



THE PROPHET OF PANAMINDORAH

BOOK THREE - FIRE AND FLOOD

ABIGAIL HILTON

Chapter 1. Skeletons in the Closet

The question is not whether we will find our answers, but whether we want to.

--Kenslo, king's annuls

Amid the long shadows of Archemais's library, Corellian lay awake. He could hear the soft snores of his companions, and the supper they'd eaten sat warm and pleasant in his belly. The banked fire gave off a soft glow. He was tired.

But he could not sleep. It wasn't the strange mixture of serpent's den and scholarly residence they'd found behind the locked door. It wasn't the enormous snake skin lying in one of the rooms—it's eye-covers large as tea cups. It wasn't the dead alligator hanging in the cool cellar. What was keeping Corry awake was the other locked door—the one that led presumably to Archemais's bedchamber. That, and the Earth items he'd found lying about the house.

Corry had a terrible suspicion. He wasn't sure when he'd allowed himself to examine it, but he knew it had been there for quite a while, locked behind its own door. Images tumbled through his head—bits of lost memories tangling with the events of the past four days—the picture of Gabalon from the book in Danda-lay, Archemais's green eyes, Dance in a dungeon, a tunic and trousers laid out beside the bathing pool—a little small, but they fit.

Corry got up and went softly to the door that led into the rest of Archemais's house. He stepped into the hall beyond, shut the door, and flipped on the electric lights. He went past the door to the cellar steps, past the kitchen, and there was the door to the bedroom.

Corry thought for a moment. He'd never been taught how to pick a lock, though he thought he understood the rudiments. He went to the kitchen and searched until he found some kind of skewer. He returned to the door, but soon gave up. Nothing inside the lock felt like a

tumbler. *In fact, it doesn't even feel like a lock.* Corry stopped. He looked at the lock for a long moment. It was molded metal, with embellished shapes of leaves and fruit. Finally, he reached out, gripped it with his whole hand, and tried to swivel. The lock *turned*. It rotated around the axis of the keyhole—the false keyhole—and Corry saw behind it the real keyhole—flush with the wood. He took out the key to the main door. It fit.

* * * *

Tolomy couldn't sleep either, but his keen ears detected Corellian's uneven breathing, and Tolomy didn't feel like speaking with anyone. Finally, the iteration got up and went further into the house. Tolomy rose at once and glided out the door that led to the bathing passage, through the tunnel, and into the frosty night. He moved through a fallow vegetable garden and poked about under a likely-looking hedge, but the wildlife seemed in short supply. *No surprise there, considering what lives here.* He did, at last, find a mouse, with which he amused himself for the better part of a half watch.

Then he went to the stream and had a long drink. When he raised his head, the iteration was standing not ten paces away. *The cursed thing moves like a cat.*

Corry sat down on the riverbank. Tolomy wondered if he could still slink away without being seen. Then Corry spoke. "It must be difficult—to have Demitri's soul and Lexis's conscience."

Tolomy would later give himself some credit for not flinching. He would also, in later analysis, surmise that his utter stillness was a kind of flinch. For a moment, he couldn't even breath. "How did you—?"

"I saw the expression on your face after you killed those dogs...and the fauns."

Tolomy's mind raced. His eyes darted to Corry and then away.

Corry lay back on the grass and put his hands behind his head. "You were enjoying it. The only thing you're really afraid of is yourself."

Tolomy found his voice. "That's not true."

"Oh?" Corry glanced at him. Tolomy saw the eyes, almost as green as his own under the black shadow of hair. "I knew something about you didn't make sense, but until that moment, I didn't know what. You're always watching yourself. Everything you do, every calculated action, is a lie. I suppose when your family hunts, you miss your kills on purpose."

"You," sputtered Tolomy, "know *nothing* about me."

"That makes two of us."

The cub jumped to his feet. "I know what I am! I behave the way I do for good reasons." He wanted to stop, but the words came crawling out of his throat like wasps from a broken nest. "My first memory is of a kill. Some little creature that had gotten into our nursery. I remember how it squirmed, the crunch of its bones, the warm blood in my mouth, and it was pure pleasure, even then. I snuck away to hunt long before they began training us, but you're right: I do miss my kills when I'm around other cats, because I don't want them to know—" He bit down the words. *Why am I even talking to him?*

"Because you think you're like Demitri?"

Tolomy didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Corry thought for a moment. "Leesha didn't see, you know. She was strangling when you killed those fauns."

Tolomy felt himself relax a little and hated that it showed. “Leesha hated Demitri and for a good reason.”

“You think she’d hate you, too, if you knew you took after him?”

“I know it.”

“I don’t think Leesha’s as weak as you imagine.”

Tolomy huffed. “I don’t think you understand me, iteration. If father changed his mind today about the succession, if he decided to go back to the old way and put Leesha and I on the Field of Bones next year to fight to the death, I don’t think she would kill me. Not that she couldn’t—although that’s probably true as well—but that she *wouldn’t*. But I could kill her. I would feel dreadful afterwards, but while I was fighting, while I was killing her, I would enjoy it.” He felt some satisfaction at Corellian’s wince. “So don’t tell me I should *be myself*.”

There was a long, heavy silence. “Strange,” said Corellian. “Leesha is afraid of the same thing—that she would kill you in the old succession.”

Tolomy growled. “She doesn’t know me. Or...she knows a part of me. Leesha wants...*needs* something to protect.”

“And so you give it to her,” murmured Corellian. “Interesting.”

“I’m not *interesting*,” said Tolomy. “Crossbows are interesting. I’m very simple—like a claw.”

“On the contrary, I think you’re one of the most complicated people I’ve ever met.”

Tolomy was staring at the river again. “Leesha likes to jump at me from behind corners. She thinks it’s funny. I’ve asked her to stop. I tell her she frightens me, but she doesn’t

understand. What I mean is, I'm terrified that one day she'll startle me, and before I can think, I'll do to her what I did to those swamp fauns."

He glanced at Corry. "But I don't know what business it is of yours. You come along and stick your nose in the middle of my family's concerns and behave as though we're suppose to thank you."

"I understand," said Corry looking at the sky.

"You do *not* unders—!"

"Archemais is my father."

In the silence that followed, a fish splashed in the stream. Somewhere in the distance, a dog howled. At last, Tolomy said, "Your what?"

"I turned up in Laven-lay unable to remember how I got there. It's a long story. Just now I broke into his room, and there are pictures—of me when I was younger and of my mother, I think. I suppose she's dead. And of my uncle. At least, I think that's who he is."

Tolomy stared at him. "Your uncle?"

"Gabalon."

Another long silence. "Oh."

Corry laughed. Tolomy thought he sounded half mad. "So you see, I do understand about having skeletons in the family closet."

"Skeletons in the closet," repeated Tolomy, trying out the phrase and rather liking it.

"Earth expression. Never mind. I thought my other shape was a dragon, but apparently, it's only a snake."

Tolomy thought for a moment. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

“What do you mean?”

“Well, up there on the cliff—whatever you were, you *did* fly.”

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Sharon-zool stared at her officers’ latest report. It had *not* been a good night.

Unfortunately, the fire was only the beginning. She cursed herself again for not remembering the cats. *But even if I had remembered them, would I have expected Shaddock to use them?* She wondered, not for the first time, whether Shaddock was dead and one of his generals making the decisions. *This does not have his stamp at all. There’s another mind here—a devious one.*

The sewage and the glass—that had been a stroke worthy of Daren. The fire had been the barricade’s intended defense, but the sewage and glass were meant to finish what came after. Already her healers were bringing her dire reports. Scratches and burns that might normally be treated were expected to fester. Swamp fauns frenzied with battle had rushed unfeeling through pools of ground glass and filth. Others had slipped in their retreat from the cats through the flooded plaza and fallen in the muck with scratches and bite wounds. The healers were asking her whether they should remove limbs in order to save lives for the long-term or whether they should leave the limbs intact in order to save fighters for the short-term.

He has, in effect, poisoned us. All he needs to do is hide and wait for us to sicken.

The horrible burns were something else. The sight of shelts, moaning and screaming on the floors of the designated hospital building had caused such a blow to morale that she had ordered that the dying be sped quietly on their way.

Sharon-zool paced her chamber. *Who am I fighting? There’s got to be a cliff faun left in there somewhere. I refuse to believe that cats would defend Danda-lay of their own accord.*

Whoever, was orchestrating them, the cats certainly had saved the palace. She had been ready to enter it herself when the fighting started. Sharon-zool felt the cold breath of disaster but-too-nearly averted. A city at night was just the sort of place in which cats loved to fight, with potential ambush points on every corner. They had chased her soldiers all the way out of the palace and into Danda-lay, where, for a short time, it was feared they would retake the city. However, as her archers found their way to rooftops, and with the coming of daylight, the advantage began to shift in favor of those with arrows and spears. The cats retreated back into the palace, and the exhausted swamp fauns assessed their losses.

I'll never take the palace by storm, Sharon realized. Not when it's infested with cats and my soldiers grow weaker by the day. I need fresh troops from Port Ory. Somehow I must force my way far enough inside the palace to shut off the water. In order to do that I must find a weakness in my enemy.

She could think of one. It might not move Shadock, but then she was clearly not fighting Shadock. Sharon-zool made up her mind. She thought for a moment more and decided on a messenger. *So they have cats. Well, we have something large and dangerous, too.* Aloud, she said to her aid, "Go and get Danthra Michweer." *He and his lizard riders have had more than enough leisure to pillage corpses. Time they put in another day's work.*

Chapter 2. Thunderbolt

Shelts, fox: are a race of canids small in stature and in number. They have never sought to organize a delegation to the Canisarian government, but exist mainly as wandering entertainers, merchants, furriers, and hired labor. They are somewhat more common in the far south and occasionally interbreed with the more populous wolf shelts, producing a taller hybrid.

--Anson's Political Encyclopedia of Panamindorah

Sham glared at the wood faun healers. He felt that black was a singularly ill-chosen color for healers' robes, but there they stood—*like carrion crows*, he thought—looking at him as though he were a rabid dog who had unaccountably been submitted for their care.

Sham drew in a breath between clenched teeth. "If I wake up again with this poison smeared over me, I will hunt down whoever did it and shove every appalling handful down his throat." He watched them whispering to each other. *As if I could even get out of bed unaided, but they look almost as though they believe me.* Sham spoke again, "And don't imagine I can't figure out who did it. Every one of you has a signature scent." The abilities of a wolfling's nose were legend. What was not such common knowledge was the effect upon it of the aromatic concoction the fauns had been smearing in his wounds. *I couldn't follow a blood trail just now.*

The healers glanced at him uneasily, then went back into their huddle. Sham heard most of their whispers, as their drug had done nothing to his ears: "Can't just let him die!" "But he refuses treatment." "He can't refuse treatment." "I say we tie him down."

Sham groaned. "I was treating arrow wounds before I could use a bow. Just give me an assistant, a pot, a fire, some bandages, some water, some salt, perhaps some tincture of silver. I

will do very well. But if anyone recovers from your ministrations, all I can say, is that shelt has a powerful constitution.”

As he spoke, he noticed one of the healer’s assistants—Sham couldn’t imagine what he assisted with, unless the fauns had a steady stream of dislocated centaur femurs—sidling around behind the bed. At the same time, one of the healers extracted a bolus of some chalky material from his robe. Sham knew at once what they meant to do. *Tie me and drug me.*

“No, look, this isn’t necessary.” He hunched down under his blankets. “There’s no need to—” Sham sprang from the bed. The room reeled as he hit the floor, but he didn’t fall. The healers scattered like frightened hens, but the big assistant came lumbering after him. Sham staggered into the hall and ran straight into Chance, coming the opposite direction.

Chance took a step back. “What’s going on here?”

Sham sagged against the wall. “They’re trying to kill me, but they’re doing poor job of it. Perhaps you could and show them how it’s done.”

Chance ignored him, speaking to the assistant. “Can you not even handle one half dead wolfling? Get him back in bed.”

The big faun muttered something and picked Sham up, not unkindly. The healer’s voices buzzed like angry wasps as Sham regained his bed. In his dizzy state, he thought they must have multiplied. “He won’t keep the bandages or the ointment on.”

“Has he asked for anything else?” came Chance’s voice.

“Yes. *Boiled* linen. *Boiled* water. *Boiled* salt. His wolfling assistant—surprisingly uncooked. Next he’ll wanted boiled ointment.”

“That’s the only way your ointment would be safe,” snapped Sham.

“It is not poison!”

Sham fairly howled, “It has mercury in it!”

“Mercury has mystical properties that—”

“If you call madness a mystical property, then, yes, I suppose it does.”

Chance held up his hands. “Enough! Master healer, your disapproval is noted. Now bring him what he asks for—minus the assistant; I’ll see to that.”

Sham slumped back in the bed as the healers huffed out of the room. “Thank you.”

Chance waited until they were gone. “The rest of the Raiders are alive,” he said, answering Sham’s question before he could ask. “So is your wolf, although several others are dead. They are confined to a complex of rooms in the castle, but not to the dungeons, and they are not in chains.”

Sham looked impressed. “We are faun prisoners—?”

“*My* prisoners.”

“Yes, and he all but leveled a bow on Meuril to keep him from executing you.” They looked up to see Laylan standing in the doorway.

Chance spoke before he could say anything else. “Sham disapproves of the healer’s ointments and wishes to make his own dressings. He’s asked for Talis. You are authorized in the wolfling area; would you go and get her?”

Laylan nodded. “Fenrah’s been asking to see him.”

Chance frowned. “She tried to cut a guard earlier.”

“I believe he was trying to take her weapon,” said Laylan.

“They’re not supposed to have weapons.”

“Yes, well...”

“The wood fauns are jumping at shadows. Just bring Talis for now.”

Laylan inclined his head and went. Chance looked as though he intended to follow. Sham stared after them. *Please stay until Talis comes. Don't leave me alone with these fauns.* “What happened,” he blurted, “on the bridge?”

Chance hesitated. Sham's vertigo had eased, and he thought the faun looked haggard. “The bridge is hollow,” he said.

Sham waited, but there seemed to be no more explanation forthcoming.

Chance turned to go, but Sham spoke again, “They've not been smearing that ointment of theirs on your neck, have they? Because if they have, you really should take it off.”

Chance looked at him for a moment, then came slowly and sat down on the stool beside the bed. He unwrapped the scarf he'd wound around his throat. Sham was pleased to see that, although the skin was an extravagant array of bruised colors, little swelling remained. Chance proffered the scarf and Sham took it, sniffing delicately. There was ointment, but not the stuff they'd been smearing on his wounds. “Lacking in medical properties,” he pronounced it, “but otherwise harmless.” He handed the scarf back. “Something cold would be better.”

“Mmm.” Chance did not seem to be attending. He rewound the scarf, then leaned forward and rubbed hard at his eyes with the heels of his hands. He remained with his head in his hands for so long that Sham wondered whether he'd fallen asleep. Then he said, “He ran away.”

“Who?”

“My fa— Shaddock. He left Danda-lay to the swamp fauns and lizard riders.”

Sham sat very still. *I should have let him leave when he wanted to.* “I suppose the city was already lost?”

“Perhaps, but the palace guard stayed. He left them with orders to...” Chance drew a breath that shook—whether from anger or sorrow, Sham could not tell— “to defend the city. His city! And they stayed.”

Jubal. Sham felt ill.

Chance’s head snapped up and he said almost savagely, “*You* wouldn’t have left *your* city.”

Sham’s gaze dropped to the blankets. “I fled a city once.”

“That was different. You were a child. You weren’t the king. They weren’t *your* soldiers trapped and dying, not *your* citizens you’d sworn to defend.” Almost in a whisper, he said, “I’m glad he’s not my father.”

Sham groaned inwardly. *I am not the right shelt for this.* In his mind, he heard the echo of Fenrah’s words in the cave, “*He is the way he is because of us, because of what others have sacrificed for us!*”

“And yet,” said Sham, choosing his words with care, “he is.”

Chance took a moment to react. “What did you say?”

“I said: Shadock is your father. At least, insofar as... I mean, I have no reason to believe he’s not,” Sham finished lamely.

Chance’s glare could have melted steal plate. “What would you know about it?”

“I don’t think that’s my place to tell.”

Chance shot to his feet so fast he knocked the stool over. “If you know something about my...my parents,” he bellowed, “you *will*—!”

Sham had unconsciously turned his head to the side and shut his eyes—a placating gestured among wolves and wolflings. Chance had read enough to understand. “I’m sorry.”

Sham risked a glance and saw that Chance had gone from dangerously unstable to merely unstable. He gestured at Sham. “I’m sorry about that, too.”

Sham glanced down at the vaguely hoof-shaped bruise on his chest, visible in the open V of his hospital robes. “I’m not. Probably kept me from doing something I would have regretted.”

Chance folded his hands behind his back. “I’m certain I would have regretted it more.”

It was a ghastly joke, but it was a joke. Sham smiled. “Talk to your mother. Tell her I sent you.”

Chance shook his head. “I don’t know my mother. I haven’t truly spoken to her since I understood what the word ‘bastard’ meant. I know *you* better than I know her.” He forced his voice to a normal pitch. “This is not an interrogation, but *please* tell me what you know.”

Sham thought for a moment. “Tell Fenrah what I said. If she thinks it’s alright, I’ll tell you.”

* * * *

“Sham’s awake and doing well,” said Laylan, “but you can’t see him yet.”

Fenrah was crouching beside one of the wounded wolves in the little courtyard where they’d been confined. “Why?” she asked without looking up.

Laylan shrugged. “The fauns are nervous. Sham has requested assistance from Talis, and I have permission to bring her.”

“Talis is treating some of the others who were hurt. Sham should be brought here.”

Laylan held up his hands as if to say, *I don't make the rules*, but what he actually said was, “There’s a lot of conferencing going on. I think someone may want to speak with a wolfling presently. May I say that you speak for them—all of them, not just the Raider pack.”

Fenrah stood up and wiped her hands on a towel. Then her black eyes turned on Laylan. He was surprised at the anger he saw there and took a step back. “You *are* of royal blood,” he said. “They all say so, although I’ve heard different versions of the details.”

Fenrah shook her head. Her eyes darted briefly back and forth. Lyli was working on a wolf on the far side of the courtyard, Hualien a few paces away. Curious faun guards peered down constantly from the wall above.

Laylan understood. *She doesn't want to talk about it here.*

Fenrah walked past him through the door and into the first of two small rooms where the wolflings had been quartered. There were no windows, and all the rooms were on ground level. Fenrah went through the first room where Danzel and Sevn were resting, and Talis was dressing a wound on Xerous’s arm. Laylan could feel their eyes follow him. The second room was empty, and Fenrah shut the door. A single lamp burned low in the corner, and she went to turn it up. Laylan remained uneasily by the door. If Fenrah had decided he needed to die now, not even the presence of armed fauns in the corridor would stop her.

“You know Malic?” Fenrah’s slim form was silhouetted against the lamplight—her eyes only bright glints in the gloom.

“The last wolfling king? What about him?”

Fenrah’s tail twitched.

She's nervous, thought Laylan. *Why?*

Her voice continued—low and soft. “A crisis developed in the kingdom two generations before Canisaria fell. This was in the time of Malic’s great grandfather. That king had three children—the eldest a son, the middle a daughter, and the youngest another son. The king and the crown prince died in a hunting accident. That left the daughter as heir to the throne, but she abdicated, so the youngest son became king. He was Malic’s father. The older princess went on to have three children. One of them was my mother.”

Laylan nodded. “So royal, but no longer in the direct line. However, all those who were died in the sack of Sardor-day-lore. What about Sham?”

Fenrah shook her head. “Noble, yes, but not royal. He was born to my father’s sister.” Her voice caught—like a rusty hinge on an old door, opening with difficulty. “We were in Sardor-de-lore when the city fell. I was five, Sham seven. We escaped because we were small and the cats were carelessness. They had *so much* to kill that day. We climbed into the drainage system and splashed through the blood that was gushing down from the streets.”

Laylan had heard the stories and knew she was not exaggerating. The sack of a shelt city by cats was a thing out of nightmare. In their excitement the big predators cared only for the sport of killing. He had spoken to a few fauns who had been in the outer city and escaped, but never from the inner city—the palace and its grounds. *She could tell scenes that would make any shelt bristle to his tail-tip. But surely this is not a secret from her pack. Why did she bring me here in private?* Aloud, he said, “So you *are* the only one—the heir to the Canisarian throne.”

Fenrah bowed her head. She was still a moment. Then her hand shot out. Laylan leapt back, but the hand was empty. “When you caught Sham last summer he told me he saw a ring on your finger. I want— I think—” She tried again, “May I see it?”

Laylan did not like surprises. She’d given him sufficient start to make his heart rate jump, and he had half a mind to walk out, but he was also curious. Slowly, he worked the ring loose and handed it to her.

Fenrah examined it critically by the light of the lamp. Her back was to him, and he could not see what she was looking at. “Who gave it to you?” she asked.

“My mother.” It was the only thing he had of hers and its gift nearly the only memory.

“Liar. You stole it off some wolfling you killed.” She spoke without heat, but with something like disgust.

Laylan was surprised. Fenrah had always seemed to consider him beneath her contempt. Her judgment now offended him. “No such thing! Rings and chains are a liability in a fight, and if there’s one thing I’ve had to do in life, it’s fight.” Laylan’s mouth snapped shut against his anger. “I’ve killed many shelts,” he said more levelly, “but I’ve never taken trophies. I’d need a better reason to wear something that might catch and rip my finger off.”

Fenrah turned back to him. Without any sign of temper, she said, “The kingdom of Canisaria suffered a scandal many years ago. I was not alive at the time, but I heard rumors. The story goes of how, when Malic was a young prince, he fell in love with a wandering entertainer that visited Sardor-de-lor. She came with a troop of performers. They stayed many months and feasted and danced, and the whole court made merry. However, no one realized the seriousness of Malic’s bond with one of the performers until she was found to be with child. He declared that

he would marry her. The king was outraged and embarrassed. No son of his, he vowed, would marry a wandering mountebank.

“The king sent the actors away with orders never to return. The prince was locked in his room and restrained until he accepted his father’s verdict. They say he never quite overcame his bitterness. They also say that in some distant country the young performer gave birth to Malic’s firstborn.”

Laylan hesitated. Something was shaping that he did not like. “Interesting. But this was only a court rumor. I’ve never heard it. And if this person does exist, no one is likely to know who he or she is. For all practical purposes you are the heir to Canisaria.”

“Ah, but you will remember that my line abdicated two generations ago. This person, should he or she exist, is in the direct line.”

Laylan looked noncommittal. “You’ll never find this shelt, Fenrah.”

“There is something else,” she continued. “The performer was a fox shelt.”

The air in the room seemed suddenly very heavy. Laylan felt the jaws of a trap closing. “That’s unusual. I haven’t met many in this part of the country.”

Fenrah’s voiced sounded angry at last. “Haven’t you seen the impression on the inner circlet of your ring?”

“Of course I’ve seen it—a bird flying with a crescent moon.” He couldn’t keep the frustration out of his own voice any longer. “That’s *not* the royal insignia of Canisaria, Fenrah!”

“No. That is the family sigil of Ausmainern, the royal *line* of Canisaria—not the national standard as displayed on the flag and royal seal, but the family sign. I’m not surprised you never

recognized it. Family signs weren't used for state purposes. That sigil has probably never been seen on any document or bit of metal since Canisaria fell."

Chapter 3. Secrets Unraveling

Lizard rider: the shelt of a water lizard, the only native naun still extant in Middle Panamindorah. The exact number of lizard riders living in Kazar swamp today is unknown, but assumed to be less than a thousand. They have no central government or written language and generally attempt little contact with the world outside their swamp. They live in clans and are frequently at war with one another.

Lizard riders were said to be the first inhabitants of the swamp, while the goat shelts inhabited the desert and plains. At some point in the distant past, the shelts known today as swamp fauns explored Kazar and found it suited them. They quickly gained ascendancy over the ever-quarreling lizard riders. Today, the small number of lizard riders still living in the swamp has official protection from Kazar's government, though it is said that local lords still hunt the lizard riders for sport or retaliation against their occasional raids.

When studying these shelts, it is important to remember that they do not think of themselves as a nation, only as individual clans. They have been known to enlist swamp faun aid against each other whenever possible.

--Anson's Political Encyclopedia of Panamindorah

Danthra blinked in the sunlight reflected from the sheet of moving water that covered the plaza before the Palace of Danda-lay. By now the water had washed nearly all the glass and filth from the plaza. Gripping his flag of truce like a weapon, the lizard rider urged his enormous mount out of the shadow of the buildings. Nothing moved along the barricade as he advanced,

but his beast sensed his nervousness and hissed. Idar-mor was afraid, and when a water lizard was afraid, it responded with aggression.

Danthra gripped the flag tighter. He had not brought his clan up out of their protected swamp for this. His agreement had been only to open the gates of Danda-lay, should those gates be sealed by water. His clan received payment, but, more to their taste, they received looting rights and the promise of revenge against a rival clan upon successful completion of their task. He had kept his shelts out of the fighting yesterday and last night. In spite of pressure from the zool, he'd also kept them out of the disastrous storming of the barricade.

These cats have sent her half mad, thought Danthra. Outside her door, he had listened to her railing at one of her officers. How could this have happened? Hadn't they taken measures to ensure the absence of cats in the battle for Danda-lay? What of the centaur's promises? She cursed them all for a herd of geldings. Where were they now that they were needed?

She was no more pleasant with Danthra. They were all trapped in the city. If the cats gained an advantage, did he imagine they would spare his lazy mud lizards? She was sick unto death of his excuses. She was paying him three times what he was worth. "You lizard riders grow fat, while my shelts die in the streets. You *will* do your part."

Even then, Danthra had balked. He had referred to their original agreement, and she'd actually laughed. "Show it to me. Where does it say you need not take part in battle?"

Danthra had reddened. No lizard rider he had ever known could read or write. Of his fifty-six clan members, only nine had ever been to the top of the cliff before, and only three had been to a Lupricasia. He had more experience than all of them with the fauns, yet he could barely write his own name, and he could not read a word.

Sharon-zool had shaken her shiny black hair. “You must do your part. I’m not asking you to fight, not yet. All I want you to do is carry a message and look dangerous. You’re good at that—standing about and looking dangerous.”

Oscillating gentling on his lizard’s back, Danthra passed beneath the shadow of the golden winged monument. It seemed sinister today—all wings and no body. *We do not belong here—high in the air. This is a place for those with fur and feathers.*

He was close enough now to see blood stains on the statuary and furniture of the barricade. He saw bits of shattered glass gleaming in its hollows. He felt naked without a weapon. *I am in range of their arrows. If they were going to kill me, they would have done so.*

Perhaps they have no arrows left, answered a treacherous voice in his mind. *Perhaps all their archers are dead. Perhaps they are waiting to tear you apart with claws and teeth.*

Danthra would have rather done any amount of fighting than walk weaponless into a den of cats. *The zools of Kazar have always been bad for lizard riders. What made me think I could handle the wasp and avoid its sting?*

“Stop right there.”

Danthra obeyed, his mount rumbling as it scented his fear.

“What do you bring us, mud dragon? If it’s anything but a full surrender, you can take it and throw it over the Sky Walk and yourself as well.”

Danthra held himself ridged. Lizard riders did not tremble. “I bring a message from the zool of Kazar,” he said. “It is not my message, but hers.”

He heard a buzz of low voices. At last, the first voice said grudgingly, “You’re good at swimming, eh, mud dragon? Good at swimming down tunnels?”

Danthra gripped his mount harder with his knees and said nothing.

“Go to the place where the flood tunnel passes under the barricade. Enter there, and we’ll hear your words...and break your bones, too, if you forget the meaning of that flag you hold.”

“I’m unarmed,” snapped Danthra. He was relieved to feel anger replacing his fear. Anger was much easier to deal with.

Urging his water lizard along the barricade, he came to the place where the flood tunnel passed beneath. The fauns had stacked rubble across it almost to the waterline, but Danthra’s mount slipped effortlessly into the deep trench, and they swam beneath the barricade. Almost at once, Danthra and his mount came up against a dam and were forced to surface. At first, he thought he saw nothing but cats. Then, he noticed a handful of fauns standing beside a smallish cat—in his agitation, he’d forgotten the names of their kinds—and talking.

Danthra’s mount had turned its nose upstream to keep from being dashed against the dam, and it held its place in the current, keeping Danthra’s head above water. At last, one of the fauns said, “Well, do you have something to say to us or not?”

Reluctantly, Danthra guided his mount to the edge of the channel. He tossed the flag onto the paving stones and then urged Idar-mor over the edge. The cats moved away from him, growling and circling as more and more of the beast slid from the water. Danthra dismounted and stood dripping in his oiled tunic, his eyes darting from the fauns to the cats. He addressed himself to the faun who’d spoken. “Sharon-zool insists her message be delivered in a tower.”

The faun raised an eyebrow. “Any tower?”

“Any tower overlooking the plaza.”

He could see that the faun did not like this. *He’ll like it even less when he learns why.*

“May I know the reason?”

“I am to give you no message until we enter the tower.”

A murmur of conversation rippled through the ranks of cats. The faun said a few words to those around him, then, “Very well, but your mount stays here.”

The faun led the way across his half of the plaza towards the palace. Several other fauns walked with him, along with the small cat. Two large and dangerous looking cats took up the rear. “What is your name, lizard rider?” The faun sounded almost friendly.

“Danthra.”

“My name is Jubal. What is your rank?”

“We have no ranks.”

The faun frowned. “Do you serve others or do others serve you?”

“We serve ourselves.” Danthra had not expected questions about himself. He did not like this. His anger was ebbing into fear again.

The faun said no more until they’d reached the top of one of the outer towers. The room was small, and Danthra could feel the hot breath of one of the cats on the back of his neck.

“Look into the main street just beyond the plaza,” he said without waiting for Jubal’s questions.

Jubal went to the window. One of the other fauns had beaten him there and he began to curse. Danthra knew what they were looking at. Sharon-zool had probably started the executions as soon as he left with his flag of truce. Anyone with a view of the main street of the city would be able to see the ten hastily erected scaffolds with their burden of cliff fauns.

Jubal did not react as Danthra had expected—with howls or curses or possibly a command for the cats to tear the messenger limb from limb. Jubal just stood there with his back

to the room. The faun who'd been cursing grew silent. The silence stretched on until it seemed to twang like a bow string.

Danthra had expected a cue, but finally decided to deliver his message without one: "The zool of Kazar bids you surrender. If you do not, she will execute ten citizens of Danda-lay each watch. She asks you to observe that half of these will be children."

"I have *observed* that already," came Jubal's voice, and there was nothing friendly about it now. "What else?"

Danthra swallowed. "She also commands me to remind you that, while grain may be growing scares in the city, cliff fauns are still in abundance."

The oldest of the fauns present spoke sharply. "Are you saying that the swamp fauns plan to *eat* the citizens of Danda-lay if they run out of food?"

Danthra shrugged. "This is siege." *Although it's no longer clear who is besieging who.*

Jubal drew a deep breath. "Is there anything else?"

"No."

Jubal was silent a moment. "Tell your queen that I request a conference. She may name the time, but I will name the place—in the parade ground, in front of the barricade."

Danthra swallowed. "And what about your citizens?"

Jubal turned to him at last, his face a mask. "What about them, Danthra? You know her majesty. What do you suppose will happen to them if I surrender?"

Danthra said nothing. He wanted badly to leave, but the faun wasn't quite finished.

"Why do you fight for Sharon-zool, lizard rider?"

Danthra's eyes slid away. "She pays us."

“With what?”

“Gold. And revenge against the Bladderwort clan.”

“How if I out-bought her?” asked Jubal.

Danthra smiled faintly. “I doubt you could.”

The cliff faun almost smiled back. It was not an expression Danthra cared to see again. “I think I could give you something more valuable than gold or revenge, Danthra.”

“What?”

“Your life.”

* * * *

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Corry stood in his father’s lamp lit bedroom. Every wall that did not contain bookshelves contained paintings—some no larger than his palm, others nearly life-sized. He recognized himself, looking only a few years younger than he looked now.

“They’re *my* clothes, aren’t they? That’s why they fit. Except I’ve grown a bit in the last couple of years.”

Archemais stood in his doorway. Corry had slept the rest of last night in his father’s room and waited there half the morning. Archemais entered and took off his boots. “Lexis is here.”

“Is he?” Corry didn’t smile. “You might have told us before if you knew where he was.”

“I wasn’t sure. I found out while you were with the swamp fauns.”

“You knew he wasn’t in the slave camp, though.”

“Yes, but I thought the future rulers of Filinia ought to see it. Syrill is here, as well. He seems to have made his peace with Lexis. They rescued Capricia from the centaurs and sent her on to Laven-lay.”

Corry turned back to the pictures. He wasn't sure that he wanted to see Syrrill. "The pictures," he persisted. "Is that my mother?"

"Yes."

Corry stared at her. His mother had been a shelt unlike any he'd ever seen. Her hair and fur were silver-white. Her skin was black as onyx, with fine features and high cheek bones. Her eyes were as golden as a leopard's and reminded him of a leopard's gazing out of her dark face. She was a faun with split hooves and a long tail with a densely curling tuft. She looked bright and amused and happy.

"Who was she?" he whispered. "*What* was she?"

"She was an unibus," said Archemais. He put a hand on Corry's shoulder. "A unicorn shelt."

Corry shrugged him off. "Why didn't you tell me who you were when we met in the swamp? And why can't I remember her or you or anything before the last couple of years?"

"You were forced out of the world without protection—out of time, out of space. You're lucky you only lost your memories."

Corry was still looking at the picture. "Is she dead?" he whisper.

"Yes. You were there when we burned her body."

Corry bit his lip. *I can't even remember my own mother's funeral.*

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier," said Archemais. "I hoped you would remember."

Corry shook his head. He was trying very hard not to cry. He turned to his father with a snarl, hands curled like claws. "What *happened* to me?"

Archemais didn't recoil. Instead, he stepped forward and pulled his son into an embrace so tight Corry could hardly breath. He struggled for a moment, and then he really did cry.

* * * *

"His name is Jubal?" Sharon-zool clasped her hands and rubbed them together. "Of course! Of course! Why didn't I think of it before!"

"The conference?" pressed Danthra.

"Yes, yes, I'll send you back with terms in a moment. You are dismissed."

Danthra retreated with reptilian swiftness. His visit with the cliff fauns had left him shaken, and that pleased Sharon-zool. *High time he realizes what will happen to him if we lose.*

She paced her makeshift headquarters. She knew the court rumors about Jubal and Istra, but Sharon-zool also knew something else. A year ago, one of her archers had shot a raven with a suspicious object on its leg. The shelt had suspected some Fealiday plot. *Foolishness. Every plot-monger in Kazar believes the Fealiday are preparing to murder us in our beds, when in fact that brutes can hardly find their way to the privy.* The bird must have been blown off course, because it was certainly not intended for anyone in Kazar. The fauns did not use ravens for messages. It was said the wolflings had once, but no one had seen messenger ravens since the disillusion of Canisaria. The message was coded, and when her cryptographers broke the code, she learned a most interesting bit of information about the captain of Danda-lay's palace guard.

Jubal was ideally positioned for spying, but something kept her from attempting to blackmail him. *That sort of shelt is likely to have a twisted sort of honor.* Sharon-zool wasn't certain that he could be blackmailed, and exposing him would have served no purpose at that time. So she'd tucked the information away for a time when it might be useful. *A time like this.*

If Jubal is in command, Shaddock is certainly dead or fled. He would never suffer his rival any real authority in his presence, but to leave Jubal in charge of a sinking ship—that has Shaddock's mark. Daren told me there was a secret passage out of Danda-lay. Perhaps he was right. She thought back over the last day and felt certain. Everything that's happened since the barricade has been Jubal's doing. I wonder how many fauns he actually has. A few dozen?

Her mind raced over the possibilities, discarding them one by one. I have a weapon, but if I don't use it in just the right way, it will do me no good. This conference must be the place. His honor—that twisted since of honor—will be the key.

Chapter 4. Laylan

To define treason we must at some point define loyalty.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Shyshax barreled around a corner, nose to the ground, and fairly ran into Ounce. “They let you out!” Before Ounce could say anything, Shyshax continued in a rush. “I thought they would. Capricia’s here. She came in last night on a griffin’s back. Rumor has it he’s a slave from the fighting pits, and that means you were right: they really did take her all the way to Iron Mountain. I’m sure she confirmed everything you told the fauns. Meuril is white with rage. He’s declared Syrill a traitor. I think he’d hang him today if he could.”

Ounce growled. “You little dog-cats prattle as fast you run.”

Shyshax huffed. “Like I said: nice of them to let you out of your cage this morning. I, of course, was never in one. Have you seen Laylan? He went to the wolfling quarters and hasn’t come back. I don’t know if he’s heard the news.”

Ounce dropped an enormous paw on the stone floor and started on his way again. “No, I haven’t seen your—” He seemed to think better of his words. “I haven’t seen him.”

Shyshax matched Ounce’s pace easily in spite of his shorter legs. His broken tail was pinned awkwardly at his side. He kept forgetting and trying to twitch it. “Where are you going?”

“To council.”

“They’ve asked for you?”

“No, I thought it would be a good place to hunt down breakfast.”

Shyshax shook his ears. “Something’s wrong with my hearing. I thought I just heard you make a joke.”

Ounce smiled—just barely. “You appear to be completely healed.”

“Not at all! Look at my tail. The bandages itch worse than fleas, and it still hurts when I take a deep breath.”

“Doesn’t seem to stop you.”

“Are you always this pleasant?”

“Only when I’ve been in a cage for two days.”

Shyshax laughed. “That’s a lie.” He jumped over the snow leopard and put his nose to the ground again.

It was another half watch before he found Laylan. The fox shelt had gone to the roof. Shyshax was puzzled to find his friend sitting there, silent, far from the buzz of news in the castle below. He approached slowly, not wanting to startle him. Laylan was sitting rather close to the edge. Shyshax cleared his throat, but Laylan did not turn. “Laylan?” He padded up beside him. Laylan had something clutched in one fist. Shyshax could smell his distress.

“Laylan?” His whiskers were tickling the tufts of Laylan’s ears, but Laylan did not look up. “What’s happened?” asked Shyshax. “Did you hear about Capricia? I know you’re not happy about Syrill. Perhaps there’s some mistake. We won’t know until he’s here to defend himself. Laylan, what’s wrong?”

Shyshax nuzzled his neck, but Laylan wouldn’t even look at him. With mounting unease, Shyshax tried to paw his friend back from the edge of the roof, but Laylan wouldn’t have that either. “Talk to me,” pleaded Shyshax. Laylan had never refused to speak to him before.

At last, Shyshax backed away, bristling with frustration and alarm. “Alright. Fine. You stay there, and I’ll go get—” He tried to think of who he would get. It should have been Syrill.

Syrill had always been their truest friend in Laven-lay. *Who else? Chance? Perhaps. Chance owes us. Laylan didn't abandon him when it would have been prudent, and I think he's fond of us, of Laylan anyway.* "Fond" seemed entirely too strong a word to apply to Chance, but Shyshax was growing desperate. *Who else? Fenrah? Laylan likes her. She—* An idea occurred to him. *Laylan went to talk to her; that's the last place he went.*

Shyshax growled low in his throat. With a final look at Laylan's back, he darted down the stairs. By the time he reached the wolfling quarters, he was fairly boiling. The guards couldn't seem to decide whether he had clearance in the area, but when he began to snarl, his fur standing on end, they changed their minds. No one was paying them enough for this.

Shyshax bounded into the wolfling rooms. He found Fenrah in the courtyard and began shouting at her. "What did you say to him, wolf bitch? After he spared your life in that courtyard! Do you really think he couldn't have shot you? He couldn't bear to kill you, and now you've said something to make him wish he was dead! Well, let's see if it works on me!"

Before he could think about it, he lunged at her, jaws clicking on air as she stepped back. Dance was on his feet in an instant, white teeth bare to the gums. His chest was a mass of bandages, but he moved as though he didn't feel them. Shyshax thought for a moment the wolf would rip his head off.

Then Fenrah shouted, and a warning arrow thumped down from the guards above. Dance paused, legs stiff, tail straight, hackles as high as his ears. Fenrah stepped out from behind him. "Where is he?" she asked.

"On the roof," he grated. "On the *edge* of the roof."

“Oh dear.” Fenrah stroked Dance’s hackles down. “He left so suddenly. He wouldn’t let me finish. I told the guards someone should go after him, but they said they couldn’t—”

“Finish what?”

Fenrah sighed. “Come inside, and I’ll—”

“I have to know now!” Shyshax’s voice broke. “He won’t talk to me. He won’t move. He just sits there staring at his hands—at whatever he’d holding. Did you give him something?”

Fenrah winced. “Not exactly.”

* * * *

“Long ago,” said Archemais, “when the Creator made our world and everything in it, he made the creatures we call wizards. They were the lords and stewards of our world—the gods of Panamindorah. They were protectors, judges, mediators. Their ability to shift meant that they could sympathize with all races. The wizards could understand fauns because they could *be* a faun. They could understand wolflings, because they could *be* a wolfling.

“Some say the wizards abused their power from the beginning, others that they went bad very slowly. It is perhaps a blessing that our women can bear a child only once in a hundred years. There were never many pure bloods. By the time I first looked on the world, Middle Panamindorah was embroiled in half a dozen wars. Every town and city had its wizards, and everyone of them wanted more power. Wizards started the wars, but it was shelts and talking beasts who bled for them.

“Our temple was one of the oldest in Ariea (that city is dust now, forgotten even by the stones). I was standing at our Monument one day in the autumn twilight, when the Firebird came to me. He gave me the flute—the Muse, he called it.”

Corry frowned. “What are the Monuments, anyway? What is the Firebird?”

Archemais shrugged. “Some say he is the Creator or one of his aspects. Others say he is a spirit-child of the Creator, born at the moment of our world’s appearing, bound to watch over us. Many believe he is the keeper and judge of the dead and that he guards the gateway between this world and others. Some say he is the personification of the best in all of us, others that he acts independently. The Monuments are his sigils.”

“You don’t sound like you know what he is,” said Corry.

“I’m not sure I do. Or perhaps he is all of these things. He asked me to be his Prophet. I was young and idealistic, and I wanted to save the world. I accepted.

“The flute is a powerful tool, but it is only a tool. It has no mind. Like any tool, it can be used or misused. The Firebird gave the flute one special quality to keep it safe. He made it visible only in the hand of the prophet. At all other times, it cannot be seen.” He hesitated. “May I—? You *do* have it, don’t you?”

Corry reached inside his tunic and drew out the silver chain with its invisible weight. His fingers closed over the smooth, metallic surface of the flute. Archemais reached out, and Corry handed it to him.

Nothing happened. Archemais shut his eyes and leaned back, cradling the flute in both hands. He looked sad enough to cry. “I thought so. I am a prophet no more. I failed the Firebird...and all of you.”

“What did you do?”

His father smiled wanly. “I fell in love. But before I talk about that, you should hear about your uncle, Gabalon.”

Corry glanced at one of the pictures, in which Archemais and Gabalon were little older than himself. Gabalon looked at that age eerily like his nephew. His eyes were the true green, not the gray cast of Archemais's, his hair the true coal black, not the dark chestnut that shown across from Corry in the lamp light. Corry remembered the picture in Danda-lay. Even Syrril had noticed the likeness. "Why don't I look like my mother?" *Or you.*

"The wizard blood is stronger than any shelt's," said his father. "Wizard features are always dominant in an iteration. Perhaps your children...or your children's children—"

Corry cut him off. "Tell me about Gabalon."

* * * *

Shyshax lay next to Laylan, half curled around him on the roof. They'd been sitting like that for a quarter watch, and Shyshax had calmed down a little. He knew now what Laylan was holding. Even if Fenrah's story had not been enough, Shyshax knew Laylan's hands as well as his own paws, and a close inspection showed him the lighter band of skin where his mother's ring should be.

"Fenrah told me," he had informed Laylan. "It's nothing. I told you what Cleo and Ounce said about me, but I'm not agonizing about what we did for Syrril during the cat wars. It doesn't make any difference who your parents were. You never gave allegiance to anyone, so you never betrayed anyone. Even if you are the heir to that broken throne, it was wolflings who sent your mother away to die in the wilderness. If you owe them anything, it's exactly what we gave them." Shyshax watched Laylan's knuckles whiten around the ring and decided to change tack.

"Most of the wolflings we killed were real bandits, anyway—thieves and murderers, shelts who wouldn't scruple to kill for a few white cowries. You were never the kind to torture

wolflings, never the kind to bring them in alive for the fauns to kill. And you never left them in the traps for days to starve. Laylan, at least look at me!”

But Laylan would not look, and he would not speak. At last, Shyshax put his head in Laylan’s lap, forcing his nose under the clenched fist, and was silent. He tried to remember everything Laylan had ever told him about his past. Laylan had not spoken of it often, and as far as Shyshax could make out, there wasn’t much to tell.

Laylan had been abandoned when he was five years old on the porch of a wood faun farmer in the far, lonely south, hundreds of miles from Laven-lay. His mother was a fox shelt, but Laylan had only one memory of her—a tearful good-bye in the chill dark of night, before a strange house, with the smell of fauns all around them. She had been injured—Laylan guessed by a wild animal. He now suspected the foaming sickness.

Before she staggered away into the woods, she had slipped the gold ban from her finger. “Keep this, child, and remember that your mother loved you.” His fingers were too small for the ring then, but he had held it in his fist as he watched her limp away. Laylan never saw his mother again. Shyshax had never seen the ring off his finger.

The fauns were not openly hostile to wolflings then. Canisaria was still a wealthy and respected nation, if growing increasingly embroiled in Filinian politics. However, faun/wolfing relations had always been strained along the borders, where wolflings occasionally poached deer. Fox shelts were one of the little races, living on the borders of everything. They had a reputation for thievery and tricks, and the fauns could not decide at first what to do with Laylan. They took him to the town council, and Laylan could remember sitting in a corner, crying while the fauns argued about him.

A family in the community had finally agreed to raise Laylan, as they'd recently lost a son and needed the help. They did not treat him as their own children, but better than a servant. From what Shyshax could glean, his friend had begun very early to be a kind of shadow—drifting around the edges of the faun community, more often out than in, and bothering no one. That fact seemed to be a hallmark of Laylan's life among the fauns: that he bothered no one. He required little care, little food, and little love. He was never welcome, but he was tolerated.

Laylan worked hard for his foster family, but he was a clumsy farmer. He was, on the other hand, a first-rate hunter. He began making his own traps when he was eight from wood and woven leaves. By the time he was twelve, he was buying metal ones, and when he was fourteen, he began making them himself. By that time, Canisaria was in serious trouble, and wolflings were pouring over the border—hungry, desperate, and frequently armed. Deer were killed and some shelts as well.

In the small towns, Laylan found himself more and more unwelcome. He looked too much like a wolfling. One day he came home and found his possessions packed and waiting on the porch, together with a few cowries and a several day's supply of food. Laylan had taken his things and left without saying good-bye.

Shyshax had never been able to deduce from the story whether Laylan felt bitter about this second abandonment. He never bothered to give the fauns their names. Certainly, he never called them anything like “father” or “mother.” *They were never his family*, thought Shyshax. *They never wanted to be.*

Soon after leaving the farm, Laylan had found Shyshax. He was only a cub, small and frightened, crying beside the corpse of a female cheetah. Shyshax himself had no memory of his

mother or her death. His first memories were of playing tug-for-tug with a bit of rawhide around Laylan's campfire. He'd turned back flips, trying to make his solemn master laugh.

In time Laylan acquired a crossbow and a sword, and he practiced until he was proficient at both. Shyshax grew to be a speedy mount. They traveled east, trapping and hunting as they went. Laylan sold his furs in the towns and villages. Sometimes he was allowed to trade, and sometimes he was chased away with stones and arrows.

Laylan soon learned that the larger cities were more tolerant and brought higher prices. By the time of Shyshax's first clear memories, the bounty laws had been instated. Laylan discovered that if he concentrated on wolflings and wolves he could nearly double his profit. *But we did have scruples*, Shyshax told himself. *We always went after known outlaws. We left plenty of wolflings alone.*

Not that there hadn't been more than enough known outlaws. Laven-lay's refusal to come to the aid of Sardor-de-lor left a bitter taste in the mouths of wolflings. The refugees were desperate and angry. Many had not the least idea how to survive as an outlaw, but for a time they still ran circles around the clumsy wood faun hunters. Not so Laylan. In the beginning, he took whichever wolflings he decided to go after. Soon, however, the bandits improved in skill, and so did the faun hunters. Shyshax could remember an evening when Laylan sat by the fire and turned a leg-hold-trap over and over in one hand, while in the other, he held a lock and key mechanism. "How to hold a shelt," he'd muttered.

Shelts escaped easily, if painfully, from the traps normally used to catch wolves. Laylan introduced a lock into his traps. Plenty of wolflings knew how to pick a lock, but Laylan

continued to perfect his mechanism, changing the locks frequently. Without access to smithies, most wolflings were in no position to find a solution to his increasingly sophisticated traps.

They weren't the only ones. Laylan caught a few fauns in his traps and earned himself a royal reprimand. For a time, he was forbidden to set them. Even so, he'd developed a solid reputation and was no longer in danger of being set-upon by most fauns. Laylan worked his way to the very gates of Laven-lay and the region around the Triangle Road. Bandit activity was rampant here and bounties high. He stayed in the region.

Laylan's reputation continued to grow until the day an angry young prince approached him in a quest for revenge. Chance wanted the Raiders. He would pay Laylan a handsome salary if he would concentrate on them exclusively. The offer interested Laylan—not so much for the money, but the prospect of doing what no faun had been able to do. Of course he had heard of the Raiders. He had actually taken a few tentative shots at them, but he made a comfortable living hunting less efficient outlaws, and he had no reason to exert himself over the Raiders. Chance gave him one, and he took it.

Laylan had uncovered information about Fenrah's pack that no one else had been able to find. He learned their past, their present habits, and, as far as possible, their future plans. *There's where our problem started*, thought Shyshax. He did not understand the pack instinct himself—few cats did—but he knew of its existence. Laylan was part wolfling. He could no more escape the pack instinct than Shyshax could escape the instinct to groom. *He looked at the Raiders too hard for too long*, thought Shyshax. *They turned into his pack, and he never even knew it until that courtyard in Selbis. Laylan's not used to guilt. Now it's eating him alive.*

Chapter 5. The Muse

The stories say that once the world was full of music—that tree and sky and mountain all had their song and answered each other in harmony. Some say that as the gods died, the music stuttered into silence. Others say that we simply lost the ability to hear it.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

“All Gabalon saw in the stories of the past were examples of wizards foiling each other. He deduced that a wizard might gain ascendancy over shelts, if he did not have to worry about his own kind. As he grew older he built a powerbase of other wizards who shared his ideas and shelts who were being mistreated. Gabalon styled himself their savoir and set out to conquer. He killed every wizard who did not bend the knee and many who did. The Muse saved me—plucked me into the place where time and space run together and doors open on all the worlds. I visited Earth. When I returned to Panamindorah, I was shocked at the number of years that had passed. Nearly everyone I had known was dead. As far as I could tell, there were only eight other wizards left—Gabalon, and seven loyal followers.

“He was abusing his power. Whole species of shelts and animals had disappeared, and the meaning of the Monuments had been forgotten. I worked with the rebels, fought alongside them, made their victories my own. Sometimes the Firebird showed me things, though not often. Do not ask me to explain how he chooses when to interfere. I do not know. One summer, we took a city in old Filinia that had been held by one of Gabalon’s lieutenants for a generation. In dungeons, we found an unibus. Unibus are not like other shelts. They are shape-shifters and magic users, and they live a long life, though they are easier to kill than a wizard. Like me, she

was older than she looked. She remember things and people from long ago. We shared a past, and over the next year, we became close.

“To love is to fear. I was afraid of her dying, but more than that, I was afraid of being called away, of being required at any moment to leave her and return to find nothing but her scattered ashes. I did not know what the Firebird would say about my taking a mate. I did not ask. I was too afraid of his answer. So, I put away the flute. Previously, I had never taken it from my person, but now I hid it in a place I thought safe. I told myself that I would return for it when her life was over, but I would not be the prophet while she lived. Worst of all, I told no one. I still sat on their councils and gave my advice, but I knew that I no longer spoke with the authority of the prophet. The music no longer came to me, and the Firebird was silent.

“You were born about that time, Corellian. The shelts and I were no longer winning, but were settling into a comfortable stalemate with Gabalon. For several years, I lived quietly and loved my wife and watched my child grow. And then one day our enemies achieved a strange victory—a victory wreaking of magic. I knew before I even went to look that the Muse had been stolen and by whom.

“I found also a change in my own person. A dragon is a wizard’s true form. In the beginning, dragons were all feathered, like birds, and they breathed flame—an echo of the Firebird, living Monuments. I had heard that Gabalon and his companions were under a curse—that they had lost their feathers and their flames. Now I had my own curse—the snake—which has become my true form, for a snake is but a dragon fallen. Perhaps the Creator will give me back my true form one day, but for now, whenever I reach for it, I find only the snake.

“The war went badly for us after that. The wolflings fought hardest, and we lived among them. One day your mother was killed in a foolish skirmish—shot in the dark by our own shelts.” Time had obviously deadened the wound, but some of the pain lived still in his voice.

Corry wanted to reach out to him, but he was angry—at whom, he wasn’t sure. “What about me?”

“You were thirteen. Two years later, the king of the wolves, Telsar, was captured by Gabalon on the eve of a great battle. We were close to the royal family, and you felt the loss keenly, especially as we knew he would be tortured.

“The insult was enough to galvanize the wolves. They marched on Selbis and might have taken it if Gabalon had not used the flute to catch the army in a time-Fold. He broke the wood to do it, and you can still find evidence of the damage if you know where to look.

“*You* crept away from the army the night before we were to march on Selbis. I believe that you intended to free Telsar. You were still learning to shift and not very good at it. I went after you and escaped the fate of the Durian wolves, but I could not find you. Later, I learned that Gabalon had caught you and used the Muse to send you...*somewhere*. No one knew where. I searched frantically, but found nothing.

“Some hundred years later, the cliff fauns defeated Gabalon and destroyed Selbis. I searched the ruins for days, but found no trace of you. My brother used to send me mocking notes about you from time to time, but with his disappearance, even those ceased.”

“Disappearance?” interrupted Corry. “I thought he was killed.”

Archemais shook his head. “Wounded, but his body was never found. He would have had to consolidate his useful tissue and shift to something rather small, but I’m sure he lived.”

Corry frowned. He wanted to ask a dozen questions—about shifting, about his mother, about dragons, about the flute. He wanted to ask all those questions, and he wanted at the same time to walk out of this room and never speak to his father again.

Archemais handed back the flute. “Come,” he said. “We have work to do.”

* * * *

Shyshax heard the footsteps on the stairs. He’d talked to Chance before coming back up here and had expected some kind of help before now. A moment later, the wind brought him the scent of the visitors. Chance had brought Fenrah. She came and sat down on the other side of Laylan, who never stirred. After a moment, she said, “I wanted to show you something before you ran off.”

He did not look at her, though her movements must have been visible out of his peripheral vision. Fenrah drew her dagger. She raised it a hand’s breadth above the smooth stone of the castle roof, then drove down. The blade hit the stone with a dull ring. It stayed there for a moment while she continued to bear down on it. Then, slowly, the dagger began to sink *into* the stone. Shyshax stared. Above his head, he heard Chance catch his breath.

Laylan blinked, then *looked* at the dagger. It seemed almost to be melting the stone, like a hot brick on ice. When Fenrah had gotten it half buried in the roof, she pulled it out. The dagger came away smoothly, leaving a thin slit in the stone.

Laylan’s eyes flicked to her face. “Move quickly,” she said, “and it behaves like any other dagger. In a fight, you’d never know it’s special. Move slowly, though, and it will cut absolutely anything.”

“Gabalon’s dagger,” murmured Chance. “A cursed weapon.”

Fenrah tapped the clear gold jewel in the pommel. “That’s unicorn gold, nothing else it could be. I think the blade is of a piece with the pommel. The jewel is just cut and polished differently. If you polish the blade, it looks much the same color.”

Laylan spoke at last. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Nothing. I just thought you’d like to know, since the dagger is how you found us.”

Laylan looked away from her. Shyshax knew he felt tricked. *But at least he’s talking.*

Fenrah drew a deep breath. “I care about the wolflings. Their well-being is my first concern. What you have done or not done in the past is not of primary importance to me now. What matters is that you have a legitimate claim to the Canisarian throne, *and* the fauns know and trust you. They do not trust me.”

Chance leaned on his staff. “She’s right, Laylan. If you speak for the wolflings in council, you will get a better reception. You have, after all, never robbed or killed any of them.”

Laylan gave a bitter laugh. “Yes, but can the wolflings say the same? I don’t think they want me representing us.”

“What they want,” said Fenrah, “is to *live*—without traps or bounties or gibbets outside every town. You promised me in Selbis that if I got you out of there, you would try to do something about the bounty laws.”

Laylan’s eyes flicked to her face again, and Shyshax felt him tense.

“Yes,” she murmured, “you have given your word that far. You can’t kill yourself without doing that.”

Shyshax growled. “He wasn’t going to—”

But Laylan’s hand closed gently around his muzzle. “I’ll do what I can, Fenrah.”

Chapter 6. Wheels Within Wheels

It is always better to have our black boxes opened by friends than by enemies.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

In the frosty dawn, Jubal stood by the barricade and waited. He felt intensely uneasy.

What is she doing? Sharon-zool had consented to the conference without argument and with no objectionable stipulations. She wanted to meet at dawn in the place he had specified. She'd even agreed to stop hanging cliff fauns until they had completed their parlay. The only odd part of her request was that all of his fauns and at least a hundred of his cats be in attendance. Jubal knew, then, that she guessed the small number of his remaining fauns, but that was hardly avoidable, once she knew she was dealing with the palace guard. He had wondered if she meant to use the conference as a diversion while she attempted a flanking attack, but that seemed imposable. The whole length of the barricade could be seen from their conference point, and Jubal knew of no other entrance to the palace. He was sure that if Sharon did, she would have used it by now.

But she's planning something. What? Jubal turned towards a flurry of trumpets. Sharon-zool certainly did not intend to sneak into the plaza. She came mounted with a glittering escort.

Jubal stepped forward to meet them. Tavaris and Loop came with him, along with a small guard of cats. The rest of the fauns and cats stood on or just in front of the barricade, watching.

Sharon-zool rode a milk-white goat, its twisted horns crusted with jewels, its green and silver livery flashing in the morning sun. Behind her rode perhaps thirty fauns, along with a handful of lizard riders. Jubal glanced around at Tavaris. "If anything goes wrong here," he muttered, "I want you back inside the barricade. Don't wait for me; just go."

Tavaris raised an eyebrow, but Jubal continued. “There aren’t many fauns left who know how to command. If she can kill or cripple us—”

They were within hailing distance now, and one of the trumpeters began listing Sharon’s titles. Jubal hardly heard. She had dismounted and was striding towards him, followed by her retinue. She was closing the distance more rapidly than Jubal and his councilors—*trying to get even closer to the barricade*, Jubal realized. *How can this be to her advantage?*

Then Jubal saw her eyes, and he *knew*. He could not say how or when or where, but Sharon-zool had discovered his secret. *This is not a parlay*, thought Jubal. *This is a trial—mine.*

* * * *

“It’s my mother, isn’t it?” said Chance. “The wealthy patron Laylan suspected was helping your pack.”

Sham nodded. Fenrah had given her consent, but in the meantime Chance had begun to put things together on his own. “Your mother contacted us several years after Sardor-de-lor fell, when we were still children, living on the edges of Canisaria with an outlaw band still fighting the cats. She gave us money and food, contacts among sympathetic fauns, our first spy network. Without her, we might have been caught up in some hopeless plot by the old nobility to retake our city and died as symbols of a lost cause. Instead, we burrowed deep into wood faun territory and accepted our lives as outlaws. Because of her gifts, we were able to help other wolfling packs.”

Chance frowned. “But my mother hardly ever leaves the palace, and she’s something of a recluse. How did she orchestrate all this?”

Sham hesitated. “No one ever told us, but we think your mother handles our affairs through one main contact. They’ve set up an elaborate diversion to hide the arrangement.”

* * * *

Jubal glanced at Tavaris again. “What I said,” he whispered fiercely, “remember.”

“Filinians! Fauns of Danda-lay!” Sharon-zool did not even pretend to be speaking to Jubal. She projected her voice over his head at the crowd around the barricade. “You have all been deceived! I and my shelts are here to liberate you from a wolfling plot to take over your city and wreak revenge on the cats and their allies.”

A murmur broke out along the barricade—jeers and laughter, mostly, but she had their attention. Whatever they had expected, this wasn’t it. Tavaris glanced at Jubal and realized what was coming. *Don’t be a fool, Jubal. After all these years, don’t be a fool.*

Sharon-zool looked at Jubal, and her mouth twisted into a smile. “It was a clever plot. It almost succeeded. But now, at this barricade, before these witnesses, it ends. Tell them, Jubal: how you used a little scandal to cover a larger one. Tell them what you’ve really been doing with Queen Istra.

* * * *

“Jubal,” said Chance softly.

“Yes,” said Sham, “We think Jubal and Istra cultivated the rumor about their affair, because they rightly assumed Shadock would be too proud to acknowledge it. He would try to cover it up as long as they were discrete. His distaste would prevent him from looking too closely at their activities.”

Chance was quiet a long moment. “When I tried to hang you, Jubal was there. I was angry about it. I knew shelts would say he came to see my victory because he was my sire.”

Sham grinned. “He came to see *me*. He opened the gates for Fenny and Sevn and Xerous and told them where to find the materials for the scaffold. Hualien’s rats did the rest.”

* * * *

The barricade went silent at the mention of Istra’s name. “She disagreed with Shadock’s decision to leave Sardor-de-lor to its fate,” continued Sharon-zool. “She schemed to find and aid the heir to the Canisarian thrown, but she knew she could never have any direct contact with wolflings, nor would she be able to contact the network of wolfling sympathizers among the fauns. Istra needed a footpad—a clever shelt with wolfling sympathies who could mingle with all classes of fauns without arousing suspicion. She found such a person in her palace guard. She raised him to Captain in spite of his low birth and young age, and they devised a ploy to keep their activities unsuspected. In order to justify the secret notes and the private meetings, which would certainly become known in time, they spread the rumor of Jubal’s affair with the queen.”

A low rumbled swept the barricade. “You cats have lived and died to make Canisaria your own,” continued Sharon-zool. “You know very well the wolflings would like nothing better than to see you all shot. Yet now you blithely follow the orders of a faun sold heart and soul to Fenrah Ausla! You fauns, do you realize that this ‘defender’ of the city once opened the gates to the Raider pack so that it could humiliate Danda-lay?”

The noise from the barricade had swollen to a roar. Sharon-zool let them argue and shout, her dark eyes gleaming at Jubal’s tight-mouthed glare. Tavaris glanced at Loop. The Lynx was frowning from Jubal to Sharon-zool. *They will not believe it*, thought Tavaris, *never. Unless...*

Oh, Jubal you've lied about this so flawlessly that not even Laylan or Chance suspects you. But, whispered a little voice in Tavaris's head, *not this way. He doesn't know how to lie this way.*

Sharon-zool let the clamor on the barricade die down.

Jubal spoke at last, "Who set fire to the library and scriptorium? Who took bread at our tables two days ago and then shed the blood of our soldiers in the streets last night? Who hung cliff faun children before their parent's eyes? The only danger to Danda-lay in this plaza is you and your shelts. We did not come here to bandy accusations with you, Sharon-zool, but to arrange for your—" he spat out the word, "departure. Though it pains me to say so, we will let you walk out of here if you leave now. This offer will not come again."

Sharon-zool only smiled at him. She did not answer a word until silence had returned to the plaza. "Do you deny that you have aided wolflings and their allies, Jubal? That you have pledged your services to Fenrah Ausla? Swear you have not. Swear it on your honor as a guard and defender of this city. Swear it on the Creator's throne. Swear it, and I and all these shelts and cats will be content." She swept the plaza with her arm as though to include herself with the watchers on the barricade.

Tavaris groaned inwardly. He watched Jubal's mouth working in his pale face. *We are lost.* For five heartbeats, the barricade held its breath. When it became clear that Jubal was not going to answer, pandemonium broke loose.

Chapter 7. More Mirrors

If we are to learn balance, we must at some point lose our footing.

--the Swordmaster of Ense

Jubal turned to Tavaris and gave him a shove. "What I said!"

Dimly, Tavaris was aware of Loop shouting at their escort. The big cats were arguing with one another, and at least one seemed on the point of springing at Jubal. Several others looked like they might jump at the swamp fauns. A large number of cats had leapt over the barricade and were running towards them, but whether they meant to help or harm Jubal was never clear. Sharon-zool gave a hand signal which brought swamp faun soldiers from every building bordering the plaza. They surged forward to hit the disorganized group of cats and cliff fauns, pushing them back to the barricade and then over it, breaking like water across a dam.

In the midst of the fighting, Tavaris caught a glimpse of Jubal swept up by a lizard rider. He had not even attempted to flee.

* * * *

"I have another story about this dagger," said Fenrah. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Alright," said Laylan.

"When we came to Selbis, we investigated the inner keep. I found the dagger on the first day and by the second day, I knew something of what it could do.

"On the third day we were walking in one of the great halls, and there was a mirror along one wall. The castle must have had mirrors everywhere at one time—many of them smashed now, but not all. I turned around, and there he was—a huge black wolf, the biggest I'd ever seen.

He was in the mirror and nowhere else. Later, we saw him in other mirrors, too. He followed us around the castle.

“None of the others believed he was a real wolf. They thought he was some sort of echo of magic or something meant to frighten trespassers. He howled and barked sometimes, but we could not hear him. On the fifth day, a strange creature joined him—a shelt the size of a child, with rat’s feet and tail. He breathed on the glass and wrote with his finger, but he wrote in the old picture script, and we could not read it.

“On the seventh day, I found a room with a freestanding door. It was made of many kinds of wood, and it faced a mirror. When I came around the front, I saw that it was sealed with three seals, which I think were meant to represent the three moons—blue lapis for Wanderer, yellow gold for Runner, and for Dragon a cloth that might have been soaked in blood.

“Everything else in the room was dusty and crumbling, but the door looked untouched. The wolf in the mirror pawed at it, ran around it, gave a silent bark. The rat shelt wrote frantic unreadable messages on the glass.

“We tried to cut the seals or pry them off with a sword, but we couldn’t make a mark, not even in the cloth. Finally, I thought to try the dagger. It went through the seals as though they were made of silk.

“As the door in the room opened, it’s reflection opened in the mirror, and the wolf and the rat shelt came through. They’d scarily bounded into the room before a wind sucked the door closed again, and there was a sound like a hinge being twisted out of true. Then the whole door crumbled into ash.

Laylan sat up straight. “Then Dance *is* a Durian wolf—a talking wolf.”

Fenrah scowled. “I believe he was. Until someone cut out his tongue.”

* * * *

Danthra pushed Jubal from the water lizard and ushered him up the main street at sword point while the battled roared behind them. “You didn’t even try to run,” muttered Danthra as he maneuvered Jubal into an alcove and unlocked a door.

Jubal said nothing. He hardly looked like the same shelt Danthra had met in the courtyard—so grim and self-contained. This faun looked beaten. Danthra directed him into the house that Sharon-zool was using as her headquarters. “You’re to wait here.”

Jubal’s gaze fell on the Monument that graced the foyer of most cliff faun houses. The little brazier in front was cold, and someone had hacked off the golden wings.

“I know why you didn’t run,” murmured Danthra. “You’re a liability to them now. They’d fight over what to do with you.”

“Jubal of Undrun.” Sharon-zool’s voice fairly purred. She stepped into the room, shaking blood from one spattered sleeve. Her bodyguard came with her. “Quite a show, wasn’t it?”

Jubal looked at her with dull eyes. Sharon-zool walked across the room and slapped him—backhanded, so that her ring left a cut across his cheek. “You have been far more trouble than you’re worth, Captain, but now it’s over.”

Jubal blinked. He reached up to touch the blood welling on his cheek.

“It’s wonderfully ironic,” continued Sharon-zool. “The wolflings finally have their revenge on Danda-lay. The city fell because of them, and they weren’t even here. In a larger sense, you’ve won, eh? This is what you wanted.”

Jubal's eyes came to life for a moment. He started to say something, then decided it wasn't worth it.

Sharon-zool sneered. "Is this the faun whose threats so unnerved you, Danthra? Look at him. He's already given up."

She turned to one of her guards and murmured something. Then she looked back at Danthra. "Take him to the tower room. Cut his throat at the exact moment our flag flies unchallenged from the castle's peak. Not before."

Danthra stood up straight. "My shelts—"

"Will be fine," murmured Sharon. "I will take personal care of them."

Danthra's eyes widened and flicked around the room. None of his subordinates were present. He'd even left his mount outside.

"I'm sure they will fight bravely and return home laden with treasure," continued Sharon-zool.

"They won't fight for you!" snarled Danthra. "You can't take my clan from me!"

"In the heat of battle? With the smell of blood in their nostrils and swords in their hands? They will fight. They will fight well and even the odds with the big cats."

Danthra's naturally white skin had gone even paler with rage. She watched him dispassionately. "I don't intend to waste them, Danthra. I think most will return to you."

"Our agreement—!"

Her voice hardened. "I am sick unto death of your bleating about our agreement. Best not do anything that might cloud my judgment." She jerked her head towards the stairs. "I have given *you*, at least, a safe, easy job. Be content, and take him!"

Danthra looked at the fauns, several with half-drawn swords. *If I resist, she will cut me down. Perhaps she even wants me to resist. Then my clan will be in confusion, trying to choose a new leader, and she can control them more easily.*

His glance fell on Jubal. The faun was staring at Sharon-zool. Danthra's eyes narrowed. No, not at her. At the mirror behind her. And in the mirror...

Danthra swallowed a yell. The Monument in the mirror was *on fire*—the broken wings replaced by feathers of flame. Danthra knew, even before he looked, that the Monument in the room was still dark and cold. His legs felt weak.

Sharon-zool caught Jubal's fixed stare, but did not see what he was looking at. Danthra glanced around at the swamp faun guards and realized that they could not see the apparition. Suddenly, Danthra *had* to be out of that room. He took Jubal's arm and directed him towards the stairs. Jubal came slowly, glancing back at the mirror.

* * * *

"I just want to know one thing," said Corry to Syrrill. "Are you the one who pushed me off that dancing platform?"

Syrrill looked up. They were alone in Archemais's library. "No." Syrrill's ears drooped. He looked like a shadow of himself. "But I might as well have been."

Corry nodded. He didn't trust himself to have a civil conversation right now, so he turned to leave. "Targon wanted to kill you," said Syrrill. "I didn't understand why. He said you would interfere, that you were too close to Capricia. I told him that was ridiculous, but he insisted, and the swamp fauns didn't care one way or the other. I told them I would personally accompany you

to Lupricasia, make sure you didn't cause trouble. It was the only way he would agree to let you live. I see now he was only using me to keep track of you."

Corry's hand clenched. "*You used me*, Syrrill—to find Capricia."

"I know," whispered Syrrill. "I'm sorry."

Corry left the room.

* * * *

Jubal saw very little of the battle for the palace of Danda-lay. By the time he reached the tower window with Danthra at his back, the fauns and cats had abandoned any attempt to defend the barricade and backed up into the palace itself. He could imagine the fighting—room to room, hallway to hallway, ambush in the dim passages, cats stalking the swamp fauns as they would in their native wilderness. Yet in the end, even the cats stood little chance against an organized, systematic attack with careful use of arrows and spears. Danthra's terrible water lizards would certainly speed things up. He'd reached the tower in time to see several of them disappearing into the palace complex. Even that brief glimpse told him that they were faster than they looked, and their huge jaws were reputed to have tremendous crushing strength.

And surely, he thought, Sharon-zool is not foolish enough to fight the cats for the whole palace. All she needs is control of the flood tunnels. As soon as the water stopped, the other half of the swamp faun army would sweep down from Port Ory and crush the defenders.

He could imagine the little room deep in the subbasements and the dripping passage leading to it. They were narrow, those passages, defensible. But for how long? And would the fauns and cats be sufficiently organized to rally around the proper junctions? Jubal didn't think so. They were confused and frustrated and likely to argue. Even taking himself out of the

equation, their fragile trust of one another would remain severely strained. *Loop trusted Tavaris, but if Tavaris is killed...? And what if Loop is killed? Will the cats keep fighting? Why should they? If Sharon-zool offers them a truce, they would be mad to refuse.*

Jubal watched the swamp faun activity in the courtyard around the barricade. He saw Sharon-zool a few times, giving orders at a safe distance. He saw mounted fauns running into and out of the castle, and occasionally they brought out bound cats and took them away. No cliff fauns emerged from the buildings alive.

Shadows began to grow long, and still the flood tunnels gushed. Jubal felt a deep pang of guilt as he imagined the passages in the subbasement, choked with dead bodies, slippery with blood. *I should be down there—not up here, where my death will mean nothing.* He tried to remember why he'd given himself up, but his mind kept thrashing like a hooked and desperate fish. The Raiders, Istra, bargaining with Loop, Sharon-zool's accusations, the expressions of confusion and betrayal on the faces of the cliff fauns and the cats, even on Tavaris's face—they all blurred together in his mind.

Jubal didn't realize he was falling until Danthra caught him. Then he was on knees, retching. He tasted acid and tears. When he raised his head, Danthra was crouching in front of him. "How long has it since you slept?"

Jubal shook his head. He couldn't remember.

"When did you last eat?"

Jubal didn't respond.

Danthra glanced around. The room was obviously a study, with a desk in one corner and bookshelves lining the walls. A rug lay in the center of the room, and Danthra dragged Jubal to it and made him lie down. Then he left.

Staring up at the patterned tiles of the ceiling, Jubal felt dimly surprised that Danthra would leave him alone. *Maybe he thinks me too weak to escape. Maybe he's right.* Jubal concentrated on a small fault in one of the tiles directly overhead. He tried to think of how it might be fixed. While he was considering various types of grout, he thought he might have heard a shout from below, but he felt no concern.

Danthra returned moments later with bread and cheese, candied nuts, some fruit, a skin of water. Jubal ate obediently. He kept thinking about the tile. He was trying so hard not to think of anything else that he almost didn't notice Danthra cleaning his dagger on a handkerchief.

Danthra tucked the bloody cloth back into his tunic. Their eyes met. "I killed a guard."

Jubal took a moment to process this. "Why?"

"He didn't want me to leave the tower." Danthra got up, paced around the room a few times, looked out the window, his claws making little clicking noises where he crossed stone. Jubal didn't have to look to know that the water was still running. He could hear it.

"What will you do with us?" asked Danthra softly.

"Do with you?"

"With my clan? Or what's left of it—after the zool is finished."

Jubal shook his head. "You're the one with the weapon, Danthra. You're supposed to kill me, remember?"

Danthra's pale eyes narrowed. "I saw it," he hissed. In his excitement, his normally clear voice had grown thick with the accent of his race. "I saw what you saw in the mirror!"

Jubal's eyes opened wide. He'd almost forgotten. "And you think, even now—?"

Danthra held up his hand. He was staring out the window. A moment later Jubal heard it, too. Somewhere underground the struggle had ended. The flood tunnels had fallen silent.

Chapter 8. What Came from the Flood Tunnels

Rat shelt: one of the races of diminutive shelts, standing no taller than a six or seven year old faun. In ancient times, they had a powerful kingdom and were known for their cleverness and, sometimes, for their trickery. They were one of the first to oppose the wizard Gabalon in his rise to power, and he destroyed them so that hardly any trace remains. Some say their city used to be in old Canisaria, others that it stood on the edge of the desert. One story claims they had an underground empire, and Gabalon built his city over top of it.

--Anson, A Political Encyclopedia of Panamindorah

Sharon-zool bounded up the tower steps two at a time, hardly hearing the roar below. The unthinkable had happened. But all was not lost. She still held much of the city and the citizens—that was the important thing. She must plan, must think—

The white tiger. He'd been the first one out the tunnel. *Targon, you liar! You told me he was dead!*

No, she must not think of that. She could set the city on fire. Yes, that was it. Turn Jubal's weapon against him. *Jubal at least won't get away.*

The tiger. She's been standing across the plaza when he leapt from the tunnel—leapt all the way to the ground without touching the steps.

Sharon-zool stopped, panting, on a landing. She'd left her escort behind. No, that wasn't right. They'd left her. Why? *Because I told them to...to...what?*

She could still hear the wail that had come from the throat of the messenger beside her. *Like a stupid she-goat in kid*, she'd thought. But then she'd seen them, too—Fealiday, pouring from the tunnels. *It should have been Rquar with my army, but it wasn't. It wasn't.*

The tiger. Some cursed trick of the light had made the Monument flash in the moment he jumped, and she'd thought, for a just a second, that he had wings. Sharon-zool had heard someone whimpering and turned to tell them to shut up. Then she realized the noise was coming from her own throat.

We'll kill them all—every last Fealiday. We should have done it a long time ago. Father said we had gotten greedy, bred too many to control. Daren and his stupid speciation plans! He wanted to make them even stronger and smarter! Just as well the disaster happened now. We'll kill the Fealiday and take the wood and cliff fauns to replace them.

She was beginning to feel better and lifted her head to continue up the tower stairs. Danthra was standing above her. He had a crossbow. “You’re here,” she grunted. “Good. Your water lizards have proven resilient. We’ll need them now more than ever, and this time I want you to lead them. Where is the prisoner?”

Then she saw him—coming around the curve of the stairs above Danthra. Jubal had a sword in his hand. Sharon-zool pointed. “Danthra, behind you!”

“I know,” he said and shot her.

* * * *

Corry was in Port Ory, sitting across from the swamp faun general, Rquar. His Fealiday guards seemed to be hoping he would try to escape, but he disappointed them by sitting quietly with his nose in a book. *Does he know I'm here to keep his guards from killing him?*

Most of the Fealiday had come from the pelt factories. Char had been sure they would be the easiest to convince on short notice. But the word had spread, and by the time the little army reached the foot of the cliff, slaves were coming from everywhere. Most of the swamp fauns were away in Sharon-zool's army, so the Fealiday found it relatively easy to escape. They were disappointed in Port Ory, however. To everyone's surprise, Rquar had surrendered at the first offer of clemency. The Fealiday were angry at having to keep his swamp fauns alive. The swamp fauns themselves were begging for cliff faun guards, but these were in short supply.

Corry watched the hungry, slitted eyes of a spotted female near the door. *She'd kill this faun for a wrong look, and I couldn't do much to stop her.* Fortunately, the Fealiday were afraid of Corry. They'd heard of the giant snake. They'd seen him now with their own eyes, and this was his son.

The door to the room opened, and Archemais came in. His clothes were spattered with blood. Corry guessed he'd come from the fighting in Danda-lay.

The swamp faun's eyes flicked up, though he did not raise his head from his book. He had an insolence about him. Corry could see why he excited his Fealiday guards.

"I need to talk to him." Archemais was a little out of breath

"Will you torture him?" asked the leopard-spotted Fealiday. Her tail twitched. *She'd love to help,* thought Corry.

"What I do, I do alone," said Archemais. He urged the Fealiday out of the room. Corry got up to leave, but Archemais shook his head. "You stay."

He turned to the swamp faun. "I need some answers, Rquar. Your cousin isn't here, and I don't think this is all of your army. I've lived in the swamp long enough to know."

Rquar closed his book. “You want to know where Daren is?”

“Yes. And I want to know some things about this centaur, Targon.”

“And why should I tell you?”

“You seem interested in surviving.”

“You’ve already given your word not to kill me.”

Archemais laughed. “I’m about to leave for Laven-lay, General. What do you think these Fealiday would do with you once I’m gone? How bound do you suppose they’ll feel by my promise?”

A pause. “So what are you offering me?”

“I’ll see that you survive. I’ll see that you’re not left in the hands of anyone who will harm you, and I’ll speak for you when this is over and council comes to pass sentence.”

Another pause. Archemais spoke again, “You didn’t agree with the zool about any of this. You wouldn’t even be talking to me if you had. You’d never have surrendered so quickly. You knew the whole thing was a mistake from the beginning. Help us clean it up.”

“I won’t help you do anything.”

“Then at least help yourself.”

“My weaponless soldiers are being killed by Fealiday,” snarled Rquar, his fist coming down on the table.

“Ah.”

“Put them somewhere safe with *faun* guards.”

“Alright.”

“Now.”

“No, first you tell me what I need to know. Then I will arrange it. You have my word.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“It’s all you’re going to get. Do we have a deal or not?”

A long pause. “Daren was sent to Selbis,” said Rquar. “He was told to begin repairs on the city’s defenses.”

“You thought this peculiar?” prompted Archemais.

“I thought it mad,” growled Rquar. “The city is a ruin, a place for an ambush or perhaps a desperate stand, but the centaur wanted to hold it as some kind of...I don’t know. I wasn’t privy to all the discussions.”

“This centaur—how long have you known him?”

“I don’t.”

“How long has the court known him, then? When did he start attending upon your mistress?”

“Why don’t you ask her that?”

“She’s dead.”

Another pause. “He began coming a few years ago, before he became their new king. He killed the old king, but everybody knows that. They’re barbaric, half beasts. They—”

“I’m not interested in centaurs, just Targon.”

“He’d like the rest of them—gaudy, brash, illiterate, loves to watch things bleed.”

“And he’s well-known among the centaurs?”

“I have no idea.”

“Did he grow up on Iron Mountain?”

“I think so. Yes, I remember he used to come with a cadre of young stallions from the city, all them bragging about how far they could run across the desert without water—as though frying one’s brains were something to celebrate.”

“Did he have any close friends? Lovers? Relatives?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Are you *sure*, Rquar?”

The swamp faun thought a moment. “There was one stallion about his age who was almost always with him—Mercurion. I believe he’s his second now.”

“Did Targon change at all recently? Think hard, Rquar. This is important.”

“He stopped bringing all the others. And I seem to remember that he got better taste in clothes—which is to say, he started wearing them.”

“Can you remember whether there were any physical changes?”

“Not that I saw. You think he’s a wizard, don’t you?”

Archemais didn’t answer. “He *jumped*,” he said to himself. “He actually jumped.”

“Which one is he?” Rquar waved the book he’d been reading. “You say here there were eight wizards who survived.” Corry saw with a guilty start that it was the old volume found in Danda-lay before all the trouble started. He remembered then where he’d heard his father’s name before—he was the author of the book.

Archemais glanced at it. “Tavaris hasn’t been keeping track of my things, I see.”

“Which one?” repeated Rquar.

“Well, they all disappeared when the city fell.”

“But—?”

“But only Gabalon could have jumped.” He stood. “I’ll give you what you asked for. This interview is over.”

* * * *

The walls remembered him. Gabalon saw it as soon as he came into the city. They were scared and burned, but he’d put his own blood into those red stones, and they still sang true. His castle, too, remembered. Some of the rooms echoed yet in his mirrors, and he brought them out, piece by piece, at night when no one was watching.

His centaurs worked feverishly with plaster and ax and hammer, although he could tell that Mercurion, at least, had finally decided he was mad. Gabalon would like to kill that one, but Targon protested, and his protests were still enough—barely enough—to be dangerous.

Gabalon was mildly surprised not to find Daren and his swamp fauns in the city. They were supposed to have begun the work. Instead, they seemed to have camped briefly and then left. Almost, he wondered if one of his old disciples had made mischief for them. He checked all the likely haunts, but found nothing. *My wizards are long gone, he decided, fled to distant parts of Panamindorah. When they hear of my return, they will come.*

He was displeased to find his inner castle wall ringed with traps and deadfalls. Two centaurs died and one was badly wounded before he could remedy the problem. He found evidence that wolflings had been using his castle. A door to the Otherwhere had disappeared, and his dagger was no longer in its hiding place. He found the remains of cooking fires and tidy stashes of food, clothing, and weapons. The intruders, however, were nowhere to be found, and he did not give them much thought after removing their snares.

His centaurs grew daily more amazed at their own progress, congratulating themselves as guard towers sprouted again like spiky mushrooms from the walls. Gabalon visited the work sites in between the crews. He put his hands to the stones and sang softly. It was not as good as the Muse, but this was his own work, and it answered him. Daily, nightly, bit by bit, the city straightened, righted, healed itself. Selbis was waking up.

Chapter 9. Jump

Let us not forget that while we are planning to surprise our enemy, he may be planning the same.

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

Istra Windar was in the one of Laven-lay's gardens when she heard the news: Danda-lay was saved. Stories of how she'd been saved and by whom flew like birds around the city of Laven-lay—cats and Fealiday and wizards and through it all, her palace guard. Jubal, it seemed, had made wine out of vinegar. In addition, the Raiders were in Laven-lay, and in spite of Shadock's outraged protests, Meuril would not give his consent to have them executed. Istra would have liked to see these wolflings she'd risked so much for, but that didn't seem safe. In a few days the victors would be in Laven-lay, and then there would be a great deal of talking.

That night, Istra did not dream of wolflings or cats or Jubal or Shadock. She dreamed she was a girl again in the city of Ense on the banks of the Tiger-wan, playing with her dearest friend, the wood fauness, Natalia. In the dream they both knew what was to happen to them, and their play was tinged with sadness.

Natalia made a little shelt of clay and said, "I will marry him and be a queen. I will have a daughter and be happy for a little while."

And Istra made a little shelt of stone and said, "I will marry him and be a queen and have many sons and be unhappy for a long while."

They made little clay wolves and little clay cats and little clay deer and set them to fight one another, and Natalia said, "Will you miss me when I am gone?"

Istra, who had no blood sisters, said, "My sister, I will miss you until I die."

“Will you avenge me?” asked Natalia.

Then Istra took the little shelt of stone and broke him and ground the bits to powder with her heel. Then she woke up.

* * * *

In the great audience room of Laven-lay, before the antlered throne, a strange group of shelts and animals were about to meet. Lexis was the first to arrive, and he paced in the sunlit hall among the huge potted plants. Ounce came in a little later and watched him from the top of the dais. “Tell them what you have to tell them, Lexis.”

“I could tell them enough to start another war.”

Ounce stretched out on the dais. “Or enough to stop one.”

“I know it was you who saved me when I was a cub and those assassins tried to kill me—the ones we all thought were cheetahs, but were really lions—I know that was you.”

“I did that for Demitri,” said Ounce.

“You did a lot of things for Demitri.”

“Yes.”

“But in the last few years, you’ve also done a lot of things for me.”

“As I said: do what you must.”

At that moment, two small animals darted through the partially open throne room doors. Lexis frowned, “I don’t think anyone invited you, my dears.”

“Please, father, please!” Leesha was wriggling with excitement. “We want to hear what Archemais says about the centaurs and the swamp fauns! Please!”

Loop was trailing behind the cubs. He shot a glance at Ounce, then turned to Lexis.

“They were insistent, sir, and you did not expressly tell them—”

At that moment, the expression on Lexis’s face changed so abruptly that Loop stopped and looked round. Fenrah, Sham, Laylan, and Chance had come into the room. The cats and wolflings looked at each other in complete silence for a moment. Sham had a peculiar expression on his face. At last he said, “I know you.”

Lexis took a step forward. “I always wondered. Well, you’ve both grown.”

Fenrah glanced between them.

“You never saw him,” said Sham. “But during the sack of Sardor-de-lor, a white tiger cub covered a grating and let us pass.”

“It was very long ago,” said Lexis, “and not representative of some of my behavior since. I am...sorry for what you and your people have suffered.”

Fenrah tried not to appear surprised, but she failed. At last, she said, “I didn’t expect it to be this easy.”

Ounce made a strange grumbling noise behind Lexis. He was laughing. Lexis gave a bitter smile. “Hold that thought.”

“Fenrah Ausla.” It was Archemais, resplendent in somewhat archaic court dress. “I have wanted to meet you.”

She gave a little bow.

“Where is Dance? Him I would like to see even more.”

“He’s in the courtyard,” said Fenrah, “where they’re keeping us. I’m sure the fauns will let you visit, but we are not free to come and go as we wish.”

“I think I can remedy that,” said Lexis.

“You?” Fenrah frowned. “How?”

The door to the throne room opened fully. Meuril and Shadock entered, their advisors humming around them like a swarm of bees. Capricia came last, silent, a little apart from the others.

Lexis cleared his throat. “Sir,” he said to Meuril. “I have something to say to you that is not for everyone’s ears.”

Meuril hesitated, then sent all the advisors out of the room. Shadock started to leave as well, but Lexis said, “Please stay, Sire. I would like you to hear this as well.” A look passed between them. Shadock clasped his hands behind his back and waited.

Lexis turned to Meuril. “I would like to tell you what happened to your wife, the lady Natalia.”

This was not what the shelts had been expecting. They grew immediately silent. “Syrill was right,” continued Lexis, “my father orchestrated her death so that the wolflings would be blamed and you would not come to their aid. He sent his councilors to do it and told me nothing until he lay dying. He instructed me to use this information to make my peace with you, blame his old council and hand them over so that you would have revenge. I could then name my own council and establish myself in peaceful Filinia and Canisaria. He gave me something to prove my story. Ounce, did you bring it?”

The snow leopard leapt down and spat out a bit of metal at Meuril’s feet. Slowly the king picked it up. No one in the room doubted that he was looking at Natalia’s ring.

“I was unwilling to betray his old council members,” continued Lexis. “I thought I could make them trust and work with me. I was wrong, at least about Liliana. She thought I was waiting for an ideal moment to make my announcement and plotted with the centaurs and swamp fauns to kill me before that happened.”

He stopped. Capricia had moved to stand beside her father. She put her arm around him. Meuril’s shoulders were shaking.

“The wolflings are completely innocent of your wife’s death,” said Lexis. “It is unfair to continue punishing them for it. As for my council, two of them are dead. For the other two, I would say in their defense that they did as they were ordered for a king they trusted and admired. Demitri is your real enemy, and he is dead. If this is not enough to satisfy you, we are here in your court and at your mercy.”

Meuril shook his head. “I want no more lives,” he said thickly. “Are you finished?”

Lexis inclined his head.

“These particular wolflings,” said Shaddock suddenly, “were never accused of murdering Natalia. They are accused of bandit activity, of raiding Danda-lay and Laven-lay, of illegal trespass on lands forbidden to them. I see no reason they should be forgiven these things just because their elders were falsely accused of a crime.”

Lexis growled low in his throat. “I am in a forgiving mood today, Sire. Perhaps you should be, too.”

“Is that a threat, cat?”

“Is that gratitude for saving your city?” sneered Loop. “Or are you smarting, because you ran, and we fought?”

Shadock drew himself up. “How *dare* you?”

“You will not execute these wolflings.” It was Chance. “They saved my life, and I have given them my protection.”

“*Your* protection,” said Shadock, “from *me*?”

“Yes, from you especially, father. If you raise a hand against them, I promise you this: I will appear at every public function in Danda-lay. I will make myself as visible as the Great Monument. You will find it completely impossible to hide or ignore me, and shefts will talk and talk and talk.”

The blood rushed to Shadock’s face. He sputtered for a moment and looked as though he might begin shouting. Then Archemais spoke, “Enough. We will not execute these wolflings because we need them. They will help us to win a difficult battle. If we do not win, there may be no more Monuments, perhaps no more Danda-lay or Laven-lay.”

He had their attention. “A wizard who is injured,” said Archemais, “has several choices. He can try to shift his matter to heal himself, but if he is badly hurt, he may not have the strength. Instead, he may consolidate his useful tissue and shift to something small. Normally small shapes are difficult for wizards, because they must compress their material, but when they have little to work with, a small shape may be their only option.

“Rebuilding from such a setback takes time. The wizard must rest, perhaps for a few hundred years, and then he must consume a great deal of living tissue to rebuild himself. A faster way exists, but it is dangerous. The wizard may ‘jump’ to a willing subject—incorporate himself into the subject’s mind and slowly absorb the subject. If at any point in this process, the subject decides to fight, the wizard risks losing himself.

“I believe this is what happened to the centaur Targon. I believe that Gabalon met him somewhere and convinced him to form a partnership. In merging, all the wizard’s powers and memories become part of the subject, and likewise all the subject’s powers and memories become part of the wizard. However, when a much older and stronger being melds with one younger and weaker, the self of the weaker is swallowed up and essentially ceases to exist. This is probably not something Gabalon told his subject.”

“Wizard or not,” sniffed Ounce, “Selbis is a ruin. I was there only days ago. Even with all the centaurs in Iron Mountain working day and night, he would take a year and more to make the city anything like defensible. Centaurs are formidable, but they have never been numerous. If you wood and cliff fauns attack that city, you cannot possibly lose.”

Archemais shook his head. “The city you saw a few days ago will not be the city we find when we march on Selbis. There is blood magic in those walls and in that castle. When he calls, it will waken. The city will heal itself. Not all his wizards are dead—perhaps none of them. When they hear he has returned, they will come out of hiding and join him. We must strike now while he is still at his weakest, still limited by his attempts to keep his identity secret.”

“What did you mean about us Raiders,” asked Fenrah. “What is it you think we can do?”

“Gabalon planned for most of what is happening now,” said Archemais, “but he did not plan for you—a pack of accomplished bandits living in his citadel. I have no doubt that you’ve made ways in and out that he could know nothing of.”

“You want us to open the gates for you?” asked Sham.

“More than that. You have a rat shelt among you, yes?”

“A what?” asked Lexis.

“The youngest member of this wolfling pack,” said Archemais, “is neither young, nor a wolfling. How the Raiders came to have a thousand year old rat shelt in their pack does not presently concern this council. What should concern you is the myth—more than a myth—that Selbis is built on the ruins of the underground kingdom of the rat shelts. In my day, Selbis pumped its water supply from an underground river, and the city used to have occasional quakes and strange floods. It was said that the city had grown too heavy for the labyrinth of caves far beneath, that it would one day sink. Few in old Selbis knew the way into the deep places under the city, but the rat shelts were said to have sailed ships on the old river long ago. A living rat shelt might remember the way. A clever wolfling pack with thunder powder might find a means to dam the river. Then the city would flood, perhaps sink.”

“So the Raiders will let us into Selbis,” said Meuril. “And perhaps they can sabotage the city. At what price comes this assistance?”

Fenrah’s head shot up. “No more bounty laws. No more traps. A place in Canisaria. A place on your council.”

Meuril smiled faintly. “Few fauns will deign to council with you, my lady of shadows.”

“I’ll speak for them,” said Laylan. “You know me.”

Meuril raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

Laylan sighed. “Apparently, I’m their king.”

Chapter 10. Departure

It's no accident that Gabalon was never defeated until the cliff fauns decided to enter the war. Historians remember the victory. What they often forget is how long Danda-lay waited, watching the wolflings and others break their teeth on Selbis. The cliff fauns were thought to be as much the wizard's creatures as the swamp fauns.

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

Shadock was glaring at Archemais. "Who are *you*," he spat, "that we should listen to any of this? We have not even tried to parlay with this Targon. Perhaps no battles need be fought. We have no proof that he is a wizard, but we know that you are. It was always the way of such creatures to make shelts fight their wars."

"I was the prophet of Panamindorah," said Archemais. "I was the first to stand against Gabalon. I am also his brother. This is my son. Corellian, show them the Muse."

Corry held up the flute on its chain. He passed it around, let them touch it. "A curiosity," said Shadock. "It means nothing."

"It means everything," said Capricia. "Two years ago, I took it from Hualien in a fight when the Raiders attacked our caravan. With it, I found Corellian, trapped in another world. A centaur demolished my study in search of it during their visit last summer. It was the real reason I was kidnapped at Lupricasia. Syrill helped in my kidnapping because he thought it would rid the wood of cats. Liliana helped in order to be rid of Lexis. The swamp fauns and centaurs helped in order to frame the cats and remove them from the coming battle. But Targon set it in motion, and he did it for the flute."

"Of what use is it," asked Meuril, "this thing my daughter was tortured for?"

“None to us,” said Archemais. “The Muse is visible only in the hand of the prophet, and no new prophet has been revealed. It was never intended for use by anyone else. The most we can do with it right now is to keep it safe.”

“Is it true,” said Chance suddenly, “that there are cat shelts in Kazar swamp and that they helped to save Danda-lay?”

“It is true,” said Archemais. “I suspect that at some point during Gabalon’s reign, he participated in their extermination, but sold a few to his lackeys, the swamp fauns. They were kept as slaves and their existence eventually forgotten by the rest of Panamindorah. When the wizard fell, the swamp fauns continued to hide them, even during their occupation. I was appointed their governor during that period, and even I knew nothing of the Fealiday until later.”

“You were governor of Kazar during the occupation?” asked Meuril with interest.

“Yes, but shelts became suspicious of me. I was a wizard, and I was no longer the prophet, and when Danda-lay’s library burned, I was blamed. They ordered me to council to face charges of conspiracy. I disappeared into the swamp. I washed my hands of Panamindorah and never intended to involve myself with shelts again. Some years after that, house Anroth began an aggressive breeding program with their Fealiday. They became bolder with their slaves, and I found out about them. I did nothing, because I told myself that if I came out of retirement every time I saw shelts being cruel to one another, I would never rest. But then someone brought my son back.” He glanced at Capricia. “And I changed my mind.”

* * * *

Corry watched the Raiders with hungry eyes. He’d considered visiting their quarters late last night when he and the rest of Archemais’s company reached Laven-lay. They’d ridden hard

and fast to get here so quickly, and he was very tired. He'd decided to wait until today. *Patience*, he kept telling himself. *You can get them alone. Not here in front of everyone. Just wait.*

Corry listened with half an ear as Meuril, Shaddock, Lexis, and his father wrangled about how many shelts could be collected to march against Selbis and how, when, and where they ought to be deployed. Fealiday and cats did not figure largely in the calculations. Most had remained in Danda-lay to make sure the city was not retaken. A few were expected to trickle into Laven-lay over the next few days.

"Speed is more important than numbers," Archemais kept saying. "I suggest you take the remains of Danda-lay's army and every able-bodied wood faun in Laven-lay and march tomorrow. Never mind that you have only a few hundred. If Gabalon is allowed to repair his defenses and gather his wizards, even a hundred thousand may fail."

"Where is Syrill?" demanded Meuril at last. "He knows our army and it's officers better than anyone."

"He's here," said Lexis quietly, "but he didn't think you'd want to see him."

"He's right," growled Meuril. Capricia murmured something in his ear, and he sighed. "Syrill's sentencing will be postponed until this is over. If you would take a message to him, tell him to organize our troops for departure tomorrow."

Corry was mildly surprised to discover that he was expected to accompany the Raiders to Selbis. "Our attack should be three pronged," said Archemais, "the Raiders to deal with the city, the faun armies to deal with the centaurs, and Corellian and I to deal with the wizard."

Fenrah, Laylan, and Sham seemed to be having an argument among themselves. After a few minutes, Laylan cleared his throat. “Sires, if the council has nothing else to say to the wolflings, then we’d like to begin planning our task.”

Finally! Corry followed them out of the throne room. His heart was beating hard. His hands felt clammy. “I need to know,” he said as soon as the doors closed. “What did I shift to in the wood?”

The wolflings stopped talking and looked at him. “You flickered,” said Fenrah at last. “You didn’t hold your shape, but what we saw—”

“You were a dragon,” said Sham, “perhaps twice the size of a wolf, and you had feathers. They were the color of pearl, iridescent, and the light struck rainbows from them. You were the most beautiful and the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen. Is that what you wanted to know?”

“Yes,” whispered Corry.

The wolflings walked away and resumed their argument. Corry stood still in the antechamber for a long time.

* * * *

Sham sat on the edge of his bed in the infirmary. He felt very tired. Attending the council had put a strain on him. Two of his arrow wounds were bleeding again, and he redressed them, moving stiffly and painfully. Talis had been with him earlier, but now she’d gone to be with the rest of the Raiders when Fenrah talked to them about their mission. If all went as planned, they would leave tonight.

Laylan wanted to go with them to Selbis, and Fenrah had objected. She said that if he was killed, the faun treaty with the wolflings might fall apart. Laylan had pointed out that wolfling

cooperation might do the same if anything happened to her. They argued until Sham spoke up. “I think you ought to let him go, Fenny. I can’t. I’m not well enough, and you might need the extra hands. Your arm’s broken, and half the pack have minor injuries.”

They’d looked at each other. He had an idea that she’d been dreading telling him he couldn’t come, and she was relieved that he wasn’t going to argue. Still, he half hoped she’d disagree with him. Never in their long partnership had there been a major risk they’d not shared. They were each other’s only family and closest friend. She was the leader by right of blood and by temperament, but he was the elder. He’d looked after her, protected her.

Tell me I’m wrong, cousin. Tell me you need me. Tell me I’m not being replaced.

But she only nodded. “Alright, Sham. Get well.”

Sham watched them go. *You’d better take care of her, Laylan, or you’d better not come back.*

Towards evening, Fenrah returned, and this time the whole Raider pack came with her. They were dressed in travel cloaks and outfitted with fine new weapons. Sham told them each good-bye. He exchanged a few jokes with Sevn. Talis hugged him, and he gave her more tips on what to do with various wounds the Raiders had acquired from Daren’s attack. Danzel came last holding something behind his back. It was a violin.

Sham could have cried. “You didn’t steal it, did you?”

Danzel shook his head. “I asked Chance. He got it for me.”

Sham was still turning the instrument over when they all filed out. Fenrah lingered a moment, then hugged him. The violin twanged discordantly as she pushed it out of the way. “I’m sorry, Sham.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s alright.”

“We’ll come back.”

But not to me. He sat in his little room in the dark for a long time after they had gone.

Finally, he picked up the violin and started to play.

Chapter 11. Violins

Music is to a group of wolflings what a howl is to a pack of wolves.

--Lasa, Tour of Canisaria

Sham locked his door and played until late that evening. When he woke the next morning, he started to play again. Several times he heard knocks, but he paid them no mind. Once someone shouted and beat on the door, but he ignored that, too. Late in the afternoon he was startled by the sound of another violin. It surprised him enough to make him pause. The other carried on for a few notes and stopped. When Sham started again, so did the other.

At first they tested each other like too strange dogs circling. Sham found that the other player could not only keep up with him, but could often *anticipate* him. He was just beginning to really enjoy himself when the other violin began to change the game. Sham wanted to play “Tears of Moon,” the other kept turning it into “Leaf Dance.” Sham wanted to play “The Stone Wolves of Lym,” the other wanted “Blue and the Unicorn.” The violins half argued and half danced for the better part of a watch until yellow moon stood bright over the windowsill.

Finally, Sham stopped playing. He was curious and he was tired. He walked over to the door and opened it. “Ah,” he said, “I might have guessed.”

Chance looked up at him. He’d dragged a chair into the hall. “I had no idea you could play so well. However, I’ve been asked to get you to stop.”

Sham looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Because your music isn’t good for morale. Do you have a stack of the saddest songs ever written in there?”

“Just what I know,” muttered Sham.

Chance got up and came into the room. “You haven’t eaten all day.”

Sham thought about it. “I suppose not.”

“Come down to the kitchens. You’re not confined here anymore.”

Sham shook his head. “I’ll just go to bed. I’m sorry I upset the fauns. I didn’t realize.”

Chance frowned. “The Raiders aren’t dead, Sham. They’re coming back.”

Sham said nothing.

Chance tried again. “Apparently, I should have been bating my traps with violins. I thought I knew everything about you. Why didn’t I know you played?”

Sham shrugged. “Anything that makes noise isn’t safe for wolflings. I used to play in the catacombs in Selbis—no one to hear down there. I’ve made several violins—none of them very good. I tried to get one during a raid once, but it was damaged. Danzel stole a very nice one for me during our last raid on Laven-lay. He got so caught up that he forgot to do his job, which is why Talis and I ended up dropping through the roof of Meuril’s antechamber and taking hostages. I had to make Danzel understand what he’d done, so I broke the violin.”

He glanced at the instrument lying on his bedside table. “It wasn’t as fine as that one, though. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You play it better than I do.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Come, we’re going to the kitchens.” Chance took Sham by the shoulder and propelled him out of the room and down the hall.

It was well past the evening meal, but Laven-lay’s cooks always kept stew over the fire, and there was always deer cheese and bread. Chance also managed to find a cask of the local

thistle brandy, made with a great deal besides thistles. Sham sniffed at it cautiously. “Smells like rat poison.”

“Yes,” said Chance cheerfully and poured him a large mug.

Sham made a face. “Tastes like it, too.”

“You don’t drink much, do you?”

“Not much and not often,” said Sham. “Can’t afford to when a moment’s indiscretion might get us killed.”

“Not here,” said Chance, dropping a half loaf of bread and a huge slice of deer cheese onto Sham’s plate. “Here only the food itself will kill you. Eat.”

Sham smiled. “A sense of humor is the last thing I would have credited to you.”

“I only bring it out for special occasions.”

Sham tipped his mug. “Already had some of this, have you?”

“Alcohol and music—they go together like blood and politics.”

“Ah-ha!” said a new voice. “The orchestra has moved downstairs. And started drinking. Very good.” Sham and Chance looked round to see Shyshax coming into the kitchen. “I thought I heard you say you had a sense of humor,” continued Shyshax to Chance.

Chance jerked his finger at Sham. “He said it, not me.”

“Ah,” said Shyshax, “because I was about to disagree.”

“You would.”

Shyshax came over to the table. “Did I ever mention that I dislike you?” he asked Chance.

“Have you ever *stopped* mentioning it?”

“Although I will admit,” continued Shyshax, “that you’re one of the only shelts who can play anything with strings without making my hair stand on end.” He looked at Sham. “And now there’s another one! Who’d have guessed?”

“I can’t believe Laylan left you,” said Chance.

“Me neither.” Shyshax laid his head on the table and gave a great sigh. “My ribs are too sore for riding, and my tail is broken so my balance is poor, and he said I couldn’t come.”

Sham reached out and stroke his dark ruff. “Well, that makes two of us. Have a bowl of rat poison.”

“I still want to know the rest of this violin story,” said Chance. “If music is so dangerous for you, why did you keep trying to play? Why did you learn to begin with.”

Sham looked at the table. “Most wolflings like music. It’s in our blood.”

“And?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

Sham thought for a moment. “My father taught me to play as a child in Sarder-day-lor. He was a healer—a teacher at the academy. When the city fell he was treating the wounded in one of the deep subbasements of the inner keep. The old shelts, the ladies, and the children had been sent there as well. It was a defensible place. We could hear the fighting getting nearer, the cats coming. Everyone was terrified.

“Then my father took out his violin and played. The room got quiet, and the we stopped shaking. Even the wounded shelts stopped crying. We all listened to him play while the cats

broke down the door, and we weren't afraid anymore. My father was a competent swordshelt, but he didn't die with a sword in his hand, only a violin."

There was a moment's silence. Even the cook washing dishes had stopped clinking. "If he had not played," continued Sham, "I'm not sure that I would have been thinking calmly and clearly enough to get Fenny and I out of that room while the cats were busy with the adults. I'm not sure I would have thought of using the privy hole as an escape route, leading to the drains beneath the streets. Somehow, his music drove all the sadness out of my mind, and I could think of the things I needed to do. Music has always done that for me. That's why I kept playing, even though it was dangerous."

Chance examined his hands. "I have a few violins even better than the one in your room. I collect them, actually, the really good ones. My best are in Danda-lay."

Sham smiled. "You've already given me enough, Chance."

"What I was going to say is that you'd be welcome to one if you'd come play with me now and then."

Shyshax cleared his voice. "So. On a lighter note—pun intended: Fenrah and Laylan. Bets?"

Chance gave him a severe expression.

Shyshax stuck out his tongue. "Oh, don't pretend you haven't noticed. Or maybe you don't know him as well as I do, but I saw his face in that courtyard when he thought he had to shoot her for you. He's gotten over-attached to the Raider pack, but it was more than that."

Sham swirled his drink. "She was rather upset when she thought he fell off that bridge."

Chance quirked an eyebrow. "Haven't we established that they're related?"

“Third cousins,” said Sham. “In old Canisaria, it was common even for second cousins to marry, especially in the royal family. Nothing strange about that.”

“It would solve some problems,” mused Chance. “The fauns trust Laylan—most of them, anyway—and the wolflings trust Fenrah.”

“That’s the real reason you’re depressed,” chirped Shyshax to Sham. “Not because you got left behind, but because you think you’re about to lose your best friend.”

Chance swatted him on the side of the head. “A sense of humor you may have, but you’ve got all the tact of a ram in rutting season.”

“He’s probably right,” said Sham.

“But,” continued Shyshax, “Laylan doesn’t want to replace you. He doesn’t just want Fenrah, either. He wants to be part of a pack. He *needs* to. It’s the wolfling in him. Except he doesn’t know how, because he’s always been alone. Or with me. I’m the one being replaced.”

Sham smiled. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“A blue month,” said Chance, “that’s what—seventy days right now?” They both looked at him. “Well, you asked for bets,” said Chance.

“Red month,” said Sham immediately.

Shyshax snorted a laugh into his thistle brandy. “A yellow month. Or less. Laylan’s a very good hunter.”

“If they come back alive,” said Sham softly.

Shyshax laid his head on the table again. “Yes. If that.”

Chapter 12. The City Under the City

Sevn was raised by his grandfather, Xanlyn, the greatest sword maker of his day.

Ironically, nearly all of his creations are now prized possessions of wealthy fauns. Xanlyn lived for years after the fall of Sardor-de-lore on an island of the Tiber-wan on the edge of Canisaria and the Endless Wood. He set up a smithy there, and the fauns came to trade with him. No one bothered him, even after the bounty laws, but he was old, and when he died, his grandson disappeared, only to show up some years later with the Raider pack. Sevn didn't suffer as much as the rest of us. He had friendly dealings with fauns, which is probably why he was gentler.

--Fenrah, *Who We Were*

Corry went with his father that afternoon to the courtyard where the Raiders were staying. Dance howled when he saw them. "Telsar," said Archemais softly. "Old friend, it is good to see you." He put his hand on the wolf's shoulder and they walked off to the far side of the courtyard, where presently Hualien joined them. Archemais spoke with them while the Raiders made preparations to leave.

Laylan kept glancing at Archemais. "He looks almost as though he's listening to Hualien," he said.

Sevn smirked. "He probably is."

"How?" asked Laylan.

"His speech is pitched above the range that fauns can hear," explained Fenrah. "He talks all the time."

“I *heard* him,” said Laylan slowly, “that chittering sound when we were in the tunnels in Selbis. Does he speak Westerly?”

“A bit, but he doesn’t like to. He has his own language. We’ve all picked up some of it, but it’s difficult for a wolfling to speak.”

They left the city just after nightfall. “Did Hualien tell you how he got into the mirror?” asked Archemais as they rode.

“No,” said Fenrah. “We asked, but he’s never given us a coherent answer—just that a wizard put him there.”

“I probably understand his language better than you do,” said Archemais, “and this is what he told me: he said that the mirror’s curse is such that the creatures inside continue to exist only for as long as anyone remembers them.”

Everyone thought about that. “Well, *you* must have been keeping Dance alive,” said Laylan.

Archemais smiled. “I and Gabalon. I think that was the idea—eventually he and his wizards would be the only ones who remembered any of them. But Gabalon put thousands of creatures into his dungeon, many of whom he didn’t know at all. Hualien thinks that he is a kind of composite, kept alive because the shelts of Panamindorah still remember that rat shelts existed. Hualien remembers many times, many places, many selves.” Archemais hesitated. “He says that the old river had a dam that might be used to cause a flood. He thinks he can find it.”

They camped that night inside Harn-beng at the very spot where Laylan and Chance had come up inside the bridge. Archemais knew the secret of the bridge, but the old road was so ravaged by time and the efforts of wood fauns that he needed Laylan’s help to find the tunnel

entrance. “We should post sentries,” he said, “but I think we’re safe here. My brother built this bridge long ago. The tunnel was a well-kept secret even in his day and he will think it forgotten. I’ll take the first watch on the north side. I think Dance will go to the south.”

Corry lay awake after the others had gone to sleep. He listened to their quiet breathing, but his thoughts kept churning. At last, he got up and crept down the tunnel in the direction his father had taken. He concentrated, brought his color sense into focus, and saw-smelled a blacker shadow hunched in the darkness ahead.

Corry padded over to him. Archemais glanced at him as he sat down, but didn’t try to start a conversation. At last, Corry said, “I’ve shifted by accident a few times. The fauns say that iterations can only shift to the animal of their shelt parent—which means I should shift to a unicorn. But the Raiders saw me, and they say I was a dragon. A *feathered* dragon.”

“The fauns haven’t seen a fully half-blood iteration in hundreds of years,” said Archemais. “Any iterations they’ve run across have only a thread of wizard blood. Don’t take their word for expert.”

Corry licked his lips. “So I *could* shift to other things.”

Archemais shrugged. “An iteration’s abilities are as varied as the features of his face. Some of them could shift to several things. Others, not at all.”

Corry told his father what had happened when he went over the waterfall.

Archemais looked thoughtful. “Shifting is like flexing a muscle. The muscle grows stronger or weaker with use.” He hesitated. “Can you smell colors?”

Corry looked surprised. “Yes. And sometimes I can *hear* vibrations in the ground.”

“You’re sensing heat as snakes and dragons do. In human form, you don’t have the proper organs to process the information, so you confuse it with other senses. If you were in snake or dragon form, the sense would be heightened and less confusing.”

Corry let out a long breath. “Then you think I can learn to shift?”

“I’m not sure. I think that when Gabalon sent you violently across the void between the worlds, you lost some things.”

“The void between the worlds,” repeated Corry. “The gray world, the Otherwhere—I’ve been there. I’ve seen those Durian wolves.”

Archemais stared at him.

Corry told him about the centaur on the stairs of Capricia’s study and of his strange escape. “When I was in the Otherwhere, I could *see* the flute. It was translucent gold, smooth as glass. It was beautiful.” He looked at his father, at the dark pits that were his eyes in the gloom. “What does it mean?”

Archemais frowned. “I’m not sure. A possibility.”

* * * *

The next morning when the Raiders left the bridge, they found four centaur corpses at the entrance to the tunnel. “Sentries,” said Archemais. “I killed them last night.”

They gave the bloating bodies a wide birth and continued. During their years in the city, the Raiders had dug several tunnels under the walls to allow entrance. “This is what we will do,” said Fenrah. “Xerous, Lyli, Talis, and Danzel will go in through the north tunnel. It comes up inside the wall. There’s a storeroom down there, and Sevn says there’s thunder powder in it. With any luck, the centaurs won’t have found the place were the tunnel exits, and even if they

have, a centaur would never fit. You'll lay some of Sevn's thunder powder inside the outer wall, and when you hear the fighting tomorrow morning, you'll blow it. If you have time and opportunity, you'll lay some under the second wall as well."

Xerous looked skeptical. "It won't be enough. A hundred pounds of thunder powder couldn't make a real hole in those walls."

Fenrah shrugged. "It will make a weak place, though, and it will cause confusion. Laylan, Sevn, Hualien, and myself will go in search of this underground river. We'll go by the east tunnel. Hualien says it's closer to our destination."

She glanced at Archemais and Corry. "What about you?"

"Just show us the tunnel into the city," said Archemais. "After that, we leave you."

Dance whined. Fenrah glanced at him—still heavily bandaged about the chest. "Oh, no. You are staying in the forest."

Archemais looked at him thoughtfully. "You want your revenge, but you also want to see your people again. If you had to choose, which would you have?"

Dance growled for a moment. Then he lay down and put his head on his paws. Soon after, the shelts left all the wolves behind. Xerous's party went south, and Fenrah's southeast, skirting Selbis at a distance. A light rain had begun to fall when Fenrah's party came within sight of the walls. "Glacia's Gates!" exclaimed Sevn. "The centaurs *have* been busy."

"Not the centaurs," said Archemais, "Gabalon."

The forest that had grown up to the walls of Selbis during its years of dilapidation had been burned away in a wide swath around the city. Spike-like guard towers stood at regular

intervals around the walls—everyone of them whole and gleaming. The red stone glistened under the weeping sky.

The Raider's tunnel began under a rock that looked much heavier than it actually was. "When were you planning to enter the city?" Corry asked Archemais as they watched Laylan and the Raiders disappearing into the hole.

"Tonight," said Archemais. "That will give the wolflings time to work and the fauns time to get here. Night will also make it easier to hide you."

"Hide me?" echoed Corry. He turned around and saw an amused-looking centaur with gray-green eyes and a cape with a cobra mark.

* * * *

Laylan was watching Sevn as they started into the tunnel. He'd always liked Sevn. They had in common a penchant for invention and a cleverness with their hands. He had no doubt Sevn would have broken the puzzles of his traps, given access to a smithy. Watching him now, Laylan thought he detected apprehension. Hualien kept chattering, but he wasn't even attempting to speak Westerly, so Laylan could understand nothing.

"What is it?" he demanded after they'd been crawling for some time. "I know you're worried about something. I can't help if you don't include me."

A long silence. "Hualien is afraid to go down to where the river is," said Sevn after a moment. "He's trying to explain why, but we don't understand."

"Something about a trap," said Fenrah.

Laylan relaxed a little. "Traps I can handle."

She shook her head. “It’s not an ordinary trap. He says it’s in a place that only his rats go. He’s never been there himself, but he knows where to find the door. Don’t speak now; parts of this tunnel are close to the surface.”

They crawled for what seemed a very long way in the dark, and when at last they immersed into a larger space, they were still in underground blackness. They sat and listened for a few minutes, and when they heard nothing alarming, Fenrah lit her lamp. The light showed an ancient basement—cool and musty with moisture beaded on the walls.

They all lit their lamps, and then Hualien started off at a trot. It soon became evident that they were in more than just a basement. Laylan thought he saw the foundations of buildings above their heads. “Selbis is built on itself,” explained Sevn. “It seems to have been leveled and then rebuilt several times, aside from the usual city stacking.”

They went on and on through the system of subbasements, sometimes squeezing through tiny opens or over crumbled walls, sometimes walking in large, echoing chambers. They passed through several crypts lined with alcoves, stacked with bones wrapped of moldering linen. “Do you know where we are?” Laylan asked Fenrah.

She shook her head. “We wolflings didn’t go down here much—just into a few places. Hualien is the one who roamed the lower city.”

“The city under the city,” said Sevn, “that’s what he calls it.”

Occasionally, Hualien stopped and cast about. Sometimes Laylan caught a glimpse of small moving shapes coming or going around them. Several times he thought they’d reached a dead-end, but each time Hualien located some crevasse or a trap door or a tunnel under a wall. They were going nearly always downhill—sometimes almost imperceptibly, sometimes steeply.

At one point, Sevn said, “We’re under the castle. I recognize those foundations. I was down here with Sham once.”

After that, the rooms got stranger. They descended many stairs. They passed rows of cells, all locked, and through a rusty armory, through a room full of mirrors, a room full of bells, and a room full of chimes. There was a wind in that room, and the chimes rang eerily in the dark. They could hear them long after they’d left that place, and still they went down and down.

At last, they came to a door with characters carved in the ancient picture language. Hualien chattered something.

“This is it,” said Sevn. “This is as far as he’s ever been.”

“What does it say?” asked Laylan.

Sevn listened to Hualien for a moment. “It says: They know the way who are of the blood.”

“Well, Hualien is of the blood,” said Laylan, “if it’s talking about the rat shelts.”

“He’s not sure it is,” said Fenrah.

Laylan reached out and pushed. To his surprise the door opened easily, though he could see nothing beyond. He held up his lamp, but still saw no floor, no walls. The door opened onto an abyss.

Chapter 13. The Three-headed Beast

Unibus: A unicorn shelt—or perhaps the unicorn itself; the stories are unclear. The Unibus are said to have fled into the Snow Mountains during Gabalon’s reign, but the stories about them are inconsistent, leading one to wonder whether they are complete fictions. Unibus are said to have been able to fold space and to perform other curious feats. Glacia is the name of their mythic city—a utopian ideal, which figures in the afterlife of some faun religions.

--Anson’s Encyclopedia of Panamindorah

Sevn lit a piece of cloth and dropped it through the door. The cloth fluttered and came to rest. “We could probably jump down without hurting ourselves,” said Laylan after a moment’s silence.

Sevn said what they were all thinking: “We’ll never jump back up.”

There was nowhere to tie a rope, not even on the door. It had no handle, and the surrounding tunnel was completely smooth. Sevn suggested tying the rope to a sword and wedging it in the threshold, but the threshold proved a little too wide. They’d brought no equipment that might drill a hole in the wood. At last Fenrah thought to try the dagger, but to her immense surprise, it could not penetrate the door. This made them all uneasy.

“We came down here to do a job,” said Fenrah at last. “We have to risk it.”

So they jumped. As Laylan said, the drop was just far enough to give an unpleasant twinge on landing, but not enough to actually hurt anyone. They found themselves in a triangular room, perhaps a dozen paces across. Two walls had openings with no doors. Against the third wall stood a table with three tall candelabra and a number of books. A richly patterned cloth

covered the table in purple and scarlet. Above it there was a strange mosaic of a three-headed beast, perhaps a dog or wolf.

Hualien shivered. “He says this place stinks of magic,” said Fenrah. Her black brush of a tail was standing on end. “It’s odd that rats haven’t eaten the candles or the books.”

“We might as well use the candles,” said Sevn, “and save our lamps.” He was examining the books. They were in every conceivable language—the old picture language of middle Panamindorah, the curly writing of the centaurs, glyphs from the far western jungles of the Pendalon mountains, and stranger texts that no one in the group had seen. There were quite a few in the language of modern Panamindorah. “Here’s a book on thunder powder,” said Laylan. “I always wondered how you made that stuff.”

“I could show you,” grinned Sevn. “The trick is to get it stable enough not to blow up in your pocket.” He glanced over Laylan’s shoulder. “I’ve never seen these recipes before.”

“Here’s one on lost races,” said Fenrah softly. “I wonder if it talks about the Durian wolves.”

An impatient chattering made them turn around. Hualien was glaring up at them. Laylan didn’t need a translation to know that he was telling them to quit wasting time. The rat shelt dove under the table and tugged at something. They raised the cloth and stared in horror at the body underneath—scarcely more than rags and bones. The skeleton still clutched an open book.

“Now there’s someone who should have stopped reading for lunch,” said Sevn.

Laylan picked up the book. It was in the ancient pictographs. “He’s been here a while.”

“Let’s make sure we’re not.” Sevn took the candles to light their way, but he needn’t have bothered. Each room had an identical set on an identical table with the same mosaic above.

The only differences from room to room were the titles of the books and the skeletons, which lay in various attitudes of repose, always reading.

“It’s a maze,” said Laylan. “We can light the candles as we go, and then we’ll know which rooms we’ve already been in.” This seemed like a good idea, but somehow they always found themselves back in the room with the door they’d entered by. They tried again and again.

Sevn could not resist reading some of the book titles as they passed. “*The Complete Almanac of Blue Moon*—but no one knows where Blue is going to be ten years from now!” said Sevn. “That’s why we call it wanderer. *What happened to the Burrow Shelts*—well, what *did* happen to them? As far as I know, they never had any shelts. *Surgery and Sleep*—won’t Sham go for that one? Why *Can Cats Speak?*, *Hydraulics: how to make water do anything*, *Mirror Magic*, *The Nature of Unibus*.”

“Sevn, stop it,” said Fenrah. “Don’t you see what happened to the shelts who read these books? And *don’t* take any of them. There’s something wrong with this place.”

“How long do you think we’ve been down here?” asked Laylan.

“I don’t know,” said Fenrah. “My head hurts. Perhaps we need to eat.” So they had a small meal of dried meat and nuts and then went on, but they still felt fatigued.

“I want to take a few books,” whined Sevn with uncharacteristic churlishness.

“No,” snapped Fenrah.

“Perhaps it’s night,” said Laylan. “Perhaps we’ve been down here all day and half the night, and we need to sleep.”

Fenrah leaned against a wall. “I don’t think it’s night. Or if it is, I don’t think it’s very late. I don’t think we’ve been down here all that long. It just feels like we have.”

“We’re not coming to anymore rooms without lit candles,” said Sevn, “and here we are again.” They were, indeed, back in the first room with the door high in the wall.

“Alright,” said Laylan, “I have another idea.” He took out paper and a quill. “I’ll map as we go. Let’s head straight away from this room. As straight as we can. All the rooms are the same shape, so our path shouldn’t be difficult to plot on a grid.”

They walked for some time with Sevn making increasingly disjointed remarks about the books. He and Fenrah had a mild quarrel over a volume on metallurgy. Laylan went ahead, trying to ignore them, and this wasn’t hard, because he was beginning to hear a ringing in his ears. He looked back once and saw that Hualien had dropped well behind. He was watching them all with a puzzled expression.

And then they were back in the first room.

Laylan stared at his paper. He noticed with dismay that the last lines he’d drawn were shaky, but they still showed the impossible. “We cannot be back here,” he muttered.

“Well, we are, oh Master Trap Solver,” said Sevn. “Looks like you can make them better than brake them.”

“Sevn, as your pack leader, I’m ordering you to shut up,” said Fenrah wearily.

“Some pack,” retorted Sevn, “there are just as many wolflings as non-wolflings here.” He laughed—a high mad sound.

Hualien was chittering in the background, but no one was paying any attention.

“Folded,” muttered Laylan. “That’s the only explanation. Look.” He showed Fenrah his map. They had gone straight away from their starting room. They had not made a circle, but somehow they were back.

“The history books say the Unibus could fold space,” said Laylan. “This place is folded. It explains why your dagger wouldn’t go through the door. The dagger is made of unicorn gold. Surely only Unibus could make something it wouldn’t penetrate.”

“So it’s not a maze at all,” whispered Fenrah. “It’s just a trap.”

One of the candles in the room next door went out. Suddenly Hualien shrieked so loudly that Laylan almost dropped his candle to cover his aching ears. Sevn and Fenrah looked at each other. Then Sevn uttered a wolfling curse so old that even Laylan had never heard it before. “Get down!” he shouted, his words a little slurred. “On the ground, fast! And put out the candles! Glacia’s gates, what idiots we are. No wonder the rats haven’t eaten them. Put out the candles!”

* * * *

It was past midnight, with blue moon already set, when Archemais woke Corry. Corry scrambled onto the centaur’s back, and Archemais tied a cloak around him in a bundle. Neither one of them were particularly satisfied with the result.

“I could, perhaps, put a glamour on you,” said Archemais doubtfully.

“What does that mean?” asked Corry, muffled through his cloak. He felt a hand on his forehead and then...*something*. “Stop it!” he jerked away.

“I thought not,” said Archemais.

Corry rubbed his head. “What were you doing? It felt like...like...a fly in my head.”

“Never mind. I don’t know you well anymore, and you don’t trust me much.”

“What were you trying to do?” repeated Corry.

“Get inside your head,” said his father, “change your shape that way. It can be done.”

“I don’t want it done,” said Corry.

Moments later, they were cantering across the desolate burned land between the forest and the looming outer walls of Selbis. A guard hailed them before they'd got halfway.

Archemais answered, "Urgent news! Mercurion's orders!"

Two confused guards met them at the gate. "The centaurs watching the triangle road are dead," panted Archemais as though he'd just run a league. "I alone escaped." Corry realized belatedly that his father must have taken the likeness of one of the sentries he'd killed.

"We've had reports of a faun army," began one of the guards.

"Yes," said Archemais, "at least three thousand." This was a gross exaggeration. Corry doubted that the wood and cliff fauns had been able to scrape together even six hundred.

"There's more," continued his father. "I must speak with officer Mercurion at once."

"What's that on your back?" asked one of the guards.

"A prisoner, unconscious and tied. Are you going to take me to Mercurion or not?"

* * * *

Laylan lay in blackness with his cheek pressed against cool stone. He felt a little nauseated. Someone was shaking him. "Laylan? Aren't you awake yet?"

"Grurumph." That didn't sound very intelligent, so he tried again. "Where am I?"

"Under Selbis," came Fenrah's impatient voice. "In some kind of maze full of poisoned candles. We lit them, remember?"

"Oh." Laylan tried to sit up.

"Hualien thinks the poison rises in the air," continued Fenrah. "That's why you were affected most, because you're tallest. He's nearer the floor, and he noticed how strange we were acting. He thinks that when the poison gets too concentrated, it starts to put out the candles."

“Laylan?” It was Sevn’s voice, a little shaky. “I think I said something insulting to you just now. I apologize. I’m looking at your map, and if you’re right, then this place really must be folded. I can’t see any way out.”

Laylan turned over and saw that Sevn was looking at his paper by the light of one of their own lamps. “Hualien put out the candles for a several rooms on either side of us,” said Fenrah, “but he was afraid to go too far.”

“I suppose a lot of those shelts who died took the candles down onto the floor with them,” said Sevn. “It would be the logical thing to do—stuck here with the mysteries of the universe written all around you.”

“I’ve been trying to get our grappling hook to catch somewhere on our entrance up there,” said Fenrah, “but so far no luck. I thought maybe I could get the door to close on it, but the door seems to have swung shut.

Laylan frowned. Something was niggling in the back of his mind, something that he’d said while he was still foggy from the candles. “Unibus made this maze,” he said aloud. “They know the way who are of the blood.”

He sat up straight. “Fenrah, your dagger. Let me see it.”

She looked at him, puzzled, then unsheathed the dagger and slid it across the floor. Laylan caught it and turned it over in his hands. He examined the weapon minutely, tested the weight, and *there*—he felt it twitch. But not enough. Laylan laid the dagger on the smooth paving. Nothing happened for a moment, then, like a lode stone, the dagger swung towards the door in the right hand wall.

* * * *

Mercurion woke grudgingly to a pounding on his door. He saw up from his deep, soft pallet in his plush room in the great keep and struggled to his feet. *This had better be important.* He valued his sleep a great deal lately. It seemed to be the only time when he was not worried about something.

“Yes, what is it?” he called to the sentry outside his door.

“Sir, there’s a centaur here to see you—one of the guards from the triangle road—says he has important news for your ears only.”

Mercurion opened the door wearily. “All important news goes to straight the king. I suggest you—” He stopped, peering at the centaur who’d come to see him. His face looked a little like Pernon, whom he knew had been sent to watch the road, and yet... Mercurion was well acquainted with all the centaurs of Iron Mountain. “I don’t know you.”

“Perhaps you ought to,” said the new centaur. “May I come in?”

Mercurion hesitated. Was it possible that the fauns had convinced one of the wild tribes of the desert to send a centaur assassin? It seemed incredible, especially in such a short time. And yet, fauns did not permit centaurs to live permanently in their territories. Mercurion racked his brain to think of where a centaur unknown to him could have been found so quickly.

“Your friend and king is rapidly becoming a stranger to you,” said the centaur. “I can tell you why.”

Mercurion’s head snapped back. He looked at the other carefully. *I should send him straight to Targon. He may be an assassin, and if he doesn’t kill me, then Targon will when he finds out I handled such a situation without him.*

Targon will kill you anyway, said a voice in his head. *You’ve seen it in his eyes.*

Mercurion opened the door wider and stepped back. “Come inside.” He turned to the sentry. “We are not to be disturbed for any reason short of an attack on the gates.”

* * * *

The Raiders followed the dagger from room to room, putting out candles as they went. At last they came to a room with no candles. “We’ve never been here,” breathed Sevn. Where the table usually stood in the third wall, there stood a plain door. Fenrah opened it and held up her lamp. “The river!”

They followed her out onto a wooden wharf. Black water gushed below them, churning around the pilings. By the feel of the air, they were in a huge place. Behind and above, they could see what looked like a city built into the side of the vast tunnel, but no path lead up to it.

Far out at the end of the wharf, a solitary light glowed—the only sign of life in all that vast place. There seemed to be nowhere else to go, so they started onto the wharf, approaching the light hesitantly. As they drew closer, they saw that it was a little boat with a lantern in its prow. A dark figure stood at the tiller. “What weird magic is this?” muttered Sevn.

The Raiders drew their swords as they approached. When they were within hailing distance, Laylan called, “Who are you? We are seeking the dam to this river. Answer me if you are sheltish.”

The figure raised its head, and they saw in the gleam of the lantern that his eyes were golden, his hair silver white, his skin black as coal. “I am Charon,” he said, “keeper of the three-headed beast and of the ferry. You have something of ours, or you would not be here.”

“Three-headed beast?” repeated Laylan. “Would that be the maze?”

“It might,” said the ferryshelt.

“You are an Unibus?” asked Fenrah.

“I am many things,” he said, “one of them is Unibus. Do you seek the Architects?”

“We seek the river,” said Laylan, “and the dam on the river.”

Charon mused. “You will have to take that up with the Architects. The river does not go to the dam anymore.”

Hualien came up very quietly. He looked the ferryshelt over, then got into the boat.

Fenrah hung back. “What will it cost us?”

“The journey in will cost you nothing,” said Charon. “The journey out is another matter. It looks like the ratling is coming. How about the rest of you?”

Chapter 14. The City Out of Time

The Architects are not the subjects of any tale now extant in Panamindorah, but they are at the edges of many tales. They are mysterious figures, sometimes helping and sometimes hindering the heroes of legend. They are usually represented as pragmatists, neither good nor evil, and they never give something for nothing.

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

"I don't believe you." Mercurion's voice came very faint. He would not look Archemais in the face.

Corry was sitting against the wall, watching them. Outside, it must be nearly dawn. Any moment the fauns would begin their attack on the southern wall of Selbis. Somewhere deep under the city, Fenrah and her wolflings were hopefully approaching their goal. With surprise as their weapon, their small forces might have a chance, yet here stood his father, calmly spelling out to this enemy centaur exactly what was happening. Corry did not understand.

Mercurion listened without interrupting. Sometimes he paced.

"Which part don't you believe?" asked Archemais.

The centaur shook his head. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to go with us when we confront Targon."

"I should take you to him in chains."

"Do as you wish, although chains will be wasted on me." Archemais had shifted to his human form to make his point about wizards.

Mercurion shrugged. "If you wanted to be arrested, you could have done that at the gate. I don't understand what you expect me to do."

Someone pounded the door. The noise was so loud after hours of only Archemais's quiet voice that they all jumped. "Yes?" called Mercurion.

The door flew open with a bang. A centaur glittering in armor pranced into the room, his battle whip loose in his hand. "Ah, I thought so." He sent the whip hissing around Archemais's waist pinning his arms to his side. Archemais made no attempt to dodge.

Mercurion looked at the newcomer with distaste. "Sandarin, what is the meaning of this?"

The centaur leered at him. "We have fauns attacking our northern gate, *sir*. One of the guards was under the impression that a runner came to warn the king more than a watch ago, but no such news ever reached him. He would like to see you and your...*guests* at once."

Mercurion did not argue. As they stepped from the room, they heard a sound like distant thunder, and all the centaurs pranced and muttered. Corry guessed it was the Xerous's party making their breach in the wall.

* * * *

Fenrah and her party sailed down the broad river with the current, past the ghost of a city, just visible on either side. No one spoke.

They had not been traveling long when Laylan saw something strange in the river up ahead. He half stood, craning his neck for a better look. The water was *gone*. It didn't diminish. It just ended, as though someone had sheered it off with a knife. There was no waterfall, nothing. He could see the dry riverbed beyond.

Laylan started to speak, but stopped as he saw something else. A door—or the shape of a door—freestanding just above the water at the spot where the river ended. Light was coming through. It looked like daylight.

He glanced at Fenrah. She looked tense and uncertain in the strange glow. “Ferryshelt,” she said as they skimmed towards the door, “*where* are you taking us?”

“Why, lady, don’t you know?” And at that moment they shot through the door.

The sunlight was so dazzling at first that Laylan could not see properly. An icy wind hit him in the face, and he forced his eyes to open. They were sailing the smooth waters of the river through a huge domed building that appeared to be made of crystal. Sunlight bounced off the transparent roof above, dappling the room in rainbows and chords of light. A thousand random paths wound their way through the room, past strange fountains and benches and stone tables. The water of the river, which had been black, was now shot through with sunlight, and strange creatures could be seen dancing in the depths, moving too fast for the eye to follow. At the far end of the great room, they came to a cluster of smaller buildings, and here Charon docked the boat. “My masters will see you shortly. Follow that path.”

They walked as though in a daze, down a little winding path, full of pleasant crystal statues. “Ice,” said Fenrah suddenly. “It’s all made of ice.”

She was right. What Laylan had taken for crystal was ice, spun and carved in the most fantastic patterns. It also explained the extreme chill of the place. They were all shivering. The path lead them shortly to one of the buildings, where they entered a room not made of ice. Here they found leather upholstered chairs and a pleasant fire. They all gathered round it and were still rubbing their hands over it when another door opened and three persons came into the room.

Laylan was never sure afterwards what kind of shelts they were or whether they were shelts at all. They wore boots and thick coats and gloves. The first was a laughing giant—the tallest person Laylan had ever seen, with fiery orange hair and broad shoulders. The second was a grey-haired ancient, his face lined with a thousand stories. The third was a freckled boy, perhaps ten, certainly no older than twelve, and the color of his hair and eyes seemed, by some trick of the light, to be ever shifting.

“Welcome to Glacia,” boomed the giant.

“Welcome to the City Out of Time,” wheezed the old one.

“Welcome to the Building,” piped the boy. “May you find what you seek.”

Fenrah sank to one knee. “Sirs—” she began, but the giant interrupted her.

“No need for that, Lady. We are not the Firebird or even his prophets. We are elements with a function to perform. Are you here because you wish to change the past or the future?”

“The future,” said Fenrah in some surprise.

“Ah, the future is always easier,” said the old one. “But there will be a price.”

“I am Melchior,” said the giant, “and the toothless one is Gaspar. You can call the boy Bal. Come walk with us in the Old City. That is where we usually do business.”

“Though we’ve not done business with shelts in many a year,” growled the old one.

They followed the strange trio out of the dome to a high balcony, where the river plunged down in a waterfall. “Over there,” pointed Melchior, “is the New City, the place where the Unibus live and work.”

“There,” gestured Gasp, “is the Old City, from which the building has moved on, and nothing changes.”

“And there,” said Bal, “is the cleared space and raw cut ice for the City-Yet-To-Be.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sevn. “How can all of this be under Selbis.”

Gaspar cackled. “Silly wolfling, of course we’re not under Selbis.”

“We are deep in the Snow Mountains,” said Melchior, “folded into a space that not even the little reindeer shelts could find.”

“The river,” said Laylan weakly.

“We bought the river,” chirped Bal. “Long ago, from the wizard Gabalon. We paid a fair price for it.”

“*Bought* the river,” whispered Sevn.

“Well you didn’t think we’d just take it, did you?” asked the boy indignantly. “We do have rules!”

“We folded the river into our city,” said Melchior. “I understand from Charon that you want it back?”

“Yes,” said Fenrah.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” said the giant. “As Bal says, we paid a fair price, and we use the river as raw, shapeable water for our Building.”

They were descending steps now, into what Gaspar had called the Old City. Every now and then, they saw an Unibus, easily recognizable with their dark skin and silver hair, but the city was for the most part deserted. It was made all of ice, much of it colored and elaborately fashioned into vines, trees, houses, towers, all the trappings of a city. In spite of his unease, Laylan could not help admiring the skill it had taken to create this place.

They walked in silence for a time and came at last to the library. Inside, they found real books and shelves of strange curios and knickknacks. Melchior spread his hands. “Well, my children, this is what most who find us come to see—the truth of every life that lived and died.”

“We did not come to look at other people’s stories,” said Fenrah. “We came for the river.”

“We cannot give it to you,” said Melchior sorrowfully, “we cannot even let you keep the knowledge of these books, but you may read and understand, and later you will know that you understood. You will be content, though you will not remember what you read.”

“We need the river,” said Fenrah stubbornly.

“He wants you to make an offer,” whispered Bal.

Gaspar shot him a withering look. “Be silent, boy!”

Melchior sighed. “We cannot give you anything, lady. However, we do sometimes trade.”

Fenrah and Laylan looked at each other. *What have we got that they’d want?* They glanced around for Sevn, but he’d wandered over to the bookcases.

“What is all this other stuff?” He was looking at the knickknacks on some of the shelves—in particular, a little ice sculpture of a golden cowry.

“Ah,” said Melchior, “these are the in-between things and places, which do not fit comfortably in the rest of the city.”

“The flute,” muttered Laylan, looking at the ice sculpture. “I suppose they would have taken *that* in trade.”

“But we don’t have it,” said Fenrah

Beside the cowry was a glass case, full of tiny figures of wolves. It was locked. Beside that, stood another glass case and in it, a city. Sevn squinted, then drew in his breath. “This is your city,” he whispered.

“Of course,” said Gaspar. “It *is* the City Out of Time.”

“And I suppose inside it is another Glacia,” said Sevn, “and another, and another—”

“It will not do to look too hard at things in this room,” interrupted Melchior. “The last shelts who visited us here went mad.”

“We don’t know what to give you for the river,” said Fenrah. “We didn’t bring anything of value.”

Bal grinned and clapped his hands. “Silly shelts, you have all sorts of lovely dreams.”

Melchior stroked his chin. “Yes, dreams are very fine things.”

“One dream from each, I think,” said Gaspar critically.

“Dreams?” echoed Fenrah, bewildered.

“Your greatest wish,” said Melchior patiently, “whatever you long for most, whatever keeps you awake at night. We will take it. You will not remember it.”

“Troublesome things, dreams,” said Gaspar. “Most shelts do better without them.”

Laylan recoiled. “Is there nothing else you would take?”

“Memories,” said Gaspar, rubbing his hands. “You have some very nice memories.”

“Yes,” agreed Melchior. “A single day from each—the finest memory you have. That would be a good trade.”

Fenrah grimaced. “Couldn’t you take a bad memory instead?”

Melchior smiled. “I’m afraid not. Of course, there’s always your names.”

“Names are powerful,” said Gaspar.

“You can take our *names*?” asked Sevn.

“Yes,” said Bal. “You will not remember them, and neither will anyone else.”

“But the living can make new names,” said Gaspar. He smiled again in a way that made Laylan’s hair prickle. “Or, I suppose you could owe us—a debt to be collected at the time and place of our choosing.”

“I don’t think we want to owe you,” said Laylan quickly.

“Then what will it be?” asked Melchior. “Your dreams, your memories, or your names?”

Hualien gave a desultory little chitter. It was not a happy sound. “Can we each give you something different?” asked Laylan at last, “just so you get something from each of us?”

“That is acceptable,” said Melchior.

“Then,” said Laylan, “I suppose I’ll give you my—”

“Wait.” Fenrah was looking hard at the Architects. “You said you paid a fair price for the river.”

“Yes,” said Melchior.

Laylan’s head shot up. “And Charon said that we had something of yours or we wouldn’t have gotten through the maze.”

Fenrah unsheathed the dagger at her belt. In the cold air the blade had become a perfect translucent gold. “This is what you gave Gabalon in exchange for the river, isn’t it?”

The architects looked a little disappointed. “Ah, yes.”

Fenrah held it out. “Take it back, and give us the river. You said yourselves the trade is fair.”

Melchior frowned. "If we return the river, it will flood Selbis. Gabalon built foundations over that dam long ago."

Fenrah nodded. "That's exactly what we want."

"Very well, then," hissed Gaspar and he snatched the dagger from Fenrah's hands.

She sagged visibly. "Good. Now may we go back quickly? We'd like to get out before the water rises."

Gaspar's little black eyes narrowed. "You've paid for the river, lady, but not your passage home. We do not give gifts. That is not our function."

"One of your company must stay behind," said Melchior. "That is the price of the ferry."

Laylan felt a little sick. In his mind, he saw a thousand maybe's and might-have-been's, and he pushed them all away. "I'll stay," he said.

* * * *

Chance watched as yet another cautious group of wolflings came through the small gate that had been erected to replace the Wizard's Gate. Fenrah had sent ravens and rats before she left. The message was simple: a treaty had been arranged with the wood fauns and the cats. If the wolflings wanted a say in its terms, they would come to Laven-lay.

They were coming to the Wizard's Gate because it was closest to the palace, and many of the common fauns were still hostile. Meuril had already left for Selbis when they began to arrive, but Capricia declared that since her father had made Chance responsible for the Raiders, he was also responsible for any stray wolflings coming into Laven-lay. Chance thought this slightly unfair, as the wolflings neither liked nor trusted him. They would listen to Sham, so it was he who met them as they came, made note of their grievances, and told them where they could

camp. They'd been offered rooms in the castle, but enclosed spaces made the outlaws nervous, and the smell of fauns made them frantic, so they camped in the open, against the wall where they'd come in. There were perhaps thirty altogether now.

Chance watched two newcomers at the gate, representatives from different packs. They were dressed in poorly cured skins, and they moved with exquisite caution, their ears flicking nervously at any noise or rapid movement. One walked with a staff. He was missing a foot.

When Sham finished speaking with them, he came over to Chance. "Looks like one of them paid Laylan's ransom," he commented. Wolfplings who'd cut their own feet off to escape from traps had become so common in recent years that the phenomena had acquired a name. "They say there's a sick child in one of their packs. They want me to come see her."

Chance shrugged. "Go if you wish."

Sham shook his head. "I'm not sure they'd let me come back."

Chance looked surprised. "You mean, they'd—?"

"Kidnap me? Maybe. Maybe kill me because they think I'm cooperating with the fauns. Maybe hold me for ransom if they think I'm valuable. I don't know either of the supposed packs these two are representing, and I don't trust them."

Chance frowned. "And we're letting such shelts into Laven-lay?"

Sham shrugged. "We've got to start somewhere. Chance, these are the dregs of a nation. The gentle, the thinkers, the far-sighted are mostly gone, and it will take a generation to rebuild them. The survivors—that's what's left—and many of them think only as far ahead as the next day, the next meal, the next opportunity. They've been cruelly treated, and that hasn't made them into nice—" He stopped. "What's that smell?"

Chance sniffed the air. “Wood smoke? Campfires?”

Sham cocked his head. “I don’t think so. It’s almost like—”

And then they saw Shyshax running towards them across the meadow from the castle.

“Swamp fauns,” he called. “They’re setting fire to the city!”

Chapter 15. Choices

There is only one crime: the overestimation of one's authority.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

The centaurs took Archemais and Corry deeper into the inner keep, down corridors glistening with marble and burnished bronze. Mercurion gestured at the centaur, Sandarin, now walking well ahead of them. "This one thinks he wants my job. It would be an act of pure cruelty to give it to him, but I am sometimes tempted."

Archemais gestured at the walls and floor. "Were these things here when you came?"

"No," said Mercurion uneasily, "we made repairs."

"Repairs?" Archemais raised an eyebrow. "With such materials?"

"Centaurs *are* craftsman. There are many work crews, and they have found a great deal of materials in the palace. Its—" He stopped with a hiss of breath. Even Sandarin seemed momentarily at a loss. They'd entered a throne-room-courtyard with its roof open to the sky. An enormous fig tree crouched at the far end. Its trunk and tortured roots had been shaped or carved—it was hard to tell which—into an elaborate throne. Statues carved in jet lined the isle as one approached—disturbing images in various attitudes of agony and ecstasy. The walls of the room were made entirely of mirrors.

"This was not here yesterday," said Mercurion weakly.

"The tree," whispered Sandarin. "It was a blackened stump. How—?"

The centaurs wandered around the courtyard at a loss. "His majesty must have gone to oversee the defense of the southern gate," said Sandarin at last. "We will wait for him."

Archemais stayed in the center of the room, but after a time Corry's curiosity overcame him, and

he wandered over to have a look at the tree. It was monstrous, with roots that seemed to be devouring some of the nearer statues. Around back of it, he found a little rectangular pool of white marble, its water perfectly clear. Corry sat down beside it in the shade of the tree, feeling weary after having been up most of the night.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

Corry looked up. He thought he might have been dozing. He saw a ragged boy sitting in the branches of the tree. “Are you thirsty?” asked the boy.

Corry rubbed his eyes. “Who are you?”

“Nobody. A servant.”

Corry frowned, looked back down at the pool.

“It’s called the Water of Forgetting,” said the boy, “or, sometimes, of Remembrance. Is there anything you wish you could remember, Corellian?”

Corry’s eyes shot up. It was hard to see clearly in the shifting shadows of the tree. The boy looked no older than himself. “How do you know my name?”

“I heard it when you came in,” said the boy. “You were all making enough noise to wake the wolves in the walls. You don’t want to do that. They get very unpleasant when they wake.”

Corry glanced at the pool again and started. The reflection that looked back at him was not his own, but the face of his mother as he’d seen her in pictures in his father’s house. *Is there anything you wish you could remember, Corellian?*

“Yes,” he whispered. “I wish I could remember everything.”

And then, the world seemed to shift on its axis, and the pool was not a pool, but a door, and it was not lying on the ground, but standing upright. All the rest of the world seemed askew, and only the door stood straight—the door of white marble, of white light, of *remembrance*.

Corry saw all this as a double image, for he also saw clearly that the boy had jumped out of the tree, and his hair was black as starless night, and his eyes were green as poison. “I know who you are,” whispered Corry, but his voice was so small he could barely hear it.

“Do you?” smiled the boy. “And do you know who *you* are, Corellian?” Then he pushed Corry through the door, into the pool.

* * * *

Daren watched with approval as his fauns galloped through the streets of Laven-lay, tossing burning brands onto thatched roofs and wooden buildings. *The green city, the garden city...* “City of kindling,” quipped Daren. Laven-lay had insulted him, shot at him, harbored his enemies and taken his prey from between his teeth, but he would have his revenge.

Of course, the centaurs would be angry that he’d not been in Selbis, making the city into a base. *But that was an insane plan from the beginning*, thought Daren. *Targon will thank me when he sees what I have done instead*. After his humiliating retreat from the walls of Laven-lay, Daren had returned in haste to Selbis, collected his full force, and marched back towards the wood faun capital. He’d hidden along the triangle road and waited.

He did not have to wait long. As Daren had suspected, a hastily assembled wood and cliff faun army soon came marching up the road at speed. It was not a large army, but it was probably every able-bodied soldier in Laven-lay. Daren wasn’t sure whether they were marching to Selbis

to find him or whether they knew about the centaurs. He didn't care. He gave them a day to get well away from Laven-lay, then proceeded to attack the city.

As expected, he met little resistance. His mounted fauns were fresh and eager for action. They torched the wooden buildings and great trees, shot the deer, and rode down any wood fauns who challenged them in the streets—nearly all of them females and children. *When Meuril returns, he'll find nothing but ashes.*

The fauns guarding the doors of the castle were ancients and cripples and they died quickly on swamp fauns spears. More wood fauns were running to help, but they were not warriors. Daren and some dozen of his personal guard fought their way easily into the central palace complex. Daren had a wish to see the city aflame, and he thought he might climb one of the towers. His personal guard were keen to make sport of the royal ladies, and Daren dismissed them. He wandered at leisure until he found a suitable tower and ascended alone.

The room at the top appeared to be a study, and he paused for a moment to appreciate this person's taste in rare books. *Perhaps I'll take a few before I burn it.* The view from the window was as breathtaking as he'd expected. The fire was spreading rapidly through Laven-lay's myriad green spaces, aided by a fortuitous wind. Little figures of wood fauns ran about like frantic insects in a kicked ant hill. *Some of those buildings must be four hundred years old. Some of these books are even older, but old books burn as easily as old buildings.*

Someone spoke behind him. "I was extremely disappointed not to have found you in Danda-lay, your lordship. But I have found you now."

* * * *

Archemais was watching the mirrors, the throne, the statues. He felt alive for the first time in years. He was doing what he had been made to do. He was fighting the battle he'd been born to fight. He was watching so closely for his enemy that he did not notice for some minutes that Corellian was no longer with him. The boy moved as soundlessly as his mother. Sometimes Archemais wondered if he could Fold.

Still, he was not too worried until he heard the soft sound of voices near the tree. He walked towards them. Then he started to run.

"Lost him again, have you?" The centaur Targon came strolling out from behind the tree, an expression of cat-like smugness on his face. "Really, Archemais, you'd lose your own head if it wasn't attached to your shoulders. You may lose it anyway."

Archemais blanched. A mist was rolling in the mirrors now. Wolves were wandering in that mist, and far away he thought he saw a boy—lost, stumbling—and beyond him...something else. Archemais tore his eyes away from the mirrors.

"Yes," purred Gabalon, "I would not make the mistake of sending him away again. He'll stay here in the mirrors and watch. Perhaps in three or four hundred years he'll be ready to become one of my wizards. It can get very dull behind that glass, or so I'm told." He paced around Archemais, loosening his battle whip. Archemais turned with him, said nothing.

"Targon?" It was Mercurion. He had a hunted expression. "Do you know this person?"

The centaur glanced at Mercurion. "Why, yes. I'm told you spoke to him without me. That was foolish. He's a dangerous wizard. They'll say anything when cornered."

Mercurion looked around at the room, the tree, the wolves in the mirrors. "Who are you?" he whispered.

“I am Targon,” smiled the other, “the friend you grew up with, the friend you followed to the throne.”

Mercurion shook his head. “My friend was no lover of illusions. He would kill, but never torture. He was overeager, but he was not insane. You are not him.”

Targon smiled and spread his hands. “Ah, Archemais *has* been talking to you. Very well, then, you may say that I have acquired a new perspective, a new weapon.”

“A new personality,” muttered Archemais.

Targon sent a huge hoof flying at his head, which Archemais dodged with reptilian swiftness. They glared at each other. “Has it occurred to you, *Targon*,” said Archemais, “that this new personality of yours is doing most of the thinking, making nearly all the decisions?”

“We are *not* two personalities,” barked Targon. “I chose to merge with a wizard. When that happened, all my memories became his memories, and all his memories also became mine! I can remember growing up on Iron Mountain, but I can also remember ruling Panamindorah for a thousand years. *I* built Panamindorah, wrote its history, made it interesting—better than anything your pale Firebird could have done. I can remember all that! But of course I also remember my days as a centaur colt.”

“Remembering is not the same as *being*,” said Archemais. “When a weaker being merges with an older and stronger one, the weaker is swallowed up. You barely exist, Targon. He has almost devoured you. Almost. But he still fears you just a little, or this one would not be alive.” He jerked a finger at Mercurion. “He’s not the sort of advisor my brother keeps around.”

Targon's face twisted. He danced backwards, reared, and sent his whip flashing at Archemais, who dodged again. "There's another thing my brother would not do," he said. "Try to fight *me*, as a paltry centaur."

"You!" The centaur ground his teeth. "You're nothing. Not even the Firebird wants you anymore. Disinherited prophet! Who would fear such a creature—fallen dragon that goes upon its belly. Ha!"

He raised his hand, and Archemais let out a hiss of pain. He put his hands to his head, and then suddenly his form sprang out, and in his place lay the giant cobra. He spread his hood.

Gabalon smiled. "I'm still stronger than you." He stroked his chin. "I should lock you in true form forever, Archemais. I'll take your power of speech and banish you—a monster to be hunted wherever you go. You were always the cultured one, brother. How does the prospect of never seeing another book, painting, fork, or instrument ring in your ears? To never again converse with a living thing, to be loathed and hated and feared. What would you give to avoid that? My little golden flute is a small price. Come, Archemais, I might even let you live."

At that moment a tremor ran through the building, and from somewhere deep below came the faint sound of grinding stone. A frown flickered across Gabalon's face, and for a moment his attention wavered.

Archemais's form shifted back to human. He cocked an eyebrow. "You were saying?"

* * * *

Corry was falling, falling. He wasn't sure whether he was in water or air. Confused images flashed through his mind—a Panamindorah that was gone forever, growing up in Canisaria, his mother, his *mother*, and she was dead, and it hurt, and everything was so dark, and

he'd been stupid, stupid, and now he would have nothing to do but think about it forever. When he finally opened his eyes, he was lying on some sort of ground, and he might have been lying there a moment or an age.

Golden light was falling all around him, and he thought for a moment he had the flute, and it would be alright, but then he remembered that they'd left it in Laven-lay. He raised his head. Someone was looking down at him—a huge bird with wings that seemed to cradle a nascent sun. He was almost too bright to look at. The only thing Corry could see clearly were his eyes—golden as the purest flame. “Corellian,” said the Firebird, “what are you doing here?”

“He pushed me!” Corry babbled. “I didn’t go through the door. Gabalon pushed me.”

The Firebird said nothing, and at last Corry petered into silence. Then he said, “But I let him push me. I wanted to go through the door. I wanted to remember, and now I do, and most of it’s bad. I’m sorry. I’m not any better than my father or Syrril, am I?”

He let his head fall until his forehead was resting on the ground. “When I came to Selbis to rescue Telsar I didn’t really come for him. I came because I wanted shelts to know me as someone besides the son of the failed prophet. I wanted the glory, and I tried to steal the flute for the same reason.” He stopped talking, and the quiet of that place seeped through him like cold water.

“Peace,” said the Firebird, and Corry felt the word in his very bones. He raised his head and heard music—wonderfully familiar, yet he couldn’t remember where he’d heard it before. Corry thought that if he could have heard that song every day, he would never have been sad or lost or lonely. “Gabalon does not give true gifts,” said the Firebird. “He has given you back the worst of your memories, but I will give you back the best. Be whole.”

He breathed on Corry, and he remembered laughter, the smell of his mother and his father's jokes and that he really had loved Telsar and wanted to save him, and at the same time, he knew that the bad things were also true, but they had no more power over him than a dead leaf has over the tree that shed it. While his head was still ringing with the music that had sung the worlds, he heard the Firebird say, "I offer you the position that your father once held. Will you be my prophet in this world?"

Corry staggered to his feet. He glanced around and was startled to see, some distance away to his left, the throne room beyond the glass, and his father and the red centaur talking. "Then you really have abandoned my father?" asked Corry.

"Not at all," said the Firebird. "The Good that *is* cannot be the same as the Good that *might have been*, but that does not mean that it is not still Good."

"I don't understand."

The Firebird shook his head. "He is no longer my prophet, but that does not mean that he is not mine. I need your answer, Corellian. Speak your mind."

Corry hesitated. "If I say no, will I survive this battle? Will we win?"

"If you say no, you will survive the battle. Whether you will win is a decision for another. If you say no, you will have a long, uneventful life. You will be much loved and surrounded by family and friends. You will be happy."

"And the feathered dragon?"

"You will never find that shape again, but you will find your mother's shape, and you will bring it out when in need or when you wish to startle or amuse."

"And if I say yes?"

“If you say yes, you will be the feathered dragon—the living Monument. You will visit Panamindorah in many ages, but I cannot promise a long life as it will seem to you. You will be often alone. You will be both loved and hated. You will know great sorrow and great joy. You will change this world and make it better.”

“Will shelts and animals suffer if I say no?”

“Perhaps. They will suffer more if you say yes and do as your father did. Think well, Corellian. This is a real choice. You can say no, and you will not be punished for it.”

Corry thought a moment. “So my choice is this: a short, unpleasant life that means something or a long, happy life than means little?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.”

Corry looked at the shadow wolves pacing around him. He looked at Gabalon, leering at his father beyond the glass. He thought of the wide world and all there was to love and want and need there. Then he gave his answer.

* * * *

Fenrah rounded on Laylan. “You certainly will not stay! You promised to help the wolflings, and that isn’t finished.”

“Well, *you* can’t stay,” he said, “although I know you’ll try.”

“They don’t need me anymore,” she said.

“They do, and so do I.”

Hualien was chittering, but the Architects shook their heads. “We need one, little friend, not hundreds of thousands. You are many more than you appear.”

“Let me stay.” It was Sevn. He looked at Fenrah. “I’m the only one you can spare. Besides, Fenny, I want to read those books in the maze. I want to see how this place works. Panamindorah doesn’t need thunder powder anyway.”

A tear rolled down Fenrah’s cheek. “Sevn—”

“You know I’m right,” he said and hugged her.

“It is done then,” crooned Gaspar. “One life for three, and one of you is legion. The trade is more than fair. Come, we must return you to the river.”

As they turned to leave, Laylan looked back. Sevn had reached out and broken the ice lock on the glass case full of wolves. He turned to Laylan and winked. Then he walked away into the library of the Architects.

Chapter 16. Water in the Dark

The agony of battle is not wondering whether you will lose friends, but *which* friends.

--Archemais, journal

Charon polled Fenrah, Laylan, and Hualien back up a river that was clearly rising. "How will we get out of the maze without the dagger?" asked Fenrah.

"Go straight away from the door you came in by," said Charon. "Do not turn aside or look back. You will arrive at the front entrance."

"But the front entrance is high in the wall," objected Fenrah. "We can't reach it."

"That is not my concern," said Charon.

"Is there any other way out?" asked Fenrah.

"Not anymore."

By the time they reached the door to the maze, the wharf had completely disappeared, and water was churning under the door. They stepped from the boat, and Charon shot away with the current. Fenrah, Laylan, and Hualien lit their lamps and splashed into the place that Charon called the Three Headed Beast. They walked in silence through the rectangular rooms, their candles reflecting off the water on the floor. Somehow the books had all gone away, but the candles were still there, and the ominous mosaic of a monster. As they walked, they thought they heard voices, and once Laylan felt certain that someone else was trapped in the maze and calling for help. Fenrah thought she heard Sevn's voice, and Hualien kept grinding his teeth and whining. "Don't look back," said Fenrah over and over. "He said we mustn't look back."

By the time they reached their entrance, the water was up to their hocks. They looked at the door for a moment in silence. Something shifted deep below, and the whole room shuddered.

The water was rising fast now, and it was very cold. “I can only think of one way to get up there,” said Laylan.

Fenrah nodded. “We can tread water, wait until it carries us high enough.”

“Our lamps will go out,” said Laylan.

“Hualien is good at finding his way in the dark,” said Fenrah.

Laylan looked at her broken arm, still bound against her side. Neither one of them said anything. There was nothing to say. Quickly, they divested themselves of all their equipment, anything that was heavy. Then there was nothing to do but wait for the water and the darkness.

* * * *

Syrill joined the first wave of fauns who attacked the breach made by the Raider’s thunder powder. He was among the first to climb the half crumbled wall amid a shower of centaur arrows and start across the deadly space between the outer wall and the inner. Syrill had every intention of dying in this battle. He had always expected to die with a sword in his hand, and it would save Meuril the pain and embarrassment of executing him. He wasn’t about to go cheaply, though. *You’ll have to shoot better than that, you sons of burrows.*

Syrill saw a gate in the second wall, but it looked very strong, and the fauns who’d crossed the breach now seemed uncertain, trapped between two lines of enemy fire, dying fast and losing their momentum. Syrill called to them, tried to rally them. He saw that Ounce had come over the wall as well. He wasn’t sure why the cat had elected to come at all, since nearly all the others had stayed in Laven-lay, exhausted.

Ounce caught up with him as they approached the gate. “What are you going to do?” he shouted.

“I don’t know,” called Syrrill. He was holding his shield over his head, and at that moment, a javelin thumped down into it so hard that it knocked him to the ground. They were near the gate now. Syrrill struggled to his feet, and Ounce slid to a stop beside him. The cat must have heard something, smelled something, because all at once he grabbed Syrrill around the middle and shot away from the gate, ignoring Syrrill’s angry protests. A moment later, the gate erupted in a roar of flame and falling masonry. The Raiders were doing their job well.

* * * *

The water in the maze became too deep for Hualien before the wolflings had to start swimming. Fenrah dropped her lamp and picked up the little rat shelt. Laylan held his lamp up for as long as he could, but at last Fenrah turned Hualien loose in the water, Laylan dropped his lamp, and then they were all swimming in the dark.

They spoke seldom, saving their strength. Laylan reached out occasionally to touch the wall as they rose, feeling for the door. He strained his ears for the small sounds of the other two breathing and the lap of water as they moved. Already he was shivering, and he was particularly worried about Fenrah with her broken arm. He would have asked her to hang onto his back, had he not been certain she would refuse.

Disaster came with little warning. There was a groan from deep underground, and something in the maze fell with a crash, followed by a gurgle as of some enormous drain. The water in the room surged. Laylan heard Fenrah shout, and then a wave walloped them. Laylan reached for the wall and couldn’t find it. Water was suddenly pouring into the room much too fast. He bumped his head, realized it was the ceiling. *We’re going to drown.*

At the same time, his foot brushed against wood. *The door! I found the door!* “Fenrah! Hualien!”

He heard a faint chitter, but nothing else.

“Fenrah!”

He bumped his head again. They had to leave *now*. “Hualien,” called Laylan desperately, “I’ve found the door. Please speak something I can understand!”

There was a pause, then Hualien’s high hissing voice spoke in the language of Middle Panamindorah. “She here. Hurt. Can’t swim.”

Laylan plunged towards him, his head now only a hand’s breadth from the ceiling. His reaching fingers closed on fabric, a deadweight. Then he realized it was Fenrah, and Hualien was holding her up. She must have been bashed against the wall when the wave came. Laylan took her, and grabbed Hualien’s hand. “This way,” he said and fervently hoped he was right.

* * * *

Dance had not stayed with the wolves in the wood. He circled back around, caught the trail, and followed Fenrah’s party. He waited until Corry and Archemais slipped into the city. Their entrance provided him with the distraction he needed—black as night, a shadow of a shadow, he slipped past the guards, following sometimes by sight and sometimes by scent as Archemais and Corry went to Mercurion. He waited while they talked, becoming more worried as dawn neared. It would be harder to hide at dawn.

At last they left the underlings quarters, but it was more difficult to hide in the palace, and his progress along their trail was slow. It took him the better part of a quarter watch to follow them to the throne-room-courtyard. The wolf who had been Telsar remembered this place,

remembered the iron muzzle, the loss of his speech, the years in the mirrors, watching his enemy win victory after victory, laugh at him, forget him.

Telsar flung himself at the door, his black lips already peeling back from his white teeth in a snarl. He saw the tree, the mirrors, the startled faces of the centaurs. He saw the red centaur and for all his guise, he knew him. Dance howled.

He was as surprised as anyone else when, from behind the tree, another wolf answered.

* * * *

Laylan found the door with his feet, and they dove to it, pushed it open, and were immediately sucked through with a wall of water. Seconds later, Laylan and Hualien stood up, waist deep. Hualien started away, chittering as he went, and Laylan stumbled after the sound, carrying Fenrah. He couldn't tell whether she was breathing. He knew she must have swallowed water. He wanted to stop and try to wake her, but there was no time.

She's unconscious, he kept saying to himself. *Not dead, not dead, not dead...*

She twitched. Laylan let out a long breath. He was slogging through the water, and soon they were climbing stairs. Hualien was muttering in the tunnel ahead when Fenrah twitched again, gagged, coughed up water. "Laylan?" she whispered.

"Hmmm?" He was listening for Hualien.

"I can't breath."

"What? Oh." He realized then how tightly he was holding her. "Sorry."

"Are we out of the maze?"

"Yes."

"I think I can stand now."

Laylan set her on her feet, but she immediately began retching more water. She seemed wobbly, and Hualien was walking very fast. “I think I’d better carry you a little further.” She didn’t argue, and when he picked her up, she relaxed against him.

Laylan felt curiously light. *I hunted you. I set traps for you all over the wood. I tried to kill you, but now...you trust me.* It seemed like a gift too great for words.

Up more stairs and along more tunnels. Sometimes there was water on the floor, and sometimes they were ahead of it. Quakes came more and more frequently—rumblings and shiftings that brought showers of mortar down around their ears. After a while Fenrah asked to be put down again, and this time she was steady.

Hualien’s chittering in the passage ahead grew almost desperate. Several times he stopped and did not seem certain how to proceed. They were in subbasements now, broader tunnels and open places. They were crossing one such room when a rolling motion brought them to the floor, and they felt the whole room *drop* several feet. The deafening crack subsided, but the creaking and groaning continued. In the blackness they could hear the walls shifting.

Hualien was making a whining that sounded nothing at all like language. “I think he wants us to wait here,” said Fenrah, so they sat in the dark, holding hands to keep from being separated if the room shifted again.

At length, Hualien came back and spoke for a few moments to Fenrah. She listened and then said, “The way that normally leads out of here is gone. He’s found another way, but.... Laylan, do you remember how Shyshax told us he got away from those cats in Selbis? The rotating fireplaces?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s the way out. Only, they rotate in a circle, like buckets on a water wheel, and we’re on the downswing of the circle. To get out, we’ll have to go all the way to the bottom and back up again.”

Laylan thought a moment. “And the rooms below this are flooded.”

“Yes.”

“Is he certain the mechanism still works?”

“No.”

“How large is the wheel?”

“He thinks there’s maybe six rooms between us and the surface, but he’d not sure.”

Laylan drew a deep breath. “Well, where is it?”

Hualien led them across the uneven floor to an alcove in the wall. A brief exploration with his hands told Laylan that it was a large fireplace. All three of them crawled in and sat down. They spent a few moments breathing in and out very rapidly. Then Hualien chirped. “Ready?” asked Fenrah, but before Laylan could respond, the fireplace dropped through the floor and into cold, black water.

Chapter 17. The Living and the Dead

A lake lies east in the forest now,
a vast and silent lake,
and some shelts say
they fish every day
where dark things sleep and never wake.

--Wood faun nursery rhyme

Daren turned as quick as a hawk, but he still barely parried the sword that whisked past his ear. Char's skill had improved with practice. However, skill alone could not have kept him alive against one of the greatest swordfighters in Panamindorah. Daren was frankly astonished to find himself fighting a Fealiday, and it took him some moments to recover.

Char used those moments to maximum advantage. He struck hard and fast and managed to catch Daren across the ribs on a backswing. "You are everything I hate about the world," panted Char as he watched the dark stain spreading across Daren's tunic. "But the Creator must have some sense of justice, because he's given me a chance to kill you."

Daren managed a sneer. "Do I know you?"

Char launched himself at the swamp faun again. Round and round they went in the open tower room against the backdrop of Laven-lay in flames. "Slave," grunted Daren. "I don't know how you got here, but you're still just a beast of burden. The wood fauns will see that soon enough."

He was fighting to kill. Char saw it and smiled. "Where has your play gone, your lordship? Are you afraid that if you wait to toy with me, I will kill you instead?"

Daren cursed. He was far past exhilaration. The shock of finding Char here was affecting him badly. “Do you know where I sent your sister’s pelt?” he taunted. “I sent her to port Ory to be sold at market during Lupricasia. Do you consider the cliff fauns your friends? I wonder which of them is wearing her right now.”

Char lunged at Daren and drove him backwards almost through the low window. For one second Daren worried that he had pushed it too far. But no. In close quarters he was able to catch Char’s blade, snap it away, and send it spinning into the air beyond the tower. His confidence instantly restored, Daren whirled to pin Char against the wall beside the window. “You fool. Did you really think you could kill me? Work and clothing—that’s all your kind are good for.”

“My name is Char, and I am a cat shelt. You may kill me, but you can’t kill that knowledge in the hundreds of Fealiday who tore apart your armies in Port Ory and Danda-lay. They’ll do the same to your army in Laven-lay. Your queen is dead, and your cause is lost.”

Daren stared at him. “*Fealiday*,” he spat. “Cats are nothing, less than nothing. Stupid beasts that need a rope around their necks and a faun to tell them what to do.”

BOOM! The door to the room flew open. Capricia was standing there in the green and purple robes she wore when presiding as judge of the royal court. She looked down her nose at Daren. “Your fauns are causing a disturbance in my city, sir, and *you* are causing a disturbance in my study. You do not have my permission to be here, nor do you have my protection.”

Daren made a little bow. “I will be happy to speak with you in a moment, lady. I might even offer you protection from my guard, several of whom were speaking wistfully of your supposed absence.”

Capricia sniffed. “I am not in need of your protection. You are in need of mine.” At that moment, a huge white tiger pushed around her through the doorway. Lexis growled. “As you can see,” continued Capricia, “I do not have a rope around his neck, nor do I intend to tell him what to do.”

Daren started to bring his sword around, but Char punched it from his grasp. There was a brief struggle and then a scream as Lexis picked Daren up, shook him as a dog shakes a squirrel, and then flung him from the window.

* * * *

Everything seemed to be happening at once as Corry came up out of the dry pool with the Durian wolves. They were all shouting and yipping. He came around the tree just in time to see Dance in the act of springing at Targon. The centaur had turned towards Archemais with an expression of pure rage, but before he could do anything Dance landed on his back, and his teeth closed on the fragile centaur neck. Targon reared, bellowed, then his form sprang out.

In the same instant, Corry heard his father shouting, “Mercurion, get out of here! Go tell the centaurs what they have followed. Run!”

Where Targon had recently stood, there crouched a great red dragon. He was as tall as the fig tree, with sagging naked scales and horned head. He flung Dance from his shoulders as a horse might fling off a kitten. Sandarin made a terrified rush for the door, but the dragon’s head snaked out and caught him around the human torso. He expired with a crunch and a hideous scream.

Mercurion was very pale, but he had not moved. “So,” he said. “Now you will begin killing us. Is this the culmination of your great plan?”

“Archemais has found a way to destroy my city,” hissed Gabalon. “Very well. We will retreat. In the meantime, my enemies will pay dearly for this day’s work.”

“*We* will retreat?” echoed Mercurion. “What makes you think the centaurs will follow you from here?”

“They will follow me because I am their king,” snarled Gabalon, “and because no one will tell them otherwise.” His jaws flashed out and closed around Mercurion, bearing him to the ground. Corry saw a gout of blood and thought that Gabalon had killed him. Then Gabalon froze. He released his prey and raised his head, shook it as though troubled by a fly. Mercurion moved weakly on the ground. Gabalon’s head shot towards him again, then veered away. He began to whine low in his throat—a sound of anger and pain. He took a step back, now shaking his head violently.

His form flickered wildly—now a dragon, now a centaur, now a man, now a creature with one head, now with two. He was growling and talking and whimpering all at the same time, and Corry thought for a moment that he had two voices and that they were arguing with each other.

I’m supposed to do something. Corry looked for Archemais and found him, standing well back against the fig tree. “Father! The Firebird said to tell you that you made your own prison. He said to tell you to try again.” *And he said that he misses you. He said that, too.*

Archemais whipped around, saw Corry, and smiled in a way that Corry didn’t think he’d smiled in a long time. *I found the way out of my prison, he thought, now perhaps you can find the way out of yours.*

The ground shook, and suddenly all the glass in all the mirrors exploded. A jet of water shot out of the ground near the roots of the tree. It hit Gabalon's writhing form and seemed to shock him for a moment into stillness. He was a dragon, though a smaller and uglier one. "You!" he balled at Archemais. "This is all your doing!"

He pounced, but before he could close the distance, Archemais shifted.

* * * *

In the cold, airless blackness, Fenrah held her breath and counted the brief stops of the rotating fireplaces. *One...two...three. Huali didn't think it was more than six. Halfway. Maybe. Four. Got to breathe. Hurts. Hurts. Laylan's hand feels like a corpse. So cold. Got to breathe. Five. Fenrah wanted to open her eyes, though she knew it wouldn't help. There was probably soot in the water.*

CLUNK. The fireplace ground to a halt. Out of the blackness came an ominous shrieking, as of metal on metal. *Something has wedged in one of the lower buckets, or perhaps one of the rooms has collapsed. It could be anything.* Panic rose in her gut. They'd stopped between rooms, so they couldn't even try to swim out. They were trapped in a tiny box deep underground and underwater. Stupidly, she remembered something Sevn had said once, "The wizards built their machines to last for a long time."

Not long enough!

* * * *

Archemais reached for his shape and found it. He knew even before the world came back into focus that he was a snake no longer. He was a dragon and not a naked scaly beast, but a

dragon clothed in feathers of deep bronze. Gabalon struck at him, but he was awkward and off balance. He didn't seem able to hold his shape properly.

Thank you, Targon, thought Archemais. *I'll put you out of your misery now.* He opened his mouth and breathed a sheet of flame. The creature that was mostly Gabalon screamed, twisting in the ball of fire. A yawning crack had opened across the floor of Gabalon's throne room. The tree appeared to be sinking. All the wolves had fled. Even Mercurion had staggered to his feet and limped through the open door.

Archemais took one last look at Gabalon's shrinking form. Then, as the walls began to collapse, he scooped up Corry, and they flew up and out of the sinking castle.

* * * *

Fenrah could feel Hualien and Laylan moving around her in the darkness, pounding at the walls, frantic to find something that would start the fireplace moving again. She had just begun to let out her breath in a stream of slow bubbles when, with a great grinding, the fireplace burst upwards and then...*light!* It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

They all washed out of the fireplace onto a uneven floor. Masonry was groaning all around them, splashing down into the waste-deep water. Laylan stood up with a giddy whoop. He picked Fenrah up and spun her around. She was still laughing when he set her on the windowsill, which was just above the water and the only surviving exit from the room. "Let's get out of here."

Hualien clambered up beside her, muttering something about how he was having to swim, but no one had bothered to pick *him* up. They climbed out the window into a hallway, found some stairs, and managed to reach a courtyard that was only ankle deep. "We'll have to

swim to get out, though,” said Fenrah. “We’re in the castle, and it’s the highest point. If it’s flooding, quite a bit of Selbis must be—” Fenrah stopped, staring at something black under the shadow of the portico ahead. “Oh, no.” She broke into a splashing run. “Oh no, no, no...”

The black mound was Dance. Fenrah knelt, trembling, in the crimsoned water beside him. The spear wound in his chest had been re-opened by some tremendous blow, making a pulpy mess of his chest. His eyes were glassy, his paws cold. The sight made Fenrah think of Sevn and how she would never see him again, and now Dance, and it was too much. She buried her face in his fur and cried like a puppy.

She could hear Hualien keening, whispering the strange chant she’d heard him say a few times before—a rat shelt’s memorial for the dead. She could sense Laylan standing behind her. She was sure he was about to tell her they needed to leave. *You tried to kill him, too. Go away. I don’t want to you here right now.*

“If I had been a moment sooner,” she whispered, “I might have said good-bye.”

“You did say good-bye.” She looked up and found that Laylan had crouched down across from her. “You said good-bye every time you left.”

“He’s gone, lady,” said a voice behind them, “but it’s what he wanted.”

Fenrah looked around. She saw a gray wolf, as big as Dance. “He was a good king,” continued the wolf, “and he has surely found his way to the wood beyond the worlds. Don’t cry now, for the battle is won.”

“Who are you?” whispered Fenrah.

“We are what is left of the Durian wolves, mistress, the ones trapped in the mirrors. Someone broke the lock on our cage. Come, Selbis is disintegrating, and we can carry you out.”

Chapter 18. Postlude

In the end we all get what we chose in the beginning.

--Archemais, *Treason and Truth*

Voices echoed softly in gaily lit courtyards at dusk. Shelts and animals were eating and drinking and talking. It was a sort of victory party, “because we never finished Lupricasia,” Meuril had said, but it was not like any Lupricasia anyone remembered. No fauns danced in the streets, and most of the merchants were silently handing out their remaining wares for free. Shelts held their families close in their ravaged homes, and they welcomed their neighbors who had no homes left. They mourned those they had lost, but they ate well and they hung their brightly colored lanterns, and everyone felt that it was the right thing to do.

Three days had passed since Selbis disappeared beneath a lake which was purportedly still growing. Most of the wounded were in Laven-lay in the care of competent wolfling healers. More than half of the city had burned, and some fifty fauns had lost their lives in Daren’s attack. Nearly a quarter of the fauns who’d fought at Selbis were dead and more than half the centaurs had either drowned or been killed.

Something else had died as well—faith in the sameness of things. Panamindorah’s social and political landscape had undergone rapid and violent change, leaving its leaders perplexed. Two new nations had emerged overnight, and two more had plummeted to occupied status.

Canisaria was officially on the map again for the first time in twenty years, and the wolflings had a lot of work ahead. The Fealiday were free, but most of the population didn’t know it yet or hadn’t grasped the implications. The victors were still trying to decide what to do

with the surviving centaur and the swamp faun soldiers. At present, Danda-lay's dungeons were crowded.

In the cool evening air, a small group of shelts and animals were chatting in a palace courtyard. Meuril stood with his daughter, listening to Chance and Sham give a detailed version of how the wolflings in Laven-lay had been persuaded to help hunt down swamp fauns and put out fires. They and a handful of Fealiday had been largely responsible for saving what was left of the city.

Laylan and Shyshax were listening to a Durian wolf talking about his years of imprisonment in the mirrors and of some of the things he'd witnessed in old Selbis. "Do you know how you got out?" asked Laylan.

The wolf frowned. "I thought perhaps the prophet's son did it. He was there. He led the way."

Laylan shook his head. "Did they tell you how Fenrah, Hualien, Sevn, and I started the flood?"

"Yes," said the wolf, "shelts say you went down into the roots of the earth, that you saw wonders, that you visited Glacia and spoke with the Architects."

Shyshax rolled his eyes. "I think they all went down there and hit their heads in the dark. Laylan keeps trying to explain it to me, and it makes less sense every time."

Laylan smiled. "It's very strange, and I don't pretend to understand completely. I think that everything in Glacia corresponds to something here. Only 'corresponds' isn't the right word. Objects in Glacia don't *represent* things here. They *are* the things—the real things. Sevn—the

wolfing who stayed behind—broke the lock on a glass case full of little ice wolves, and I'm certain that was your prison. He let you out."

"Ah." The wolfing thought for a moment. "We shall sing for him, then, when we sing for those who died. Perhaps he will hear it in Glacia, where all true things have a form and a name."

At that moment a group of cats came gliding out of the palace in company with Lexis, Leesha, and a number of Fealiday. Queen Istra was trailing behind them. She approached Meuril. "Your majesty, I would speak with you a moment."

"Very well." Meuril put a hand around her shoulders. "I have seen little of you these last years, and that is unfortunate. I remember you visited often when Natalia was alive. Come, we will talk."

"Char?" asked Sham uncertainly. He had seen the Fealiday once or twice, but not yet spoken to him. "Some of us were wondering if a certain rumor is true."

"Oh?" Char was walking arm in arm with a lovely female Fealiday. She had crimson spotted fur and bright green slitted eyes. She was holding a young Fealiday asleep in the crook of one arm, and two more were trailing after. One of them kept reaching curiously for Leesha's tail, which Leesha jerked away with an annoyed growl.

Char smiled. "You want to know what happened to Daren?" he asked.

"Yes." Chance came strolling over. "We heard that you..."

Char reached into his satchel and took out a roll of something dark and wet.

Sham started to laugh. "Well, I suppose that's appropriate."

"I intend to swaddle our next child in his pelt," said Char pleasantly. "Or perhaps I'll make a hat for one of the youngsters. I haven't decided."

“He’s been working on it all day,” complained Crimson. “It’s messy.”

“You have to flesh them properly,” said Char. “They taught us to do these things right in block seventeen.”

“Shyshax,” rumbled Lexis. “Exactly the cat I was looking for.”

Shyshax smiled madly and took a step back. “I didn’t do it.”

“Didn’t do what?”

Laylan looked around. “Yes, what?”

“Whatever it is you’ve about to accuse me of.”

“I was about to ask you to sit on the next council meeting while we decide what to do about the cheetahs.”

Shyshax looked down at his paws. “Lexis, I don’t know much about cheetahs. I don’t really want to sit on the Filinia council.”

Lexis cocked his head. “That’s your choice. May I ask why?”

Laylan coughed. “Nervous of cats.”

“I’m not nervous,” said Shyshax with gravity, “just slightly allergic.”

Lexis gave a purring laugh. “Well, think about it.”

Capricia walked over to Lexis. She leaned forward and whispered something in his ear.

“Ahhh.” Lexis rose. “Excuse me.”

* * * *

Istra clenched her teeth on her tears as she walked back to her rooms. *I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t do it.*

She met Jubal coming from his office and stopped beside him. “You should go,” she said. They both knew what she meant. *Go somewhere far away. Kings are not mocked. Shadock will have his revenge.*

Jubal shook his head. “My place is here. This is my city.”

“The wolflings would take you,” persisted Istra. “I’m sure they need shelts who know how to lead, who understand fauns.”

“I wouldn’t do that to them,” said Jubal, “even if they’d have me. Canisaria is barely on its feet. The wolflings will have an uphill task putting themselves back together. The last thing they need is Shadock’s active enmity, which they would certainly have if I came running to them for shelter like some fugitive. Besides, assassination isn’t his style, and I held his city for him. He may hate me, but I don’t see how he can do anything to me.”

‘Assassination isn’t his style’! How little you know him, Jubal. She thought of something else. “Danthra and his lizard riders seem to have unaccountably disappeared.”

“Have they?” asked Jubal with guileless curiosity.

Istra glared at him. “Don’t push your luck.”

“I made a bargain. I kept it.”

She sighed. “Perhaps that bargain could save your life?”

Jubal laughed. “Well, I suppose they might take me if I could find them. But to live in the swamp with mud dragons? No, my lady, I will take my chances here.”

Istra shook her head. *All these years, she thought, and you don’t really know Shadock.* She watched Jubal walk away and wanted to call after him. *I never told you why I did it. You did*

it for the very best reasons—because it was the right thing to do for shelts you’d never even met. But I’m not that good. I did it for a friend.

Istra went to her rooms and tried to pack, but she kept putting items in her bags, only to remove them again. *Where can I possibly go?*

Nowhere, answered a miserable voice in her mind, *nowhere you know how to get to.* Certainly the wolflings would try to help her if she asked, but Jubal was right. They were in no position to harbor fugitives from Danda-lay. Istra had financed and aided outlaws, but she had no idea how to be one.

Perhaps I should do nothing. Perhaps Shadock really will forgive and forget, or perhaps he won’t be able to think of any way to harm me.

Fool, said a voice in her mind. *Wait for the poison that takes the guise of slow illness. Wait for the slip on some tall staircase. Wait to fall asleep in your bath. Wait for the claws in the dark.* Istra shuddered. *Shadock might wait a season or a year or five. It would be his way to let me dangle, but he will never forget and he certainly will not forgive.*

I could still go to Meuril, she thought. *I believe Lexis would back my story if pressed. Then there’d be another war, and thousands of innocent fauns would die, but the one shelt who’s guilty would almost certainly escape. And maybe I’d be safe.* She covered her face with her hands. *No, no, no.*

“Why are you crying, Lady?”

Istra raised her head. An orange tiger cub looked up at her. She blinked hard and endeavored to compose herself. “You’re one of Lexis’s cubs, aren’t you? How did you get in?”

Tolomy smiled. “I am a cat, Mistress. We go where we will.”

Istra almost laughed. “I suppose you do.” She tried to stifle a convulsive sob. *One of the windows, she thought. Left open in the courtyard. If even a cub can get in here, how easy it would be for an assassin to find me.*

“I think I know why you’re crying,” said Tolomy, “but I have to be sure before I do anything about it.”

* * * *

Shadock looked up from the papers on his desk. He was expecting Lexis at any moment, and he’d purposely dismissed all his retainers. He wanted no evidence that this meeting had ever taken place. He was surprised to see, not Lexis, but Tolomy sitting in the doorway. “Good evening, Sire.”

Shadock stood up. “I sent a message for your father—”

“I know.” Tolomy strolled into the room. “I met your messenger and told him I would deliver the message. I didn’t, of course.”

Shadock was becoming angry. All his preparation for nothing, and now a new complication. *I told the messenger to speak to no one but Lexis!* “I have nothing to say to cubs. You have behaved childishly tonight, and your father will hear of it. Now go back to your quarters.”

Tolomy yawned halfway through Shadock’s last sentence. It made the king almost glad of the misunderstanding. *Insolent brat, you’ll pay dearly for this folly.*

“Do you know why the cats kept their speech during Gabalon’s reign?”

Shadock wished he had a guard within hailing distance. He would like to have this little beast thrown from the room on his ear. “No,” he said, “but I do know that I have dismissed you.”

“The fauns, of course, have all kinds of stories,” continued Tolomy, “and you’ve probably heard them, but I doubt you’ve heard *our* story, because the cats don’t tell it often. This is how it goes: During Gabalon’s early reign, before he consolidated his powers and started killing his fellow wizards, there was an enchantress—a female wizard—who loved the cats. She took the form of a white tiger—something never seen before in Panamindorah. She took a tiger to mate and when he died, another. All together, she had about six mates, and their children were iterations. They were different from other cats, sometimes misunderstood, and eventually they banded together, formed their own tribe. The enchantress’s name was Alainya. Sometimes still you hear cats call white tigers the Children of Alainya, and we use it as our sir name to this day.

“Gabalon hated beasts, but when he began killing them and taking their speech, Alainya fought for the cats, protected us, advised us, and kept us safe. No one knows what happened to her. Some say Gabalon killed her. Some say she was assassinated by jealous cats. Some say she grew sad and weary of losing friends and lovers, that she withdrew into the snow mountains and lives there still. All agree that those born to the line of white tigers have wizard blood in their veins. Some say it makes us a little cruel. They certainly said so of Demitri.” Tolomy paused.

Shadock had sat back down. He had never heard this story, and it *was* interesting. Perhaps he should humor this cub a few moments longer—a few moments might be all he had. “A pretty story,” he said. “Why are you telling it to me?”

“Sometimes our heritage makes us better able to understand and deal with shelts. This is true of my father. He lacks that streak of cruelty, but he makes up for it with cleverness. He can be manipulative, but he is patient and he is merciful. My father wants to see the best in shelts and beasts. He has a habit of forgiving those that he should not forgive and trusting those that do not

deserve it. This is what got him into trouble with Demitri's old council. I think my father's mercy is about to get him into trouble again."

Tolomy's eyes narrowed to slits. His voice had lost all traces of childishness. It was stone hard. Shadock felt it like the shock of cold water. He had a sense of seeing something much too late. *He's only a cub!*

Tolomy gave Shadock a moment, but when he said nothing, he continued. "Everyone knows now that Demitri orchestrated queen Natalia's death so that the wolflings would be blamed and Meuril would not go to the help of Sardor-de-lore. But Demitri sent only a small party of his personal officers. They waylaid Natalia on a little-known journey through her own country, and they came and went without a trace. This smacks of treachery. The cats seemed to know exactly where to go and when. Someone told them, and that someone was you. You were jealous of the wolflings, their power and their wealth. You did not want to go to war, and you knew that if your allies, the wood fauns, started fighting the cats, eventually you'd have to do so as well. You thought that by scheming with Demitri to get Natalia killed and thereby keep Meuril out of the war, you were safe and your rivals were doomed. Perhaps you were a little jealous, too, because Meuril adored his queen, and you never learned to love yours."

Shadock's mouth opened and closed without a sound. He was red with fury. "How dare you."

Tolomy sneered. "It must have been a shock when Demitri went ahead and attacked the wood fauns anyway, after he finished with Canisaria. I suppose you felt betrayed."

"These fantasies of yours—" began Shadock, but Tolomy talked over him.

“I became suspicious while watching your behavior when my father told Meuril how Natalia died. You were afraid of what he was going to say. Of course you were! Demitri put a greater weapon between my father’s teeth than anyone guessed. My father had the power not only to deliver Natalia’s murderers to Meuril and name a new council. He also had the power to throw faun territories into chaos by exposing what you’d done. Meuril and his shelts would never forgive such a thing. Who knows where it would have ended? But Lexis didn’t do it. He didn’t tell your secret. Ah, but his mercy chafes. You feel in his debt, and you can’t bear it. He could destroy you at any moment, and you don’t trust him, not after what his father did. So you invited him here this evening to kill him.”

Shadock sat back in his chair. “You stupid cub. You have no proof.”

“Actually, I do. When I started to put things together, I realized that Istra and the Raiders and Jubal were all part of it. I dropped in on your queen a few hours ago just to make certain. It seems that she overheard you talking to a highly secret visitor—a cat who came to parley about Demitri’s proposal. Istra did not understand at the time, not until after Natalia was killed. She was very close to Natalia and wanted to avenge her, but she knew what would happen if she went to Meuril—long, bloody war, and the only person responsible for the war would almost certainly go unpunished.

“In the end Istra retaliated by protecting the very shelts you had framed. She sought out the remaining wolfling royalty and did all in her power to help them. She distracted you from the truth by circulating a rumor that wounded your pride and pointed your suspicions in the wrong direction. As a result, the wolflings were eventually acquitted and part of the truth revealed, but

Istra knows her life and Jubal's aren't worth two cowries now that you know the truth. She was crying, because she's afraid of what you'll do to her, and she can't bring herself to tell Meuril."

Shadock had stood up and walked around the desk. He went to the door, closed it, and took down the sword hanging on the wall behind. He was calm now, beyond anger. "Well, cub, you could have made a successful spy or investigator or whatever they call such persons in your country. It's unfortunate you chose to test your budding skills on me. There's not a court in Panamindorah who would hear such a case. No one judges kings."

Tolomy backed up to put a few paces between them. "I've heard it said that history is the judge of kings, but you're right. No court would hear such a case. No war will ever bring you to justice. No shelt would dare to call you murderer. But you remember what I said about house Alainya? My father and my sister may be the ones with the white coats, but I'm the one who takes after my grandsire."

Shadock sniffed. "If you think you're going to harm me, think again. There's poison on this floor, which is absorbed through the pads of a cat's feet. Already, you will begin to weaken, and very soon, you will begin the descent into madness and death. You were doomed as soon as you stepped foot in my office."

To his surprise, Tolomy grinned. "Someone told me about this kind of poison not long ago. I thought it sounded like you, so I took the liberty of going to a Chandler before I came." He lifted a paw and shook it dainty. "Wax. It feels a little odd, but I should be safe."

Shadock's eyes widened. He had been so certain that the cat was growing weaker, that he would begin to convulse at any moment. *Still, he's just a cub, just a cub.* Tolomy leapt to the desk, putting him almost at eye level with Shadock across the small room. "One day, Sire, there

may be a court that would hear a case such as yours and dispense justice. But for now, there is only me.” He sprang.

* * * *

Laylan and Fenrah were walking the Sky Walk later that evening, trying to hammer out the details of the agreement that he was to present in council next day. Aside from an end to bounty laws, nothing had been finalized. Attempts to re-draw the map of Canisaria were meeting with resistance from some faun nobility, who had claimed parts of that land years ago, as well as cats, who were living there.

Fenrah had invited several of the prominent pack leaders to the council meetings. They spoke cautiously to the fauns and cast nervous glances at Laylan. “They still don’t trust me,” he told Fenrah as they walked.

“And you shouldn’t trust them,” she said, “not until you know them better.”

Laylan frowned. “You still think I’m the right shelt to represent them?”

“You are the *only* shelt to represent them.”

“And who’s going to actually rule their country?”

Fenrah looked uncomfortable. “I had thought of a council—”

“I don’t think wolflings would follow a council,” said Laylan. “They want a clear leader. A queen—”

“Or a king,” she countered.

“Or both. We could give them both.”

Silence fell between them. The sounds of merrymakers on the Sky Walk seemed suddenly far away. Fenrah had a hunted expression. She would not look at him. “If you don’t love me,” he whispered, “just say so. I won’t ever mention it again.”

She laughed then and met his eyes. “Won’t you?”

Laylan winced. “Well, I’ll try not to.”

Her eyes glistened like wet velvet in the dusk. “Laylan, to the fauns and to the rest of Panamindorah, you have always been within the law. We wolflings have been living outside it. We did what had to be done, but now they’ve got to get *inside* again, to be something that we’ve fought. I am the very symbol of that. A free Canisaria doesn’t need something like me hanging around.”

Laylan put his hands in his pockets. “When we were in Glacia and the Architects asked for our dreams—our futures—that’s the one you were afraid they would take, isn’t it? A free Canisaria.”

Fenrah looked surprised. “Yes, of course.”

“Do you know what mine was?”

She shook her head.

“You.”

Fenrah’s eyes started to fill with tears.

“I’d give up my memories,” continued Laylan, “give up my name before I’d give away that dream. If you ask me to live without it, I will, but not because you’ve outlived your usefulness. You haven’t. I love you. Every wolfling in Canisaria loves you. They need—”

She threw her arms around him. “Enough, alright, I’ll ma—” The rest of the sentence got lost in a kiss.

* * * *

Tolomy looked up at the sound of the door opening. He tensed, then relaxed when he saw the iteration, Corellian. Corry was staring at the mess in the room. Shaddock had hit the desk as he fell, and blood-speckled papers lay everywhere. Spilled ink was dripping onto the floor, mingling with pools of crimson. Tolomy had a long cut down the side of his leg, but most of the blood wasn’t his.

“What have you done?” whispered Corry.

“Did you overhear any of that?” asked Tolomy.

“Yes, some of it.”

“Then you know what I did and why I did it.”

“Shelts may not believe you,” said Corry. “This may start faun/shelt hostilities all over again!”

Tolomy shook his head. “Not the way I’m going to do it. Ah, here they are.”

Corry glanced over his shoulder to see two black leopards. They were staring wide-eyed into the office. Tolomy grinned at them, his teeth bright red. “Didn’t bargain for this, did you? Well, at least I didn’t make you kill him. No, don’t come in this room, the floor’s poisoned. Did you bring the water like I asked?” One of the leopards turned and picked up the handle of a bucket in his teeth. Tolomy tipped it over the floor. “Let’s hope that dilutes the poison enough to keep it from killing anyone.” He grabbed one of Shaddock’s arms and dragged the body into the hall. “Now you need to make some tracks in his blood,” he told the leopards.

He turned back to Corry. “These are two of the cats who followed Liliana. Apparently Daren killed her in Selbis and sent them to search for Shyshax and Ounce. They were frightened and came creeping back to Danda-lay. Knowing my father, he’ll probably pardon them, but they’ll never hold office again, and they stand a good chance of being killed by their own kind for what they’ve done. I offered them a way out.”

“And what is that?” asked Corry.

“My blood is on this floor, too, for anyone with a nose to see. They’ll find Shadock’s body and the tracks of these two known traitors. I disappear, and everyone will assume that they killed Shadock and carried me away out of spite.” He smiled. “I am only a cub, after all.”

Corry frowned. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Where will you go?”

“Not sure yet. The Snow Mountains maybe. Between the three of us, we should have no trouble bringing down enough game.”

“Tolomy, your father and your sister—what will I tell them?”

“You’ll tell them nothing. Don’t make me regret not killing you, Corellian.”

“They’ll be frantic.”

Tolomy ran a paw through the blood on the floor. “I know. I’m sorry. But Demitri was right: there can be only one king or queen of Filinia or of house Alainya. Leesha is the cat to rule. She’ll make a good queen. If I stay, I’ll eventually destroy her. I *know* this, Corellian.”

Corry sighed. “Good-bye, Tolomy.”

* * * *

Lexis left the palace complex and walked through Danda-lay until he came to a certain hotel in a poorly lit section of town. He went, unchallenged, up several flights of stairs until he reached the roof. There on the edge he spied a crouched figure, hooves dangling, elbows on knees, chin in hands. He looked small and alone on the empty roof, watching the party below and listening to the muted sounds of music and laughter. The tiger padded forward and lay down beside him. “Nice place to watch the sunset.”

Syrill started to rise, but Lexis stopped him with one heavy paw on his knees. “Stay.”

Syrill looked down at the huge, velvet paw which completely filled his lap. “Not you, not now. Go back to the party, Lexis.”

“I think I’d better not. I’m worried that you might come down without using the stairs.”

Syrill grimaced. “It’s not such a bad alternative.”

“To what?”

“He won’t even see me, Lexis.”

“Meuril, you mean?”

“He says that he will never see me again.” Syrill covered his face with his hands. “You,” he growled, “you sent Ounce to Selbis to keep me from getting killed!”

“Guilty as charged.” Lexis stretched out the other paw behind him.

“Why?” demanded Syrill. “It would have made everything so much simpler.”

“Simpler maybe, but not better. Do you know what Meuril is going to do with you?”

Syrill drew in a deep breath. “I heard today that he’s planning to make me—” he swallowed, “ambassador to Filinia.” He glanced sharply at Lexis, but the blue eyes looked back

without a flicker. “Go ahead and laugh,” snapped Syrril. “All of Laven-lay will. He’s exiling me! To Filinia of all places! Don’t you see? He’s inviting you to kill me.”

Lexis did smile then. “Oh, for the last time: I’m no one’s executioner. Meuril is not inviting me to assassinate you, although I’m sure some shelts will think so. Assigning you to Filinia was my idea.”

Before Syrril could think of anything to say, he continued, “Now stop wallowing in self-pity and guilt, and listen: I need your help. Many Fealiday want to come live in Filinia, and I have reservations about how this will work. I’m not at all accustomed to dealing with shelts in my court, and some cats are hostile to the idea. Shelts instinctively trust and follow you, Syrril. That’s why you were so valuable to Meuril, why you’re still valuable to me.”

Syrril sniffled. “They follow me because I lead the way. I stupidly charge ahead when a more thoughtful shelt would stand back.”

Lexis purred a laugh. “Perhaps.”

“I still think some random cat will kill me, even if you don’t.”

Lexis bent his head and rubbed his nose hard against Syrril’s shoulder and the back of his head. In cat parlance, it was a highly significant gesture—scent marking that said to all who could read it: mine. “There,” said Lexis critically, “now no cat will raise a paw to you, at least for a day or so while they’re getting used to the idea.”

He rose. “What do you say, councilor?”

Syrril looked down at the city a few moments longer. Then he sighed and struggled to his feet. He seemed to have something stuck in his throat for a moment. “Yes, sir.”

Lexis chuckled. “Well, you didn’t choke on that as badly as I expected, but, still, just call me Lexis.”

* * * *

On the Sky Walk with their backs to the glowing colors of Danda-lay Corry and Archemais stood looking out over the stretch of darkness. Dragon and Wanderer stood like colored festival lamps in the star-dusted sky, and Runner was just peaking over the horizon. Finally Corry reached into his pocket and opened his hand. There lay the flute, a glossy shell of translucent gold, catching the lights of the city.

“So,” said Archemais. “You chose.”

Corry nodded. “I have to go away tomorrow. I don’t know where I’m going. I don’t know *when* I’m going. How long do wizards live, father?”

Archemais shrugged. “We don’t age like shelts, but we can die of illness or violence. Iterations do age, but more slowly than shelts. If you’re asking whether I’ll be alive where you’re going, the answer is: probably, but I don’t know.”

“There are so many things I wanted to ask you,” said Corry, “so many things I wanted to talk about, but I was stupid and angry, and I didn’t, and now there’s no time.”

“There’s tonight,” said his father.

Corry gripped the wall. Already he was feeling the weight of secrets he wanted to share and couldn’t. “There’s going to be a huge uproar tonight or tomorrow.” *Whenever they find the body.* “I’m not sure how long we’ll have to talk.”

“Well then,” said his father, “let us make good the time we have.” And they did.

THE END

This concludes *The Prophet of Panamindorah* trilogy. Find the PDF's of all three books, as well as the audio podcast, maps, and artwork at www.panamindorah.com. These books are not currently available in paper. If they become available, I will post a notice on the website.

Two more Panamindorah series – *The Guild of the Cowry Catchers* and *Walk Upon High* – will be available online, probably beginning in 2010. I expect to podcast *Cowry Catchers* fully illustrated. I will post a notice on the Panamindorah website when those stories appear, so if you would enjoy more stories in this universe, check the site regularly or just subscribe to the RSS feed.