumbled backwards. He was expecting claws, but Lexis only flung him back into the center of the pit. "Stand and fight, you claw-less leaf-eater! Not going to give up now, are you? You never have before, you rat-chasing mongrel. Get up!"

Syrill lay on his back, dazed. Lexis's paw had lifted him well into the air. *Is this his way of playing?* Lexis's jaws closed on his arm. Syrill jerked up, but when he realized he couldn't

pull away, he stopped struggling. Lexis's eyes, now uncomfortably close, bored into his. Syrill looked away. *He'll pull my arm off now. It'll hurt horribly, but I'll bleed to death in no time.*

Lexis released him. "So. You really have quit." He sounded disgusted.

"How long are you going to drag this out?"

"I'm not Targon's pet griffin to dispose of prisoners. He can kill you himself."

Syrill rose unsteadily and backed away.

"She's here," rasped Lexis, "somewhere. I heard her screaming not two watches ago."

Syrill didn't have to ask who Lexis meant. He licked his dry lips. The consequences of what he had done were worming their way into his brain. *Blix. Corellian. Capricia.*

"She's as good as dead," continued Lexis. "When he finds she can't give him what he wants, he'll kill her. And you, when he gets around to it. And me; of course, me. That was the point, after all. Was it worth the price, general?"

Syrill trembled. The word *traitor* kept running through his mind with exactly that heavy sneer in which Targon had said it. "*Danda-lay will be ours within the hour.*" Syrill staggered back against the wall and slipped to the ground. He drew his knees up and buried his face in his arms as his shoulders began to shake.

When Syrill mastered the spasm, he raised his head and saw that Lexis had gone to the far side of the pit and lain down. "Why did you do it? Did you really hate me so much?"

"It wasn't supposed to be this way."

"It never is."

“Capricia was never to be hurt,” whispered Syrrill, “nor even to leave Port Ory. Just sleep for a time, and—” His face sank back into his arms.

When Syrrill raised his head the second time, Lexis was sitting up looking at him. Syrrill made as though to lower his head again, then sprang to his feet and took a drunken bound towards Lexis. He had no clear idea what he intended to do, only that he could no longer endure his own thoughts. If he had had a sword, he would have fallen on it, but he had only the tiger.

Lexis jumped lightly over Syrrill, knocked his feet from under him, and pinned him to the ground on his belly. Syrrill fought this time. He landed a solid kick to Lexis’s leg before the tiger managed to move away from his hooves. Lexis grunted, but kept his weight on Syrrill’s back.

“You were going to frame me for her kidnapping?” Lexis asked, as though their conversation had never lagged.

“Yes!” snarled Syrrill. Reaching behind, he found a handful of fur and ripped it out.

“And the centaurs and the swamp fauns were to help for...what? A bit of Canisaria?”

“Right again,” panted Syrrill. The weight of Lexis’s paw was making it difficult to breath.

Lexis seemed to consider. Syrrill was beginning to see spots. “Syrrill, where does this unremitting hatred of yours *come* from? You won the war. What more did you want?”

“Don’t...trust...you,” managed Syrrill.

“I’ve noticed.”

“Went...over my...head.”

“*Went over your head,*” sneer Lexis. “Tell me truly, Syrrill, would you have listened to me if I had come into your camp and asked for a parley? Would you even have let me get past the

sentries without shooting me? You certainly wouldn't have let me leave under any conditions but a full and humiliating surrender, and you would not have seen the good in an alliance, but it *has* done good. Meuril saw that, but you never..." His voice was getting fainter. Syrril felt himself slipping and let go.

He hadn't been gone long before he came swimming back up out of the blackness. Something wet and painfully rough seemed to be taking the skin off his face. Syrril batted at it feebly. He opened his eyes.

Lexis examined him narrowly. "You should have told me you couldn't breath."

Syrril sat up. Exhaustion, shock, and pain finally overcame him, and he wretched violently. "You," he said between gasps, "were always...cruel."

"I? For not killing you? What would I gain from that?"

"Oh, I don't know." Syrril wiped his raw mouth on his sleeve. "Revenge, satisfaction, a meal?"

"I *am* hungry."

Syrril frowned. "I was going to say something back there: You can't tell me I trapped you against the river, you gave up and we all went home, the end. You knew about at least part of that trap. I don't trust you because I know you lost on purpose." *I've never said it so clearly*, he thought. *Not to Meuril, not to my officers, not to Capricia.*

Lexis stared at him. Finally, he said, "I wish you had told me that before."

"I couldn't," whispered Syrril. *I couldn't even tell myself.*

"You think I patronized you."

“Yes.”

“Let you win and thought you were too stupid to see it.”

“Yes.”

“And you couldn’t tell Meuril, because it would mean admitting that you didn’t win the war at all, and—”

“I’m too much of an arrogant jackass to do that, yes.”

Lexis flexed his claws thoughtfully. “Well, you’re right.”

Syrill laughed—an odd, broken sound in the dungeon.

“I meant,” said Lexis with something like a smile, “about letting you win. But it wasn’t to patronize you. It was—it *is* a long story. Would you permit me to tell it another time?”

Syrill looked surprised. “I don’t think I’ll have another time.”

“Oh, I think you will.” Lexis padded over to Targon’s whip. He tossed the long end to Syrill, who followed Lexis’s gaze upwards to the grating. It was designed to trap creatures of Lexis’s size, not small, nimble wood fauns. Syrill tested the weight of the coil a couple of times, then threw it. The whip fell short, but the length looked promising. Syrill tried again, this time curling the lash around a bar, but when he pulled, it tumbled back down.

“The other end,” sighed Lexis.

Syrill’s eyes lit on the long, iron handle. He started to throw it, then stopped. “You had this all worked out, didn’t you? From the moment he threw me in here.”

“Not all of it.”

“Enough of it.” Syrill toyed with the handle. “What if I leave and don’t let you out?”

“Then I’ll probably die.”

“If I do let you out, how do I know you won’t kill me as soon as you’re free?”

Lexis half smiled. “You don’t. But I won’t.”

Syrill crossed his arms and tapped a hoof. “What if I tell you that I won’t let you out?”

Lexis cocked his head. “Is this a guessing game, Syrill, because I don’t see the point?”

“I won’t.” Syrill threw the whip handle first, and it lodged between two bars. He tugged on it, then jumped up and dangled. It held. “I won’t let you out,” he repeated.

Lexis lay down with his chin on his paws. “You might let Capricia out, though. I think she’s in the cells opposite this pit. Go on, Syrill; you’re wasting time.”

## Chapter 8. Unpleasant surprises

Griffin: a quadropedavian indigenous to the far northern isles. They have four paws and a tufted tail. Their faces are beaked and eagle-like, with tufted ears. They are partially feathered, with fur covering most of their bodies. Griffins have a round pupil, and their shelts, called Grishnards, closely resemble the extinct lion shelt. Griffins and Grishnards have been migrating south into Shavier/ pegasus territory over the last twenty years, and hostilities between the two groups blossomed into war five years ago. The council of Middle Panamindorah gives its unofficial support to the pegasus and their shelts. Captured griffins may occasionally be purchased from Shavier merchants in Iron Mountain, where they are prized for the fighting pits.

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

Jubal sat straight up in bed. He took a couple of quick breaths, then relaxed a little. The star called the Unicorn's Eye had not yet risen above his windowsill. *Only the first watch of the night.* Jubal pulled his knees up to his chin and rubbed his head. Something was wrong. What?

His window overlooked the pool in the central courtyard. He rose and walked to it, rubbing his sleep-sluggish eyes. For a moment he admired the face of Blue Moon on the water. *It wasn't this clear earlier.* Jubal stiffened. *Because my room overlooks a flood tunnel!* When he'd gone to bed, he could hear it separate from the falls—a dull throbbing. And now—silence.

Jubal reached his door in one bound, flung it open, and raced down the stairs. "WAKE UP! WAKE UP! THE TUNNELS ARE DRAINED!"



On second thought, he ran back up and scrambled into his clothes, pulling his sword belt on so roughly he tore the fabric of his tunic. Already he could hear shouts of alarm from the ground floors. A sick feeling swept over him as he listened to the rising tide—the screams of unwary, half asleep cliff fauns. High in one of the towers, an alarm bell began to clang. The sound was like a death knell.

\* \* \* \*

Syrill climbed to the top of the whip, expecting all the while to feel claws dragging him down. When he reached the bars, he got hold of one and pulled himself high enough to see there were no centaurs in the room. Syrill pulled himself out and clambered over the bars to the edge of the pit. He glanced down. Lexis hadn't stirred. He looked almost small in the shadows below. Syrill felt a tightness in his throat. "I lied."

Lexis sat up and stretched. "I know. Hurry before the guards come back."

To Syrill's relief, the windlass did not require the strength of a centaur. Nevertheless, it took him several minutes, grunting and straining, to raise the grating enough for Lexis to jump out. "I just had to make sure you weren't—" began Syrill.

Lexis was already starting away. "I know, I know."

"How long has it been since you had water?"

"Awhile."

"How long have you been in the—"

"I don't know, Syrill; there's no day and night down here. There *are* guards, and I can't think why they haven't found us yet."

The reason became apparent as soon as they came around back of the main amphitheatre, where the inhabitants of the cages were tended. It wasn't clear which bit of the guard they had gotten hold of, but the essential bits must have come off quickly. What remained lay slumped against the bars, with the hungry griffins tearing at him. They stopped when they saw Lexis and Syrill, their long necks stretching outward. They began to trill.

Lexis hesitated, then started towards them.

Syrill grabbed his tail. "Don't be a fool; can't you see what they've done to—"

Lexis turned so sharply that Syrill nearly fell over backwards. "Don't," growled Lexis, "ever do that again."

"Tail?" Syrill managed.

"Yes." Lexis turned back to the griffins. "I think they want us to let them out."

"Of course they do! Then they'll have even more to eat."

Lexis rumbled at them. He cocked his head and listened to their clucking, chirping, growling, and trilling. "I think," he said slowly, "they're proposing to create a distraction for us."

"Why would they do that?"

"They want to get out of the mountain. That's the distraction."

"How can you understand them?"

"Their language is...similar...to Filinian."

"Doesn't sound similar."

Lexis watched them closely. Then he walked up to the bars. Syrill flinched as the first griffin thrust his beak into Lexis's fur, but the griffin only butted his shoulder, making a noise

almost like a purr. Next moment, their heads were all around Lexis, plucking at him, muttering in their strange tongue. Several began digging wildly at the stone floor. One grew so excited that he flapped his wings, bounced into the air, and struck his head against the roof. He landed awkwardly, shook feathers everywhere, and screamed at Syrill.

“Alright, alright.” Syrill came forward, still wary of their beaks. He found a ring of keys on the dead guard, as well as a dagger that he tucked in his belt. He looked once more at Lexis, then unlocked the cage door, and threw it open.

A mad rush, a flurry of gold and white and speckled feathers, and the air rang with exultant shrieks. Syrill counted at least a dozen griffins. They circled the high-ceilinged room before dropping down to vanish along the passage through which Syrill had first come.

“Now,” said Lexis, “we wait. I suggest in the griffin cage.”

Syrill nodded. They moved into the shadows of the cage, where Lexis found a water trough. Before either of them had finished drinking, the shouts began. Hooves pounded on stone overhead. A huge silhouette obscured their entrance, and Syrill thought they’d been spotted, but a centaur only was examining the body of the guard. A moment later, the silhouette was gone.

Syrill counted between each passage of hooves, and when sixty counts had passed since the last hoof beat, Lexis stood up. “Now’s as good a time as any.”

Syrill started towards the light. “How many guards are usually down here?”

“Not more than three.”

“And you think we can find Capricia quickly?”

“I think so. I have an idea the king’s private dungeon isn’t large.”

It wasn't. They found her not far from the pits, the only occupant in a row of cells off a darkened hallway. Syrill unlocked the door with a key from the guard's belt. The princess lay curled on a bed, knees pulled up to her chin. Her only response when Syrill opened the door was to curl more tightly.

"Capricia?" whispered Syrill. In the gloom, he could see little, though there was no mistaking the ripple of her hair, its shine caught even by the dim light of distant torches.

"Go away." Her voice was so guttural he hardly recognized it. "I'll kill you this time; I swear I will."

"Capricia?" Lexis padded into the cell and bent over her.

Capricia uncovered her face, her eyes huge and frantic. She rubbed them hard. "Not him," she muttered. "You can't be him."

"I think she's been drugged," said Syrill.

"Yes, she's been drugged," trilled Capricia in a sing-song. Then she started to laugh—a keening hysterical sound that dissolved into sobs.

Syrill could hear Lexis grinding his teeth. The tiger was bristling all over. "Put her on my back. Quickly." He lay down on his belly to make the task easier.

Syrill thought at first Capricia might fight him, but when he lifted her, she only whimpered and locked her hands in the fabric of his tunic. He had difficulty making her let go. "She's wet," he said with a frown, and then, "I think her dress is soaked with—"

"Blood," said Lexis. "Let's get her out of here."

Syrill's mouth opened in an O of horror. "Did he give her to his slaves?" he choked. "I'll kill him! I'll cut out his living heart!"

Capricia had traded her grip on Syrill's shirt for two handfuls of Lexis's fur. Lexis ducked out the door of the cell with the princess slumped on his back. "Just now, I'm worried less about his dying than about her living."

\* \* \* \*

The messenger was trembling when he approached his king. "Sire?"

"Yes?"

"Your griffins have escaped."

One eyebrow rose. "They should be weak. They haven't been fed this moon."

The messenger nodded. "Yes, Sire, only they ate one of their guards."

"Ah."

"Also," he took a deep breath, "somewhere in the confusion, the tiger escaped."

Targon grew very still. It was enough to make the messenger break out in a cold sweat.

"The surviving guards are being held for questioning. They say—"

"Was there a faun with him?"

"I don't know, Sire. The guards—"

"Find out. Check to see if there were any pieces that might be interpreted as a faun in his pit. Also, set new guards on the fauness."

"Yes, Sire."

"Question the guards on duty *thoroughly*."

“And then, Sire?”

“Hamstring them.”

The messenger shuddered. “Yes, Sire.”

Chapter 9. Dark Secret

Where are you going, wandering wind—

lost in the night, lost in the night?

I go to the desert, far and away—

child of the light, child of the light.

Why are you crying, wandering wind—

alone in the night, alone in the night?

I cry for a home, never to leave—

child of the light, child of the light.

You cannot stay here, wandering wind—

go back to your desert tonight.

--rhyme sung to cliff faun children

Mercurion the centaur came down the corridor at a trot. He had news that his majesty would particularly dislike, and after what had been done to Lexis's guards, Mercurion thought best to deliver the news himself. He had known Targon a long time and could deflect his wrath, could even argue with him—one of the only creatures who still could. *And yet*, thought Mercurion, *he'll strike me down one day*. He had known it for some time. He just didn't know what to do about it.

*If I could only make him rest properly, he might be in a better temper.* When was the last time he could be certain Targon had slept a night through? *Not since he came back from the desert.* Mercurion shuddered.

When they were colts, they had used to take long runs together into the desert—flattering themselves with their ability to find water and shelter. They had ranged all the way to the grasslands in the far north and hunted the wild dogs, gazelle, peccaries, and beautiful birds on the edge of the jungle. Targon had even taken a pegasus once, though it was forbidden. He'd skinned it and worn the feathered pelt like a cape—rich purple, a kingly color. Mercurion had relished those days of freedom. He had not, however, relished the deep desert—the profound silence, the wandering wind, the days of crushing heat and the nights of bone-shattering cold.

Targon had been drawn to the deadly beauty. Even after they were adults and following their families into politics, Targon had gone back periodically—alone now—into the arid silence. Mercurion knew of a stone forest Targon frequented—pillars of twisted bedrock rising out of the sand, the wind growing them ever taller as it ate away the dust round their bases. Legends said a great battle had been fought there in the long ago, and one occasionally found bits of armor and bone. Mercurion disliked the stone forest, and he never went there except to draw Targon away. The place reminded him of a charnel field, the wind like the voices of troubled ghosts.

*The last time he went to that haunted place is the last time he slept.* This had been shortly before Lupricasia, yet the changes in his friend had begun years ago. The killing of King Concaïn had only been the culmination. Mercurion was sure Targon had killed him, though they never spoke of it. *It is natural for a capable centaur to crave the leadership of his herd,* Mercurion told himself. *Targon is nothing if not capable. Yet why could he not have waited? Why not challenge Concaïn in the traditional manner? The assembly would have backed him, and he surely would have won. Why this furious haste?*



Mercurion had made excuses for his friend so often they sang like a litany in his head.

*The fauns persist in barring us from colonies either in their country or the newly opened Canisaria. What do they expect but a war, with our populations expanding in such limited space?* Yet he could no longer repress the answering arguments. *Is it wise to impose such a war on a new centaur administration barely accustomed to one another? Targon would gain much by giving his officers a few years to adjust to him, and he has everything to lose.*

“Mercurion.”

“My lord.” Mercurion pranced to a guilty stop as Targon appeared from a side passage. Never until recently had he felt compelled to use formal address to his friend.

“What news?”

“All but four of the griffins have been caught or killed. The princess, however, has escaped.” A long, heavy silence. Mercurion raised his head. He’d never been a coward.

“Released by someone who could use keys, my lord. The dead guard’s set was missing.”

Targon drew a deep breath. “I should have never left Syrill alone with Lexis.”

*You said it, not me.* “We think Syrill released the griffins as a decoy.”

Targon nodded and began a thoughtful *clop, clop* down the passage. “Any idea where they’ve gone?”

“All the passages are guarded, and soldiers are everywhere. They can’t be moving about. They must be hiding, and someone will stumble over them soon.”

Targon stopped suddenly. “You are dismissed. See to the rest of those griffins.”

Mercurion's eyes followed his king's. Targon was looking at the entrance to a ventilation shaft.

\* \* \* \*

The shafts had been Capricia's idea. "The centaurs have enormous furnaces for their smithies," she said, "and all that fire must have air from the outside."

Syrill and Lexis glanced at one another in surprise. They'd thought her insensible with drugs, but although her voice came thick and low, it sounded lucid. As it turned out, she was right. The ventilation shafts provided circulation and fresh air for the entire mountain. Most of the larger shafts opened high in the ceiling, so that Lexis had to jump first with Capricia, then with Syrill. Many had been drilled and were far too small for centaurs to enter. Some were too small even for Lexis, especially with Capricia on his back. She pointed this out herself as soon as they reached the smaller passages. She could walk unaided, though she tired easily.

Syrill suggested that he and Lexis scout ahead in order to avoid exhausting Capricia with endless backtracking. When the trio came to a major intersection, Capricia would wait while Lexis and Syrill examined the alternatives. It was while waiting at one of these intersections that she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Capricia woke with a stifled scream. She'd been having nightmares again. She set her teeth and tried to relax. Her dress felt stiff with blood, and she tried not to touch it. *Rutting season*, she reminded herself. *It's only that; the rest was poisoned nightmare.*

*Someone is looking at me.* Raising her head, she saw a shadowy figure crouching in the threshold of the right-hand tunnel. The shape moved forward, and in the dimness Capricia recognized Syrrill. She had not spoken to him except by necessity, and although she understood that he had helped to rescue her, she could not suppress a dull loathing for him.

“Where is Lexis?” asked Syrrill.

“Still gone.” Capricia tested her legs.

“I think I found a way out!”

“How far?”

“Not very. Come and see. The air is sweet out there.”

The promise of fresh air made her feel almost gracious. “That’s wonderful!”

“I’ll take you out and come back for Lexis. It’s not far.”

Capricia’s brow furrowed as they moved into the tunnel. “It smells like smoke.”

“We have to cross a fire pit.” They passed a branching tunnel where the air smelled fresh, but Syrrill shook his head. “That way goes out, but the hole isn’t big enough to crawl through.”

Now the air was so thick with smoke that they went to their hands and knees.

Capricia coughed. “Syrrill, are you sure about this?”

“Trust me.”

*That sounds perverse, coming from you,* but she said nothing. The way Syrrill was acting bothered her. Neither he nor Lexis had yet taken her down a passage without consultation with the each other. *If we’re so close to the surface, Lexis might have found a better way out.*

A red-orange glow filled the passage. She could clearly see Syrill's brown cloak and belt. *He had a centaur dagger. Where's it gone?* She opened her mouth to ask, but the words were drowned in a fit of coughing. *Why did he ask where Lexis is? He knows where Lexis is.*

Capricia caught sight of a rectangular hole in the floor ahead. Smoke and orange light poured through, and she could hear hammer blows in the workroom below. An idiotic panic rose in her, but she mastered it.

When they reached the edge of the hole, Syrill turned to look at her in the unearthly light. He smiled in a way that should have been reassuring, but Capricia only noticed the flash of his teeth. She didn't remember Syrill's eyes being so green.

He stood and motioned for her to do the same. Capricia saw a narrow ledge between the wall and the mouth of the pit. The gap was about two strides across—not wide, but wide enough to be dangerous. “We have to get beyond this,” shouted Syrill over the roar of the flames and the banging of the hammers. “Then we're free!”

*Lexis could jump it without danger, thought Capricia. Does Syrill mean to leave him behind?*

Syrill inched out onto the ledge and got one foot solidly onto the path beyond it. “Take my hand. I'll help you.”

Capricia stared at him. Then, very slowly, she reached for his hand. The updraft from the furnace made his hair writhe about his head. *Clean hair, she thought. How is that possible?* Something flashed in Capricia's mind, and suddenly she understood. *It was all real. All of it. I was never drugged.*

She felt sweat running between her shoulder blades, but when his hand touched hers it was dry and strong. Capricia slid a hoof towards the ledge, willing her heartbeat under control. She saw Syrril begin to shift his position to draw her forward.

*Now!* Capricia tugged with all her might. Syrril let out a cry as he plunged forward, just catching himself on the lip of the hole in front of Capricia. She was on her knees now, and she stared into his face as he struggled on the edge of the opening. He snarled at her, piercing eyes glittering terribly in the orange light.

Capricia didn't scream. With a swiftness that surprised even herself, she rocked back and kicked him. Her hooves struck his face with a satisfying crunch of breaking nose. With a final snarl, he plummeted into the abyss.

Almost in the same moment, Capricia sensed movement in the passage behind. Then Lexis's warm breath and soft fur were all around her. "Capricia, what are you doing here?"

She twisted her fingers in the fur of his chest and buried her face against him. Her shoulders heaved. "It was *him!*"

"Capricia?" Her gaze shot up to meet Syrril's astonished brown eyes. His dark hair lay lank against his neck, sticky with sweat. He knelt beside her. "Why did you go off alone? This passage isn't safe. Look, we're right over a fire pit."

Almost, she hugged him. "We *have* get out of here," she whispered. "We have a warning to deliver."

"The getting out part, we can manage," said Lexis. "My tunnel leads to the surface."

"By now," said Syrril, "Meuril probably already knows that the centaurs—"

Capricia shook her head. “Targon isn’t a centaur. He’s a shape-shifter, a wizard.”

\* \* \* \*

A centaur smith stood sweating over a glowing spear. Stopping to wipe his brow, he was astonished by the largest bat he’d ever seen, winging out of the flames. He might have followed it into the passage for a closer look, had he not been at such a delicate point in his work.

If the smith had stepped into hall, he would not have seen the bat. Instead, he would have seen his king, glaring through the open doorway into the furnace. Targon shook himself. “Very well, my dear. It would have been something of a shame after all, and I have more important chores. We’ll meet again soon.”

## Chapter 10. Rescues

Shayshoo fur—I laugh every time I see a wood or cliff faun wearing it. How horrified they would be if they knew our little joke.

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

Corry and Leesha returned to their host's study to find a meal laid out for them. He had provided extra cushions for the cubs' chairs, so that they sat at just the height Filinians preferred at table, and he'd set out the wide-mouthed bowls considered appropriate for entertaining cats. *Hermit he may be, thought Corry, but he hasn't always been.*

Corry and the stranger ate stew with bread. The cats' portions had been prepared raw with only a few herbs. At the end of the meal, Corry and his host ate candied nuts and fruits, while the cubs licked at small savory meat morsels glazed with fresh blood and sprinkled with catmint. It soon became clear, however, that it would take more than savory morsels to gain the trust of Lexis's cubs. The stranger was still wearing his pants and boots. Tolomy kept darting glances at them, and Leesha stared openly, as if hoping to pierce the leather with her blue glare.

To Corry's consternation, she also insisted upon sniffing every item he consumed and declaring it nonpoisonous. Tolomy interrupted her inspection of Corry's soup with a muttered, "Doesn't matter. Liquid poisons don't smell."

"They do so," hissed Leesha. "Loop told me—"

"Loop was talking about poisons that come from Filinia. Shelts make their poisons differently. They have odorless—"

"Offal! I remember that lecture, and Loop had us smell all the classes of liquid poisons."

They continued, growing ever louder.

Corry glanced at their host, but his face was expressionless. Finally, he leaned forward, laced his hands beneath his chin, and said, “Actually, if I was going to poison you, I think I’d use something topical. The jungles of the northern mountains have a frog that answers well. It releases a toxin through its skin, and a colorless preparation of inoffensive scent can be applied to floors. The pads of a cat’s feet are one of the few places susceptible to topical poisons.”

The cubs had gone completely silent. Leesha was staring suspiciously at the floor.

The stranger drummed his fingers. “And if I had done so, you’d already be feeling the affects. Please eat your dinner before it congeals.”

They finished the meal in uncomfortable silence. That symbol on the stranger’s cape still bothered Corry. He kept turning it over in his mind, trying to remember where he’d seen it.

As their host was clearing away the dishes, Tolomy spoke. “Yesterday we saw swamp fauns herding prisoners along their plank road. Do you know where those prisoners were taken?”

“Perhaps.”

“Will you guide us there?”

He considered. “On one condition.”

“What condition?”

“I need to know what you intend to do.”

Leesha’s hackles rose. “That’s our business. What makes you think you can ask all the questions and never answer any? Who are you? *What* are you?”



“I am the owner of this house. I am the provider of your dinner. I am an innkeeper who asks no more payment than the designs of his guests.”

Leesha’s eyes locked with the stranger’s. “Leesha Alainya,” he murmured, “you are so like your father.”

Corry thought for a moment she would leap onto the table, but before she could decide to do it, the stranger stood up. He walked to the door—the one they’d not yet entered. “My name is Archemais. I will take you to the prison you speak of in the morning, *if* you promise not to do anything rash. You are a small army, and the long-tailed fauns are fierce and cruel.”

Leesha’s hackles had settled a little, but she was still fuming. “That name doesn’t mean anything to us! I still want to know—!”

The stranger turned sharply, and Corry caught the glint of his eyes—green as his own in the firelight. “You are in no position to make terms. There’s bedding in the corner. Goodnight.” The door closed behind him, and they heard the lock click into place.

“Insufferable impertinence!” stormed Leesha with no attempt to keep her voice down.

Corry did not speak. *Archemais. I’ve heard that name before—somewhere recently.*

Tolomy had gone to the corner and was digging in a pile for furs and blankets. Corry helped him sort out the bedding, then settled down to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Lexis dreamed he was back in the pit. He could hear Capricia screaming, and all he could do was pace and growl and jump at the walls. He woke with a roar, on his feet before his eyes

could focus. The scream came again—now nothing like Capricia’s. Lexis squinted in the painful brightness. He saw a griffin on the sand perhaps ten paces away.

*Eeeah!* The creature shrieked again.

Lexis glanced around. Capricia had been lying against him, but as the day grew hot, she’d rolled away. Syrill lay curled in the sand nearby. *We came a good distance last night.*

Turning east, Lexis saw a line of grassland and beyond it, the sharp ascent of the cliff, deceptively close in the morning air. A fast mount could cover the distance between Iron Mountain and the grasslands in a day. But a weak tiger, and two shelts with no water?

*Eeeeeah! Eeeeeah!*

Lexis looked back at the griffin, obviously one of those they’d released from Targon’s dungeons. His beak was stained with blood. “You’re far from home, friend.” He tried to decipher the creature’s strange babble—the faint intonations that reminded him of Filinian, the body language that counted for as much as the verbal. “You’re welcome,” Lexis tried to tell him, but the griffin’s excitement seemed well beyond a thank you.

At last, Lexis turned and looked behind him. Iron Mountain dominated the foreground. He scowled at it, then squinted. A haze stood in the shimmering air between themselves and the mountain. *Smoke?*

*Eeeeeah!*

Lexis caught his breath. *Not smoke. Dust.*

\* \* \* \*

Corry woke well rested. Sitting up on his fur pallet, he saw breakfast laid out on the table, but no sign of Archemais. He rose and dressed, trying not to wake the cubs, then left by the bathing room door and padded down the passage into the pink, frosty dawn. He stopped on the threshold and sniffed. *That smell. It's an Earth smell. What?*

*Coffee!* Corry had not encountered coffee in Panamindorah; the fauns drank tea. Following the smell, he moved around the rock wall of the reinforced hillside until he came to a porch. There sat their host, drinking his coffee and watching the sunrise.

Corry cleared his throat, and the stranger's head shot round. "You do move quietly, Corellian. You always did." He took his feet off the other chair. "Have a seat."

Corry came forward, but didn't sit down. "Where did you get the coffee?" he asked.

Archemais hesitated. "I don't remember. It's nothing special; do you want some?"

Corry shook his head. "I just want to talk to you."

Archemais motioned to the chair again, and this time Corry sat down. "How did you visit Earth?"

Archemais quirked an eyebrow. "How did *you*?"

Corry tried again, "How do you know my name? What do you mean 'I always did move quietly.'"

Archemais sipped his coffee. Corry watched him. In spite of his host's apparent ease, Corry had an idea he was struggling to suppress some great emotion. Anger? Sorrow? Fear? Corry couldn't tell, but he was sure it was there, just below the surface.

"Let us say I've heard of you," he said at last. "I promise a better explanation later."

Corry was not surprised at the non-answer, but he was surprised at the promise. “And the...the world jumping?”

“I’ll explain that, too.”

“When?”

At that moment, Leesha and Tolomy came tearing around the side of the hill, noses to the ground on Corry’s trail. When they saw him, Leesha cried out. “Corry! He hasn’t eaten you!”

Corry smiled. Archemais said, “Don’t be absurd. I never cook an iteration without coriander, and the garden doesn’t have any at this time of year.”

Leesha scowled at him, then at Corry. “Don’t you know a wizard’s true form is a dragon?” she hissed. “Dragons *eat* shelts and animals, and iterations, too. I think.”

Corry wondered if she’d forgotten how he’d arrived on the cliff. *Is my “true form” a dragon?* He’d suspected it for some time.

Archemais descended the steps of his porch. “What makes you think I’m a wizard, kitten-cub?”

“I’m not a kitten!”

He started around the side of the hill.

“Why can’t we go in the back door?” asked Leesha. “What are you hiding in there?”

“Living rocks and wing’ed snails and silver feathered dragon’s tails,” he sing-songed over his shoulder. Corry had heard the children’s rhyme on the streets of Laven-lay. It reminded him of something—some dream he’d had recently.

Archemais continued, “Do you want to go to the prison this morning, or not?”

“Yes,” said Tolomy.

“Then you’d best eat breakfast and get ready. Morning’s a better time for spying.”

\* \* \* \*

Corry smelled the prison long before he saw it. He didn’t need the cubs to tell him the smell was sinister—a carrion reek, mingled with the odor of seared hair and flesh. Beneath the whole, he detected a curiously chemical smell.

Archemais led them by no apparent path. “We dare not use the road,” he told them.

Soon they began to hear the prison as well as smell it—a low mutter and mewling and a noise of industry. At last, Corry and Archemais had to stoop to hands and knees, and they all crawled forward through what looked like an animal-made tunnel into dense thorns.

Archemais stopped well before the end of the tunnel and gestured for them to look. Craning their necks to see around each other, Corry and the cubs were able to make out moving forms in the brightness beyond the thorns. Corry saw a complex of low-quality buildings and tents. Shelts were coming and going between them.

Corry felt Tolomy go rigid. He looked around and saw the cub’s eyes dilated so large they looked black. His lips were drawn back from his teeth. When Archemais reached out to calm him, the cub turned and almost bit. Corry looked around at Leesha and found she was no longer at his side. She’d gone all the way up to the edge of the thicket and was peering out with criminal carelessness. Her fur rose in an indignant ridge along her spine.

“Easy,” murmured Archemais in his softest voice, and Corry saw with dismay that he looked worried.

Squinting past Leesha, Corry saw that most of the shelts coming and going around the buildings were not fauns. Their tails were too long even for swamp fauns, and their feet seemed too large. Most were naked.

“Leesha!” he breathed as loudly as he dared. “What are they?”

She whipped her head around. “They’re cat shelts,” she spat. “Fealiday!”

## Chapter 11. Fur and Feathers

*Rquar, you can stop sending troops down here. The battle is over, and the day is ours.*

--Sharon-zool in a dispatch to her general in Port Ory

“Wake up.” Lexis rolled Syrill over with his paw. “Up! Up! Now!”

Syrill was already on his knees, blinking hard in the bright light, hand on the hilt of his centaur dagger

“Look.” Lexis motioned with his head.

Syrill looked, saw the dust, knew what it meant. “They’re coming.”

*EEAAAAH!*

Syrill spun toward the griffin. “Where did he come from?”

“The dungeons.” Lexis was prodding Capricia. “He’s offering to carry someone.”

Capricia’s long brown lashes flickered open. Her bloodshot eyes regarded them with uncharacteristic stupor. “Hurts,” she muttered, but tried to stagger to her feet.

Lexis came alongside so that she could lean on him. “Capricia, I think we’ve found you a quick ride home. Do you think you could hang onto a mount?”

“She won’t have to,” said Syrill. He had tied dozens of wounded soldiers to their mounts, and he began immediately slicing his cloak into serviceable strips. While he worked, he asked, “Does the griffin know the way to Laven-lay?”

Lexis relayed his question. He listened to the griffin’s response, then said, “I think so.”

Syrill stopped. “You *think* so?”

“Does it matter?” snapped Lexis. “Look at her, Syrril. Do you think she’ll survive an all-day race across the desert without water?”

Capricia raised her head. “I’ll go, carry the warning. Any faun town will do.”

“Any faun town with a good healer,” muttered Lexis.

When they had her situated on the griffin, Lexis said, “I think he could carry two.”

Syrril hesitated. He looked at Capricia, drooping against the griffin’s neck. He looked at Lexis and at the billowing curtain of dust in the distance. “Two would slow him.”

Lexis reached up and licked Capricia’s hand. Her fingers closed for a moment in the fur of his nape. Then the griffin turned, ran for a short distance, and took flight. Syrril and Lexis watched him for a moment before beginning their long run towards the edge of the desert.

\* \* \* \*

Corry felt a thrill. *Cat shelts! Believed extinct since the time of the wizards.* He could understand Leesha’s excitement, but not the anger radiating off both she and her brother.

He made out what looked like clotheslines in the center of the compound, all hung with garments. He saw large vats, stirred by Fealiday. On the far side of the camp, something was burning, billowing a column of reeking black smoke. Above the general mutter of the place, Corry caught the clink of a chain and saw that the Fealiday were manacled. He began to understand. *They’re slaves. That’s why they’ve been kept a secret.*

Tolomy had planted his feet and was leaning slightly backwards. He looked as though no inducement in Panamindorah would bring him any closer to the prison. Corry was puzzled by the intensity of their reaction. Crawling forward on his elbows, he was able see the swamp faun



overseers, many of them directing labor around the vats. Something about the chemical smell reminded him powerfully of Port Ory's lower districts. *Why?*

He tried to figure out what kind of garments were on the clotheslines. *Perhaps this is a laundry facility.* The longer he looked, the more the idea made sense. He even caught an impression of assembly-line activity in the sequence of movement from building to building. On long tables, some of the slaves were beating the clothing with stones.

A slave passed close, and Corry saw that all the garments were furs. *That would account for the chemical smell. Fur probably requires special treatment.*

In that moment, three things happened very quickly. Corry remembered that Port Ory's lower districts housed the tanneries, the slave dropped some of his furs, and Leesha tried to speak to him. As the furs tumbled, Corry saw that they were raw, still bloody in places. Yet even in their unprocessed state, he recognized the dense pelage and exotic patterns of Shayshoo fur—the new swamp faun product he'd seen in Danda-lay. As the slave bent to pick them up, Corry registered the same fur on the shelt's living legs.

For a moment, he was too sickened to think about what Leesha was doing. "You! Fealiday!" she hissed. "Over here!"

The slave froze. His eyes moved across the empty dirt between himself and the edge of the camp. Even in the shadows, Leesha's brilliant white fur must have shown. He stared at her.

"We'll help you," she whispered, "if you help us. Duck in here, and we'll run. Quickly!"

The cat shelt's fur was ash gray with very faint black leopard spots. He had thick, curly black hair. Like all the slaves, he was naked and manacled so that he could only take short steps. He looked healthy, but for his dead eyes. Now something in those eyes stirred. He remained bending over his furs while he stared at Leesha.

"We can protect you," she continued. "We need information about the fauns. When my father hears of his place, he'll break it like bird bones and boil the fauns in their own vats; you'll see. But for now, come and help us!"

The Fealiday blinked hard. Behind him, Corry saw one of the swamp fauns staring. "Leesha!" Corry whispered, "they're suspicious. Leesha, he may not even know how to speak!"

Abruptly, the Fealiday's eyes focused on Corry, and he *knew* the creature could understand. "What," muttered the slave, now looking again at Leesha, "did you call me?"

Leesha seemed confused for a moment, then said, "Fealiday. You're a cat shelt, my blood-kin. Haven't you ever seen a cat, Fealiday?"

The slave swallowed. "Never. Are you free, cat?"

"Yes, and—"

"Then run away. This is a place where lives end badly."

Tolomy spoke suddenly in Corry's ear. "The fauns!"

Looking beyond the slave, Corry saw some of them whispering and pointing. Corry glanced back down the tunnel to see what Archemais thought of this, but their guide had vanished. "Let's get out of here." He reached forward and jerked Leesha's tail.

Tolomy began breathing in a low, unbroken growl. "Something's coming!"

Corry turned from Leesha just in time to see a pair of fierce-looking dogs sniffing up the tunnel. When they saw Corry and the cubs, they began to bay. Not knowing what else to do, Corry scrambled forward and out of the tunnel. Leesha had already gone. In the glaring light of the tree-less camp, Corry saw a ring of fauns brandishing pikes and swords. Two tossed coils of rope round Leesha's neck and pulled in opposite directions. They were unable to coordinate their efforts, however, as Leesha kept flashing at first one and then the other with claws and teeth.

One of the fauns struck Corry in the chest with the but of a spear. Corry staggered, wheezing a thin stream of air into his stunned lungs. *Shift!* he screamed at himself. *Shift, shift, shift! Be a dragon!* Then something struck him in the back. He fell flat on his belly, his cheek to the sand. He tried to move and couldn't. Leesha was choking. Bloody froth dripped from her wide red mouth. Her blue eyes were terribly bright and frantic, every hair on her body erect. The fauns were quiet, now, busy. *They've done this before*, thought Corry. *This sort of killing doesn't damage pelts.* Corry saw no sign of Tolomy. *The dogs probably killed him in the tunnel.*

And then the slave struck. He had been ignored on the perimeter of the circle, but he came to life with a roar. His first bare-fisted blow dropped the faun nearest him like a fishing weight, and he wrenched free the falling sword. The slave clearly didn't know how to use it, but behind every blow lay a weight of hatred and a lifetime of hard labor. He cut his second faun completely in two from shoulder to groin. The third had the measure of him and danced away. The next fauns came with spears. They were herding him beyond Corry's line of sight, and all the while, the small group around Leesha continued their work. Corry saw that her eyes were glazing. He felt a tear run across his nose and into the dirt.

Movement from the direction of the thorns made him blink and refocus. Something was coming out of the hole. Corry saw a hound's head, its bloody jaws oddly slack. Its body jerked, thrust forward, and Tolomy Alainya stood with the dripping corpse between his teeth, its legs dragging in the sticky mud.

The fauns around Leesha faltered. Tolomy wore a cape of blood—his fur saturated from nose to hips. He did not growl. He did not bristle. Without any warning, he dropped the hound and sprang. Corry saw him rip the throat out of one of Leesha's persecutors and disembowel the next. Leesha collapsed. Corry made an experimental movement and found that he could crawl. Methodically, he worked his way towards her while blood speckled the dirt around him and fauns shouted and screamed. He saw that she was still breathing. Then something connected with the back of his head, and he fainted.

## Chapter 12. A King's Revenge

*Traditionally, the palace guards of Danda-lay are administered by the queen, as head of the household, while the king administers the army, as protector. There had been times in Danda-lay's history when kings and queens contested so hotly that the palace guard was at odds with the army. The past two kings of Danda-lay have made a concerted effort to reduce the guard's strength and standing. One may make of this what one will.*

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

Jubal saw little of the battle. After the first fierce fighting around the tunnels, he and his subordinates spent their time trying to organize the terrified civilians who were fleeing to the palace. In the beginning it was only the old, the ladies, and the children. These had to be housed as comfortably as possible, out of the way of soldiers and messengers. As the sun rose higher, groups of wounded began staggering into the charmed circle of the tower sharpshooters. Some collapsed in the plaza, and Jubal had to send shelts with litters to fetch them. Soon the halls and council rooms lay thick with bloody bodies, an inadequate supply of healers scurrying between.

As the swamp fauns began to consolidate their hold on the city, the streams of refugees diminished. Trotting down an upstairs hallway, listening to a half-hysterical report from a subordinate, Jubal caught sight of flames on the city skyline. Over the tumult of the battle rose a many-throated wail.

He snatched at the other faun's shoulder. "Stop." He walked to the window, looked, listened.

"What is it?" whispered the other.

“They’re burning the library,” said Jubal, “the scribes, too, by the sound of it.”

Running hoof beats made them turn. Jubal saw a faun still dressed in his nightshirt. Only a ragged bit of purple tied round his arm marked him as a king’s messenger. “His majesty wishes to see you.”

Jubal trotted after him. He had not seen Shadock since yesterday and was anxious for news. As he had expected, the king had set up council in the protected lower rooms, well below the bedrock of the palace. He had half a dozen counselors with him—two of them ancient uncles, all of them noble, their houses linked to the royal family by blood or marriage. None of them loved Jubal.

Shadock raised his head from a map as Jubal entered, and all talking ceased. Jubal was not reassured by the king’s expression. His eyes looked hollow and hunted.

Jubal stood awkwardly in the door for a moment, then bowed. “You sent for me, Sire?”

Shadock stood and moved around the table. “A glass of wine, Captain?”

Jubal inclined his head. “Gratefully, my lord.”

Shadock poured the wine himself—a gesture that made Jubal profoundly uneasy. He’d never seen Shadock serve anyone, not even his queen. *Has he poisoned it?*

The other counselors had resumed their conversations around the map, but Jubal knew they were watching, listening. Shadock gave Jubal the choice of glasses, took the remaining one, and downed half of it in one gulp. Jubal did not feel reassured and continued to hold his drink.

“Sire, you are kind to offer me refreshment, but I am needed in—”

“I won’t keep you long, Captain.” He paused. “If I told you that we have an option of retreat from the city, would you council me to take it?”

Jubal studied his king. *Is he trying to find out whether Istra told me about the secret tunnel?* “I’ve been occupied with palace matters, your majesty, and I don’t know enough about the state of the city to guess whether such a move is advisable.”

Shadock nodded slowly. “The state of the city...” He leaned against the table, swirled his wine a few times. “The city is lost. The largest part of the army—what army we could gather on such short notice—broke up about half a watch ago. The survivors attempted to rally in the city library. The position seemed defensible for a time, but their lines were breached and the building set on fire. At present, I can be sure of only the area commanded by the tower sharpshooters.”

Jubal remembered the wailing and felt ill. He cleared his throat. “Under these circumstances, I would advise your majesty to retreat. If such a retreat were possible.”

Shadock nodded. “It is possible. You may have heard *rumors* about a certain door discovered in the palace library last season?” The disgust with which he said the word “rumors” assured Jubal that Shadock had no doubt his queen had divulged the secret to her lover. “We will use it, go to Laven-lay, and seek Meuril’s aid to recover our city.”

Jubal said nothing. For the proud, cultured cliff fauns to come trailing into parochial Laven-lay, begging asylum and assistance must be a bitter pill to swallow. *He’s very calm to be considering such a thing*, thought Jubal. *Does he have some consolation he’s not mentioning?*

“The court is already in motion,” continued Shadock. “About half have left and the rest will be gone within the watch. I have arranged for the civilians to travel in our train.”

Jubal nodded. “I’ll tell my officers to prepare for evacuation. What shall we do with the wounded who do not have families to move them?”

Shadock fixed Jubal with an expression of such undisguised hatred that Jubal took a step back. “You will tell your officers no such thing. You are the palace guard. You took an oath to protect this place. Are you an oath-breaker, Captain?”

The room had gone completely silent. They were all watching him. A cold hand clenched around Jubal’s throat. “We will cover your retreat, of course. After that—”

“After that, you will do your duty. Those are my orders, Captain. As for the wounded, I’m sure the civilians will take all they can carry.”

Jubal’s eyes flicked to the councilors behind their king. None of them would meet his. Jubal searched his king’s face. Shadock’s usual calm had closed over the flash of hatred, but a hint of smugness remained. *So, thought Jubal, this is your revenge. If I leave, I will be hanged for treason. If I stay, the swamp fauns will cut me down.* Jubal knew in a flash of intuition that Istra had not been told, that she was already well down the Triangle Road and would not know until she arrived in Laven-lay. *We’ll all be dead by then.*

Shadock was watching him keenly. *Does he want to hear me beg? Would that move him?*

Jubal spoke carefully. “Sire, my life is in your hands and always has been. If you order me to die here, I will not question you. But, I beg you, do not punish my subordinates for my sake! They have served you faithfully, and they do not deserve this.”



Jubal sank to one knee and reached for the hem of Shadock's robe, but Shadock jerked away. "Get up, soldier; you're a disgrace. Your subordinates took the same oath you did, and now you ask that in time of greatest crises they be allowed to foreswear it?"

"Only that they be allowed to live! Let them cover your retreat and then—"

"I've no time for this." Shadock walked back around the table and sat down. "You have your orders, Captain. You are dismissed."

The whole counsel was looking at him now, some leering openly.

"One more thing," murmured Shadock. "My youngest son has gone missing. Some fear he was cut down in the fighting. A pity."

*More than you know.* Jubal stood up, seething. A dozen poisonous remarks rose to his lips. The temptation to be reckless now was almost overpowering. With an enormous force of will, he walked wordlessly to the door and down the hall.

Jubal's heart sank as he saw one of his youngest subordinates running towards him—a faun of only eight years, his voice still high and lilting. "Sir, sir! We're evacuating! The civilians are collecting their wounded. There's talk of a secret tunnel! Is it true, sir?" Before Jubal could answer, he dashed on, "And Master Tavaris wants me to ask what shall we do with the dead? Shall we try to make a funeral pyre? What about the unclaimed wounded?"

Jubal looked at his tassel-haired charge, the youngster's blood and tear-streaked face now lit with hope. *How am I going to tell them?*

## Chapter 13. Reflections in a Glass

Most legends have a seed of truth.

--Lasa, "Travel in the Middle Kingdoms"

Corry woke to a gentle rocking. He could feel a rope cutting into his wrists, and his back ached from his hunched position. He saw that he was sitting in a cart with benches on either side. Leesha and Tolomy lay on the floor, bound and muzzled. Tolomy was still gory with blood, but Corry had no idea whether any of it was his own. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the cat shelt who had tried to help them. His hands were also tied. His long, black-furred tail rested on the bench between them.

"Who are you?" whispered Corry.

"Char," said the slave, and then, as though to answer Corry's question, "No one."

"Where are they taking us?"

"Silence." Two swamp faun guards came to life on the benches opposite. "Enjoy your last hours in an unbroken body *quietly*."

The wagon bounced over an uneven plank in the road, and Tolomy stirred. The swamp fauns watched him uneasily. *They're afraid of him*, thought Corry, *even now*.

Looking ahead, he saw another swamp faun in the driver's seat and two goats pulling. The goats were nearly as tall as deer, with delicately boned faces and long, spiraling horns. A fourth faun on goat-back rode in front.

*They will discover who we are, and then they'll want to know everything we can tell about Lexis, Capricia, and that flute.* Corry felt a lance of terror. He shifted position and felt a soft bump against his chest. *At least they haven't taken it yet.*

A darker thought lurked in the back of his mind. *Did Archemais betray us to the fauns? He certainly disappeared when things got ugly.*

*Can you blame him?* asked another voice. *He told you not to do anything rash. Leesha disregarded him. Why should he stay around to get killed?*

An enormous blue butterfly danced across the cart. It capered around their heads for a moment before tracing a shaft of sunlight upwards into the twisted branches. The light spun and fluttered with the butterfly's shadow, dappling the planks. The cart made a rhythmic creaking, the goats hooves a lazy clomp. Against all odds, Corry dozed.

One of the goats snorted, and Corry sat up straight. He heard a few muttered words from one of the fauns and saw that the Fealiday, Char, had begun to bristle beside him. Following their gaze, Corry saw a lone figure in the path ahead. The shape looked familiar. *Archemais.* Corry waited, anxiety building in him with every clomp of the goat's hooves. *Whose side are you on?*

Archemais showed no sign of flight, but neither did he hail the wagon. His body remained oddly still, though a breath of unsteady wind toyed with his garments. He was not wearing his cloak this time. The high-collared cape came up around his head. He'd pushed the edges of the cape back over his shoulders, leaving his weaponless arms plainly visible. He did not move, even when the lead faun stopped directly in front of him. The cart pulled up a few paces behind.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” asked the first faun.

“That depends on your intentions. Where are you taking these prisoners?”

The faun dismounted and drew his sword. “You’re on Anroth land for half a league and more. Answer my question: what are you doing here?”

Leesha was struggling to see what was happening, and Tolomy had sat up a little.

Archemais looked at the faun. “I don’t want to kill you. You’re nothing to me. Run away.”

At this, the two fauns in the wagon hopped down and drew their weapons. “You’re under arrest,” said the leader and reached out to clamp his hand around Archemais’s arm.

Archemais seemed to swell slightly, and the faun drew back. “Tell your superiors you met the swamp monster on the road. Tell them he killed your prisoners. Or find a better story. It matters naught to me; just go.”

For a moment, the faun hesitated. Then he seemed ashamed of himself and brought up his sword. “Hands behind your back, or I’ll have them off at the elbow!” He glanced at Archemais’s boots. “If you have paws under there, you’d better pray his grace is in a mood for quick killing.”

Archemais moved. Only his head turned—one lightening quick motion to give the swamp faun the full benefit of his stare. His mouth opened in a peculiar grimace, and Corry heard a sharp exhalation of air. His form shimmered. At that moment Corry remembered where he had seen the symbol on Archemais’s cape. It was the mark on the hood of a king cobra.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the palace had half-emptied, Jubal's anger had cooled, and for the first time in his life, he felt profoundly afraid. More than that, he felt guilty.

With the soldiers gone and the armed nobility departed, many poorer commoners chose to do some last minute looting. The palace guards scampered through the labyrinth of rooms, trying to stop shelts from prying ruby eyes out of statues, cutting swathes of rich fabric from tapestries, or even breaking into private apartments to rummage for jewelry. Some of the looters had swords and were not impressed by over-dressed, overfed guards.

*This is madness, thought Jubal. We're risking our lives to protect the property of the shelts who are abandoning us, property the swamp fauns will seize within the watch.* But he could not think what else to tell his subordinates to do, and the activity kept their minds off what was coming.

Jubal chased one street urchin into the Hall of the Kings and stopped there while the thief dashed away towards the royal library and the secret tunnel. *Like rats, he thought, leaving a sinking ship.*

He looked at himself in the vast mirror that ran the length of one wall. He was soiled with blood and sweat, pale with fatigue, dark half-moons under his eyes. On the opposite wall hung larger-than-life paintings of the kings of Danda-lay, all the way back to the time before the Wizards ruled in Selbis.

Jubal had difficulty meeting their eyes, even in the glass. *What have I done?*

He had made sacrifices for what he thought was right, and if other shelts believed ill of him, the Creator could judge between them. He knew what the soldiers would be saying to each other, “What did Jubal expect, making a cuckold of his king? He got what he had coming.”

*And maybe I did have it coming*, thought Jubal. He had always felt badly for Chance. He’d wanted to speak to him, but Istra had objected. “He’s so angry, Jubal. If you told him the truth, he would only fling it back in your teeth. He would destroy everything we’ve built.”

“Shadock has made his life a misery for my sake,” Jubal had said. “I might at least explain why—”

But she only shook her head. “Chance’s problem is half his own and half his father’s. He must resolve at least his end of it before he will make a reasonable ally.” Her steely eyes had softened for a moment. “I’ve raised eight children, but only my youngest hates me.” Those words had stung, but even then Jubal had told himself it was Shadock’s fault, Shadock’s cruelty.

*But whose fault is it that a hundred innocent palace guards are going to die today?* Jubal ran over them in his mind—a hundred and ten, all told, but eight had been wounded and one was dead. Two kinds of shelts entered the palace guard—old soldiers and young commoners. For the commoners, the guard represented an opportunity to enter the regular army as an officer—five years, and they might put on their blue cap with the sons of nobles. The old soldiers had many reasons for joining the guard, ranging from quarrels with their peers to senility.

Everyone had assumed when Jubal entered the guard that he intended to do his usual five years and then move into the army. After the rumors began about him and the queen, everyone assumed he’d stayed to be with his mistress. Istra had promoted him quickly, and he was not

without real merit. Jubal cared about his subordinates, and they returned his care with their own versions of affection.

*I brought this on them.* Until now, Chance was the only casualty he'd ever counted, the only person whose situation had ever troubled his sleep at night. Now he had over a hundred, and they were friends. *Does anything I've accomplished justify this?*

*We could leave,* he thought. *I could take them all into the woods. We could become outlaws. I have friends who would help.*

Folly, sneered some other part of his mind. He thought of Fat Minston trying to eke out a living in the wilderness, of Leil, who loved jeweled armor and had never been outside the city in his life, of Old Rat-Face Nil who was so forgetful that he had to be reminded a dozen times a day what door he was guarding, of little Olly, who's grandmother was always coming up to the guard house to check on him.

*They would all be rounded up and hanged as deserters. I might survive, but only if I abandoned them. Shadock knew that, too. He knew they would be a tether to me, a chain that would keep me here to die.*

Jubal saw a brightness out of the corner of his eye and turned towards it. In the center of the hall a stood a smallish Monument, only about waist high. It was very old, made of some black metal. The workmanship was crude by the standards of modern Danda-lay, but Monuments were rarely taken down. Looking at it now in the mirror, Jubal was surprised to see it aflame. Monuments often housed a candle or lamp or even a mechanism to bathe them in fire, but he'd never seen this one lit. He turned away from the reflection towards the real thing.

No fire.

Jubal blinked. He looked back in the mirror and saw the wings dark and still. Slowly, Jubal crossed the room to the monument. He put his hand on it. Warm. The metal was warm!

*It must have an oil well in the base.* But a quick inspection showed only a very simple Monument. Jubal looked at the black wings as though for the first time. It represented the two aspects of the Creator—the feather and the flame, mercy and justice, protection and vengeance, shield and sword. He’d heard the words a thousand times, but for some reason the Monuments’ brooding wings had always impressed him more than the little candle flames. Even the expensive Monuments bathed in flame had seemed to him only an image of wings softened by fire—a comfort for mothers and children and soldiers far from their families.

*I am grown stupid with desperation,* thought Jubal, but he put his hands on the warm metal and whispered, “Oh Protector of my city, innocent children and old shelts will die today because of me. I want to save them, but Shadock has ordered me to defend this place.”

And Jubal could have sworn he heard a voice speak clearly in his ear, “Then defend it.”

#### Chapter 14. Smoke and Mirrors

The best way may be the easiest, but not always the obvious.

--Archemais, private reflections

Jubal’s hooves beat a furious tattoo against the stone as he ran. *How long until they realize we have no archers in the towers?*



He spotted Olly and Tat at the end of a hallway and shouted for them. The two youngsters came, both talking at once. Jubal silenced them with an impatient gesture. “Do you know where to find Tavaris?”

Olly’s head bobbed. “Yes, sir, but a faun just tried to take—”

“Never mind what he tried to take. Run tell Tavaris to leave off chasing looters. He’s to report to me at once, along with Margo, Merion, and Elsa. I want everyone else to start collecting tables, chairs, statues, any furniture they can carry. Bring it all to the plaza in front of the basin.”

Olly stared. “Furniture, sir?”

“Yes.” Jubal turned to Tat. He bent so that he was at eyelevel with the ten-year-old. “I have a job for you, Tat—you and Jonsyl and Patter and Owyn and all the rest who aren’t wearing breastplates yet. I need you to tell them.” Jubal reached into the leather satchel at his waist and brought out a stack of broken pieces of mirror.

Tat and Olly watched with round eyes. “What do you want us to do, sir?”

“I want you to be my archers,” said Jubal. “These are your arrows.”

\* \* \* \*

Sharon-zool stared from a rooftop across the smoking city of Danda-lay. “So the proud come to ruin,” she murmured. Three hundred years ago, her grandfather’s grandfathers had bent the knee to Danda-lay and submitted to an ignominious occupation—their punishment for siding with Gabalon in the Wizard wars. In all the years since, the swamp fauns had never quite regained their previous status. Until today.

Sharon-zool frowned. At the highest pinnacle of the city she saw a flag that must have been enormous to look so clear from this distance. A strong gust opened it full length, radiant against the pearl-gray cliff: royal purple, with a white flower. The zool of Kazar turned to a messenger. “Go find out why that flag is still flying. Take it down and burn it.”

\* \* \* \*

Tavaris of Danda-lay was the bastard son of Shadock’s grandfather. He had been the captain of the palace guard for decades, but he did not seem to resent Jubal’s ascendancy. More than ninety summers had come and gone since Tavaris first looked on the world, but like a small number of fortunate shelts, he seemed to have stopped aging at sixty. He was small and wiry, with hair gone glossy white. Even now, he was more than competent with a sword, but his vision was failing, and this was the reason given for his re-appointment (none dared call it demotion) to lieutenant of the guard.

Within the castle, no one would have guessed that Tavaris’s eyes were dim. He had been intimately acquainted with those stone corridors when Shadock was still a babe in arms. Some even hinted that he had known of the secret escape tunnel and only arranged for its “discovery” when he smelled trouble on the wind.

Jubal owed much of his easy ascent to Tavaris’s goodwill. The other members of the guard revered the old sage and followed his cues, and Jubal was not too proud to ask for help when he needed it. Jubal loved and valued the old shelt. He also feared him. He’d even considered killing him once, though it shamed him to remember. Tavaris was the only shelt who’d expressed open doubt when the rumors began to circulate about Jubal’s affair with the

queen. Once, in a crowded tavern, he'd come to Jubal's aid during a denial and argued so convincingly that Jubal had been forced into the awkward position of retreating from an apparent victory. *There's nothing like a heated denial to convince shelts that rumors are true*, Istra had told him, and she'd been right, except when the denial came from Tavaris.

For a couple of days, Jubal had thought Tavaris might wreck everything, but then suddenly, he had stopped. Jubal was unsure to this day whether he had convinced the old shelt or whether Tavaris knew more than he ought.

Spotting his flashing white head in the courtyard, Jubal knew at once that Olly had found him and that Tavaris had guessed Jubal's intent. Already, a ragged line of wagons and furniture stretched across the narrowest point of the palace crescent, before the waterfall and just his side of the flood tunnels. A half dozen of the largest guards were struggling with a marble statue of a ram, dragging it towards the nascent barricade, while smaller guards scurried back and forth with tables, dressers, colonnades, and shelt-sized pots overflowing with greenery.

Tavaris had also located two of the three shelts Jubal had requested—Elsa and Merion. Elsa was something of a novelty. Unlike the wood fauns, the cliff faun army did not admit females, and Elsa would never have been permitted even in the guard, had she not come from a wealthy noble family. She was no beauty, but her arrows could find the heart of a hummingbird on the wing. The army would have snapped her up years ago, had she not been female. As for Margo, he was an old army archer, bent, but still able. Merion was a sour drunk, but even in his cups, he could rival Elsa with a bow.

Tavaris turned as Jubal approached. He had a glint in his gray eyes that lifted Jubal's spirits. "Tavar, I see you've been reading my mind again."

Tavaris bowed. "There's a problem with the archers, though." He had a soft voice, and they were standing too close to the waterfall. Jubal had to strain to hear him.

Elsa spoke up. "Shadock's taken all the arrows!" she said in a full battlefield bellow.

Jubal nodded. Supplies had been a problem from the beginning. Much of the military equipment had been kept in Port Ory and the swamp fauns had had plenty of time during the festival to discover where the Danda-lay's few stores lay. Those buildings had been fired or captured early. Jubal doubted that Shadock had actually taken the arrows out of malice. He probably needed them. *Not that he wouldn't have taken them from us in any case.*

"What do we have?" he asked.

Elsa shrugged. "Merion is searching, but probably just our personal supplies."

"And that is?"

"I've got about three dozen, and supplies for fletching maybe fifty more."

Jubal tried not to grimace. "And you?" He looked at Margo.

"Perhaps twenty. Merion is about the same."

Jubal took a deep breath. It was no worse than he had expected. "Is Merion drunk yet?"

Elsa grinned. "I pulled him out of the kitchens a quarter watch ago. I don't suppose he drained more than half a brown barrel."

Jubal nodded. That was sober by Merion's standards. "Alright, then." He opened a leather satchel and pulled out a handful of jagged bits of broken mirror. Jubal handed each of his

confused archers a palm-sized piece. “Margo, I want you in the Winged tower, Elsa in the Ram, Marrion in the Ewe. Shoot any swamp faun or lizard rider who steps into the plaza, exactly as the military arches were doing. Elsa, you take the first shelt, Merion will taken second, Margo, third. If more than three come, don’t shoot. Let us handle them on the ground.”

Margo was turning the broken mirror over in his hand. “What’s this for?”

Jubal smiled. “What’s usually your first clue that an enemy sharpshooter is taking aim?”

Elsa grinned. “The light off the arrow head.”

Jubal nodded. “We can’t hold the swamp fauns with arrows. Not even Shaddock’s army could have done that if the enemy had massed and charged. But Shaddock’s army could keep them from venturing into the plaza without rallying their full force, and we must convince them that we *are* Shaddock’s army for as long as we can. I’ve already sent the youngsters into the other towers with bits of broken glass. The sun is moving down the sky, and the light will be shining in our windows. Flash those mirrors often. I want them to think the windows are full of archers.”

Jubal could feel Tavar’s eyes on him as Elsa and Margo hurried away to find Merion. “It occurs to me,” said the old shelt, “that Shaddock may been wiser than he knew.”

Jubal glanced at him. “How so?”

The cool gray eyes glittered as brightly as the glass in Jubal’s hands. “If *I* had to choose a shelt to hold Danda-lay with nothing more than smoke and mirrors, I’d choose you every time.”

\* \* \* \*

Sharon-zool did not wait for the messenger to complete his duty. She had a bad feeling about that flag. A view from the head of main street confirmed her suspicions. Beyond the

enormous Monument, at the narrowest point in the palace crescent, the cliff fauns were throwing up a barricade with feverish speed.

Sharon-zool selected one of the tall mansion homes on the main street and climbed to its balcony for a better look. While her attendants were clearing away the bodies and straightening the rooms, she studied this latest piece of cliff faun defiance. The barricade seemed pitiful enough. She doubted it was the work of calculated generalship. More like, it had gone up spontaneously, as so many street barricades during the night. And like those smaller barricades, her solders would swarm over this one like ants over a dying butterfly.

A wink of light caught Sharon's eye and she turned her attention to the towers. There were three of great height, and dozens only slightly lower. She had been told earlier that archers in those towers were making the plaza perilous to cross, and she'd told her troops to avoid it. "Let Shadock and his brats guard their soft royal underbellies. It's his army I want dead."

She wondered if she'd made a mistake there. The palace was the most defensible point in the city, and the remnants of Shadock's army were surely in there now. She turned to a handful of runners. "Take this message to my officers: we will mass for an attack on the palace. Stay out of arrow range until I give the signal." Four runners scattered for the stairs. Sharon turned to those who remained. "You will tell Rquar in Port Ory to send down another hundred mounted soldiers. You'll have to cross the plaza; take shields. Two of you go."

\* \* \* \*

Jubal saw the riders galloping for the entrances to the dry flood tunnels. Elsa's arrow took one rider between the shoulder blades, but the next two arrows thunked harmlessly into the second rider's wooden shield, and he vanished up the dark passage to Port Ory.

*Those were messengers.* Jubal considered. Shaddock's officers had not deigned to consult with the palace guard about their estimates of Sharon-zool's strength. Jubal doubted they had an accurate idea in any case. The swamp fauns had never been easy to count in their own territory, and last night in the dark, fighting street to street, the estimates were unlikely to be much more accurate. Then there were the lizard riders to consider. Had Sharon-zool employed only a small group of them to breach the flood tunnels, or did they form a large contingent of her army?

Jubal tried to remember everything he'd ever heard about alligator shelts. There wasn't much. They were half-savage creatures, lawless and wild, incapable of organizing under one rulership. The clans fought over territory and showed little interest in the rest of a Panamindorah. Individuals ventured out of their swamps occasionally to trade or attend festivals, but this Lupricasia had seen more of them than ever before. *Foolish of us not to have seen a warning in that,* thought Jubal. *We should have seen many warnings.*

He wondered where Daren was. The Queen's consort had attended Lupricasia without fail for years and regularly won the sword contests. He had a habit of "accidentally" killing competitors and making jokes about it after. *He was probably organizing the queen's troops in Kazar while we feasted, and now he's probably in Port Ory—he or that cousin of his, Rquar.* Rquar was sullen where Daren was flamboyant, but they were equally dangerous.

Jubal wondered how many Sharon-zool had lost in taking the city. Even with her advantage in surprise and numbers, the taking of Danda-lay would not have been bloodless for the swamp fauns. *And they haven't brought in more troops since that first rush*, he realized.

Jubal realized something else, too. If Sharon-zool was to hold Danda-lay, she must keep Port Ory, and Port Ory was weak. It had been weak when she took it, and it would be weaker still with its few defenses damaged. *She must have left a sizeable portion of her army above.*

*Reinforcements*, Jubal decided. *That's the message she just sent.* He looked at the flood tunnel again. "Tavar, what do you think: can lizard riders swim upstream?"

Tavaris had a grin like a mischievous child. "Let's find out."

Jubal watched him select four strong guards from among those hauling materials for the barricade and then start for the palace and the deep room beneath the rock of the cliff. Jubal wondered how long the lizard riders had searched for that room when they crept dripping from the pool. *Now they're going to wish they'd held onto it.*

Soon the winch would turn, and the flood tunnels would roar again. The water would make problems for their barricade where it lay athwart the channels, but Jubal suspected it would make more problems for Sharon-zool. *In all the city, the one point she does not own was the key to the door she came in by. She'll be as trapped as we are.*

\* \* \* \*

Syrill watched his shadow weave, changing into grotesque shapes with the ripples in the sand. Sometimes Lexis trotted beside him, sometimes far ahead. In the beginning, Syrill had watched the horizon, but more and more, he only watched his feet. He knew he was lagging.



Sometimes he looked up to find he'd begun to angle in the wrong direction, and twice he tripped coming down a dune and got a noseful of sand.

Syrill glanced over his shoulder. Not so far away, a cloud rose from the desert. Now that it was closer, he could see things flashing in it. At least the sun was at his back now; all morning it had been in his eyes. Of course, it had been in *their* eyes too. *Can they see us yet?*

He looked ahead for Lexis and didn't see him. Syrill slowed, then stopped. How long since he'd last looked for the tiger? *Has he left me?*

Something pushed between his legs from behind. Syrill would have cried out, but his dry throat gave only a strangled croak. He nearly tipped over backwards before his grasping hands found white fur. Then the wind was in his face, and he was leaning forward. Lexis shrugged him into place behind his shoulder blades, his long legs opening out in a full run.

"You're not—" rasped Syrill. "I'm not—"

"Heavy," finished Lexis. "We've walked long enough, general. Now we run."

## Chapter 15. Arrivals Unannounced

I felt like a starving shelt who has been trying to scrape together enough salt cakes for a pasty, when all the while he has a speckled cowry forgotten in his jacket pocket.

--Diary Jubal of Undrun

By later afternoon the barricade had risen to nearly twice the height of a shelt, and Jubal had stopped work on it, setting all his heavier guards on the dams and all the less muscular to scavenging for breakables. Jubal inspected the latest offerings from his foragers—several basketfuls of pottery and three large painted vases. All the remaining crystal in the palace had

already been collected—its exquisitely cut panels throwing rainbow shadows against the hodgepodge of the barricade. Jubal glanced at the sun. *Tavar, what is taking you so long?*

Through a chink in the barricade, Jubal kept an eye on the plaza. It looked more like a lake now—reflecting the molten gold of the setting sun. He'd dammed the flood channels just his side of the barricade, sending a shallow, but swift sheet of water over the stone paving of the plaza. The channels went under the barricade, forming a breach in his line, but Jubal had chosen this arrangement for a reason: whatever he poured into the water would diffuse rapidly across the whole plaza, and the swamp fauns could not see what was done.

Jubal watched his enemies watching his hiding place. *These fauns have been up all night, he reminded himself, pillaging and fighting. They're tired, and now they see the water.* The sun's rays grew lower every minute. Soon they would be directly in his eyes. *That's when they'll attack.* He judged they outnumbered the defenders anywhere from six to ten to one. A few flights of arrows had already come across the barricade, but with so few defenders to hit, they'd done no damage.

*She still thinks there are hundreds of us. She'll wait until she has her whole strength, then fire a heavy volley before storming our wall.* He'd ordered crude shelters erected against the deluge of arrows.

"Jubal."

He turned with relief at Tavaris's voice.

Tavaris sounded excited. "I've found another weapon—something I should have thought of in the beginning. We're not as outnumbered as we—"

A roar from across the barricade. Jubal turned to see a wave of fauns on foot, their cries swelling as they came. He heard the hiss as hundreds of bowstrings let fly their shafts. Tavaris turned and ran to his battle station on the opposite side of the barricade.

Jubal's fauns at the tops of the ladders were already dumping their loads as they'd been ordered. The basketfuls of glass clattered down onto the barricade. Some of the crystal made a high keening sound as it shattered. The fauns by the dams dumped their baskets and barrels into the water. The glass glittered as it fell—beaten as fine as Jubal could make it. The water spew it swiftly across the plaza.

Arrows were clattering down everywhere now. Tavaris's foragers scampered into the pavilion around the dam, hauling their sloshing tubs of filth. The palace had a complicated sewage system, and Tavaris had had to trek down into the labyrinth beneath to find any accumulation of refuse. Yet find it, he obviously had. Jubal could smell the reek on the intermittent gusts of breeze. The brown sludge followed the glass into the glittering water.

Then Jubal had no more time to watch. The first of the attackers were swarming up the wall, cursing as they cut themselves on broken glass. Jubal gave one last frantic gesture to the fauns around the dam and then turned to defend the barricade. He thrust his spear through his peep hole and felt it sink into flesh. His satisfaction was short-lived, as the faun on the other side roared with pain and wrenched away, taking the spear with him.

*The oil*, Jubal realized. *I must still have it on my hands*. He looked up just in time to see the shadow of a swamp faun leap from the wall onto the shelter over his head. Jubal wiped out his sword and thrust it into the faun's back as he leapt off the rickety shelter. He caught sight of

his fauns around the water emptying the last of the barrels. The liquid flowed as smooth as silk and dark as honey—the last lamp oil in the palace. *We've had the mirrors*, thought Jubal. *Now for the smoke*. A palace guard picked up one of the torches and flung it into the stream. The water swallowed the torch, and it was gone.

Jubal's heart dropped into his stomach.

Desperately, the guards hurled in another firebrand and then another, but the last of the oil had swirled away. There was nothing for the fire to catch. *I should have made little fire boats*, Jubal realized. *But it's too late. Too late*.

The swamp fauns were pouring over the wall now. They seemed confused by the lack of resistance, but were making short work of what little they found. One of the youngsters by the water seized a firebrand and ran towards the wall.

*Olly! What's he doing here? I told him to stay in a tower*.

Jubal saw two swamp fauns swing their swords at him, but he dodged. He reached the barricade and dashed up a rickety ladder. Jubal saw him fling his firebrand out over the sea of swamp fauns. Then an arrow took him in the chest, and he toppled backwards in a limp sprawl.

Jubal took a step towards the child. Then he heard a soft *whoosh!* Light and heat exploded beyond the barricade.

\* \* \* \*

Meuril stood in his daughter's study as the sun set on a troubled day. His court was at supper, but he had not taken his meals with them since he returned to Laven-lay. In truth, he had

taken little food. Meuril scanned the books that lined Capricia's shelves—books about history, about wizards, books in languages he could not read.

*Where did I fail her?* He pushed a strand of nearly-white hair from his eyes. *Be honest, Meuril; where did you not fail her?*

She had never called him father except upon the most formal of occasions. In public, he was “your majesty,” and in private, he was Meuril. *Who decided that?* He couldn't remember. *I pushed her away when her mother died. I knew I was doing it, and I didn't try to stop. I felt guilty about the wolflings. Is that why I did it? Did I punish my daughter for my own crimes?*

He had seen their faces night after night in his dreams—the faces of all those who had died that bloody fall—his wife, Natalia, as well as Malic, the wolfling king, his family and so many others. Strangely, in his dreams it was not the wolflings who killed and devoured Natalia. It was Demitri and his cats.

*Malic begged for my help before the end. I would have given it, even against Shaddock's wishes, but not after what they did to Nattie. Why does she accuse me in my dreams?*

Meuril drew in a deep breath. The room still smelled like his daughter—mingled odors of lilac perfume and tea, old books and ink and leather. He leaned on her desk and let the tears fall—silent sobs that wracked his thin body. He raised his head at a furious pounding on the door. A muffled voice shouted, “Your majesty! King Meuril!”

Meuril straightened and wiped his eyes. “Enter.”

The door flew open, and two guards stood panting on the threshold. Meuril noticed with alarm that they were wall guards, dressed for duty. “Sir, you're needed at the Wizard's Gate.”

“Wolflings,” panted the other guard, “fighting with swamp fauns. They came in where we’re making repairs to the gate. We think it’s the Raiders, sir.”

\* \* \* \*

The next thing Jubal saw clearly was Tavaris’s blood-streaked face. The old shelt stood over him. Jubal realized that he was sitting on the ground, holding something warm and limp, something dead. Tavaris was trying to talk to him, but the whole world seemed full of noise.

The old guard reached down and made Jubal let go of Olly’s head. It flopped bonelessly towards the pavement, blonde curls trailing crimson across Jubal’s arm. Tavaris leaned close and shouted in his ear. “We must retreat! Too many already over the wall! Follow me!”

Jubal’s vision cleared a little, and he saw Tavaris had half a dozen of the larger guards with him. Several of them helped pull Jubal to his feet. They made him leave Olly’s body at the foot of the barricade, put a sword in his hand, and started towards the palace.

Swamp fauns contested them most of the way, although they seemed uncertain, demoralized by the fire and the screams from the other side of the barricade. They still outnumbered the cliff fauns, but were not pressing their advantage nearly as effectively as they had...a moment before? Could it really have been only a moment?

As the cliff fauns crossed the plaza, they picked up more of the guards who had survived the storming of the barricade. At last they reached one of the entrances to the palace, now with a force of perhaps twenty. Jubal had expected Tavaris to stop in some narrow entrance where one or two fauns might hold off many hundred. The flaw to such a plan was, of course, that the palace had too many entrances, too many routes by which the defenders could be flanked.

Tavaris had apparently no such plan. He kept going deeper into the palace. Most of the swamp fauns seemed unwilling to follow them beyond the plaza, and as soon as they'd left the last enemy behind, Tavaris led at a full run towards the tunnels that burrowed into the stone beneath the cliff. He was heading, in fact, for the dungeons.

Jubal saw the logic in this at once. The dungeons had only one entrance that he knew of, and that entrance was infinitely defensible. Jubal could, however, foresee one big problem.

When Tavaris stopped to unlock the heavy metal doors, Jubal spoke. "I think," he panted, "we may have time to get supplies. If we trap ourselves with no food or water—"

"We're not trapping ourselves." Tavaris flung open the door.

Jubal stepped back at the nauseating stench. The dungeons had never smelled pleasant, but he didn't remember an odor quite like this. Tavaris fumbled for the torch and lighter that always hung on the wall beside the door. Jubal heard noises out of the darkness and racked his brain to remember how many prisoners were down here. He couldn't think of more than a handful—dissonants who'd threatened to disrupt Lupricasia. They were all more-or-less mad, and he felt certain they were not what Tavaris would call reinforcements. The air in the dungeon seemed hotter than usual, aggravating the stench.

The torch flared, and the cages that lined either side of the wide path bloomed with reflected green and gold and silver eyes. Somewhere in the darkness, something growled and then came a noise like a child weeping. The hair on Jubal's ears prickled.

"Cats." Tavaris shoved the torch into Jubal's hand and took out his keys again. "Shaddock had every cat at Lupricasia rounded up and put in the dungeons when Capricia disappeared."

Jubal could have kicked himself. He'd forgotten entirely. Everyone had, including those that were supposed to feed and water the prisoners. As he followed Tavaris down the isle, he saw that some of the cats looked weak and ill, packed into the cages so tightly they could hardly turn around. Most only looked angry and ravenous, their eyes following the fauns. Some reached through and tried to slap at Jubal as he passed, their paws filthy with the excrement that had piled up in the cages. The dungeons had not, thankfully, been designed by idiots, and the paws could not quite reach him. "We're thirsty," rose their cry. "Thirsty! Hungry! Thirsty! Hungry!"

Tavaris stopped beside one cage and raised his torch high. A lynx sat in the middle of the floor. He'd been caged alone. "Loop?"

The lynx made not a sound. His exquisitely lined eyes, pretty as a painted satyr, gave nothing away.

Tavaris continued, "You were the only one of Lexis's officers taken during the arrests. May I assume that you speak for all the cats here?"

Nothing. Just those glittering eyes.

Tavaris unlocked the cage. "I'm coming in."

Jubal grabbed Tavaris's arm. "I don't think that's a good—"

Tavaris shook him off. "How else are we to show good will? There's no time to do this slowly. Besides, we were eating and drinking with them a few days ago. Surely I can trust one to have a civil conversation without tearing me apart."

"That was before—" said Jubal.



“Before we arrested them on the dubious evidence, packed them away in squalid conditions, and left them to starve. Let us hope they have a better sense of honor than we do.” Still, Jubal kept his grip on Tavaris’s arm. “They’re not wolflings,” said Tavaris quietly, “so they don’t deserve justice from us; is that it?”

Jubal released him as though stung, acutely aware of the puzzled gazes of his subordinates. The guards were strung out in an awkward line between the cages, staring uneasily at the cats and at Tavaris and Jubal.

“Who are you?” The lynx had come to the bars so quietly that neither shelt had heard him.

“We’re palace guards,” said Tavaris. “Danda-lay has been all but taken by the swamp fauns. We believe they kidnapped Capricia to cause confusion and remove the cats from the battle. Shadock and his court have fled with the army and the citizenry. We were left to defend the palace.”

Tavaris pushed open the door of the cage and crouched on his haunches. The lynx came forward and sniffed his face. Jubal’s knuckles whitened around his sword hilt, but he did not draw. Loop looked them over critically. “How many of you are there?”

“Maybe twenty,” said Tavaris.

The lynx considered. “And I assume there are a great many more of the...enemy?”

Tavaris nodded.

The lynx looked at the rows of feline faces, their ears pricked forward. The dungeon had gone absolutely silent. “Well...” murmured Loop. “Twenty is hardly a meal for so many.”

He glanced at Jubal's stunned face, and his teeth flashed in the torchlight. "A joke, little hornfoot. Forgive me; hunger makes me crude. Yes, we'll fight for you. I'd advise you stay down here while we're at it. Some of us can be undiscerning when hungry."

## Chapter 16. At the End of the Race

At the end of every race lies the beginning of another.

--Wolfling proverb

Loop wanted to give the swamp fauns a chance to get well into the palace before attacking, and Jubal wanted to give any surviving cliff fauns a chance to reach safety. To this end, Loop sent out several swift cats to search covertly for cliff fauns. Throughout the next half watch, a trickle of exhausted guards staggered into the dungeon. Jubal's archers were the only adults who came uninjured. Most of his children returned from their towers, and there were a handful of wounded from the fight in the plaza. When the last of Loop's searchers returned, Jubal counted forty-eight known dead, thirty-five in the dungeon, and twenty-six still missing.

The cats gave ever-increasing news of swamp fauns swarming through the palace. Dogs had been seen, and it was only a matter of time before they tracked the cliff fauns to their hiding place. At last, Jubal agreed that they had searched long enough, and several hundred eager predators bounded out the door. The palace guards of Danda-lay shut themselves in the dungeon, sat among piles of cat excrement, and counted themselves lucky as outside the screams began.

\* \* \* \*

Laven-lay's castle sat closest to the southern wall of the city, and only a narrow grassy strip separated it from the east gate—the Wizard's Gate. The ancient road that had once crossed that green sward had long ago disappeared, but the gate was the largest and most beautiful in Laven-lay, and king after king had let it stand—massive doors of ironwood, banded with metal wrought in fabulous shapes of dragons and griffins and creatures of flame.

This was the spot the Raiders had chosen to blast as a distraction during Sham's hanging. They had left several gaping holes, and Meuril had decided the gate represented too much of a risk to maintain. He had ordered it removed and walled over, but the job had taken considerable effort, and the masons had yet to finish when all worked ceased for Lupricasia. Upon his return, with war on the horizon, Meuril had ordered the task renewed. The masons had made a mighty effort. Only a half dozen holes remained, though one could still ride a buck through the largest.

Now swamp fauns poured through the gaps and over the grass, driving before them a handful of wolves and wolflings. The old stones reverberated to the clash of their swords and the snarling of desperate wolves. Far above the melee, two figures were fighting furiously on the parapet of the city wall—one dressed in tattered black, the other in pale blue.

Meuril squinted. "Is that who I think it is?"

\* \* \* \*

Fenrah dared not take her eyes from the sword. She almost forgot Daren behind it. She knew she should be watching him, but right now she could barely keep ahead of his blade—its jaws always questing after her own. Her ears registered the agonized snarling of a wounded wolf, the shriek of steal on steal. She even imagined she could hear beneath it all the ragged breathing of wolflings too exhausted to call to each other—the failing heartbeat of her pack. She wanted to look around—wanted and feared to see who lived and who was bleeding out on Meuril's bright lawn. But if she looked around, she would die and lose all chance of helping them. Daren's blade whispered around her head, past her shoulder, beyond her throat, a hair's breadth from her belly—the sword filled her world.

Fenrah tried to remember how she'd gotten onto the wall. Daren had driven them so hard towards the end. The choice had been to put their backs against Laven-lay or face the mounted fauns in the wood. She wasn't sure she'd made the right decision, wasn't sure there had been a right decision. Her luck had deserted her when they came to the wall and found it full of holes. The swamp fauns flushed them through like rabbits through a ruined thicket. Then a goat kicked Dance so hard he stumbled. She fell, and Daren was on her. He pushed her up the first steps they came to—up and up the wall, away from her pack, stumbling, nearly falling, gaining her balance and losing it and gaining it again. If he hadn't broken her arm in Selbis, she might have been a match for him. At the least she might have made him bleed, but fighting left-handed with her broken arm still bound against her side, it was all Fenrah could do to stay alive.

The small size of her weapon helped. The huge dagger was shorter than traditional swords, and did not offer Daren the leverage he needed to twist it from her grasp. Still, he'd managed to separate her from her pack if not from her weapon. *This is how it ends. Alone.*

Fenrah was dimly aware that she must look a ridiculously easy target for the wood faun archers and wondered why they hadn't fired. *Maybe they're afraid of hitting Daren.*

Somewhere on the ground, she heard Dance howl. The sound tore at her. *Got to get down there.* She made an abrupt offensive, caught Daren slightly off balance, and gained the head of the stairs. Fenrah risked turning her back on him and bounded down the steps, expecting any moment to feel his sword between her shoulder blades. She jumped over the edge a dozen steps from the ground and heard him curse as his blade cleaved the air above her.

Her eyes swept the field—knots of fighting wolflings and snarling wolves. A few dead fauns and dogs. A dead wolf, but she could see no dead wolflings. Turning towards Dance's terrible howls, she saw that a group of fauns and dogs had him at bay against the city wall. He had an arm's length of broken spear protruding from his chest, yet he fought on. Fenrah started towards him, but her momentary respite had ended, and she had to turn and defend herself as Daren drove her with teeth-jarring blows towards the castle wall.

*He expects the wood fauns to intervene*, thought Fenrah. *Why haven't they?* During her brief glimpse of the field, she was certain she'd seen a mass of spectators on the castle parapet.

Closer and closer to the castle wall, and still no arrows. And then he finally broke her guard—a blow meant for her chest, but in parrying, she caught it across her good arm. Daren swatted Gabalon's dagger from her grasp and stepped on it. Fenrah barred her teeth at him, bloody hand clenched, but before he could deliver the killing stroke, Sham jumped between them. Fenrah had not seen him coming, and for a moment all she could think of was relief that he was still alive.

Daren did not miss a beat. He rained blows on Sham, driving him backwards so fast that he nearly ran into Fenrah. Sham retaliated with all the strength he could muster, he was outmatched and exhausted.

*Got to get my weapon back*. Daren seemed to read her thoughts. He could not bend to pick up the dagger, but he was staying near it. That helped Sham a little. Fenrah circled them, waiting for a chance.

She never got it. All once, Sham's sword slipped through the opening in Daren's and went spinning away. Fenrah saw it's track of flight and despaired. *I can't get it in time; I can't get my dagger. Daren will kill us.*

“STOP!”

The voice came while Sham's sword was still in the air. It came through a speaking cone from the wall. “STAND STILL OR YOU WILL BE SHOT!” As though to emphasize this, one of the running swamp fauns dropped with an arrow in his chest.

Daren stood still, his sword within killing distance of Sham's head. Keeping them in her peripheral vision, Fenrah turned her gaze up towards the wall. Blinking hard against a trickle of stinging sweat, she saw a crowd of fauns, some in courtly dress, a line of archers, a slight figure who could only be Meuril, and beside him, a large faun with a booming voice and the speaking cone. He continued, “YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. SUBMIT QUIETLY, OR BE SHOT.”

The field quieted a little. Knots of fighters hesitated. Daren was the first to recover. Still holding Sham at sword point, he made an elaborate bow to Meuril. Fenrah had to admire his stamina. They were all panting, but Daren mastered his voice enough to sound almost untroubled. “King Meuril! I bring greetings from Kazar. Have you any news of your daughter? I was disturbed to hear that she is missing.”

Meuril said nothing. Daren drew another deep breath and continued. “Upon returning home, our noble queen sent me with search parties to help look for Capricia. Sadly, we have not found the princess, but we did find these outlaws whom I believe have been bountied in your city for a number of years.”

He paused, glanced at Sham, and went on in a nastier voice, “Queens of Laven-lay have met with ill luck among wolflings before. I am sorry to report that my searchers found the remains of half-eaten fauns in the Raider camp. One or two of them may have been female.”

Fenrah shut her eyes. *It’s happening again. And there’s nothing I can do; nothing. Fauns will believe anything about us. They don’t need proof.*

A hollow laugh cut him short. Fenrah opened her eyes. Two more persons had stepped into view beside Meuril. Fenrah glanced at Daren and had the satisfaction of seeing some of the color leave his face. She reflected that if she had to die, the conditions had at least become more palatable. Chance and Laylan were not only alive; they had beaten Daren to Laven-lay.

Meuril spoke at last. “There seems to be some debate over what you found in the outlaw’s den and what you did about it.” The shelt with the speaking cone echoed the words, but Fenrah, Sham, and Daren were close enough to hear the disgust in Meuril’s voice. “You are called to answer for some half dozen crimes and to explain certain allegations regarding a possible state of war between—”

As Meuril began his second sentence, Daren had slowly sheathed his sword, and Sham had relaxed a little. Then Daren sprang. Swordless, his attack caught Sham by surprise. Fenrah took the opportunity to dive for her dagger, but she was mistaken about Daren’s intent. He was not attacking. Rather, as the archers on the parapet loosed their shafts, Daren held the wolfling’s body before him like a shield.

\* \* \* \*



The night had been fully dark for some time when at last Corry plunged into the stream that would take him beneath the wall of thorns, into Archemais's...den? Lair? Was that what he should call the lawn and gardens and pleasant little house within the hill?

Corry could not get the images of the falling bodies out of his mind—the way the first faun had dropped as though unhinged at the knees, a faintly startled expression on his face, two red holes in his brow. The others took a few seconds longer to die, twisting on the plank road.

Char was carrying Leesha over his shoulders like a lamb—white in the dimness. *She is a sort of lamb, in truth*, thought Corry, *and then there's the other*. Tolomy had not needed carrying. He stalked ahead of Archemais, only returning now and again to see how his sister was fairing.

Archemais did not hold his cobra's shape for longer than it took to kill the guards. Even so, the goats were so frightened they would have bolted along with the cart if Char hadn't leapt forward and controlled them by brute force. Archemais left the bodies on the road. "What will the fauns make of them?" asked Char as they started into the swamp.

"Rumors," said Archemais. He seemed in a hurry and asked Tolomy once if he thought he could take them back to the wall of thorns alone. After some consideration, Tolomy said no, he would need Leesha's help, and she was too ill from strangling. He said this with an accusatory tone that impressed Corry. Anyone willing to quarrel with Archemais after watching him kill four shelts in under five seconds had more audacity than Corellian. But Archemais answered quietly, and they were walking too far ahead for Corry to hear what he said.

At the wall of thorns he turned and handed Corry something on a silver chain. Corry realized it was a key. “Now that you know what I am, nothing in the rest of my house should shock you overmuch. There are medical supplies, food, and bedding. Get what you need. That key will not open the door to my bedroom; don’t try. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

As he let go of the chain, he shifted, and Corry nearly dropped the key. The enormous snake shot away from him into the darkness as swiftly as water running through open fingers.

\* \* \* \*

At sunset Syrill felt Lexis halt. The faun opened sweat-bleared eyes and sat up, coughing, shaking sand from his hair. Lexis stood with head bowed, swaying faintly. *If I don’t get down, he’ll fall.* Syrill threw a leg over and slid from the tiger’s back. Lexis’s tongue lolled like a dog’s, and at the corners of his mouth a reddish froth was forming. Syrill reached out and brushed his hand across the black nose. Lexis did not appear to register the touch. Syrill looked at the bloody mucus on his hand. *He’d done.*

Syrill looked around. They were among tall yellow grass. A little way further, clumps of twisted trees began, and beyond that, he saw the tall trunks that could only grow near water. He took a handful of fur at Lexis’s shoulder, and started forward. The tiger came ponderously, like a sleepwalker. Syrill did not bother looking towards the desert. He knew they were coming, could smell their dust and sweat on the wind.

The water was not far ahead, but reaching it seemed like the hardest thing Syrill had ever done. Twice, Lexis lay down and would not get up. Syrill was reduced to kicking and screaming at him. When at last they reached the spring, Syrill was certain he could feel a throb in the earth.

Lexis's eyes lit at the sight of the water, but Syrril got in front of him and made him climb a tree—the thickest and tallest. They climbed as high as their exhausted limbs would carry them and waited.

They did not wait long. The tremor in the earth grew to a rumble. Dust filled the air, and then the grass to the west exploded with moving bodies. Centaurs poured beneath the tree. Syrril turned his face away, clung to the branch and thought, *There's nothing more to do. If they see us, they see us..* He must have fallen asleep that way. When Syrril opened his eyes the night was dark, and he was alone.

## Chapter 17. Requests

Nothing unites old enemies like new ones.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Fenrah saw her cousin's body jerk, but before she could take a step, Daren dropped Sham and fled. The more trigger-happy fauns had spent their arrows, and the others took an instant to decide whether they should shoot. Now a rapidly moving target, Daren swung atop a stray goat and galloped for an opening in the wall, calling for his hunting party to follow. Now arrows zipped down at the fleeing fauns, but their leader was already gone. A door in the castle wall opened, and armed wood fauns poured out.

Meuril, Laylan, and Chance had disappeared from the parapet, but the archers remained. Fenrah could feel their eyes. She reached Sham, forcing herself to move slowly. He was still on his feet, but hunched forward, hands on his thighs. A feathered arrow protruded from his side. She could see another in his arm and in the top of one leg.

Sham's face was ashy, eyes screwed shut. His dark hair lay damp against his forehead. "What are they doing?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I'm not sure." Fenrah glanced at the archers. "I think they'll shoot us if we run."

"Can't run. Where's Talis?"

Fenrah looked behind her at the field. Most of the fauns had fled or been killed, but the exhausted Raider pack lingered, either trapped or unwilling to abandon each other. The group had been driven far apart, and some were out of sight around the wall. "I don't know," she told Sham. "I can't see her."

He reached out blindly and caught at her bad arm. Fenrah stifled a yelp and turned so that he could get hold one of her good shoulder. She realized he was about to faint. She wasn't sure how to hold him up or lay him down with the arrows protruding at so many angles. She couldn't get a grip on him with her dagger in her good hand, and she was afraid to put it down.

Fenrah caught movement out of the corner of her eye and looked up to see two figures coming toward her over the green. Chance walked with a limp, leaning on a tall staff. Laylan came behind him, sword drawn, watching the field. Fenrah felt Sham stiffen and knew that he had seen them, too.

Chance called out, his voice scratchy, but audible. "Put down your weapons."

Fenrah didn't move.

"They will shoot you." Chance stopped a couple of paces away. "Laven-lay is preparing for war. They'll kill you if you don't surrender."

Fenrah's lip curled. "Then they had better go ahead and do it."

Chance gave an impatient shake of his head. "You must surrender to *me*. If you wait until the wood fauns take you, you'll be Meuril's prisoners, and I've got no claim on you."

Fenrah's mind raced. Why was it so difficult to think? Sham's weight was growing heavier against her shoulder. She was so tired. "I don't trust you."

"Sham did," said Chance, "or he wouldn't have saved my life."

Sham stirred. "He's right," he said thickly. "Gambled. Lost?"

Chance shook his head. He glanced towards a group of wood fauns heading in their direction. "Please," he said almost desperately.

“My pack,” Fenrah whispered. “What will happen to them?”

Chance met her stare without a flicker. “Trust me.”

\* \* \* \*

Syrill half fell out of the tree and stumbled over the trampled grass to the edge of the water. He found Lexis there, asleep, but much cleaner. “Just like a cat,” he muttered. “Gets himself clean before he gets me out of the tree.” Lexis stirred, but if he’d heard Syrill’s remark, he did not think it worth a reply.

Syrill took a long drink. The night had grown chilly, and the cold water in his empty stomach made him shiver. He was still very tired, and after a moment’s consideration, he went back to Lexis and lay down beside him. The cat was at least warm.

\* \* \* \*

“Are you out of your mind?” Meuril looked weary and exasperated.

“But, Sire, they have been of service. They saved our lives in the forest.”

“That was an isolated incident. It doesn’t make up for all the others.”

“If they had not saved Laylan and I, you would not know of the army rallying at Selbis.”

Meuril ran a hand through his gray hair. “Chance, think what you’re asking. These are not simply a group of stray wolflings. They have shed blood in this city!”

Chance shook his head. “In self defense. The Raiders have never been a bloodthirsty pack. My files will attest to that.”

Meuril leaned forward. “If word gets out, I’ll have half the guilds in Laven-lay at my doorstep screaming for justice. Do you know how much money has been lost—?”

“I have some idea, and if it’s only a matter of money, I can—”

“Some shelts,” continued Meuril, “have suffered much at Raider hands and will not be appeased by anything but vengeance. Some shelts—”

Chance made an exasperated gesture. “Of whom I am the chief! At *my* request—!”

“At *your* request, I raised their bounty last spring. At *your* request I allowed traps to be planted all over my wood. And at *your* request of only a season ago, I *will* executed them—speedily and quietly behind closed doors.”

Chance crossed his arms. “No.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I forbid it.”

“You forbid it?”

“They surrendered to me. They’re not your prisoners.”

“They were rounded up by *my* army!”

“Nevertheless, they are my prisoners, and I will not allow you to execute them.”

Meuril almost laughed. “How do you intend to stop me?”

“I’ll fight you.”

“All by yourself?” Meuril stared into Chance’s face and was struck forcibly by an impression of Shaddock at his most intractable. *How could anyone miss it?* “Chance, you always were the most stubborn burrow of any faun I ever met. Ten days ago you would have carted them off to Danda-lay and turned the execution into a national holiday. I think your gratitude

misplaced, but I'm tired of arguing with you. I'll make the Raiders your responsibility. If they misuse my generosity in any way, I will hold you personally accountable."

Chance's taut face relaxed. "You are most gracious, Sire."

The king did not smile. "Don't thank me yet. I was called away from the wall this morning by a messenger from the city gate. Laven-lay has visitors. Your father is here, and you will not like the news he brought."

\* \* \* \*

Syrill woke shivering. It was still dark, and clouds obscured Dragon, Runner, and most of the stars. Wanderer gave only the poorest of blue light. He felt the flattened grass beside him and discovered a trace of departed warmth. He got to his feet. "Lexis?"

No answer. Syrill could see the outlines of the trees and the churned and tramped earth around the spring. Beyond, he saw the shadowed silhouette of the undisturbed grasses—waist high and...swaying?

Syrill reached for the place where his sword ought to hang, but found nothing. He'd dropped the heavy centaur dagger somewhere in the desert. *My eyes are playing tricks*. But then he saw a closer movement—something that flitted between two trees.

A splash behind him made him jump. Syrill turned to see Lexis's enormous pale form, crouching on the edge of the water. "Where did you go?" asked Syrill.

"Hunting." Lexis indicated something lying on the grass. Syrill saw the black outline of a water lizard—a young one of the kind the lizard riders tamed for mounts. "We shouldn't sleep so near the water," continued Lexis. "There are more of them, and some are large."



Syrill nodded. “There’s something darting around out there in the grass.”

Lexis glanced in the direction Syrill indicated. “Where?”

“I don’t know. Running between the trees.”

Lexis sniffed the air. “What did it look like?”

Syrill scowled at him. “Do you think I wouldn’t have mentioned that already if I knew?”

Lexis seemed puzzled for a moment. Then he asked, “Can you count my stripes from where you’re standing?”

“Why would I want to?”

“Can you *see*, Syrill?”

Syrill drew a deep breath. “No, I don’t see so well in the dark, as you surely—”

Lexis glided up beside him. “Yes, but I did not know *how* blind you are. Stop assuming I’m taunting you and get on my back.”

His words made Syrill rather more angry than less. It had been some years since anyone had given him unqualified orders. “You were breathing blood when we stopped,” he pointed out. “I would never ride a deer in that condition. I think I’d better walk.”

He knew the comparison to a deer would make Lexis bridle. With a faint exhalation that sounded suspiciously like a hiss, Lexis picked up the dead water lizard and stalked away without a backwards glance. Syrill followed, angry with himself and with the cat. They walked through the tall grass for perhaps half a watch, all the while going more and more steeply downhill, into the stagnant sink that would become Kazar swamp. When they had moved well away from the spring, Lexis stopped and began ripping apart the water lizard.

He flipped his head, and something plopped at Syrill's feet. "The tail is said to be palatable to shelts," commented Lexis between crunching bones. Syrill bent to examine the grisly lump. Wood fauns were nearly vegetarian. He was very hungry, but the thought of eating the raw tail of a swamp lizard made him feel queasy. *I think I would vomit.*

With some envy, he watched Lexis devour the small carcass as though it were the choicest entrée on the great table in Laven-lay. Then, behind the cat, Syrill saw two pale points of reflected light. "Lexis!"

It was not much warning, but it was enough. Lexis raised his head in time to avoid the snap of the jaws directed at his face as a much smaller animal darted out of the grass, obviously intent on stealing the dead water lizard. The thief lost his nerve as Lexis came after him, dropped the remains of the carcass, and vanished into the grass.

Lexis stood, hackles raised, tail twitching. "That was a desert dog—probably what you saw near the water. I found their tracks while I was hunting. The pack is large."

Syrill was scanning the grass. He felt naked without a weapon. "They're scavengers?"

"Maybe." Lexis left the remains of the carcass. For a time, they walked in silence. Syrill picked up a few medium-sized rocks. Now and again, they heard a howl or a high yipping. The sounds came from different directions, but each time they seemed a little closer.

Syrill was not surprised when they were attacked again—this time more directly. Three dogs came at them out of the dark. They were wary and stopped to growl and posture. Syrill

danced away and threw his rocks hard enough to make one animal yelp and scurry for the grass. Lexis killed another, and the third fled. It was, however, a victory without savor. “They’re testing us,” commented Syrill.

“Yes,” muttered Lexis, “and calling all the packs.” The howls and yipping had grown more and more frequent until they were nearly continuous.

“We need to find a defensible spot and stay there until dawn.”

Lexis didn’t say anything for a moment. “We haven’t passed many defensible spots.”

“We could climb another tree.”

Another silence. “Do you think they’ll stop at dawn?”

Syrill didn’t know, but he didn’t see any reason why they should. The animals sensed they were weak and would take advantage of that as long as it lasted. Syrill didn’t expect things to get much better in the swamp. He hoped the centaurs had left as clear a swath of beaten track there as in the grasslands, but he doubted it. The swamp fauns would have sent them guides.

Lexis was limping again. Syrill had been observing his uneven gait without really thinking about it since they left the spring. “You’re favoring your left hindpaw.”

“Well, I don’t have a stone in my shoe,” snapped the tiger.

Syrill sighed. “I’m sorry I compared you to do deer. I was picking a fight because I feel blind and useless.”

Lexis hesitated, then said, “A centaur stepped on it.”

Before he could say anything else, the dogs came again. This time, they were serious. Syrill vaulted onto Lexis's back, and they ran. Lexis jumped into the first tall tree he found. Syrill bounced off as he landed, but managed to grab the branch. A scream burst from his lips as weight from below laid him flat against the branch. Looking down, Syrill saw the fierce eyes of a desert dog, its body dangling well off the ground, its jaws locked in his calf. Another made a lunge and barely missed Syrill's hoof. *Two will be enough to pull me off*, he realized.

Then Lexis was crouching over him. He swatted the side of the dog's head, and it let go. Syrill bit back another scream as he pulled the leg under him and reached for the branch above. Lexis prodded him a good deal higher before stopping. When they had gotten themselves safely positioned, Lexis said, "Lie down. No, there, on your belly. Put that leg towards me. It's still bleeding."

This was an understatement. Syrill had been slipping in his own blood as he tried to climb. As Lexis started to clean the wound, Syrill wrenched loose a piece of bark and put it between his teeth. He remembered with terrible clarity the fauns who'd sometimes escaped Filinian torture with patches of skin *licked* off. The back half of a cat's tongue had bristles designed to sand the last traces of meat from bone. It could easily sand away skin.

Lexis seemed to read his thoughts. "Tip of my tongue. Don't kick me, Syrill." When he'd finished, he said, "If you've got something to tie it up with, that would help." Syrill had little trouble finding a frayed corner of sleeve that would tear. When he's tied the bandage, he lay down again, this time facing Lexis. He was trembling. He told himself it was the cold.

Lexis settled down at the base of the branch and stretched out a paw alongside Syrrill. Syrrill had an idea it was meant to be comforting, but it felt more like a threat. Lexis's paws were weapons. *He could push me off and say the dogs killed me. He wouldn't have to lie much.*

Syrrill tried to count the dogs below and gave up. Their bodies made weird, shadowed shapes in the grass, and the faint reflections from their eyes winked like malevolent fireflies. He could be certain of only two things: there were many of them, and they were not leaving.

Lexis's voice cut into his thoughts. "I have found," he said, as though they had been carrying on a conversation all evening, "that shelts—and cats, too—tend to hate what they're afraid of. I would like to avoid being hated, so tell me: how can I make you less afraid?"

Syrrill laughed shakily. He tried to sit up. "I'm not—" He stopped. "I smell like it, don't I?"

Lexis only looked at him. Syrrill looked away. "There's nothing you can do. My own shelts will hang me when we get back. What does it matter if you kill me out here?"

Lexis flexed his claws against the branch. "I don't think you should assume—"

"That!" interrupted Syrrill. "Don't do it."

Lexis looked at his paw. "Oh."

"Claws. Seeing them makes fauns nervous—like a drawn sword."

Lexis smiled. "I never thought about it." He hesitated. "I promised you an explanation earlier—why I let you win the war. Do you want to hear it now?"

Syrill sat up straighter. He wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight, not with the throbbing in his leg growing steadily more insistent. "Tell me."

## Chapter 18. Lexis Explains

Of all the beasts in Middle Panamindorah during Gabalon's reign, only the cats retained their ability to speak. Many stories have been told to explain this. Fauns say the cats betrayed their shelts in exchange for the wizard's favor. A wolfling myth says they bartered their souls. The cats, of course, have their own story.

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

"My father," began Lexis, "had a proverb: Cats love only their mates and their masters."

Syrill considered. "Where does that leave the king?"

"Loving very little."

"His children?"

"Me?" Lexis flicked his tail. "He cared for me, cared for what would happen to the kingdom because of me. Love, though, is a luxury a Filinian king can ill-afford, particularly for his cubs, who must fight to the death. I never met him until I'd proven myself in the Field of Bones. I was half grown by then.

"The proverb *was* a lie, though. My father loved Ounce. He was comfortable with all his officers, but with Ounce, he was as easy as I ever saw him. They were both opportunists. Neither of them would have seen the point in stopping something that was working. To do anything else would have been dishonor, weakness, imperfection, and waste."

Syrill heard himself say, “You mean it would have been waste not to start killing the wood fauns, since it seemed to be working so well with the wolflings?” Before Lexis could say anything, Syrill dropped his forehead against his knee and groaned. “Don’t answer that. My tongue operates independently of my brain when I’m in pain. Continue.”

To his relief, Lexis gave one of his little purring chuckles. “Only when you’re in pain?”

“Or drunk or angry...or awake. Continue.”

“My father did understand that the effort required to continue the war would eventually outweigh the advantages of conquest. In his final illness, he recalled me from the fighting for counsel. He said, ‘The fauns will never forgive me; there is no reason why they should. They will forgive you, however—more than that, they will thank you.’”

“For what?” asked Syrill.

“He said,” continued Lexis, “‘Ounce will never serve another master. He is dangerous, and you must kill him before the vultures have done with me.’”

Syrill grimaced. For once he couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I told you the first part,” said Lexis, “so that you would understand the second. It is customary for a new Filinian king to replace his predecessor’s cabinet. Cats form their loyalties at a young age—powerful bonds, exclusive. They may be friendly with many, but they serve only one. Often, the old advisors are killed, but sometimes they are simply allowed to leave. Father mentioned Ounce specifically, so that I would not misunderstand. It was as though he said, ‘Kill all of them, even the one who is my dearest friend.’”

Syrill’s disgust registered in his voice. “Did you tell Ounce?”



Lexis gave a little huff. “Of course not. He already knew.”

“I will never understand cats,” said Syrill.

“No, but humor me for a moment and *try*. Or at least, try to understand my situation, because, frankly, my own people say I think more like a shelt.”

“Do they?”

“Yes, but we’ve already established you disagree. Now listen because, you’ll like what comes next. At least, it will justify your suspicious. Father not only told me to kill them; he gave me the weapon to do it—a weapon that would stop the faun wars and dispose of his old council in one stroke. He wanted to leave me a kingdom well-found, at peace, and thoroughly under my paw. He would have, too, if I’d done what he suggested.”

Syrill’s voice dropped to a growl, “What weapon?”

“You know,” said Lexis softly.

Syrill sat up straight. “I knew it! I knew the cats killed Natalia! Demitri made it look like a wolfling attack so that Meuril wouldn’t lift the siege of Sardor-de-lor.”

“Correct. But Demitri had more in mind than cutting off the wolflings. He sent his own officers on that expedition. Purportedly, he did this both to ensure competence and to keep the secret entirely in-house. No subordinates were to know that we had orchestrated the killing. Both I and my brother were alive at the time and privy to some state secrets, but we were not told. Neither was I told when I won my right to live and rule. Demitri never told me what happened to the wood faun queen until that last private audience as he lay dying.”

Syrill was incredulous. “He wanted you to sacrifice his officers for peace?”

“Yes. Well, not just for peace; for stability. I was truly not responsible for the killing because I had known nothing of it. I was to denounce my father’s officers, let the fauns execute them, and thereby give Meuril the vengeance and answers that he craved. I could then appoint my own council. Demitri felt certain this would ensure for me a solid throne and peace on undisputed borders of a kingdom considerably larger than he had found it. He gave me the queen’s signet ring to prove my story to Meuril.”

Syrill could not help himself. “Your father was a monster.”

Lexis said nothing.

“You didn’t do it.”

“No. And if he were here, he would tell me I am now paying the price. His officers had guessed what I was to do with them. I thought the danger had passed, that they had accepted my acceptance of them, but apparently Liliana still felt threatened. Who could blame her?”

Syrill still couldn’t get his mind around the betrayal. “Your father didn’t really love Ounce or anyone else.”

“Ah, you are wrong. Ounce was his friend, perhaps his only friend. What’s more, Ounce knew my father’s plans for him long before I came of age. He knew his life would be measured by Demitri’s, and he accepted it.”

Syrill shook his head. “I don’t believe you.”

Lexis purred a laugh. “Which part?”

Syrill only shook his head.

“You don’t understand cats, Syrrill. We’re not evil, just...pragmatic. My father was wrong about some things.”

“About quite a few things!”

“Perhaps. For one, Ounce didn’t turn on me. I think he may even be looking for me.”

Syrrill thought for a moment. “I can see you’ve tried to change the way your nation does business. You let both your cubs live. But you kept up the war in the wood for more than a year after Demitri died. You’re not going to defend that with some merciful excuse.”

Lexis’s voice took on an edge. “I don’t need to *defend* anything to you, Syrrill.”

Syrrill stiffened. “No,” he said after a moment, “you don’t.”

Lexis’s tone softened. “If you find yourself on a runaway cart, bounding down a steep slope, you can’t save yourself or the deer or the passengers by suddenly applying the break. The cart will tip over, the deer will stumble, and everyone will die. I was born on a runaway cart. If I had used my father’s suggestion, I could have ended the war as soon as he died, but I wasn’t prepared to do that. I had to find another way to stop the cart without turning it over.

“I let you win in the end. I probably would have let it happen earlier except that you seemed bent on not only winning, but annihilating us. I didn’t trust you to even parlay without trying to kill me. I had to run away to Meuril in the middle of the night to arrange a surrender that wouldn’t cripple my nation.”

“What about the wolflings?” asked Syrrill.

“The wolflings,” Lexis signed. “*That* will leave a stain across cat/shelt relations for generations. I have no idea what to do about the wolflings.” He hesitated. “Any ideas, general?”

The wood fauns aren't exactly innocent of wolfling blood, but the heaviest fault does lie with us."

Syrill thought about the daily display of sad, thin bodies on the gibbet outside the gates of Laven-lay—outside the gates of most wood faun towns. It had always sickened him. He felt an affinity with the wolflings in his hatred of cats and his suspicious about Natalia's death. *But did I ever actually do anything about it?*

Lexis's voice dropped to a murmur. "I was at the fall of Sardor-day-lore. My father ordered that both I and my brother attend. I remember looking down and seeing my front legs bright red to the elbow. I'd only been walking through the streets."

Lexis looked, unseeing, down at the winking eyes of the dogs. Syrill realized that he could distinguish the individual stripes on the cat's face. The sky was lightening.

"I think—" began Lexis. "I think that's when I decided."

"Decided what?"

"To change things. At least, that's the first time I can remember doing something strange. I was standing on a grating, looking at the...well, the killing; I can hardly call it fighting. We were near the wolfling palace. I was surrounded by my bodyguards. I glanced down and saw through the grating a drainage tunnel and in the tunnel, two little wolflings. They were a girl and boy in rich clothes. The girl was very small, and the boy had her by the hand. She looked exhausted. I don't think she ever saw me, but he did. He looked up just as I looked down, and we stared at each other. I knew I should say something to my bodyguard, but instead, I lay down on my belly and covered the grating. I suppose the wolflings ran past. A second later, I sat up, and

they were gone. I remember feeling guilty about it later—guilty as one feels after a stolen treat. I knew it was wrong, but it tasted right.”

Syrill had always been quick to laugh and quick to cry. Whether it was the pain in his leg or the loss of blood or exhaustion or hunger or fear, he didn’t know, but he knew he didn’t want Lexis to see. He turned away, both legs dangling off the branch, and pretended to watch the dawn. A moment later, the paw against his back shifted and he felt a heavy weight. Looking down, he saw that Lexis had stretched out and laid his head across his lap. Syrill cursed softly. Lexis didn’t stir.

*You’re doing it again—just like you did in the pit, working me around to the point where I’ll do whatever you think you need, spinning the truth into something you can put around my neck and lead me with.* But he didn’t say it, because he didn’t trust his voice, and anyway, he didn’t quite believe it. Syrill leaned back on his arms and watched the sunrise.

A moment later, Lexis sat up so abruptly Syrill nearly lost his balance. He looked down and saw not a single dog. Instead, something shelt-shaped stood beneath their tree, peering up at them. Syrill heard a nearly sub-sonic noise like a cauldron coming to a boil. He took a moment to realize it was coming from Lexis. The cat opened his mouth and hissed. Syrill didn’t think he’d ever seen *all* of Lexis’s teeth at the same time.

“Are you—” began the stranger, but Lexis didn’t give him time to finish. He sprang from the tree like a bolt from crossbow and would have made short work of the newcomer, had that person not moved with preternatural swiftness.

“I know what you are,” snarled Lexis. “You may deceive the eyes or an inexperienced nose, but you don’t deceive me.”

The stranger was backing away. “True. You know what I am, but not who.”

“*What* is more than enough to make you worth killing.”

“A strange way to repay me for getting rid of the desert dogs.”

“I’ll take a dog over a snake any day,” spat Lexis.

“Your cubs would disagree,” said the stranger.

Lexis froze.

“They’re safe, and they’ve been looking for you. I thought you might like to see them.”

THE END

This story is continued in:

*The Prophet of Panamindorah, Book III: Fire and Flood*

Find the PDF's and the audio podcast of the whole story at [www.panamindorah.com](http://www.panamindorah.com).