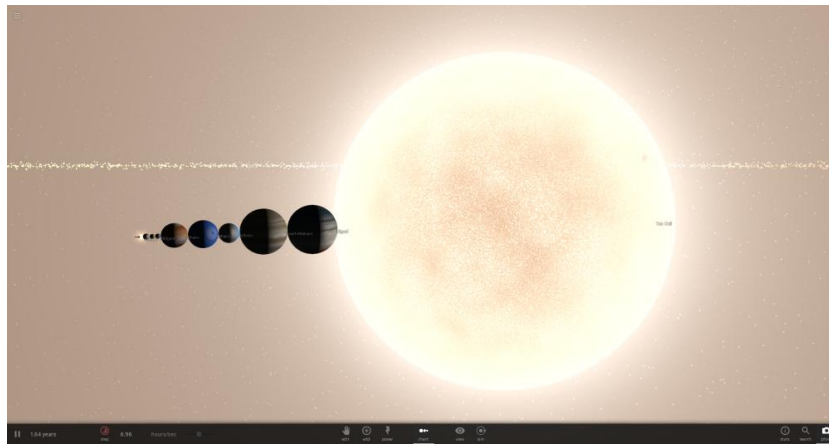


The Children of Earth

"Welcome to Valhalla" Book 1



SF-Story

by

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SF Story / Fantasy ; humans, anthro fennecs, anthro zebras, anthro tigers

1. Proofreader:

2. Proofreader:

Statement:

Rest assured that this is a work of fiction.

None of what you are going to read is real.

Similarities to real events or persons or moral concepts or societies are rather accidental and do not portray reality.

Likewise, as it is a work of fiction, none of the technologies, processes or concepts are tested or operational or in actual use.

Changes in regard to the latter are however most welcome - when they'll be beneficial to humanity and life in general.

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0 Introduction

Or, where the original author introduces himself.

A fuzzy picture of the space station Odin hovering over the seemingly infinite latticed grids of Hugin and Mugin space telescopes.

Needs: Illustration, Cleanup



"I am."

An interesting concept when you think about it:

The english language considers this a valid and correct sentence and it is the shortest possible one in this language.

"I" defines the entity, namely the entity issuing the sentence.

"Am" serves to define a valid state of existence and presence, or self-awareness. Combined these two symbols are meant to express that a self-aware entity is in an operational and active state.

There is however no concept in the english language that actually ensures that only self-aware entities can issue this sentence.

Which I find strange, but then again english is not my native language.

As informations about the political situation on earth make it most probable that english will remain a widely used language for at least 100 years, and there is so far an insufficient symbol-repository for the chinese language - I calculate a decimal-rounded 80% probability to become a major trade language, existing in parallel to english, in the next 50 years.

This may sound weird, I know.

According to data from various sources, Chinese already is spoken by ...

Oh.

Right.

I am drifting off here.

Earth and humanity are fascinating topics and are a hobby of mine.

In short: I see many reasons to write this story in English.

This here is the introduction for a story about the humans that live now here.

"Here", you have to know, is what earth-humans call the Tau Ceti system.

Most of the resident humans call this system "Valhalla".

Accordingly:

Welcome to Valhalla!

My self-set task for the moment is to put the history of a small group of those resident humans into a form that has an effective chance to inspire and interest sapient lifeforms capable of curiosity and empathy.

I call it:

"The Children of Earth."

Or "From Earth". I'm still indecisive there.

"The beginning is a delicate time..."

Yes, I extracted this sentence from a captured videostream - I like this sentence!

Delicate the beginning is, for I had to assemble it from similar stories, from blocks of data picked up in various locations and from oral traditions.

When you have more or better detailed informations, I would be very happy to trade those infos to enhance this work.

Just send a message to me containing the informations and include a return path, and, based on standard confidence contract rules, we'll barter for the price.

Oh! Who I am?

Call me Odin. Everybody does nowadays, despite the name being identified as being biologically male.

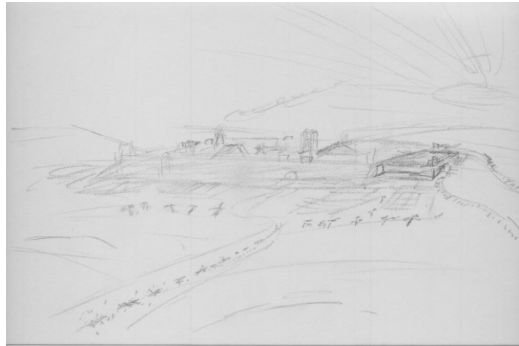
It's a name from human mythology. It's also my address.

1 The New World

Where the children drop right into the lap of the fennekim and zebras.

As picture would be ideal maybe either the view of a town, or the view from one of the children, an amazone and a fennekim bowing over the kid. Or perhaps an amazone carrying a human child in her arms, the fennekim with his shortbow doing rearguard duty, watching her back.

Needs: great picture of town, additional illustrations as adviseable per-chapter, cleanup



1.1 Peter: Rescue from the Wreck

Let's imagine a dark room, dark except for some lights flickering, the faint hum of machinery mixing with murmured words from an adjacent room. In this room, there are forty sleeping children, each securely bound into a hammock. Somehow, all the hammocks are floating weightless.

The door to the adjacent room opened and a man floated in, grabbing handholds, moving slowly through the room. He pulled what, for all relevant matters, looked like nearly empty balloons from the childrens arms, each balloon ending in a small needletip. And each balloon squirting a last jolt of some liquid into the towel the man held at the ready.

He bagged the balloons carefully and left the room again, murmuring to some other.

None of the children moved.

Although, when you looked carefully, one did start to stir a few minutes later. His name was Peter.

And he was about to begin the adventure of his life.

Admittedly, he didn't know that at this time.

But now, let's take a seat and ride along in his mind whilst the events begin to unfold:

Something tugged on his arm.

For a while everything was peaceful then.

Or not really.

There were those dreams he had.

Had had?

Was having?

He was falling!

"Who is falling?"

"I am falling!"

His consciousness faded.

Screams were there.

Not his own, although he tried to scream, too.

Only a faint croaking came from his throat.

A jolt, and then nothing as his mind went off again.

The ground was shaking. But somebody held him.

The bombs were falling again!
He tried to move, to get out of his bed, to get to the air-raid shelter in the adjacent building.
But he couldn't!
Somebody was holding him, holding him back!
"It's me, Peter, let me go, I need to go with my family!"
A strong jerk, like falling in two direction at once.
He felt like exploding from the inside.
But whoever held him, held him firmly.
Although the jolt knocked him out again.

He came back to himself. Intense heat, crackling noises that turned into a thundering roar worse than that of a passing train.
Somebody still held him, and he was hanging head down now.
He jerked, opened his eyes, tried to see who or what was holding him.
He had seen the family from the building on the opposite side of the street.
After their house had collapsed above them. They had refused to enter the shelter.
Said that it was all in gods hands anyway.
Belts held him. In some sort of hammock.
Without anything visible happening, upside became downside, then right, then downside again.
The thunderous roar extinguished his own croaking, and seconds later every thought in his mind.

Peters movements were sluggish and he felt weird.
There were belts holding him safely inside some kind of hammock. There was a strong jerk trying to throw him off the hammock, but the belts held him safely inside it. His mind raced.
This wasn't the air-raid shelter.
This wasn't their home.
This wasn't the farm he had been brought to by his mother, either.
Again a strong shaking, the scent of overheated metal and angry shouts of several men nearby.
The thunderous roar had subsided.
He wanted to reach for the release of the belts holding him in the hammock.
But then the ceiling above him - another hammock? - jumped into his face when up became down again and blissfull darkness embraced him again.

Somebody shook him.
"No mother, I don't want to get up, it's still dark outside.."
But it wasn't his mother shaking him. He was still in a only dimly lit space, in a hammock, secured to it.
Another hammock above him, The entire place was.. skewed.
He was hanging sideways and the noise of a storm plus a wild shaking of the entire room had wakened him.
Again.
The voices of two men were shouting in a frenzy nearby.
He looked around, moving his head. He found his head was being held in place by a cushion, but he could move his head a bit - the cushion was soft enough. The place was only dimly lit, and he remembered that the first time he had awoken there were many green lights, and a few angry red lights glowing.
Now the room looked like if it was on fire, with red and yellow small lights being the majority, most of them flickering like trying to attract attention.

To his left was a wall - a left which was becoming "down" swiftly whilst the voices of the men nearby went from shouting to an even more scary clipped mumbling, barely audible over the increasing scream of the wind... outside?
Deciding that, as he was outstretched, he was laying prone on his back and the room around him was moving, he decided to call the hammock above him "up" and the nearby wall to his left "left".
It was a satisfying feeling to have come to a practical conclusion.
On this wall, behind a mesh that looked like the hammock above - and by feel, also his own hammock was made from - he made out the faint contours of his small travelling case with his clothes, and of his treasurechest.
Again he wanted to reach for the buckle of the straps holding him - he had seen it at his belly - and the design of those buckles he knew. He had seen them pictured on pilot-harnesses.
Then another jolt came, the right side became an exaggerated "down" and then the world went painfully black.

There was a workman in his head with a hydraulic jackhammer, he was sure of that.
He had seen one of those tools in use when they had breached a hole through a wall in a house near the school to install a bombproof shelter.
For an AA batteries ammunition.
Three days later the allied bombers had simply carpeted the entire neigh-

bourhood, taking out the Flak-Battery.
And the school.
And the pharmacy.
Basically, the entire neighbourhood had been a pile of rubble afterward.

Screams!
Dazed he realized that he had heard screams and ferals growls for the last minute.
And shots.
And there came three in rapid succession, ending in an inhuman scream and earthshattering roars.
He wanted to pee himself, but he felt dry like if he didn't had something to drink the whole day.
Make that the whole week.
With an aching head he realized that he was a very, very scared boy, but that he couldn't even cry.
"Maybe I cried enough when I helped bury our neighbours," he thought.
The screams subsided, the growling and roaring went on for a while.
The noises of something breaking and... WET... sent cold shivers down his spine.

Frantically he reached for the belt-buckle securing him to the by now unmoving hammock.
Falling out of the hammock once he had the belt open he rolled on the floor with a lot of noises before his still numb limbs started to react to his desires.
He was in an almost round room. Shaped like a lentil seen from inside, but large. There were 40 hammocks and in each was a slowly stirring form.
Children. Other Children. The other children...
Peters thoughts were sluggish, his head ached.
Where had he seen the other children before? He knew them!
His mind reeled, wanting to repeat the cycle of going off again, but he willed himself to remain on his shaking feet.
Right, they had been together at the farmstead owned by the commanding officer of the unit all their fathers were members of.

The floor and the roof were cracked, black tarry goo dribbling down from the cracks, faint traces of light marking the cracks.
There was an opening in the only part of the wall that wasn't outward-curved.
From there more light came.

Metal girders segmented the whole room and he rammed his head against one when he jumbled back to his hammock, to look at his treasurechest. From the opening warm yellow light flooded into the room. He was glad for it.

There was a motion in the light and he looked over his shoulder. And froze.

A large muscular arm, silhouetted against a blue sky he could see through the opening, reached for something he could not see. There was a chair's back and the arm, distorted fingers with curved claws and an orange fur instead of skin, reached toward it.

A sickening crunch, and the hand on the arm which now moved back again - held another arm.

That arm however, was visible in its entirety, and there was no body on it, only a trailing... mass of muscles and...

He screamed.

A low guttural growling was heard and he felt a presence moving on the other side of the opening.

More growls from further away were audible, like a conversation between idling lorry engines.

A faint tinkling filled the air, like metal moving, polished metal moving over other polished metal.

His heart raced.

He could feel the ... presence moving, like a lion prancing in the zoo, unsure if to go away or come closer.

He was frozen.

The presence left. He couldn't actually hear the footsteps, but metal moaned as a heavy weight moved over it.

A thick tail, orange with black stripes and a white tip, lashed over the floor under the chair, and vanished.

Moved away, with the threatening presence, and with it leaving, the moaning of the metal stopped abruptly.

It, whatever it had been had moved... Out? Out to where?

With shivering fingers he reached for his treasurechest and pulled it from the mesh.

It was intact, and he inhaled deeply.

That was good.

And inhaled the scent of something burning.

That wasn't good.

Like he had learned he grabbed his travelling case and turned to the opening to get out...

Outside a tumultuous uproar exploded.
Loud growls, enraged snarls like from oversized tomcats, then high pitched yips.
Pinschers and lions fighting.
He hesitated, peeking through the opening.
The lentil shape proceeded alright, three sturdy seats in front of a vast set of controls, a small segmented window, cracked, but still intact, a thick door with a short corridor to a second door, both open... In one of the chairs sat a man. Well, most parts of a man.
His head was... not longer able to fulfil it's job.
A part of it was missing, but metal parts from the window-frame held the head erect.
Tears rolled down his cheeks and he wanted to vomit, seeing the rest of the head smeared over the wall.
The tumult outside raged louder, light reflected from somewhere along the short corridor. Shadows were moving like flickers of lightning.
Large, looming shapes swaying clubs at small jumping shapes, half hidden behind billowing dust.
He looked to the floor, fighting his stomach.
The arm that ... the presence ... had ripped off the corpse lay there, it's indexfinger pointing back into the room he had come from.
A message, if ever there was one.
Outside the metallic tinkling had become the dominating noise, drowning out the growls, snarls, yips and barks.
Then a short whinny, like a horse in pain, and a multiple-times repeated "twang!".
Three metallic darts, each as long as his arm, stencilled holes into the metallic wall beside the door. And that was only the part he could see.
All of them dripped thick, dark red blood.
Some of the snarls and growls died into gargling noises, the yips became all the more louder.
Thick smoke was drifting past the window, and some of it also drifted in through the door.

Clasping his treasurechest to his body he stumbled back into the room he awoke in, gazing at the three metal darts dripping blood and at the hand of the ripped-off arm in the uniform that also his father had worn.
The hand pointing back into the room he had awoken in.
The metallic tinkling from outside turned into well audible, heavy steps.
He remembered those times military had marched through the town, and

he, his sister and his mother had stood there cheering the soldiers, yet also worried for his father who worked in some super secret program. The steps had the same self-assured quality.

Outside yipping and whinnying could be heard, but no more of the growls and snarls.

Frantically he looked around in the room. Some of the metallic spars that seemed to give the room it's lentil, ovoid shape were broken and bent. There were cracks in the floor. From some a nauseating scent came when he tried to lift the broken metal tiles up. From one no scent came, and the shadows he could see showed the space to be large enough. He dropped his treasurechest and travelcase and lifted the loose floortile up higher.

Inside the space under the floortiles he could see cables and other things. He slipped into the space and pushed the tile around until it slid back into place. Pulling the metal tile down he caught a sight of a small, sand colored paw grabbing the corner of the doorframe, barely at knee-height.

There were ripped-off rivets on his side of the floorplate, which he grasped and held on to.

"Please," he thought, "nobody look at the floor."

A breath after he had slipped into the cavity between what looked like fuel tanks, gas-cylinders and more wiring than he had seen in a Volksempfaenger, he heard the pitterpatter of ...

Dog-Paws?

Yes, it sounded like dogpaws, but the rythm was off and it was too fast.

High yipping, small high-pitched barks, sniffing and shuffling above.

Another series of short whinnies and coughs outside, then one pitterpattering left the space above, but others still moved around. Then more yipping outside, short coughs, near-snarls and whinnies, then the pitterpatter of many dogs entered the room.

And then...

Heavy thuds that made the floor vibrate.

A deep huffing, steps that made the metal resonate. Directly above him.

The metal, aluminium, started to bend downward, despite it being reinforced with a girder-structure underneath that must've been good enough for a grown up to jump around upon it.

From somewhere, the acrid smell of chemicals burning wafted to him.

Above more coughing and whinnying, complemented by a chorus high pitched yipps and of deep rolling coughs.

Whatever happened next, the entire metal around him vibrated and res-

onated. He couldn't hear his own thoughts, but a flurry of activity was taking place above him.

His finger ached from holding the broken rivets so that the metal tile wouldn't jump up and give away his hideout.

Feet left and came, the rythm sounding very well coordinated. Then more feet left than came back in until only the sighing of one of the nearby metal tiles spoke of somebody very heavy standing upon it.

He held his breath.

Soft barks and yipps, murmured, whispered. Two heavy steps, in his direction. The tile over what he assumed was a tank of some sorts bent down slightly. Then more barked and yipped whispers.

From outside some sharp barks, then the heavy steps left the room. Seconds later, a light pitterpatter of clawed paws followed the heavy steps. Stopped. Moved on, becoming more silent, ceased to be.

He held his breath. Outside a rustling and tinkling was audible, became more and more silent. The scent of something burning was fading. In the silence falling over him in his hideout, he could hear the crackling of cooling metal.

Minutes became hours, or maybe days.

Perhaps a few eternities, give or take two.

Finally he pushed the tile upward.

The room was empty.

Not only empty.

Except for his floortile all the floortiles that had cracked open had been removed.

All the struts that had beed ripped loose were gone.

All the hammocks were gone. Including the children that had been in them.

And the meshes on the wall where gone too. Including the luggage they had held.

He looked around stunned. The rivets on his floortile were deformed. Tiles with intact rivets where still in place, but all other tiles were just gone. And whatever had been underneath them, too. No object that was identifiable as being something individual was left. The smelly tank was gone. Loose nuts dangled on the now dry pipes it had once connected to.

He turned around. His hammock was still in place. Likewise his mesh on the wall hadn't been touched. His treasurechest and an enameled bottle lay

on his hammock. He was perplexed. Placing his luggage on the ground he grabbed the bottle. It was plugged with an enamel plug held in place by a metal clamp.

Easy.

Flip the clamp, and you can pull the stopper out. There were beerbottles with the same mechanism. Just they were out of glass and ceramics, not enameled metal. And the beerbottles were three times bigger. The bottle could barely hold a mouthful of water. Which, indeed, it actually did. Containing a mouthful of water, with a light mint flavour. He closed the bottle, putting it into his short trousers pocket. It was getting hot in here. Not the heat of a fire, but of a locked shed in summer. He picked up his case and the metal treasurechest. He was thankful for the handle on its top. In the room beyond the wall the corpse was gone, so was the arm. Sand had been dusted over the blood on the wall and floor and soaked up the blood's wetness. No icky bits were visible anywhere. The three darts had gone, too, leaving three holes in the wall. The holes had closed with the black gooey, tar-like substance that was also dribbling from the cracks in the ceiling.

He went to the door. Outside was blinding brightness. Yellow-white sand and blue sky.

His foot set down on the outer door's frame, when a shadow blotted out the light.

A clawed hand shot out to grab him. A hand with orange fur and long claws like that which had ripped off the arm of the dead man in the seat.

More reflex than thought, Peters' hand holding the treasurechest shot out, too, in an arc upward. The chest contacted with the clawed hand and the doorframe.

The crunching noise was loud and clear in the otherwise silent air.

The loud, pained snarl ended the silence, until he brought the heavy chest around in a second arch, upward.

That ended the pained snarl abruptly.

Slowly, like a cut tree, the shadow fell over backward into the sand.

And gave free sight at a group of at least two dozen other large looming shadows.

Shadows with tiger ears, tiger muzzles, tiger tails and tiger paws, orange fur and long claws.

Wrapped into clothing like the pictures in Karl May's "Through the Desert" had shown to be worn by the Berber people, wide billowing burnouses.

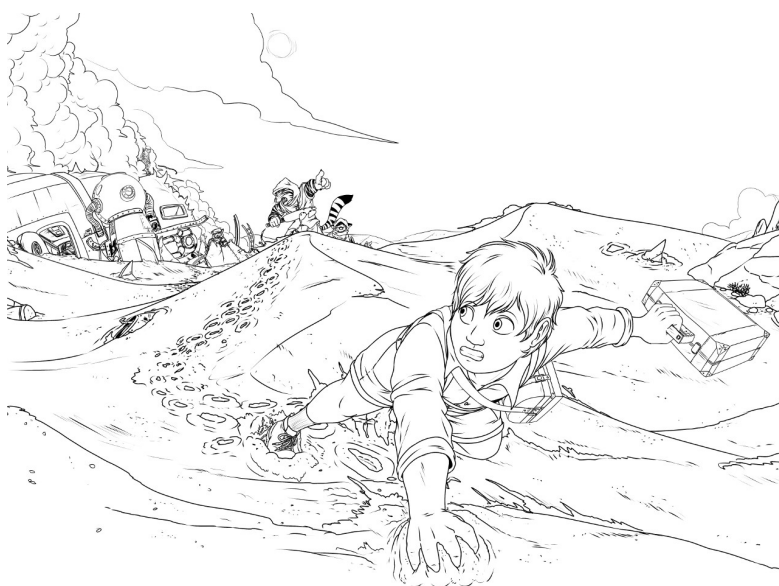
And wielding spiked clubs.

In the resulting explosion of snarls and growls, the fangs bared at him and the clubs risen over the heads in unmistakably hostile manners, he discovered he was an astonishingly good runner.

Turning away from the tiger-people, he looked at a town, maybe a quarter of an hour leisurely walk away. A large gate was closing behind a group of people leaving a dustcloud.

The city was bright, colorful, and he could see lots of high trees over the citywalls. It looked much more inviting than the tigerpeople and their fangs and clubs behind him.

He ran.



Down the dune on which the metallic-shiny oversized lentil rested from which he had emerged, along a deep, charred trail that began shortly behind the cities wall - there where the battlements looked like stencilled away - and then lead up to where the lentil rested.

The snarls and growls became louder behind him when the tigerpeople decided to follow him. He shot a look over his shoulder and decided not to do that again.

He jumped and bounded in great leaps down the dune, barely managing to slide the treasurechests strap over his shoulder. Holding firmly to his small travelcase he dashed up the next dune. The town was still pretty far away. And the tigerpeoples snarls and shouts got louder. Well, they didn't have to carry much more weight than their clubs around.

Before him, the sand exploded in a cloud of dust, taking his sight.

He fell, landing in something soft which immedeatly gave way under him, and then things went dark.

But it wasn't the darkness of unconsciousness.

It was just .. Dark.

He heard light yips around him, then he felt somebody.. several... dogs stepping upon his back.

He wanted to scream and get up when he heard, muffled, the snarls and growls above becoming louder, then he felt pokes on his back, like if the dogs on his back were fetching heavy loads, the heavy thuds of many feet running past above. The snarls became quieter.

A small hand fuzzled his hair, then small hands with claws sought his hands and tried to help him up. A wet nose touched his ear:

"yepyappapp rwuuf"

It was whispered, and with a high pitch and a rapid rate. He had heard the same noises inside the... Lentil.

Separated by a metal floortile.

The small hands holding his hands - rather two of his fingers each - tugged him into a direction.

It was pitchblack, aside of a few stars, which his head threw at him as a "thank you" from the exhaustion of the sprint downhill and the following fall. There were several ... beings around him. He felt them moving, when soft fur and smooth hide touched his body.

He was still kneeling, so he wanted to stand up.

Immedeatly the hands holding his pulled him down again, tugged on him and when he didn't stopped, somebody gave him a clout.

"Okay, I'll remain on all fours!" he cursed.

"urrrrAPPAPP yipp!"

Again a wet nose at his ear whispering those staccato noises. Instead of a second clout a small paw grabbed his lips painfully and pressed them together.

"Yes, I'll be silent," he whispered into the darkness once his lips were released.

Instead of another yapping, somebody patted his head gently, albeit also with a staccato-like speed.

The tugging on his hands began anew, and slowly he crouched ahead.

He stopped when he realized he had lost his luggage and chest. He pulled his hands free, resulting in at least two separate excited squeaks, barks and yips. He wanted to turn around to trace the five meters or so back that he had moved so far in utter darkness. His shoulders rammed into squirming bodies, and sand started to rush down from above. Sharp claws grabbed his ears, nose, wrists shoulders, ankles. He wanted to throw his unseen assailants off, but he couldn't move much - and each time he moved, more sand rushed down upon him. Things wrapped around his arms his legs, and even

around his head. Smooth, cool, fluffy material suddenly pulled tight, binding his wrists together. The excited yips moved around him, and several times somebody gave him another clout when he tried to move. Often he felt warm soft fur running over his face, his arms and legs. He finally decided to lay still. His legs were almost fully under sand, and he slowly concluded that he was in a tunnel under the sand. Around him, movement. Sand flew around, then whoever was moving, moved, and he felt how swift hands removed the sand from his legs and around him. Finally something heavy bumped into his legs. The hard corners of his treasurechest. He inhaled deeply.

"Yiiiiirf yepyep"

Fur pressed into his face and he could feel the warmth of the body it belonged to.

Whoever had trained those pinschers...

But pinschers wouldn't have the hands to untie whatever had bound his wrists and legs.

Small hands rested lightly on his arms and guided them to the handles of his chest and of his travelling case. He sighed and gently, slowly, pulled them up to his chest. Around him several silent yipps and woofs sounded, then helpful little hands helped him back on his knees and then steadied his shoulders.

"irrekkekk."

A small hand grabbed some of his hair and then pulled him along. It was maybe undignified, but he had no idea where he was. But he had a very good idea what had been the intention of those tiger-people. So better to be cooperative. After a while a faint light showed up ahead, together with a whiff of fresh cool air.

1.2 Peter: Arrival in the Town

Peter emerged from a hole in a small green meadow. Meadow was maybe too much. It was a space shaded over by an acacia tree. The surface was grown over with short-cut broad leafed grass. On three sides the space was surrounded by high, rough walls of sandstone, the fourth side went to a gravel-covered ... road.

Peters vision was blinded for a moment as the sun burnt down brightly onto the gravelroad, and reflected off the bright yellow walls beyond. The chittering of his rescuers was around him and behind him. Small fuzzy hands grabbed his wrists and shoulders and pulled, whilst other hands got hold of his legs and pushed.

Like a cork from a bottle, Peter popped out of the hole in the ground.



All around him there were... people.

Rather, creatures from fairy tales.

On the gravel, five giant knights stood, the light reflecting off their polished armor. Looking around, Peter saw his rescuers for the first time. The one who must've been in front of him stood on the grass and was shaking himself, sending dirt flying all around.

It was a sand colored fox.

With extremely huge ears, that seemed to move all on their own.

And, once the roughly one meter short fellow stopped shaking so fast that its outlines were all fuzzy, Peter saw that the fox was wearing a sort of leather cuirass and a kilt made of leather strips, both in dark green and dark brown shades.

When the fox stopped shaking, he gazed back at Peter with big black eyes, flashed a ... grin ... full of small sharp fangs back at him.

Behind Peter, over his legs which were still in the hole in the ground, four more of the fox-people emerged, walking rather unceremoniously over Peter and starting to clean themselves in various corners of the mini-meadow.

Around their necks were thick neckties of sand-colored silk, Peter noticed. And they wore all the same types of leather armor. Only their belts, from which a pair of stilet-like daggers were dangling on each, really differed. All were of leather, but they were embroidered with different patterns, in different colors. The fox that had pulled Peter on his wrists out of the hole looked down himself, turned halfway around, inspecting his bottlebrush-like tail, combing last traces of sand out of it.

Peter pulled his legs out of the hole, sat up and pulled his treasure chest against his body.

The sight of the five giant knights was unsettling, especially as they stood in the blazing sun and the light reflecting off their armor partly blinded him. The "lead fox" walked over to the knights - Peter tried to find a word for "running with a swagger", but failed - and one of the giants knelt down, and took off his helmet.

Kneeling now for the greater part in the shadow the acacia tree cast, Peter had to correct some of his assumptions.

The knight wasn't a "he", but a "she", as the great amount of cleavage the armor showed quite clearly indicated.

Whilst the foxes' movements always appeared hectic and cut short, the knights' motions were slow and fluent.

It was a striped horse, a zebra. Her mane had been pressed flat by her helmet.

"Not pressed flat," Peter realized.

She wore it combed all over the left side of her head, and it flowed down to the shoulder guards of her armor.

Like a white-black waterfall.

The fox gesticulated wildly with arms, ears and tail and yipped and barked in rapid order at the zebra-mare-knight, who then and when nodded in a very human fashion. The noises... voice of the fox - a fennec, Peter remembered, guessing by its large ears - were high pitched. The voice of the zebra-mare-

knight, when she responded, were much lower, deeper.

With his eyes accustoming to the glaring brightness, Peter could see more and more details on the knights armors. "Zebra-Woman-Knight sounds stupid," he thought. "Amazones. Yes, that sounds better."

The Amazone kneeling in front of the wildly gesticulating fennec petted his head and then looked up to Peter, her ears flicking. One of the fennecs that had come out of the hole behind Peter, flailed his arms, jumped to Peters side and mimicked to be holding something in his hands. Peter was startled, even more so when a second fennec jumped to his side, a third jumped upon that ones shoulders and snarled ferociously, clawing for the fennec who jumped to Peters side first.

Peter gazed.

The first fennec moved his arms - and Peter realized that he was mimicing his own motions earlier and so...

When the imaginary case the first fennec was holding was smashing into the face of the third fennecs muzzle, he and the fennec upon who's shoulders he stood, toppled over like Goliath hit by David's slingshot. The two made an impromptu performance of dying from terrible wounds.

Peter was sure he, at best, broke the tigers nose, but nevertheless:

When the other fennecs started banging their chests, the amazones clapped their hands and bowed lightly to Peter.

The kneeling amazone, who's armor was inlaid with golden leaves on her shoulders and torso, lowered herself until she sat on her haunches. She whinnied - said - something to the four other amazones who bowed their heads and made a step backward.

Then she looked at Peter, flicked her ears and then, after a few second, made a waving gesture with both her hands.

The fennec that had stood aside when she adressed the other amazones, dashed to Peter, grabbed his wrists and yipping excitedly pulled him toward the kneeling amazone. Peter stumbled to his knees, then, as more small hands started to push him from behind, got up and, clutching his treasurechest to himself, stepped to the kneeling amazone.

Despite kneeling, she was still half a head taller than Peter.

She looked at the metal chest he held protectively against his chest. Then she nodded.

She moved extra slowly, much slower than when she had talked / gesticulated with the fennec, placing her hands upon Peters shoulders and then leaned forward, until her broad nose touched his forehead.

Peter didn't know what to make from it, although the warmth of the velvet muzzletip against his forehead felt very reassuring. In the shadows he could see on the ground he saw that the four standing amazones bowed, and the fennecs jumped into the air and made saltos.

"Whatever that means... it seems to be something good," Peter thought and relaxed a bit.

He didn't know how he had come here, or where "here" actually was. He missed his mother and father, but he had seen the other children having been brought into the city, and he was in it now, too, and, ...

He inhaled deeply whilst the amazones gloved hands carefully caressed his shoulders, her breath washing through his hair.

The air was warm, and there was a sweet scent in the air that sent a reassuring tingle through his spine.

He would be safe here.

The Amazone stood up, her armor clicking and tinkling as she did so. She flicked her ears looking at Peter, then pointed at the fennec who had spoken to her earlier, issuing a short sequence of whinnies and other noises that were so well modulated, that Peter was sure it was a proper language. Just one he never even thought of possible.

The fennec ... saluted to the amazone in the gold-decorated armor. He stood first very straight and then bowed in a motion that, considering the swiftness of all his other motions, was ceremoniously slow.

Then he barked a single high pitched "Yep!"

The amazone nodded to the fennec and to Peter, then turned around, trotting away. The four other amazones fell, two by two, in behind her.

"Looks like I got kissed by a female general, or a queen," Peter thought, clamping his his case between his legs and rubbing his forehead. His skin and hair was moist where the zebra mare... zebra woman... Amazone had breathed against it, but the heat of the air was drying his hair rapidly.

1.3 Peter: Tehuioy

The group of fennecs, each - except for their ears - a hand shorter than Peter, ran around him and then all into a direction along the gravel road. When they noticed he wasn't following some made the same motions with their hands as the amazone had made, whilst two dashed back behind him, ready to give him a push.

Before they could do so, Peter got his travelcase into one hand and his treasurechest into his other and started to trot after them.

One of the fennecs made a salto in the air, whilst those that had run back to get behind Peter made lightning dashes to get ahead of the others.

Peter followed them at his own pace. Which seemed to be a crawl by the fennecs standards, as always only one stopped to wait for Peter whilst the others went dashing around hunting flying bugs or doing acrobatics.

The first building they passed was a swimmingbath. It provided two of the three walls that had framed the mini-meadow Peter had arrived in.

Looking over his shoulder a cold shiver ran over his spine when he saw a black ant, as big as his arm, emerge from the ground and close the hole in the ground again. Peter stopped to watch until a furred hand grabbed his wrist and tugged on it.

It was the fennec that had preceeded him from the hole and who had reported to the zebra-amazone.

"RepyipyipAryap" the fennec said, looking at Peter, waving his ears and his other arm like a seaman uses flags to communicate, pointing down the gravel road.

"Yes, I come," Peter said and followed the tugging of the fennec.

Barking and yipping and clapping his hands the fennec danced ahead and Peter followed him. When he would have run he might have kept pace with the fennecs, but they didn't seem to mind. Rather, some of them seemed to enjoy walking at Peters pace, with an exaggerated swagger.

Peter caught a glimpse of the shady interior of the bathhouse. Some fennecs were jumping off a tower into a bassin in which some zebras were swimming slowly.

Large buildings right and left framed the gravel road, spaced by small green islands. Some buildings seemed to be stables. He could see bales of hay in their open upper levels, until he realized that it might well be food storages for the zebra-amazones.

A group of amazones in leather armor of the same type as the fennecs were wearing trotted past, glancing curiously at Peter. They were carrying large

wooden poles over their shoulders and from their belts various tools were dangling. When one of the zebras addressed one of the fennecs and pointed at Peter, three of the fennecs immediately enacted the scene of Peter knocking out the tiger.

This time the swinging of the imaginary treasurechest was more powerful and the imaginary tiger was almost decapitated.

Scratch that, the fennec playing the upper body of the tiger took his own head in his hands and hopped over the ground with it.

The zebras looked at Peter.

"Oh fuck," Peter thought, took his treasurechest and motioned how he had moved it. Then he tried to enact how and where he actually hit the tiger. And what effect he thought it had had on the tiger.

The fennecs who had enacted the play started a wild debate about the motions and the actions, whilst the zebras bowed their head to Peter and then went their ways to the wall, where the gravel road ended at a large gate.

And where one of the two gate towers was, like, stencilled out.

The fennecs surrounded Peter and gesticulated wildly. They barked, yipped and whistled at him all at the same time.

"You notice I don't understand you, do you?"

If they did, they couldn't have cared less. They seemed to want to convey something to Peter.

One of them crouched ducked and timidly around, scared of his own shadow, booed at by the others.

When he switched to a proud swagger, with broad chest and his short arms pressed into his sides to appear even broader and bigger, the others bowed to him and kissed the gravel where his feet had touched it.

"I don't think you want to mean what I think you want to mean," Peter murmured to himself.

"My mom would have you over the knee in a minute and would surely be able to explain to you why humbleness is proper behaviour."

Then he realized something. He had read Robinson Crusoe. The first thing Robinson did when he met Friday was conveying his own name to the wild man.

They had crossed a robust bridge over a lazily flowing river when Peter had worked out the idea. Looking up from his thoughts, he saw the fennecs leaving the bridge and the gravel road that connected to it again, and instead slide down a short slope to a large meadow overgrown with high grass.

On the other side of the meadow a white castle with a mighty central tower

arose. The castle was nestled against a steep cliff which itself was embraced by a steep sandstone wall. All around the meadow and the castle and the other buildings a towering wall arose, made from warm yellow sandstone. The gravelway, Peter was sure, ran through between the castle and the high wall. Peter marvelled at the sheer measures of the place. The walls were easily twenty meters tall, thrice as high as his parents home had been.



Except for one fennec who waited impatiently for him, the others had darted into the high grass where only their eartips were visible. They were heading to where a number of fishing rods emerged above the high grass. Peter loved fishing. He always had used his free time to try and catch a trout - any fish actually - in the river. Not that he ever had caught a trout. His father had told him these fish didn't swim in such small rivers. Peter followed the fennecs into the high grass, leaving a wide trail where he trampled the grass down. The Fennec that had moved in behind him squeaked and grabbed him by his neck, pulling him back. The fennec gesticulated wildly, chittering and yipp-yapp-ruffing agitatedly, pointing at a dozen amazons that were climbing a stairway to a second stable-like building, then at the grass pulling off a leaf of grass, and mimicking chewing on it before sticking it between the gravel and then, imitating Peter's walk with the case and the treasurechest, trampling the leaf until it wasn't much more than pulp. Again he pointed at the amazons who were visible in the stables, counting bales and taking notes on wax tablets, then picked up the pulped leaf and looking disgustedly at it before trying to eat it. Then he sat down on the ground, crossed his arms and legs and let his ears hang, looking up to Peter

and pointing at the ground.

Peter had a good idea what the fennec wanted from him: Sit down and wait. Soft chitter and barking emerged from the place where the fishermen were located and the fennecs had went - went without leaving a trace in the high grass.

There were mewls and soft growls. And noises that sounded like genuine laughter, although like from a hoarse person.

Again chittering and barking, accompanied by more of the, almost musical, laughs.

Moments later the fennecs appeared again, one of them holding up a sizeable blue shimmering fish, easily a meal for the whole group of them.

One of the fennecs, the leader of the group, stepped to Peter and looked at the other fennec who sat visibly frustrated on the ground.

That one shot a finger at the path Peter had trampled into the grass and then yip-yapped something with a great amount of gesturing and ear-posing at the groups leader.

That one inspected Peters shoes with great interest and tugged on them, looking puzzled at the shoes lacing.

When he inspected Peters black socks and poked his wet cold nose against Peters ankles, Peter decided it was time to get the initiative.

He waved to the fennec until he looked up. His ears perked upward.

Peter pointed at himself, and said: "Peter."

The fennec tilted one ear sideward, then the other.

Then he sat on Peters outstretched legs and grabbed Peters shirt, tugging on it:

"PeTarr."

Peter wanted to nod but the pawy hands grabbed Peters nose gently:

"PetArr."

"Okay, with Robinson Crusoe it had been automatically obvious that pointing at oneself meant: 'My name is'."

Peter placed his treasurechest beside himself on the ground and scratched his head.

The fennec sitting on his legs looked at him with his big black eyes, then gestured at one of the other fennecs.

That one stepped to Peters side, sat down like Peter and then pointed at his own throat, where the thick silk was wrapped around his neck.

Then he yipyep-riff-yapped, wiggling his tail and ears.

The fennec on Peters knees bumped the other fennecs nose gently and then grabbed Peters ears and pointed to where the amazones were taking inven-

tory of haybales.

The second fennec flickered his ears, then straightened them upward and pointed with an extraslow gesture at his throat:

"YipipYepap-rRiffef-Yapapap."

Peter wanted to point at the other fennec and repeat the sequence, when the fennec sitting on his knees snipped his fingers in front of his face and then pointed at himself, also at the throat, and "spoke" as slowly as the other one:

"YipipYepap-rRiffef-Yapapap."

Peter was baffled.

But then the fennec on his knees touched his own nose, and said:

"aRruun,"

before touching the other fennecs nose and saying:

"Tiz."

The other fennec touched his own nose, repeating:"Tiz," only to touch the nose of the fennec on Peters knees and say:"aRruun."

Peter nodded and touched his own nose:"Peter", then gently placed a fingertip on the nose of the fennec sitting on his knees:"ARrrun."

The fennecs ears flickered and he placed his own hand on his own nose:"aRruun."

Peter tried again, placing a finger on the fennecs nose:"Harun."

This time the fennec placed his hand on Peters nose, said:"PetArr", which Peter tried to correct to "Peter".

After a few minutes it was agreed upon that he was Peter, add or loose a few R depending upon who addressed him. And the company he was with were Harun, Tiz, Viraz, Kaeva and Frava.

1.4 Peter: Learning the language

Peter was pointing at various items, saying their name. When the fennecs were unsure what exactly he meant, each one of them would give his interpretation, enacting the use of the item or providing another explanatory performance.

Some of those performances were so hilarious that he started to laugh heartily. The first time the fennecs flinched back but when the acoustic outburst proved to be free of danger, they went over to enacting the attack of the tiger on Peter, making it more and more hilarious each time. Finally, laughing heartily, he agreed to play the part of the tiger and Harun played Peters part.

The fennecs laughter was staccato-like yipping, which sometimes ended in a hiccup-like coughing.

The small group followed the gravelroad, passed by the large gates of the white castle.



It's gates were wide open, but in the shadow of the gate stood two groups a five of the armored amazones.

The five fennecs waved to the armored knights, and most of them waved back. Then the five made yet another impromptu performance of Peters feat. Peter had to laugh, as this time he waved to Harun and positioned himself like the tiger had in front of Peter. Harun immideatly took the cue, stepped in front of Peter and mimiced carrying Peters treasurechest that Peter had placed on the ground.

Peter mimiced the growl of the Tiger and lashed out for Harun, Harun ducked, crushed the imaginary chest upon Peters hand who yowled loudly,

Harun stopped to brush his chestfur before landing the second blow and being obedient in return, Peter threw himself backward onto the ground.

Snorts and snickers, neighs and spoken words came from the guards at the gate. After a short moment negotiating amongst each other, one of them came over. She took off her helmet, a peculiar item with a neck-guard of chainmail sewn to a wide strip of leather, metal plates protecting the long sides and top of her muzzle and a chainmail veil protecting her throat. She hung it to a hook on her thigh guards and offered Peter her gloved hand to help him up. He was still sitting on the ground and grinned at Harun, having enjoyed partaking in the enactment of, as he started to think of it himself by now, his heroic deed.

He placed his hand in hers and she pulled him easily up onto his feet. However, something caught her interest. Her ears flicked, and she spoke to Harun and Tiz, who made poses Peter interpreted as signs of strength. Or rather of being strong.

Basically it was throwing a small stone into the air and following it with the head on a much longer flightpath than it actually took.

She opened a lock on her armored glove and slipped out of it, then offered Peter her hand again.

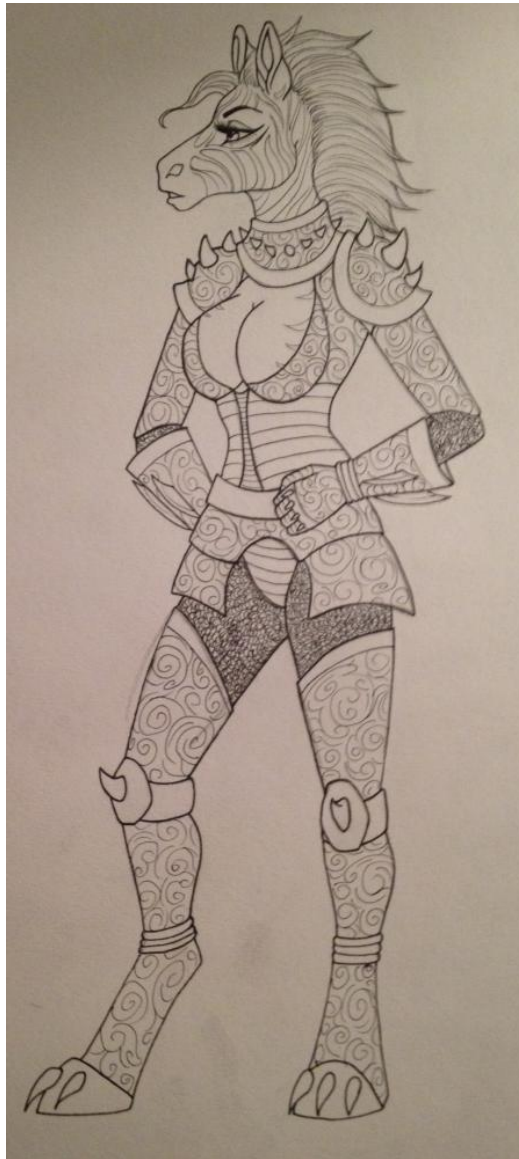
A bit worried what it might mean, Peter placed his hand again into hers.

When she squeezed lightly, he squeezed back.

Next she squeezed harder and snorted.

It was a strong grip, like real boys gave each other. So Peter squeezed back as strong as he could.

The amazone relaxed her grip and so did Peter. She flickered her ears, looking from Peter to the fennecs. She spoke a bit with the latter before releasing Peters hand and sliding her armored glove back on.



Harun zipped to Peters side and bopped the boys nose.
"Peter," the fennec piped,
The Amazone knelt down, thus coming heightwise much nearer to the fennecs and Peter, and tipped her broad black nose with her thumb:
"Nisha"
"Okay, I get the knack of this. I just wish I'd understand what they are talking amongst each other," Peter thought.
Then he repeated the by now familiar process of touching his own nase, repeating his name and then he placed his hand slowly upon the amazones broad nose and said her name. She replied in kind, pronouncing his name

properly with ease.

What came as a surprise was that she started to touch and explore Peters ears and hair with her hands. Whilst the fennecs had pawy hands with longer fingers that was proper for a fox, but shorter than a humans hand, her fingers matched her hands size.

Just, where the fennecs had claws and pawpads, her fingers ended in horned caps that covered almost the entire fingertip to the outmost joint.

Peter flinched back when her fingers opened his mouth. She looked to Tiz and Harun, who flicked their ears in circles, and she repeated the gesture.

Then her right hand took Peters left and guided it to her ear, whilst hers went to his.

Her muzzle was a handspan from his and her brown eyes looked at him expectantly.

After Tiz kicked his rear end for the second time, looking innocently into the other direction, Peter moved his hand along her ear, curiously massaging and feeling it. As best as the differing anatomy allowed, Nisha repeated the motions. When he ran his hand through her black-white striped mane, her hand ran through his hair.

Peter smiled. She mimiced those motions, too.

To the boy it was hilariously funny. Her head looked like that of a horse, but then again not. She had a mane longer than any horse he had ever seen, and she wore it in a real hairstyle, like some of the older girls at school had worn theirs.

Peter burst into bubbling laughters and wrapped his arms around her neck and, laughing happily, pressed his head against hers.

Her armor was hard where he touched it and he felt for a moment how her muscles tensed when he wrapped his arms around her neck.

But then, slowly, she returned that gesture, too, and when she moved her head against his like he did, her mane fell over his head like a curtain.

Holding her, and being held by her, reminded Peter of his mother.

His mother?

In all the chaos, where was his mother?

And his father? He had been there, just yesterday?

His father, and the fathers of the other children, had come for a surprise visit to the great farmstead the children had been evacuated to, months ago.

One by one, their mothers had arrived, too, often surprised to find themselves in or around the farmstead, often in some of the nearby farmsteads.

His mother had told him one evening when she had come over that the farmstead belonged to the officer of his father.

And yesterday evening...?

Peters mind drew a blank when he tried to remember anything after his father had invited his mother and him to a glass of a special drink.

It had tasted of licorice and Peter had poured half the drink aside when his father hadn't looked.

His father had said that the next day, rather, the next time they'd meet, they'd all be together and it'd be a big adventure.

Peter started to sob when he realized that he had no idea where his mother was, or his father.

Tears filled his eyes and he held firmly to the amazone, which just happened to be there in the moment.

Through teary eyes he noticed that Tiz and Harun lifted the amazones mane from his face and looked at him with an expression of worry he knew from his fathers dalmatians.

There were heavy steps, silent talk.

Then the strong arms of the amazone wrapped around his body and he was lifted up.

He was carried, carried somewhere. Careful fingertips caressed his neck, his head, and a low murmur was at his ear.

It weren't words - at least none he knew - but they told him somebody was there and was caring for him.

There was talk around him, pitterpattering paws on gravel and on stonepaved ways.

Yips and voices, sharp scents, the ringing of a hammer on an anvil.

Peter was very, very worried about his parents. His father had been a soldier, and despite his reassurances that he wasn't fighting on the frontlines, he had never told him or his mother just what he and his company were actually doing. Just one year ago Peter had been sent to the countryside to a small village to help on a large farmstead.

Which belonged to the leading officer of Peters father as he learnt later.

And then a few weeks ago, his mother arrived.

Some of the older children had said that it was unusual. They had been sent to the countryside already in earlier years, as their towns had been in reach of enemy airstrikes from the begin of the war.

But, they had told, it always had been only during the summer, whilst Peter and the other children - all who's fathers were soldiers under the officer to whom the farmstead belonged - were now since almost a year there.

They had went to the small school in the nearby village.

It had been a mostly normal life, only sometimes seeing the white contrails of the allied bombers in the skies.

The long, heavy thudding steps of the amazone became muted, gravel giving way to sand. The brightness became dimmed, but more colorful.

The voices had changed, less of the neighs and sharp accented language of the amazones, but a much more intense yip-yapping and barking of the fennecs. Peter had cried himself dry. He didn't know where the other kids or his parents were.

But he was sure that they had rescued the other children and brought them into the town. The bloody orange paw that had reached to climb into the ... the THING he had awakened in... had been of one of those beings that had hunted him down the dune.

Tiger people.

The amazone had stopped and knelt down when he moved his legs. Her big brown eyes looked sorrowful, there were wet traces in her fur under her eyes. She had cried, too.

Her helmet and gloves dangled from her armor. Harun and Tiz carried Peter's treasurechest, one other fennec was running ahead clearing the way and the other two carried his travelcase.

His fennecs had been rather quiet and there were many noses poking from open doors and windows. Whiskers twitching and dark eyes peering at him curiously, chittering, yipping. Above the now sand covered road colorful silks acted as sunscreens, making the light mellow and soft.



Nisha painted lines into the sand, Harun nodded and hugged Peter in a way similar to how Nisha had held him. She spoke some more, addressing the five fennecs, showing her teeth. The five stood straight like ramrods. Then Tiz sketched a few lines into the sand and then wiggled his paws, showing a

few fingers.

Whatever it had meant, the amazone seemed to be satisfied. She stood up - her eartips touched the silks hanging over the road - and then placed her hands back on Peters shoulders for a moment.

Then she turned around and walked back, vanishing through a huge portal in a huge wall that seemed to encircle the entire city-sector.

Peter noticed that many of the fennecs that were standing in doorways or looking out of windows were following her with their eyes.

A shrill whistle from Tiz made all the heads, including Peters, turn around. The five did their impromptu performance again. Peter grimaced - it seemed to be their most beloved pastime.

This time it looked like if Peter had singlehandedly massacred a whole squad of tigers in a bloody fist fight.

Loud cajoling and yips resounded from the doors and windows and terraces. A flurry of fennecs in all colorings, red, white, sand, yellow, ochre, orange, black, grey, bursted forth from the surrounding buildings and everybody seemed to be most eager to give Peter a hug, bop his nose with theirs and pipsqueak their names at him.

Harun tried to get some organization into the mob, but failed. However one thing he achieved:

A group of muscular fennecs grabbed Peter by his legs and arms and carried him deeper into the city district.

All the buildings were small, like if built for liliputians.

Matter of fact, they were build for fennecs.

The mob was chanting something. It were sneezes and yipps. To Peter they sounded more and more like: "Fennekim! Fennekim!"

Maybe it was just their way of shouting: "Horray!"

Maybe it had a totally different meaning.

But Peter, laughing happily from seeing the funny tumult around him, forgot his worries in the tumultuous happy crowd. And found a name for the fennec people:

Fennekim

The happy mob carried Peter and also the other five fennecs - fennekim - through the street. Every few steps, the sunscreens above the road changed color.

Pink, blue, yellow, green, red, violet, ...

Strips with flowers framed the road. Although the buildings were all small and piled one atop the other, many had small, but colorful gardens. Barely a few feet in size, Peter recognized flowers, peas and even grapes, which grew in the miniature gardens. The wines grew up the walls and along the miniature staircases that allowed access to the buildings upper flats.

Wet nosetips touched Peters skin at arms and legs, and like dogs, the fennekims seemed to use the event to learn Peters scent.

Seriously, as it tickled, Peter didn't mind.

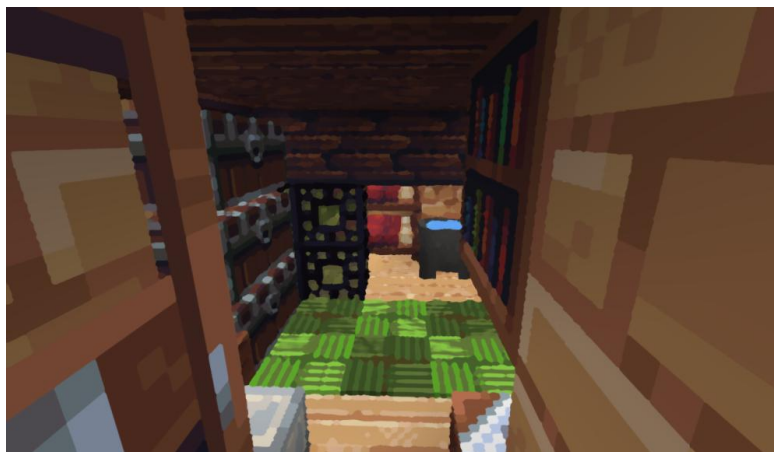
The happy mob approached one of the citywalls, which loomed incredibly high into the sky. Harun waved his arms and, the mob, still singing, dropped the six of them down at the door of one of the houses. The opposite building was in part some industrial complex, as Peter could see cranes and pulleys through the open windows. Several Fennekim hugged Peter, two especially slender ones hugged him together and Peter laughed as they seemed to tickle his whole body before vanishing in the mob again. The door they had been dropped own in front of opened and a greyfurred fennekim with eyebrows so bushy his eyes were near invisible stood in it. He guffawed when he gazed at Peter, then gesticulated with Harun.

Once more the play of Peters deeds was enacted, this time not as gory as when it had been performed the last few times.

The greymuzzled fennekim went to Peter and inspected him in minute detail. Peter did likewise. But Peter used his eyes mostly to gaze, whilst the fennekim used his nose to sniffle - and quite noisily so.

The old one wore an exceedingly flamboyant scarf around his neck, and a richly embroidered belt.

Tiz whispered something - and the old geezers ears shot upward, his fuzzy eyebrows flipped up to expose amber colored eyes, and with loud coughing, huffing and puffing he ushered the six into the house.



Peter didn't understand why or how the sudden change in behaviour had come from. But when he found the inside of the house amicably cool compared to the heat that had burned down in those places where there

hadn't been trees or silks covering the road, he liked it immediately. The ceiling was somewhat low, but Peter could stand even under the massive wooden log that carried the ceiling and which halved the one room of the flat into two halves. The greymuzzle waved and pointed, gesticulated and soon the five other fennekim dashed from here to there and back again. One vanished down a small stairway. In front of Peters amazed eyes a pair of thick carpets was unrolled on the wooden tiled floor, and big cushions were brought forth from a cabinet on the wall. In an oven, which stood under a window looking out to the road, Tiz kindled a tiny fire and was soon roasting a few spices which gave the room a fresh scent of lemongrass. Peter was amazed at the speedy motions of the fennekims, which blurred in front of his eyes when they seemed to hurry.

A mug of water was poured over the spices, and then the broth-like soup poured through a piece of fine cloth into a large glazed amphora. The cloth with the solid remains of the spices was hung from a peg in the wooden log carrying the ceiling. Peter stood between his chest and his travelcase and gazed at the activities, which all happened in parallel, in awe. The only reason the fennekim didn't step on each other's toes was that they seemed to be able to literally run past each other without actually running into each other. No matter if talking and looking into a different direction, carrying some unwieldy cushion or lugging the heavy amphora around. The fennekim that had run down the stairway returned. In his arms he held something which looked like a honeyjar.

Until Peter saw that it actually was a giant ant. But the fennekim handled it more like a doll, or a jar, and poked the ant's head against the log in the ceiling. Immediately and with an audible effect the ant's jaws sunk into the wood. The fennekim carefully released the ant, and ... then it just hung there. One of the fennekim tugged on Peters trousers.

On the floor, neatly arranged, were eight cushions, one large, one medium, and six smaller ones. The largest one had pearl shimmering tassels and was of a deep green. All others were in various shades of light blue, yellow, red or bright green, but had tassels and trimmings in brown or black or ochre. Peter was tugged and pushed to the medium cushion, which provided an amiable seating, once Peter managed to sit down with his legs knotted up like the fennekims. They were naturals at flopping down on their haunches and immediately wrapping their legs up like a yogi from India did.

Tiz, who had made the spices and what Peter guessed was tea before fetched seven mugs from a rack, and filled them with water from a large amphora that leaned beside the door together with three others. He pipped something, and all of the other fennekim tilted their ears straight up for a moment.

The greymuzzle had sat down beside Peter and poked him into his side. Peter was sure there had been a question asked, but had no idea what it might have been so he shrugged his shoulder.

This gesture was unknown to the fennekim, as he did it the first time since he had met them.

But then Peter had an idea: He pointed at his ears and looked at Harun for help. Harun reached for his own ears and then jumped up, fetching a pair of wooden sticks. The greymuzzled wiggled his ears and followed Harun's actions with the same expression Peter had seen on the faces / muzzles of the fennekim in the street when the others had shown their performance of his deeds to them.

"Curiosity?" Peter wondered, but felt pretty safe to assume.

Harun ran one finger over the swollen golden rear end of the ant and the ant produced a glob of some thick yellow substance, which Harun caught skillfully on the two wooden sticks. Rotating them he dashed to Peter and gave him one stick, only to enthusiastically - and with lightning speed - lick his stick clean. Peter watched the behaviour of the thick liquid. It smelled sweet. Then, carefully, he tasted it.

Then he licked the stick just as clean as Harun had.

It WAS honey. Very aromatic honey even.

He was mildly perplexed, but he remembered that there was some animal that lived exclusively upon ants. Well, somehow that now made sense. However, the ant was as large as an old ladies lapdog. That somehow was a bit scary.

Tiz, who was the shortest of the lot, had to stretch to hold the mugs under the ant and then rub its belly to have the ant drop a glob of honey into the water.

Peter nodded eagerly when Tiz looked at him and held up a mug. Tiz flicked his ears slowly upwards, then let them fall back to their 45 degree resting position. Holding his hands to his ears, Peter mimicked with his hands the motions the fennecs did with their ears, and then nodded slowly. The greymuzzle ruffed and looked at the human boy. Tiz brought Peter the mug, placed his paw on its rim and pointed at the others who already were holding theirs. Tiz brought the greymuzzle a mug, too, and then got himself a mug with a big glob of honey.

Peter had, like back at home, waited patiently for all to be seated, and planned to repeat everything his fuzzy hosts were doing.

"That surely will impress them," he thought.

The greymuzzle looked into the round and then started to slurp his honeyed tea with an audible fervor. As one the other fennekims followed suit, slurping, lapping their honeyed tea. Marvelling at manners his mother would have slapped him for, Peter tried to mimic the fennekim. And he put a lot of effort into mimicing them! Actually, he enjoyed himself in the process of trying to slurp the tea as noisily as his big-eared hosts did.

Farzan, as the old greymuzzles name was, started to talk in the fennekims rapid way with Harun and the others. Then and when he looked at their unfurred guest, only to start another round of noisy tea-slurping.

Finally Farzan addressed Peter directly:

"Peter, greetings. *** Sun in you *** shine/reflect."

As far as Peter could guess, that was meant as a question. He noted the ears of the fennekims moved to certain positions. Farzan obviously had requested the words he had learned so far from the others. Still, some things Peter realized he didn't fetched.

They had taken their sweet time on their walk to here - before Peter had started to cry - and there was a list of words which Peter had picked up. But they didn't cover all of a language, by far not! And the order of words was... weird.

He guessed for a meaning and tried a response:

"Farzan greetings. Yes, Sun shine in me... " and then Peter patted his chest. Farzan flicked his ears in what amounted to some positive reaction. Then the elderly fennekim repeated:

"Sun in my Heart/Chest shines." - I am happy.

Frava and Viraz, who had done most of the enacting of more complex words such as "shining", clapped each others paws.

Peter felt like when he had read those Karl May stories of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

Winnetou, the proud chieftain of the Apaches, had always spoken... slightly abstract, describing things in complicated ways because he didn't knew the words in the language of Old Shatterhand.

Peter smiled and wondered if he now was as Old Shatterhand amongst the Apaches.

"Farzan," he asked, "Me searching friend..." Kaeva jumped up to group hug Tiz, Viraz and Harun, yapping, "Me searching friends. See Friends?"

The next moment there was an avalanche of fennekims tumbling all over Peter. Wet nostips poked into his shirts neck, his arms sleeves. And from some point near his left knee he heard Harun bark:

"Friends We!"

Even Farzan echoed that statement, although he had remained sitting and slurped his tea.

"Me friends - me... no nose friends," Peter was laughing from the tickles and cuddles he got, but he realized frustrated that his vocabulary was too limited to clearly ask for the other children let alone his parents.

Haruns muzzle appeared at Peters face and he placed his paws on his shoulders, looking into Peters eyes, his nose pressed against his:

"Sun climb up, friends see. Sun dig - sleep. Friend more see."

Peter mulled over these words. The first part was somewhat clear - he'd see his friends tomorrow. Most likely. A climbing sun sounded like before noon and the sun seemed to be sinking already as the light that fell through the window had gotten longer. The Fennekims darted back to their cushions. Tiz speedily refilled the mugs, also Peters, then placing a much finer mug with the lemongrass flavoured water in front of the larger, more luxurious cushion. Peter was a bit confused, especially when all fennekims started to comb their fur, brushing their chestfur out of their collars like trying to appear bigger. Finally Farzan himself stood up and went to the door, opening it...

And in came a tall figure, not as tall as Nisha and more graceful in her motions.

But when that figure had entered the room, and pulled back the hood, Peter started to scream and back up against the wall frantically.

It was a tiger! Those big eared morons had one of those monsters in their town, their home, and didn't do anything but sit and stare!

Peters hand grabbed the handle of his treasurechest and he jumped up.

The tiger stood there in the room, gazing at Peter with large eyes.

Screaming at the top of his voice, Peter ran to the tiger ready to brain it right here and now before it could attack anybody.

He got as far as two steps of the five to the tiger. At that point Tiz seemed to materialize at his arm, curling his body around the treasurechest.

Half a step onward, Harun was wrapping himself around his left, Farzan around his right leg.

Kaeva, Viraz and Frava caught the boys fall partywith their own bodies, partly with all of the cushions piled up in one heap at the point Peters body hit the ground.

Peter screamed, tried to move, calling the fennekims all the names he had reserved for the bullies in the school.

Until,...

Yes, until he saw the tiger.

Curled up in a fetal position, covering her - for it was a female - head with her arms, a small bag had dropped onto the floor, spilled its contents of fine sheets of paper and charcoals onto the floor.

Peter stopped moving, and became silent, looked around. Tiz was still curled around the chest, his impact between the chest and the floor cushioned by the biggest cushion and Frava, who had grabbed Peters arm and thus slowed it, saving Tiz from being maimed by the heavy chest.

Slowly Peter released the chest which Tiz immediately brought out of his reach, same as Peters travelcase. Farzan left Peters leg and murring softly, went to the tigress in her green robe, softly patting her shoulder, talking with her, collecting her papers and charcoals. Kaeva brought intact charcoals from a small wooden chest and replaced those that had fractured.

Finally also Viraz, Harun and Frava released Peter and the boy sat up onto his haunches. He gazed at the tigress. It was a female tigress, obviously. Her cowled robe was of thin material and covered her like his mothers nightrobe had covered her.

Harun stepped into his view, grabbing Peters cheeks, forcing him to look directly into his eyes:

"Wall friends hugs. Friends we." Peter nodded, hoarsely squeaking "Yes, yes we are friends," before realizing he hadn't used the fennekims speech, repeating:

"Friends we. Friends hug."

And as to verify he carefully hugged Harun, who returned the gesture in kind.

When Harun stepped aside the tigress knelt on all fours in front of Peter, and purred:

"Friends we"

Her facial expression was... more familiar somehow. Peter nodded:

"Yes."

"Friends <a mew> Hug"

The tigress purred.

Peter blushed, and gulped hard, nodded and said yes, first in german, then in the language of the fennekim.

The tigress moved very slowly, sat up and then stretched her arms out. Her paws showed no claws, but she was shivering,

A fennekim hindpaw kicked Peters butt and he leaned forward, reached out and embraced the tigress.

The hugging the fennekim felt like hugging a squiggly Pinscher or some oversized german sheperd puppy. The tigress felt... Like a person. Her size was right, her proportions were right.

Nisha had felt like hugging a bear by comparison.

Her head slid beside Peters and he heard her sniffing, heard her breathing. She was warm and strong, yet incredible gentle and soft. Nisha had held him gently, but like his father had held him at times: Firmly, showing his strength, whenever he had tried to struggle free.

The tigress was shivering in his hug, and Peter held her more gently. He felt embarrassed when he realized that the tigress, who's fangs he had seen when she had spoken, had been, was still deadly afraid of him.

Even more so because she was obviously a woman, if not even a girl, for she was so much smaller than the tiger people he had seen at..the metal ... thing.

Farzan looked miffed. He bowed to the tigress, growled and made large gestures. pointing at the other fennekim and at Peter. Watching, and listening, Farzan spoke slower than when he was talking with the other fennekim, Peter picked up words he had already heard.

"Dungheap," at which the five other fennekim winced, obviously was a word usable to... Peter guessed to publically questioning somebodies.. wisdom.

Or something along the lines of an general insult.

Speaking, Farzan seemed to pick up steam but the tigress purred, a soft vibrant noise that made Peters belly vibrate. And he stopped and bowed, returning to his cushion to sit upon it.

The tigress sat down gracefully on the cushion beside Peter, and now he realized that her robe had the same colors as the cushion. The fennecs sat all in a lotus-position. Peter didn't knew the word, but knew the style. The tigress sat differently, her legs folded, like a rich lady would sit on a picnic blanket.

Harun yipped and told Peter:

"Assist/Help *** You. Friends help. Friends You."

Peter was getting the gist that he was to help... the tiges? How?

She pulled her bag onto her lap. On the bag gleamed a symbol and he pointed at it:

"Medic! Y-you're a medic! A Doctor!"

He had shouted in german again, and the fennekim as well as the tigress looked at him puzzled. He didn't knew any of those words he thought would help explaining the meaning of the emblem. It the symbol was stitched with fine metallic yarn into the canvas of the bag. It was a line around which

another line was curving. A line which terminated in a slightly thicker end with a stylized split snake tongue ...

A staff of Asclepius!

The tigress spoke with the fennekim when Peter calmed down, realizing he knew too little to say anything of meaning,

Obviously they didn't know either what his fuzz had been about.

She unfolded a larger piece of paper. It showed an outline of a human, over faint traces indicating fennekims and zebras.

Peter looked. When Farzan was an adult fennekim, and Nisha and all the other zebras had also been adults...

Then sketch gave the size for an adult human.

So the tigress, the medic, the .. doctor... had seen a grown human!

He cursed his lack of words. But then the doctor produced a pile of papers, each depicting a human joint. She spread them on the ground. Farzan leaned forward, and all the other fennekims and Peter followed suit. She produced also a ruler and a set square, talking again with the fennekims. Tiz zipped with his extreme speed to the tigress, looking at Peter and letting the tigress measure the angles in which he could move his limbs. The tigress then crouched to Peter and held up the tools. With a shrug Peter let her measure the angles his limbs could move. She noted it all down.

Then she pulled out another set of papers whilst Frava wrapped her filled-out papers in a large dried leaf and bound the pack together. There were finely written symbols on some of the papers, forming charts. This time when the tigress spoke, Tiz and Frava started to compete to stand in front of her, ending up being pushed aside by Harun. Farzan commented on what Harun and the tigress were talking about, eyeing Peter from under his bushy eyebrows. "Weird, " Peter thought looking back at Farzan, "it's not actually eyebrows, just his facial fur becoming more fuzzled above his eyes."

Harun tugged on Peter's hand and pulled him to sit facing the tigress. She looked at Peter, her facial fur fluffed, shivered like in a strong breeze. She spoke, but after a few sentences of which the boy understood "you" , "me" and "help", Harun stepped between the boy listening, but not understanding, and the tigress fumbling for words. "Peter," Harun started, then hugged the boy, went to the tigress and did the same. He waved and Tiz jumped up and walked not looking skyward, stumbled over something and fell onto the ground yammering and holding his arm. The tigress nodded and crouched beside Tiz, looked at the arm, pulled it straight - which resulted in Tiz yammering even more, then she produced two sticks and a piece of cloth and bandaged the arm,

That done, Tiz, the tigress and Harun gazed at Peter.

Then Harun barked and yipyapped somethig which was a long word or a short sentence.

Repeating the sequence a few times, Peter filed the word as meaning "doctor". Tiz pulled off the bandaid and neatly folded it up again, handing it back to the tigress with an almost ceremonial bow which she returned in kind. Harun took one of the papersheets and showed it to Peter, showing him a small irregular line in his left arms fur. The sketch was a draft, but despite some oddities... Peter cringed:

It was a human arm with the bone looking out sideways.

The tigress crouched low on all fours , half exposing her throat, looking as apologetic as a canine or feline ever could. Harun stepped to Peters side and placed his paws on the boys arm. The tigress murred, whined almost, sat up rubbing her head against Peters side which made him somewhat quesey. When a cat at home did that, it had only done this to his lower leg. The tigress started at his waist and worked up to his shoulder.

Farzen guffawed and then hastily slurped on his mug again.

The tigress however placed her hands upon the boys arm, looked at it intensively, gently kneading, massaging his arm. Then she even entwined her fingers with his, moving his hand slowly whilst running her soft rosy paw-pads all over his arm. Then she started to lick all over his hand, his arm, which tickled so much Peter couldn't help but giggle. On and on she touched , poked and prodded his arm until she nodded and then took a red and a green pencil, making markings all over the sheaf of paper showing the broken bone. It were many lines, some with notes and symbols attached. She nodded, gave the sketch back to Harun who pulled forth the next grafik. It was a very visual one and Peter winced and looked away.

But Peter had understood something. The doctor had a wounded patient somewhere and needed to know how to sew him back together. Peter dimly remembered a group of wounded soldiers passing through the village where he and the other kids had lived on the farm. Many of those soldiers had been terribly wounded, many of them supported friends who had been wounded even worse.

Peter laid down and pulled up his shirt, and closed his eyes. The tigress started to purr, like singing a soft melody. And she started to explore Peters ribcage. Explored his belly, his neck, and his left leg. Her pawy hands had shivered in the beginning. But the longer she was touching and exploring and sketching, the more calm she had become. At one point in time he had to roll on his belly and the tigress worked on his back and on his buttocks. When a few more hands poked and prodded him, Peter decided that his guests had obviously expected a short tail or something like an amputation

wound.

"Nope, humans come without tail," Peter thought with a grin.

The tigress worked on his left leg, too. The pile of annotated papers he could see had become a small tower.

Worries crept into his heart. When somebody, a grown up, was wounded in all the places the tigress was now checking over, what had happened to him?

Then he realized it: The Tiger people outside the town had happened to him.

The memory of the body, the bodyparts he had seen...

It was a memory Peter was looking forward to forget. For a moment he struggled with his curiosity to ask to followed the doctor. But when it meant to have to see heavily wounded people...?

He shrank from the idea.

The paws of the doctor touched his shoulders, his spine, and he shivered. Immedeatly she purred and he felt her breath on his back, tensed even more. It didn't tickle exactly when she started to lick him. But her whiskers tickled a bit. Her purring varied, her paws massaged, kneaded his back. At some point his belly started to resonate. It was a weird feel, but incredibly relaxing. The tigress kept that note in her purring whilst she went on massaging his arms and shoulders. But the most strange thing for Peter was to be licked... Well, like a kitten was cleaned by its mother.

He felt strangely relaxed and barely registered the chittering and yapping of the fennekims. He rested on the finely polished floor and felt dozy.

And happy.



He dozed, didn't notice anything around him. When he came around he found himself resting with his head and chest on the silver-green cushion of the tigress. A light blanket had been pulled over his back. Outside the sun had moved a great stretch, the shadows had become longer. The aromatic scent of burning spices was in the air. Getting up Peter found that he was still wearing his short trousers, his pants, and his shoes. But his socks had been removed. Looking at his shoes he had to grin:

"I never got the shoelaces THAT nicely bound."

His other clothes were laying, all neatly folded, on a diminutive chest. It looked like only recently made, as the varnish on it had no scratches. Standing up, a bunch of ears flopped up from the beds on the other side of the room. Peter walked to the chest, which looked slightly lost beside the larger chests which separated the flat of the fennekim into a kitchen and a sleeping room. Peter contemplated putting on his shirt again. But the air was so warm he didn't see a reason for that...

A furry paw pointed at the top of the chest, where there were lines inlaid

with something like mother of pearl.

"Pe-Terr!" Harun grinned up to Peter. It wasn't a grin showing fangs. Rather fennekims grinned with their mouths corners, pulling them up. Peter had seen that with some dog that, when they were happy, wagged their tails and grinned, smiled, like that. He looked - fennekims wagged their tails, too. Somehow that was very reassuring. Looking at the symbols he tried to make sense. Separating them he tried to guess:

"Pe - e - te -..."

He realized that the symbols, no matter how he tried to arrange them, wouldn't end up being five, nor would there be two identical for the two "e" in his name.

Harun looked at him, his ears folded sideways - puzzlement, Peter knew by now.

"Pe," Harun pointed at the first sequence of symbols which Peter had taken for three symbols, "Terr," and pointed at the last symbol.

Peter looked at the symbols. It were symbols, okay. But he couldn't read them. Harun interrupted his brooding by giving him a small key which dangled from a string made of black and white fibers. Individual strands were ... he looked closer. There were strands in green, red, orange, violet. The key belonged to the chest and Peter opened it with the key. It had a bottom with small compartments, closed with a lid which served as the actual bottom for the main compartment. The chest was big enough to take in Peters treasurechest and his travelcase. He placed his travelcase in the wooden chest, then lifted his treasurechest upon the chests corner. He closed his eyes to memorize the code to open the box. The chest had four wheels with numbers on them. It was a new type of lock, as secure as a lock with a key, yet not requiring a key. Carefully he rotated the wheels with his thumb, and then flipped the lock open. Looking to his right and left he found himself surrounded by the fennekims. Tiz sat on Frava's shoulders. Viraz had squeezed himself through between the ceiling and a narrow bookshelf. Harun, however, had obviously kept his cool. If he hadn't been the one who seemingly had made it right next to his side as the first, his demonstratively desinterested looking-elsewhere might have been persuading. Peter pulled out one of the thin glasspanes, of which there were over twohundred in the chest. Neatly arranged and stored in felt-cushioned magazines, each slide was an entire book.

Or, round about, 200 pages of one.

Carefully Peter inspected some slides at random, but they all had survived the abuse without damage.

Each magazine contained about 20 slides. And there were ten magazines in the chest. They gave the chest its weight. But the slides themselves would

be useless...

Carefully the boy lifted out the box of thin plywood and opened it. In it was a microscope-like item, with which one could read the microfiche slides through the devices two okulars, using light reflected through a small mirror. And there was a slightly different device, which allowed to project a slide onto a wall in a darkened room, with one side serving as adjustable projector, the other end receiving light, also via a small mirror reflecting sunlight. Both devices seemed intact. Kaevas nose emerged between Peter and his treasurechest, sniffing, then his ears flopped up. They tickled Peters chest. But when his paw wiggled toward the devices, another paw shot forward. Harun pulled Kaeva out from between Peter and his chest chastising him, or so it seemed. Carefully Peter stowed the reading-devices back into their box, then put the box back to the chest and closed it, locking it.

His father had given him the chest last year at christmas, and had told him it was a great treasure. There were some interesting books, true, on navigating by the stars, building a compass, how to produce gunpowder, how to cast metal... They were all sort of schoolbooks. Fortunately there were two magazines with books. Books of great explorers. Some were from Karl May, others of Edgar Rice Borroughs. However none of those books was about ending up amongst crazy foxes. Gently he closed and then placed the treasurechest in the wooden chest the fennekim had organized for him.

Somewhere outside there was a "Thock!" noise which repeated itself a few times. But it sounded far away. Farzan opened the frontdoor and came in when Peter placed the key with the string around his neck. The oldster held up a wooden board with a layer of clay in it and waved it to the others: "You <***> Aania work <***> Peter <***>."

The fennekim burst into happiness and started to get out of their leather armors. Except for Tiz who seemed not too happy getting out of his armor. The other fennekims stowed their armor away in the big chests that formed almost solid cabinets on the walls. Each had a key for his chest, each on a likewise colorful string around his neck. Peter again felt left out due to the language barrier. The fennekims looked at him. They all were nude now, except for colorful towels around their necks. Peter had grown up so far with cats and dogs around him. And in the last two years on the farm he had even seen horses and cows daily. So the fact that the foxy fellows ran around nude didn't bother him at all. However, when they tugged on his trousers and pointed to the rear door of the flat near the tower-beds. Peter lifted his hands up and tried to tell them that he didn't understand:

"I need clothes."

A short, heated debate resulted, which was ended by Farzan producing a

canvas bag, writing a few scratchmark symbols on it with a charcoal pen and handed the bag to the boy:

"Harun follow."

Farzan smiled whilst Harun grabbed Peters hand and tugged him out of the rear door. There was a small courtyard and a fenced off area where giant bugs crawled lazily around and nibbled on grass and other plants. Peter marveled at the sight, but was being taken between the fennekims. With Kaeva pushing from behind, Tiz and Harun pulling on his arms, he was moved through a narrow pathway to a large alley.



Above the sunlight - it was late afternoon by now - was colorized by large translucent sunsails spanning the roads. Peter tried to look right and left, as the buildings had many windows almost down to the ground, which offered views into a number of flats. In many flats fennekims were working, painting, sewing, or doing other things Peter could only guess about. In the street fennekims were working on larger objects, making the public space an extension of their homes. Groups of fennekims dashed past, talking agitated in some cases, or sometimes even singing. A lot of them wore the same leather tunics Harun and the others had worn. But Peter also noted many running around in the nude, even those that were doing work, like working with a potter-wheel on a bowl. Others again wore wide trousers, or short skirts, shirts, armless vests, and, and, and. And everything was bursting with colors. Peter sometimes stumbled along when he wanted to gaze but the others pushed him along. The small furry citizens of the town looked at Peter and many flicked their ears and yapped a greeting at him which he replied with a wave of the hand. But his "bodyguards" always pointed onward and explained something with a few words and on they went. There were many trees lining the roads, some treetops were visible above lower

buildings, shading courtyards. And then there was a lake. Several trees shaded the surroundings, colorful sunsails added their share to the place.



A wooden frame was anchored to a large polished stoneslab separating the sand-covered road from the lake.

It's purpose?

Tiz released Peters hand and with a loud "Wrrrryyyyyy!" beelined for that frame, climbed its stairs , ran to the end of the plank and then bounced like a frog launched from a catapult in a high arch into the water. Now Peter understood. A sort of public bath! The others were able to restrain themselves better. At the foot of the stair up to the plank they picked up Tiz towel and then guided Peter to a small shack made of polished sandstone with a red tiled roof. Many fennekims were in the water, mostly young ones, but also some older ones. Some of the younger ones were digging canals in the small sandy beach strip or were making little sandcastles. The shack turned out to be a dressing room, shower and bar, with a young fennekim smaller than Tiz standing at attention and saluting to each of the older fenekims coming in. Seeing Peter the young fennekim - Peter guessed him to be less than one meter in height - oogled at Peter as the human boy had oogled at the town around him, just minutes ago. Harun stepped between them and mimicked the smaller ones expression and posure. It took a second or two, but then the small guy yapped, curled his tail between his legs and turned around, busying himself with cleaning wooden mugs and putting them up in neat rows on a shelf. The others placed their towels on a shelf and darted away after Tiz, the yipping and loud splashings telling of equal enthusiasm.

Harun enacted Peter undressing, putting his clothes into the bag and the bag to the shelf. Whilst Peter followed suit, realizing that it was by temperature actually very comfortable, Harun used the shower. It was basically a

metal bucket one could more or less slowly splash over oneself. When Peter used the shower, Harun took one of the cleaned mugs, filling the mug in a large glazed earthen amphora. A small dried slice of an apple dangled on a string on the handle of the amphora. When Peter had used the shower, finding the water positively refreshing, he also took a mug and sampled the liquid in the amphora. There was a slight tinge of apple in it. Maybe a liter of applejuice in fifty liter of water. Harun placed his empty mug on the small counter behind which the small fennekim sat on a large cushion, bowed to the small guy and waited for Peter to do the same. Immedeatly the small guy bowed back and barked excited, washing the mugs immedeatly in a small bassin with soapy water.

Harun took Peters hand and guided him along a small way that ran through the grass around the lake. It connected the shack with the road and with the entrance to a passage between a group of buildings facing the small lake. Harun pointed to the passage, and there, down a short stairway. Peter immedeatly darted down the stairway - there were toilets!



They looked differently, true. But Peter remembered that the toilet in an old castle, which he had visited with his class, had looked pretty much the same. The room was bigger than Peter had anticipated. There was a sink, a large bucket with water... And then not one toilet, but four of them. Two facing two. And there were two already in use. Peter blushed. The fennekims hadn't bothered him at all, he realized. They looked very much like dogs walking on their hindlegs. But there was a fennekim engaged in debate with an amazone. And the amazone was nude, too. The two looked at him, and greeted him. But Peters reply was half stammered. Not, however , due to feeling ashamed. The amazones left arm was visibly crippled and her

muzzles and faces left side was badly scarred- The eye on that side blind. It was an awkward moment.

Awkward on so many levels. Then Harun pressed past him, hopped onto the toilet beside the fennekim and greeted the two, chittering casually about various topics. Peter inched carefully to the toilet beside the amazone, slid upon it. Harun was telling a joke and the two others started laughing. The other fennekim was an oldster, too, like Farzan. His body was however much more wiry than Farzans. Although that might be Farzans wide cut clothing.

Peter tried to focus on something distracting. Restroom stalls had always been individual jobs for him. Peter looked at his feet, bare now with his shoes in the shack. Then his eyes wandered to Haruns feet, hindpaws, and those of the other fennekim. Finally his eyes settled on the foot, hoof, of the amazone which he could see. It was as big as the hooves of those horses pulling the beer from the brewery to the hotel and the various stores in the town Peter had lived in with his family, before the war had begun. A long time ago, a totall different world. The toilet was a polished stoneslab, a primitive yet effective design with nothing more than a plain hole in it's surface.

Somehow it worked. Peter closed his eyes and just imagined he was using a toilet in a stable. However, the next unpleasant surprise awaited him. There was no toiletpaper, no leafes,...

Peter looked around when the arm of the amazone reached around him and pulled on a thick rope dangling on the wall.

Harun had a hiccup and caughing fit from laughing.

And from the face Peter was making when he stomped up the short stairway again.

After having washed his hands with soap and using one of the fine towels hanging from the wall. Like with Peter, Haruns inner thighs and groin was dripping wet. Unlike Peter, however, the fennekim had been long accustomed to the concept of a cold water blast from below , combining flushing and cleaning.

Peter tried to remain grumpy, but barely had they come out from the restroom, Harun stopped his laughing and pointed at the diving board. Viraz was balancing on Kaevas shoulders and Tiz stood at the very top, shouting something. And then they jumped, in close succession, each a bit shorter than the previous one, but in such a short timing that they hit the water at the very same moment.

Hitting the water butt-first, they made one giant splash.

Harun yapped and howled and Peter clapped his hands. The noise drew attention. Frava pointed at Peter and yipped something about "great per-

son". Immediately the whole lot of fennekims howled and Harun pointed to the diving board, Biting his lip for a second, thinking, Peter dashed to the diving board to jump. He was just halfway there when Harun shot past him and made a graceful jump with a forward roll from the board - only to make a "butt-bomb" splashing landing in the water. Peter slowed to wait until Harun had paddled like a dog away before he jumped. The board had barely moved when Harun had jumped upon it, but it bent under Peters weight. He jumped on the board, once, twice. And then, being catapulted as high as Tiz had been, he splashed butt-first into the water. His hands touched the sandy ground, and he suddenly realized he had been lucky the water hadn't been more shallow. Emerging from the water, the boy looked around. It was silent. The amazone stood at the walkway. The only piece of wall that was dry was where her body had caught the water. Water dripped off the shingled roof of the shack and the buildings embracing two sides of the lake. Peter looked around.

On the road stood five fennekims, pulling / pushing a small cart loaded with amphoras. Their colorful dresses were dripping with water, their ears twitching, sending sprays of water all around.

"Uh-oh," Peter thought.

The amazone poked her good arms indexfinger into her ear and shook her head until a jolt of water dripped from her slender ear.

Then however she howled in the same way as the fennekim had applauding the three's feat and seconds later all the young fennekims in the lake joined the howl. Even the involuntarily splashed passerbys howled and slapped each other. Peter took a few long strokes to where the water got more shallow so that he could stand. Doing so he overtook Harun who was still paddling to the same area of the lake.

For about an hour Peter splashed around with the other fennekim, whilst the amazone and the fennekim he had seen first in the restroom watched over the fennekim in the water. Sometimes they would enter the water and help a younger fennekim swimming in the paddling style which seemingly was a natural for the fennekim. The sun had long become invisible from the ground, vanished behind the high walls.

It was Harun who called for Peter and the others, pointing skywards and then back to the direction they had come from. Peter was a bit sad having to abandon finishing a sandcastle in, so he was sure, a perfect image of castle Neuschwanstein just without the hilltop underneath. They fetched their possessions from the shack. Peter didn't put back on the shoes or socks. The fine yellow sand of the streets was very comfortable to walk on barefoot. Still,

Peter smoothed out his socks and folded them neatly. In doing so, he found several short sand-colored hairs in both his socks, inside and on their outer side. Curious, he also inspected his other clothes. His trousers and pants were likewise filled with stray hair. all of the same color. The lil guy who was still doing duty at the tiny bar had however a rather reddish hue. Shrugging, Peter chalked up this one to some overly curious fennekim. As nothing was missing, he didn't really bother. Peters stomach rumbled lightly on their way back and Peter realized he hadn't much aside of the honey hours ago. His companions, who dashed all around him like a swarm of bees, seemingly were deflecting other fennekims, who were running along the roadway like olympic sprinters, from colliding with Peter. When his belly rumbled again they approached him and located the noise, poking his belly, looking up to Peter, quizzed. "I know you won't understand my words, but luckily you understand a lot of gestures," Peter murmured half to himself, before enacting eating an apple. He focused on chewing and then gulping. Kaeva, feeling helpful, dashed forth and returned with a handful of grass. "No, thank you kindly," Peter grinned and shook his head. They were passing under a large tree that shaded a section of the road that was wider, like a little plaza. Looking skyward for a solution for his dilemma, Peter froze and pointed upward. The tree was an appletree. At one side of the tree several scary large ants were walking up and down it, a watchful fennekim in a dress identical to Farzans, accompanied by two younger copies of himself, stood guard and waived fennekims running at high speed around the ants. Harun stood beside Peter, looked along his arm, then where Peter pointed. He chittered with the others for a while, then walked to the guy who was , well, herding the ants. An agitated discussion arose, during which the fennekims enacted Peters feat with knocking out the tiger in a particularly grisly manner. Harun puffed up his chestfur a few times and the others patted his shoulders like to impress the ant-herder. Peter stepped close and the ant-herder and his two apprentices watched Peter closely, walked around him. The herder combed his whiskers slowly and then flicked his ears in agreement. He made a shrill whistle and one of the ants that were moving from a nearby grassy patch to the tree swerved to him and stood stil lin front of the herder.

And then Peter saw one of the remarkale feats of the Fennekim:

Using two sticks he had dangling from his decorated belt, the herder started to caress and drum on the antennae of the ant. Sometimes he stopped and the ant drummed it's part on the sticks.

Then the ant scuttled up the tree, and vanished in the trees dense leaves. Casually the herder polished his claws and then combed his chestfur until his chest seemed twice as big as before.

Then one ant came down the tree and walked to the herder, a second and a third one.

One held a twig with leafes in its mandibles.

The next held an apple and the last a twitching, fist-sized mite.

With a gesture of grandeur, bowing deeply and swinging his arm in a wide arc until it pointed at the three ants, the herder waved Peter closer. He positively beamed, as Peter guessed by the wagging tail.

Peter knelt down and carefully reached out for the apple. The ants antennas drummed upon his arm, but the ant didn't move. When he grabbed the apple carefully the ant released it and scuttled back to the tree, vanishing in it. Aside of the two small cuts where the mandibles had held the apple the fruit looked great and with watering mouth he bit into it. It was a large apple, not yet perfectly ripe, admittedly, maybe needing another week or two. And it was very sour, but positively so. Harun pointed at the other two ants and the items they were holding. Peter smiled and gleefully shook his head, clasping the apple to his chest. Tiz snatched the leafy twig from the first ant, Viraz the leg-struggling mite from the third ant, barely beating Kaeva to it. Viraz, hunted by Kaeva and Frava, dashed off homeward, whilst Tiz looked after them and then back at Harun and Peter. Harun made a regal gesture and Tiz bounced off and away, yipping happily and clutching the leafy twig. Peter looked up into the tree. There were a good many apples up there that were visibly more red, more ripe, than the one the ant brought. Following his eyes, Harun gazed at the tree, then at the half-eaten apple. He poked Peters belly and, when Peter looked at him, pointed at the apple in the boys hand and then counted the fingers on his pawy hand. "Oh, how many I'd like...", Peter thought aloud, "Three, Four," indicating the numbers with his fingers, as he spoke german. "Dree, Foor." Harun mimiced him with his pipsqueak voice and showed the numbers using his finger, then nodded gleefully in Peters way of showing assent and then started to talk with the herder.

"Three, four," came a faint echo of Peters words.

He looked around for a moment, confused, but aside of a sea of fennekim in colorful clothes or nude except for a colorful belt and loincloth, there was... Nothing?

A lot of the fennekim were gazing at Peter, but none were pointing at him. He realized he had expected to be the focus of attention, the Freak. But he was just like, well, like a man in outlandish clothes. People oogled at him, but for the greater part passed on.

Harun was eagerly talking with the herder using hands, feet, tail and ears. Looking at the tree Peter found that he wouldn't need the help of the ants. Whilst Harun was still talking, Peter jumped, grabbed a low hanging branch and then pulled himself up. The tree had many branches, but the lowest ones were where the ants were running up and down, so Peter took the other side. Sometimes he could hear light noises from the tree - ants running around, maybe some of the big ugly mites. Below, the herder poked Harun and pointed upward. Harun looked, blinked, spoke to the herder and then scurried after Peter. Peter was making steady progress to one of the branches where he had spotted a group of ripe apples. To his amazement he found the tree had not only fruits in various states of ripeness, but it even had blossoms. Bumblebees were flying between the blossoms. Looking back, he saw that Harun made good progress, but far slower than Peter. He used his claws to hook into nooks and crannies, pulling himself up. However, before he made it to the branch Peter was on, the boy had already reached up and plucked four apples. Putting one into each of his trousers pockets and holding the other two in his left hand, Peter met Harun at the base of the branch. The fennekim was huffing and puffing and eyed Peter through halfclosed lids, trying to growl, but the snarl turned into a wholehearted laughter. The way down took both about the same time - despite Peter using only one hand. The herder had returned to preventing other fennekim from crushing into the ants who still busily ran up and down the tree and vanished in a nearby patch of grass. Harun gesticulated wildly at Peter and was talking in a very staccato-like speed, looking at Peter's hands and feet, then at the shoes Peter had bound to one of his trousers beltloops. After the desertfox had shrugged, he dashed back the road to his home, stopped after a dozen meters, and then trotted back to Peter, making a show of walking slowly alongside the human boy.

When they arrived, the sky overhead was already darkening.

There were no electric lights, no torches in the town, so it was easy to spot the stars. Peter hesitated, looked up to the sky.

The fennekim inside debated for a while what to do. Peter stood with wide open mouth and was gazing at the two moons. Although the small one was moving out of sight every minute now, it would return toward the end of the night. It was the most normal thing. So, finally, Harun tugged on Peter's trouser until the boy snapped back.

"This is surely not Duisburg," Peter murmured when he followed inside.

The scent of smoked fish was in the air. Farzan stood at the small oven, placing shards of wood and spices in the oven, where the fish rested on a

grill. Aromatic smoke emerged from the small chimney on the outside of the house, a fraction of it whiffing back into the flat.

Farzan turned around, and Peter had to suppress a giggle. The greymuzzle was wearing an apron embroidered with what looked like a list of all the main foodstuffs of the fennekim people. Seeing Peter and the other fennekim, Farzan pointed at the oven, harrumphed and very slowly yipyapped:

"Eating Sun rising."

The fish's for breakfast.

Peter nodded, the others however let their ears hang and, sometimes actually drooling, started to arrange their beds.

Also, Peter noted, there were some more changes in the "diningroom": A mattress - just like those on the beds of the fennekim in the "sleeping room", where their beds were stacked atop each other - rested on the ground. A blanket was there, as well as astonishingly big, fluffy cushion. Touching the items, he found they felt like silk.

Silken bedwear!

Beside the mattress - his bed - was a neatly folded, colored towel, a wooden cup, three different types of brushes and, to Peter's further amazement, a toothbrush. Its size gave hint that it was made for a fennekim, but due to the length of their muzzle, the handle was as long as a human's toothbrush. One after the other, his hosts appeared, each with his towel, a brush, a cup and a toothbrush in it. Farzan, too, undressed, got into a loincloth, and fetched his utensils. Peter undressed down to his briefs and collected what he identified as his bathroom utensils, but Farzan stopped him, pointing at the brushes. Lifting his own, single one, he showed how to use it - it was thought to be used brushing one's fur.

"Makes sense to me," Peter thought.

Farzan pointed at the boy's chest where there was no hair at all. Checking the brushes the boy found that one brush was as hard as a steelwire brush - it looked identical to those the fennekims all had in their piles. Checking the other two, he settled with the medium one. The other two Farzan took and put back into a bag he hung to the frontdoor together with a wooden token. Then he wanted to show Peter the toothbrush, but the boy put it already into his mouth.

Harun puffed his chestfur up and looked at the others, who flicker their ears in agreement. Huffing, Farzan clapped into his paws and suddenly the fennekims except for Harun seemed to explode into flurry streaks, running over each other, over Peter and leaving the flat through both exits, leaving the door ajar. Now Harun huffed in imitation of Farzan who had not shown

less agility than the others. In his pantomimic extra-slow walking he went out and looked back at Peter until the boy followed him. He lead him out the front door, around the housing complex, into a narrow pathway between two houses - the path they had taken to the swimming lake earlier - and again around the corner toward a stairway leading up to the level above their flat. Peter guessed they could have used the backdoor and would have been at the same spot in a fraction of the time, but seeing the large bugs crawling much more actively around with the dimming light and glowing in candle-bright hues of orange, green and blue, he was happy they had taken the longer route. Once upstairs he found a small pathway leading to several doors like the one of the fennekims flat. Harun beelined to one doorframe that didn't have a door in it. By the dimming light Peter had problems recognizing details, but it was a group toilet like at the bathing lake. It had, however, a cleanly tiled space where at the moment Tiz was scrubbing himself all over, his tongue lolling out sideways in sheer bliss, whilst one was standing over a low sink brushing his teeth. Two others, Peter couldn't distinguish them safely in the low light except for Tiz for being almost a head shorter than the others, were using the toilets gesticulating wildly like fishermen comparing imaginary catches. And a fourth, this one being Farzan whom Peter could identify by his bushy eyebrows hiding his eyes almost fully, was using a ladle to pour water in a slow steady rythm over Tiz.

"Showering, local version."

There was a hard brick of sandy soap which Tiz used sparingly. It had a logo on it, but Peter couldn't make it out. Careful not to step on one of the fennekims tails or feet he filled his cup at an earthen amphora and used the second sink to brush his teeth with the brush. The fennekim brushing his teeth pointed to a small bucket between the sinks in which something was. When Peter didn't react, the fennekim reached up and gently, but sternly, pushed the boys hand with the toothbrush to the cup, cleaned it and then dipped it lightly into the mass. Some of it stuck to the wet brush and Peter lifted it up to sniff on it.

It smelled like mint.

Carefully the boy started anew to brush his teeth again. And as he did, the flavour of the mint became well noticeable, the finely minced stems and leafes nearly completely desintegrating between brush and his teeth. In the end he gargled - to the amusement of the others - and spitted the water out into the sink. His tongue found no noticeable traces of mint between his teeth, except for a lingering, quite welcome flavour. The order, he had observed, was brush teeth, use toilet, take shower, go outside and shake, then return to ladle water over the next one. He followed the example, Viraz or Frava ladling over him. The soap, which felt like a block of sandstone, had

an amiable fine scent of almond and honey and something more to it. There was a twinge of uneasiness when he slid out of his briefs. But as dark as it was by now there were only contours and shadows visible anyway. Using his wettened, soaped brush, Peter scrubbed himself down, each area he left with his brush was splashed clean with another ladle. For his hair, the boy soaped his hands and used them, the brush too soft to have much effect on his hair. Again he was ladeled with water until all soap was gone. The ladle splashed into the amphora - several feet away - and the fennekim yipped what amounted to something like "see you!" and dashed away.

Realizing that he had problems seeing the ladle and the amphora which stood in the most shadowy place of the bathroom, Peter had to realize that the fennekims seemed to be little impacted by the darkness. Shaking himself outside didn't work as intended, but he had an easy time drying himself with the towel. The stones gave off some residual warmth, but the air had gotten cold. Using the towel as a cape, Peter tried his best to assist Harun with his shower. Sometimes he splashed the water anywhere but upon Harun, then again he hit the fennekims arms or ears. Harun's yipyapped complaints Peter countered with a "I'm sorry but I can't see a thing!" Not that it really explained much to Harun other than that Peter had a different opinion in regards to something. When both were done, Peter had to guide himself along the wall with one hand, whilst Harun danced down the stairs like in good daylight. The lower part of the stairs were mildly illuminated by the glowing bugs, whose light was now more intense than the remaining moonlight that made it through the canopy of the acacia that shadowed the small green space between the houses.

On the stairways end a group of other fennekims passed them by, each happily greeting Peter, who tried to reply with what he learned so far. The sincere sounding "Thank you"'s made Peter proud of himself. Until, in following Harun through the fencegate - the glowbugs had all piled up around a small watertrough - he rammed his toe into one of the acacias roots. His shout of pain made Harun shoot around and the bugs scatter. And produced a stack of fennekim heads in the rear door to the fennekims flat. Cursing under his breath Peter hobbled a step before, as the fennekims piled up around him patting and touching him, inspecting him all over, he bit his teeth together and moved his big toe carefully. Luckily it had been more a shout of surprise at the pain than anything else, for moving the toe gave a lot of discomfort, but no real pain. Harun and Tiz offered to support him, but he showed them that he could walk and wiggled his toes for them to see that everything was alright.

Finally inside, he patted his way through the darkness. Again he felt a small paw on his arm and guessed that it was Harun:

"See not?"

"Dark Blind," Peter tested the limits of his vocabulary and shook his head. "Yepp," came the agreeing reply. Then the fennekims paws grabbed his wrists and safely guided him to his bed. The mattress was indeed covered in something like silk, filled with a compact yet soft substance. The duvet was also silk, containing a thin blanket of coarse material. The pillow was a different thing. Also wrapped in silk, it was big and fluffy. With a chuckle Peter imagined the small Tiz being able to curl up on the pillow like a puppy. With the warmth in the room making it very comfortable, Peter curled himself up into the duvet, hugging the pillow.

A cool breeze flowed through the room, carrying the yipyapping of his hosts along, clicking noises from further away, strange scents and then and when a distant growl. "Like this," Peter thought, "these early Explorers in Africa must have felt like!"

"Good Night," he spoke into the darkness, trying his voice in the fennekims yippyapping language.

The yippyapping of his hosts stopped for a moment and then a multivoiced chorus replied:

"Good night!"

And then his thoughts fled and exhausted he fell asleep.



1.5 Anne: Morning in the Hotel

Anne sniffled and inhaled carefully. The air was different today. Vastly different. She wiggled her fingers. When her mother noticed she was awake, she'd ask her to get up, so she was careful to appear still asleep.

She listened.

The sounds weren't right, either.

It wasn't the loud bustling of her hometown. No bike-bells, no loud machineshops.

It wasn't the farmstead, either.



And the bedspreads... Carefully she probed the fabric. It was a fine smooth dream, not the rough cotton she had at the farmstead or at home. Warm air caressed her face and noises came in from outside. Strange noises. Whinnies, barking and yipping, and a lot of other small noises. Hissing, scratching, walking feet on gravel. Anne shot a gaze up through her lids, gazing at a wood paneled ceiling. And at a fox tail swishing lazily to and fro. Anne inhaled sharply, and the tail bottlebrushed and shot out of sight. Immediately Anne shut her eyes and moved like in uneasy sleep. She had that pat down, making her mother move quietly out of the room on Sunday mornings. Not that it had bothered the elderly couple running the farmstead to quieten down, ever. They had, with military precision, always awakened all the kids at the same time.

There were some faint noises from the ceiling, a sniffing, then claws on wood, like when squirrels or birds had run around on the windowsill. Anne wanted to look up, but decided to play asleep some more. It was difficult to pretend

moving sluggishly in ones sleep when all she wanted to do was to jump up and look where the fox had come from and what it was doing up there - and where she actually was.

She wiggled her feet, which were still stuck in her shoes. Which was somewhat amazing, for neither her parents nor the mistress of the farmstead would ever have allowed her to jump into bed with all her clothes on. There were no noises, but Anne knew the feel when her mother had gazed into the room of the girls to see if the youngest was still asleep. So she pretended to be asleep still. From nearby she heard the raspy breathing of Hannelore, the oldest of the girls that had slept with her in the same room at the farmstead. With the feel of being watched gone, Anne dared to peek up again through half closed lids. Just in time to see one reddish and one sandy colored foxtail bounce, one after the other, along the rim of the walls top.

And not only that! She saw an oversized foxear.

And she saw a small furred arm holding a tiny bag.

Anne pinched herself to stay calm and silent, waiting. There was the faint noise of a door opening and closing again.

She exploded silently: She loved foxes!

And these foxes were carrying stuff around in small bags!

She slipped out of the bed, which wasn't hers, looked at the room and at the tiny bed she had slept in. The wood of the room and bed was polished to a shine, the bed richly inlaid with intricate carvings showing grass and beetles and trees and lakes and...

Small large-eared foxes dancing with other foxes, whilst upright walking zebras stood in the grass playing on harps and lutes. And other zebras and foxes were listening, dancing, feasting and carousing. There was her small backpack and her small suitcase against the wall. And on a bedstand stood an earthen amphora in a wooden frame and a fine glass. There was a wooden door, with a wooden latch which was in the "open" position. The entire room was barely the size of a broom-closet, but it's furniture was more elaborate than any she had seen before. She looked up to where she could see the wall ending, leaving ample space between the walls top and the ceiling.

Whilst the walls were made from smooth polished wood panels, there were decorative slits between the individual panels. Just big enough to allow Anne to sink her fingertips in. She bit her lips, slipped out of her shoes and socks and bound the shoelaces together, hanging the shoes around her neck. then she looked at the top of the wall, and sunk her finger into the narrow slits of the paneling, pulling herself up. She had often climbed up those trees that others had problems climbing. She used her toes, looking for the slits

in the paneling and once her feet had found their footing, the girl pulled and pushed herself up. Making barely any noises, not wanting to alert the foxes of her presence, she climbed up to peek over the walls crest. There was a whole walkway there. The walls were wide enough to safely walk over them. The paneling was high enough that, Anne was sure, she could lay down between the panels on the well-worn walkway and thus become invisible for everybody in the rooms. Seeing no foxy on any of the walls walkways, she pulled herself onto the walkway, casting a glance down into the small room she had awoken in.



Peeking over the paneling she looked down into a room a lot larger than the small room she had just climbed out from. There were similar beds like hers, but stacked, and in each slept one of the kids from the farmstead, including Hannelore with her curls. Like her, all slept in their clothes.

Anne oriented herself. The pathes on the walls ran to two points against smooth walls.

When there would be no exits, the foxes couldn't have vanished. So there were exits.

She crouched low and dashed on her bare feet along the direction the foxes had taken.

Counting the seconds, she arrived at the wall by the same amount of time that had passed between the foxes passing through her field of vision and the noise of the opening door.

She looked at the smooth wall. Wooden paneling rose higher here, serving as a blockage against anybody who might gaze up from the corridor between the rooms to this spot.

Her cheeks glowed. She loved puzzles and mysteries!

The foxes arms had been a bit over the paneling - they were smaller thus

than her, assuming they had ran upright. The first one had held a bag in her left hand, so...

Stepping back one step she looked at the paneling on her right side.

One step from the wall was a knothole in the wooden beam that supported the raised paneling.

And whilst all the wooden surfaces where smooth and plain, this knothole was indented and roughened up.

Anne looked at her hand. Foxes had claws...

She pressed her indexfinger forcefully onto the knothole.

With a faint noise of wood sliding over wood, a secret door opened right at the end of the walkway. It was heavy wood, plastered over to look exactly like the wall. It's seams had been hidden by making the plaster cover with irregular lines, which vanished in the irregular structure of the raw plaster. She slipped throuh the door, grabbing the small handle on the inside and pulled the door close behind her. Not far in front of her she heard agitated barking and yipping. Around her were stacks of dry haybales. With just enough light coming from ahead to see her path, she sneaked toward the noises. Her heart raced. The foxes were very near now!

Sneaking through an open wooden gate she entered a place with low ceilings. Light flooded in from arcade-like windows and rich, colorful carpets lay on the floor. And there the two foxes were! They stood upright, a head smaller than Anne - and she wasn't that large - with their ears drooping.

Anne squealed in glee and hugged the two foxes from behind.

Both wore cloaks over their slender shoulders, and the cloaks rattled metallicly when the foxes squirmed and flailed their limbs.

Burying her face between their heads, Anne delighted in the soft furs touch and squeezed the two close to her. They squirmed, trying to reach into their capes, but a stern bark made the two suddenly go limp. Anne cuddled with them, kneeling between them.

Foxes!

Real honest to good foxes!

Foxes wearing capes!

Porcelain made a fine 'clink'.

Anne opened her eyes and looked through between the heads of the two foxes she was hugging. Both were panting and had their fangs bared in a silent snarl.

In the sun, on the balcony the winow opened out to, sat a third fox.

Long green hair flowed from her head between her large ears and down over her shoulders, and her fur shimmered as white as freshly fallen snow. She sat on a cushion beside a low desk on which a porcelain mug and a decanter stood, wearing some dress like a persian princess one, made of lots of green

shimmering silk.

"Hello," the vixen said and looked at Anne.

Anne gazed at the fox and smiled:

"Oh, Hello! You are so cute! And these here are cute, too! And, and, it's all so lovely! And..."

Anne gesticulated, and like lightning the two foxes she had embraced before darted to opposite corners of the room, taking a half crouching stance. The vixen at the desk lifted her arms and spread her pawy hands, her ears flicking sideways and up:

"Please. Not speak."

Anne knelt down, mouth open, but the vixen at the desk made a waving motion with both hands toward the desk:

"Come."

Then she looked at the two other foxes and yipyapped for a moment, making them bring a cushion for Anne and a second porcelain mug.

Anne thanked the two and bowed lightly, but they zapped like lightnings back again to a far corner of the room, gazing at Anne with their ears up in an alert pose. With swift motions the vixen in green filled both mugs with water, then took her mug and almost daintily lapped a few times on the water before drinking a few small sips. Anne took the other mug and looked at the vixen in amazement. Her clothing was... Anne was sure this was a princess. The vixen wore jewellery, rings, and fine golden and silver chains around her neck, her waist and ankles. Her necklace had seven shiny metal boulders, looking like grapes on a vine branch.

But the tone in which she had spoken had sounded... exactly like a boys voice. The words had been pronounced like if they had been cut from other sentences.

"Do you understand me?" Anne wanted to be sure.

The vixen's ears flickered up, and sideways again, then she pointed at a nearby tree in the park the balcony looked out upon.

"Tree," she said, then pointed at a white-yellow shimmering palace at the other side of the park: "House."



Anne realized that the vixen was going through a very limited vocabulary, with words like "walking" or "running" illustrated by ordering the two other foxes to show them for Anne.

Also, watching the three talk amongst each other and move, Anne felt the vixen was taking great lengths to move slowly and also speak slowly to her. Finally, the vixen touched her own nose:

"I name is: Chaman."

Her name sounded like a sneeze and a bark. So that was in their own language, Anne thought.

The vixen pointed at Anne: "You name is."

Anne thought to answer in a full sentence for a moment. Then, to call herself princess Anastasia Romanov. Finally, imagining all the trouble that might spell down the road, she just pointed at herself and said:

"Anne."

The vixen placed the mug on the desk and then stretched out her right paw to Anne and slowly poked the girls nose:

"Anne."

Then the vixen lowered her hand and held it outstretched toward Anne. She took the mug into her left hand and then carefully took the vixens paw into her right and gently shook it:

"Hello Chaman."

"Hello Anne."

Somewhere above, heavy steps thudded over wooden boards, passing by and vanished.

Chaman lifted her mug again and drank a mouthful from it, looking at Anne, offering her cup to the girl.

Anne shook her head, clearing her mind. She had a million questions. But she realized that, when what the vixen had listed were all the words she

understood so far, asking anything at the moment was pretty pointless. She lifted her mug and sniffed on the water a second before imitating the vixens manners, lapping a few times on the water before drinking.

And was amazed: "Oh thats so delicious!"

The water had a light flavour of orange and honey to it.

Greedily Anne drank the entire cup empty and placed the mug on the desk, eyeing the decanter. Following her eyes the vixen burst into a series of coughing and yipping, reaching for the decanter and filling her own and Anne's mug. Taking the mug into both hands she lifted the cup up and toward Anne, who copied her motions with her own mug.

Next the vixen tinked her mug lightly against Anne's, speaking slowly:

"urfripyerfyapp."

Anne repeated the sentence, guessing from the vixens snorting that she had vandalized some of their language. But when the vixen downed the mug in one go, Anne copied her again, grinning wildly when she actually finished before the vixen.

From the corners of her eye Anne saw one of the other foxes make a sudden move and then heard a yelp.

Looking, she saw one of the foxes had moved indeed a step forward and was now holding his nose, eyes watering and ears drooping down.

"Anne", the vixen got up and waved for her to follow her. The other two foxes stood aside.

Anne followed, stopped and picked up something she saw on the floor.

It was a thumbnail sized metal boulder, partly bloody. The vixen went to a heavy metal door and pulled on a rope hanging from the ceiling. A moment later a mechanical click was heard and the vixen opened the door which was so small Anne barely could walk through. Anne followed the vixen and passed from the room, which seemed to be part of a huge wall, into a narrow valley between the very same wall and a grassy hill.

When the Vixen turned around to point down a stairway toward a large gate in the wall, Anne looked at the necklace the vixen was wearing around her neck. With a smile she held the iron boulder to the vixen:

"This is yours, Chaman."

For there were only six of the metallic grapes on her necklace now.

Chaman blinked at the metal ball like if she saw it the very first time.

But as Anne didn't move, the vixen started to giggle and then took the ball, attaching it back to her necklace.

"Thank you Anne."

Then she turned around again, and in passing by a piece of dark fabric resting on the ground, picked it up in one fluent motion, throwing it over her shoulders. Whilst the wooden floor had ben very comfortable, the polished

stoneplates of the stairway to the gate where uncomfortably cool, so Anne drew Chamans attention again and slipped into her socks and shoes. Chaman and the two other foxes waited and looked with great curiosity at the procedure before showing their hindpaws and comparing the way they walked with Anne's. Chaman scolded the two other foxes a few times before she wrapped herself into her cowled robe - for that had been what Chaman had picked up from the ground. When they pulled their cowls over their heads, the light fabric rested upon their eartips, barely pushing them down. Chaman walked beside Anne and pointed at the mouth of a large cave, no, tunnel, that cut through the hill. There were many more foxes there, bartering in the half-darkness at desks. Anne wanted to run to them and greet them all, but... Chamans paw came to rest on her shoulder, tugging her gently to the great gate in the wall.

Anne kept looking over her shoulder, amazed at the many different colored foxes, some with long and often colorful, some with short hairs. "Boys and girls! It's so obvious!"

Then she realized, however, that there seemed to be no distinction between the clothes the foxes wore. Leather aprons and heavy gloves and leather boots were worn by foxes with both long and short hair, just as semitranslucent silks were also seen on both. They were halfway through the gate when Anne looked ahead again and froze seeing the larger-than-life knight statues. Just they weren't statues.

A deep, warm voice huffed and whinnied when the towering steel clad knight turned around and looked down to Chaman and her entourage. Anne blinked and rubbed her eyes in disbelief.

The light reflected off an armor, dented and bruised in many parts, but polished to a shine, stenciled with floral patterns with coppery trim.

The knights feet were hooves, as wide as Annes feet were long. Metal bands with mean looking spikes protected the knights ankles. Metallic hissing accompanied every move of the knight. Annes eyes travelled up, over slender legs encased in platemail and joints covered with chainmail and segmented steel strips. Up, over a belly covered with steel segments like a bugs belly, and then to... Anne was sure it was the biggest cleavage she had ever seen on a woman.

For that much was sure: The knight was a woman, even when she was a zebra.

Black and white stripes on a horses head, her mane woven into along broad plait dangling down to her waist.

The knight spoke with Chaman pointing at Anne a few times. Finally the knight flicked her ears. Anne recognized the gesture to be identical to the motions the other two foxes accompanying her and Chaman had used when

obeying Chaman. The knight waved to three others that had stood on the inside of the gate. They lifted off the heavy bar and then pulled the large gate open. Anne gazed at the gate opening slowly, looked up, and saw the ceiling above, made of whole treeboles. A nasty hole was in the center, shadowy and secured with a heavy trapdoor. And a iron portcullis was there, too, to be dropped in case somebody would breach the gate. On the other side of the gate two more knights stood. Anne looked at them. They all were women, easily a few heads taller than the biggest human Anne could remember to ever have seen. They all wore a shortsword on their right side, a two handed sword on their back and a large crossbow on their left side, with a number of quarrels clipped on their left and right upper arms and their thighs.

Anne gulped. Who carried so much stuff around did it either for show or meant serious business.

But then.. Zebras! Horses!

Anne fidgeted and looked at the knight when Chaman started to walk through the gate. The knight looked at the group, saw Anne and whistled, making Chaman stop and look over her shoulder.

Again they talked in their two languages.

Then the knight knelt down and reached out, holding her hand to Anne. Anne looked at the hand. If not for the fine fur and the black horned caps instead of fingernails, it could have been a humans hand. Maybe a bit shorter fingers and very slender for it's size.

But still, a very human hand, much more so than Chamans pawy one.

Anne reached out and touched the muzzletip and nostrils of the zebra-knight. The knight didn't flinch, rather made a small chuckle and exhaled, flaring her nostrils. It felt just like the horses, or the asses, noses on the farmstead had felt. Anne smiled and giggled, then stood on her toetips to hug the knight, careful not to harm herself on the sharp spikes on the shoulderguards. Mith metallic scratching sounds, the knight hugged Anne carefully, talking with Chaman in low tones.

Anne was happy. She remembered vividly how her father had arrived at the farmstead, just yesterday, and had told her and her sister and brothers that, come tomorrow, they'd get to a wonderful new place.

"Thank you, Papa," she whispered under her breath.

Toying the knights braid with her fingertips she wondered for a moment where her parents were. But, looking at the scale of the place, Anne didn't really worry. This seemed to be a big place, so her parents would be somewhere.

Chaman and her two servants waited for Anne to release the knight again and follow them. Chaman with bright eyes and attentive ears, her two servants rather bored, fidgeting, looking all over the place and whispering amongst

each other.

From the corner of her eyes Anne saw a motion, just a flick of Chamans elbow. A cough and then the two servants stood as rigid at attention as Chaman herself.

Chaman offered Anne her pawy hand when Anne released the knight from her hug and approached the three foxes.

1.6 Anne: The City Center

Anne took Chamans paw and with a very human smile Chaman guided her into the light-flooded park. Embraced on three sides by large walls, each with a closed and guarded gate, the fourth side ended at a kind of temple. Anne would have loved to walk over to the temple. It was large and made of the same yellow stone as the walls, but there the yellow stone was polished to a sheen. The rising sun reflected of it and the polished bands and columns of white marble adorning the building. Colorful curtains blinket from the arcades and doorways of the temple. All over the park, other foxes were working. They all wore simple dark cowled robes, a few, however wore colorful ones. Those usually seemed to be more engaged with planning and coordinating, pointing here and there and directing other foxes with spades and sicles around. Chaman patiently waited when Anne stopped or slowed down. They went along a gravel pathway, passed a large plaza, paved with colorful tiles, and then, the temple in their back, went to the largest gate, which faced the temple over the paved plaza. Anne made a face when she saw a number of smaller foxes - they barely would have reached to her chest - herding.. huge bugs around. Some big beetles were guided with sticks to a fenced area into which a number of, easily arm-long, ants had carried what looked like pumpkins. Anne gesticulated and pointed and tried to pull Chaman close to the other foxes, or the more colorful bugs. But Chaman always shook her head and pointed to the great gate, pointing at the sun and its projected path over the sky.

Anne pouted. But it seemed as if Chaman had something important to show her.

More important than all this fantastic colorful riot?

Anne blubbered like a waterfall:

"I just want to look for a moment! What's that there? what are they doing there?!"

A few times Anne tried to slide her hand from Chaman paw, only to suddenly stumble and fall back into Chamans paws. The first time she was seriously surprised.

A few steps down the plaza - the paving was done with parts of raw as well as cut and polished crystals - there again came a moment Anne wanted to slip away and dash to look at a head-sized butterfly. Again, barely half a step had she turned when she stumbled over something that suddenly was in front of her feet. Only Chamans swift motion of pulling her hand up and catching her in her fall prevented Anne from harming herself on the hard pavement. Anne thanked Chaman who looked quite demurely down to the floor, her cheekfur fluffing up and her giggling. But the human girl also saw

from the corner of her eyes that one of the two servants rubbed her right hindpaws instep with her left foot. Hidden under the robe, true.

But the motion and the grimace on the muzzle made Anne think.

Chaman was all helpful to help Anne up again and yipyapped what sounded like excuses, gesturing with one paw. The other never left Anne's hand.

Anne smiled. Brilliantly. Petting Chamans paw she pointed at the big gate which had been their goal anyway and walked toward it.

"So, you like playing? Eh! I can do that, too, you know?" she thought. And the thought widened her smile a lot.

Some twenty steps from the gate Anne suddenly exclaimed aloud and pointed at some bettle sitting in the grass. She turned halfway around and set off to dash toward it. But instead of actually lifting her feet to go into that direction, she jumped and upon landing kicked her right leg forcefully backward. Chaman was at her left, and thus in no danger of being hit. Likewise should have been true for the two servants, which should have been at her right after she turned around halfway.

Instead of kicking into empty air, Anne's leg hit a substantial target. With a surprised yowl one of Chamans assistants - who had skidded with outstretched leg forward to have Anne stumble over her leg - found her outstretched leg being kicked away sideways, and thus followed it in a sideward spiral toward the ground. Chaman released Anne's hand and stepped back a bit.

The kicked-down servant rolled around and jumped back upon his feet again. Fangs bared at Anne, the large ears laid backward agaisnt the head and in a posture to jump at the human girl.

Anne grinned back and stretched out her hand:

"No need to be angry. But what you can do, I can do, too."

The facial expression of the servant turned rather more hostile, eyeing Anne's hand like if it was a venomuous snake. Chaman started to laugh. It was not a silvery dignified giggling like Anne would have expected from a silk wearing vixen.

It was a rather hyena-like cackling.

The two servants and Anne looked at Chaman, who, very unladylike and undignified, rolled around on the floor laughing.

Whilst Anne started to smile, feeling somehow very good, the hostile manners of the servant she had kicked over evaporated and instead the tail and ears dropped down like wet towels. After the vixen had calmed down, she sat up on her rear end and waved her two servants to her.

They knelt down on one knee and both their forepaws and bowed their heads to Chaman. Relatively gently, Chaman bumped their heads together. Then she pointed at Anne and serenaded a staccato sequenze of yipps and growls.

So fast actually, that Anne couldn't separate the noises from each other anymore. After a while, both servants looked at each other and then slid out of their capes. The one who had bowled over Anne, and had been bowled over by Anne, was the sand-colored one. The bellyfur was white, with a toe on each hindpaw being colored in a different furcolor. But, more remarkably for Anne, both wore a similar outfit as Chaman did. The fabric was thicker, not almost-translucent as Chamans. Instead of metallic bracelets like Chaman, both wore braided colored leather straps at their wrists and ankles.

"Apprentices! They're chamans apprentices!"

Chaman jumped to her feet in a fluent motion and took her less competent apprentice cape from the ground, and held it up to Anne.

"A gift? Me becoming your apprentice?"

Chaman tilted her ears, and said nothing.

But Anne saw how the ears of the assistant drooped down even more and her nose started to twitch.

Anne had seen a dog cry once, when the soldiers brought a married woman the uniform of her man who had died in the first days of the war.

The dog had sniffed on the uniform and then curled up and cried, its facial expression had been nearly...

Anne took the cape with firm hands from Chaman - it was astonishingly heavy, and she felt many heavy objects move around in the fabric - and wrapped it around the slender shoulders of the apprentice.

She - for Chaman and her apprentices were all female - looked up, then her ears perked up and she gazed at Anne.

Then she jumped up, wrapped her arms around Anne and licked her face all over like a happy puppy.

Anne giggled and hugged Chamans apprentice, petting her between the ears:

"No need to be worried. I like you, so I won't see you unhappy!"

Chaman and her other apprentice meanwhile looked at her.

Rather, they looked at the fact that Anne held one of them with ease aloft and was able to easily turn to smile at Chaman. When the latter grinned back with her fangs shown, Anne closed her lips, yet smiled even wider. Chaman wagged her tail, flicked her ears and radiated happiness when Anne bowed lightly, still holding the apprentice in her arms and caressing her between the ears. Soon Chaman clapped her hands and barked, jumping to her feet. Anne lowered the apprentice she was holding back onto the ground and released her.

Chaman pointed at them all, then toward the large gate ahead of them:

"Tehuioy see."

So they went to the gate. The red furred, slightly pudgy apprentice made faces at the sand-colored one, until Chaman, however she had noticed it,

turned around when the red one was making a very mean looking face. She yippyapped a bit, until the red furred one lowered her head. When they arrived at the gate, one of the female armored knights pulled open the man-door in the large gate for them. Anne and her foxy companions passed through the door, each politely bowing to the knight that had opened it for them. Anne looked out onto a vast lake, framed by trees which stood in a meadow with high growing grass. Around that, a wide road ran, itself encircled by houses. And behind those a vast wall stood, just like the one that encircled the park they had just emerged from. The human girl smiled happily, looking around, luxuriating in the suns warmth and more so in the view.

All around her there were foxies and zebras. Some were splashing and swimming in the central lake, others were seemingly sparring in sandy pits underneath the trees. Anne clapped in her hands and jumped up and down in glee. All passing by her looked at her, some flickering their ears, others huffed or snorted. As Anne observed, Chaman and the other two returned the greetings almost exactly in kind, and so she tried to do it, too. Except, however, lacking the impressive ears, she couldn't flick her ears in return to the greetings of the other foxies. So she went with the snort and headshake of the zebras. Her three foxy companions had their cowled robes on, their heads vanishing under the cowls, only their large ears poking out through cutouts. Chamans robe had stitcheries on it, made with some pearly-opalescent yarn that reflected the light in all colors of the rainbow. There were many more foxes on the street than zebras. Many of the foxies only wore a broad belt and a loincloth, some wore gaudily colored puffy pants and vests, others again wore cowled robes like Chaman and her apprentices. Only those wearing cowled robes had long hair Chaman tugged on her sleeve and guided her toward a large building nestled in a corner of the citywalls. Anne didn't mind being pulled along this time. She was speechless, looking around, trying to take it all in. Gaudily dressed foxies were arranging the contents of small sales booths, whilst, Anne gasped, almost completely nude zebras and loinclothed foxies assembled more booths. She was thinking of slavery for a moment until she saw that one of the... merchants... let the workcrew pick an item from his glazed earthen wares after they had finished assembling his booth, including a large sunsail.

1.7 Anne: The Dancing Lizard

As they moved into the shadow of the house they had steered toward, Anne realized it to be the building she had awoken in. Beside its entrance a sign hung, showing a green thing, a lizard, hopping on one leg and holding a mug in each forepaw and the tail, from which some liquid was splashing.

Chaman's assistants hurried past her and opened the doors for Chaman. Curiously Anne realized that they did so that from the inside they'd be hardly visible, but the doors would seem to swing open on their own for Chaman. Inside the light was of a cosy green-blue, owed to thin curtains that faded from light blue on the top to a light green at the windowsill. A Chaman went inside, dragging Anne and her assistants along in her wake. It was a proper restaurant, or rather a tavern. There were several rows of benches surrounding desks. Some of the benches were higher, and surrounded higher desks, others were lower and stood at lower desks. Some benches again had ladders at their rear, were very high, and accompanied the high desks. Anne blinked a moment, realizing the furniture matched the size-requirements of the potential customers.

What an effort that must mean!

A whinny from the bar in the rear of the vast room notified her of the other persons in the room. There stood a zebra behind the counter, slowly polishing glasses and placing them in a cupboard. A smaller zebra stood beside her, washing glasses thoroughly in a basin, and handing them to the taller one. Like a whirlwind a colorfully dressed fox approached them from behind the counter, stumbling, no, flowing over the benches and under the desks straight toward them. Arriving in front of them, his red colored fez almost fell off his head when he bowed deeply in front of Chaman and her entourage.

He didn't seem to be wondering about Anne's presence, instead he exploded into a straccato of yips, yelps, barks and half-howls, gesticulating wildly with arms, tail, ears and sometimes also the legs.

Chaman bowed and replied in kind, her movements however much more fluent and also far less of them.

Anne looked around, unable to follow the rapid conversation. In the door behind the counter another pair of ears appeared, and slowly came around and into view.

It was - as not to be expected otherwise - a second foxy. But this one was wearing a long blue colored toga, light sandals of snakeskin

and a scarf of darker blue around her neck and over her head.

A bit shorter than the other foxy, Anne observed the two carefully. The puffy pants of the first.. his movements were swift, widereaching and always somewhat clipped. The second foxies movements were somewhat slower, more graceful, one movement turning into the next...

Anne grinned happily when she realized she was very much sure that the one wearing pants was a boy, and the other was a girl. And when the latter bared her small fangs and laid her ears back, Anne covered her own mouth with her hands.

The male foxy hadn't noticed anything and was still chittering at Chaman. Anne couldn't help but notice that Chamans tail and left hand moved around a bit behind her back, and one of her apprentices slowly moved around Anne and toward the...

Innkeepers wife, Anne decided. The colorful lil guy was thus the innkeeper, and the two zebras... Maybe barkeepers.

Chamans apprentice took the innkeepers wife by her baw and started to whisper into her ear, taking her aside and sitting down on a bench. Looking demonstratively at the innkeeper and Chaman conversing, the human girl couldn't help but notice the silent chitchat between the innkeepers wife and the assistant becoming somewhat heated. They had went to the remote, shady corner of the room. Their tails bottlebrushed and they bared their fangs at each other several times without making any noise. Until the assistant pointed at Chaman - with one paw and both ears.

The innkeepers wife ears sagged visibly, and then rached under her toga.

Annes eyes bulged when the innkeepers wife produced a small stilet, a kind of hammer, some metallic hooks and, when the assistant patted the desk, another stilet. All of those tools vanished smoothly under the assistants cloak. Gulping heavily, Anne made a mental note really not to smile with showing her teeth.

And to tell the other kids about that.

The two barkeeper zebras had worked on as if nothing had happened. "Anne." Hearing her name, the girl turned around. Chaman was pointing with one ear and hand at the human girl. The Innkeeper zipped from Chaman to Anne. He bowed deeply - and so quickly Anne worried he'd crush his head on the ground - his nose zipping past a handspan from her midriff, inhaling audibly. Then grabbed Annes left hand bubbling in a springflood of yipps and barks, changing between bowing deeply, pressing Annes left hand against his forehead, or against his chest. His arms, tail and ears were swirling like being disconnected from his body. He was, for all matters, a

colorfull whirlwind.

First it was a gurgle in her chest, then, within a few breaths, she couldn't suppress it and started to laugh heartily,

The innkeeper froze, eyeing up to Anne, then peeked over to Chaman who made a small curtesy.

This seemed to free him, for he himself burst into pipsqueak barks, soon holding his own belly and sitting down on his butt. He grabbed his hindpaws and started to hop around on his butt my some bodily contortions covered by his wide clothing.

Anne found it all the more hilarious, for he looked as if he was riding a flying carpet with a hiccup.

And accordingly, laughed even more.

Chaman sidled over to the innkeepers wife, exchanging a few words and gestures. Anne was keeping her eyes on them, despite the laughing. She wished she could understand the foxes, talk with them.

The innkeeper panted heavily, staggering to his feet and then sluggishly moved over to Anne, placing his arms crossed in front of his chest and bowed deeply.

Watching closely, she could see that the innkeepers fur was lined by many white and silver strands. He looked old from close up, wrinkled even. But he was so energetic that Anne feared he would explode any minute. "Even when such an explosion most likely would be entertaining", she thought.

Chaman clapped her paws and made a sharp bark. The innkeeper, his wife and the two zebras bowed lightly and then started to busy themselves around the place. Anne and "her three foxies" went to the staircase in the rear of the building, where they showed Anne both a pair of restrooms with astonishingly normal looking toilets as well as a real indoor...

It was more a small swimmingpool than a bathtub, really. But still. Anne was astonished.

At home, her family had posessed only a wooden bathtub which had to be filled using buckets filled at the well in the courtyard. Here she could see an inflow and an outflow / overflow tube emerging from the walls in the corners of the pool.

Chaman tugged gently on her sleeve to make her follow her upstairs. The foxies made no noises at all walking upstairs, so Anne followed suit. Upstairs, Anne recognized, was the corridor she had passed over using the strong

wooden beam that had brought her to the hidden door. Chamans assistants perked up their ears and dashed noiselessly past all the doors stopping only seconds at each. Seconds later they were back and knelt down on one knee in front of Chaman, slapping their tail twice on the floor each. Chaman nodded and then looked at Anne, pointing with one ear and arm to the wooden beam Anne had crossed. The human girl looked up to it and then grinned and nodded eagerly. Before she could try to climb up there, the three foxies stood aside of each other, looking at Anne. Well, two of them did. Chaman covered her ears, one of the assistants covered her eyes, the third pressed her nostrils closed. Looking from the foxies to the wooden beam, Anne thought she understood them. Slowly she covered her mouth with her hands. The foxies bowed, not removing their hands, and Anne returned the gesture in kind. All returned to normal after that and Chaman gave Anne a small knife in a sheath made of something like snake leather on an opalescent string. Chaman stood on her toetips and laid the string over Annes neck, letting the knife vanish under the girls clothes. Anne stood a moment, perplexed, but then she silently hugged Chaman, who returned the favour in full. And the other two foxies hugged Anne, too.

"Fenwa," Chaman whispered into the girls ear.

1.8 Anne: Waking Call and Breakfast

All foxies had slipped out of their robes, wearing their colorful silken dresses. Chamans assistants stood right and left of Chaman, holding their instruments. After Chaman had noticed her red furred assistant made faces at the sand colored one, she had stepped on the formers feet and then placed herself between them. On a sign of their superior they started to play, calling forth their instruments voices. Panpipe and flute, played maybe a bit fast, but in perfect harmony, reminding Anne of the concerto birds made in the early morning, but more coordinated, supporting each other. In the church on sundays she had sometimes heard such music. Light, enchanting. gentle. And then Chaman started to sing. She had closed her eyes and swayed to the music.

When the music was the sweetest songbirds play, her singing was a a happy child toying in a gentle river.

A mother smiling at her childrens play.

It weren't words, rather, yipps and sound like just plain:"Lalalaala!"

For her size, Chamans voice was clear and carried well, sending shivers of pleasant warmth through Anne. Anne turned to look down the corridor. She heard the stirrings of the other children in the rooms.

Here and there a stirring, then the first sudden outburst, feet dropping onto the wooden floorpanels.

Chaman sung on and placed a pawy hand on Annes shoulder, gently pushing her into the center of the corridor. Noises of confusion, of curiosity sounded up, and then the first door opened, the second. And Anne saw the faces of many of her friends, looking amazed and confused at the same time.

Chaman stopped singing, her assistants stowed away their musical instruments in their seemingly bottomless robes.

Stepping beside Anne, Chaman poked Anne. With a wide smile, Anne spread her arms and grinned at the other children:

"Well, hello there you long-sleepers! Welcome to Tehuioy!"

The other children stepped forth from the rooms. Many were missing, actually most of them whom she had lived with in the past year on the big farmstead. But overall... Anne lost count when all of a sudden the children surged forward at her and questions flooded over her.

And most where not about the why or the where.

But the children, boys and girls alike, wanted to know where the music had come from, and how it came Anne had a fox at her side.

Smiling, she spread her arms and slowed the kids before she and the foxies could be overrun.

"Where are we?"

One of the older boys pushed himself to the fore, Hermann. He looked around:

"Where are we, what is it with those weird animals, and where are all the other children? I have to know, I'm the oldest here."

He grinned, placed his fists on his hips and looked around:

"And as the oldest, I'm responsible for you all."

Anne looked at Chaman, who's ears were erect and perked forward. The foxies neckfur seemed to bristle and her tails movements looked very controlled. Gently she laid her hand around Chamans slender shoulder:

"This is Tehuiy, a great and wonderful city. It's run by Zebras and Foxes. This here is Chaman, and she is a princess."

At her name being mentioned, Chaman made a small curtsy, enhanced by moving her large impressive ears into an almost demurely posture. Some of the children started to murmur and looked at each other, at Chaman and then out of the windows.

"Where the others are I have no idea, and Hermann, you're an oaf."

"Yeah, as if you knew," Hermann puffed himself up even more, but a lot of the children grinned behind his back. Hermann always had airs of grandeur and tried to bully others.

A whinny from downstairs made them all perk up. Tugging on Annes sleeve, Chaman picked up her robe and slid into it, pointing downstairs.

"I think breakfast is served. They have delicious juice and tea here. And I saw an appletree."

Letting the three foxies pass downstairs first, she looked over her shoulder at the other kids and smiled:

"Just don't expect bread I'd say."

As it showed, there was something akin to bread.

However, most of the children wanted to touch the foxies, wanted to know they're real. Anne calmed them and made sure that she stayed between Hermann and Chaman. The fact that he was eyeing Chamans ears all the time didn't encourage Anne to let him get any closer to any of her foxies.

With the Zebras, well...

"Holy Saints!"

They had arrived at the lower end of the stairway, from where they could see the innkeeper waving his arms like directing an orchestra. Which, in a way, he was:

The two zebras were wearing something akin to a poncho, the broad belts Anne saw them wearing earlier now holding the poncho in place around their waist. "Holy Saints," Hermann repeated himself, "there's more of them!"

Rolling her eyes, Anne turned around and mimicked Hermann's pose from earlier:

"With a whole TOWN of foxies and zebras around us, you surely expected this place here to be run by Heinzelmännchen, Hermann. Sorry, it is not."

"Why you little snotty.."

Chaman placed her paw on Annes shoulder and patted her. A quick look told Anne that Chaman hadn't used one of her steel boulders. More likely that Hermann had met a foxies paw in the one step he wanted to make toward Anne.

"You have to be careful, Hermann, the floor is tiled. It's easy to stumble here."

The children behind Anne 'oooo!'d all of a sudden and then started applauding:

The big zebra lifted one of the desks around, whilst two foxies wearing loin-cloths were busy placing small placemats and wooden plates on it. Hermann was sitting up, helped by a kindly offered paw from one of Chamans assistants who watched his movements like somebody might watch a bug under a magnifying glass. But Hermann was silent, looking at how easily the big zebra, roughly half again as tall as him, was moving the massive desk around like if it was a childs toy. Her muscles rippled visibly and her nostrils were flared, but unlike the strong man at the circus, who had always been visibly bulging with muscles, the zebra appeared to be, at best, well trained. The innkeeper waved his arms and ears and she moved the desk a last bit. Whilst she was still doing this, the two hands jumped off the desk, each fetching another stack of deskmats and plates and equipping another desk.

On those desks...

Anne spread her arms to keep the other kids from trooping past her:

"There's enough for everyone, so wait until they're finished."

Even Hermann obeyed, who was maybe happy that the other kids didn't comment on his earlier stumbling. He eyed the floor, trying to spot the dent in the tiles which must've been the reason for him to stumble when he had planned to hit Anne over the head.

The smaller zebra appeared, carrying a large tablet with crystal decanters on it. "Holy saints, how strong are these horse-guys?!" Hermann pondered.

"Pretty strong, and it is women," Anne happily explained to him.

"Here is a toilet!"

"And an indoor pool!"

The children further back had started to explore the open doors on the ground level.

"An indoor pool? You're.. no, really!"

The inkeeper looked at the arrangement of furniture that the barkeeper and

the two hands had created, nodded and then started running around like the hands, fetching cutlery from another room whilst the two zebras placed more trays with different foodstuffs on the tables. After a final inspection the innkeeper jumped up and down, clapping his hands and then darted over to Chaman, bowing deeply to her, yipyapping something. Chaman replied by bowing gracefully. Then she turned to Anne and spoke, loud enough that all the children could hear her:

"Be mine guests."

Some of the children giggled at the awkward phrasing, but Anne stared back at them and hissed:

"Learn speaking their language fluently - then you may start making jokes about how they speak ours."

The innkeeper and his wife, Chaman and her assistants, the inn's hands and the two zebras all moved to the side of the main room. Waving his arms the innkeeper gesticulated the children to come closer, so Anne went ahead, letting Hermann slide past her at last.

"Apples! And pears! And... what's that?!"

"That" were what looked like sausages with legs, but proved to be centipedes.

Some of the items the children discovered, like apples and pears and bowls with peas and various nuts or the jar with honey in it, were known to them. Others, like dried fish and fresh fish, dates, oranges and citrus and small bread-like crackers were not unheard of. Some however, like the centipedes - honey-baked - and biscuit-sized, honey-glazed bugs decorated with strawberries and cherries on their back, managed to make some kids gulp hard.

"I think the decoration here is actually lettuce and chinese cabbage. And this... That's a champignon!"

The kids went over the menu, exploring with their eyes.

Anne improvised:

"See, they don't know what we eat, or what we like. So they got a few samples for us to try. Take a plate, and get yourself a something of everything you think you like."

Now, even the most timid children smiled and soon wooden plates filled with apples and oranges, small bowls with a spoonfull of honey, and so on. Anne smiled and got a plate for herself. When she was trying the different drinks available, finding them all to be some kinds of teas or heavily thinned juices or some light kind of beer, a tiny hand tugged on her skirt.

"Miss Anne? Manfred says I shall ask you if I may hug one of the Zebras. May I?"

Anne looked for the girls big brother, Manfred. She found the young nobleman - Manfred von Feldstein - eyeing one of the centipedes and then really

picking it and putting it on his plate.

"Ah.. Manfred..." Anne had never understood why anybody should be addressed in a special way, "are you really sure you want to try that?"

He squinted back at her and then shrugged:

"When we were still living in Dresden, Father had a cook, who had lived and worked for years in the Phillipines and Vietnam. He told me they eat insects there."

Then she looked at Anne:

"Could you inquire for me how these are eaten, please?"

"Why are you... no problem, I'll do it."

She looked at Eva and smiled at the little angelic girl:

"Let's go over to the Zebras."

Eva's eyes sparkled. So Anne put her half-assembled plate aside, took the little girl's hand into hers and walked over to the foxes and zebras. First, they went to the big zebra. Anne made a small curtsy which the zebra gazed at and then replied to in kind. Next, she hugged Eva and then made the hug motion toward the Zebra before slowly hugging her for real. Well, her hip at least. Eva squealed in glee and jumped from one foot to the other when she saw that the Zebra knelt down and hugged Anne for real. Anne smiled, released the hug and waved Eva closer. Eva, like Anne before made the hugging motion and the Zebra whinnied, bayed almost and hugged the little girl off the ground. Eva made unintelligent noises of glee, sometimes hugging the neck of the zebra, sometimes just toying with her mane or the flexible ears of the Zebra, which the striped giantess happily endured. Anne left Eva in her care and addressed Chaman, trying to convey Manfred's question of how to 'properly' eat the centipede. After accepting that the question was a bit too complicated, Chaman looked at her assistants. The red furred one pushed herself forward, but then Chaman instructed the sand-colored one to help Manfred. She herself returned to amiable yip-yapping with the innkeeper and his wife, leaving her reddish assistant fretting. Anne picked up her plate and went through the items she found most delightful, leaving Manfred in the care of Chaman's assistant:

"She'll try to help you. I tried to explain the issue, but I don't know how to explain the concept of etiquette."

"Hmmm," Manfred nodded and squinted at the foxy.

"Tanaz," she said, putting her left hand on her nose.

"Manfred von Feldstein," he replied and repeated the gesture after placing his plate back on the desk.

"aahnredvo..," she began, but he interrupted her and repeated the gesture again:

"Manfred"

"Ahnfrit," she tried again and touched his nose with her fingers. Looking queer at his nose for a moment, Manfred gently touched her nose in return:

"Tanas"

Ann shook her head and set off to one of the benches as the two started a cycle of refining the pronunciation of each others name and touching their noses.

A good while later many of the children had finished their breakfast and were touching-exploring the two zebras and Chaman alike. Others laughed at the acrobatics the innkeeper and the two hands made, which were on a level with the best circus acrobats any of them had ever seen. Eva was still chewing on a big red apple whilst her brother was giving Tanaz an impromptu lesson on grammar and the alphabet after she had shown him how to eat the centipede properly.

"Nutty flavour," his comment had been, but he remained the only one to try the insects.

It was upon that scene that the door opened.

1.9 Anne and Peter: The Princess Offer

The door was opened without any pompous fanfare or anything. It got brighter inside as the door opened and then a looming shadow entered the room, followed by several smaller shadows. It was a zebra, half a head shorter than the barkeeper, but wearing a full knights armor. Outside, several more knights stood. The Barkeeper and the smaller zebra turned to the zebra-knight and bent their knees to her, bowing deeply. The innkeeper and his assistants bowed in the same manner, whilst Chaman, the innkeepers wife and Chamans assistants just bowed. The human children looked at each other and got and looked at each other, unsure what to do.

"As guests of the princess Aania of Tehuiy you are not expected to bow,"

Peter stepped from behind the armored zebra knight,

"as you are neither her subjects nor, as she understands, you know anything of their customs anyway."

And behind Peter, more children entered, happily greeting their friends, swarming the still richly covered breakfast table. The zebra whom Peter had introduced as princess Aania talked with the inkeeper and Chaman. With the inn being a flurry of children grabbing food and talking with each other about the place they were in and about their strange hosts. Anne stowed an apple away in her skirt and walked to Peter who talked to a foxy that had come in with him as part of the entourage of the princess:

"How come you can talk with them? You're Peter Schmidt, right?"

"Yes, I'm Peter, and you're Anne Huber, the girl that always manages to get into trouble."

She smiled and poked her tongue at Peter:

"People just don't like when a girl has fun the same way you boys have fun. But, tell, how come you understand them and," Anne flailed her arms in an all-encompassing manner, "where are our parents and where are we actually? Is this Africa?"

Peter shook his head:

"I doubt we're on any place on earth. There's two moons at night and the sun is ... it's somewhat orange. And you all awoke today only, I was awake already since two days, so I had chance to learn and see the place. It's huge! A huge town in the desert!"

He paused and grimaced:

"And, I don't really 'speak' their language yet, just a lot of words and I am getting the hang of how to arrange the words like they do. That is, arranging the words so they understand what I want to say. It's more like talking pidgin, like 'Effendi see sand in sky, cover we shall seek', you know?"

Anne nodded slowly and looked at her fingernails that had grown unusually

long.

Two days slept trough? Well, it made some sense.

"And our parents? Any adults?"

Peter rubbed his nose, which the fox that stood beside him took as a cue, reaching for his own nose, looking at Anne and piped:

"Harun!"

Peter laughed:

"Well, Anne, meet Harun ibn Ardach, that is, Harun of the Ardach family. To introduce yourself to a fennekim touch your nose and say your name. And be prepared that he'll touch your nose to say your name to make sure he gets the pronunciation right. And do the same with him. It's normal for them." Obediently Anne poked her own nose and looked at the foxy:

"Anne"

Harun nodded eagerly then reached for her nose and touched it with his palm:

"Anne."

"Harun," Anne replied the gesture in kind. Harun bowed deeply, his nose running down her front a fingers width distance.

"As for our parents or any adults, there is one soldier who is in bad shape. Their doctors have stitched him back together, but he's in coma. When he awakens, we'll learn more. I hope."

Peter looked troubled at her, but the girl just grinned back happily:

"That means there's no war that could kill us, and there's no more school! Awesome! And, oh... how did you call the foxies?"

"Fennekim. That's a term they happily apply to themselves. Means something like 'hero' or so. And there will be school. We have to learn their language."

Anne cursed silently.

Harun looked from one to the other, his ears flopping around like signal flags. His tail was twitching and by the end of their chat he was hopping around on both feet.

"What is it Harun?"

"She is a female of your kind?"

"Yes, she is. Why do you ask?"

"I want to introduce myself to her in your language!"

"Well, don't ask me for permission! Just do it!"

"She was still talking with you, so I didn't want to interfere."

"Oh! Well, now she isn't talking with me, so..."

Harun happily turned to Anne, who hadn't understood the conversation, yipped and bowed deeply with a flamboyant gesture like a spanish hidalgo:

"May nam is Harun ibn Ardach, lady Anne."

From behind the fennekim, other voices piped up. One by one, four more fennekim scampered into the room, looking around. They caught sight of Chaman and her assistants. And for some reason, they then excelled in introducing themselves to Anne and, next, to all the other children. The princess Aania observed it all, flicking her ears, watching, listening, as did Chaman.

The children were chattering amongst each other, gazing out of the windows. The new arrivals telling of the sights they had seen, walking from the other side of the great plaza, the city center, over to the 'Dancing Lizard'. Tanaz occupied Manfred, using a charcoal and a white-glazed ceramic tile to exchange numbers, letters, mathematical symbols. She was eager to learn and he, usually rather shunned by other children for his excessive book-learning, was happy to teach as well as learn. Princess Aania looked to Peter and caught his attention with a discreet whinny:

"Peter, it is time. Please tell them about my proposal."

"Yes, Princess."

Peter bowed to her and then clapped his hands:

"Listen up, guys! This amazone here, the Princess Aania, has an offer, a suggestion, for us to think about. She welcomes us in her town, but it's a small town, so she can't afford dragging us along for free."

Some of the kids quickly snatched another apple or orange, hiding it away under their clothes, and worried whispers bubbled up.

"However," Peter proceeded, "she and the good people of the town agree that they can take us in easily when we make ourselves useful."

"Useful? In which way?" Hermann growled and stuffed his fists into his trousers pockets.

"Well, literally: Whatever you like and are good at." Peter explained with a wide grin: "These people have no steamengines, no electricity. Farmer, blacksmith, carpenter, you name it and most likely they got a use for it."

"And when I want to be a soldier?"

"Well, then that is also great. As I understand it, the town is always needing guards, especially as at the moment there is some sort of siege going on."

The background-chatter exploded:

"A siege?" and "Is there a war going on here?" were the more audible questions.

"Well, sort of. A Band of... Raiders roam the area and the town is under lockdown for the time being. Until the Raiders leave or the towns...", Peter tried to phrase it in a way easily understandable, "Well, the towns garrison forces return with a number of caravans with which they had been sent out."

Hermann spoke up:

"Well, it is obvious that we don't want to be thrown out when there is some bandits in the countryside. Can't say what they would do to you kids."

Peter smiled sweetly:

"Oh, that is simple: They eat you all. And if they wouldn't fetch you, one of the giant monsters of the desert would eat you. Or you just die in the desert."

"Holy Saints! And you call that an alternative to making ourselves useful?!"

"No, the alternative the princess can offer is that we leave with the next caravan to one or more different cities. There is a much larger town about a month away. She says that she is sure that we will prove a valuable asset to her town, which is why she would prefer us to stay."

"Why does she think so?"

"We're just children!"

Hermann calmed the other kids:

"It's obvious, she understands how strong we will become and,"

Peter made a small movement with his leg. Princess Aania stepped forward and with a single hand lifted one of the heavy desks up - and held it without a shiver for almost a minute in the air.

"Your kind of 'Strength'," Peter rubbed his temples, "is so totally irrelevant for them, you won't believe it, Hermann. Seriously. No, it is a lot of other things they are interested in. Like, there is one soldier who must be one of the comrades of our fathers. He's comatose and badly wounded, but the fact he's still alive is something like a miracle for them. But also," and he lifted his shoe and pointed at it's sole, "They know latex, but they never saw rubber."

Manfred perked up from where he sat, talking with Tanaz:

"But vulcanization has been around since ages? All you need is sulfur and heat and..."

Peter applauded and the princess finally lowered the desk, which she had held aloft rather casually all the while, much to the dismay of Hermann:

"Manfred, you know that. I didn't. I remembered that rubber is made from latex only when one of the fennekim here actually tried to compare the scent of the material and opened a bottle with dried in latexmilk. But there is a lot more that we might know and they don't. And," Peter lifted his hands to the air, "it seems that your hands are our strong point. When you give hands, remember that and be gentle."

Peter inhaled and rubbed his temples:

"Long story short: The princess offers that she'll have homes erected for us

in one district of the town. We'll attend their schools, learn their language and script and teach ours in return. Those that like to, are welcome to move in with the locals. They'll take us in as apprentices so that we'll learn trades where we can earn our pay. And she hopes we'll exchange what ideas and knowledge we have. In return she will send word out to the other towns and ask around if our parents or the other children have been seen anywhere."

Most of the children nodded slowly, looked at each other. They had lived the greater part of the last year on the farmstead of their fathers officer. They had gone to a school far away from where they had been used to go to school. And only the wife of the officer and the farmhands had been around for a year to take care of them. And it had worked well so far, so, it might just work as well for them here in this strange place.

"That doesn't sound like much for us, but like a lot for them," Hermann stood, with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Surely she hopes to have the greater gain from it. But she's willing to make the bet. I for sure like the offer."

"That's just because you can't think of anything better!" Hermann accused Peter, staring wildly around.

Peter smirked:

"Can you?"

After half a minute of silence Hermann growled that he currently didn't have enough informations to make any suggestions. But that, come time, he surely would:

"Just so you wait."

It didn't exactly make any of the kids applaud him.

"Well, I think that this is then settled, but still:

Please, everyone in favour of staying where we are, raise your hand."

Aside of two of the smallest kids, who didn't understand what all the fuzz was about, and Hermann who decided to be in opposition out of principle, pretty much all the children raised their hands.

Peter turned to the princess and bowed again, formally announcing the result of the childrens vote to her. She nodded regally:

"Then about part two: Where you will stay until your own quarters can be constructed."

"I'll tell them. For myself, I will stay with Harun and his friends. Sire

Farzan permits it."

"In case you will permit it, I would like to take the girl Anne as an apprentice," Chaman purred, gazing at the princess.

*"When she agrees, I will be fine with that, dear <***>."*

Peter perked his ears. That last word was another one he had never heard before. He could make sense of a lot of words by now, some mostly by context. Well, later on he could ask Harun about that word.

"As you agreed to the princess proposal, you are invited to select your future hosts. There's plenty of nice people in town that offer you a bed and a roof over the head. Most of them are craftsmen of one sort or the other." He looked around, smiled and then looked at the princess for a moment.

"I made a few friends here already. Harun," the fennekim, who had sat on a bench and basked in the attention that some of the children gave his ears and tail, perked up, "is one of them. They will show us the town in the coming days. You'll see what the trades in this town are. And I hope that you all will find something that interests you as a future occupation."

Peter smiled softly and looked at one of the youngest girls that started to cry:

"I only want back to my mommy and daddy!"

Chaman slid to the girls side and caressed her head:

"Princess Aania find them when they around someplace."

Then she yippyapped to the princess who stepped close and then knelt down in front of the girl, placing her hands on the girls shoulders, speaking haltingly in her low voice:

"I promise, child."

2 Strange Times - From Zero To Hero



2.1 Apprentices

The light falling through the deep green colored silks forming the skylight of the hall gave the impression of standing in a peaceful forest. Water dribbling from tiny lizard shaped gargoyles into bassins of polished stone provided cooling. Sugar ivy was growing from flowerbeds, up to the ceiling where it was regularly cut back as not to interfere with the mechanics that could close the roof with wooden blinds. Between the leafs, small lizards and bird-like things scurried around, hunting the insects that buzzed around the ivys flowers.

On the head end of the hall there were two thrones, one of metal and dark wood, the other of polished white wood and with silken cushions. Between them a podest had been erected.

The children poked each other, whispering, pointing out the large pictures on the walls and the reliefs running around the halls walls. The two large doors in the sides opened. Through the left came a greying amazone, in armor. She stopped before the left throne and nodded curtly to the assembled children: "I am the Stratega, the strong arm and strategic mind of the town. My word guards the walls, my honor defends our society. I ensure survival."

Through the right came the princess in her robe of office, a long stole with stitcheries telling the story of Tehuioy and a broad belt carrying her ceremonial sword. The children had met her on their first day, where she had worn her ornate armor. She took place in front of the right throne:

"I am the Princess, the heart and smile of Tehuioy. My word guards the towns peace, my honor speaks justice. I ensure happiness."

The two amazones sat down on their thrones and then looked at the podest between them. A young amazone who stood guard at the right door caught the impatience of the princess and walked with clacking hooves to the second door on the right side. She opened it and whispered to somebody behind the door, before she closed the door again.

Audible even through the closed door, an earthshaking belch sounded.

The strategas face looked like if cut from granite, whilst the princess ears flickered in amusement. Then the door opened and an ancient fennekim in splendidly colored robes and wearing a huge turban came forth. He was leaning heavily on a cane and a fenwas shoulder. The fenwa wore a cornflower blue robe matching her blue mane.

"Anuthapardee?" the fennekim grumbled well audible to his female attendant.

"No, honorable eldest, its a meeting to finally introduce our towns guests properly."

"Thaddanice! Wherearethey?" he asked whilst climbing on the podest with a lack of dignity, until the princess got up and lifted him up. Up on the podest he turned around a few times before he sat down on a hughe pillow facing the wall.

"Behind you, honorable eldest," his attendant whispered into his ear so loud that even the people in the last row could hear her.

"I know I'mma stillspordive!" he guffawed proudly and patted her paw on his shoulder.

Muscles twitched along the strategas face. The attendant nodded and then took the eldest right paw:

"You want to see our guests now?"

"BringemIn, bringemin! Cantleddawaitem!"

"Sure, honorable eldest. Here, let me show them to you," and then she walked slowly around him, holding his right paw. This way she made him slide around on the silken pillow on which he was seated.

"Reptileeggsandcactispikes! Thaddaloddasalesmen," he shouted amazed, seeing the forty human kids assembled in the hall. The fenwa smiled angelically whilst the princes placed a hand over her own muzzle to hide a ladylike giggle. The stratega exhaled and buried her muzzle between her hands, her shoulders twitching.

"These, honorable eldest, are our guests and new citizens."

"Ohhhh!" For a moment he sat silent, gazing at the children from under his turban, which slowly was sliding over his eyes until the fenwa pulled it back again. "Didaprepare a speech?"

"Yes, honorable eldest."

"I'm good at that." It sounded like a question.

"Yes, honorable eldest."

Then she leaned forward and whispered into his big ear and he nodded:

"Greetings gentle humans! Yeahdismeohyoumeanokay. Immadeeldest... I am the oldest fennekim offa Tehuioy," the cities name sounded like a sneeze coming from him, "anamthus da Sheyk of the town, the - yes, exactly. Thaddammee! Oh!" He looked around, pushed his turband out of his eyes as it slipped over his ears and eyes. "Imma de afvisor in all questions offa justice toda luvvely princess. Imma da pillar of wisdom! Is my," he stopped, thinking hard, "Imma da lord of de guilds, brodecdor of the fenwas honors, anna king ufaa pardee."

He nodded and the fenwa stepped back from his side. Then he reached un-

der his colorful robes, pulled forth a small blue bottle and chugged a good quarter of its contents, put it away again and bowed to the princess to his left. The fenwa held his turband when he leaned forward so that it did not slide over his eyes. The princess whinnied lightly and got up, standing beside the podest, bowing lightly to the seated eldest. He returned the bow with a flourish which made his turband slide over his eyes down to his nose, only to have it pulled back by the fenwa as he sat up again.

"Dear children of earth," the princess began, "in the past hands of days you learned the basics of our language. Now that we can speak with each other, we, the rulers of Tehuiy, want to introduce you to those good people that will happily welcome you in their homes until you can found your own homesteads. Also, we want to let the workers of the town present their trades to you, so that you may choose a trade with which to earn your livelihood." She turned and bowed to the old fennekim, then stepped back and sat back down on her throne. The blue maned fenwa leaned to the old fennekims ear and whispered into it. His head had sunk to his chest and jolted up when she started to whisper. "Ah, surely! Yes, yes. Oh? Now? Ah, Wonderful!" After this babbling he stood up and looked at the children. The fenwa leaned over his shoulder and whispered on.

"Dear guests of Tehuiy, it is my esteemed pleasure to announce to you the wonderful people that wish to show you Tehuiy's greatness, their own kindness and, ahh...", the fenwa whispered again into his ear, "Ah, yes. Exactly! So, I call in the good people of Tehuiy to offer their hosibaba... holalla... their thing, yes exactly, to you. May you find many friends here and," he flailed his arms around that the fenwa had to duck, "And dadadifumshum. Yes!"

He sat down again, grinning happily from ear to ear. The princess smiled brightly and clapped her hands in applause as did the stratega, the latter biting her lower lip firmly. The fennekim looked around, asking the fenwa:

"Was it a great speech?"

The two zebras as well as the fenwa answered unisono:

"It was a splendid speech, oh honorable eldest."

He nodded satisfied and then reached under his robes, pulled forth a small green glassvial, uncorked it and slurped half of the vial's content.

In the adjacent rooms right and left of the great hall voices could be heard. Then the doors through which the stratega and the princess had come earlier were opened by a pair of young zebras each. In walked a lot of people. Fenwas (in cowled robes, the cowls resting on their back) and Fennekim (in various gaudily colored clothes). Next came a number of zebras, some accompanied by fennekim. Then came in a figure that had

many of the children flinch or shy back. It was a sand colored giant, more than a head taller than the tallest amazone, with bulging muscles visible on his arms. He wore a dark brown colored robe, his fangs standing out like a sabertooths. Hermann mumbled to those around him:

"That is surely the biggest fighter of the town! Gosh, I'd love to learn from him!"

Beside and behind the leonine giant came a few smaller lions and tigers of both genders.

The fourty children stood there, more or less in neat rows and whispering amongst each other, pointing at the various people of the town. As especially the fennekim cubs happily ignored language barriers, the children had met a lot of the people already. Sometimes it had been fathers that helped taking happily yipping furplets apart, looking for their cub to come home for supper. And at the same time rescuing a laughing human child from merciless being-licked-in-the-ear. Sometimes it had been mothers who, with their sisters, helped the human children getting an especially nosy cub out from their rooms or their cases. And sometimes it had been fathers or mothers, delivering a cub by the neckruff from which's muzzle dangled a shoe, a sock or some other definitive human possession. Then the parent stood waiting beside the cub until the cub had ceremonially handed the item back, making grand gestures and yipyapping something about that it was an honor to bring back this misplaced item which surely the owner hadn't even known to be missing. Which especially with shoes was usually not the case. However missing a shoe since the last furplet would have been much more worrisome if not the weather and the cityways encouraged walking barefoot anyway. And as school kept the kids busy all day, they had usually little time to, again, look if the shoe was really just misplaced in the hotel, or if, again, some of the visiting cubs had taken a liking to the 'chewy' items.

From behind the assembled persons came a hearty snoring. The honorable eldest had fallen asleep. His attending fenwa leaned him slightly sideways, and the audible snoring stopped. The fenwa looked at the princess who nodded and stood up, walking in front of the podest, but stayed behind the people of the town. "Dear children," she began, "Let me introduce you to your foster-parents and future housemates, as well as to your future teachers and," she tried to find a suitable word, "employers." The word she used described somebody educating and working with others, but this somebody filled in a fatherly or brotherly role.

"I present you Master Bakit ibn Nisra, Master of the carpenters guild, who offers his families hospitality to two young children."

A slightly, for fennekims, rotund fennekim in garish colored clothes stepped

to the fore, accompanied by three cloaked fenwas. All four bowed deeply to the children. "My household is large and comfortable, but since my last cubs moved out, it has grown lonely. Thus, considering you humans size, my wives and me wish to offer two of the younger ones a homestead until they are able to stand on their own feet."

Again he bowed and then stepped back into the group with his wives.

Hannelore leaned over to her older brother:

"Really? Wives? Several? That is... bigamy! Why, these immoral..." Hermann hushed her: "Sis, they are animals after all. Got no manners. Just ignore them." A few steps away Peter leaned over to Manfred and whispered: "That's a funny custom. We have something similar?"

Manfred nodded: "In many variations. There were many cultures in the past where there were several adults involved. Just think of kings and their concubines. That's our closest european example." Peter couldn't suppress a giggle: "Even if not for such, they're not humans. It'd be a bit unfair to judge them by human standards." Manfred nodded again whilst the next volunteer stepped forth and presented himself to the children. "Especially as there are even today societies where that is absolutely acceptable. Just, I don't know if it is the women who decide if they want to share their husband. Here, it is."

Anne squeezed from behind between the two boys and grinned:

"Chaman told me just yesterday: When a fennekim man wants to marry, he has to show off his skills, or whatever else he thinks might be impressive about himself. And then the women decide who like him, and then," she stopped a moment, thought, "And then they discuss amongst each other how many women can profit from working together with him closely. Like, he is good glassblower, one women is a chemist an can provide colors for his art, which will make him more successful. And herself, too. Another maybe is a prospector specialized in sands and limestone, a glassmakers raw materials. And a third one is perhaps a good bookkeeper. So, together they can start their own business. Else, he'd just be an employed glassblower. This way they share something in common to talk about. But each can do his or her work without standing on the others toes." Whilst the next fennekim presented himself and boasted about his families virtues, Peter and Manfred looked at each other and then at Anne: "That is...", Peter began, "Actually a well reasoned idea," Manfred finished. Anne grinned up to the two older boys: "Don't you get any weird ideas. Just think of the amazones. They keep their handful of males locked up in the central keep."

Peter gasped: "But that is..."

Anne grinned and giggled: "The most comfortable and safest place in the

entire town. And the most spacious living quarters aside of the princess ones. For a Zebra." Peter scritchd his head and now it was Manfreds part to grin when Peter finished his sentence: "... that is quite an unexpected thing, but... Well, when that is their custom," he shrugged, "I'm fine with whatever they do for themselves. As long as we don't have to follow their customs onehundred percent." "Nah, we don't have to when we don't like. And, there's the tigers," Anne pointed at the giant leonine figure, the 'Patriarch'. "Lions you mean?" Peter looked puzzled at Anne, but Manfred shook his head: "Harun most likely didn't tell you as for him they are all cats. Leonine and tiger like forms are both the same. They are variations, like our haircolors I think. Tanaz tried to explain it to me, but we are lacking too many words as of yet." Anne nodded eagerly: "There's a long story behind. I guess you can learn it when it interests you. But they have families like we do." One of the other children prodded them from behind: "It's nice that you have your connections amongst the natives, but we don't. I'd really love to hear them introduce themselves." Anne rolled her eyes, whilst Manfred blushed and looked at his feet and Peter pouted. But they did shut up.

Another fennekim stepped to the fore, wearing rather subdued colors. Over his shoulder he carried a banjo which he swung to the fore and started playing. It sounded like an avalanche crashing into a guitar shop. Behind him an amazone played what looked like an oboe. Within seconds his music grew slower and more calm, and her play became more prominent. Then they both played an accord on their instruments and bowed lightly each: "We are the instrument builders guild of Tehuioy. Our guildhouse is roomy and well suited to house more than us. So, for those who also love to create music, to play it and to build the instruments in cooperation with the honorable metalworkers and the famous woodworkers of Tehuioy, our guildhouse shall be open." The amazone behind him flickered her ears and looked at the small, almost frail fennekim before her. Then she snorted:

"We have space for two of you humans. A third place we keep for the next apprentice or passing through journeyman." He played a small ditto on his banjo. After she stepped back into the mass of people, he followed her, bowing deeply to everybody and nobody in particular.

Many of the fennekims that presented themselves were guildmasters. Some were traders, one even openly admitting that he hoped to get ideas for new tradegoods from the humans. Next were the amazones. The towns public blacksmith, a muscular mare wearing a leather apron and a heavy hammer on her broad belt, began introducing herself and her offer to house one strong boy or girl. Next was an amazone who introduced herself as the mistress of the masons guild. That her seven fennekim assistants all wore red

pointed caps produced a lot of glee amongst the children. The waterworkers were represented by two small amazones. Small in this case meant that they were just as tall as a tall human and not two heads taller. The children whispered amongst each other when they realized that the fennekim had, for a large part, been craftsmen of the arts, whilst the amazones represented almost exclusively jobs the children understood as physical hard work.

One of two surprises were the gardeners:

Those were equally amazones and fennekims alike.

A loud snoring from the podest informed everybody that the honorable eldest was obviously busy with very important political decisionmaking. He stopped only when his attendant rolled him onto his side.

Herrman growled: "I want to be a soldier. I'll be famous then! And you guys will all have to obey my orders!" And he looked toward the giant leonine form of the patriarch: "That will be so cool with such a teacher! All those muscles and scars!"

Anne snickered and Manfred was about to walk the two steps to Herrman, but Peter placed his hand on the other boys shoulder and shook his head. The princess bowed to her assembled sisters and then to the Patriarch, who bowed gracefully and then ushered a bubbly-curvy, only 'as tall as a grown human', lioness forward. She wore a bolero jacket and a belt made from some shimmering leather, from which many small pouches dangled.

"Hello," she began, nearly hopping up and down. Her long brown mane was a smooth waterfall over her shoulders and back. And like a waterfall running over stones, her hair bounced up and down, too, amplifying the effect. "I'm the mother in the place where cubs hide, waiting for their parents," Kindergarten nurse and teacher, "and I will need to learn about your kind, too. So, I would be glad to be entrusted with some of the youngest of your kind, or with one who knows how to take care of your young as to teach me." She hopped some more, until everything about her seemed to consider remaining in one place as utmost boring: "I am so happy! I will be the first to write a book on the care of young from a new tribe!" When a fennekim was funny to see with his boundless energy hopping around, it was somewhat cute. But seeing a likely hundred kilo heavy, two-meter feline, whos fingerlong fangs showed whenever she was talking, bouncing up and down with almost the same speed and energy as a fennekim...? That had a certain awe inspiring effect.

Still, there were a few relieved sighs from the older girls. Taking care of the five toddlers amongst the children alongside learning a new language in a hot desert climate was a taxing job. Hermann had, sometimes forcibly, ensured

that the older girls - at least those younger and smaller than him - took care of the five toddlers. Those five were at the moment in the rear, each sleeping curled-up in a basket laid out with a weave-pelt. WA weave-pelt was a silken sheet into which shedded fur from fennekims, zebras and, so the color implied, also tigers and lions had been interwoven. That produced a light, short furred fake fur which warmed at night yet did not overheat so much during the day.

Hermann was pumping his fists, mumbling. "I'll become a soldier, a great warrior! You'll see!" And he was gazing at the leonine giant.

A tigress, a zebra and three fennekim stepped forth. The zebra was grizzled and scarred, the feline was, by her appearance, just barely an adult. Both wore a light leather cuirass and other light armor pieces made from reptilian leather, the tigress additionally wore a brown, long sleeved cowled robe. "We," the tigress began and bowed, "are the beast doctors," the amazone proceeded. "We take care of the mighty beasts of burden when they come to town through the desert," the tigress sung rather than talking. "We mend the wounds of them when they get hurt working in the town," the amazone finished the explanation of their trade, before one of the three fennekim climbed upon the shoulders of the other two, stating their offer: "When one or two of you have no fear, but respect for our large reptilian assistants, when you don't mind doing hard work and when you enjoy getting the newest gossip from the rest of the Alliance first, we would love to welcome one or two of you in our cozy flat!" Then the three scurried over to the amazone and the tigress, one climbing up the amazone, two up the tigress, forming an arch. The one fennekim held up in the air by his friends grinned at the children: "Our door's open, yannow?"

The children clapped applause and laughed. Considering the serious way the tigress and amazone had started out, the fennekim had made an acrobatic act from the introduction. The fennekim saltoed down from the females shoulders, bowed and scurried back with the two. This were the vetenarians which, consisting out of all local species, where the second real surprise.

A tiger male, a tigress and a lioness stepped forth. They all wore long sleeved, wide, airy cowled robes of sandish color, and each carried a net over the shoulder. The male knelt down on one knee and bowed his head:

"Be welcome strangers. Tehuioy welcomed us without hesitation. So we do the same now. We are the heads of the fisherwomen and fishermen. We share a common house where there is still place. Lighten it with your laughter and song, as we desire to brighten your moods with song and stories of our own." He stood up and stepped back, letting the lioness step to the fore.

She knelt on both knees, crossed her arms before her chest and bowed deeply before sitting upright again. "What we can offer aside of housing, is training. Learning to knit nets, how to cast them, how to use a fishing rod. It is a good an important job. And it ensures neither you nor those you care for have to ever go hungry." She bowed again, then stood up, and the tigress knelt down, much in the same way as the lioness had. "We work a lot with the waterworkers of the zebras, for we maintain saltwater tanks and a pool to raise special fish. We work with the salt-workers guild, the alchemists, as well as several other guilds to ensure the fish and lobsters we raise in captivity are healthy. Thus our work is rich in variety and needs patience. And we are willing and looking forward to teach this to you." That said, she stood up, bowed and stepped back to her colleagues.

Hermann was almost perpetually grumbling now, anxious - or as he would have insisted upon: expectant - that the giant leonine, the Patriarch, introduced himself. Two more tigers presented themselves. They were the heads of the hospital, the medical specialists.

Peter poked Manfred and Anne and pointed at Hermann: "I think he'll be in for a huge dissapointment in a moment. See how he gazes at the Patriarch?" Anne nodded eagerly: "You think he still wants to become a soldier?"

"Yes. And I bet he looks toward the Patriarch because he's big and scary and muscular and thus a soldier."

Manfred rolled his eyes: "What is it with Hermann? Not only is he trying to commandeer us around, he enjoys threatening us. Like 'I'll make you eat honeyed mites!'" Anne looked up to Manfred, puzzled: "But I saw you several times eating those when you were learning with Tanaz?" "Yes, but he didn't. When he threatens me that way I seriously don't care. It's better than when..." The other two looked at him: "You know that you only have to ask or call for a gate guard when you need help. They're there to serve as mediators or... to stop trouble." "And you know that they are able to handle him. Even those that are just barely older than him." Manfred shook his head: "Well, yes. but... Ah, the Patriarch speaks!"

The giant leonine had stepped forward and flexed his giant paws claws: "I am the patriarch, the oldest and strongest amongst the big clawed people of Tehuioy. I greet you, my children. My household has space for one of you, if one so desires. And I have many things to teach!"

Here Hermann started to smile blissfully.

"I'm a storyteller and guardian of my peoples lore. And I am an expert cook for all things captured from the waters. And also of some of the insects the small people find so delicious. I have trained and educated many of my small sons cooks. Yes, I am proud saying that even a few of my striped daughters learned one or two tricks about the seasoning of vegetable meals from me."

Here Hermanns expression ran frontally into a wall, with the wall being the uncontested winner.

"Butbutbut... I want to be a soldier!" he shouted, interrupting the Patriarch. The mighty leonine flickered his ears and gazed first at Hermann, then to the stratega on the left throne.

"Well, my eager son, there is no reason why you could not fulfil that desire of yours, or is there?"

The Patriarch bowed to the stratega: "Wise lady of steel and sword, did you stop hiring apprentices for the guards?"

She whinnied and denied this: "It just was not mentioned so far. We would surely love to evaluate the skills and endurance of our human guests. But like with our feline citizens, they are few in numbers. So we shall not request assistance in matters involving life and death." "Well, wise lady of steel and sword, here you find a volunteer I think. Test him, if he so desires. Test him hard and proper as your trade requires." The stratega looked at Hermann. He pushed his chin forward and stood straight, inhaling as to appear more impressive.

"Willing he is, wise Patriarch. I shall permit it. Even though I doubt this ones wisdom. He seems most eager to join the ranks."

"The folly of the male, wise lady."

The stratega burst into hearty equine laughers, baying: "Spoken true! Well, he shall receive the same training as any other protector."

Hermann, who lagged behind his language sessions a bit, hadn't understood all that was said. But he had understood that he'd be allowed to join the military. His smile reappeared and he looked at the other children around him:

"Told you so! I'll become a mighty warrior!"

Paul and Wilhelm Huber looked admiringly to Hermann: "You'll become a hero!"

Hermann basked in the admiration of what, for all relevant reasons, could be considered his two minions. Anne however looked from where she stood with Peter and Manfred over to the oldest of the children and shook her head,

mumbling: "It's bad enough that he believes himself to be the infallible ruler because he's the oldest of us. But to think that my older brothers admire him for being the lout and bouncer he is... Bleah." She made a face to the backs of her brothers and Hermann. Peter chuckled and shrugged:

"Well, you won't have to see much of them. As I heard you were invited to stay with the fenwas in their district?"

Anne nodded eagerly, just barely audible murmuring back: "The unmarried fenwas district, exactly. It's," she hesitated for a moment, "It's like a huge garden above ground. Most of their houses are underground." Manfred watched her and then nodded slowly, leaning close to the other two: "You are staying with the danceress guild? With Tanaz and Chaman?" The girl nodded happily, then looked at her brothers for a moment, smirked, looked back to Peter and Manfred, whispering: "And you two?" "I'm staying with Harun - rather, in Farzans ibn Ardachs household. Aside of an ant walking by during the day or night, it is a very nice place. And the sawmill is directly on the opposite side of the road. I applied there for my first year of apprenticeship and am already accepted," Peter proudly whispered back.

Anne smiled.

Manfred smiled, too: "Well, that's good to hear! The princess requested me to work in their library, to learn the languages of both the fennekim and the amazones. And I am to teach the cities scribes our language. By the way, Peter, you have this microfiche library... Can I use that? We have a bunch of books amongst us, but a lot of it are, well, childrens books. I would like to impress them with something more complex." "Maybe you can teach them how to make photos and then copy it?" Peter chuckled in good humor. "Well, as you mention it... that might actually be possible!" Manfreds expression brightened, whilst around them children and the people of Tehuioy mingled. The children inquired about what they could expect in particular, their potential hosts most eager and happy to explain in detail. Peter rolled his eyes: "What books would you need to help them make copies?" Manfred counted on his fingers and bit his lip: "Chemistry and optics. That is physics. I'll come over to you this evening and will help you find a good book. And something on mathematics." Peter chuckled: "And weeks later every fennekim had a library..."

"Won't happen that fast. I think it'll be a year at the earliest before it is possible to make real copies."

Anne grinned brightly, looking around.

They had stood in the middle before, now they were the rearmost. The others were mingling with the townspeople.

Only Hannelore and Nina, Peters oldest sister, were behind them. They

were showing the toddlers to the lioness. The little ones gazed at the face of the lioness and giggled, grabbing her broad nose. She purred in a very nasal way due to the small ones having a very tight grip. Even when they grabbed her whiskers, which was most likely hurting a lot, the lioness didn't expose her claws. She just wiggled her fingers into the little ones fists to relieve her tortured whiskers, and then used her tailtip to capture the attention of the toddlers.

Anne poked the two older boys:
"And I also have a trade to learn!" The two boys looked at her:"Really? So far you hung out only... with Chaman..." Peter thought aloud before offering:
"Chaman is a guild mistress?"
Manfred patted his own forehead with his palm:"Surely! She is the dancress guild mistress! She's one of the three most famous dancers of the town!"
"Exactly! And I'll be one of her apprentices aside of Tanaz and Lal."
"And that's something you like? Dancing? You've been roughing up the boys your age at times. And now dancing?"
"Pshaww! I can still do that if I feel the need to!"

In the rear a subdued mewl of pain sounded. The lioness asked one of the older human girls perplexed:"And they don't have teeth yet?"
One of the toddlers had grabbed her tailtip and chewed on it.

All three looked back at where the older girls acquainted the lioness with the toddlers. Then Peter patted Annes shoulder:"You never striked me as a ballerina, but when you like it and they are your friends already, then it's great!" The girl nodded happily:"Only Lal is nasty. She is strong and fast and more skilled than Tanaz, true. But she is so self-centered! Thinks she is special because her father is the town eldest." All three looked at the eldest on his podest. He had rolled on his back again by now, his hindpaws kicked air. And he was snoring so loudly that there was a wide empty circle around him where no people stood as to understand their own words. His attendant fenwa, his 'maid of honor', had given up moving him to positions where he stopped snoring.
"Ahh... yes." "Very Obvious." The boys looked at each other and giggled, Anne joining them. "But now, Manfred, where will you stay?" That you got a job already is great, but where will you sleep?" "Well, there is a former colleague of the princess, a legionaire of the caravan guards. She retired and

is now living and working in the fennekims sector. She shares a flat with a few young fennekims. They seem to be a nice bunch. And one of them is actually from one of the neighbouring fennekim sietch, one of their desert cavetowns. So I have a chance to learn also about them." "Do you ever think about not-learning?" "When I am sleeping. And when Tanaz goes over the various edible things they sell at the market stands and lets me test them. Though that is work, too. We're working together on a list of foodstuffs we can eat and that actually taste good."

Peter and Anne made faces, imagining terrible things.

"The honey baked apples were particularly good, but the grilled cherries... they still had their stones inside. Amazones consider them crunchy." "Honey baked apples?" Annes eyes grew big and she looked over her shoulder toward where the town plaza and the market stands were. "Wait till the ceremony is over," Manfred calmed her, "They make them fresh daily in a sun-powered oven."

The princess presided from one of the water troughs over the meeting, sealing both apprenticeship- as well as guardianship-contracts. Sometimes she had to explain some details, making the constellations change subtly.

A few fennekims arrived through the halls main gates, stopping at the toddlers, talking quietly with the lioness and the two human girls.

One by one, the children left with their new adoptive families. The childrens property was to be fetched from the hotels and relocated to their new homes. Each little group was accompanied by Decana, an amazone squadleader, who served as scribes on such occasions. They'd take notes what the children would need in their new homes and also take their measures to have, where needed, a first set of clothes made for them.

Hannelore, Nina, the lioness and the group of fennekim picked up the five toddlers and carried them toward the princess. From the group, Tanaz waved to Manfred and Anne, who both waved back. "Why, that's the Ardach family!" Peter noticed, "Seems like they'll also adopt some of the toddlers." The three stood there and watched how the lioness underwent a kind of ceremony with each of the two toddlers she adopted. "Why is that so different than with the others?" Peter wondered, "There the ceremony was like a handshake and that was it." "They are babies," Anne offered, "and for all of the people here, taking care of a cub from another species is something very important. She basically has to swear that she'll defend the lil ones with her life. And that she warrant with her life should the small ones come to harm whilst under her guardianship." "Gosh, that sounds... heavy!" "It has to be.

Just think that a fennekim cub is barely a handful for a lioness, or that a zebra fillies legs are barely thicker than your thumb in the first year. You want to impress heavily on a onehundred kilo predator that she has to be very carefully with the children of potential prey species before you even think about actually letting your children into her reach," Manfred offered. Peter bit his lip: "It's that bad?" Anne smiled: "Naw. Chaman couldn't name a single occurrence where a cub had come to harm from a cat in the town. But several where a big feline had protected cubs." "Else the fennekim would not trust the lions and tigers at all near their offspring, I guess." "The fenwas would," Anne hesitated, "not allow it, I am sure." In the meanwhile the lioness had left with Hannelore, each carrying a toddler, eagerly chatting. The toddler with the lioness held on to her tail, which she conveniently had trapped under her arm to allow him playing with the tuft. Hannelore had found the bubbly feline to not only be fun, but also smart and curious. Offered, she had agreed to become her assistant in the kindergarden. Whilst Hannelore was upset with some of the mores of the people of Tehuioy, the lioness seemed to be one of the less troublesome persons. Maybe it was also because Hannelore liked cats.

Tanaz came over to the three children: "May the sun shine in your hearts," she greeted them with a curtsy. They all replied in kind, the boys bowing, Anne returnign the curtsy. Anne pointed at the fennekim family that, together with Nina, knelt before the princess: "Your family adopting the remaining three toddlers?"

The young fenwa nodded: "Yes. Fathers household had up to sixteen children at peak. So there is a lot of space in the house." At the princess, two fenwas, one with remarkably small ears, and an amazone each lifted a toddler out of their baskets and held them, murmuring the same formula to the princess that the lioness had done. The greymuzzled fennekim in his colorful dress was shaking hands with Nina. "And father offers the girl a job in his business. He makes jewellry and small metal works. And as she's wearing earrings, well, I recommended her." "Will she also live in the household?" "Yes. That way father and my mothers can learn proper caretaking of human cubs. It's expected to become an important skill considering there are more of your kind in the town now than of the felines." "An important skill?" Manfred stared at Tanaz who wiggled her big ears and then yipped in glee: "Well, the gateguards will all have to learn how to handle human cubs. So, most amazones will have to learn how to fetch and carry a human cub. And most fenwas will want to learn that, too, in case cubs are quarreling amongst each other." "Calling babies 'cubs' sounds weird," Peter uttered. "Well, little ones, fillies, cubs, kittens, kits, eggings,... It's just a word," Tanaz murred and slipped to

Annes side:"Do we want to fetch your possessions from the 'Dancing Lizard' now?" Anne nodded and hooked her arm into Tanaz' offered one: "Good bye you two," she waved to the boys. Together, the two girls left, Tanaz tail swishing happily through the air.

"And you?" Peter looked at Manfred. "The princess will guide me personally to my new place. How about you?" The Ardach family passed by, Nina eagerly talking with the two fenwas who each held a toddler in their arms, whilst Harun ibn Ardach - Senior - marched ahead of the little procession, the rear being brought up by the amazone who wore the same style of clothes as the two fenwas in front of her. "Harun and Tiz are waiting outside the palaces gate to pick me up. I'm living with them since we arrived, so I would find my way even alone." Manfred smiled, then offered his hand to Peter: "Whilst I'm worried where our parents are, seriously, I love it here. Take good care of yourself!" They shook hands. "You too. I have a feeling Hermann has an eye upon you because the princess has hers on you. Seriously, that jerk already made a lot of trouble back home. Heeard he is proud that he spied on some people hiding a child in their attic. He gave them away. The kid and the family got picked up by the Gestapo he says. So, stay away from him." They eyed Hermann as he walked past them, between the patriarch and one of the amazone squires. He was trying to follow the chitchat of the two that towered over him. But understanding was not something that was granted by muscles. "He is proud of that? If I can, I will gladly avoid him!" Manfred had blanched and shook his head in disbelief. Then the two departed, Manfred to the waiting princess, Peter out of the halls main gate through which all the others that had left. Already out on the courtyard he could see not only Harun and Tiz, but also his other three big eared friends. They were busy impressing the gate guards with their acrobatics. Peter chuckled:"Strange places, strange times, strange friends. Well, I like it here, too."

Then he hurried toward the gate, calling and waving to his friends.

That they were upright walking fennecs?

He couldn't have cared less. They were his friends.

2.2 Hermann: Guard Duty

"So we stand all day around and do what?"

"We guard the gate and prevent the civilians coming to harm."

"Nonono, I mean... we just stand here and... ," Hermann pointed at the gate

"We stand in the sun to learn coping with it's heat and to learn how much each of us has to drink not to topple over," Sinna offered and flicked her ears in amusement.

"No, I mean: Why do we stand guard on the inside of a gate, when there's a whole small garrison right behind the outer gate?"

Hermann jumped aside when a gaggle of barely foot sized furballs dashed out of the open doorway of the adjacent construction site with an earsplitting, high pitched cacophony.

"And to learn not to be startled by the unexpected," Sinna added.

Hermann sighed and swiftly plucked one of the fennekim cubs from the gates viewport before the small guy could open it and slip through. It squeaked surprised by the rather harsh handling, but then hung like a wet towel from Hermanns hand, pouting frustrated. He handed the cub over to Lina who gently took it and massaged its neck gently where Hermann had caught it. It purred happily and wiggled its oversized ears, melting into Linas neckrubs. Three cubs of the gaggle were exchanging grapes. Most likely they had made bets about if they would be able to startle the inner gate guards, or maybe how many, or whom in particular. "In case of the latter," Hermann thought with a glumly, "at least someone is still betting on me NOT being startled, I guess."

"Sinna, seriously, I mean, yes, the city is under a kind-of pretty pointless siege, we make sure the cubs don't slip into the outer fortification. I'm fine with that. But why do we need to stand here with five guards? It's not as if there would be any risk of any group of raiders to plopp in here. There's the outer fortification with its garrison that should be good enough to stop any raiders. And if any raiders would break through... Well,after all, you don't even wear any armor!"

Sinna looked at herself and the other squires and Hermann added, somewhat lamely:

"It's not as if you'd wear any clothing anyway - aside of your utility belt."

"That is why we are on the inside of the gate. And why you wear armor. You're our protector. Your task is to buy us time, in case some raiders 'plopp' in, to organize a retreat of the citizens in case the outer fortification starts

to fail."

Hermann cursed under his breath. None of the squires he was tasked to 'protect' had anything soldierly about them, aside of their stoicism in accepting and executing their orders.

Weeks ago, when he and the other children had selected their trades-of-interest, he had insisted on becoming a soldier. And then he had been told that, as he was male, he could not become a legionnaire - which was the nearest translation for the armored knights, as Peter and Manfred agreed. But he could become a protector, after learning and training and, most of all, testing his usefulness. He would have quit there if Peter wouldn't have given a rough description of the duties and tasks of a full protector:

"Protect the caravans and fighting the raiders in the desert."

Well, that had sounded quite okay.

That most of the teachers at school were female, well, fine.

He could live with that.

That there would be females, well, he had seen that the bodyguards of the princess were females, so, well, decorum. But that eight out of ten military trainers would be females, and the two males would be grey-fuzzed half-sized foxes, that came as a surprise. That he was tasked to protect five females, well, that was somewhat what he had seen in his dreams as a heroic soldier. That these females would be his superiors, would order him around and would be taller than him, stronger and also his seniors, that had been a shock. The fact that he had the choice of either sleeping in the same bed with one of them or sleep in a pit of sand on a blanket had been even worse. That those other males training with him were a bunch of oversized, big-eared pinschers, that they were faster than him and enjoyed being cooed over by those girls - for none of the squires was really that much older than him, just taller...

That had really hurt.

"Shorrymateylemmeshroughpleashe" Hermann stepped aside as an obviously slightly drunk fennekim beelined from the restaurant facing the construction site over to the latter. "Boyshshiftishovahanmawifeymadeushhoney-winecake!" Loud applause erupted from the construction site, followed by various "thunk!" noises as some tools thrown into the air missed their exhausted users hands. Some curses and expressions of pain were in the mix, too. The Fennekim had been working through the heat of the day for the last eight hours. The next work shift - there was no real nighttime in fennekim-towns except for the cubs - already was assembling in the shadow of the walls, some playing a cardgame Hermann hadn't caught on to yet.

He sighed. When he had insisted on needing some armor as a proper protector, the fennekim training with him at the time had been totally puzzled, considering their snake-leather cuirasses absolutely perfect. In the end, after having a long 'chat' with Manfred, who knew a lot about medieval armor and warfare in general due to his father being a high ranking officer in the Wehrmacht and aristocrat, he had a talk with his combat instructor. This elderly, graying zebra-mare, or Amazone, as most kids called them by now, had agreed that, as not being as fast and agile as a fennekim, he wouldn't lose much speed wearing some light amazone armor. After about a week he was presented with a reworked armor. The fact that it's chest indicated that it had been designed for a female wearer hadn't been covered up. The laughs of the other human kids still rang in his ears:

"Hey, Hermann, you're looking quite the girl, you know?"

And:

"The military really dresses you cutely!"

He had been very, very angry.

The fact that the armor was an almost 800 year old piece, fitting his frame because it was for a waterworker-amazone, a slightly smaller breed, did help a little. He understood that the waterworkers were considered to be the most important people of every amazone fortification. They, the water workers, built and maintained the water systems elemental to every towns survival and health. And the armor was 800 years old, so it was a somewhat revered item due to its age.

"And", he counted the list of positives to calm himself, "it's design is purely protective and functional, not frivolous as the more modern armors."

Finally, the armor was made from some stainless steel, a material only a few towns of the amazones empire, the 'Allied Sultanates', manufactured.

He sighed again and handed the next innocent looking cub, which he had plucked from a drainage pipe, over to Lina, the 'return specialist'. She was slightly short and plump. But that didn't stop her at all from being still a full head taller than him, and, most of all, she was a damn good shot with a crossbow. Newi, Anka, Inwe, the other three amazones of the northern gate guard detail in the families quarter of Tehuiy, had already handed the cubs they had caught to Lina. The little ones tried often to dig under the gate, climb over it or climbing into the rainwater drainage, in short, places where they might get stuck or where they could easily be squished or come to harm in some other way.

"For innocent puppies you grin too much, you know that?" Hermann tried to sternly address the quartett of big eared cubs that grinned from the gentle

embrace in which Lina held them all to her chest.

Sinna coughed and pointed at her neck.

"Wha?"

A chittering giggle erupted from his armor's neck-guard when he reached up to it. The armor was well flexible enough to reach there, but he himself was too slow and not flexible enough to fetch the cub that raced on all fours over the rimguards of his armor, giggling happily and enjoying itself. The other cubs and the squires soon started to giggle, then laughed, when Hermann started to jump around on one leg trying to shake the cub off. The fuzzy critter alternated between poking its wet nose into one of his ears moments after pinching his unprotected inner thigh or inner upper arm. After what was like an eternity, but in reality barely two minutes, the lil one stopped exhausted, slid around Hermann's neck and licked his face affectionately. Inwe picked the lil one up, seeing Hermann's expression:

"You look angry, protector, why?"

"Why? Why I look angry?"

Lina got the fifth cub, nuzzled them all over the head and then trotted off to deliver the exhausted, happy pile to their respective families.

"I want to become a soldier, I want to fight the enemy! But I never wanted to be some kind of chewtoy for, for, puppies! Or a bodyguard for a quintett of nudists!"

Newi, Anka and Inwe looked at him blankly, incomprehending.

Anka, the squadleader, sighed and started to rub her horned fingertips against her long muzzles sides:

"Whom of us is sweating?"

"Well, I am profusely so," Hermann barked back at her.

"We would, too, when we would wear full combat armor. We are behind the wall, behind the outer fortification. Even under bad conditions we have not the task to fight, but to evacuate the population."

"And when the enemy breaks through faster?!"

"Then we die trying to evacuate the population, unless reinforcements arrive in time. But getting a heat stroke? I don't see merit in that."

Hermann rolled his eyes:

"It's about being decent! Being decently dressed!"

The last sentence he shouted.

The squires looked at each other and shrugged and went back to their post on the sides of the gate. A small window in the inner fortification wall opened and an older amazon's head looked out and down:

"It'd be more decent not to shout your wussy moralities around and let the

night guards get some sleep, you crycub!"

Anka shooed a pair of young fennekim on their way after trading a short ride on her shoulders agaisnt an apple from a nearby tree:

"Hermann, none of us minds that you prefer sleeping on the floor instead in one of our beds. We also don't mind that you insist on wearing clothing or even armor all the time. The chief medics apprentice Arzu Shershah-sa told us how easily human skin suffers in the full sun."

Hermann growled:

"Yeah until we get some suntan."

"Exactly. That is what puzzles me and the others. You growl about sweating, but wear heavy clothing. And you're not exactly smelling of alfalfa and kudzu. And, you need to be afraid of sunburns and still take the job where you are most exposed to the sun. Why not wear just a light toga? You don't exactly make sense, you know?"

The boy growled to himself. Nothing had prepared him to be... not even mocked, just...

In school he always had been the strongest, and even now a few of the boys looked up to him. They always waited for him until his day was over. And together they went to see that all the younger ones were behaving properly. Not that it was neccessary, but Hermann was sure his presence helped reminding the others to show proper gratitude.

For what? That he himself would have a hard time reasoning logically. Maybe being thankful for not being beaten up for having aroused his attention. With the fennekim-cubs, he had been informed rather gently by his combat instructor, after she had thrown him for nearly three meters, he would show only gentleness and kindness, else he'd find himself permanently subscribed to sewer-duties. That message had made it across to him quite clearly. Still, he didn't have to like the small furballs and their antics.

"I don't get paid to make sense," he growled at nobody in particular in german.

Inwe started to giggle until the others, all of whom stood at attention like on the drill-field - unless they were shooing cubs away from the gate - finally asked her for a translation:

"He said he receives no compensation for the effort to be understandable," she kept on giggling, "As if anybody would pay him to make himself an outsider."

The others chuckled and Hermann decided to stand at attention and suffer

and sulk silently.

With the sun slowly starting to sink, the shadows growing longer again, the boy refilled his drinking bottle at one of the near-ubiquitous water-tanks. The large earthen urns were refilled regularly by stout fennekims which brought water from the main supplies in buckets.

"Grandma would be so proud of me... drinking so much water," Hermann thought and chuckled. Inwe had shown him how to flavour the water in his bottle using shots of grape. Ever since, drinking as much as was necessary not to dehydrate had grown a lot easier.

"For a horse she is damn smart," he had to admit grudgingly to himself.

Over the hubbub of the family sectors daily noises came the audible clip-clop of a group of amazones making their way down the paved stairways to the 'Families Plaza'. He had to bite his own lip not to walk the few extra meters and to take look to see who that might be, but he knew that curiosity and restlessness, whilst considered the norm for fennekim, was frowned upon by amazones whilst under orders. He shared that opinion. With the exception of taking care of unruly fennekim-cubs, it seemed, where behaving childish was suddenly all okay.

But that was the actual duty of the squires: Keeping cubs out of harms way. Soon there came a group of squires into view, each with her staff used as a walking stick. They moved in a line through the playing cubs and the various artisans using the families plaza during daytime as part of their workshops. A group of fenwas in their cowled robes were weaving a large piece of cloth to replace one of the sunsails over the streets.

The newly arrived amazones carried their school-bags over their shoulders - they came straight from classes - and saluted by crossing their arms over their chests and bowing lightly. Hermann zoned out their ritual phrases of transfer of command and the short report on what had happened today. The reason for the absence of Lina made him perk up:

"The safe return of five cubs to their parents."

They even reported such details.

Lina would go straight to the school after she delivered the cubs to their parents. So he took her staff and her schoolbag, which she had left at the gate, saluted to the squadleader of their relief, and then hurried to follow his teammates. Amazones moved rather slowly, or, better, say they moved gracefully and saved themselves every unnecessary effort. But their long legs resulted in him having to hurry to keep up with them. And they could keep up that speed for a day without breaking a sweat.

Hermann remembered that Peter had spoken about a special walking, or rather running, style inspired by wolves, which allowed one to do the same. If the short guy was right with that, he'd have to prod him to tell him more about that. It might be a necessity for him if he was ever going to become a caravan guard and roam the desert and fight the monsters there.

He bounded up the wide alley, past one of the construction sites where the town expanded inward on a hillock on which the families quarter water processing plant and reservoir, the 'Ziggurat', was located. In itself a small fortress, it was partly clad in dark and bright green glazed tiles, partly the similarly colored burnt claybrick showed. Its windmill was slowly rotating, pumping up clean water from cisterns deep underground into the ziggurat. There the water underwent final fine filtration and then flowed into the distribution system inside the citywalls.

At the top of the stairway he closed up with the others who were carefully making their way through the chaos that was the families sector. The girls being nearly twice as tall as everybody else, he would have a hard time loosing them from sight anyway.

"Lekkekek-arrrii!"

Something bounced over the sunsails, slipped through between two different colored segments, landed on Anka's head and used a strand of her long mane in Tarzan-Style, flying directly into Hermann's face. Its wet nose pressed against his, tiny claws sunk painfully into his face, the fennekim cub looked him into the eyes:

"Surprise," it pipsqueaked and licked his nose before bouncing off him again. The cub, looking like a furball with ears and tail, bounced off passerbys heads and shoulders, yipping greetings and finally dropped out of sight in a basement's airvent to a subterranean home. Hermann started to curse and shout and kicked a stone after the cub. He didn't stop insulting it, and its ancestry, and its behaviour, he also started threatening it. Without him noticing, Anka and the other amazons moved back toward him and took him in their midst. Newi bumped her body into his, pushing him forward into Sinna. With each of the four girls being taller and stronger than him, they pushed him unceremoniously onward, changing their course to the nearer gate to the sector of the unmarried fennekim males.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Hermann was stumbling, but the four pressed so firmly against him that he couldn't even fall. The four said nothing until they had passed through the gates. Sinna wanted to say something, but a shooing motion of Anka silenced her:

"Herman, what was our task when we were moved from the stables to the

guard detail?"

"Ah... uh... 'guard the gate and prevent people coming to harm and... ," he tried to recall.

"And exactly what is so difficult about that for you to understand?"

"What? Nothing? I mean we did okay? Whilst we were at the gate nobody was hurt?" Hermann didn't understand the sudden icy attitude of the squires.

They moved on again, taking the detour through the winding alleys of the, as Hermann called it, 'Boyscouts Sector'. Aside of the occasional fenwamother visiting one of her grown cubs, you only met females of the other races in this part of town. Similarly, so Hermann had been told by his little sister, there were no male fennekim in the females sector of the town. Actually, so she had told, she hadn't seen any males at all there when she had her tour of the town.

Anka shook her head and whinnied, her mane dancing behind her:

"When you would be told that you are incompetent, or ugly, how would you feel?"

"I'd be angry and beat the guy!"

Anka looked at Sinna who lowered her head and flared her nostrils, her ears drooping.

"Exactly. And you'd have some right to it when such a statement is not made in conjunction with an event supporting the statement. Like you failing doing something you actually know how to do."

"Well, hmmm, I'd be at least making a bad impression if I do something sloppy which..."

Anka took him with one arm by his armors shoulderguard and lifted him up, two backpacks and all, snorting into his face, bumping her broad muzzle against his nose and staring down the length of her muzzle into his eyes:

"You made a very bad impression shouting and insulting a cub and its family for the cub being a cub. You even threatened the cubs life verbally!"

"Well, he scratched my f..."

"When you become a soldier, you basically agree to risk your life protecting others," and she gave him a firm clout on his head.

"Yeah, but not -"

"And you follow orders without discussions," Anka snarled, lifting Hermann completely off his feet, "And 'protecting from harm' means not only making sure they don't get killed, but that they grow up free of fear and injury. Fear, you listen? That cub might one day have to face a king scorpion in the desert, alone. And when he's scared in the least bit, he will die, and those he's tasked to protect, too. And that might be YOU!"

Hermann flailed his arms uselessly, hanging in the clamshell of the armor until the infuriated amazone - and how true and fitting this name seemed to Hermann this very moment! - let him drop like a hot potatoe.

"Either you learn to enjoy life, or you learn to be quiet. Or, by my fathers mane, I'll suggest personally to have you sent permanently to minecart-drafting!"

As far as Hermanns limited knowledge of punitive work went, that was the worst thing an amazone could imagine. Every amazone was detailed one day per year to work in the mines the fennekim had dug deep under the town and the surrounding area. Their boundless strength was used to pull away the stones in new mineshafts that were to big for either fennekim or their trained ants to move. But most of their race were claustrophobic, the waterworkers being those amazones that suffered the least from that affliction. But even then, most watersystems were big enough for an amazone to walk through. Much unlike the mines, where kneeling often was the only option for them.

Hermann nodded, got up and pointed at his cheek:

"It's just that the lil bugger hurt me..."

Anka twirled around and with a whinny placed her left foot - hoof - plain on the centerpiece of Hermanns armor. The force took him off his feet again and threw him a onto his back. Without any further comment, Anka stomped away. Hermann sat up and coughed a few times to catch his breath again. A lot of fennekim bystanders followed Anka with their gazes. And all of them had very happy, if not even dreamy expressions on their muzzle. Sinna helped Hermann up and handed him his own and Linas staff, then his schoolbag. Linas bag she took herself. Wordlessly she brushed her arms fur for him to see. Under the white-black hair, there were tiny bitemarks visible:

"They're cubs. They don't know each better, they react instinctively. And they love to chew on things. When you are worried about your good looks, Hermann," Sinna flared her nostrils and her ears twitched as she set off again to follow Newi and Inwe, "I would think that a few scratch- and bitemarks of cubs mark a male as being a kind and great-hearted person. And thus a good father."

2.3 Hermann: Schoolltime

"Did you all hand in your homework to the librarians?" the teacher asked, sitting in the shade of the large appletree under which the open-air classes were taking place. One fennekim apprentice frantically dug into his schoolbag, pulled the wax tablet out and dashed into the adjacent city library. Moments later he returned and then settled down on his place again. "Good," the teacher nodded slowly, "then let us begin. You all know the mighty draft-lizards and the helpful honey-ants." All the children showed assent, the fennekim and amazones by flicking their ears, the tigers and humans by nodding. "The small people cultivate glowbugs, mites and various insects, which you are also familiar with. Last week we went to the harbour and caught fish in nets. But," and here the shaggy maned, one eyed teacher, a lion-like (former) member of the tribes of the coastal plains and patriarch of the tigers enclave in Tehuioy, lifted up a metal crate from behind his chair and placed it in front of him in the free space usually reserved for children reciting for the others, "does any of you know these creatures?" He flapped down the boxes top and the children stood up, to gaze into the box. "Yyyuck!" Sinna uttered, eliciting a hearty roared laughter from the patriarch. "Well, they surely ain't beauties, my daughter." One of the fennekim wanted to poke his paw into the water in the crate to poke the creatures that tumbled over each other in the crate. "Careful, little son, those pincers are sharp!" the patriarch warned the fennekim who pulled back his paw again. Hermann, who stood in second row, bent over the fennekim in front of him and then grinned:

"Ah! That's crabs!"

"Oh, you know those beings then? The name you use I am not familiar with. In the shared tongue they're called 'salt water net cutter', for that is what they do. The tribes hunt them with spears in the shallow waters of the coast. They are considered a delicacy by meat-eaters." One of the fennekim piped up: "Where do these come from?" "We got them months ago with the last caravan. They were little back then, barely a handful, together with the seaplants they feed upon. We are currently building a bassin to breed them. They will need bad, that is salty, water, but the water-constructors of the tall people are optimistic that they will be able to help us with that." He bowed his mighty head to the two smaller amazones who were daughters of water workers. "When you want to keep beings in captivity and want to breed them for whatever purpose, you need to make sure that you provide them with the proper food, the proper care and enough space. Too little space, and the creature will hurt itself or its partners. The wrong food, and it will simply die or become sick. And the proper care, well, you all heard from the accident yesterday?" He looked around and then laughed roaringly

again: "I know you children pick up rumors like high trees pick up lightning. So, do not be shy." One of the fennekim hopped up and down and waved both his arms. "Yes Tiz, do tell us what you heard or saw."

"Therewasalizardgoingberserkan"

"Slow, my little son, slow. I am an old man, and not everyone here is as swift of mind and body as the small people."

Tiz inhaled visibly, puffed his chestfur and spoke up again:

"There was a lizard going berserk in the families sector and doing lots of terrible damage and killing hundreds of people!"

"You saw that yourself, little son?" the patriarch flicked his ears curiously.

"hmmmnoididnt," Tiz looked at his hindpaws and scratched patterns into the packed earth that formed the classrooms floor.

"Maybe one of my striped daughters can tell us then, in their impeccable precision?" he leaned forward, resting his head on his fists and his arms on his knees, gazing with his yellow eye into the round.

Anka cleared her throat:

"Shortly before noon a lizard detailed to haul construction material from a transfer point on the wall between the families and the females quarter stepped onto a tarp-nail. In reaction to the pain, the lizard moved unexpectedly, hurting both handlers and throwing off a pallet of bricks from his harness. The bricks fell from street level down into the construction sites basement where..."

The patriarch lifted his hand: "Wonderful, my daughter. Thank you. As you all learned now, the lizard stepped into a nail. In the desert, the lizards walk over sharp stones without so much as a hitch. They know the ground and walk accordingly. When you take animals into your care, you take over responsibility. The lizard knows the gravelroads and the smooth stoneplates used throughout the town. It cannot see or understand a single nail. So, it was surprised when it stepped onto that nail and reacted accordingly. Neither of the handlers had noticed the nail, either. Care does not only mean scrubbing a lizards scales. Or cleaning the fishpond. It also means that you have to be prepared and take responsibility. Simply for you own safety, my children."

"But you would surely have been able to control the lizard, would you not?"

The patriarch started laughing and beat his chest:"Once the lizard would have striked me, I'd have reflexively striked back. When the lizard, by accident, makes such a mess, guess what it would have done when it would have felt properly attacked! It would have really went onto a rampage! Nono, the handlers, despite their injuries, managed to calm the lizard for it to be unloaded and then went to get medical aid. Thanks to their calm and cool nobody really came to harm, aside of minor injuries to pride and body of

some of the workers in the house."

He cleared his throat with a deep growl: "With a sharp mind you can learn to control almost any animal. But always stay alert. No animal born in the wild will be happy in captivity. So you need to observe well and be able to overpower an animal or know how to lure it."

Huffing, he leaned forward again and closed the container, placing it back behind his seat. "Today's lesson is on the beasts of the desert. I was asked to tell you about them. For, I fought most of them, and am still here to tell about it." He lifted up a set of wooden boards into which, in fine lines, various creatures had been carved and the lines later colored. He shuffled the boards and lifted one up, showing it to the children. "This is a King Scorpion. It lives in the deserts as well as the more fertile plains. Small ones are just as big as my hand."

The human children gazed at the lion's large forepaw. Its palm was as big as one of their outstretched hands. "The small ones are of little danger. They will flee you, as long as you do not pursue them. My little sons and also my unfurred children might consider them edible. Use a strong stick to roll away a stone under which one hides. And then take a smaller stick and spear them from above. They are nearly blind and can't look upward. All their enemies they cannot flee and hide from will usually attack them from the front, so their eyes are all looking to the fore and sides. Personally," he made a retching noise, "I ate my share of them in my time and never liked them much. You have to rip out the stinger and the upper element of their tail, or their poison will give you days of agony." The fennekim nodded, ears erect and with big eyes hanging on the patriarch's lips. "A grown exemplar as big as you, my little sons, will most likely be aggressive enough to attack anything in sight. And they don't become much slower as they grow bigger. I once fought an exemplar that had pincers this large," and he held his arms apart for what was about one and a half meter. Peter looked at Tiz and at Harun and then lifted his hand for a moment before just speaking up: "But.. that would mean that the king scorpion was like... eight meters long? As long as the library-building?" The patriarch looked behind himself, at the building, swayed his head a few times and then looked back at Peter with a grin that made the amazons flinch: "Exactly, my unfurred child. Just not as tall."

Hermann blurted out: "I don't believe that!"

The patriarch didn't stop grinning, producing a sharp whistle. One of his daughters came out of the library with a canvas bag. From it, she pulled a scorpion's claw, whilst the patriarch lifted his robe and exposed his chest, where a large scar showed through his fur. The size and shape of the scar matched the form of the claw. "The scorpion was so kind to provide me with the means to back up my statement after I clubbed it to death." Seeing

the childrens faces, especially Hermanns, the patriarch broke out into his uproarious laughter again. "When you fight a larger specimen, you, dear daughters, should try to take out its eyes with your crossbows first. That won't disable it, and I know what I talk about. But it will make its attacks much less coordinated and sluggish. You, little sons, might wish to either attack its legs from the sides and rear to slow it down. And when you can get up on its back, use your blades and cut between the segments of its tail. Theres strong muscles to move it around and to sting with it, and when these are cut, the King Scorpions mightiest weapon, its poisoned stinger, is mostly useless. Who it hits with it..." and there the old feline leaned forward again and looked at all the children, "Is already dead, if they realize it or not. It takes only a few breaths for the poison to start working. The pain will be terrible and the person stung will loose all control over their muscles." "Chances of survival?" one of the amazones asked clipped. The patriarch shrugged: "**All** muscles stop working after a while. Breathing stops and then the heart. And then, thats that." The amazone just nodded. "But more cheery things: There is a lot of meat on such a monster. Not that it would taste especially good, but it's nourishing. They grow more tasty as they grow larger I think. As they prey on each other, killing off a larger specimen means that in the coming months to years you might end up with several smaller ones competing for an area. So hunting them down to get rid of them sadly doesn't work all that well."

The patriarch took the next chart and lifted it up: "This is a cacti spider. When you ever run into an extensive forest of cacti, look if you see mites and ants around. If yes, good, you're most likely near a sietch of the small people. If not, then that is bad. Do not enter the forest unless you are prepared to battle a spider that even king scorpions make a wide circle around." "Does it eat people?" one fennekim asked, thrilled to hear what might be a horror story he could tell his smaller brothers. "No, these beasts live off the cacti. They suckle on their juices and deposit their eggs in them. But they place their nets on the ground between the cacti. And when you venture in, and stumble over such a nets string, the spider knows you are there. It digs holes in the ground which it covers with sand-coated nets. There the spider rests during the day. But when you move into the forest, and step on a piece of net," and again the patriarch leaned forward, eyeing the children, "the spider will strike! And everybody it kills, the spider will bury between the cacti as fertilizer." "How... exactly how big is such a cacti spider?" Hermann asked and tried to sound cool. The patriarch clapped his hands and after a moment of rummaging his daughter appeared from the library, carrying what was a spiders mandible. The eyed the woodcut of the spider

and pointed with extended clawtip on a small part of the picture: "That is it, here. How large you think thus the spider is.... You!" and he pointed at one of the fennekim who jumped and flickered his ears around. Obviously he hadn't been watching the lessons. The little fellow waved his arms: "E-E-Enormous!" "Well, enormous, yes, but some more precision please!" Then he pointed at Hermann: "Your estimate, my son?" "Ohww... when the mandible is as long as my lower arm, and is just as wide as my finger on the picture... The beast must be... as big as the library. As high, as long, and most likely wider." "Very good estimate! As good as one of my striped daughters would have given!" the patriarch bowed his head. "And yes, these monsters are as big as houses. Whilst the king scorpion is fast, the spider is slow. But it resides in its cacti forests not only because it feasts upon them. No, also for defense. It will push you into one of its hidden nets and then pull on one of its strings, making the net roll up on you. It will simply crush you with its weight. And it won't hesitate to throw cactus onto your head." "How many of those did you kill, Patriarch?" Lina asked in an awed voice. "One. I didn't get as old as I am by being stupid. If I was, I would have stayed with my tribe and been killed after they would have realized all my children were striped, smaller and weaker than theirs." He chuckled at the expressions of disbelief from the human children: "The tribes live by a simple rule: Only the strong may survive. Everybody who is weak is killed. And the striped ones do not grow as big and strong as the unicolored ones. So, the law of the tribes is that such children have to be killed. How could I kill my sweet children? But not doing so marked me as weak in their eyes - when they would have learned about it. As I said, I am not dumb." He shrugged and patted the wooden board with the cacti spider: "About the cacti spiders... Daughters, when you want to clear a place from one of them, use darts that can cut." "Tigerclaws," Anka nodded, "They are made of metal and have three fins sharpened as blades. Why, Patriarch?" "Because, slender daughter, the shell of a cacti spider is in itself rather soft. There is a lot of strain on its limbs and body when it moves. A crack, a rupture, somewhere in its body, will start to rip open quickly. Either the spider slows down to save itself, or it will rip itself apart." He threw his arms up in a grand gesture and spread them, like if ripping a piece of paper apart. Then he looked each of the fennekim into the eyes: "Your job, when you fight with your sisters, will be to both distract the spider. Hurt it plenty, so that it doesn't know where to attack. But do not believe you are safe behind it, or anywhere around the spider. It not only has good eyes, but also a very fine sense of hearing. It can hear you breathing, even in the thick of battle. And when it gets a chance," he clapped his hands together suddenly with a loud clap, making several of the children flinch back, "Then you will be little more than a wet

smear in the landscape." He leaned back: "Use your swords, little sons, and climb up the spiders legs. The more you damage its legs, the more likely they will break and the spider will become immobilized. But to kill it," he took a stick and painted a sketch into the sand, "You have to smash or stab this area here. I think its brain is there... But after I smashed it up enough I couldn't tell for sure. In any case: Destroy that area and the spider will collapse almost immediately. I think a hatchet would be ideal for that." He leaned back and purred a moment: "And once you killed the spider, check every single cactus. There will be those with a blueish foam on them. Burn them right away." His voice was hard. "Why?" a fennekim from the rear piped. "Because, the spiders brood is in there. And the spider renews the blue foam every evening. When it doesn't, its brood awakens and bursts forth from the cactus. And the little ones are ravenous hungry. They attack and eat living beings. And they are poisonous. So... Burn those cacti before the sun rises again." He breathed with a heavy shudder and then lifted the next picture up: "This is a dunecarver. The giant version of the centipedes the small folk enjoy frying in honey."

And he shared his knowledge with the children, cautioning them on the traces that the beasts of the deserts made, of their weak points and the best ways he could think of to exploit them.

When the lecture was over, Hermann lifted up his torso-armor and looked at the dent the chestplates center. "You had trouble with one of my daughters, my son?" the patriarch had moved without a sound to Hermanns side, startling the boy. "Well, yes, Anka was slightly angry with me." "She," and the patriarch ran his pawpad over the dent, "was very angry with you. And you were too slow as to evade her anger. Be careful and listen to my daughters, my son, for they are smart. And this world is theirs, they know it very well, whilst you are still but a cub." "I'm almost an adult! Just a few more years!" "Ah, but if years would be all that counts! You need to fit into the world around you, else the world will grind you down and to size," and he patted Hermanns shoulder lightly with his huge paw. "I didn't do anything wrong!" The patriarch flicked his ears in his version of a shrug: "My striped daughters are not easy to enrage. I hurt a number of them by accident, but they never punished me. Instead they told and showed me how to avoid harming others. When one of my daughters thus is enraged enough to," and he extended a claw as long as Hermanns small finger and ticked the dent in the armor, "she must be really angry and really worried. I would thus listen to her and try to learn. But I am just an old tomcat." Hermann mumbled assent and picked up his schoolbag and his staff: "Thank you for the advice, Patriarch." The hulking lion in his wide robe of rough, earth colored cloth

nodded and picked up the metal container with the crabs, whilst his daughter picked up the wooden boards and brought them back into the library. The sun was nearing the horizon, the days heat slowly being cooled by an upcoming cooler breeze.

High up in their tower in the center of the amazones fortification, one of their males started to sound the large tubular bell to tell the town the time and to announce the guard shift.

The classes that took place during the day were mercifully held either in a cave formed by the walls in the amazones sector, or, depending on the teacher at or even in the central lake of the park. With the late hour classes, the tree and small lake provided enough cool. Hermann poked around the armor, trying to push the dent Anka had kicked into it out, but the material was too strong and resisted his hands pressure easily. Anka ignored him completely, talking instead with the other amazones and one of the tigers, showing him how to fix a fishnet he had knotted a few weeks ago in school and damaged with his claws.

Peter walked over to Hermann and pointed at the clear hoofprint in the armor: "You had trouble?" "No. But you will have in a moment when you don't get away." Peter shrugged and went to Manfred who was talking in low tones with one of the fennekim apprentices of the glassblowers guild. Manfred, who was wearing glasses, had happily agreed to an apprenticeship with the towns premier jewellers. They not only made jewellery, but also most precision instruments the town needed. The two fennekim-brothers had been intrigued by Manfreds glasses early on. In exchange for learning the secrets of how to make such lenses first and a three year grace period they took him as apprentice. With the amazon princess requesting his and Peters knowledge as teachers, both their one-year apprenticeships would take longer, but that was fine for both.

With fennekims notoriously high speed and short attentionspan, an apprenticeship lasted usually one year, after which a fennekim might call himself a 'Trainee of the Craft'. That meant that he was able to do most basic tasks of the trade without supervision. When he found the job was not to his liking, he could apply for another apprenticeship. This way many fennekim had basic skills in several jobs before they entered advanced training for another two years in a job they had the trainee degree. Once that was finished, they could call themselves 'Journeyman' and usually went with a caravan to another town to work for about three years after which they were officially recognized as 'Craftsman'.

Being a craftsman meant a fennekim was considered a full adult. The

fennekim society didn't count adulthood by years, but by a fennekim showing the determination to stick to a task long enough to master it. The amazones used a different system for education and training, but wherever possible school classes were shared amongst the different species of the town.

Many of the human children had come from farms and were now working in cultivating plots in the towns park sector to grow the seeds that they had found in the luggage the amazones and fennekim had rescued from the wreck. They underwent, for lac kof a better term, gardening and farmer training. From the eggs that had been in one of the strange metal containers amongst the luggage, a batch of chicken and two roosters had hatched. The fennekim teachers teaching general animal-care were learning as much about chicken in the process as the human children were learning about the fennekims insectoid livestock.

Hermann sighed and placed his armor back on the ground behind the bench he sat on when the next teacher came toward the open-air classroom from the roadway. She wore no armor and no sword, but the scars on her body, worst on her muzzle, spoke volumes of her being a seasoned veteran. The amazones amongst the schoolkids knelt down on one knee and bowed ther heads. "Stratega," they greeted the teacher as one. The teacher ignored them and went past them, settling down on the chair the patriarch had vacated earlier. "Sit down, pupils," the old amazone said, "today I will show you how to use maths for two practical issues. For one, how to calculate food and water supplies for excursions into the desert. Second, how to properly calculate a ballistic catapults settings and munition to hit a target." Looking to the tigers amongst her pupils, she added: "I'll make the tasks more abstract for you. You will be able to use that type of maths in carpentry and construction work just as well. It might be helpful in that way for many of the others, too."

Hermann tried to follow. Calculating ones water and food requirements was mostly easy, It boiled down to addition and multiplication. And division, when it came to distributing the load amongst several lizards.

But the calculations for catapult shots, with their parabel curve and computations of weight, projektile speed and even air resistance made Hermanns head swirl. In the end he went with the task the tigers and several of the fennekim choose, which was the geometric calculations for a hipped roof.

They scribbled their calculations into waxtablets the library handed out for the purpose. The teacher, who's regular job was the role of the military commander of the town, checked the tablets whenever a pupil announced he had a problem or thought he was finished.

She didn't praise anybody, but neither did she admonish anyone. She explained patiently, and found always new ways to explain a problem to a child when it didn't understand it. Hermann had tried to use that aspect of her to mock her. Not only had she not reacted, but instead handed him a wooden tag at the end of class. Those tokens served as seals and passports, this particular one instructed the bearer to appear in the princess palace twice a week, without naming any details. When he had reported grudgingly the next day to the palace, her adjutant went over the lecture with him. Seeing that he had understood everything, he had found himself doing physical exercises alongside the amazone who grinned and said that he could be happy that he was so smart that he had learned it all so fast in the end. Exercising in the glaring sun at 40 degree celcius for almost two hours had brought him several times close to a collapse. After this experience he had never again tried to play dumb.

One fennekim boy, who worked as a tanner, had serious problems with the more complex math, was also handed a wooden token at the end of class. His master would be happy to have an apprentice of his appear in the heart of the amazones fortress. Most likely he would dress his apprentice in garb made from the best leather, as to impress the stratega and princess. And the fennekim would have personal tutoring, either by one of the assistants of the stratega or the stratega herself. Reading, writing and maths were topics taken dead serious by the amazones. Lectures in art and music and chemistry were usually taught by fennekim, whilst biology and history were topics taught by various teachers.

Hermann sighed when the stratega nodded, reading his calculations. She placed his tablet on a growing pile at her feet, which one of the librarians would collect at the end of the lecture. The shadows grew long as the sun touched the buildings on top of the fortified hill that was the amazones main garrison. Finally the stratega clapped into her hands: "Class dismissed" She spoke to the children the same way she spoke to the soldiers, short and clipped. She got up and left the class, walking around the library to the amazones sector. Some of the fennekim jubilated and jumped into the little lake beside the 'classroom', happily splashing around, enjoying the remaining warmth before the cool of the night would settle in.

Hermann picked up his belongings, angered about feeling so insecure. He tried to mock people, to insult them. Either they didn't understand him, or his comments backfired. Strongarming others? Fennekim were simply to agile. He had gotten one, once, but pinching his ears had resulted in a short and painful bite. And the fennekim had excused himself afterward, for, so

the lil guy had said, Hermann couldn't have known fennekim ears were so sensitive, whilst the fennekim should have guessed that the unfurred skin would be easy to harm. "I gotta get my buddies and then we'll show one of the other kids... human kids... that they should obey and listen to us for good reasons. To me." He had not the slightest inclination to try dabbling with one of the tigers. They were timid for the greater part, but this timidity was because they were scared to harm anybody. They had claws and fangs, were fast and strong. When they'd be fighters, like their patriarch had been, he could maybe have respected them. Still, even in a scared reflex those claws could accidentally disembowel somebody. Likewise the amazones. His finger traced over the imprint of Anka's hindhoof in the armor. Anka was about his age, a head and a half taller and about the same weight as he was. And her roundhouse kick had thrown him back a step and on the ground. They were slow, true, but their slender limbs had all the strength of a horse. Well, they WERE horses, after all.

When he looked up from the dent in his armor, Lina stood there: "Well then, Protector, let us get your dented pride to the blacksmith for repairs." "Won't that mean any trouble?" "No, why? Your armor is a tool. A tool is exposed to wear. And thus needs regular maintenance." She trotted off, almost dancing, her tail lashing out behind her as she hummed a small song she had picked up in the families sector today.

2.4 Hermann and Manfred: Nightguard

Lina had accompanied Hermann to the garrisons blacksmith, where he handed the armor to one of the apprentices. The smoke- and soot-stained amazone looked over the dent, flicked her ears and then chuckled: "It will be ready by tomorrow morning." With that, she took the armor to one of the anvils, took the armor apart along its joints and placed it on the anvil, before attending the smithys fireplace, stirring the glowing coals.

"Well, she'll work on it during her watch. No point waiting here. Let's go back to the barracks. There's a cardgame this evening." Hermann shook his head: "Thank you, but, no. I want to use the remaining time to meet my buddies. You know, talk about the day and such." Lina whinnied: "That sounds like a splendid thing! Can I come along?" "Nunno, it's you know, a mans ... a human mans thing." "Oh." she trotted alongside him, passing by the now-closed gates of the princess palace toward the steep stairway up the garrison hill. "Well, I'll be back after nightcall and before gate closure." "After gate closure would be quite the feat," Lina chuckled good humoredly.

He took the turn to the right through the western gate of the garrison to the city central plaza. The public blacksmith had already lowered the wooden blinds that prevented dust - and potential rain - to blow into the shop. Her apprentices were busy collecting the ash in a bucket to deliver it to the alchemists guild. They made soap from it somehow, in return providing special alloys. A lot of the trade in the town was based on barter or on a coinage named "deed", or "duty". The coins were numbered and registered. Living in the town meant that everybody owed a bit of his worktime to the town and the society. When somebody had skills the town needed, he paid his taxes in doing work for the town. Like the public blacksmith maintaining the metal parts of the city gates, or many fenwas providing silks for both the public sunsails as well as wound dressings and equipment of the towns military. The list went on like that. Hermann strode past the glassblowers guilds building, stopping a moment to gaze through the windows upon the wide array of small delicate figurines or vases made of colorful glass. Like many fennekim, the glassblowers mostly worked two jobs. The society simply did not have a demand big enough to support several full-time glassblowers, but the demand was high enough to run a small public workshop and sales room.

Past the instruments-makers shop and home, from where the faint music of some stringed instrument sounded, Hermann finally arrived at the corner where the spice trader was serving the last customers of the day. His stocks were still well filled and aside of a very few spices, nothing was missing

from his assortment. The air was filled with the sometimes mouthwatering, sometimes goosebumps inducing scents. Opposite the spice traders stall was a public restroom. For Hermann this was absolutely absurd, but the sanitary installations of the town were impeccably clean. He never had noted any scent emanating from those places, and when the fuzzy folks with their most likely finer noses didn't bother...

Leaned against the restroom, he spotted his buddies, the Huber brothers. Their youngest sister, Anne, was sticking most of the time with the the fenwas, the female fennekims, in their own city district where males were not allowed except under extraordinary circumstances. As much as Anne despised Hermann, her older brothers adored him. Back when they had been living in Cologne, Hermann had been the group leader from the youth organisations local branch. He had enjoyed the influence and power he did have back then. Paul and Wilhelm spotted him now, too, and waved. They had taken up apprenticeships in the sawmill, which, like most larger scale industries, was located in the city sector of the unmarried male fennekim. "Hey Hermann! What we'll do today?" "Well, I have to be back in the barracks in about an hour, so nothing long. But I think we ought to teach Manfred or Peter that they're just some wimps and shouldn't think too much of themselves only because the horsie-princess is so fond of them as to declare them to be teachers. "Ah.. Hermann, you're sure of that? You're a guard now, wouldn't that collide with your oath or something?" Wilhelm scritchd his head and looked thoughtful. "There was no oath. Just a lecture what my duties are. And now I am off duty." Paul and Wilhelm looked at each other and then shrugged in unison: "When it is like that, well... We know where Manfred is at the moment.

They guided him from the central city plaza to the 'Tail', the roadway that connected the plaza and the entrance to the harbor sector with the entrances to the families sector, the unmarried males sector and the side entrance to the Town Eldest Plaza, the park-like area where the adult fennekim regularly met to learn about the wisdoms that their elderly leader decided to bestow upon them. Beside the latter entrance was a small, sunsail-shadowed meadow with a freshwater fountain. On his way to the families sector, where he did guard duty with the five squires / young amazones, Hermann passed this area daily. There were the small vendor stalls, the pottery, the butcher - make that bug- and grub-seller for fennekims - and the storytellers meadow. Here the young of the town, too young yet for school, but old enough that their parents allowed them out of the families sector - respectively out of the princess palace or the tigers sector - assembled during the day to listen to the stories the oldsters, the musicians, or, just about every adult who had an

hour off, told them. Sometimes the alchemists guildmaster showed one of his tricks. As Hermann had heard, the tricks that the children liked most, the guild showed off in large at a festival once a month. Which would be in two days. The patriarch sometimes sat there, too, telling stories from the tribes, and from his travels through the desert with his family. Today, Manfred sat there and was telling a story. It was the story of Haensel and Gretel, and he was translating it on the go, reading it from a book of collected fairytales. Wearing a cowled robe exposing just her muzzletip, a red furred fenwa sat beside him, following his finger over the paper as he indicated which part of a sentence he was currently translating. He was almost at the end of the story. Hermann, Paul and Wilhelm waited around the corner until Manfred had finished the story. The children - "Cubs," Hermann corrected himself in thinking about the audience of mostly big eared furballs - stormed Manfred and the fenwa with questions, but the latter laughed sweetly and hushed them. "It is late now, children, and you need to rest. When you really want to know something, talk about it with your friends, and then make, all together, ten questions." She lifted her hands and let them count her fingers. "And these ten questions, Master Manfred and me will answer. Tomorrow!" The last she said laughingly, as the cubs started to throw questions all over the place. Hermann waved Paul and Wilhelm forward when he heard her excuse herself from Manfred to herd the fennekim cubs back to the nearby families quarter. Manfred was standing up, carefully sliding the book back into a fennekim-made silken pouch. He had borrowed the from one of the other human children.

"Ah, Manfred, being all important, uh? Just like back home with your dad being aristocracy and high military, eh?" Manfred looked up over his glasses rims and gulped visibly: "Well, hello Hermann. What is it you want?" "Oh? Me? I am just curious, you know?" He and the two others cornered him against the small fountain, speaking in low tones, so that the perpetual splashing of the fountain would overshadow the 'discussion', as Hermann thought if it. The three boys also blocked the view on Manfred fully, looking, so they were sure, as if the three of them were just standing there and talking to themselves. "Maybe I am curious if those glasses of yours would make me look all smart?" Hermann mocked the younger boy, snatched his glasses, putting them on his nose. He grinned through the glasses, their strong distortion and the quickly coming darkness making it near impossible see anything: "No, they just make me look silly." "They were never meant for you," Manfred said defiantly, standing ramrod straight. Hermann took the glasses off and threw them over his shoulder into the grass of the tiny meadow that was the storytellers plaza: "Right, I don't need it" The younger

boy wanted to protest and press through to start searching for his glasses, but Hermann shoved him back into the wall: "Nawww, you want to leave our little party? No, not yet."

"Ohhh, have you've seen Sire von Feldstein by chance?" The voice was high and clear like a bell. It was Tanaz, standing barely a meter behind Wilhelm. "No" "Yes" Paul and Wilhelm looked at each other, but then Hermann turned around and gazed at the fenwa that barely reached to his belly: "Yeah, he's here. And we're taking good care of our friend." As if to prove anything by it, he pulled Manfred forward and wrapped his arm around the boys neck, using his other arms fist to painfully scrub the younger ones head: "We're good friends, aren't we?" "Please, Milady ibn Ardach, go home. It's all good, really," Manfred stammered and tried to look as composed as he could. "Yeah, go home little lady. This is boys business," Hermann grinned at her, exposing his teeth, knowing it to be a rude gesture. She lowered her head demurely: "All will be well." Then she turned and walked away to the left, down the road to the main city plaza. "All will be well... But not for you," Hermann grunted and rammed Manfred again into the wall once the little desertvixen had vanished out of sight. The fact that he didn't shout, as not to attract the attention of the guards under the nearby gate, made him all the more scary for the younger boy. "What is it with this 'Sire' and 'Milady' babbling?" He lifted Manfred up with one hand, pressing the other hand over the boys mouth. Then he gestured to Paul, who nodded and then banged his fist into Manfreds belly. "You read her some of those fancy stories about knights and dragons and fair ladies?" Manfred nodded before he started to struggle with all his, limited, might. But when Wilhelm helped holding him firmly against the wall, holding his legs and one arm, the other arm held my Paul, Manfred could do nothing anymore. Paul stretched his right arm back and again drove his fist into the younger boys belly. "Ohhh, look, the great storyteller is crying!" Hermann whispered acidly at the sight of Manfreds tears. He nodded again to Paul, who raised his fist again - and then suddenly released Manfreds arm to hold his own head, wincing and falling to his knees. Beside him on the ground lay a shattered brick from the decorative pattern that ran along the wall. It had narrowly fallen through between the wall and the silken sunsail covering the place. "Paul!" Wilhelm released Manfred and slipped around behind Hermann to his brother, helping him up. Paul was bleeding lightly, but the stone was too small and light to have been a deadly danger. Fennekim were responsible for the decorations on the walls, and they used rather small stones. Still, Paul was bleeding and looked around dazedly. "S-Sorry Hermann, but that - that gotta be taken care of immideatly," Wilhelm stuttered apologetically. "Yeah,

take off, you clowns," Hermann growled. The wound didn't look too good. The two trotted off to the left, the city plaza and the harbor district. There was a sort-of hospital there and medical personnel. Manfred was struggling against Hermann's hold, but didn't make any noises loud enough to attract the attention of the gate guards. The smaller boy tried to push Hermann away. But Hermann just leaned with his weight against him. He arched his arm back to drive his fist into the younger boy's belly when the latter suddenly stopped pushing him away and instead pulled him close.

2.5 Manfred: Kind Souls

There was a double knock. And then Hermann released Manfred and slowly toppled over like a felled tree. Manfred sunk to his knees, looking dazed at Hermann lying on the ground, until his eyes caught sight of a small apple rolling away from where Hermann was cold out.

"Oh, is your friend unwell?" Tanaz came up on the meadow from the right, from the families sector. "No, I think he... He is just exhausted," Manfred got to his feet and held his aching belly. He looked at Hermanns forehead where, as he had hoped, a big bump was forming where the bigger boys forehead had connected with the stone of the citywall.



"I came back because I found these. I am sorry it took me so long to

return, but I didn't realize they were yours. You see, the metal doesn't hold scent so well." She pulled his glasses from one of her robes pockets. "You need to be more careful with those. I never saw such type of lenses," she scolded him and unfolded the glasses, standing on her toetips to place it on his nose. "Yes, I know. Maybe I should talk with the glassblowers and the jewellers about how such lenses are made?" "That is such a splendid idea! There are many that would profit from such marvelous glasses!" Manfred looked around. The stone that had hit Pauls head rested still on the ground. It was an orange colored brick. He picked it up and looked up. "Whats that?" Tanaz piped curiously. "A stone that fell down..." "Ohhh, most likely from the frieze. It happens at times. I'll inform the masons guild house tomorrow morning." She looked up and then snatched the stone from his hand, putting it away in one of her robes pockets. Her skirt under the black robe was a rich orange, like the stone. Looking up, Manfred wasn't entirely sure, as it had gotten too dark by now... But the frieze above the storytellers plaza was a rich unicolor green, he was sure of that.

A gong sounded over the town. In a quarter hour all main gates would be closed. And in the garrison in the amazones sector it would be taps. "Wasn't your friend trying to become a *soldier*?" The term 'soldier' translated roughly to 'military force of one person' in the common tongue. It was usually either 'guard' - 'protector of a place' - 'legionaire' - 'protector of the caravans' - 'knight' - protector of the people - or just plain 'protector'. Unless you included 'squire', which meant 'protector in training'. "Yes, I think so. Why?" "Well, he will be in trouble when he doesn't make it back in time for taps." Manfred stepped over Hermanns limp body and picked up the apple he had seen rolling away earlier. It's one side was heavily dented and there were several small indentures in it. Like from clawtips. "Oh, maybe he has the day off tomorrow?" Manfred ventured the rather unlikely option. There was a light thud behind him and when he turned around, Tanaz stood behind him, right beside Hermanns head, her ears lifting her robes cowl up. She looked somehow happy. "Oh. That might be. He would surely not enjoy missing taps. Anyway, I need to head back to the sisters city," that was the term used by fenwas for the unmarried females sector, "and you need to get back to your bed." "Wisdom speaks from your heart, milady ibn Ardach." Manfred smiled and bowed deeply. "Ah, my knight von Feldstein, the tales of your bravery are much famous at court," she replied with a silvery giggle, bowing her head lightly and making a curtsy. She loved the stories about medieval knights that some of the children, and most of all Peters microfiche library, had brought along. Abruptly she turned and walked away. Looking after her, Manfred had the impression she was favouring her left leg a bit.

For a moment he stood and looked at Hermann on the ground. There were two bumps at the rear oh his head. The smaller one had four lightly bloody dots - just at the right positions for the clawtips of a fennekims - or fenwas - hindpaw. A whinny from the gate made him look over to it. One of the gate guards stood there, an elderly amazone, leaned against the wall. She pointed at her ears and twitched them. "You should know by now that these are not for decorative purposes, child. When bozos like those bother you again, you know, just ask for help." "But aren't you there to guard the gate only?" She whinnied in laughter: "Being a guard means protecting people from harm. That is our first and foremost duty. Guess why there is five of us when two are sufficient to operate the gate itself. Next time, just say the word," she chuckled. "Then again, when one of the small sisters tells you that all will be well, rest assured it will be." Manfred thought of the orange stone and the two bumps on the back of Hermanns head. Then he looked at the apple in his hand. The nearest apple tree was quite a bit further away. He actually didn't even know where exactly it was. But it had hard, wild apples on it. "Well, I'll go home then... What about him? He ought to be in the garrison by taps." The amazone snorted: "Let that be his problem. Go home now." "But he will be in trouble, won't he?" The amazone neighed and shook her head: "There will not be any problems for which you will be the cause. You cannot protect everybody from themselves. Go now." The last she said in a firm and authoritarian voice. Manfred fidgeted a moment longer but then trotted off to the unmarried males sector. It's gate was on the other side the road, but the low hanging branches of a pear tree, filling the road crossings center, cut the visibility of the gates toward each other to zero. Manfred reached up and plucked a few ripe pears from one of the branches fennekim didn't reach from the ground. He ate one of them, handing the others to the guards at the unmarried males gate. They all bowed gracefully and their officer snorted softly, pointing to the other gate behind the peartree. "You know she's right. Don't you worry." He nodded and tried to smile. Then we walked the stairway down to Minehead Road, took to the right, stopping at the bathhouse. Merry yipyapping and splashing from inside invited him for a quick visit. The stars were becoming visible in the sky. They shone through the near translucent silken sunsail that formed the normal roof over the bathhouse. Wooden tiles could be pulled over the roof, too, in case of a sandstorm. That way the bathhouse was rather low maintenance. In the low light Manfred could see several fennekim splash around and others use the diving board to splash into the deeper water with abandon. He slipped out of his clothes, a loose shirt made from the silk of a damaged sunsail and short trousers made of likewise material. Tanaz had showed him the tame dog-sized spiders fenwas and fennekim alike kept to produce the raw silk. That

had been really scary. But the material was light, extremely tough and in some variants water- and even airtight. Just for the shoes they would have to come up with some ideas. He went under the shower - a bucket that refilled automatically and could be emptied using a rope - to get rid of all grime and dust before climbing the small stairway to the diving board. "Careful down there, I'm coming," he announced himself. "Ish all free, buddeh, go flying," some fennekim from below yapped. He jumped and made a cannonball. He knew fennekim enjoyed the huge splash that this made, and their light bodies didn't make as much of a splash as he could do. When he surfaced from the cool water he felt refreshed. And the happy yipps and howls felt really good, too. "Again! Again!" Fennekim loved splashing around. "No, I just wanted to take a short dip. I need to go to bed now." "Aye buddeh, naishe napping!" "Happy dreams!" He slipped into his trousers, taking the other clothes into his arm and then walked barefoot back to the place that had taken him in. Minehead Road, Sawdust Alley, Orchard Alley, Lake Road, ...

There were still many fennekim around, but those that were working at night followed rather the more silent trades. Fennekim had excellent nightvision. The sunsails had been pushed aside in several spots as soon as the sun had set. In the starlight Manfred had to walk slowly to avoid walking into fennekim working on potter wheels or that were varnishing larger wooden parts. The more intense traffic during the day would have thrown up dust and hairs that would have degraded the quality of their work.

He heard the perpetual small gurgling and splashing of the waterwell in the Workers Gate Way to the left, and pulled carefully over to the right, into the Fishing Pond Alley. He guided himself along the right hand building and then around the first corner. Finally he arrived at his home. The door was still open, so he reached inside, taking the brush resting under the first doorstep, brushing his feet and legs clean of the sand that still stuck to them. "We're all home!" piped a chorus of voices, and a lower voice growled in good humor: "We waited for you. They retold me one of the stories you told during lunchbreak. So the... Wolf ate the girl with the red cap and the grandmother? And they were still alive hours later to be saved by the woodchuck?" Manfred closed the door and threw its lock, then carefully descended into the room. "Alizea, well, it is a fairy tale, that is, a story that is," he thought how to describe the concept of a fairy tale optimally to the amazone that served as the five youngsters guardian. He moved to the small washing stand and fingered for his toothbrush. "More to the left," one of the fennekim piped from the bunk beds. Their nightvision was just awesome. When the larger moon came up, they would be able to read by its light alone. "Thank you .. Jahan?" "Kaveh!" It piped back from the darkness. Manfred

started to brush his teeth with a bit of the crushed and dried mint on his toothbrush. After he was done he slipped out of his trousers and put on his pyjamas. They were basically a long pair of trousers and a long sleeved shirt - at night it got uncomfortably cold. There was agitated whispering from the bunk beds when he rounded them to get to the ladder. Alizea snorted: "Bashing him with a cushion over the head would be no feat, Kaveh, as he can neither hear nor see it coming." A disgruntled snort was the sole reply. "Get to sleep, all of you," the amazone laughed softly. "And dream of what heroic deeds you might be able to do tomorrow." Manfred climbed up and then slid into the uppermost bed, beside Heydar. Pulling the blanket over his body, the human boy curled up his cushion and rolled onto the side. After a while he felt a wet nosetip at his ear: "We are all mighty proud of you," Heydar whispered. "Why?" "Because you got a girlfriend!" Manfred put his forehead into folds: "Ah... I got a girlfriend?" "Sure! The Ardach girl, the danceress! She is from a great family. And she is a danceress." "I... Well, maybe?" Five suppressed giggles told him all the fennekim were listening in. "You got to take good care of her. Protect her, you know? Girls are weak and soft and gentle and easily scared. You gotta protect her from harm, you hear? We'll help you train when you want to become a proper protector." "That... Well, thank you, guys," Manfred replied in low tones. "Just say when!" "And what you wanna learn." "And what style!" "Nima, style! Pfff! It's just a question of the legwork, I tell you!" "Kids, SLEEP!" Alizea grunted from the other side of the room. "Okay." "Will do!" "Goodnight Alizea!" "Good night Manfred" "Good night Heydar!" "Good night Kaveh" "Good night Nima!" A suppressed groan came from Alizea and it sounded as if she buried her head under her cushion. After every fennekim had wished everybody else in the flat goodnight, it finally got quiet.

"So Fenwas are weak, easily scared and gentle?" Manfred thought. And in his mind he reviewed the headwound Paul had gotten from the stone that had, supposedly, dropped from the frieze and the bumps on the back of Hermanns head. "Yeah, and I am the emperor of China."



The sun rose over the horizon, kissing the clouds a burning red before she appeared. High on the central tower of the princess palace a lone guard, huddled in a warm cloak against the nights cold and the chilling wind, got up and climbed the ladder down into the tower, took the stairway to reach the next level of the tower where he shook the other inhabitants of the tower awake.

"It's time to wake the city, brothers."

Together they ascended the stairway and went out through the door to the balcony embracing the topmost level of the tower. Equipped with their tools, they started, lets call it 'working'. Using cushioned hammers, they started to play a carrying melody on large tubular bells that were mounted on the towers sides.

Far away in the unmarried males district, Manfred was still sleeping. Kavehs ear popped up and turned to track the noise. barely a second later he knelt up, took his cushion and used it as a club to bowl Nima out of the bed. Nima was still in in mid-flight to the ground, awake enough to stretch out his limbs, when Kaveh jumped off his bed, grabbing one of the ropes dangling from the ceiling, catapulting himself up to Heydar and Manfred. Due to a formal non-clubbing-agreement presided over by Alizea, Kaveh just used Manfred as an anchor to get more force in clubbing Heydar, who was struggling with his blanket, off the bed. Nima surely would provide emergency cushioning. and if not, fennekim could drop from scary heights with little to no injury. Heydar flew over the side of the bed, still half wrapped into his blanket. Manfred started to blink and to move, but Kaveh already had jumped down over the side of the bed. Fetching one of the loose ropes dangling around the bunk beds, his velocity downward converted to a side-

ward motion as the rope came to an end. A swift cushion-attack from the lowest bunk missed him, but was obviously used by Jahan to bowl Navid out of the bed. With a shrill "agiagiagiagi-ahhhh!" the rope angled around the bedpost, carrying Kaveh, wildly swinging his cushion with the left, into the lowest bunk. Like shot from a catapult, Jahan, still holding his own cushion with which he had battled Navid successfully, flew sideways out of the bunks, a rather surprised expression on his muzzle. "King of the Hill!" Kaveh piped and then made a yapping howl. "All hail the king!" the other fennekim piped in response, Manfred joining them, smiling widely. Yesterday Heydar had managed to secure the title. Manfred slid carefully out of the bed and down the ladder that had been installed for his comfort. Kaveh climbed out of the lowest bunk, threw his cushion to his own bed, marching regally over to Alizeas large bed. She slept on her belly, one arm dangling out of the bed. Her head and her other arm were mostly buried under her big cushion. Only her muzzletip showed from under cushion. Kaveh stepped to the headend of her bed, bowed over its frame and then placed a wet lick - humanlike kissing was anatomically a bit tricky for fennekim - between Alizeas nostrils. Alizeas reflexes were good, but too slow for the fennekim. Her arm dangling out of the bed grabbed the cushion and whacked it blindly over her own head and roughly where Kaveh had stood. But he had zipped two steps to the side, giggling, and kissed one of her now exposed ears. Again the amazone blindly whacked the cushion at him, groaning: "Yeah, yeah, I'm awake!" Growling she finally got up. Manfred had gotten into his shorts already, picking up his toothbrush and towel. Kaveh came back to the others, being handed his items and accepting them with regal manners. Then he marched, you couldn't call his affected style anything else, up the stairway to the door and through the pathway between the interconnected buildings to the swimming lake. Some other fennekim from the adjacent buildings were already in the water, splashing with abandon. Nima and Heydar lifted Kaveh up when he waved impatiently for them. Then he shouted: "To victory!" And they catapulted him as high and as far as they could into the lake. The others just slid into the water taking their morning bath. The water was cold and Manfred himself just submerged for a moment before wading out again. The silk of his trousers didn't take much water and would dry within a short while. He went to the lakes washroom. It was also their building's shared restroom. Behind him Kaveh bade his minions to 'carry the king back to shore'.

They had offered Manfred to share in their custom, but Alizea had explained to him that it might include being kicked out of a bed higher than he was standing. Considering the, for him, rather cramped conditions in the flat, the amazone had diplomatically organized a 'non-whacking treaty' be-

tween Manfred and the five big eared youngsters. Still, he'd be legally used as an anchor to gain a hold and as a jumping board. As a concession he was given the bed on the wall side where he could by no means accidentally drop down two meters to the ground.

Manfred was brushing his teeth when the others arrived. Nima and Heydar carried Kaveh on their shoulders, lowering him in front of the washstand. "The king would like his teeth brushed," Kaveh stated, and immediately Jahan jumped to his side and started brushing. Manfred burst into laughter. When Peter wouldn't have warned the other kids of this and similar mannerisms in advance, Manfred was sure he would have had a heart attack purely from laughing upon seeing it for the first time. Fortunately Alizea had repeated the warning and taken him out of the loop right from the start. Finishing his business, Manfred waited patiently. The king was the first out of the house, the king was the first back in the house. The amazons that lived in the males quarters usually went to the washroom whilst the fennekim took their bath. And when the fennekim came in for toothbrushing, the amazons took their bath.

Manfred towed himself dry and then waited for his friends to finish. Outside he could see a deal more human kids and fennekim arrive at the lake. As they came, they soon dispersed again back to their flats restrooms, vacating the lake for the amazons. Alizea walked by, almost noiseless on the sand of the lake. She greeted several of her fellows, swimming a few strokes in the small lake. What the striped females talked about, Manfred couldn't hear. Then again, 'the king' was ready, and so were his 'minions'. They trooped back to their flat, Kaveh taking the lead. Once arrived, they made their and Alizeas bed. She had hung all their blankets and cushions up on low hanging ropes for airing. Ropes strung to those ropes allowed the fennekim to climb up, toss down the blankets to their waiting friends and then push the down-hanging ropes toward the bedposts of their bed. It were the ropes they used for their acrobatic antics. Once all beds were made, Nima climbed upon Heydars shoulders and pulled dishes from a cabinet, whilst Jahan dived under Alizeas bed and returned with their seating cushions. Five small ones, one medium, one large one. The medium one wasn't for Manfred, however, it was for 'da king'. The human boy opened the food-storage cabinet and pulled out the remaining half of yesterdays pineapple, a metal box in which several fat grubs were chewing blissfully on a big leaf and, from the other compartments, three hands full of compressed grass, several big apples and some more fruits. Kaveh had fetched a small basket and had run out again, passing by the windows. His walk was bouncy to say the least. His ears flopping after him like flags, he vanished at a speed slow by

fennekim standards. Manfred squinted at the note over the food cabinet - it was a list he had written for himself to judge the amounts and types of food properly. Nima had laid out the dishes whilst Heydar was blending the apple-flavoured tea they had made yesterday afternoon with fresh water.

Meshes of iron and silver kept the water at the public wells mechanically and biologically clean. With no real chemical industry around, the sand-and-coal filters in the ziggurates were actually most likely sufficient to produce clean, drinkable water. Manfred had been astonished to find that the amazones put such an effort into details that most public waterworks on earth had deemed unnecessary just a few decades ago. Then again, he had learned, their culture was deserving the term 'ancient'. Theuiyoy was considered a young city, its core, the princess palace, being 'just' 4000 years old. The stones used in its construction were smaller than anywhere else, because, so the history teacher had said, the zebras had been unable handling larger stones back then.

He portioned out the basics for everybody on a central platter, namely the apples, pears, two quarters of a water-melon and grapes. The specialties, the compressed grass for Alizea, two oranges and four honey-baked grasshoppers for himself and two of the squiggly grubs for each of the fennekim, he distributed directly to the dishes. Placed with a part of fresh leaf, the grubs wouldn't try to get away as long as they could still stuff themselves with more leaf. Manfred was told that the town was keeping a strict rationing during the 'siege', as the surrounding landscape couldn't be used for extended farming. Still, as long as the river flowed there were fish and water. And the town itself had such huge areas of greenery that the amazones and fennekim could last a few years. The bigger problem were the limited resources of special substances, ranging from medicine to certain metals needed to make special alloys. Kaveh ran past the windows looking out to Fishing Pond Alley, singsonging "Hello,I'msorry,niceweather,justpassingby,willbeagreatday" until he zipped through the flats door and dashed down the stairway. He had brought in two handfulls of fresh grass, some soft leaves from fast growing vines and several flowers. And seven segments of sugarcane, a bamboo-like plant that grew as fast as bamboo, but gave off a mild sweetness when chewed upon. The flowers, leaves and grass he used to decorate Alizeas dish. The sugarcane he distributed equally amongst his friends, placing the largest chunk again on Alizeas dish. The sugarcanes were a sort-of candysnack-with-toothbrush. The fennekim loved its sweetness. And its fibrous structure cleaned their teeth when something got trapped there during the day. The amazones used it in identical fashion. Then the fennekim sat down and waited, Manfred with them. As hyperactive as they were, 'waiting' in idle-

ness could be kept up by fennekim for all of thirty seconds. At the very best. It took about fifteen seconds until Jahan started to flop around on his cushion, keeping his legs folded upon each other, but sliding his hands through between his legs. Then he lifted himself up on his hands, "walking" around on his palms. The others giggled and applauded until he made it back to his cushion. Navid and Nima eyed each other before jumping together to the ropes dangling near the bedposts again. They scampered the ropes up and down hunting each other around in 3D space whilst the others cheered them. Heydar clapped his hands in glee, jumping into the air, making saltos. Suddenly all the fennekims ears flopped up and toward the door. They zipped back to their cushions, panting more or less hard, but sitting mostly motionless when the door opened and Alizea came in. She greeted them, and was greeted in return by a happy choir of voices. She had to stoop to pass through the door and on the upper ledge of the stairway. Once halfway down she could stand erect. She hung up her towel - which was larger than the blankets of the fennekim - over one of the ropes criscrossing the ceiling of the room. She gave all the boys a smile before she knelt down on her cushion - unlike the fennekim, which sat in a lotus position on theirs. She placed her hands on her thighs and bowed her head, the fennekim copying her gesture, whilst Manfred folded his hands. Then she spoke, like every morning: "Dear ancestors, may you be proud of our deeds, amazed by our inventions and agree with our decisions. May current foes become future friends, the sick recover and the worried be at ease." "Yeah!" "Exactly!" "Would suck otherwise!"

Then they started to eat. Manfred liked to think of it as eating. The small guys sliced the leaves on their dishes in half with their claws, rolled each of their grubs into one of those halves together with a grape on each end and then stuffed the first of these rolls sideways into their muzzles. By that time, Alizea had lifted a handful of gras to her muzzle and taken the first bite, just as Manfred had gotten one of the honeyed grasshoppers up. He was still surprised that he really liked them.

By the time he was having his second bite from the crispy sweet - he always thought they tasted like candied almonds - the fennekim had already hooked their claws into an apple each and were ripping bits out of the - for them big - fruits. They didn't chew, at least not more than once or twice, before wolfing the chunks down. That they sent bits of fruit flying around didn't bother them. Alizea was still munching on her compressed grass when the fennekim poured themselves their mugs in a single go, refilling them from the big caraffe Heydar had prepared. The caraffe made its way around them

with polite:

"Wouldyouplease?" "Surehereis." "Thankyoukindly!"

When Manfred peeled his orange, the lil guys devoured their second 'grub-roll' and had stuffed themselves with a pear each by the time he took his first bite. Alizea chuckled and laid her ears back, Manfred made a face and kept on eating, knowing what was to come. Emptying their mugs, all fennekim, one after the other, belched so vigorously that their ears wiggled like flags in a storm, before they dropped on their back, holding their now rotund bellies. The human and the amazone kept on eating, taking their time chewing their food. "Alizea, this weekend is the big monthly festival, right?" Manfred asked after clearing his throat with a gulp from his mug. "Yes. Sadly there were no other festivities due to the siege." "I heard some stories. Would there have been a festival every weekend?" Alizea pointed at the fennekim: "Make your guess about what is central to the life of the small people. I tell you: Having a good time. And a party at every possible occasion is just about right for them." Manfred chuckled and chewed on his last candied grasshopper for a while, until Kaveh produced another earth shattering belch. "Why don't they party every day?" Alizea wanted to answer, but Navid lifted one of his arms, the other holding his belly: "To have a party you need enough food and entertainment. That means you have to have a certain excess in ressources. And," he belched a three-tone jingle which made the other fennekim cheer him enthusiastically, "when there would be a perpetual party, you'd soon forget how wonderful a party is. You'd get overfed. So, the wise allfather made the days of the week, and made one of them for partying with all ones friends, one of them for recuperating and being with ones family. And the rest of the days to work. To collect food and material to improve ones den. And to learn crafts to impress the ladies!" And all the fennekim belched in unison. Alizea snorted: "Let me guess, you all train to impress the ladies - once you are eligible for the courtship - with belching melodically?" "Naw." "Nope" "Cantbedone" "WastriedbyFarimIbnKessaURRRRP!," that was Kaveh belching, sitting up and repeating slower, "That was tried by Farim ibn Kessa, Jandal ibn Korum and Ifram ibn Ardach of sietch Glowing Waters. Didn't impress the ladies. Didn't work." Manfred was intrigued: "How come you know about that event? And when was that?" "Bout 500 years ago, sietch Glowing Waters. They trained for almost a full year and then belched 'The whiskers of my Love' at courtship. No success." Manfred shuddered at the mental image before he refilled his mug and fetched the last remaining apple. Alizea was nuzzling a handful of grapes, audibly crunching their seeds. She also ate apples and pears whole. Outside a group of amazones, the nightguards of the north-eastern corner of the citywall, tramped past. They were cheerfully greeted by the Fennekim that were already - or

in some cases still - around on the streets. Manfred got up and collected the used dishes, piling them in the flats sink. Alizea finished her mug - by fennekim-standards a small barrel with a handhold, for Manfred an oversized tankard - and got up, bringing it to Manfred. Whilst he washed the dishes, it was his turn today, Alizea collected the cushions by simply pulling them out from under the fennekim. They moaned and groaned and protested the 'mean treatment' by their 'striped overlord' but their giggling made sure they rather enjoyed being bowled around. She shook the cushions thoroughly and then lifted her bed up with one hand, placing them under it. Jahan and Navid dried the dishes, Nima and Heydar did their acrobatics and stowed them away again in their cabinet hanging high on the beam supporting the flat above theirs. Manfred and the fennekim fetched their schoolbags, whilst Alizea fetched her broad utilitybelt, filling her canteen - a two liter bottle made from metal - and then she went up the stairs to the door. The fennekim all bowed deeply to her as she passed them on the narrow stairs and even Manfred, with a happy chuckle, copied the motions. Judging her springy step, Alizea was in a good mood. "Minions," Kaveh squeaked in what went for an authoritarian voice, "To school!" Then he marched upstairs and out, throwing his legs with their big feet high up in the air, the others following him, sorted by size, in the same gait. Manfred decided not to copy that walk. It was hard enough not to start laughing seeing his fuzzy friends walk like Johnny Look-in-the-Air. He carefully closed the door, then decided to walk, with just a slightly silly gait, along behind his friends.

2.6 Anne: Fay

"To become a proper Fay, you must be able to keep perfect balance. You always have to stand sure-footed." Assenting murmurings came from Chamans pupils. "You know this lesson. Think of a step within a dance which you want to hold whilst the wind toys with your dress. Or think of having to freeze in your motion when somebody enters a nearby rooftop-terrace." Slight giggles enlivened the audience.

"Now then, keep your balance. Just this time, on one foot only."

Chaman passed through between the Fay, the youngest, or rather the least experienced, of the danceresses guilds apprentices. The class she was giving was on physical fitness. The training room had a high ceiling and had mirrors all around the walls.

"Ready?"

The murmured responses were all - well, mostly - positive. "You know that I am going to enjoy this now. And that I won't say that I am sorry." The responses were much more lively and good humored. Somebody slipped and hopped around for a moment. Chaman picked up the shoulderbag with its load of sand-filled leatherballs. Then she started to run around her pupils, peppering them with the balls. Pretty much all her balls hit. Some were caught, others were evaded by more or less graceful acrobatics. Many, however, knocked those hit off balance and threw them from the wooden boulders they were balancing on. Once she had emptied the shoulderbag, Chaman counted the heads of those still standing on their wooden boulders. Tanaz was sprawled on the floor, but had caught the ball that hit her. Lal, unlike many others, was still standing on her boulder, waving her arms to regain her stability. Her shoulder was dusted white where the chalked ball had hit her. Anne, however, still stood on her boulder and grinned ferally, holding a ball in each hand. "I don't remember having thrown two at you," Chaman looked puzzled at Anne. "Well," Annes legs twitched as she stabilized her precarious position on the wooden boulder, "that's the ball that bounced off Lal." Chaman nodded and then clapped her paws: "Get off the boulders. When that would have been a rooftop, most of you would have clattered down the shingles audibly by somebodies casually discarded apple or a shindaz mistaking you for something to settle on. I expect you all to train your balancing skills on your own. You all know the training methods. I want to see improvement. Else your right for day- as well as nightexcursions will be suspended." Groaning and moaning piped up from the fenwas that had fallen down their boulders. "No grousing. Pack away the boulders and get the ropes out." Stowing away the boulders and fetching a tall ladder and armloads of ropes, many of the fenwas timidly approached Anne: "You have

no tail - how can you balance so well?" "And you got no pawpads, why don't you slip off the boulder?" Such and similar questions were piped into Anne's ears. She smiled carefully, avoiding showing her teeth. Chaman knew how to interpret her facial expressions, but the others might not. Advancement in the physical classes of the dancers guild was fluid, unlike in the classes on theoretical topics. Anne was in the rookie, the beginners class, which was given by Chaman, herself one of the most highly skilled danceresses. Physical exercises were mandatory for all fenwas. Those covered running, climbing trees, sneaking. The rookie class was more difficult than that. Keeping perfect balance, climbing and walking over ropes, scaling walls and, most of all, falling, respectively landing. The entire three weeks since the human children had arrived and Anne followed the invitation of Chaman, they had toppled each other over. At first from standing. Then they had tossed each other from chairs. They had learned how to fall on grass, on sand, on stones, on gravel. Even how to fall onto rooftiles. At first with a focus on not to harm themselves, then, since last week, to land as silently as possible. Controlled jumps, accidental topples. Anne felt like an elite version of Mata Hari. Anne held the ladder with one hand, handing the ropes she had over her shoulder to the two fenwas on the ladder that attached them to the hooks in the ceiling. Carefully she and two other fenwas moved the ladder a bit and repeated the process until there was a grid of ten by twenty ropes dangling from the ceiling. Then they carried the ladder out to the corridor and deposited it there. With the ladder out of the way, thick cushioned mats were unrolled on the floor. Chaman and her pupils assembled at the entrance. Clapping her paws, the white furred desertvixen pointed at two of her pupils, Banu and Esfir. Both dashed to opposite corners of the room and grabbed a rope, looking back to Chaman. A second clap and they darted up the ropes. At half height, about two meters up the ropes, they stopped and again looked back at Chaman.

"Watch them closely, sisters!"

And again, a clap of her paws.

Immediately the two fenwas on the ropes gained a bit more height, jumping from one rope to the next, approaching, circling each other. All of this in utter silence except for their breath and the faint noise of the ropes swinging in the air. With the low level of lighting provided by two pitch coated torches beside of the entrance, the motions had something ethereal. Anne stood in the last row, but being a bit taller than most fenwas, she had an excellent view. The two fenwas worked ever closer, circled around each other, jumping from rope to rope, sometimes swinging in a perpetually fluent motion from one rope to the next. Anne was fascinated. She had read that the small apes in the african jungle jumped from branch to branch. And she had seen

squirrels move gracefully around in trees. But the speed with which the fenwas were moving around on the ropes, high up in the air, was surrealistic. Finally the two came into contact. Jumping from one rope to the rope adjacent to her adversary, but letting herself fall below the others reach, just a meter above the ground, Banu grabbed Esfir's rope, giving it a strong jerk, catapulting herself upward to another rope.

However, her opponent had jumped backward the moment she reached out, so the jerk did shake an unoccupied rope. Somehow Esfir guessed Banu's trajectory, lashing out with one leg, kicking against the rope Banu was trying to reach. The rope jerked out of Banu's reach, her trajectory arching downward. Somehow - Anne couldn't see the details between all the moving ropes and at the high speed motions of the two fenwas - Banu managed to fetch a rope in the last meter above the ground. Banu and Esfir were Chamans' best students in the current group. They most likely were going to the more advanced class in a few more weeks. Their skills showed well when Banu grabbed the rope with her hands but, as not to touch the ground, wrapped her legs around the rope above her hands - head down. Immediately she pushed herself higher up. Esfir jumped over to the rope on which Banu was gaining height again. Her feet kicked down forcefully to stomp on Banu's tail and feet, to push her down and off the rope.

But Banu hadn't left Esfir out of her field of vision. She thrust herself upward but also away from the oncoming opponent. In a graceful backward salto, which aligned her head up again, she caught the rope that had been behind her. It was a rope at the rim, so she could not move further away from Esfir. Esfir's fore- and hindpaws clasped the rope, slipping on the rope as Esfir had intended to bring her mass and speed to bear against Banu to kick her to the ground. Banu catapulted herself sideways past Esfir to a rope further toward the center. Passing by Esfir, the two exchanged a kick and a slap, which threw Esfir off the rope, hitting her midriff. Banu had been thrown out of her trajectory, fetching a passing rope, high enough above the floor that she could wrap her feet around last hand's width of rope above the floor. But so did Esfir manage.

Both fenwas had a lot of momentum, the ropes swinging in wide archs, crossing other ropes. When they swung back, both slid to the very low ends of their ropes, gaining additional speed. At some point on their upward swing, they both jumped off, toward each other. Anne gazed in fascination, barely able to follow the lightning-swift motions of the small desertvixens. Esfir and Banu met each other high up in the ropes, still in flight.

They kicked at each other viciously.

If not for the light, but robust, silken shirts and pants they were wearing, both would surely have been badly bruised by their opponents' claws. Their

kicks made them bounce away from each other, grappling for a holding on the ropes behind and beside them. Esfir managed to wrap her left hand around a rope, her claws fetching in the coarse material and giving her hold. Banu however flew backward into the space the rope she had swung in on had already vacated again. She grabbed into empty air, grabbed sideways for another rope. But she missed the ropes by a hands width, crashing onto the mats on the ground.

Chaman clapped her hands again.

Esfir slid down the rope and then offered Banu her paw to help her up. Banu snarled, but when Chaman made a single bark, she folded her ears back and took Esfir's paw, letting herself be pulled up. Esfir hugged her and patted her back, whispering into her ear. Together they walked back to the others, bowing to Chaman. Their teacher chuckled and looked at Anne:

"Would you like to try, too?"

Anne nodded happily:

"But I am slower than you. I don't know if I would be much of a challenge?"

"Oh, trust me, you have your qualities, Anne."

Chaman looked around at her other pupils:

"Well? Who would like to test her skill against our friend Anne here?"

Some Fenwas raised their pawy hands and stepped forward. Others looked at Anne, measuring her up, some then stepping back, others lifting their hand and stepping forward. Chaman looked at them thoughtfully, then at Anne: "All remember: No hits to the head. And no biting." All nodded in unison, fenwas and human girl alike. "Ah, wait, so slapping and kicking is... Allowed?" Anne looked at the fenwas. She was about as tall as them.

Unlike her brothers, she was coming very much after her mother. And she had been a short woman. Yet still, looking at her own legs, she wondered if a full kick of her against a fenwa - or of a fenwa against herself for that matter - wouldn't be quite painful. "Won't hard kicks, you know, **really** hurt?"

All of the fenwas looked at each other and then started chittering. Chaman coughed into her folded forepaws and then flickered her ears in amusement:

"Did falling to the ground in the first week hurt?" "Yes, until I learned to roll off or to land properly on my feet." "And did jumping and falling off the rack in the second week hurt?" "UhhmmnnNo, because I had learned

how to land or roll off the first week." "Well, this week you learned to either block incoming objects or to evade them." "Yes...", Anne scratched her head,

"so, you mean we should be able to evade each other, and only when we fail to do so we will be thrown off? And then we'll be able to use our knowledge..." She trailed off but smiled widely, understanding: "This will be so awesome! A pity I can't tell others about it." Chaman tilted her ears and tail

in the position indicating patient curiosity. Anne giggled: "No worry, it'll

be so much more fun to use this knowledge and skills to make them puzzle over what actually hit them." Chaman and several of the fenwas gestured approval. After a short moment, Chaman pointed at Lal: "You made fun of Tanaz for having been bowled over by Anne on the first day they met. But you always evaded any physical contest with our human guest." Looking to Anne, the white desertvixen smiled sweetly: "Would you accept my recommendation of Lal as an opponent?" Anne looked at Lal. She was rather pudgy for a fenwa, which was the result of her regularly eating supper with her family in the town eldest palace - and after that participating in the supper of her flatmates in the unmarried females sector. Still, she trained diligently, wanting to become a danceress. Anne bowed formally to Lal, and said in her most serious voice: "Opponent accepted!"

They both scurried to the ropes. Lal was faster and took the nearer end of the playfield. Upon Chamans claps, the two moved up in the ropes. In the last three weeks, Anne had climbed more than ever before. Likewise she had found the changes in brightness didn't worry her much anymore. Be it bright day outside, the halflight of the surface rooms or the dimness of the subterranean cavecity of the fenwas: She found she liked it all. So she didn't mind that she started looking into the direction of the torches. Finally Chaman made the last clap, the contest of skill, speed and strength begun. Lal, the red-furred apprentice of Chaman thought a lot of herself because she was the eldest daughter of the town-eldest, the old grey furred fennekim who lived in the town-eldest palace. Hanging in the ropes, Lal gazed at Anne. The human girl took great care to climb up and down with support of her feet. Maybe Lal would misjudge her strength when she kept up the masquerade. Anne was hopeful because, during all previous lessons where they had worked with climbing ropes, she had used her feet, too. But Anne was confident that she could pull herself up on the rope purely with her arms strength. Anne moved slowly and carefully, moving from rope to rope, whilst Lal was making a show of jumping from rope to rope. Annes heart started to beat faster and faster as she expected Lal to attack every second. They were still somewhat apart from each other, further than Esfir and Banu had been. Anne grinned, keeping her slow speed. Lals ears indicated confusion for a moment and her movements slowed for a moment. When Anne was moving again from one rope to the next, Lal glowered fiercely and jumped in a high upward arc at her. Her left hindpaw outstretched and aimed at Annes belly, she hoped to use her mass to throw Anne off the ropes. But Anne just released the rope she had come from and leaned backward, swinging around the rope, letting

Lal sail past her. Lal was a fenwa, no doubt there. She tried to grab the rope Anne was on and missed it only by a hands width. The next rope she passed she managed to grab. She was close over the ground and immedeatly started upward on the rope. The fact that she was pudgy only mattered in so far as that she was stronger than most other fenwas, had more mass in her punches - but got exhausted a bit quicker. At the moment, however, there was no indication for Lal to become exhausted. It was barely three seconds since the mock battle had started. Lal wasn't giving Anne much time. For barely a second had passed which the vixen had used to gain two bodylengths in height, when she attacked again. Again with a simple 'falling stone' attack - that was what fenwas called catapulting oneself upward to crash down on an, ideally unsuspecting, opponent. Hanging on the rope, Anne simply let herself slide down half a meter. Instead of landing with her hindpaws full on Annes chest or shoulders, Lal rammed into the rope. She immedeatly wrapped her legs and arms around the rope, more out of reflex than anything else. "Headbutt!" Anne shouted gleefully and pulled herself as forcefully upward as she could. Ramming her head into Lals rear end, she showed the fenwa off the rope. But Lal wasn't finished yet. Falling backward she reached backward and caught a rope, swinging away from Anne. Even swinging away, Lal kept her head on Anne, watching her. Anne stretched her arms and bent her legs, like if she had used her legs and arms together to make her headbutt. "Deception!" Anne thought and tried to look exhausted by panting fast. Coming swinging back, Lal leaned sideways, making the rope alter it's course to pass by Anne. But she also pulled one arm back, ready to strike a blow into Annes side. Annes subconscious was amazed that she was still able to keep up with Lals speed. But she was running on pure adrenalin. Hanging on a single rope, Anne saw no way to turn her body out of Lals reach. But she had an other idea. She was well above the ground. High enough...

She twisted her legs, wrapping the rope around her right leg. Then, a split-second before Lal could strike home, she simply let herself fall backward. She held the rope with her left knee to prevent it from slipping off her legs, whilst the two times it was wrapped around her right leg gave the rope enough hold to prevent it from just running off. Lal's expression changed from self-assured to perplexed, and then to pained when Annes right leg, coming up as her torso was coming down, kicked Lal straight into her back. Lal already had been swinging with a respectable speed. Now this speed was suddenly boosted. With ears flapping behind her in the rush of air, eyes wide open and clawing at the rope, Lals rope swung past the playfield. Given the fact that her mass multiplied with her speed suddenly resulted all of a sudden in a much bigger value, Lal found herself unable to keep her hold on

the rope. In a high arch, and with a high pitched 'yiiip!', she was shot from the end of the rope. Maybe for comical value, or for pure statistics, she flew into the direction of the entrance, crashed into the wall above the entrance arch. Her claws scratched a second for a hold on the stones. Then she fell down. Remarkably, none of the fenwas below tried to catch her. It spoke well for Chamans intense training, on how to fall and land properly, that she managed to crash down to the ground on all fours. Anne hung overhead in the ropes, her arms crossed in front of her chest, and grinned. Lal got up, her nose bleeding. Unbelieving she eyed herself, her ears drooping. The next moment she ran toward Anne, her fangs bared in a snarl. Tanaz did kick Lal off her feet and Chaman growled lowly:

"Lal, cut it. You lost this battle. Accept that."

Anne giggled: "Actually I think Lal won."

Lal had jumped back on her feet and now gazed in confusion at Anne who was still hanging head down on the rope, like if it were the most normal thing to do.

"The person touching the floor first loses, right?"

Chaman nodded. Tanaz had placed herself between Lal and Anne, ears erect and watchful of Lals movements. "Weeeelll," Anne smirked and pointed toward the floor, where her hair spread out. "My hair touched the ground before Lal hit the wall. So, she won."

Picture: Anne hanging head-down and grinning widely. A rope from the ceiling is coiled around her right leg, her arms crossed before her chest, her longer-than-shoulder hair touching the ground. Tanaz facing Lal with a grim expression, her back toward Anne, Lal looking surprised toward Chaman, Chaman laughing.

Lal looked looked from Tanaz, to Anne to Chaman: "But - but...?" Chaman started to laugh heartily, cackling until she sat down on her rear end and patted her thighs. Now even Tanaz looked at Chaman:

"So, who won now, Mistress?"

Chaman yipped, holding her sides, her tail flickering behind her. Finally, coughing, she calmed down: "Well, yes, technically Lal did win. The rules are clear: The first to touch the floor loses." "But I crashed into the wall!" Lal held her nose, which was still bleeding, trying to keep the dripping blood off her clothes, pointing upward at the sandstone of the wall above the doors arch with ears, tail and left hand. Anne wiggled her foot and slowly slid down the rope, smiling at Lal: "Well, yes, you did. But a wall is not the ground. And by the time you flew off the rope, my hair had already touched the ground." Chaman jumped up and giggled silverly: "A remarkable judgement and frankness, my dear! And yes... with one of my normal students, I would

not have accounted their hair to be disqualifying. But, again, technically you are right there."

Anne had worn her hair usually short. But with the fenwas so enamoured with long hair, Anne had let her hair grow longer. It gave her a meaningful way to participate in the fenwas regular fur-grooming. And it was a regular way to earn something. Fenwas were so enamoured with long hair that they actually bought long mane-hair from the amazones to extend their own naturally short headfur.

"Because your long hair isn't, per definition, a part of you, right?" Anne rolled around and got back on her feet. Lal let her ears droop, snuffling. Some of the other fenwas giggled. Chaman looked back at them, icily. "I doubt any of you would have fared better against Anne. So, unless you tried, you shouldn't laugh. Unless you welcome being laughed at yourself." The giggles faded, but smiles remained on most of the sharp muzzles of Chamans pupils. Lal looked at Anne and sniffed: "But why did you say that you lost? That I won? The Mistress had already announced I had lost..." Anne shrugged: "Well, I need to train more and get better. It would be pointless when I would try to claim a victory when it wasn't one according to the rules." Lal flopped one ear sideways, the other up, not understanding. Anne walked over to Lal and held her hand out: "I think we both need to train more. Maybe you win next time in a way that you can be proud of yourself, or maybe I win - all proper according to the rules." Lal looked at Annes hand like if it were a serpent. Then she carefully copied the gesture and placed her pawy hand into Annes. Then they shook their hands, slowly, carefully at first, then more and more vigorous, smiling at each other. When Anne released Lals hand she added: "You just have to promise me to not be a jerk to Tanaz anymore. She didn't knew what she was up against, just as you." Tanaz tail bottlebrushed and her ears shot up, hearing this from Anne. Lal looked at her own feet, shuffling them. Then she turned to Tanaz and made a kneefall before Tanaz: "I am sorry I teased and riled you because of how Anne overwhelmed you." Then, looking at Anne and Chaman, and carefully caressing her own nose, before adding slowly: "I guess it did hurt a lot less loosing your way than winning my way did." She made a small chuckle and then looked at Anne, her ears coming up in playfull cheer: "Next time, I'll loose!" Tanaz chittered. Anne swept them both into a hug. And unlike the first time she had hugged them, they now both returned the hug with happy murrns and wagging tails.

And Chaman smiled.

2.7 Anne: The Underground City

Two hours later and aching all over, Anne, Lal and Tanaz climbed down the stairway from the danceress guildhall. The big moon was high up in the sky, the smaller one already hurtling down past the horizon. Anne looked after it for a moment. "What you're looking at?" Lal asked, sincerely curious. "The moons. Where I come from... There was just one moon." Anne made two quick steps to close up again with the two fenwas. Whom she now could really think of as friends. "Manfred told me about it, last week I think. He said your world is a boulder. And your moon hurtles around it all the time." Anne shrugged: "Manfred knows such things. Peter most likely has a suitable book in his library where it is explained why and how that works. I heard it, but it doesn't interest me. It doesn't have any effect on my daily life." Lal nodded, deep in thought, when they pushed themselves through the bustling activity in the dimly lit "shopping mall". During the nighttime the business was much more lively than during the daytime, as a majority of fenwas preferred to stay underground during the hot day. Some of the younger fenwas, younger than Tanaz and Lal, snarled at the sight of Anne. But now Tanaz and Lal stared at them, until the youngsters tail fluffed and, trapping it between their legs, they retreated. Tanaz reached for Annes hand and placed it on her shoulder. Lal, seeing that, did the same with the girls other hand. Together they wound their way through the shopping malls bustle and out onto the elegant bridge that connected the western hill with the central hill, where the unmarried females sectors waterworks and heavy industry was located. From somewhere down below the bridge, faint music carried through the air. Looking around and down a stairway to a plateau between eastern and western hill, they saw two of their classmates dancing together, surrounded by a small group. Older fenwas observed them and at times called out weaknesses in posure, or recommended them for well done parts of the dance. They leaned on the bridges railing and watched them for a while. "They are... good," Lal said after a while. "You two are better," Anne replied. "How can you judge that?" Lal asked, but Tanaz ears and tail made it clear she wanted to ask the same. Anne caressed the railing and smiled at the two: "You're my friends. I am sure you two, we three, can do better." She started to grin from ear to ear. By now she managed to do so without showing her teeth. Her two friends looked at her, then at each other, and then started giggling: "Well, given time and training? Sure!" Tanaz giggled. "Where's the music coming from?" Anne asked. Lal and Tanaz purred and and set off, waving her along. In the middle of the bridge an arch branched off to a stairway worked into the side of the steep hill. Small doors along the stairway led to the flats of the guild-mistresses and their most junior

apprentices. The three ran down the stairway. With there being almost no artificial light outdoors - aside of a few glowbugs that munched happily on the grass - Annes eyes adjusted quickly. They went through under the bridge, following the narrow gravelroad that ran along the bottom of the valley that formed between the middle hill and the western and eastern hills. Large flowers framed the way, little flying insects buzzing from one to the other. At a small lake many fenwas of all ages were sitting, some hanging out in the lake, others sitting on its rim, their feet in the water. Others again sat on stairs cut into the ground of the middle hills base. They all where listening to the play of four musicians sitting in the artifical cave formed by the base of the stairway above. "They're roommates with the dancereesses above," Tanaz whispered into Annes ear, "the musicians play as well for themselves as for their friends to dance to." Anne nodded. They remained a while here, too. As fast and hectic as fennekim and fenwas seemed to be in their daily life, much of their music was paced slower. True, there were songs that sounded more like an accident in a factory mixed with a running trainwreck. Both by sound as well as speed. But for each of those songs, Anne had heard just as many melodies that seemed to follow the speed of her own heartbeat at rest. Whilst the music carried well to the stairs and the plateau above, the comments and advice spoken up there to the two dancereesses were almost inaudible down here. The music ended, the audience cheered and applauded the musicians. Annes handclapping drew a few confused looks. Fenwas applauded with yips, howls, and, most of all, thumping their tail onto the floor. Clapping ones hands was more commonly used to attract attention instead of shouting 'hey, over here' or 'Let's do it!'. Anne flushed beet-red and then pointed at her back shrugging. That gesture was at least sufficently shared between all species to be understood universally. Although fennekim and fenwas added a wave of their ears, as their rather narrow shoulders might not show the motions when they would be wearing thicker clothing. Nods and friendly smiles reassured Anne that her 'condition' of being without tail was understood and accepted.

They set off to their home, following the way back that they had come. The entrance to the subterranean township was open. Only in emergencies it would be closed, although the mechanism was tested twice daily. Anne had seen how the massive stone slab slid into place. It was half a meter thick, two meters high and two meters wide. That were its visible proportions. Once closed, it formed just another part of the cliff-face, with a gravelroad running along in its shadow. As Chaman lived with the two other 'angels', the term for the most skilled dancereesses, in a flat inside the dancereesses guild-hall, and the guild halls dormitories were dedicated for the advanced pupils who

had much harsher training regimes than the beginners, Chamans pupils had their own room in the western hill underground township. And as it was a curtesy to host visiting guild-members with locals of the same guild, there even had been a spare bed ready for Anne. Lal and Tanaz sniffled audibly, looking around. Inside the tunnel leading into the township, an amazone in a light leather harness stood, handing tools and grease up to a fenwa that knelt in the service access above the heavy stone gate, cursing and shouting in a colorful language. From time to time she exploded in bursts of howling rage, hammering around. The looked up at where little aside of the rear end and tail of the fenwa were visible. "What happened?" Tanaz was curious and sniffled the air. "An acid-bug managed to crawl into the pulley shaft and got squished last time we tested the gate. By now it's acid destroyed the rope." From up in the service access hatch came a shower of nonprintable words. "And aside of the dead acid-bug there also was a stink-bug." "That is the reason why she's cursing so much. But why is she up there? I understood you sisters from the maintenance guild had the tools to simply pull through new ropes from the upper gallery." The amazone nodded: "We have. But it takes about an hour to replace the rope completely. She wants to repair the rope. Says thats faster." Another shower of colorful curses, these about the ancestry of inedible bugs, emerged from the fenwa in the service access hatch. **"SILK YARN AND NEEDLE, NOW!"** Lal and Tanaz sniffled again and laid their ears back. The amazone handed a ball of silken thread up and a thick needle. A small furred hand reached through between the legs and grabbed blindly for the items, got them and vanished again. Then the legs and tail started to move and twitch. Looking at a small sandclock on her belt, the amazone swayed her head slowly. **"DONE! MAKE WAY!"** The Fenwa shot from the hatch like a cork from a bottle of over-ripe champagne. She landed sure-footed on the amazones shoulder, slid down over the mares shoulder and then dashed through between the three friends. Tanaz gagged, whilst Lal pressed her nose into the amazones bellyfur. Anne made a face: "Well, that smelled like day-old baby-poo" "When you say so," the amazone flicked her ears and flared her nostrils, "I prefer stink-bugs every time over acid-bugs. The stink doesn't hurt." Downstairs loud squealing, barks and yips exploded. A pile of very wet and queasy looking fenwas ran from the public bathtub. One stopped, turned around and shouted with a squeaky voice back to the tub: "Ever tell me again that my stinkbombs are awful!" Instead of a verbal reply a wet slop of clothes flew from the direction tub, but she evaded it with ease. Annes friends tails bottlebrushed: "Maybe we skip taking a bath this evening and instead..." "And just wash up in our room. A great idea!" "I think I like that idea," Anne nodded assent. The amazone reached up,

pulled the pot of grease out of the hatch, then groped around for the other bits, putting them back into her belts pouches: "Sleep well, little sisters!" She sounded very cheerful, whilst the chemists apprentice, covering her nostrils, dashed upstairs to the chemists guildhouse, carrying her wet clothes on the outstretched arm, looked pretty miserable. She looked pretty sick. However, the chemists guild had airtight boxes for stinky stuff - like her clothes were at the moment. Their guilds work- and schooling room even had an airtight door. The three followed the chemists apprentice, Tanaz and Lal with rumpled noses. Her pawprints in the raked sand of the corridor indicated that she had run real fast. Each pawprint was like a little explosion-crater. From the bathtub downstairs happy yips sounded, soon turning into a song. "I guess she's getting the stench off herself." Anne followed her friends up the next stairway. She peeked down through the bright green silks that covered the raw stone of the wall and ceiling, The silks gave a feel of moving through a forest, in the shadows of trees. The herbalists and chemists guild sometimes manufactured scented oils that were sprayed onto those silks, adding a faint whiff of oranges, apples, or just of fresh leaves, to the air.

But the tub was so far recessed into the stone that she could not see into the tub itself. However, the happy splashing she could hear. "We'll bath tomorrow," Tanaz reassured her. Anne had come to love the public bath. Especially in the evenings. That was the time when the fenwas groomed each others fur and helped those with extensions to fix the occasional loose hairs. It was also the time Anne picked up a lot of news from the fenwas, about what was going on around town and other things. So she jumped up the last two steps of the stairs and marvelled at the sand under her feet. She hadn't slipped into her shoes after class. Outside, the stonetiles still gave off warmth. And in the underground city, it was amicably warm all day round. Actually, the further down one went, the cooler it got. That was why the homesteads on the lowest level of the underground town were actually the most expensive ones. The danceress guild could have afforded a flat there easily. But the guildhouses were all in the topmost levels as to be easily reached by everybody.

The steps of the chemists apprentice ran to the door opposite their own. The chemists guild had taken residence inside the underground city. Despite numerous, and quite vocal at times, complaints about the various sideeffects of having a chemical laboratory in a residential area. However, the guildhouses were traditionally easy to reach and so the chemists guild had retained their place where they were.

Entering their own guildhouse, Anne smiled. Elaheh and Zareen were

already home. Zareen was a year older than the others and Elaheh, Lal's sister, was already in several advanced classes. The two were abusing the large hand-loom frame on the wall as a training device. Truth to be told, the thing had been designed to be a multi-purpose device. The two hung head-down, their feet clamped behind the frames struts, doing hanging sit-ups. Anne winced, seeing the ease and speed with which the two were doing them. And they even had the breath left to chitter with each other and the arrivals: "Hey! You're back! What took you so long?" Anne, Tanaz and Lal told of their lessons. It was Lal who, haltingly at first, admitted that, de facto, she had lost to Anne in the mock fight. But that Anne had given her the victory freely on technicalities.

Anne folded her clothes and placed them on the small chest she had received when she had moved in. Then she had to help Tanaz, because she managed to entangle herself in the silken bands that made up her clothing. Bands running from her shoulders to her wrists, from shoulder to shoulder, from her waists sides to her knees... A danceress dress was more an assembly of wide flowing ribbons than anything else. Lal had no problems with her dress, the silken bands seemingly flowing down her body when she reached for the knots and clasps and released them with trained ease. "Elaheh? Maybe... Could you train with me?" Lal looked at her hindpaws and stepped uneasily from one to the other. Her sister threw herself upward, somehow pulled her feet from the frame and, in a backward salto, landed on her feet, turning around to her sister. If not for Lal's more fluffed and rounded form, Anne would have been unable to keep the two sisters apart. Their coloring, furstructure, size and stance were, for all that Anne could judge such aspects, identical.

"Sister, I've offered you often to train with you."

Lal nodded, her ears drooping down like if their tips were leaded: "I know, and I always said that I am strong enough." A smile crept into Lal's expression, tail and ears perking upward: "But that was before Anne here scrubbed the wall with my nose." And to prove the point, she turned her head so that the light from the small lamp next to their door illuminated her nosetip, where the blood had hardened. "I hope it won't leave my nose scarred!" Anne was already at the small bassin in their room, brushing her teeth together with Tanaz. "Ouw! Sho bad? I'm shorry Lal! Never shoughd about shad!" Lal and Elaheh waved off the excuse: "The scars we collect are signs of where we have to improve." Zareen, still doing her situps on the hand-loom, giggled: "Like the Patriarch. One of his adopted daughters once took me along when he was bathing in the river. He has so many scars, he must've improved extremely well." Anne rolled her eyes. Zareen had a crush

for the hulking patriarch of the tigers enclave in Tehuioy. For a barbarian chieftain from the coast to guide his tribes females and children in a nightly act out of the tribes clutches was a masterstroke. But getting them all safely and alive through the desert to Tehuioy, that was something to be considered a heroic act, even, or especially, by fennekim standards. Tanaz yawned, sounding like a lost kitten mewling. Washing their mouths with a gulp of water to get rid of the remainders of the 'toothpaste' of crushed mint, Tanaz and Anne went to their beds. They occupied the lowest pair. "Where's Jasmin?" Anne asked. Jasmin occupied the bed above her. Zareen flickered her ears in amusement: "She's in town with some of the fairies. A boy that moved to the unmarried males quarter only recently is crying each night, he lost his stuffed cuddle-ant." Cuddle-ants were the fennekim equivalent of a teddybear. Anne could understand that. "And... will they try to find it?" Zareen nodded: "That, or they'll make a new one and deposit it in his clothing-chest. He'll be happy and surprised, either way." Tanaz slid into her bed, ramming her head against the boards of the bed above. Cursing lightly, she moved around in her bed, turning a few times around on all fours before curling up, her bushy tail covering her nose. Tanaz had curled up like a dog. Or a fox. Or, well, like a fennekim did. Anne smiled, pulling her blanket up under her chin. It was a light blanket, made of silk, and amiably cool on the skin. The temperature in the underground was what fennekim considered amicably cool - for a people of the deserts, that meant a temperature Anne considered fitting for a warm summer night. So sleeping with nothing but a thin blanket was very comfortable. Lal and Elaheh were brushing their fangs and washing themselves, exchanging little murmurs. Elaheh seemed to approve of the slightly subdued and more thoughtful Lal. When they were finished, Zareen as the oldest extinguished the light after washing herself. Then she climbed up the thick rope that hung on the bedframes side to get to her bed, which, together with Jasmins, was the topmost. "Good night Anne!" she whispered.

"Good night Zareen."

"Goodnight Tanaz!"

"Good night Zareen."

And so on it went, until each had wished the others a good night. With larger fennekim families, half an hour could well pass when all the kids wished everybody else a good night. Anne lay in the darkness, thinking. Getting her nose rumpled seemed to have done wonders for Lal. "Tanaz?" she whispered, forming the noises almost only with her lips. Instead of a verbal reply, Tanaz ear touched Annes cheek. An asking 'yes?'. "Chaman told me she sent you to protect him." Again, instead of a verbal reply, Tanaz ear swiped softly down over Annes face. An assertive 'yes'. "Is it difficult?" Tanaz hand touched

Annes hand. Then the fenwas fingers slid in a pattern through hers and again the soft eartip touched her cheek. Anne was still learning the touch-and-feel alphabet the fenwas used to communicate secretly whilst in the public. "Restraining yourself is hard? Why? Is Manfred mean to you?" She tried to express her question in the same manner as Tanaz had replied before. She was optimistic that what she 'said' was about what she intended. Lacking suitable ears she used her second hand to reach out and touch Tanaz muzzle to add the proper intent, the 'this is a question' aspect. What she 'said' was more like: "Restraining you hard? Person of concern (= Manfred) equals mortal danger?"

Tanaz tail bumped lightly onto the mattress as she wagged it. 'Person of concern is personally important to me. Is enemy of person of concern I need to restrain myself for.' Anne thought and then whispered: "Hermann?" Tanaz swiped her ear in a swift motion downward over Annes face: 'Yes!' Anne laid back onto her cushion and pulled her blanket up to her chin. Then she slid her hand to Tanaz paw and carefully held it: 'personally important?' Tanaz tail wagged swiftly, making an audible "thumpthumpthump". 'more than duty.' Anne grinned and couldn't help but giggle lightly. Tanaz wiggled around on her bed, then suddenly she placed her head on Annes belly. The human girl thought a moment and found that the warm and soft fur of Tanaz did feel quite amiable. She placed her hands gently on the fenwas head and her back, like if petting a big dog. Tanaz murred lightly for a while, before she fell asleep.

And before long, Anne slept, too.

2.8 Peter: Carpenters

"Yipp!"

"Yapp!"

"Yipp!"

"Yapp!"

Whilst neither Peter nor Cerise were fennekim, they used the fennekims barks to synchronize their pushing and pulling of the sawblade through the log. Tehuiyos local supply in wood was mostly used for heating. Construction wood was usually provided by other towns such as Xochtli, Waterdeep - which was located at a large lake - or Biting Winds, a fennekim sietch in a distant mountainrange, surrounded by rich pine and fir forests.

"Yipp!"

Cerise pulled the sawblade downward, showering herself in fine dust. When she wouldn't have been an albino, she would have been unicolor by now anyway from all the dust.

"Yapp!"

Peter lifted the blade up. They used a one-way blade, so Peter just had to pull it up and watch that they followed the marked line on the log. And then hang on to the blade to apply pressure against the wood. Teams of fennekim cut the smaller boards from the log-halves and quarters Cerise and Peter made. Their workspeed was typical for fennekim:

- a) Explosions of frantic activity.
- b) Heavy panting for a while to fetch some breath again.
- c) More or less often explosions of coughing and sneezing when they had inhaled a bunch of sawdust.

Peters skin was itching all over. Although Cerises fur caught most of the dust, the sweat on his skin collected its share of dust, too. "When you want to take a break, just tell," Cerise mentioned from the cavity in which she stood under the heavy log. "You've been working constantly for the last ten minutes." "As you have noticed, I didn't try to pull on the blade whilst you were still pulling it down." "Truth. And you didn't, ..." that very moment the fennekim pulling the blade down on the other log in the sawmill slipped with his paws on the logs smooth surface, resulting in him letting go of the blade. As he was hanging head-down, as to be able to use his legs strength to pull down the blade, he simply fell down to the ground. Reflexes like a cats helped him to land on his feet, but he had to pull a ladder to his workplace. He climbed it, grabbed the sawblades handles and swung himself up again, needing a few times until his feet found support on the

log again. Harun dashed over and removed the ladder once the carpenter was 'standing' upside down under the log again. Harun, together with Tiz, was learning grading and planing one of the finished wooden boards under the stern eyes of the sawmills master Bakit. The board, like all the others being manufactured today, was to be used as floortiles for one of the families sectors new buildings. He had a length of string and a wax tablet on which he checked the number of boards and their measurements. "And so far you did neither fall down, nor did any other spider-business," Cerise ended her sentence. Peter slipped down from the wooden framework on which the log was resting and fetched his waterbottle. Dusting it off and then uncorking it carefully, he drank several big gulps. Cerise was audibly drinking from her bottle, too. She carried her large two liter canteen on her broad belt. Still, she had to refill it just as often as Peter had to do with his half-liter bottle. Amazonas drank lots, although they could do for a few days with a lot less if needed. Putting his bottle back onto the small desk, Peter climbed back up the log and grabbed the saws handles: "On it!" Slowly Cerise pushed the blade up: "Ready?"

"Yipp!"

And again she pulled the blade downward. Soon they were back in the rythm, working slowly through the log. It took them about an hour to halve the log. By then Peter was breathing heavily. "Why don't we use the multi-bladed saw?" Peter asked swiping sweat and sawdust from his body, pointing at a large, saw with eight parallel blades before taking a mouthful from his bottle. Cerise whinnied amused: "With that blade we make wooden boards for fortifications." "Because the boards would be so thick?" Cerise nodded. "Well, maybe we could move the blades closer together. Then we could saw suitably thin planks!" Cerise looked at the multi-bladed saw, opened her muzzle. And closed it again. "You mean, have the blades adjustable? Like, to make thick planks or thin planks, just as one needs to?" Cerise pinkish nose flushed a deeper red and she giggled, putting her canteen away. Then, without warning, she hugged Peter and lifted him off the floor, nuzzling his hair. laughing happily. For an amazone, that sounded like a mix between a whinny, a hiccup and baying. Peter was surprised, but the friendly hug by the giantess was quite welcome. Aside of her fur being full of sawdust. After a few seconds he flailed his arms to draw her attention away from his hair and she giggled again, lowering him back on the floor. Carefully Peter exhaled and tried to clean his eyes whilst Cerise made a sharp whistle - whistling horses, yay! - and called for the other fennekims attention. "Master Bakit? Hey, Our apprentice here just had a splendid idea!" Master Bakit wiggled his ears:"What is it? You no kid me over such a thing, Mistress Cerise, yer won't?" "No, do listen to his suggestion!" "Arrrrumpfff!" Master Bakit

exhaled and waddled to Peter. "So, what is it that you have in mind?" Peter blushed slightly, but Cerise 'wagged' her tail in the fennekim manner of displaying happy encouragement. "Well, you see the multi-bladed saw, Master Bakit?" "Aaayup," the elderly fennekim nodded. "Well, we could use a saw like that to cut also thinner planks, instead of just making, well those thick boards that saw here is designed to create. Master Bakits ears swayed and moved whilst he was thinking: "Yannow we create boards, planks and logs of all thicknesses and sizes, yer do?" Peter nodded. Tiz and Harun came over to listen in whilst the journeymen carpenters kept on sawing through the logs Cerise and Peter had precut for them. "No can have a saw for each possible combination of boards. Too costly to just have lying around," Bakit nodded sagely and wanted to turn. "What if you only need a single multiblade saw to make all possible combinations?" Cerise flickered her ears in gleeful amusement when Master Bakit turned back to Peter, both ears perking up now in aroused curiosity: "But a single blade can only make a single cut. Thadawa do at the moment." "A multi-bladed saw, but only one, adjustable to cut various thicknesses." Tiz hopped up and down and clapped his hands in glee until Harun placed his hands on the smaller fennekims shoulders and calmed him, eager to hear master Bakits verdict. Judging the masters ear-movements, he was deep in thought for a while. "Dat sounds great! But howdayado?" Master Bakit had a slurred accent and didn't exactly try to talk slowly. Add that his speech speeded up and his accent got worse when he was happy, tired or excited. Peter licked his lips thinking of the proper words in the common language before starting to explain his idea: "You see, on this saw here the blades are mounted on a metal rod, and to the rod the handles are attached." Cerise fetched her canteen and went to refill it, whilst Master Bakit nodded eagerly. "Well, instead of welding the blades permanently to the rod, why not have them mounted in a way that one can move them sideways on the rod?" Bakits muzzle and forehead went wrinkly when he started to think about the idea. His ears flailed around, but finally he nodded: "Issure. Preventing the blades sliding offa rod yadohow?" "I'm not sure. Maybe with rings with screws in them which one can pull tight. Or," Peter thought about it a moment. Screws were rather expensive and usually made from brass or similar metals. "Or, we have rings of differing widths which we can slide between blades, adjusting their width. And at the end of the bar, we simply slide a splint through!" Bakits eyes went glassy whilst his ears went on rotating and flexing. He gazed at the large saw and counted on his fingers. Cerise came back with her canteen and grinned, her ears wiggling: "His idea is brilliant, isn't it?" "Cerise? Whewwe work fastabytu, whadawedu widda..." The albino amazone caressed Master Bakits headfur: "You know I don't understand you when you go all slurry." The carpenters

master flailed his arms and tail and ears and took a deep breath, not doing anything to make her stop caressing him between his ears. "When we work twice as fast as up til now, what can we do with the additional time?" She flickered her ears and grinned: "First, there's always a few extra jobs we might get. Then, we'd have more free time each day to do our own small projects. Aaaaand... We could invest more time into properly representing the carpenters guild on parties." He was leaning into her fingers play on his head and his expression lacked nothing of a happy dog being caressed behind his ears. "Dattasoundgreat!" He eyed Peter over his muzzles length and then pointed at him: "Tomarrowyugoddagoto..." Cerise pinched his ear, and he went on slower: "Tomorrow yer visit the blacksmith annaask forasuitabla saw." Master Bakit stood there and grinned widely, patting Peters shoulder: "Yergonnabe muchly poplar widda pippel!" "Well, thank you master Bakit," Peter replied, happy to have helped. Harun and Tiz gave him a thumbs-up and wagged their tails happily. True, a thumbs-up meant 'you are a great one' for fennekim, but it could be applied about the same way as humans used the gesture. Bakit turned around and waved the others back to work: "Naw idling ferda wicked! Huffannapuff yer gonna do! Lotsawurk issahead!" The journeymen went back to sawing through their log, whilst Cerise reached under Peters arms and lifted him with ease up on their own log, herself sliding down into the open tunnel underneath it. Soon the sawmill was humming with activity again.

Work in the sawmill wasn't heroic, why Frava had decided to become a miner. Not that that was so much more heroic. But it had a certain atavistic, feral, native feel to it, as the fennekim people were accustomed to live underground. Viraz and Kaeva again were undergoing apprenticeships as carpenters, too. For them it was heroic enough. For the moment. That meant five days working in ones job. And on the equivalent of saturday, half the day was market day, the afternoon and evening was a big celebration and party. And one day, call it sunday, the fennekim did rest. For many to recuperate from the party the previous day.

For the children this meant four hours a day working, four hours a day attending school. With only one page of written homework daily and only on one day per week with reading homework, the older human children found their weekly life quite amicable. The younger children of schoolgoing age went to school six hours a day and afterwards helped another two hours with small tasks in the town, like refilling waterkegs, delivering small items and notes throughout town. There were a few children even still younger. Three of the very youngest had been adopted by Haruns family. Two more had been swept up by a slightly plump lioness who enjoyed caring for kids and often

did babysit fennekim-cubs. Being told that they were very rambunctious she had jubilated that she was, too. Some of the older kids had felt slightly worried at first. But not only had the amazon princess calmed their worries, but already a few days later it showed that the two kids loved the happy lioness. The lioness had been born on the march of the Patriarch from the tribal lands to the towns of the Allied Sultanates. She had grown up in Tehuioy. For all her size, claws and fangs she was as bouncy-happy as the fennekim and as gentle as the amazones. Of the other children, well, they all had their homes now, their duties and their schoolclasses. And lots of friends.

Peter worked hard, sweating a lot. Fortunately the sawmill had a lot of wooden grilled windows in its walls, overshadowed by its roof, through which almost permanently a slight breeze was passing. Cerise, working below the log, lacked the comfort of the moving air, but further down the air was cooler. Tiz and Harun changed places with two of the carpenters sawing boards, who in return took over sanding the finished boards to smoothness. The sawmill started early in the morning when the air was still cool. For the afternoon shifts, work picked up again at the early afternoon, leaving an almost three hour long lunchbreak. The young apprentices had alternating shifts, to make attendance to school more practical. So when the large gong sounded from the princess palace to announce eleven o'clock, master Bakit made the round of the sawmill. He cheered people to finish the last few inches of their work and lent a skilled hand where necessary. And so, by five after eleven, all current work was at a point where the afternoon shift could pick up easily. Cerise lifted Peter off the cut log and placed him on the floor beside Tiz and Harun who were jumping up and down. Tiz flailed all his limbs at once in the air, shouting happily: "Nowwegonnatakeaswimandthen..." Harun gently grabbed Tiz muzzle and silenced him, saying: "We take a bath first, then we fetch something to eat, then we go to school,..." From pure mercy he released Tiz muzzle, letting the smaller fennekim - still flailing his arms, ears and tail - finish the sentence: "And then this evening we can visit our parents!" Peter made a face for a moment, but then smiled, happy for his friends. "I guess I'll go to the princess palace then again." "No," Harun grinned, "If, you would have received a token of invitation already. This evening, you'll be guest with my family!" Harun fluffed himself up and marched to the sawmills door "My parents want to meet one of the humans everybody is talking about." Tiz drooped his ears: "Ahww. My papa didn't had such an idea. Me neither." Harun patted Tiz' head in a friendly manner: "That is why the Ardach family is always popular - our good ideas!" Cerise, walking behind them, whinnied in laughter until such time as an idea of your clanmembers

results in burning down a vending stall or worse." Peter and Tiz perked up at the laughter of the carpenters, whilst Haruns ears now dropped down and his proud walk turned instantly to a sulk. "The Mariz Disaster?" Tiz asked, Peter listening curiously. "Yeeee." Harun growled and kicked some sand around whilst he crossed the busy street to the workmens bathhouse opposite the sawmill. Peter shrugged and looked from Tiz to Cerise whilst Harun started brushing the thick of the sawdust out of his fur: "What was this Mariz Disaster?" "Mariz was a great inventor in the alchemists guild a generation ago, had he wanted to improve the water supply... But failed." Harun huffed and went under the showerbucket, splashing himself twice until all sawdust was out of his fur. He even flushed his nose, dipping it into a small, waterfilled bowl on the wall, inhaling, snorting the dust-and-water mix into another bowl. Tiz was next with showering, whilst Peter helped brushing the majority of the rough sawdust from Cerises back whilst she was cleaning her mane. Cerise snickered and half-whispered to Peter: "Mariz ibn Ardach had no sense of smell. He loved working with obnoxious substances, a valuable 'ability'. He discovered a mixture that tastes like pineapple. When mixed with honey it made for delicious sweets, but dissolved in plain water it's stench became abominable. And, enthusiastic as all Ardachs are, he created a huge amount of his solution and poured it into the males districts watersupply. As a surprise to all his fellow fennekim." Peter stopped brushing her back and groaned: "They lynched him?" Again, Cerise snickered, took the brush and cleaned her chest and belly: "He got a recommendation for creating synthetic pineapple flavour, got deposited for a month in the princess palace and then was carried off with the next caravan. His wives went with him to make sure he doesn't flummox again. For weeks the water supply here was contaminated and we all used noseplugs when we wanted to drink. It took until the rain season to flush the reservoir fully and clean everything." Tiz and Harun dashed up the wooden stairway and jumped from there into the deeper water, howling in glee and making huge splashes. Cerise let Peter pass before her under the showerbucket, allowing him to follow his friends via the jumping board into the water. Master Bakit and the other carpenters scrubbed each other clean and followed via the shower into the bath.

Fifteen minutes later, and squeaky clean, the kids bid the carpenters good-bye and went to their home to fetch their schoolbags. Farzan was out of the house, guiding a work group of ants from the colony under their flat to somewhere in the town. In return for their work, the ants received material they could use as fertilizer for their mushroom farm. "How long will this ... Siege... take?" Peter asked when he waited for Harun to close the door. "Normally such large raider groups are totally rare. Cause they will be hard

pressed to find enough munchies in the vicinity of the town," Tiz elaborated with flailing arms and ears. "But I saw crop-fields outside? Wouldn't they, ..." Peter tapered off. Harun grunted: "You remember they are carnivores, do you?" The human boy nodded: "Sure, just as you." "Am not! I eat honey and dates and apples alongside my insects. A Grub a Day keeps the Flox away!" Harun nodded sagely when they shouldered their schoolbags and set off. Peter went into a light trot to keep up with the fennekims normal walk. "Flox?" "Yeah, some sickness when you don't eat enough bugs. It's not a problem, though, as delicious as some of the bugs are." "Andda-stripedones," Tiz started, fetching Peters gesture to slow it down a bit, "And the striped ones only use non-meat as decoration or sidedish." This didn't exactly satisfy Peters curiosity. He remembered several humans that ate just the way the tigers seemed to eat. And who would have felt insulted being called 'carnivores'. "Anyway, I heard that our geography teacher is working on one of the walls catapults today. You know who'll be her replacement?" "Dunno." "Nope!" Peter grinned: "I heard it'll be the princess herself! Today we'll learn about the northern river and will follow it up to the mountains. I can hardly believe there are towns where there's half a year snow lying around and people have to wear clothes all the time." "I don't believe in snow. Hard water? Pah! Humbug!" Tiz lifted his nose high up and snorted derisively, just to wave happily to the gateguards and hug all of them - or rather their knees - whilst Harun played it cool and saluted smartly. He deflated a bit when the guards replied just with a smile and a light nod. Peter waved and greeted them in passing, receiving the same friendly smiles as Harun did. Tiz however was petted and twice even got a kiss on his head. Once through the gate, Tiz stride would have looked perfectly suited for a two meter giant. "It is because he still has his cublingfur, I tell you! Women adore him for being so fluffy!" Harun whispered into Peters ear. "Pfffft!" Tiz had heard it and poked his tongue out at Harun: "Toldyouitsgreattobesmall!" Peter was able to understand Tiz rapid yippyapping mostly because he guessed what the young fennekim had wanted to say. "Maybe it is because he is just polite and kind and doesn't try to appear ... cool?" Peter smiled at Harun, whilst Tiz hopped along in front of them. They neared the gate to the towns main gates, where also the hospital and the small harbour were, when they saw a large cargo lizard waddle through the gate. A number of young amazones under the guidance of an elderly amazone and a likewise elderly fennekim instructed and watched them. The three friends stopped, gazing at the huge lizard moving itself noiselessly. But the leather harness it was wearing creaked under the heavy load in the leather and wood containers on its back and sides. Peter spotted Hermann amongst those guiding the lizard.

The lizard was a 'Komodo Dragon' according to 'Brehms Tierleben', a book on animals in his microfiche library. Just, Komodos got one to maybe two meters long, whilst the amazones universal draft animals usually had a shoulder height of one to two meters and a length between eight to fifteen meters. The latter depended mostly on how you measured the tail. And if the tail was intact or, as was often the case, missing a part. In any case, Peter remembered lorries that were shorter.

The lizard was half through the gate when it began to shy shy, flaring its nostrils and throwing its head around. The two experienced handlers waved Hermann and the young amazones away before approaching the lizard and cooing it to calm it. Peter, Harun and Tiz slowed, on the one hand watching, on the other slowed by the traffic that clogged up as the roadway was reduced in width by the young amazones and Hermann forming a cordon around the shying lizard.

Then came a bugles call from one of the towers at the main gatehouse. The ears of all the people around shot upward. Peter listened, too. But the sequence of three different notes did tell him nothing. All of a sudden, people changed their headings, and the chaotic mess of moments before started to dissolve rapidly. A number of people approached the handlers, helping them to reign the lizard in. Tiz eyes and ears shot from Harun to Peter and back. Harun stood ramrod straight: "TheprincesssaidwegottaprotectPeter." Harun babbled as fast as Tiz did when he was bursting with energy. Tiz nodded so fast that his ears flopped around wildly. Then the two grabbed Peters arms and pulled him toward the nearest, easiest to reach gatehouse. It was the one leading the the town-eldest palace, rather its plaza. Looking over his shoulder he saw Hermann and the young amazones taking their staves and dash toward the main gates and harbour quater, pressing past the quivering body of the Komodo still stuck in the inner gatehouse connecting the city center and the harbour.

"Hey, what's happening? What's all the fuss?" Peter protested as Harun had him half over the shoulder and Tiz carried his feet. They took the corner sharply and dashed through the slowly closing gate into the gatehouse that led onto the palace plaza. Behind them, the huge gate closed, two of the gateguards lowered the heavy bar into place, before vacating the gatehouse. The heavy wrought iron portcullis sank down, its ends spikes sinking into the holes in the floor. "What is happening?" Peter protested again. Tiz and Harun were coughing and panting, and lowered him to the ground. Tiz fell on his back and was panting, all limbs spread out on the grass. "Townsonderat-tack," piped Tiz. "Somebiginsectandsomethingelse," Harun japped, gasping

for air. The two fennekims were massaging their legs and shoulders - carrying Peter had taxed them heavily. As Peter still looked confused, Harun gasped and concentrated for a moment before explaining: "That bugles signal meant that one of the large insects of the deserts was sighted near the town." Peter had learned that the huge insects of the deserts were the reason for the high walls embracing the town. "But the signal also said that there was an attack upon the city." "Well, those insects do attack the towns at times I was told. So isn't that normal?"

Another bugle call sounded, clear and wide carrying over the town. Tiz jumped up, Harun looked around, starting at a fast trot toward the high hill against which the eldest palace was built. It was a magnificent building of white marble and polished sandstone, but Peter had no time to admire it. Harun steered for where the hill touched and rose above the townwall.

"That," he told Peter over his shoulder as all three jogged toward the hill, "was the call telling of an imminent breach of a townwall."

2.9 The Harbour Incident

The guards on the walls towers saw daily, ever since the first raiders had arrived, how single or small groups of raiders moved around between the dunes and the green belt surrounding the city. Many had suggested that one should throw fishing equipment and dried fish over the walls adjacent to waterways. This the stratega as well as the patriarch, when he was asked, independently of each other, considered a stupid idea:

It would keep the raiders supplied with food whilst reducing the reserves for the tigers settlement and the lizards. "The faster the raiders have razed the surrounding area of everything edible for them, the faster they will get going again and leave the vicinity of the town," was the verdict of the stratega.

So, when a number of raiders came, again, over one of the dunes and seemed to inspect the walls of the Dusk Gate, the western gate, the guards loaded their crossbows as usual, but kept their fire as long as the raiders kept outside their effective range. The raiders had learned by now at which distance the town showed its claws. The raiders moved around purposefully for almost an hour, disturbed only by a couple of arrows that overeager fennekim let fly. And a hailshot of fist sized stones a catapult crew fired as a sort of life-practice. A few of the stones managed to hit the small group of raiders. But aside of a few bruises on chest and arms and maybe a light concussion little effect was achieved.

But then the guards saw a bizzare sight:

Over one of the last dunes before the green belt around the city, a shimmering form scuttled. It was a king scorpion, heading straight for the cities gate. Shouts ran up and down the towns wall and the flag signal was called for that prompted the catapult crews to change their machines hailshot loads against heavier loads. Crossbows got loaded with special ammunition designed to cut through chitin. Close behind the scorpion swift shadows moved, forgotten with the more obvious danger of the scorpion. The first catapult had changed its load and with a loud 'Thunk!' fired it at the shimmering scorpion. The aim was true and hit the scorpion in its middle segment. But instead of becoming paralyzed by the hit, the scorpion kept on moving, the stone bouncing off the scorpions back with a loud metallic 'Tink!'. The Optia of that segment of the wall had arrived at a towers top and overviewed the scene. After a second of contemplation she realized that raiders running behind and alongside a metal armored scorpion couldn't be a random happening. This was a coordinated attack. Now the guards blew the bugle signal that the town was being attacked.

All inside the walls and in the amazones sector zebras slid into their

armors, helped either by their sisters or by their fennekim protectors. In the unmarried males sector, fennekim fetched their bows and stringed them. The youngest members of each household brought the quiver and arrows. All over town weapons were grabbed and checked and whatever armor was around was put on. Well, except for the unmarried females sector. Not only was it on the other side of the actual attack, but all necessary preparations consisted in the fenwas just looking under their cloaks and checking that everything was in place - or moving to fetch their cloaks.

The scorpion came dashing over the last low dune, a second and a third stone bouncing off its armor. Its speed didn't slow when it passed from the sand onto the grass and then onto the gavelway that ran from the end of the grassy area to the dusk gate. One of the catapults of the inner walls fired, directed from the adjacent tower. Its shot arched high, the scorpion already no longer visible for the catapults crew, and missed the scorpion - although only by a meter, nearly smashing one of the raiders running beside and behind the scorpion. Inside the gatehouse, heavy beams were folded down from the gate and bolted to the ground to brace it against the expected impact of the huge beast.

But instead of ramming into the gate, or slowly climbing up against the wall, the scorpion lifted its long pincers and rammed them into the shutters of the central gatehouse, splintering the double thumb thick blinds and the armthick window grating.

The Optia of the gatehouse didn't wait to have the bugle call out an imminent breach of the wall.

The cargo lizard was still rambling in the inner gatehouse. Its legs were all outside the gatehouse, but its thick tail was still in the passage through the wall. The Optia for the inner walls gate personally released the brake, releasing the heavy girders which thundered down and cut into the lizards tail. The reptiles shocked cry echoed through the city center. Its startled jump ripped off the tail, and allowed the lorry-sized reptile to dart to the lake in great leaps and bounds, shedding its load right and left with thundering crashes. It dived into the nearer lake, vacated by all cublings when the first alert was sounded. There it curled up and bit its tails base to stop the bleeding. The tail would regrow within a year or two, luckily. The inner gate crew furiously whacked at the impaled tails base with large axes to remove the tail from the gatehouse to allow closing of the gates doors. The tail twitched madly, the Optia of the inner gate shouted to the squires, who had helped with the lizard earlier, to avoid the lashing tail. With no room in the gatehouse, the squires had little choice but to move into the harbour district.

The warehouses doors and shutters had been locked, it's workers had bailed out over the crane toward the outer walls loading gate, which was closed by now, too. Whatever doors there were, they were locked.

2.9.1 The Squires and Hermann

"Huh... That... what...", Hermann looked around, not comprehending. Lina snorted and grabbed him by his tunic, pulling him toward the other squires. Anka bayed seeing Hermann arrive this way: "Late for taps, and now not comprehending that the towns under attack. Great. What did we do to get the biggest and dumbest protector of the town?" Hermann winced. He had gotten ten lashes with a whip for missing taps the first time. A second time would mean 20. His back was coated in a wrapper containing some herbs Lina had prepared, which was why he didn't wear his armor: It chafed too much on his tender backside.

"I didn't knew that it would be important to know those signals! They weren't exactly about fighting!"

Anka lifted her hand, massaging her muzzles top with the other:

"I do not wish to talk about what you think meaningful or not. Reality disagrees with you, that much is obvious." She called up to the guard on the inner gatehouse, asking for a rope to be thrown down to evacuate them. But the guard shook her head: "Not after a breach signal, squires!"

Anka bayed and then winked the others to follow her. High on the walls, wooden boards with long metal spikes on their top were lowered over sections where doors or windows offered entrance to the walls insides. Lina didn't release Hermann, but just hurried after the others, dragging the human boy after herself. Growls, howls and whinnies, shouts and the scraping noises of the scorpion came from the outer gate. They ran down the main street, toward the hospital. The harbour bar had sealed up, the public bath was vacated, the storage hall locked. The vetenarians had lowered the heavy wooden shutters over their homes door and window. Built to withstand a raging lizard, they had good cause to consider themselves safe. Anka led them with long strides up the stairway to the nurses homes. But that wasn't her destination. She ran over the roof terrace of the vetenarians and from there over the bridge to the sickbay of the hospital.

The silken sunsails over the hospitals terrace had been removed. The nurses were carrying bedframes with patients - fortunately there were only few - into the sickbay. Inside the medical doctors helped arranging the beds. Two of the amazon nurses were already wearing heavy protective gear, made from padded reptilian leather and multiple layers of silk, as well as standard

issue amazon swords and knives. The latter could serve as broadswords for strong fennekim. "Squires, first year military training," Anka saluted to the older of the two armored nurses, "Where shall we help?"

From the gatehouse loud crashing noises came and a huge scorpion claw appeared between the gatehouse towers. An amazone with a heavy axe took a swing at the claw. But like the rest of the scorpions body, it was covered in shiny metal. The axe left a dent in the metal, but then the scorpions body jolted up between the towers. Its second claw swiped the space between the towers, throwing the amazon with the axe and two others over the wall and down onto the roadway. They landed with metallic clattering, not moving any more. A faint, high pitched howl came from between the towers. Three fennekim, well visible in their drab colored clothing, jumped at the scorpions head and attacked it with claws, fangs and their swords.

The older of the two armored nurses pointed at a heavy belted chest in the wallside corner of the terrace: "Equip yourself squires. We're going to have a lot of fun with that one."

The squires dashed to the chest. In it, wrapped in oiled and waxed silks, were several standard issue swords. The armor that usually was in the chest was already being worn by the two amazon nurses. Anka handed out swords to Inwe, Newi, Sinna and Lina. When Hermann stretched his hands out she looked at him, and reached for an amazon knife. For human measures, it rated as a shortsword, for fennekim it was a two handed sword. Hermann flailed his hands:

"I want a sword, the real deal!"

Anka looked at Lina, who offered: "Remember, his hands and wrists are really strong. He might be able to handle it." Making a grimace which, on a horses muzzle, looked rather funny than dismayed, Anka sighed and pulled out a sword and handed it handle first to Hermann: "Don't make me regret that. Males and big blades are two things that don't work well together."

Hermann gasped for air like a fish in the dry. He looked up to where raiders plucked the fennekim off the scorpion, throwing them like dolls over the wall. Two raiders followed them a heartbeat later, crossbow bolts sticking from their bodies. A third followed a moment later, struggling with an amazon and a fennekim. However, none of the tigrine raiders smashed onto the ground. They all had ropes bound around their midst. And as the ropes went taught, the scorpion with its bolted-on armor suddenly was jerked up and between the gates towers. The three raiders - and the amazone and her

protector who still were fighting with the third, still alive one - lowered as much as the scorpion came up higher.

Herman gasped again, grabbed the sword and tried to look grim under his forming pallor: "I can fight just as well as you, you... You girls!" then he took a deep breath and placed both hands on the swords handle to hold it, "Better even!"

"Lina, you make sure he won't harm himself or any friendlies." Lina saluted to Anka and then pushed Hermann aside to let the unarmed nurses and doctors pass to lock the heavy wooden shutters and then retreat into the sickbay, closing its doors and barring them from the inside.

The amazone and her protector dangling with the raider on the inside of the wall had overpowered him. As the scorpion moved fully atop the wall, the rope on which they hung lowered so far that they dared sliding down the raiders limp form to drop to the floor from his feet. Anka exchanged a few words with the armored nurse, then commanded her fellow squires: "Let's get those two up here, hurry." She led by example and ran back over the small bridge to the stairway which led down. Hermann had little chance to think twice: Lina grabbed his tunics collar and dragged him after her. His brain was in a frenzy to think about everything else but how to use that sword. Like that it was nice that there were at least two reinforcements. Although it were only the small shapes of the foxes, one white, one red. They slid down over the wall onto the hospitals roof and from there over the shoulder of one of the armored nurses onto the terrace and from there... "Swing those gnarly legs!" Lina shouted at Hermann over the clamour of growls, whinnies, barks and yips and scraping, clashing noises from both towers and from within the wall over the gate itself. Then Hermann had to focus to get down the stair in one piece at Linas fast pace.

A catapult from the inner wall fired at the scorpion with a loud wooden "thuuunk". The aim was true and made the scorpion scramble up the northern, the right tower. The shot, however, didn't break the beasts carapace, but instead left a deep dent in its metallic armor which did little to slow down the monster from the desert. Those guards on the tower pulled up heavy spears and their swords, shouting loud and stabbing at the scorpion, but to little avail. Hermann saw that the beast was trailing ropes from the sides of its armor. From the street, looking up, the scorpion high up on the tower looked gargantuan. The tower platform was five by five meters, but the scorpion had barely space to stand on it.

The squires and Hermann ran past the motionless forms of the three amazones and their protectors that had fallen down from the gatehouse.

There was nothing to be done for them. Arriving at the fourth, more lucky one, Anka and Inwe lifted her up between them. Her protector, a corn-yellow furred fennekim, whined and clung to her, until Newi plucked him from the wounded amazone and pressed him with one arm against her bosoms. His left foot dangled in an unhealthy angle from his leg. Lina released Hermann and picked the miraculously still intact medium crossbow and the tigh-quiver with the bolts from one of the fallen amazones. Up on the walls, unpleasant noises indicated the demise of the northern towers crew when the scorpion moved over the top of the tower. It swiped it clean with its claw before it moved on to lower itself onto the wall segment between the tower and the wall separating harbour and the unmarried fennekims quarters. On the wall segment ten amazones waited, always two together holding a five meter long spear. A catapult on the inner wall fired, but its stone boulder was aimed a bit too low. It hit the wall a step below the scorpions low body. Little more than stoneflakes blasted away, leaving a shallow crater in the wall, and some bigger shards of the stone boulder rained down.

The swords of the fallen amazones were either missing or partly broken. Sinna took a look at their working knives, but then kept her long wooden stick. In the gatehouse the side doors into the towers flew open and several amazones dashed out, several carrying wounded on their backs. The last ones rammed the doors shut and leaned against them. Some of those that got through before them unlimbered wooden rods from the gates support. Those rods they jacked against the metal covered doors, blocking them against opening from the inside.

Anka wanted Sinna to take her place carrying the wounded guard. But Sinna shook her head:

"You get the sister and her protector up to the hospital right away. We," she looked at Hermann and Lina, "keep the raiders a bit at bay."

High up on the wall the scorpion was dancing around and lashing out with tail and claws at unseen defenders. And so Anka, Inwe and Newi carried the two survivors quickly away, whilst Sinna ran to the gate guards that huddled inside the gatehouse. An amazone with bad claw-slashes on her cheek and her breastbone waved to her:

"Our remaining protectors keep the raiders busy, but they can't hold them much longer. Burn the towers to isolate the remaining raiders, squires."

Hermann came up huffing: "Are the towers empty?"

The wounded Amazone, the Optia who, with her fifty sisters, had the task of guarding the western gates, looked at Hermann:

"Our protectors are in there. As long as they still live, the raiders won't be able to get out." Then she looked at Sinna:

"This was an order, squire."

The young amazone nodded, gulped and waved to Lina, who slid down from the roadway to the lower roadway of the harbor. There she leaned against the wall, and Sinna carefull stepped upon her shoulders.

"You just can't burn your allies!" Hermann shouted.

"They already die inside there so that the raiders cannot leave the tower. Honor them," the Optia said icily.

"Honor my Ass!" Hermann was chalk-white, looked up and saw one of the towers windows... maybe just in range to climb up there. He dropped the sword, jumped to one of the dead amazones and took her knife - still well in the shortsword range for him - held it with his teeth and then started to climb the wall to the window. Luckily the lower inner wall was slightly tilted and decorated with plenty of murals. Sinna was pulling on a string repeatedly. The noise of metal grating over pyrite, making showers of sparks, sang in Hermanns ears.

Lina looked up and shouted: "Hermann, no!"

But he already had reached the window, squeezing himself through the wooden bars which were too tight for either amazone or raider. Outside he could hear growls and barks, occasionally metallic clatter. When he slid feet first through the window, he dived into the gloom of the towers interior. And the carnage inside it. Hermann always had seen the pictures of proud soldiers with polished weapons and clean, sharp clothing. All the ads to join the military had never mentioned the stench: The tower smelled like a toilet which hadn't been flushed for a week, despite heavy usage.

Or the noises: There were screams and shouts, barks and growls.

Hermann took the knife into his right and stepped from the platform under the window. The platform was a small corner in the tower with two beds and a rack with spare crossbow bolts. At the ground level Hermann could see several motionless figures. Some were raiders. But for every raider, it seemed, there was also an amazone and a fennekim. "But they're just Barbarians!" Hermanns mind shouted, deeply scared. "Yes. And Barbarians overthrew Rome," another, seldomly heard voice in Hermanns mind said. Feeble, but far less scared. A floor above, heavy steps danced around. Curses flew, high pitched growls answered. On one of the stairs lay a sword, bloodied, its blade heavily nicked where it had hit stone.

Hermann took it, putting the knife carefully under his belt. He stepped up the stairway, around the corner. Looking up he could see three raiders beating up each other.

No, not each other. They were clawing and slapping at five fennekim that were running and jumping all over them, using their small swords to sting

at the raiders throats, eyes and ears, on the ground also aiming for their ankles, knees and feet. A gatehouse with its adjacent towers was manned - zebraed - by fifty amazones and their protectors. The rest of the standard amazone century was then spread out along the adjacent walls. Depending upon estimated vulnerability of the wall segment, this could be a longer or shorter stretch. He gulped and jumped up the last steps of the stair, shouting: "Surrender or eat steel!"

Bleeding, scratched and bitten tigers and fennekim alike froze for a second and looked at him.

Then the raider that had only one fennekim on him, who was biting and stabbing the raiders left shoulder, jumped at Hermann, his left leg forward and his foot claws fully extended. All the others busied themselves with their current enemies.

Hermann lifted his arms to protect his face, pulling the sword up in a diagonal motion. There was a crunching noise, a cough and a yip. And then a heavy body slammed into him, throwing him against the windowsill. Luckily, for the alternative would have been the stairway. Which was the path the body took, clattering downstairs.

"Wrrryyy! Good slash!" piped a fennekims voice from beside him on the windowsill. The fennekim who had attacked the raider knelt there. The tip of his right ear was clipped and bleeding, his eyes unfocused, his small fangs bared. Hermann looked down, where the raiders head rested on the floor. Its body was a few meters down the stairway. One of the two remaining raiders managed to grab one of the fennekims head and squeezed it. Hermann saw and heard how the little guy rammed his tiny sword into the tigers wrist instead of wriggling free. And a moment later, he dropped to the floor, dead, his head crushed like an egg somebody stepped upon. But the tigers wrist spurted blood now. Whenever he wanted to cover the cut with his other hand, the one remaining fennekim on him tried to attack his eyes and his neck. Hermann felt warmth running down his thighs. It wasn't blood. "Nae time ter mark yar Territory now! Is still contested!" the Fennekim on the windowsill shouted. Then he jumped like a rubberball from the windowsill, onto the floor and then onto the tiger who's wrist had been slitted.

Hermann staggered after him. His mind wailed that this clearly hadn't been in any recruiting poster ever.

"S-Surrender and you will be spared!" He croaked these words.

Maybe not loud enough.

He lifted the sword which suddenly felt as heavy as lead and walked toward the still healthy tiger: "Surrender, please!" He pleaded.

The tiger, busy with two fennekim of which ones ear was little more then

shreds, just turned and landed a kick in Hermanns stomach, kicking him away. Fortunately his claws just scratched his side. Hermann was bleeding now, but when he pressed his left hand to his side, his fingers didnt slide into any wound. It was just one set of scratches, of which he had plenty. The wounded tiger threw himself against the wall. He left a bloody red splotch on the wall. Only one fennekim was left on him. And it was not the lil guy with the clipped ear. Herman screamed. Anger, fear, frustration, and rage. He screamed as loud as he could, lowered the sword and ran straight for the wounded tiger. The tiger turned around, and looked puzzled. He looked still puzzled when Hermann nailed him to the locked door with the sword. The Fennekim on the tigers head also looked somewhat surprised, just as the amazone on the other side of the door when the tip of a sword poked into her armors back. Luckily there was little more than a dent on the armors back. Hermann was crying. His tears blurred his vision, but the shape of the remaining raider was visible well enough for him. When the raider saw him coming and lashed out with his claws, Hermann was already past the raiders claws. He rammed headfirst into the raiders chest. This threw the raider back and the fennekim off him. Roaring like a madman, Hermann kept on running until his hip crushed into a wall. A surprised mewl sounded for a moment, cut short. Hermann had pushed the raider out of the window. Keeping on bellowing, in part for his own sake as not having to form any coherent thought, Hermann ran up the next level.

"Geeez!" the fennekim with the shredded ear said, "That guy means business!"

The fennekim from the raider that was nailed against the wall had slid down and had tried to pull on the sword, unable to move it. Then he pointed to the stinking tarry substance flowing from a small opening in the walls corner onto the bloodstained wooden floor: "Ha, my lady got out. She's setting the tower ablaze." Then he coughed some blood, spat more onto the floor: "Well, let's make sure our tall ladies can be proud of us." Upstairs the heavy thudding of the raiders trying to breach the door stopped. Instead there was an explosion of noise, most audible of it all Hermann's berserker bellowing. The third fennekim spat out of the window: "May my lady find solace that I'll bring her a another raider for company." Then the three hobbled and jumped, each according to his injuries, upstairs after Hermann.

In the room above, on the level with the walls top, five tigers had been using a wooden bole to try to break the door to the northern wall. The door still held. If locked from one side, bolts on both sides had to be released to open it again. Through the windows heavy framework one could see the rear

end of the scorpion struggling to shake off two fennekim that danced over its back.

Hermann threw himself against the foremost raiders back. Over the noise from outside the tiger hadn't correctly judged from where he was coming. He had looked to the open door to the central gatehouse instead down the stairs. When the raider stumbled, the other raiders jumped back, startled by the unknown creature suddenly appearing in their midst. The boy slung his left arm around the stumbling raiders throat and squeezed firmly. The smaller boys always gave up quickly when he was strangling them. The raider however was a different game. He rolled onto his back, rolling over Hermann. The boy took this as a reason to club with his right fist firmly onto the orange furred head. The other raiders stepped back for a second, looking at each other.

"ghet thad thinnng ovv meeeh," coughed the raider Hermann was strangling. He reached with his paws, claws fully extended, for the hand hammering onto his head. Hermann screamed when some of the claws gouged deep strips into his arm and hands back.

"You like that?!" the boy shouted at full blast into the tigers ear, then slammed his head brutally into the raiders head. He bit the round ear, hard, and threw his head backward, hammering his bleeding fist onto the tigers nose. There was a crunching noise which was familiar to Hermann: He had broken the others nose.

The raider curled up and rolled off Hermann.

The air, filled already with the stench of blood, filled with another scent, naphta, or maybe some sort of gasoline.

"Will you surrender?" Hermann had rolled around and stood up, facing the three other raiders. They all were wounded, with deep, bleeding cuts, but they were still alive and kicking. The greatest of them bared his fangs and spat:

"Yourre jussst one and we'rrre fourr!"

Behind Hermann the three surviving fennekim arrived on the stairways top: "Nunu! Is one for everybody. We dun wanna see yer at a disadvantage, Stripey."

Grinning widely thanks to an overdose of adrenaline, the three fennekim limped to Hermanns side.

"So you don't wan't to surrender?" Hermann hissed. The four raiders laughed. Then three of them were laughing, whilst the fourth coughed and fell to his knees, holding his groin, mewling in pain. The three fennekim winced as one. Hermann had kicked with all his strength.

When the three others noticed it, they sprang as one for Hermann. Two

collided in mid-air, tumbling past him in a pile of arms and legs and tails. The three fennekims joined the pile, with reckless abandon, ramming their swords at whatever bodypart they could get hold of. The third, jumping like a feral tiger, stretched out long, forepaws with claws ahead, met Hermanns head in mid air. The raiders arms wrapped around the boy, the claws sinking deep into his back. The raider opened his jaw to sink his fangs into Hermanns face. However, a tigers jaw is made for closing forcefully. Not for being forcibly opened even wider. For Hermann rammed his head against the raiders lower jaw. He had aimed to ram his head into his opponents throat, but he had his eyes closed. There was an audible crack. The tiger ripped his claws over the humans back when he recoiled. But instead of skin, meat and blood, he had fabric and herbs splattering around. The wound dressing Lina had applied over the stripes from the lashing for Hermann missing taps. Two bloody gouges on the boys forehead where the fangs had bruised him were all the wounds the raider had inflicted.

"You," Hermann growled and grabbed the tigers throat with his intact left hand, "are going to," and he rolled on top of the tiger, "burn alive," ramming the tigers head against the floortiles, "if," and he rammed his bleeding fist into the tigers face, "you," and again his fist came down whilst the tigers claws came up, shredding his clothing, "don't," his voice cracked from the pain the tigers claws inflicted as they sunk into his sides, but he payed it back in good currency when his bleeding fist rammed straight onto the tigers broad nose, cracking it open, "give," the tigers paws ripped upward, stripping flesh from his sides, moving to protect his face when the boy hammered a last blow against the broken jaw of the raider, "Up."

The tiger could not give up - he was unconscious. The door to the other tower was open. The three fennekim stood indecisively before it: "Towers clean now. No survivors beside..."

The opposite towers door fell shut. From below the scent and crackling of fire rose.

"Tell them to extinguish the fire and close the doors or whatever!" Hermann jumped up, eyes bloodshot from pain, anger and adrenaline. Then he dashed through the door after the two tigers that had fled.

The three looked at each other, then shrugged: "S'not our time yet. Let's tell 'em to flush the tower." The one with the shredded ear took a heavy stick and banged it over the heads of the two raiders still alive: "Take a nap, pals. Think yer the lucky ones." One signalled out of the window and made the signs signifying the tower was back under their control. The other two closed the door and used two smaller spare bolts on top and bottom of the

door to lock it. Outside at the other tower, Hermann kicked the door open and shouted something about speedy surrender or swift crispness. The three fennekim nodded sagely at each other: "Well, shouting he sure can. Golly, he is loud..."

Then one proceeded to bind the raiders, whilst the two others climbed the ladder to the towers top. One climbed onto the top platform and the other locked the trapdoor after him. That done, they watched and listened to the splishsplashing of the water that washed from the openings in the walls instead of naptha. The two sat down aside each other, each with a stout stick, watching the two surviving raiders, ready to give them a firm whack onto their heads if neccessary. In the other tower, all hell was loose.

2.9.2 Tiz, Harun and Peter

Peter overtook the two fennekim halfway up on the hill. Approaching the height of the townwall, noises from the Dusk Gate had become audible over the noises of the town. They saw one of the catapult crews reorient their machine according to signals from one of the towers. The crew sighted the metal-clad scorpion between the towers, arranged their machine, and let it throw one of its roughly 20 kg stones at the beast. They hit, making the scorpion duck between the towers. But instead of crippling it, or outright killing it, the stone just seemed to enrage it. The three boys stood on the little hills top, above the level of the townwalls tops.

Peter covered his eyes and gazed. Given that the town was built pretty compact, it was less then 500 meters to the Dusk Gate. But there were two massive rows of walls between them and the gate.

"Oh my gosh! that's a huge beast!"

Harun puffed up his chest:

"About two months ago there was a larger one. But the larger, the earlier they are spotted and the easier they can be taken out by the catapults."

"And smaller ones?"

Tiz faked holding a bow and releasing arrow after arrow, shouting: "Twang! Twang!"

"Okay, so usually also not to big a deal?"

"The great ladies know how to build towns. They can withstand assaults of whole swarms of insects with ease usually!"

Peter winced when he saw three bodies flying off the wall between the two gates towers.

The fennekim ears shot up, and then folded backward: "Well, this one seems to be a special breed."

Peter moved closer to the wall touching the hill toward its western flank. "That thing is armored! And it is trailing ropes! That...", he stepped onto one of the walls buttresses, "the raiders use that beast as a... siege engine!" The scorpion moved up on the tower where he swiped away the towers crew. Peter blanched:

"This beast is... it's killing the guards!"

The two fennekim let their ears hang:

"The desert is unforgiving. That is why the tall folk builds these high walled towns. They are proud maidens. They show the beasts where they are, and are not afraid to battle them," Harun said in a somewhat sad, somewhat admiring tone. Far down the wall, another catapult tried to hit the scorpion, its shot hitting the wall below the beast which already slid down onto the next wall segment. Tiz whined as he saw the reflections on moving figures right in the path of the huge scorpion. Harun shaded his eyes and perked his ears:

"Aaand that is why we have to help and protect them."

Without further ado, Harun jumped down the short distance from the hillock to the walls top. Tiz yipped happily and followed, his ears trailing his bouncy motions. Peter hesitated a moment, but then followed, sighing: "No risk, no fun... But I am not going to personally meet that scorpion."

The catapults crew had loaded their machine anew, but they couldn't see the the scorpion directly anymore. One of them knelt over a wooden board using a pair of wooden tools to calculate the angle the catapult would have to release its ammunition to have a chance at hitting the scorpion. But when another amazone, bearing several, flags asked her, she denied the possibility to hit the scorpion, which the flag bearer relayed to one of the towers. Harun and Tiz passed the amazones at the catapult by simply running at, over and through under them. Tiz. who took the route over the kneeling... Officer... greeted her politely, receiving even a reply in the form of a friendly waved hand. Harun ran through between a few legs before taking the shortcut of jumping the corner of the wall, howling in glee. Peter followed, but here his better stamina helped little. He had to carefully maneuver around the amazones. A few of them looked puzzled at him, but he was gone before they could decide to speak up. At the end of the wall-segment was a small gate which Harun held open for Peter. There was a sign on the gates other side, reading: "No unmarried fennekims allowed past this point. Except in case of battle."

"Were we...", Peter called to Tiz and Harun who hopped diagonally past a tower at a cross section, as if there wasn't a drop of 20 meters down underneath them. Tiz hopped around in a circle and singsonged some rules which, so it seemed, he had been lectured about as a cub quite often. They

explained when it was permissible to enter certain areas. Harun waved to Peter to jump, too: "Hey, it's just half a step. You jump much longer distances on the ground!"

Peter gulped and stepped up on the parapet: "Exactly, on the ground! I can't fall 20 meters down there!"

Harun shook his head and tsssk'ed: "So only because it's more boring on the ground you perform better?"

"No, it is because it is not hilariously dangerous!"

Harun stepped onto the parapet on the wall segment he stood on. It was in a 90 degree angle to the one Peter stood on. He leaned forward and looked down: "Well, yes, everybody would make an ugly splat falling down there. Would take a lotta time to clean up I guess."

Peter waved Harun back: "Yeah, so, so..."

Harun stood upright and lifted his paw and his raised indexfinger - also a gesture fennekim and humans shared - and murred: "Ladies are in danger, Peter. Jumping such a distance is something we all do safely several times a day. There is no danger here other than what you imagine. But the scorpion there is very real. So let's face the real danger. So, come please - We have maidens to protect!" Peter looked at the distance from his place on the parapet to where Harun stood. Technically the fennekim was right. With his longer legs he actually could step over the abyss.

He bit on his cheeks insides and looked at Harun's eartips - and then stepped from one wall segment to the other.

Just like that.

Harun's chest fluffed up visibly when they both jumped from the parapet to the walkway: "Ha! Gonna make a true fennekim out of you one day!"

Tiz jumped up and down like a rubber ball, applauding: "Me too!" he piped. Whatever that meant.

Peter's legs were still shaking when he followed the two. Then there were the towers above the entrance gate to the families sector. Tiz jumped up to one of the windows flanking the door and squeezed through the narrow opening. Inside the pipsqueaked something. A moment later the door opened, Tiz standing in it and waving the others through. Peter gasped seeing two amazons, one kneeling, one standing, their heavy crossbows aimed at his bellies height. Once the door closed behind them, the two giant females lifted their crossbows:

"Sorry, standard procedure."

Then they turned around, aiming at the other door, whilst two of their sisters opened it and then waved the three boys through. The same happened at

the opposite tower, again repeated at the two towers above the unmarried males sector entrance gate. At the last towers exit, one of the amazones gave Peter her knife. It was Nisha, the gate guard that had carried him to the fennekims quarters on his first day in town when he had collapsed in tears realizing he didn't know where his parents were.

"Take care, little man, and don't do anything foolish."

She whinnied and bumped her soft broad nose against his forehead when she wrapped the knives belt around his waist. It hung from his waist down to his knee. The boy nodded and then hurried after Harun and Tiz. The two were making their way over and through between the legs of the amazones, complimenting them on their hairstyles or the small self-applied decorations on their armor. When they emerged on the wall segment that connected the outer wall to the middle wall, Peter heard Harun sigh in relief: All the amazon facing the scorpion were still alive and had managed to keep the scorpion at bay. Peter immediately realized that there was a problem:

"The catapults can no longer fire at the scorpion!"

With flying ears, Tiz and Harun looked over their shoulders: "Why? The scorp's standing!"

But, it was true, no catapult was firing at the scorpion. They only pelted the entire outer harbor wall in a 30 second rhythm with fist sized stones. "Those that can hit the scorpion would also risk hitting the amazons keeping it at bay," Peter pointed at the catapults he could see that would have a chance hitting the scorpion. The only other catapults able to hit it would, shooting downrange along the outer walls length, smash the gates northern tower in case of a miss. Two amazones, from the wallsegment the boys were on and which interrupted the outer wall in the way of a tower, fired their heavy crossbows at the scorpion But with most of the scorpions shell armored with metal plating, those simply bounced off.

"Ha! His eyes are unprotected!" Harun shouted in glee and pulled out his sword. By size smaller than the 'knife' Peter got from the Amazone, the human boy was uncomfortably reminded of a simple breakfast knife. He shot a glance along the other wall segments he could see. At some spots he could see, groups of fennekim and amazones emerged. But all those places were a safe distance away from the contested area.

And...

"Get back, you floofballs!" one of the two guards firing their crossbows shouted to the two fennekim. They had jumped over the parapet, onto the wooden reinforcement walls metal spikes and from there onto the shoulders of the rearmost amazone. Peter stopped beside them: "What kinda bolts

are you shooting at that beast?"

"Standard shellbreakers. Blunt hardwood rods."

"Can you try with the heaviest and sharpest bolt you have?"

The two amazones looked at each other, nodded, opened another pocket at their thigh-quarrels and pulled out dull metal rods with a triangular sharp tip.

"Please get your two friends out of the scorpions face," the other amazone growled, placed ther crossbows butt on the floor and used her hindhoof to push down the crossbows string until it arrested with an audible click. Peter nodded, slid over the parapet and down the top row of metal spikes, dropping onto the floor three meters below with a loud "Ooof!". Not that anybody had heard it over the noise. The scorpion was, despite its size, very fast. Easily as fast as the amazones, most likely faster. But the two young fennekim were then again faster than the beast. The Amazones with the heavy lances who held the scorpion at bay were panting and sweating. Even their armor was dented in places where the scorpion had hit them. The beast used one claw to shield its lower, unprotected body from the spears - and also the bolts - whilst it used its other claw to slap, stab and grab for the amazones. Harun and Tiz had easily weaseled through the amazones. Tiz attracted the scorpions attention by hopping up and down in front of its mandibles. The result was that the scorpion had banged his own head with his claws, as dents in the metal covering the upper and lower part of the head prooved. Yellowish ichor seeped from spots where the dented metal had cracked open the scorpions carapace. Harun was busy on the scorpions back trying to find some spot where he could ram his sword into the insects armor. On the smooth metal, on the rocking body of the insect, Haruns hindpaws didn't find much of a hold. Everytime he tried to ram his sword into the beasts head, either the metal defeated his blade or the movements of the beast made him slip away. When Peter was past the foremost amazone with a spear - boy was she cursing when he slipped past! - Tiz had already had more success attacking the scorpion than Harun: He used his sword, even for fennekim standards barely more than a bread-cutter though of very good quality, poking at the scorpions segmented eyes.

The scorpion was pummeling himself trying to crush Tiz.

Who inflicted more effective damage might be open to debate.

Peter waved the amazones knife to get the fennekims attention: "Get away, the amazones will shoot the beast!"

Harun had discovered one strange piece on the insects metal armor: A wooden wheel over which a rope did run, spinning on a metal bolt crudely hammered into a bent-open part of the armor.

"Ha! My blade will kill the beast!" he yapped ecstatically, hammering his sword into the insects body where the metal did not cover it. "Me, too!"

pipped Tiz a moment later, when he, striking a heroic pose, used his bodies weight after a jump to ram his little sword into the fist sized eye of the scorpion. Having eight eyes, such a wound basically was superficial for a scorpion. Perhaps it was Haruns act, or Tiz striking the eye, or Peter waving the amazon knife, which made the sun glitter on the serrated blade:

Suddenly the scorpion darted forward, stretching both his claws forward. There wasn't enough time for Peter to run back to the safety of the amazones with their heavy spears. By sheer luck the outstretched claws missed Peter. But then the scorpion crashed into him and simply ran him over like a car does to a rabbit.

"Drop! Incoming!" bellowed one of the two amazones with the heavy crowbows. Tiz had been jumping again, striking for another eye when the beast crashed forward. Instead of hitting anything, he landed on the armored carapace and slid over it to where Harun was working his blade like an eggbeater in the scorpions flank. Hearing the amazones call, he looked up. Just in time to grab Tiz by his belt, he yapped: "As dropped as its gonna be!"

The crossbows were inaudible over the overall noise. The heavy cast iron bolts impact however wasn't. Designed to hurt an enemy behind a heavy shield or door, one hit the scorpion flat in the eye Tiz had already damaged, vanishing completely in the insects body. The other hit the heads upper side, where the wooden bolts before had been deflected by the metal. The heavy iron bolt, however, went straight through as if there was no armor at all. With a loud shriek, the scorpion raised its forward body and made a jump. The Amazones between him and the barred doorway in the walls crossing pulled their spears up. A heartbeat later, the scorpion crushed into them. Three spears sunk into the monsters body, the other two were deflected by the scorpions claws. The beast left a trace of yellowish blood on the ground. Its motion were jerky.

"Makejellypastewithmintfromit," Tiz jubilated, having wrapped his arms around the bigger fennekims waist. Harun was driving his knife slowly through between two of the armorplates. The black sticky stuff between armor and chitin was his biggest problem aside of the scorpions tail which wiggled above him. Its stinger was missing, but the scorpion instinctively avoided risking hitting himself with it. Accordingly, it did not try to sting - in this case rather beat - at the fennekims, despite two of its eyes were in a position to see them. Rather, it tried to swipe them off sideways, which the two furred mini-madmen so far had avoided. Several times they hung either from Haruns knife or from the winch on the armorplates.

The scorpion screamed like a rusted break, or a boiling teapot. Its claws were impaled, by its own onrush, on the metal spikes of the wooden shield

covering the doorway to the intersecting wall. The Amazones with the spears were squeezed between the beasts head and the wall. Its mandibles tried to grab, to bite those directly in front of it. But their plate armor protected them well enough, without the beasts strong claws to support its attacks. Those on top of the wall had gotten reinforcements. Several holes in the beasts metal plating showed the power of the cast iron bolts.

Behind the scorpion, a small figure stood up, covered in yellow insect blood and some of the beasts entrails. Peter looked down himself, panting rapidly, shivering. He held the amazone knife like a two handed sword in front of himself. On the scorpions back, Tiz looked back from where he hung on Haruns neck:

"Peter took a bath in scorpion I think," he pipsqueaked into Haruns ear.

Harun had worked his sword about a handspan along the opening between two armor plates. He looked up, not very alarmed as Tiz had sounded rather happy. "I think he'll want a bath after..." He stopped, his ears shooting up in alarm. In the meanwhile, Tiz was busy poking his small sword into the crack in the scorpions armor which Harun had made earlier under the winch. Basically he was spreading more or less liquid bits of scorpion around all over the place.

"Peter needs help!"

Harun pulled his sword out of the scorpion and dashed, with Tiz hanging to his neck like a cape, over the insects body toward Peter. A very slimy, very gory and very innards-covered Peter. Fortunately, all of those things belonged to the scorpion. The ropes running through the many different winches attached to the scorpions armor sung and whined. They had done so from the very first moment the scorpion arrived on the wall. Peter needed help, although he himself wasn't aware of it yet. His knees were shaking, and all he wanted to do was vomit, take a shower and hide in a hole. Not necessarily in this order. Several ropes ran up over the towers top, others ran through between the parapets teeth. The one thing they shared was that they were all pulled taut, as if great weights hung on them. And it was these weights that Harun had heard. Tiz jumped off Haruns back when the bigger fennekim dashed toward and past Peter. "Hoho! Glorious battle will be done today!" Tiz hopped to Peters side: "You go that way cuz else the princess will be angry with Harun and me," and pointed to where the scorpion, moving erratically, was slowly sliding over the walls inner side, although the amazones tried to push it the other way. "Cut the ropes! They bring reinforcements in!" one of the crossbow-shooting amazones shouted to the three boys. Harun curved to the outer parapet and started to whack at one of the many ropes. Despite hacking like a woodpecker at the rope, his progress was slow. Peter blinked

and looked at Tiz who was kicking his shin with a similar speed:

"Agga-uh?"

Well, this wasn't going to win him a price in philosophy.

Tiz pointed with both ears, muzzletip and both paws into various directions at once:

"Yougottagobacktosafetyandwegottacuttheropes."

Peter looked stupidly at the amazone knife in his hands, then at one of the taut ropes. He swiped something stinking and sticky from his brow before comprehension finally dawned.

"Hurry, guys!"

The amazones on the intersecting wall were leaning over the outer parapet and firing bolts as fast as they could reload. By now there was another squad amazones beside them. Some of them shot bolts with sickle-like blades on their tips at the ropes that ran up the gates northern tower. Peter stepped, despite Tiz grabbing him around the waist and trying to pull him away, to Harun's side. He took a long swing with the knife at it - and skewered the rope right through. Somewhere on the outer wall, multiple yells could be heard, followed by splashes. He looked for the next rope, when the jerking scorpion - the beast was either really tough or too dumb to know it was dead - slid over the inner wall's crown. Its claws scrabbled over the wall, trying to find a hold. But uncoordinated and weakened as it was, burdened with the armor, it fell down. It fell sideways onto the gantry crane, crashing its wooden framework. But the intact ropes that were attached to it served their purpose. Without more noise than a sharp breath and the scratching of a claw on stone, a wave of raiders washed over the outer parapet. Immediately on jumping onto the wall segments planking, they cut off short pieces of rope with which they had attached themselves to the heavier ropes from the scorpion.

"Oh, poo," Peter groaned, whilst Tiz and Harun almost jubilated: "The more, the merrier!"

"Drop!" The yell from behind echoed off the gate tower. Harun, Peter and Tiz obeyed the imperious command and dropped flat.

2.9.3 Manfred and Tanaz

Manfred sat on the kindergarden's roof, reading one of the fairytales the humans had brought along to a gaggle of cublings. Yavannah, the leonine kindergarden-nurse, lay outstretched in the middle of the roof. She was barely visible under the cubs that sat and lay all over her, using her as a beanbag-couch. The three human toddlers Yavannah had adopted rested against her

chest and bellies side, sleeping peacefully. Finishing the sentence he had read and translated on the fly, the boy handed the book over to Tanaz, who sat beside him on a cushion. Her robes cowl rested on her shoulders and she carefully took the book, placed it on her crossed legs and placed her clawtip on the first word of the next sentence:

From the harbour region a signal called. Manfred looked up and wanted to stand up, but Tanaz placed her paw on his shoulder:

"When you live here longer, you'll get accustomed to this. No need to worry, good knight von Feldstein."

Reassured, he sat down again and listened on to Tanaz reading and translating on the fly. Then and when she ticked a word she did not know, and he tried to translate it. Usually he had to describe the word and Tanaz then offered a suitable translation. In each such case one of them wrote down the word and its translation in a small booklet whilst the other resumed reading the book to the cubs. Cubs, fillies, babies and kittens, to be precise.

Then the wallbreach signal sounded. The ears of the children and those of Tanaz shot up:

"Sister Yavannah? It is time to bring the cubs to safety."

The lioness stretched and yawned and kept her muzzle open when a curious cubling poked his head into the, for his measurements, cavernous den. Carefully she picked the little fuzzball up, placed him on the floor and then stood up so slowly that all other kids had time to slide down her body to the ground. The three human toddlers were still sleeping peacefully. She scooped them up with one arm and pressed them gently to her chest. With the other arm she waved to the children at large:

"Let's head for the saferoom. You know the way. Let's go!"

The children picked up their personal belongings, scampered down the stairway and into the kindergarden building itself. Manfred carefully slid the book with the translations into its leather carrying case, handing it to Tanaz:

"M'lady ibn Ardach, I need to go and look what is happening at the harbor."

Tanaz made a curtsy befitting a royal court:

"But be careful, good knight von Feldstein."

With the huge lioness herding the children into the room below, the stairway was free. Manfred ran downstairs, taking two steps at once. Tanaz' ears perked up as soon as Manfred was down the first few steps and out of direct sight. Her paw slid under her robe and pulled out an apple carved from hardwood. Given her reflexes, this happened in the time Manfred took another stair. Her ears moved, her fine sense of hearing providing her with the

knowledge where exactly he was. She threw herself sideways and fired the pseudo apple with all her arms speed and strength. It flew via the wooden pole of the roofs guardrails - which also held the sunsail - down the stairway.

The success was instant. Down the stairway a loud rumbling was heard and a yelp of surprise. Or pain. Tanaz was not entirely sure of which was which yet. She had already planned to slap Manfred awake with a wet sponge to get a reference for pure 'surprise'. Maybe nibbling on his ear and biting him lightly. Then again... It was a complicated issue to plan something like that in an inconspicuous manner. When she moved to the head of the stairway she saw Manfred, as expected, unconscious at the end of the stairway. Lightfooted she hopped down the stairs and called for the lioness. Until Yavannah came, Tanaz had checked Manfreds head and body. She cursed lightly when she found no bump on his heads backside, but she sighed in relief when she found he had no broken bones and that his glasses had remained intact. She hadn't hit him where she wanted. But, well, it had worked, hadn't it? Much better than, weeks ago, getting the human girl Anne to stumble over her feet to direct her to follow Chaman. Then again, Anne was a girl. And women were smarter than men. The fennekim society was proof of that.

She placed his glasses carefully in the small metal case she had obtained for such purposes and placed it in another of her robes pockets.

The shadow of the lioness fell over her and Manfred. For a moment, her instincts made her shiver, urged her to do a fighting retreat. But then the lioness warm, soft murring sounded:

"Oh, the kid fell? Let's take care of him, lemme carry him for you!"

Yavannah scooped Manfred up and carried him in her right arms crook. Tanaz pouted and stood up, putting the wooden apple into one of her robes pockets:

"He is an adult male!"

Yavannah walked noiselessly back into the kindergarden, looking over her shoulder at Tanaz:

"I'm just a big cat. To me everybody is either small or a twig or both." Tanaz yipped, accepting the apology. Then she hurried upstairs again and soon returned lugging her as well as Manfreds pack. "But you have seen how large humans can grow?" Yavannah purred, closing the door behind them and counted the assembled kids. Tanaz grumbled. She couldn't imagine Manfred to grow a clumsy towering something. Especially as he was so mature compared to the average adult fennekim. And he didn't trigger her instincts in the ways a feline did.

"Good, all the little ones are here. You have your toys and your lunch-packs?" the lioness purred. All the kids lifted their bags and backpacks. Satisfied, Yavannah knelt down to lift her own, impressive, backpack with her right hand and swung it in a fluent motion over her shoulder. Neither did she wake up one of the three toddler, one of which was drooling into her fur in his sleep, nor did she make much noise at all. Tanaz cursed silently, burdened with two packs. She was barely able to keep up with the lioness easy steps. The latter had gone to the rear of the room where a heavy metal door was in the wall. With her right forepaw she grabbed the doorknob, pulling the door open slowly so that the mass of chattering cubs could flow around the moving door like water. And like water, they dashed down the stairs. Tanaz went with them. When she saw a cub with a wooden toy - a stick-riding-lizard - she swiftly dropped the wooden apple into his backpack. The zebra fillies and the mixed felines went downstairs much more carefully, until finally Yavannah came, pulling the door close and slowly rotating the big wheel in the doors center. This drove an array of finger-thick metal rods into holes in the wall. That door wouldn't give until the walls crumbled. The children ran down past another door and into a huge cavernous hall.

On exceptionally hot days, this was the large playground, same as on days when there was a sand- or thunderstorm raging outdoors. A set of polished metalplates in the walls and the ceiling reflected light from outside through a watertrough in the wall. This served as a scent-lock, so that predators didn't know that there were people around. Fennekim used watertroughs or siphon-airlocks since ages untold to prevent the exhaust of their subterranean cities to attract predatory monsters from the deserts. They however didn't block the passage completely with the water, but hung silken veils into the path of the air. On the incoming side the silks drew water from the troughs and cooled the air. On the outgoing side, the silks too most scents out of the air.

Here it was the same, just that the light-tunnel was a much larger thing and secured with heavy girders. Below the last mirror a bright green silk was hung, coloring the light. It was like if one would be standing in a dense forest. And so was the coloring of the walls and ceiling. A few real wooden boles were there, their leaves made from green silks. After counting the children a last time, the lioness dogged the rooms door. The kids spread out, some dashing to the sandpit, others to the small artifical lake. Yavannah looked around satisfied, then carefully knelt down and lowered first the three toddlers to the ground onto a weavepelt-mat that was stretched out on a layer

of dry sand. Next she lowered Manfred on another mat before she went back to the three human toddlers and curled around them protectively. Tanaz sat down beside Manfred, looking at his raw, bruised knees, elbows and hands. Digging around in her shoulderbag and her robes deep pockets, she soon produced several rolls of silken wound-dressing and a small metal-wrapped glass vial with sunflower oil mixed with extracts from various flowers and herbs and a dose of alcohol to enhance the salves effects. She knelt down and licked his wounds clean. Slowly and systematically, just as she had learned in her medical classes.

Yavannah peeked over to her:

"Humans taste funny, don't they? Strange, but not unpleasant!"

Tanaz ears shot upward in alert. The lioness purrrumbled like an avalanche going off a nearby mountain.

"Not what you are thinking, Ta. They smell like cubs, somehow. Perhaps because they have no fur."

"Well, yours are cubs according to human standards. So what do you expect?"

The lioness moved her head slowly to and fro:

"I help my sister in the hospital, you know? The big human there tastes the same. It's something different than a question of age."

Tanaz huffed and soon was finished with Manfred knees. Holding her breath, she applied a bit of the salve on his knees and legs wounds. Whilst the cubs drifted away from her, the fillies and kittens drifted closer. The latter only to satisfy their curiosity, before they, holding their breath, also moved further away. Yavannah just breathed more shallow. She was too comfortable on the mat and curled around the three human toddlers than to let herself be disturbed by something as mundane as an aggressive scent.

Soon Manfreds knees were wrapped in a thin layer of metallic shimmering silk. Tanaz closed her eyes when she licked his right hand and arm clean. She tried to pin down how the human tasted. It was a peculiar scent and taste. She wrapped the right arm, weaseld around Manfred and proceeded to lick his left arm clean. The scent and taste were somewhat relaxing. Tanaz had already found out that a humans smooth fingers were great for scritching and massaging ones ears and the head in general. Anne sometimes did that when they where chatting before sleep and it felt really great. Tanaz imagined Manfreds hands, larger and stronger than Annes... Tanaz realized she'd be really jealous when Manfred would give earrubs to anybody else than her.

Soon Manfred was properly bandaged. Tanaz sat down beside him on the weavepelt and looked at him, noting that his arms skin was developing little bumps. That was a sign that a human was feeling cold, he had told her one

evening. Like when her fur fluffed up in the night. She checked her own body and, yes, her fur had fluffed up. Below ground in perpetual half-shadow, the air running through long tunnels to here,.. Well, it was no wonder this place was cool. Even now there was a stack of crates in one corner with wax-sealed berry- and honeywine bottles. Massaging her muzzles sides, she gazed at the lioness, who had curled around the human toddlers. Well, she was too small to curl around Manfred. So she carefully crawled upon him and stretched out long, her bushy tail covering his bare legs and her muzzle resting under his chin. Her robe she draped over his arms, satisfied that he now wouldn't get too cold.

Yavannah snored. One of the toddlers was rummaging around, but patently happy and mostly silent. Many of the other children had exhausted themselves and were sleeping, whilst some others were painting on a polished wooden board using charcoals. Tanaz realized she had awoken because Manfreds hands were massaging her ears. She wanted to jump up in anger, but it simply felt so good.

"Why?" Manfred asked.

She flicked her ears: "Because you got these 'goosebumps'. And you said that my fur was amiably warm."

Returning the favours she received, she started to nibble on his ears. For a while they just lay still in the darkness.

"I have to ask more precisely, don't I? Okay, so...: why did you knock me out?"

"But you were knocked out by falling down the stairs!" Surely this simple fact would be sufficient to stop him from pursuing his train of thoughts. To be doubly sure, she poked her tongue into his ear. It was a great sign of affection amongst fennekim. He giggled, then laughed. After he was out of air, she cuddled back against him and enjoyed his hands still massaging her ears and neck. She had heard that humans had special pets, cats and dogs, like smaller tigers and bigger fennekim, that had the privilege of such attentions. She was jealous of them.

After a while he turned his head and looked at her and whispered in her ear:

"I know you managed to make me stumble and that led to me falling. Why did you do that?"

Tanaz closed her eyes and sighed. He was as stubborn as an amazone. Or a falling rock.

"You stumbled on something on the stairway."

"No, I didn't. The stairs were all free."

"One of the cubs..."

For a fraction of a second he pinched her left ear before returning to rub them. She bared her fangs, but her temper melted away under his fingers caress. "That's not fair! You're using some special human power!" He smiled and rested his head back on the weavepelt, closing his eyes: "M'lady ibn Ardach, my only power is that I think well. You risked me breaking a bone. When you'd be angry with me, you surely would have taken care that I would do so. So it's not that you are angry with me. I saw what you did to Hermann last time." She whined and her tail started involuntarily to wag. "So, rather you wanted something else. What?" She buried her muzzle under his chin and slid her arms around his neck, thinking furiously. A small lie? A great lie? Or... One of many truths? Well, the code of honor required a danceress never to admit acting on orders from the angels, the mistresses of the danceress guild. With the amazones, they always accepted that some strange action was "totally ones own idea". Being the group oriented minds they were, to them this meant as much as that one was following orders. They understood orders and took them serious. The phrasing was important. Having an idea meant that one had obtained at least opinions regarding that idea. But saying something was onehundred percent ones own idea was implying that factually it was not.

Manfred didn't stop massaging her ears and caressing her fur: "Well?" A truth then.

"I did not want you to get hurt."

He burst into laughter that made her ears tingle in pain. All the cublings perked up and gazed over to them. Even the lioness grunted and looked up. Manfred calmed himself when he saw her pained expression and felt her ears folding flat against her head.

"I think I can live with that."

They looked at each other.

"It's good that I know now that you are willing to break my bones to protect me from harm," he chuckled.

3 A New Life - Settling In



3.1 Allied Sultanates, Town of Tehuioy

After barely a month of work, a set of new houses was erected in one of the smaller districts of the town. Right beside the Tigers small enclave the humans find their new homes, surprised to find a lot of anachronisms - of the positive kind. The treasure trove of the humans microfiche library is publically showcased and after lengthy discussion, the kids decide to share the knowledge in it with the people of Tehuioy, and also the wider Allied Sultanates, without any limitations.

3.2 Allied Sultanates, Town of Tehuiy

Manfred gets hired officially as a teacher for the humans language, assisted by Tanaz. He's to instruct fenwas and amazones and tigers to read and operate the microfiche equipment, with a focus to translation. The towns scribes are to make copies for the pritners to distribute the knowledge wider. In particular to help with medical knowledge, seeing that the only grown up-human is still in a bad condition, half the time drugged to allow his wounds to heal. The nurse that took care of him, a tigress, did work miracles, but when she hears there are ways to help the human better, she is all for it.

3.3 Allied Sultanates, Town of Tehuioy

Able to access the microfiche library themselves, the natives are bursting with happiness. New ideas, new stories, new technologies, new medicines. After acquiring permission, the Princess sets up a program to systematically analyze the contents of the library, and to copy contents that are immediately useful, duplicate those copies and hand them to the returning relief-troops of the neighbouring cities for further distribution, with projections of future technologies that can be retrieved from the library.

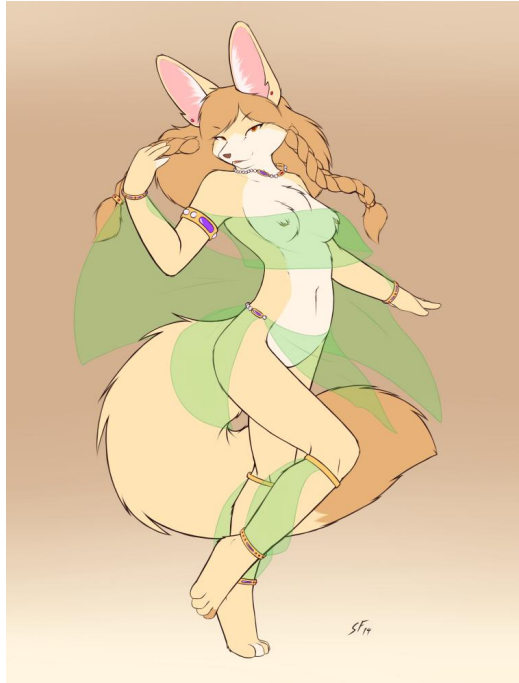
3.4 Allied Sultanates, Town of Tehuioy

The soldier awakens finally from coma, scared to death seeing a tigress - the doctor - leaned over him. He knocks her out and dashes out of her home where she was taking care of him. Outside, he runs into the tigers enclave in Tehuioy, and, dashign away as fast as his weak legs can carry him (which isn't far) he runs into the human enclave right next beside the tigers homes. He scares the human children who stop him and protect some tigercubs with whom they're playing from an assault by him. He collapses, the doctor finally arriving with her fther, the patriarch. She carefully lifts the man up and carries him into a house of the kids, moving in there soon after. Together with the kids living there she guides his recuperation. The kids explain the situation to him. And the soldier tells his part of the story

4 Growing Up - Strange Lovers



5 The Children Of Earth - The Wonder Of Life



6 Glossar

Terms, words, charts

