

WHERE IS THE BIRD OF FIRE?

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I

I am very old by the counting of my people, the Fauns—ten full years. Hardly a boyhood, men would say, but we are the race with cloven hooves and pointed, furry ears, descendants of the great god Faunus who roamed with Saturn in the Golden Age. Like the goats, our cousins, we count ten years a lifetime.

And in my years, I have seen the beginning of Rome, a city on the Palatine which Romulus says will straddle the orange Tiber and spread west to the Tyrrhenian Sea, south through the new Greek settlement at Cumae to the tip of Italy, and north through Etruria to the land of the Gauls. Romulus, the Wolf, says these things, and I believe him, because with one exception he has never failed. Now, however, I do not wish to speak of Romulus, but of his twin brother, Remus, who was also part of the beginning. Remus, the bird of fire. With a reed pen, I will write his story on papyrus and trust it to the coffers of time which, cool in the earth, endure and preserve.

My people have wandered the hills and forests of Central Italy since the reign of Saturn: the blue-rocked Apennines where the Tiber springs, and the forests of beech and oak where Dryads comb green hair in the sun-dappled branches. When invaders arrived from Africa and from the tall Alps to the north, Saturn withdrew to a land where the Fauns could not follow him. Forsaken, they remained in Italy, together with the Dryads in their leafy houses.

A Faun's life has always been brief and simple. We wear no clothes to encumber our movements except, in the winter months which have no

name, a covering of wolf skin. Our only weapon is a simple sling with a hempen cord. We have no females of our own and must propagate by enticing maidens from the walled towns. I was born to an Alba Longan who had come to draw water from the Numicus River, outside her city.

Because the city was bowed under King Amulius, a tyrant who some years before had stolen the throne from his kindly brother Numitor and imprisoned him in the palace, she was willing to stay, for a little, with my father in the woods. But when she gave birth to me and saw my cloven hooves and pointed ears, she cried, "I would rather nurse a goat!" and hurried back to her town and its tyrannical king. I was left to be reared by a band of Fauns, who had built a small encampment in the woods, with branches raised on stakes to shelter them from the rains of Jupiter, and a low palisade to guard against marauding wolves or unfriendly shepherds.

It was night and we had built a fire, not only to cook our supper but to comfort ourselves in the loneliness of the black woods. Evil forces had come with the flight of Saturn, Lemures or ghosts and blood-sucking Striges. My father, holding nine black beans in his mouth, made the circuit of our camp and spat them out one by one, mumbling each time, "With this I ransom me and mine." The Lemures, it was said by the shepherds who had taught him the custom, followed and ate the beans and were appeased.

This done, he bathed his hands in a clay vessel of water, clanged together two copper cooking pots left by my mother, and said, "Good Folks, get you gone." At six months old—five years or so in human terms—I was much impressed with my father's ritual. He had never shown me the least affection, but neither had anyone else, and a Faun's place, I judged, was to be brave and clever, not affectionate.

My father looked very gallant confronting the ghosts and very wise since, even while facing them bravely, he spoke with discretion. The other Fauns, eight of them, gnarled, brown, hairy creatures as old, one would think, as the oaks of the forest, squatted on their hooves and watched with admiration and also impatience, since they had not yet enjoyed their supper of roasted hares and myrtle berries.

But scarcely had my father uttered "Good Folks" than a tree trunk crashed through the thin palisade and figures ran through the opening and thrashed among us with wooden staves. Lemures, I thought at first, but their staves and goatskin loin cloths marked them as shepherds. I heard the names "Romulus" and "Wolf" applied to the same man and guessed him to be their leader, the brawniest and the youngest.

The first thing they did was to stamp out our fire. I scrambled to shelter in a thicket of witch grass and watched with round-eyed terror and with ears quivering above my head. By the light of smouldering embers, I saw my father struck to the ground by Romulus himself. I roused myself and scurried to his side, but Romulus's brawny arms scooped me into the air. He raised me above his head, opened his mouth, and gave the high thin wail of a hunting she-wolf. Then with the camp in shambles and the Fauns either fallen or staggering, he leaped through the broken fence with me in his arms, and his shepherds followed him, hugging roasted hares.

I gave my captor a sharp kick with my hoof, but he squeezed me so hard that I gasped for breath, and I thought it best to lie still.

Through the woods we raced; through oak trees older than Saturn, and feathery cypresses like Etruscan maidens dancing to soundless flutes. At last the earth became marshy and Romulus's sandals squished in the sodden grass. I had heard my father speak of this malarial country near the Tiber, and I held my breath to avoid the poisonous vapours. Finally I grew faint and gulped in breaths, expecting the air to burn as it entered my lungs. Throughout the journey, Romulus never seemed short of breath, never stumbled, never rested.

We began to climb and soon reached the summit of what I guessed to be that hill of shepherds, the Palatine. On a broad plateau, hearth fires flickered through the doorways of circular huts. The jogging motion of my captor made the fires seem to dance and sway, and I blinked my eyes to make sure that they were real and not some feverish dream implanted by the swamp. From their pens of stone, pigs grunted and cattle lowed in resentment at being awakened.

One of the huts, the largest, seemed to belong to Romulus. We entered through a low door—though Romulus stooped, he brushed my ears against the lintel—and I found myself in a windowless, goat-smelling room with an earthen floor baked hard by the central fire. Romulus thrust me against a wall where a goat was nibbling a pile of straw. A hole in the roof allowed some smoke to escape, but some remained, and I waited for my eyes to stop watering before I could get a clear look at my captor.

I saw that the powerful arms which had held me belonged to one little more than a boy (at the time, of course, he looked overpoweringly adult, but still the youngest in the hut). Yet he was tall, broad, with muscular legs and with muscles tight across the bare abdomen above his loin cloth. A thin adolescent down darkened his chin, but the furrow between his eyebrows suggested ambitions beyond his years. His crow-black hair, unevenly cropped about an inch from his scalp, rioted in curls.

He stood in the firelight and laughed, and I dimly understood even then why men twice his age could follow and call him Wolf. His handsome face held a wolf's cruelty, together with its preternatural strength. Had I been older, I might have seen also a wolf's fierce tenderness toward those it loves; for this boy, though he loved rarely, could love with great tenacity. As it was, I thought him cruel and powerful, nothing more, and I cowered in terror.

An aged shepherd, his long white hair bound in a fillet behind his head, rose from the fire when Romulus entered with his five men. The five immediately began to laugh and boast about their victory over my people. But when Romulus spoke, the others were silent.

"The Fauns were driving out spirits, Faustulus," he explained to the old man. "Their leader said, 'Good Folks, get you gone,' and in we come! See, I have captured a baby."

"In a year he will be full grown," said Faustulus, whose face, though wrinkled like a brick shattered in a kiln, held an ageless dignity. He was no mere shepherd, I later found, but a man of learning from Carthage. Shipwrecked near the mouth of the Tiber, he had wandered inland to take shelter with herdsmen and married a girl named Larentia. When his rustic bride hesitated to return with him to Carthage, he remained with her people and learned their trade.

"What will you do with him then? Your nocturnal games are childish, Romulus. They bring you no closer to the throne of Alba Longa."

Romulus frowned. "Everything I do, Faustulus, brings me closer to the throne. Tonight we wrestle with Fauns. Tomorrow, soldiers. My men need practice."

His ominous tone and the thought of what he had done to my father made me tremble. I burrowed into the hay where the goat seemed unlikely to eat (a foul-smelling beast, cousin though he was!) and peered out between wisps of straw.

Romulus saw my terror. To Faustulus he said, "You ask me what I will do with our captive. Eat him, before he grows up! Goat flesh cooked on a spit." When Faustulus seemed ill-disposed to the joke (or serious intention, I was not sure which), Romulus addressed a young shepherd with the stupid, flattened eyes of a ram. "Faustulus, it seems, is not hungry. What about you, Celer?"

Winking at Romulus, Celer felt my arms and muttered, "Too thin, too thin. Fatten him first, eh?" His speech was thick and slow, as if he were speaking with a mouthful of wine.

Romulus seemed to debate. "No," he said finally. "He may be thin, but I am hungry. And I want to make a belt of his ears." With that he hoisted me from the ground and lowered me toward the fire by the stump of my tail! I lay very still until I felt the flames singe my ears. Then I began to bleat, and Romulus and the ram-eyed Celer threw back their heads in merriment.

A voice spoke from the doorway, low but forceful. "Put him down, Romulus."

Romulus turned and, recognizing the speaker, tossed me back into the straw. With one tremendous bound he reached the door and embraced his brother.

"Remus," he cried, "I thought they had kept you in Veii!"

Remus returned his brother's embrace with enthusiasm, though his slight frame was almost engulfed by Romulus's massive hug. Like the others, he wore a loin cloth, but of wool, not goatskin, and dyed to the green of the woodpecker which haunts the forests of Latium. Over his shoulder hung a bow, and at his side, a quiver of arrows, their bronze nocks entwined with feathers to match his loin cloth. When I saw his hair, bound with a fillet but spilling in silken fire behind his head, I caught my breath. Picus, the woodpecker god, I thought. Who except gods and Gauls, in this part of Italy, had yellow hair (and Etruscan ladies, with the help of their famous cosmetics) ?

He released himself from Romulus's hug and walked over to my nest of straw. I squirmed away from him. A god he might be, but after all I had been kidnapped and almost cooked by his brother. I need not have feared him, however. He lifted me in his arms as my mother might if she had not disliked my ears. He cradled me against his smooth bronze chest—fragrant with clover as if he had slept in a meadow—and stroked the fur of my ears, smoothing it toward the tips.

"Little Faun," he said. "Don't be afraid. Tomorrow I will take you back to your people."

"Take him back!" protested Romulus. "I caught him myself."

"Fauns are not animals," said Remus. "At least, not entirely. They have lived in this forest for centuries, and we have no right to capture their children." He pointed to Romulus's bloody stave. "Or fight their fathers."

"They enjoy a fight as much as we do," shrugged Romulus. "We knocked them about a bit, nothing more. If I don't train my shepherds, how can they capture a city?" He grinned broadly, his sharp white teeth glittering

in the firelight. "If we don't take the city, what will we do for women?" Celer and the others— except Faustulus—whooped their approval. I was later to learn that these young shepherds, driven from Alba Longa and other towns of Latium for minor crimes, were womanless, and that Romulus had promised a house in the city and a wife for every man. Romulus winked at Celer. "My brother knows much of animals, but nothing of women. We will find him a girl when we take Alba Longa—a saucy wench with breasts like ripe pomegranates."

"Brother," said Remus, a slow smile curving his lips. "What do *you* know of pomegranates? You must have been gardening beyond the Palatine!"

"I know!" cried Celer. "I know about them! The girls I remember—"

"And the girls I imagine," sighed Remus.

"Remember, imagine," said Romulus. "One is as bad as the other. But once we take the city—! Now, brother, tell us about your journey to Veii."

Romulus and the others seated themselves around the fire, while Remus remained standing. Clearly there had been an urgent purpose behind his visit to Veii, the Etruscan city twelve miles to the north. Even at my age, I sensed that purpose and, crouching at his feet, awaited his words more eagerly than those of my father when he told me stories of Dryads and river goddesses. What I failed to understand at the time was later clarified for me by Remus.

The brothers, it seemed, claimed to be sons of the war god Mars and a Vestal princess, Rhea, daughter of that same King Numitor whom Amulius had deposed and imprisoned in the palace. As Remus spoke, I learned how these royal twins in exile longed, above everything, to seize the throne of Alba Longa and restore their grandfather or rule in his place. Remus had gone to Veii to ask the *lucomo* or king to back their cause. It was a brazen thing for a young Latin shepherd, even a deposed prince, to seek audience with an Etruscan king and ask him to make war against a Latin city. But Romulus and Remus, after all, were very young.

I passed into the city (said Remus) with farmers taking shelter for the night. The palace astonished me. Its walls were of purple stucco, and terra cotta sphinxes flanked the entrance. I told the guards that I wished to see their king; that I could speak only with him. Would they tell him that Remus, exiled prince of Alba Longa, sought an audience.

"Yellow Hair," one of them said. "Our king is a jolly man. I will take his word. Your boldness will make him laugh."

After a long time, the guard returned and said that the king would see me now—in his banquet hall. In the great hall, the ceiling was painted with winged monsters and strange enormous cats. The king was lying on a couch with a young woman at his side. She was almost unrobed. He motioned me to a couch next to him and laid his arm, heavy with amber and gold, on my shoulder.

"Remus," he said, "I have heard your story from shepherds who once served Amulius but now serve me. They told me how your mother, the Vestal Rhea, bore you to the god Mars and was buried alive for breaking her vow of chastity. How her uncle, King Amulius, ordered the shepherd Faustulus to drown you in the Tiber, but the shepherd set you adrift in a hollow log. How the log came ashore and a she-wolf suckled you in her cave and a woodpecker brought you berries, until Faustulus found and reared you as his own children.

"The story, it seems, is widely known in the country, though Amulius himself believes you long dead—for tyrants are rarely told the truth. I greet you as the prince you are. But we of Veii want peace with Rome, our closest neighbor. Lead your shepherds against Amulius, if you must, and pray to Mars that the townspeople rise to help you. When you have captured the city, come to me again and we shall sign treaties of amity. Until then, let us be friends but not allies."

I looked closely into his face, the short pointed beard, black as a vulture, the arched eyebrows, the almond eyes, and saw that he would not change his mind. I took my leave and followed the basalt road through the great arched gate and returned to you.

Romulus sprang to his feet, narrowly avoiding my ears. "No help from Veii then. And we are not yet strong enough alone. Thirty shepherds at most, even if we scour the countryside." He fingered the stubble on his chin, as if craving the ample beard—and the years —of a man. "We shall have to wait at least a year before we attack," he continued, with the heavy weariness of one who was not used to waiting—who, at seventeen, was something of a leader already and covetous of wider leadership. "Gather more shepherds around us. Send scouts to the city and feel out the mood of the crowd." Neither Romulus nor Remus had visited Alba Longa: their royal blood made it difficult to pass as herdsmen. "Father Mars, let it not be long!"

He strode to the corner of the hut where a wreathed bronze spear, green with age, lay apart like a holy relic. Mars, as everyone knows, manifests himself in spears and shields. "One day soon, Great Father, let me say to you: 'Mars, awaken!' "

"But even if we take the city," asked Remus, "will our grandfather let us rule? The throne is rightfully his."

"He is very old," said Romulus. "When he steps aside—and he will, very soon—we will build a temple to Mars and train an army even the Etruscans will fear."

"And offer asylum to slaves, and even to birds and animals."

"Oh, Remus," chided his brother. "This is a *city* we will rule, not a menagerie! For once, forget your animals."

"But the city can learn from the forest! Remember when I cured your fever with berries last year? A bear showed them to me, growing beside the Tiber,"

Romulus shook his head. "Remus," he smiled, "we shall have our problems ruling together. I sometimes wish that I had no brother or that I did not love him above all men. But let us capture the city—then we shall plan our government. Now it is late. Almost Cockcrow time."

With a warm goodnight to Romulus and Faustulus, Remus gathered me in his arms and left the hut. Of course I could walk quite by myself, but rather than lose my ride I said nothing. Stumbling a bit with his burden, he descended the bank of the Palatine toward the Tiber, which looped like an adder in the starlight and swelled in places as if digesting a meal. Near the foot of the hill we entered the mouth of a cave where a small fire burned on a raised clay hearth. Remus stirred the fire.

"I hate the dark," he said. "It is sad with spirits. People who died like my mother, without proper rites." Sleepily I looked around me and saw that the earthen floor had been covered with rushes and clover, that a pallet of clean white wool lay in the corner, and that earthen pots lined the opposite wall. There was no one in the cave, but a large dog lay asleep beyond the fire.

As we entered, the animal awoke and opened its eyes. A dog indeed! An immense wolf, its yellow-grey fur matted with age, rose on its haunches and faced us. Whether it snarled or grinned, I could not be sure. When Remus bent to deposit me on the pallet, I refused at first to let go of his neck.

"Lie still, little Faun," he laughed. "This is Luperca, my foster mother. It was she who found Romulus and me on the bank of the Tiber and brought us to this very cave. She is very old now. Sometimes she walks in the woods, but at night she shares my cave and my supper." He knelt beside her and stroked her black-rimmed ears. In looking back, I can see the

nobility of the scene, this boy with slender hands and hair as yellow as sunflowers, the aged wolf that had suckled him in this very cave. But at six months old, I saw only a flea-bitten animal which monopolized my friend's attention.

"My name is Sylvan," I said haughtily. They were the first words I had spoken since my capture.

"I did not know you could talk," he laughed, rising from my rival and coming to lie beside me.

"Nobody asked me," I said, less haughty now that he had answered my summons. As the firelight dwindled, he talked of Alba Longa and how, when he ruled the city with Romulus, Fauns would be as welcome as men.

"You have surely seen the city," he said, and before I could tell him yes, that my father had carried me once to see the walls and pointed, "That is where your mother ran off to," he continued. "It is a very small city, really just a town. But its houses are white and clean, and its temple to Vesta is as pure as the goddess's flame. It is now an unhappy city. Amulius is a harsh ruler. He killed my mother, Sylvan. He laughed when she told him that Mars was my father. 'You have broken your vow,' he said, and buried her alive in the earth. Faustulus saw her before she died. Just a girl, really. Bewildered but proud. She looked at Amulius with her large black eyes and said: 'Mars is my husband and he will look after my sons.'

"Everyone believed her except Amulius. You see why I hate him. And I have other reasons. He taxes the vintners a third of their wine and the shepherds a fourth of their sheep. What do they get in return? The protection of his soldiers—when they are not stealing wine and sheep! But Sylvan, forgive me. I am keeping you awake with problems beyond your months. Sleep little Faun. Tomorrow I will take you home."

But I already knew that I did not wish to return to my people.

II

Twelve months had passed. Growing two inches a month, I had reached a Faun's full height of five feet. Sometimes I looked in the stream that flowed near our cave and admired my reflection, for Fauns are vain as long as they resemble young saplings, and until they begin to grow gnarled—alas, too quickly—like the oaks of Saturn. My skin was the bronze

of Etruscan shields. I wore my ears proudly, waving their silken fur above my head. I combed my tail with a hazel branch and kept it free from thistles and burrs. Remus was eighteen now but soon I would overtake him. Together with Luperca, I still shared his cave and we often hunted together, I with a sling, he with a bow and arrow. But at his insistence we hunted only the lower animals, and then from necessity—the hare and the wild pig. Bears and deer and even wolves had nothing to fear from us. Sometimes on these hunts I saw my father and called to him in passing. The first time he stopped to speak with me. I saw the scar which Romulus's staff had left between his ears. He looked much older than I remembered and a little stooped.

"Is it well with you?" he asked, ignoring Remus.

"Yes, Father," I answered, half expecting him to embrace me. For I had grown used to Remus's affection. But family ties among Fauns are usually shallow; we live such a little time. "Good," he said. "I thought they might have killed you." He galloped into the forest.

On the Palatine Hill, new huts had risen near that of Romulus and Faustulus. Sabine shepherds had moved there from a neighbouring hill, the Quirinal (named for their spear god, Quirinus), and also thieves and murderers from the forest, whom Romulus welcomed too readily into his group. When Remus objected, Romulus argued that thieves, much more than shepherds, could help to capture a town. They could move with stealth and strike with sudden fury.

As shepherds, of course, the brothers must care for a large herd of cattle and sheep, leading them from pasture to pasture both on and below the Palatine, guarding them from wolves and bears, and making sacrifice to the deities called the Pales. The herds they tended belonged to an Alba Longan named Tullius, who often sent an overseer from the city to count or examine his animals; hence, our source of news about Amulius and his increasing tyrannies.

One day the overseer complained that the king had doubled taxes, the next, that his soldiers had insulted a Vestal or executed a boy for petty theft. The soldiers numbered a thousand—all the able bodied men in town were subject to duty at one time or another—and by no means the whole number approved of Amulius or victimized civilians. But a hard core, rewarded with land, cattle, or armour (there was no coinage yet in Latium), served Amulius willingly.

Inflamed by word from the city, Romulus left his herds in the care of sheep dogs and drilled his men; he taught them how to climb rocky cliffs like city walls or move with the swiftness of wolves. On the hill called Aventine, Remus taught them to whittle bows from hickory limbs and feather their arrows for deadly accuracy.

One day, when Remus was resting from both the herds and the training of archers, we had an adventure which seemed at the time unrelated to war and conquest, though it later proved vastly important. I found Remus standing under the fig tree near the mouth of his cave. He called it the Fig-Tree of Rumina, the goddess who protected suckling infants, because he felt that she had watched over him and Romulus while they fed from the she-wolf.

Finding him preoccupied, I crept up silently, seized his waist, and rolled him to the grass. My disadvantage in such matches was my tail, which he liked to take hold of and jerk until I begged for mercy. This morning, however, I had caught him by surprise, and soon I was sitting on his chest, triumphant. Already I had grown to outweigh him, with my hooves and my slim but sinewy body.

"Enough," he gasped. "Let me up!" I rose and we fell against each other, laughing and catching our breath.

"The next time you turn your back," he swore, "I will pull out your tail by the roots!" Suddenly he became serious. "Sylvan, my bees are dying."

He had found the bees in a poorly concealed log, stunned them with smoke, and removed them to a hollow in the fig tree, safe from hungry bears and shepherds. For awhile they had seemed to thrive and Remus had been delighted, taking their honey only when they had enough to spare. But now—

"Look," he said, drawing me to the tree which lifted its broad rough leaves to a remarkable forty feet. "The bees are very ill."

I stood beside him, my hand on his shoulder, and peered up into the tree. The bees were carrying off their dead in great numbers. Two of them, overwhelmed by the weight of a third, fell to the ground at my feet.

"They look beyond our help," I said. "But there are other hives, Remus. There will be no lack of honey."

"But I am fond of *these*," he protested, turning to face me. "They are my friends, Sylvan. Not once have they stung me, even when I took their honey." He looked so troubled, so young and vulnerable, that I was speechless. In the year I had known him he had hardly changed. His face

was still beardless, his hair like woven sunlight. Who could explain this blond, green-eyed boy, so different from Romulus, had been born to a dark Latin Mother? Only Mars knew the answer. Yet Rhea, the gentle Vestal, and not the warlike Mars, seemed more truly his parent.

"Wait," I said. "Fauns love honey and sometimes keep bees. My father will know what to do."

We went to find him in the forest south of the Aventine. Though a Faun without clothes and with only a slingshot to encumber me, I could barely keep pace with Remus, who raced through the woods as if he wore wings. As a matter of fact, he had sewn his loin cloth with those same woodpecker feathers he used to wreath his arrows.

"Remus, take pity," I gasped. "I expect you to rise through the treetops!"

Remus laughed. "They say a woodpecker fed me when I was small."

"And gave you his wings."

In the deepest part of the forest, the trees were tall as hills and older than Saturn. What they had seen had left them weary—bent, twisted, and sagging—but still powerful. Oaks were the oldest, but ilex trees, too, and grey-barked beeches mixed sunlight and shadows in a venerable mist of limbs. Blue-eyed owls hooted among the leaves and magpies, birds of good omen, chattered in hidden recesses. A woodpecker burned his small green flame against the greater fire of the forest, and Remus pointed to him excitedly. "It was one like that who fed me berries."

Remus might have wandered for days without finding my father, but Fauns have an instinct in the woods and I led him straight to our camp.

Outside the palisade, I bleated like a goat to signify kinship with those behind the barrier. A section was lifted aside and a Faun, knotty and mottled like the underside of a rock, filled the entrance. His ears quivered with suspicion.

"It is Sylvan," I said. "Will you tell Nemus, my father, I wish to see him?"

The Faun vanished without a word. Another took his place. To human eyes—to Remus, as he later confessed—there was nothing to distinguish this Faun from the first. But I knew my father by the scar on his head and by the length of his ears—they were very long, even for a Faun.

"Sylvan," he said without emotion. "You want me?"

"Yes, Father. This is Remus, my friend."

"I have seen you together."

"We need your help. Remus's bees are dying. We hoped you could help us save them. The hive is well placed. But a sickness has taken them. They are carrying off their dead."

Nemus thought a moment. "Ah," he said. "You must find a Dryad."

"A Dryad, Father?"

"Yes. They speak to the bees. They know all cures."

"But Dryads are rare. I have never seen one."

"I have," said Nemus proudly. "Her hair was the colour of oak leaves, and her skin, like milk—" He broke off, as if embarrassed by his own enthusiasm. "But I will tell you where to look. Two miles to the south of this camp, there is a circle of oaks. Some say Saturn planted them. At any rate, one is inhabited by a Dryad. Which one I cannot say. I saw her dipping water from a spring and followed her to a ruined altar among the oaks. There she escaped me. You must hide in the bushes and watch the bees for an hour or more. In the tree where the most of them light will be your Dryad. Taking her nectar, you know. But tell me, Sylvan, why are these bees so important? Let them die. There are others."

Remus answered for me. "They are friends. We like to hear them work outside our cave. Now they are almost quiet."

"Friends, you call them? You are one of the Old Ones, aren't you, boy? Your hair is ripe barley, but your heart might have lived with Saturn. In the old time, there was love in the forest. So the records of my people say. A scrawl on a stone, a picture, an image of clay—always they tell of love. Fauns, men and animals living in harmony." He turned to his son.

"Look after him, Sylvan. Help him to find his Dryad. Help him always. He is one who is marked to be hurt."

I reached out and touched my father on the shoulder, as I often touched Remus. He seemed surprised, whether pleased or offended I could not say. When he turned his back, we went to find our Dryad.

There was the ring of oaks, just as he had said. Not the most ancient trees, if planted by Saturn, but old nonetheless. In their midst rose a pile of crumbling stones which had once formed an altar. Fingertips of sun touched the stones and live plants overrunning them, white narcissi with red-rimmed coronas, spiny-leafed acanthuses, and jonquils yellow as if the sunlight had flowered into the petals. We did not explore the altar

however, and risk discovery by the Dryad, but crouched in some bushes beyond the oaks and watched for bees.

Soon a faint buzzing tingled my ears. I cocked them toward the sound and nudged Remus. A swarm of bees was approaching the ring of oaks. We watched them circle and vanish in the oak tree nearest the altar, a large tree with a trunk perhaps twenty feet wide at the base, and a welter of greenery high in the air. Yes, it could easily house a Dryad. I started to rise, but Remus grasped my tall.

"No," he whispered. "Your father said to watch where the *most* bees go."

We waited, I fretfully, since a minute to a man seems like ten to a Faun. Soon I grew sleepy and, using Remus's back for a pillow, slept until he shook me.

"Three swarms have entered that tree and left again," he said. "No other tree has attracted so many. That must be the one."

We rose and walked to the tree in question. "We forgot to ask your father how to get inside," Remus said, staring at the great trunk. Apparently the bees had entered through a hole invisible to us and far above our heads. The trunk was much too rough and broad to climb, and there were no branches within reach of our hands. We circled the base, prodding among the roots for an entrance, but succeeded only in dislodging a turquoise lizard that ran over Remus's sandal and flickered toward the altar.

Thoughtful, Remus stared after him. "Your father lost sight of the Dryad near the altar." We followed the lizard to the crumbling stones and began to kick among the rubble, careful, however, not to crush the jonquils or narcissi. A field mouse, poised for escape, stared at us from the tallest stone. A honey bee surged from a shaken jonquil.

"Sylvan," Remus cried at last. "I think we have found it!" Eagerly he brushed aside bushes and, head first, squirmed into an opening just large enough for one body at a time. I followed him without enthusiasm. Such holes concealed poisonous adders as well as harmless lizards and mice.

The walls were smooth; neither roots nor rocks tore at our bodies. Rut the journey seemed long and the blackness grew oppressive. I imagined an adder with every bend of the tunnel.

Suddenly Remus stood up and pulled me beside him. We had entered the trunk of a tree, the Dryad's tree, I hoped. Far above our heads, a light shone roundly through an opening. Climbing toward the light, wooden

rungs had been carved in the side of the trunk.

"We have found it," he cried, joyfully pulling my tail. "We have found her house!"

"I hope she is more accessible than her house," I muttered.

We started to climb and at once I felt dizzy, since the tree was very tall. I consoled myself that our Dryad would perhaps be beautiful. I had heard that they remained young until they died with their trees. Remus and I saw no women on the Palatine, and imagination was a poor substitute. I had seen him scratching pictures on the walls of our cave, Rumina and other goddesses. He invariably drew them young, beautiful, radiant, the image of Woman in his own young heart. Did such a woman await us now?

Through the circular opening, we drew ourselves into a room which roughly followed the shape of the trunk. Small round windows cut in the walls admitted sunshine. A couch stood across the room, with feet like a lion's and a silken coverlet prancing with warriors. The air smelled of living wood, and white narcissus petals carpeted the floor. Somewhat hesitantly we advanced into the room. At once I collided with a table and almost upset a lamp like a twisted dragon. Remus, meanwhile, had settled in a backless chair.

"It is cirrus wood from Carthage," he said. "I saw one like it in Veii. But where is the Dryad?"

"The ladder continues," I noted, hastily ridding myself of the dragon lamp. "There must be a second room over our head."

Remus walked to the ladder. "I will call her. She must not think we are robbers."

But he did not have to call, for we heard footsteps descending the ladder. I lifted the sling from my neck in case the Dryad should be armed. Aeneas, after all, had found a race of fierce Amazons in Italy. Dryads who lived alone, Amazons or not, must know how to fight for their trees.

The Dryad paused at the foot of the ladder and faced us. She was diminutive even to a five-foot Faun—no taller than four herself. Her hair fell long and loosely over her shoulders, green hair, a dark leaf-green that in the shadows looked black, but where the sunlight struck it smouldered like jade that travellers bring from the East. Her mouth was pink and small; her skin, the pure fresh white of goat's milk. A brown linen robe, bordered with tiny acorns, rippled to sandaled feet.

She waited for us to speak and explain ourselves. When we said

nothing—what could we say? our invasion was evident—she spoke herself, slowly as if out of practice, but with great precision.

"You have violated my house. I was sleeping above when your clumsy sandals woke me. May Janus, the door-god, curse you with evil spirits!"

"I am sorry we woke you," said Remus. "As for violating your house, we were not sure it *was* a house until we found this room. Then we forgot ourselves in its beauty." He paused. "We have come to ask a favour."

"A favour?" she cried. "I can guess the favour you mean." She fixed her glare on me. "You are the worst, you Fauns. Did it never occur to you to cover your loins, as your friend does?"

"If you notice my nakedness," I said proudly, "perhaps it is because you admire it. Dryads need men, and Fauns need women. Why should they not be friends?"

"I have banqueted kings," she spat. "Shall I frolic with strangers who blunder in from the woods—a Faun and a shepherd?"

"We only want to ask you about our bees," Remus blinked, a small hurt child scolded for a deed he has not committed. He stepped toward her and she did not move. "Our bees are dying and we want you to heal them."

They stared at each other. Then, incredibly, unpredictably even to me, he took her in his arms. Like the scolded child who does the very thing of which he has been accused, he kissed her small pink lips. Quick as an adder her hand rose—for the first time I saw the dagger—and raked down his side.

With a cry he withdrew, staring not at his blood-streaked side but at her, and not with anger but shame at his own affront. I seized the knife before she could use it again and caught her, struggling in my arms. Furious because she had hurt my friend, I pressed her wrists cruelly until she lay still. I felt her breasts against my flesh, and then, before I could want her too much myself, said,

"Remus, she is yours. Kiss her again!"

"Let her go," he said.

"But Remus, she attacked you. She deserves what she feared."

"Sylvan, let her go," he said, a small boy, baffled, defeated, but not to be disobeyed. I released her. She stared at the streak down his side.

"Please," he said to her. "My bees are dying. Tell me what to do for them."

She drew him into the clear light of a window and dabbed the blood

with a corner of her robe. "Burn galbanum under the hive and carry them clusters of raisins in leaves of thyme. They will heal and grow strong again." Then she took a long, unhurried look at him, and I might have been in another oak, for all they noticed me. "You are very young. At first you were hidden in the shadows. When you kissed me, I was sure you were like the rest."

"I am," he said. "I came to ask you about my bees, but I forgot them. I wanted your body. You made me think of grass and flowers in the hot sun. I am like the rest."

"But you told your friend to release me. Why weren't you angry when I hurt you?"

"I was. With myself."

She held his face between her hands. "You are fragrant from the forest. You have lain in clover, I think. Like Aeneas, the Trojan, I loved him, you know. He came to me just as you have. All Latium rang with his triumphs—Turnus defeated, Camilla's Amazons put to rout! He sat on my couch and said, 'Mellonia, I am tired. Since the sack of Troy I have wandered and fought. I have lost my wife and my father and forsaken a queen of Carthage. And I am tired.'

"I took his head between my hands and kissed him, my prince, my warrior. In the years that followed, I watched him grow old. He married the princess Lavinia to found a royal line here in Latium. But he died in my arms, an old man with hair like a white waterfall. And I cursed this tree which kept me young. I wanted to die with Aeneas. The years passed and I did not give myself, even in loneliness. I have waited for another Aeneas."

She turned away from him and stared through a window at a swarm of bees approaching the tree. "They are bringing me honey. My little friends. Your friends too." She faced him again.

"Why are you young? Aeneas was grey when he came to me, older than I in wars and loves, though younger in years. Now I am ancient. But you are young. You cannot have waited for anything very long. Your eyes are naked, a child's. You have not learned to hide your thoughts. You want me and fear me. I could stab you with words more sharply than with this dagger. Why do you come here young and virginal? I will make you old. My face is a girl's, but my eyes are tired with waiting."

Like round-built merchant ships laden with precious oils, the bees invaded the room and unloaded their nectar in a cup of agate. She held out her hand and some of them lit in her palm. "To me, Remus, you are

like the bees. Their life is six weeks."

"Then help me to be like Aeneas!"

She reached up to him and loosened the fillet which bound his hair. "It spills like sunflowers. I am cold, so cold. Give me your sunflowers, Remus. Prince of Alba Longa!"

"You know me?"

"Not at first. Only when I had hurt you. I knew you by your yellow hair and your gentleness. The forest speaks of you, Remus. With love."

Their voices blended with the whirr of bees, and the scent of nectar throbbed in my nostrils like a sweet intoxicant. I had lingered too long. I backed down the ladder and returned to the pile of stones.

Much later, when Remus stepped from the tunnel, he said, "Sylvan, you are crying!"

"I am *not* crying," I protested. "Fauns don't cry. We take things as they come and make light of everything. A bramble bush scratched my eyes and made them water."

He looked doubtful but did not press me. In fact, he said little even after we left the circle of oaks and plunged into the forest.

"The Dryad," I asked. "Was she hospitable?" I pressed him with the hope that he would speak of her lightly, as a woman possessed and forgotten. I wanted him to reassure me that I was not replaced in his heart by a bad tempered Dryad older than Aeneas!

"Yes."

"Remus," I chided. "Your spirits seem mildewed. Have you nothing to tell me about Mellonia?"

It was almost as if the aged Faustulus were speaking. "What is there to say about love? It isn't happiness, altogether; it is sadness too. It is simply possession."

"I should think you would feel like wrestling," I said. "Or drawing one of your goddesses. Or swimming the Tiber. You don't look possessed to me, you look vacant."

"I am thinking of many things," he said. "Yesterday, I wanted to punish the man who had killed my mother, and I wanted to be king for the sake of Fauns and wolves and runaway slaves. Now I want to be king for her sake also."

We were nearing the Palatine. At the mouth of our cave, he stopped and

faced me and placed his hands on my shoulders.

"Sylvan, why were you crying back there?"

"I told you," I snapped.

"Did you think she had driven you out of my heart, little Faun?"

He had not called me "little Faun" since that night a year—ten years—ago, when Romulus stole me from my camp.

"Yes," I said, losing control of my tears. "And not to a girl but a witch! Or squirrel, I should say, the way she lives in a tree. Remus, she will bite you yet." Being half goat, I always saw people as animals.

He did not laugh at me and try to make light of my tears, but touched his fingers, lightly as butterflies, to my ear. "In the circle of oaks," he said, "there were jonquils and narcissi growing together. There was room for both. Do you understand what I am saying, Sylvan?"

Just then the ram-eyed Celer hurried toward us down the hill. If anything, his eyes had grown flatter and more stupid with the passing year.

"Remus," he called in his thick slurred way. "News from the city! Romulus wants you in his hut."

III

In the early dusk, the hill lay shadowed and strange, and the hut of Romulus seemed misted to stone. Solemn and dignified, sheep roamed the paths and, pausing, were hardly separable from the low rocks which Vulcan, it was said, had thrust from his caverns in a fiery temper. Shepherds and those who had recently joined them, Romulus's latest recruits, loitered in small groups talking about the day's work or tomorrow's drill. The newcomers held apart from the original shepherds. Their garb was the same simple loin cloth, but their faces, though mostly young, were scared and sullen. One, I knew, was a murderer who had fled from Lavernium after killing his wife; another, a parricide from the new Greek colony at Cumae. It was men like these whom Remus wished to bar from the Palatine, and Romulus welcomed because they knew how to fight.

When the wife-killer saw me, he bleated like a goat. Remus wheeled in

anger but I shoved him toward Romulus's hut. He must not fight on my account.

"You sound like a frog," I called good-naturedly. "Do it like this." And I bleated so convincingly that she-goats answered from every direction.

A figure loomed toward us, a tall ship scudding in a sea of mist. It was Romulus. To me he nodded, to Remus he smiled.

"Brother," he said. "Gaius is here from the city. He has brought us news." We walked into his hut, where a small, bearded man who reminded me of a water bug, so freely did he skip about the room, was telling a story he seemed to have told several times and would no doubt tell again. His eyes sparkled when he saw Remus and me, a new audience.

"Remus," he said. "And Sylvan, is it not? Listen to what I have seen! I met Numitor in the market yesterday with two attendants. Lately Amulius has allowed him considerable freedom. To appease the people, I expect, and keep them from growling about taxes. Anyway, a half-grown sheep dog was barking at one of Amulius's soldiers. A friendly dog, wanting to play. But the soldier did not. He raised his spear and drove it through the animal's heart. Numitor cried out in anger and raised his staff to strike the man. The soldier, far from cowed, drew his sword, but a barber and a vintner intervened while Numitor's attendants hurried him back to the palace.

"As the old man disappeared, I heard him shout, 'If my grandsons had lived, there would be no soldiers!' Everyone who had watched the scene—myself included—was stirred by Numitor's courage. And everyone wished that there were truly grandsons to drive the soldiers from the street."

With a vigorous skip, he ended his story and smote Remus's shoulder for emphasis. Remus's emotion was evident. His eyes, wide and troubled, mirrored the flames from the hearth: mournful lights in a green, sad forest. As far as I knew, no one had told the overseer the boy's real identity. But Gaius watched him with unusual interest. Perhaps he had overheard the shepherds.

Sparing Gaius the temptation to repeat his story, Romulus led him to the door. "It is bad news you bring us, Gaius. Thank Jove we are kingless here! Do you wonder we stay in the country?"

Gaius smiled ironically. Doubtless he guessed that most of Romulus's men and Romulus himself avoided the city for reasons that had nothing to do with a fondness for the countryside.

"When I think of Amulius," he sighed, "I am tempted to stay here with you. They call him The Toad, you know, though he calls himself The Bear. But Tullius, my master, depends on me. His herds have multiplied, Romulus. I shall take him good news." With a backward wave, he bobbed down the Palatine.

In Romulus's hut, Faustulus, Celer, the twins, and I gathered by the fire to evaluate Gaius's news. On such occasions, Remus always included me, though the first time both Romulus and Celer had objected to the presence of a Faun.

"We have waited with patience," Romulus said with unsuppressed excitement. "Now the mood of the city seems right. They will flock to our side the minute they know us! But they have to be told who we are, and our grandfather is the one to tell them. First we must identify ourselves to him. I will go to Alba Longa tomorrow and get an audience."

"But he lives in Amulius's palace," cried the aged Faustulus bent like a hickory bow but taut, like the rest of us, with the spirit of revolt. "How can you get an audience?"

"He is right," said Remus. "You can't simply walk to the palace as I did in Veii and ask to see Numitor. Amulius's guards are much too suspicious. Your height and bearing set you apart at once. I should be the one to go."

"You, Remus? What about your hair? Blond men in Latium are as rare as virgins in Etruria. They will take you for a spy from the Gauls! Even if they don't, how will you gain an audience with Numitor?"

"I have thought what I would do for some time. First I will dye my hair dark brown. You know the umber that's dug from the banks of the Tiber? I will rub some in my hair and disguise the colour. Then I will steal one of Numitor's cows. His shepherds will catch me and take me to Numitor. In the theft of cows, the owner and not the king has the right to pass judgment. Amulius will have no hand in this unless Numitor turns me over to him. I don't believe he will."

"No," said Romulus, "it is much too dangerous. I won't let you take the risk."

Usually I wanted to kick him with both my hooves. Now I wanted to embrace him.

"Remus is right," said that idiot, Celer, mouthing his usual monosyllables. "Old men love him. He's soft and polite. Let him go, Romulus. I have a stake in this too."

Yes, I thought, cattle, women, and a house in town. That's all you want.

What do you know about government? Remus, my friend, even if you win the city, you will not have won your justice.

"It is settled then," said Remus with a finality that ended argument.

"And I will help you," I said.

"No, I will do it alone. Fauns are not popular in Latium. The shepherds might kill you right off."

Romulus looked troubled. He stroked his beginning beard and furrowed his brow. This fierce, ambitious young man, who feared neither wolves nor warriors, was unashamedly afraid for his brother. At last, like a father sending his son to fight the Gauls, he placed his hands on Remus's shoulders and said,

"Go then, Brother. But while you are gone, I will gather the shepherds. We will be ready to attack the city when you return with word from Numitor. If you don't return within three days, we will attack anyway. The gate is strong, but the walls aren't high to shepherds who live on hills."

"Or to shepherds led by princes," said Faustulus proudly, drawing the twins to his side. "For eighteen years I have called you my sons. In fact, since I found you in the cave at the breast of Luperca. After you had fed, she let me take you—she, your second mother, knew that the time had come for a third. And I carried you back to this very hut and to Larentia, my wife. When Larentia died a year later, I brought you up myself. Now, like the wolf, I must step aside and return you to your grandfather. You will not shame him."

In our cave the next morning, Remus veiled his head in a cloak and addressed a prayer to the god Bonus Eventus, whose image he had scratched on the wall. No one knew the god's true appearance, but Remus had made him young and round-cheeked, with a spray of barley in his hand. Holding out his arms and quite oblivious to Luperca and me, Remus prayed:

"Bonus Eventus, god who brings luck to the farmer with his barley and his olive trees, bring me luck too; send me safely to my grandfather!"

After the prayer, he set a cup of milk before the image, for everyone knows that the gods, whether human as Remus and the Etruscans supposed, or bodiless powers in the wind, the rock, the tree, demand offerings of food. (Luperca eyed the milk, and I hoped that the god drank quickly!) Then he attended to his bees, burning galbanum under the hive

and carrying them raisins in thyme.

"Look after them, will you?" he asked. "And Luperca too. You may have to feed her from your hands. She is very feeble." Not too feeble to drink that milk, I thought.) "And Sylvan. Will you tell Mellonia where I have gone? I had meant to visit her today."

I stamped my hoof in protest. "The squirrel lady?"

"Goddess," he corrected.

"Goddess? She will live no longer than her tree!"

"But her tree has lived hundreds of years, and will live hundreds more. Till Saturn returns. Then he will find her another."

"Is that what she told you? What about lightning? And floods? And woodcutters?"

"Your ears are quivering," he grinned. "They always do when you are angry." And he began to stroke them with his irresistible fingers. "You will see Mellonia? Promise me, Sylvan."

"Don't do that," I cried. "You know how it tickles."

"But you like to be tickled."

"That's my point. You can make me promise anything."

"Would you rather I yanked your tail?"

"All right, all right. I will see Mellonia. Now go and steal your cow."

Of course I had meant all along to help him. My problem was how to remain hidden until he had begun his theft, then run out and implicate myself and share his capture. I followed his tracks at a safe distance. In the marshes, I was careful not to let my hooves squish noisily, and among the Sabine burial mounds, some fresh, some covered with grass, I steeled myself not to take fright at the presence of spirits and break into a gallop. I was careful to keep a tree or a hill between us. He moved rapidly, as always, but his tracks and my keen sense of hearing kept me on his trail.

Numitor's shepherds lay asleep in the shade, three gnarled men as ancient as their master, who, it was said, hired only the old to work for him because the young reminded him of his lost daughter and grandsons. At the feet of the shepherds lay an aged sheep dog who also seemed to be sleeping. I hid behind an ilex tree and waited for developments.

Remus advanced into the herd and singled out a thin, black cow with a

shrunken udder. The dog stared at him sleepily as the three shepherds continued to drowse.

"Ho there, cow, off with you!" Remus cried, scuffling through the bushes with a great racket. Like a child chasing geese, he seemed to enjoy himself.

The dog made no move until he saw the shepherds open their eyes. Then he hobbled forward and warily circled the intruder. The men rubbed their eyes and began to shout, "Thief, thief!" Remus pretended to be bewildered by their cries and ran in circles around the cow. I sprang from my ilex tree and joined him.

"I told you not to come," he whispered, as angry as I had ever seen him.

"Two of them," croaked a shepherd. "And one a Faun. They might have made off with the herd!"

They cautiously approached the spot where we circled the cow, who, unperturbed by our sallies, continued her breakfast of grass, while the dog, preening himself on his vigilance, barked from a bed of lupine.

"Brave dog, brave Balbus," the shepherds muttered, stroking the animal on its flea-bitten head. One of them fetched some leathern thongs from a lean-to beside the pasture.

"Now," said the least infirm of the three, who seemed their leader. "Tie their hands."

Without resistance, we offered our hands. While a shepherd bound them, the leader waved his staff threateningly and the dog rushed in and out barking, then withdrew to catch his breath.

"They are just boys," said our binder, craning his neck and squinting for a clear look. "Need we take them to Numitor in town? It's such a long walk, Julius. A good thrashing may be all they need."

Remus hurried to speak. "My father thrashed me once. That is why I ran away. It made me rebellious. No, I am afraid you must take us to Numitor, unless you want every cow stolen and sold to the Etruscans across the river." He looked very fierce and tilted his head as if to look down in scorn on these men who dared call him just a boy. "And my friend here, the Faun. Would you believe it! Young as he is, he has already carried off six maidens." He added wickedly, "I have carried off seven. But then, I am older."

"Boys they may be," sighed the leader, "but dangerous ones. Numitor will have to judge. Can the two of you get them to town while Balbus and I watch the herds?"

The old men looked at each other and then toward town, as if weighing the effect of twenty-four miles on their weathered ankles. One of them prodded Remus with his staff, the other me. We lurched forward obligingly. "We will try," they sighed.

"Give them a whack if they talk," advised the leader, and off we went to find Numitor.

Alba Longa, the city of Romulus's and Remus's dream, which I myself had seen only from the woods at the foot of its plateau, was in truth a modest walled town of five thousand people. Its rock walls, though tall, were starting to crumble, and its streets grew grass between their cobblestones. Nevertheless the houses glittered whitely with plaster and looked to us both like little palaces.

"And their roofs," Remus whispered. "They are covered with *baked clay shingles*." We were used, of course, to the thatched roofs of shepherd huts. "No danger of fire, no rain soaking through."

"Ho there, thieves, get on with you," our captors shouted, and prodded us with their staves. Everywhere the people stared at our advance, to the obvious pleasure of the shepherds, who cried the more loudly, "Ho there!" A vestal with a black Etruscan vase almost spilled her water. A vintner dropped his pig-skin of wine and a thin red stream trickled among the cobblestones. There were barbers in stalls by the road, and sellers of vegetables holding great melons in their hands; children, sheep dogs, and asses; and, brash and numerous, the soldiers of Amulius. In most Latin cities, I knew, there was no standing army, no soldiers except in wartime. But Amulius's men, brandishing spears tipped with bronze, marched through the city as if to say, "We march on the king's business, and it is not for civilians to inquire its nature."

"Ho there," shouted our captors once too often, and a soldier swatted them both on the head with the shaft of his spear. "Be quiet, old men. You are near the palace." Chastened, the shepherds fell silent and ceased to prod us.

To the left lay the temple of Vesta, raised by Etruscan architects on a stone platform, with four square pillars across the front. Its pediment twinkled with orange terra cotta but not with the images beloved by the Etruscans, for the Latin goddess Vesta lived in the flame of her hearth and had no physical semblance. Opposite the temple crouched the palace of Amulius, a low white rectangle distinguished only by size from the houses

we had passed. It was whispered that one day Amulius hoped to build a true Etruscan palace, multicoloured instead of white, with frescoes and colonnades, from the cattle he took in taxes; he would trade them to the Etruscans for architects and stone.

As a start, at least, he had flanked his gate with bronze Etruscan lions, slender and lithe-legged, their tails looped over to touch their backs, their eyes almond-shaped like those of the men who had made them. In front of the lions stood a pair of human guards, only less lordly than the animals.

"Have you business in the king's palace?" one of them demanded. His jerkin was leather, his crested helmet, bronze.

Our captors had not recovered their composure since the scene with the soldier. They stammered awkwardly and Remus had to speak for them.

"They caught us stealing Numitor's cattle. They want to receive his judgment."

At mention of Numitor, the guards softened. One of them leaned into the gate and called, and a withered attendant appeared from the interior. Guard and attendant whispered together; attendant disappeared and shortly returned. He led us down a hallway supported by wooden timbers and into a garden behind the palace, enclosed on three sides by a brick wall. Roses rioted, in vermilion chaos and crocuses spilled like golden goblets. It was the first flower garden I had ever seen. I wanted to roll in the blossoms, thorns and all, and kick my hooves in the air. Then I saw the king of the garden and forgot to dream. He sat in a backless chair and stared into a milky pool. His white curving hair was hardly distinguishable from his robes, which billowed around his feet and hid his sandals.

He seemed unaware of us. The attendant drew his attention. "Prince, your shepherds have brought two thieves to receive justice."

He raised his head and looked at us without expression. His face was as yellow and cracked as papyrus, laid in a tomb by pharaohs older than Saturn; god-men ruling the Nile before the Etruscans had passed through Egypt and brought her lore to Italy. A face like papyrus whose writing had been erased by time; inscrutable.

"Bring them forward," he said. We knelt and Remus took his hand.

"My king," he said, nothing more, but with infinite sincerity.

Numitor withdrew his hand and motioned the boy to rise. "I am not your king," he said stiffly. "I never was. You are much too young—the age of my grandsons, had they lived. And they were born after I had lost my throne. Tell me, boy, why did you steal my cattle?"

"Because I wanted to see you."

"To see me? I don't understand."

"As a thief, I knew they would bring me to receive your judgment."

"You were right. Before I deliver judgment, what favour do you ask? I warn you, I have few to give."

"Your blessing. Your love."

"An old man loves his children. I have none. His grandchildren. I have none. My heart has rid itself of love. A nest without swallows. But what is your name? Something about you stirs me to remember—"

"A shepherd named me Remus, and my brother, Romulus. We are twins."

The names, of course, were meaningless to him, but he caught at Remus's last word. "Twins, you say?"

"Soon after we were born, our mother was buried in a pit and we were taken to be drowned in the Tiber. But Faustulus saved us and made us his sons."

Numitor groaned and surged to his feet, like the geysers of Vulcan, white with borax, which roar from the earth and shudder in the air.

"What are you saying?" he thundered. "You lie as well as steal. I saw my grandsons when Amulius took them from my daughter. One had dark hair, darker than yours. One had gold, gold like this flower." He crushed a crocus under his sandal. "A gift from the god, his father. Which are you?"

"The gold-haired." Remus fell to his knees and ducked his head in the pool, which began to run rivulets of brown. He rose and shook out his hair. Though streaked with umber, it glittered yellowly like gold among veins of iron.

I watched the papyrus mask. The worn and time-veined surface trembled and softened, the forgotten language of love spoke in misting eyes. He ran his hand through Remus's hair and felt the molten umber between his fingers.

"Time," he said. "Give me time. I am not used to tears. They burn like wine." An old man sightless with tears, he took the boy in his arms. "Rhea," he whispered, "your son has come back to me."

"You are a senile old fool," a voice croaked from the door. "This boy has played a trick on you. He should be taught a lesson."

I recognised Amulius though I had never seen him. I knew him from the

veined toad eyes which never blinked, the hunched and dwarfish shape. Amulius the Toad.

"Guards!" he called.

"Go to Romulus," Remus whispered. "I will hold them off."

Behind me a prince and a tyrant grappled in roses and thorns. With a single thrust of my hooves, I clutched the top of the wall and drew myself up the bricks. "Bonus Eventus," I prayed, "help me to bring him help!"

IV

I landed in a narrow street behind the palace and my hooves clattered on the cobblestones. An old woman, carrying melons from market, paused in surprise, then trudged down the street with a shrug that seemed to say: "Let Amulius protect his own palace. If Fauns can rob it, good for them." There was no one else in sight, but an ass, tethered to a stake, watched me vacantly. His master, it seemed, had business in the shop of a dyer, which reeked with decaying trumpet shells, much prized for their purple dye.

Remus had given me seconds. As soon as the guards overpowered him, they would follow me or send their friends. I must reach the gate quickly; I must run. But a running Faun, in a city of soldiers, would look suspicious. They would take me for a thief. Nibbling grass between the stones, the tethered ass browsed in the sun. I loosed his rope and kicked him with the full force of my hoof. He galloped down the street.

"Whoa, whoa," I shouted, galloping after him as if to recover my own escaping property. Round a bend he sped and into the central street and straight toward the towers of the gate. When he slowed, I slowed. When he quickened, I quickened and yelled "Whoa!" A hand reached out to stop him; I caught my breath; but he burst free and charged for the gate. The guards laughed and spurred him on with a slap to his flank and a cry of "Giddyap!" Upsetting a potter's cart, laden with orange clay lamps, I hurried after him.

"May thieves crack your skull," cried the potter. I waved without looking back and raced down the hill toward the forest. To the left of me, Lake Albanus glittered in the afternoon sun, and skiffs of hollowed alder poised Mice dragonflies on its molten turquoise. Ahead of me dusky cypresses signalled the path to the Palatine.

I found Romulus with Celer and the herd at the foot of the Palatine. When I told him what had happened, he turned very pale and drove his staff into the ground,

"I *knew* I should have gone."

"Never mind," I consoled. "Who can say no to Remus?"

"If they harm him, I will burn the city! Celer, watch the cattle." He hurried me up the hill, making plans as he went. "We will attack tonight. In the dark, we may be able to climb the walls before we are seen."

"But the people won't know us. Remus had no chance to tell Numitor about our plan."

"No matter. We can't delay. Once in the city, we will shout his name—'Long live Numitor!'—and hope to rally support."

Romulus was right, we could not delay. But what could we do against walls and soldiers? If we battered down the gate with a tree, soldiers would surely be waiting. If we climbed the walls, they might see us and still be waiting. Since Alba Longa stands on a ridge, it is difficult to reach the walls without detection, even at night. I said nothing; Romulus knew the dangers. But I could not risk Remus's life with such a puny effort.

I descended the Palatine and headed for the cave. I wanted to think. On the way I passed Celer with the herd. He leaned against a rock, staff in hand and a straw between his teeth. Complacent oaf, I thought. Calm as a sheep when Remus's life is in danger.

"So they shut the Woodpecker in a cage," he grinned. "Big games tonight, eh?" Before I could hoof him, he changed the subject. "Sylvan, I hear you found a Dryad. Where's her tree?"

"She is Remus's Dryad," I said indignantly.

"And yours," he smirked. "And mine, if you show me her tree."

"North of the Quirinal," I lied. "An ilex tree with a lightning mark on the trunk." I lowered my ears to muffle his answer and hurried to the cave. Inside, I threw myself on a pallet of clover, but the fragrance reminded me of Remus and clouded my thoughts. I paced the floor. Luperca crept from the rear of the cave and pressed against my leg. I knelt and took her head in my hands.

"Luperca," I said. "Remus has gone to the city. They have taken him captive. What shall I do?" She looked at me with such intelligence that I felt she understood my words; she began to whine and I wished that I understood hers.

Then I heard a swarming of bees outside the cave. I walked out and looked at the hive in the fig tree. Mellonia's remedy had worked. The bees were recovering their health. Mellonia! She was the one to help Remus. She had cured his bees. Might she not have secrets to release him from prison? After all, she had loved Aeneas, the incomparable warrior. I galloped for the circle of oaks. Behind me, a conch shell boomed from the Palatine, and I knew that Romulus was summoning his men.

I stood at the foot of her oak and called: "Mellonia, I have come from Remus." No answer.

Again I called. A voice, muffled by branches, answered. "I am coming down. Wait for me by the altar."

In a surprisingly short time, she emerged from the tunnel. She was not the Mellonia I remembered, hard and queenly, but a pale tree child blinking in the alien sun. She raised a hand to shelter her eyes.

"He is hurt?"

"No. But Amulius has taken him prisoner." I told her about his capture.

"What does Romulus mean to do?"

I explained his plan—as much as I knew.

"Romulus's shepherds," she sighed. "I have seen them drilling in the woods. They are brave but they have no armour. They have no spears. Only their staves and bows. What good are bows against walls, or in fighting hand to hand through the streets? They will cost Remus his life."

"Mellonia," I cried desperately. "You can save him. I know you can."

She touched my cheek with the tips of her fingers, like little blades of grass. "You are a good friend to him, Sylvan. You and I and the forest, we are his friends. Perhaps we can save him. Go back to Romulus now. Say that when Arcturus shines directly over the temple of Vesta, I will come to him in the woods below the city gate. Let him do nothing till I come, but have his men in readiness."

I pressed her hand; it was warm and small like a swallow. "Mellonia, I have not been kind to you."

"Nor I to you. But Remus has made us friends. You are his brother, Sylvan. Far more than Romulus, the Wolf. Trust me."

I turned to go and she called after me. "Sylvan, wait. In truth I am afraid for him. The forest is restless. The cranes have been flying all day, as they do before a storm. But there has been no storm. And all last night, owls cried in my tree. I have looked for vultures, birds of good omen.

Especially for woodpeckers. There are none to be seen."

"Good omens?" I cried. "You are Remus's good omen!"

Tall above Alba Longa, the temple of Vesta burned in the moonlight, and orange Arcturus, the star of spring, climbed above the stone pediment. Fifty shepherds crouched in the forest below the gate: Romulus with his ancient spear consecrated to Mars; several with bows and arrows, the use of which Remus had taught them; but most armed only with knives, staves, or slingshots. The bodies of all were bare except for loin cloths—no greaves on their legs nor metal corselets to hide their chests and backs from the plunge of an arrow or the bite of a sword.

Their battering ram was an elm tree cut in the forest; their ladders looked as frail as saplings untested by storms. How many shepherds, I wondered, would survive the night? I was glad that the bent Faustulus, at Romulus's insistence, had remained on the Palatine. A momentary pity possessed me. Who could blame them, rough though they were, for wanting houses in town and women to tend them: hearths?

"We can wait no longer," said Romulus. It fretted him following orders from a Dryad he had never seen. Nothing but concern for Remus, I think, and knowledge of his own inadequacy, could have made him listen at all.

"But Arcturus has just now risen above the temple," I protested. "Before, it was still climbing. I know she will come!"

"What can she do if she does? We are fools to try the gate, which seems to be her intention. We should scale the wall on the far side."

Then I heard the bees. "Hush," I said. "She is coming."

My ears quivered. The droning grew louder; curiously the men peered into the forest. I felt like a traveller approaching a waterfall. At first he hears just a murmur, faint and distant. Then the trees fall away and the murmur roars in his ears.

Now they surrounded us, bees beyond counting. Kindled by the moonlight, they curved like a Milky Way above our heads and wove a shield from the darkness. Mellonia led them. She seemed to be made out of leaves and mist and moonlight. She walked in a cloud of bees, and I had to look closely to see that her feet touched the ground. The men gaped at her; Romulus too, and that stupid Celer most of all.

"Is that your Dryad?" he whispered. "She looks like a goddess!"

I gaped too, but less at her beauty than at the dark stains on her

face—were they blood?—and at her torn, dishevelled robe.

"It is nothing," she whispered, passing me. "Part of my plan." She singled out Romulus. It was not hard for her to recognise him, the brawniest of all of the young men and the only one with a spear.

"Romulus," she said. "Brother of Remus, I salute you. When the gate is open, I will raise my arm. Enter with your men."

Before he could question her somewhat cryptic directions, she was gone, climbing the hill toward the gate. The bees swirled high above her; their droning died, their fires flickered out in the darkness.

"What does she mean to do?" Romulus gasped. "Sylvan, she is mad."

"Or a witch," cried Celer, staring after her. The men shuddered and whispered among themselves. Something moved in the forest. Shapes inseparable from the trees, not to be seen, scarcely to be heard. Something breathed.

"Striges," went the whisper. "Vampires." "Lemures. She sent to make us follow her!" Now she was midway to the gate. "Guards," she called out, her voice broken as if with pain, yet strong enough to be heard in the towers that flanked the gate. "Help me. I am hurt." She fell to her knees. "Help me." Silence. Then a voice, hesitant, testing. "Who are you?"

"I have come from Veil, Wolves attacked my escort in the forest."

Creaking, the gate swung inward on its massive stone pivot. A lamp flickered in one of the towers, vanished, reappeared on the ground. Its bearer paused in the gateway. Mellonia rose, staggered, fell again. "Help me." The guard walked toward her, sword in hand. She raised her arm.

"They will shut the gate in our face," groaned Romulus. "We can never climb the hill in time!" But his hesitation was brief. Whatever his faults, he was not a coward. With a low cry to his men, he raced up the hill toward the gate. I ran beside him. The hill swelled above us, endless and black. I felt like a swimmer in the trough of a mountainous wave. Would we never make its crest?

Kneeling beside Mellonia, the guard raised his head and saw us. "Shut the gate!" he shouted. He scurried to safety; the gate swung inward, monstrous, implacable.

Then a shadow crossed the moon. I looked up; my ears stood on end. Mellonia's bees! In a deadly amber stream, they poured from the sky. A shout, a thrashing in the tower. The gate groaned slowly to silence, half open.

I dug my hooves in the turf, kicked aside stones, drove myself furiously forward. Romulus tripped and I heaved him back in the path. Through the half open gate, I saw the movement of men, the flash of a spear, the swirling of bees and bronze. Then we were in the city. The bees withdrew and left us to fight our battle.

A soldier charged me, levelling his spear and grinning like the demons of death in Etruscan tombs. I raised my sling and caught him in the teeth. He stopped, a round black hole where his teeth had been, and stared at me. Blood gushed out of the hole. Like a broken bow, he fell at my feet.

"We have them outnumbered," Romulus shouted. "They are falling back!" Spears wavered, shields swung aside. The street near the gate lay empty except for ourselves.

"Numitor!" "Numitor is king!" Romulus began the cry, and the rest of us took it up. "Numitor is king!" Dazed with too easy a victory, we surged toward the heart of town, the temple, the palace, and Remus.

But the street was barred. A row of spears glittered across our path, like the oars of a galley raised from the sea in sparkling unison. A wall of spears to bar our advance, and behind them another, another, and finally a row of archers, grim as Etruscan bronzes. The soldiers we had routed were few. Now we must meet an army. Already our limbs were streaked with blood.

We had spent our wind in the climb and the fight at the gate. We had lost some men—six I counted with a hasty glance in the street. We were tired, outnumbered, and armourless. How could we shake those fixed, immovable spears?

"Where are the bees?" I cried. "Mellonia, where are your bees?"

Then I saw the wolves, thudding through the gate and into the street. Muffled as raindrops, their feet padded on the stones. My nostrils quivered with the scent of fur, grassy and wet from the forest. I felt hot breath and smelled decaying flesh. We crouched against the walls to let them pass. The wolves ignored us. Straight toward the soldiers they went, the levelled spears and the tightening bows. Mellonia and Luperca followed them.

Mellonia spoke so softly that I could not make out her words, or should I say incantation. It is said that the Etruscan princes, when they hunt, bewitch the animals with the piping of flutes and lure them into their nets. Mellonia's voice, it seemed, had such a power over wolves. Sometimes, it is true, an animal balked or threatened to turn from the pack. But Luperca, surprisingly agile, snapped at his heels and hurried

him back into line. The venerable wolf who had suckled my friend in a cave and the aged, ageless Dryad; both were queens.

The line trembled, the spears wavered, like oars engulfed by a wave. The long taut bows swayed in the archers' arms. And the wolves attacked. High above the wavering spears, a body spun in the air. Spears shot up to ward off its deadly fall. The line was broken. The archers never fired. Men and animals rolled in the street; armour clattered on stones and weighed men down; animals sprang on their chests and tore at their naked faces. Spears were useless, arrows worse. A few had time to draw daggers. Most used their hands.

Some of the men broke free and began to run. Wolves loped after them. Wounded, in pain, the soldiers reeled against doorways and beat their fists for admittance. The doors remained shut.

The city had wakened. On the rooftops, torches flared, people crouched behind them and stared at the rout of the tyrants who, a few hours ago, had tyrannized Alba Longa. Now a weird procession formed: Mellonia and Luperca with the wolf pack, a cloud of returning bees above their heads: Romulus with his shepherds, raising their staves in token of victory.

But an army's march is slow, and Remus was still in the palace. Ignoring the wolves, I pushed to Mellonia's side.

"Come ahead with me," I urged.

She nodded. "Luperca can watch the wolves."

In a cloud of bees, we raced through the market of silent stalls, where tomorrow the vintner would hawk his wine and the farmer his gourds and grapes. A terrified soldier reeled from our path. A sheep dog snapped at our heels but, hearing the wolves, ducked in an alleyway.

The palace was almost dark. The temple of Vesta, across the road, lent a fitful light from its eternal hearth. The Etruscan lions growled in brazen impotence. They had no soldiers to guard them. The gate was unbarred. We entered the central corridor and, following a light, turned aside into a large hall.

"Amulius's audience room," Mellonia said. She pointed to a curule chair of gold and ivory raised on a stone platform. A tall candelabrum, hung with lamps, cast mournful flickerings on the tapestry behind the throne. Seeing that the room was empty, I turned to continue our search. Mellonia stopped me.

"We will lose minutes. Let my bees find him." She raised her arms and inscribed in the air a series of circles and lines, like the loopings of bees

when they tell the location of flowers. The bees understood and swarmed from the room.

We looked at each other. Where was the powerful sorceress who had opened the gate of a city to admit the forest? Like a swallow after a storm, beaten and bruised, she sank to the floor. I motioned her to sit in the chair.

"No," she said. "Amulius sat there." She stared at the plum-coloured hangings behind the chair. "Even his dye is false. Not Tyrian purple, the colour of kings, but the dye of trumpet sheik."

I sat beside her and rested her in my arms. "It will be all right," I said. "Soon we will have him back again."

"Now perhaps. But later? He will always be hurt, always be threatened."

"We will look after him."

"We are vulnerable too. Even now I am weary for my tall bark walls. I cannot leave them for long."

Abruptly the bees returned, circling in the doorway to catch our attention. In the dark corridor, we lost sight of them, but their droning guided us through several turnings and down a stairway redolent of rocks and moisture. We stepped into a cellar lit by a single torch, smoky and pungent with resin. The room opened through a barred door into a small cell. The door swung wide on its pivot and Amulius's body, clutching a dagger, hunched like a bloated toad across the sill. Remus stood in the cell beyond the body.

"He came to get me," he said, dazed. "And you had to kill him?"

"No. They did." He pointed to the bees which had lit on the pallet in his cell. I knelt beside the body and saw the red welts, a hundred or more, and the closed swollen eyes.

"He unbolted the door and said that my friends were coming; he was going to make me his hostage. I stepped backward. He drew his dagger, and they hit him from the back like a hundred hundred slingshots. He scraped at his eyes, groaned, and fell to the floor. Then you came."

"The bees love you," Mellom'a said proudly. "Some may have come from your own hive. They sensed your danger."

He buried his face in the fall of her hair and she held him with exquisite tenderness. For the first time, I loved him loving her. Two children they seemed, warm in each other's arms and forgetful that love, however strong, is also brief, because it is bound by the frailties of the flesh. I

wanted to enfold them in the magic circle of my own love and blunt, like a ring of shields, all menacing arrows. But I was a Faun, briefer than men.

At last she drew apart from him. "How pale you have grown, shut up in the palace. In a single day, you wilt like a lotus."

"Come," I said. "We must find Romulus. He is much concerned." We climbed the stairs.

The palace thundered with men. Their shadows bristling on tapestried walls, they stalked through the rooms with torches and gasped at treasures which, to the eyes of a shepherd (and mine as well), rivalled the riches of Carthage. A fan made of peacock feathers. Pearls as big as acorns. A mirror whose handle was the neck of a graceful swan! Guards and servants were nowhere in evidence. They must have fled with our arrival, and the palace lay temptingly accessible. The shepherds seemed to forget that they had come to liberate and not to loot.

We found Romulus in Amulius's audience room, and I must say for him that he was not himself looting, but, torch in hand, trying to organize a search for Remus. He was having trouble; his men were more concerned with found treasures than with lost brothers. When he saw us, he whooped like a Gaul on the warpath. Throwing his torch to me, he lifted his twin from the floor and hugged him with brotherly ardour. Often he seemed the crudest of warriors, a brash young wolf who, in spite of his tender years, had somehow missed youthfulness. But with Remus he was youthful as well as young, and only with Remus could I like him.

"We have taken the city," he cried, while I steadied his torch and shielded my eyes from its sputtering resin. "Brother, Alba Longa is ours!"

"And Numitor's," Remus reminded us. "Has anyone seen the king?"

In a room at the back of the palace, we found him on a couch, his white beard overflowing a crimson coverlet. He had slept through the fall of the city, and he thought himself still asleep when Remus explained what had happened and said, "This is your grandson, Romulus."

At last the sleep had cleared from his eyes. He held out his arms to Romulus, though clearly he was ill at ease with this great muscular grandson, smelling of wolves and blood, who came to him from the forest.

Romulus and Remus supported the king between them and, with Mellonia and me, headed for the gate. Along the way, in corridors and sleeping chambers, Romulus gathered his men, and a sizable procession emerged from the palace. Beyond the Etruscan lions, twenty or more shepherds lounged or sat in the street, placed there by Romulus and

awaiting his signal to enter the palace. They stared at Numitor with mild curiosity.

On the roofs of the houses, the townspeople waited too. But Mellonia's wolves still prowled the streets, and the timorous Alba Longans, though visibly moved at the presence of Numitor, were not yet ready to risk descent.

Romulus stepped forward with Numitor and raised the aged king's arm into the air. "People of Alba Longa, your king is restored to you!"

With a slight motion, Numitor released himself from Romulus's support and stood alone. He straightened his bowed shoulders and lifted his weathered face. Forgetting their timidity, the people cheered as if they themselves had restored him to his throne. The shepherds were silent; it was not Numitor they wanted but Romulus. Had they fought to restore an old man to a throne he had lost before they were born? I watched Romulus's face and saw his impatience for Numitor to address the people and abdicate in favour of his grandsons. The Wolf had done the honourable thing; he had proclaimed his grandfather king. The next move was Numitor's.

Meanwhile, Mellonia had left us. I saw her in the street with Luperca, gathering her wolves and bees as a shepherd gathers sheep. Remus saw her too, but she shook her head: he was not to follow.

"She is tired," I whispered. "She wants her tree."

"People of Alba Longa," Numitor was saying in a clear, resonant voice. "Amulius is dead. My grandsons have come back to me. A staff in my old age, they will help me to live out my years—to rule wisely if only for a little while. As king of Alba Longa, I hereby declare an amnesty to all who supported Amulius. I will end my reign with peace, even as I began it. The years between are forgotten." He paused, I should say posed, and lifted his arms with the studied flourish of a mime. A king, it seemed, even in exile, never forgot the gestures of royalty.

The applause was vehement.

"Long live Numitor!"

"King of Alba Longa!"

The people clambered from the rooftops and thrust their way through Romulus's men to the feet of their restored king. Remus tightened his hand on my shoulder. Romulus paled. A mutter, lost in the general cheering, ran among the shepherds. We had rescued Remus; for me, that was enough. But the shepherds wanted more, and rightly, while Romulus

and Remus had dreamed of a throne since childhood.

At last the old man's strength was failing. "Help me to bed, will you, my grandsons? Tell your men the largess of the palace is theirs. The wines, the fruits, the venisons. Tomorrow I will rule—with your help. Now I will sleep."

When Numitor slept and Romulus's men roamed the palace, a sausage in one hand, a cluster of grapes in the other, Romulus, Remus, and I talked in the garden. The jonquils, beaten gold goblets by day, had paled with the moon into silver and seemed to be spilling moonlight into the pool.

For once, Celer was absent from our council. Romulus assured us that he had not been wounded, but no one had seen him since Numitor addressed his people.

"Chasing some wench," I muttered.

Our conversation turned to Numitor.

"Did you see his excitement?" Remus asked. "He will reign for years!"

"Then we will build our own city," Romulus announced. "Even if we reign with Numitor, we can't have our way in Alba Longa. What changes can we make while an old man holds the throne? His people will not accept changes as long as he lives. They have had a tyrant; now they want a venerable figurehead. Let them have what they want. We will build *our* city on the Palatine. Already we have a circle of huts. Next, add a wall, then a temple to Mars, then a place of government—"

"And a shrine to our mother," said Remus, kindling to the plan. "A temple to Rumina and a park for the birds and animals. I think, though, Romulus, that the Palatine is not the best hill. True, there are huts already. But some of the owners are thieves and cutthroats, as you well know. Let them keep their huts, but in our new city there will not be room for such men. Why not build on the Aventine? It is almost as high, and closer to the forest, to Mellonia and her friends, who won us our victory."

"Ask Father Mars who won our victory," Romulus snapped. "Mellonia helped, it is true. But my shepherds, Remus, took the city. The men you call thieves and cut-throats."

"Men like Celer make good warriors," Remus granted. "But not good citizens. I mean no disrespect to the man. But Romulus, can you see him worshipping in a temple or sitting in a senate house? Give him a woman and herds, but leave him on the Palatine. Build our city on the Aventine!"

"Ask for a sign from heaven," I interrupted. The gods, I thought, should

favour Remus, who worshipped all of them and not the war god only. "Consult a sheep's liver, as the Etruscan augurs do, or watch for birds of good omen."

"Very well," said Romulus reluctantly. "We shall ask for a sign. Early one morning—the best time for omens—we shall climb our respective hills and watch the sky for vultures, the luckiest of birds. Whoever sees the most shall choose his hill for our city. Now, my brother, let us sleep before we quarrel."

The palace abounded in couches; I chose one with feet like an eagle's and fell asleep, dreaming of vultures.

V

With less reluctance than the brothers anticipated, Numitor received their declaration that they wished to build a city on the Tiber. Doubtless realizing that such a city would stand as a safeguard between Alba Longa and the Etruscans—now friendly, but expanding—Numitor had promised to send workmen and materials, and he had already purchased the herds of Tullius and given them to the twins who had long been their shepherds.

But first a site must be chosen. At sunrise three days after the capture of Alba Longa, Remus and I stood atop the Aventine, watching for vultures. The day had been chosen because it was sacred to the Pales, deities of shepherds who had given their name to the Palatine. Before sunrise, Remus had fumigated his herds with sulphur to drive out evil spirits and scattered the stalk with arbutus boughs, beloved by the goats, and wreaths of myrtle and laurel. Later the shepherds on the Palatine would leap through bonfires and, facing the east, pray to the Pales. A lucky day, one would think, for omens. But for whom?

"I wonder why the gods favour vultures," I said, wrinkling my nose as I pictured the birds at a feast. "Such an ugly creature."

Remus laughed. "Ugly, yes. But helpful. They rid the forest of carcasses. And they never kill."

"Which way will they come?"

"They may not come at all. They are very rare in this country. Mellonia says to watch the river, where the animals go to drink and die."

He had visited her daily since the fall of Alba Longa. Her name had grown pleasant even to my long ears. Instead of his usual loin cloth, he was wearing a tunic, almost sleeveless and falling just below the thighs, which the Dryad had woven from rushes and leaves. Soon it would wilt, but Mellonia had promised him a leaf-coloured garment of wool to take its place. "Now you are part of my tree," she had said. "Green leaves, green tunic. You carry the forest with you."

"But how will Romulus know if we *really* see the number we say?"

"He will take our word," said Remus, surprised.

"And you will take his?"

"Of course."

"It means a lot to him to build on the Palatine."

"I know. But he would never lie to us."

"Remus. Have you ever thought of building your own city—without Romulus. It won't be easy to rule with him. If you win your hill, it will be even harder. And men like Celer, how will you keep them out? Or make them behave if they enter?"

"I will build with Romulus or not at all. He is my brother. Do you realize, Sylvan, I shared the same womb with him? We have never been apart."

"You love him deeply, don't you?"

"He is one of three. You, Romulus, Mellonia. I love Mellonia as someone beyond me, a goddess or a queen. Green leaves in the uppermost branches of a tree. I love her with awe and a little sadness. I love you, Sylvan, as someone close and warm. A fire on a cold night. Barley loaves baking on the hearth. You never judge me. With you I am most myself. And Romulus? The stone pillars of a temple. The bronze of a shield. Hard things, yes. But strong and needed."

"You are very different from Romulus. He is not always a shield. He is"—I chose my words carefully, not wishing to offend him—"rash in some ways."

"I know," he said sadly. "And I try to temper his rashness. In return, he gives me courage."

"Courage, Remus? You have strength enough of your own. I never saw you hesitate when you knew what was right."

"You can't see my heart. It leaps like a grasshopper sometimes! Romulus, though, is fearless."

Then you are the braver, I thought. You conquer fear, while Romulus's courage is thoughtless, instinctive. But I said nothing; he would only make light of himself.

And then we saw them: High above the orange turbulence of the Tiber, six vultures glided to the north. Clumsy birds, ugly—I had not changed my mind—but oh, how welcome.

"Remus, you have won!" I cried. "Even if Romulus sees them, we saw them first. They are flying *toward* and not away from him."

We raced down the hill and scrambled up the Palatine, a few hundred yards to the north.

"Slow down, Woodpecker," I shouted. "Your tunic has given you wings."

He laughed and tore me a leaf from his waist. "Catch my feathers and fly!"

In a flurry of leaves and dust, we burst through the circle of huts and found Romulus, waiting with a small band of men, on the highest part of the hill.

"Six of them," Remus cried. "Romulus, we saw six at once!"

Romulus looked surprised, but he spoke blandly. "So did we. Just before you came." His face at last showed the start of a beard, a small black V below his chin. The ambitious boy, impatient but waiting, had hardened into a man who, no less ambitious, had ceased to wait.

"It must have been the same six. They were flying this way."

"No matter. They still count."

"Then we are tied."

"No," put in Celer. "We have seen *twelve*." He twisted his mouth to the caricature of a smile, but his flat eyes were cold.

"Twelve? There have never been so many near these hills!"

Romulus started to speak, but Celer continued. "Today there were. The six that just passed, and before them, six more. Even larger—as big as eagles. They circled twice to be sure we saw them. Sent by the gods, eh, Romulus?"

"Is it true?" Remus asked his brother.

Romulus glowered. "Of course it is true. Celer has told you. And the city is mine to build where I choose."

Remus paled and spoke with an effort. "Build it then." It must have

been clear to him that Celer had lied and that Romulus, though hesitant at first, had repeated the lie. "Sylvan," Remus said to me, "I am going to the cave."

We started down the hill. Behind us Romulus was giving orders. "Find me a bull and a heifer. We will plough the boundaries of our new city. But first we will celebrate the feast of the Pales. Celer, break out the wine. And the rest of you, build us some bonfires."

The men whooped approval and scuffled about their work. After the feast, Romulus would yoke the animals to a bronze-tipped plough and drive them around the base of the hill where he meant to build his walls, leaving a space for the gate. The area enclosed by the plough would be fortunate ground. Whoever crossed the furrow instead of entering by the designated gate would shatter the luck of the builders and allow the invasion of hostile spirits.

Remus was silent until we reached the cave. He threw himself on his pallet and Luperca, as if she sensed his trouble, crept beside him.

"You can build your own city," I suggested.

"No, I will help Romulus. But first I must understand him."

"I know how you feel. Your hill was the best."

He looked up at me. "The hill is not important. Romulus lied. That is important. He is building his city on a lie and the men know."

"No one objected. They like the Palatine."

"That is the harm. They knew and said nothing,"

I left him alone all morning and waited under the fig tree. Once I looked in the cave. His eyes were open, but he did not appear to see me, nor to hear the merriment on top of the hill.

"Rumina," I said, more in conversation than in prayer. "You are the goddess of the suckling herds. But your tree stands right at our door. Neglect the lambs for awhile and help my friend."

In the afternoon, I climbed the fig tree and captured some honey in a round clay bowl. The bees, sensing perhaps for whom it was meant (or instructed by Rumina herself), made no objection. In the cave I knelt beside Remus.

"Eat it," I said crossly. "You have brooded enough."

He smiled, sat up, and took the bowl from my hands. He tilted it to his lips as if it were milk, for he relished the honey from his own bees, and drained the bowl.

"Now," he said, "I will help Romulus with his walls. But first I want to see Mellonia."

"I will wait for you here."

"No, come with me."

"You must have things to say in private. Who wants a Faun's big ears at such a time?"

"She has grown to love you. Besides—" His smile faded. "I want you with me. It is something I feel—a loneliness, a fear—I am not sure what. I want you with me."

In the woods beyond the Aventine, we encountered Celer and three of his friends, leaning on each other for support and thrashing through the undergrowth with such a racket that turquoise lizards flew in all directions. When they saw us they stopped, and Celer looked momentarily sobered. He forced a grin.

"Big Ears and Woodpecker," he said. "You missed our feast. The gods will be hurt."

"They are hurt already," said Remus, without slowing. "But not by Sylvan and me." The revellers made for the Palatine with surprising directness.

Suddenly I remembered that Celer had asked me the location of Mellonia's tree. I had not told him, but the night of the wolves he had vanished from Alba Longa. Had he followed her home, I wondered, and then today, emboldened with wine and friends, returned to invade her tree?

"Remus," I said. "Do you think he has found her tree?"

We began to run.

The branches of Mellonia's oak tree sprawled like a city which has grown without planning, its temples and archways mingled in artless beauty. From a distance, there was nothing to hint an invasion.

We approached the trunk.

"That lowermost branch," said Remus tensely. "I think it is starting to wilt."

"Too little sun," I said, but without conviction.

He began to call. "Mellonia!" "Mellonia!"

I searched the ground for traces of a fire or other means of assault, but the trunk was untouched. Around the altar, however, there were definite

signs of Celer and his friends—jonquils in crushed profusion, rocks overturned, and, yes, they had entered the tunnel; it reeked of their wine.

Mellonia's room lay hushed and broken. We found her beside the couch, a white small body blackened with bruises and cradled, incongruously, in a bed of narcissus petals. Remus lifted her on to the couch and smoothed her tangled green hair, in which petals had caught as if to take root in its venture. She opened her eyes.

"Little bird," she said. "Who will look after you?" That was all.

He covered her body with petals and kissed her on the mouth which could no longer feel bruises. "I had never meant to outlive you," he said.

I turned my head but I heard his tears. Or was it the column of bees that swayed through the open window, the forest grieving for its queen, and for the king who had loved her? The shepherds say that bees speak only what is in our hearts—our grief, our joy, not theirs. That their murmur is always the same, and it is we who darken or lighten it to our mood. Perhaps, then, I heard my own tears.

We left her in the tree with the bees. "She would not want to be moved," Remus said. "The oak is dying. They will go to earth together."

We stared at the tree and already, it seemed, the wilt was stealing upward to the green and sunny towers.

"Did you hear what she said?" he asked.

I pressed his hand. "Yes. Yes, little bird."

When we reached the Palatine, Romulus had driven his team around the foot of the hill. For one short space, the gate, he had left the earth unbroken. Stripped completely in the hot April sun, he leaned on the plough, his massive thighs diamonded with sweat. Drops rolled down his beard. He looked very tired—and very royal.

With mattocks and shovels, the shepherds were setting to work inside the circle. Romulus had captured the *numen* or magic of the gods. Now they must build strong walls and enclose the magic securely. They sang as they dug, Celer and his friends the loudest:

Romulus, son of the spear god Mars,
Nursed by the long grey wolf . . .

Celer looked up from his work and saw us. He dropped his shovel.

Pausing outside the circle, Remus cried: "Romulus, your walls are useless, the luck is gone. A murderer stands inside!" He jumped the furrow. The shepherds stared at him in horror. I myself, midway to the gate, gasped at his daring. He sprang at Celer. Celer recovered his shovel but Remus parried, wrestled it from his hands, and felled him with a blow to his shoulder.

Romulus snatched a shovel from the shepherd nearest him. "Idiot!" he shouted to Remus. "It is you who have broken Our luck. Fight me; not Celer."

"Keep away from me," Remus warned. But he made no move to defend himself from Romulus; he was waiting for Celer, dazed but conscious, to regain his feet.

Romulus struck him with the back of his shovel. I saw Remus's eyes. Surprise, that was all. Not fear, not anger. Then he fell. In the forest, once, I heard a she-wolf cry when a shepherd killed her cubs. All pain, all yearning. A cry from the vital organs of her body, as if their red swift pulsing could wrench her cubs from death. So Romulus cried and knelt beside his brother. In Remus's hair, the stains were of earth, not blood; the umber soil mingling with the sunflowers. But the stalk was broken.

I took Remus's shovel. "Stand up," I said to Romulus. "I am going to kill you."

He looked up at me through tears. "Sylvan, I wish you would."

I think it was Remus who held my hand. Born of one womb, he had said. Romulus, his brother, his pillar and shield of bronze. Instead of killing him, I knelt at his side.

Troubled and respectful, the shepherds surrounded us, and Faustulus laid his hand on Romulus's neck.

"My son, you meant him no harm. Let me prepare his body for burial."

Romulus shook his head. "I must make my peace with him first."

"And you, Sylvan?"

"I will stay with Remus."

The men climbed the hill. The sunlight thinned and shadows came to watch with us. Somewhere a cow lowed with quiet urgency. It is late, I thought. She is waiting for Remus to milk her.

"He must have a place for the night," I said. "He never liked the dark."

Romulus stirred. I think he had forgotten me. "The cave?"

"No. He would be alone there. We shall take him to Mellonia's tree. Celer killed her, he and his friends."

He looked at me with stunned comprehension. "Then that was why Remus attacked him. They will die for this, Sylvan."

I kindled a torch in the cave with pieces of flint and returned to Romulus. Luperca followed me. Romulus stroked her head.

"Old mother," he said, "you loved him too." He lifted his brother and held him lightly, with Remus's hair against his cheek. "His hair smells of clover."

"I know."

We walked slowly—Luperca was very weak—and came at last to the tree. Trembling but quiet, she waited outside the cave.

We placed him on the couch beside Mellonia. I pressed my cheek to the shoulder where, as a child, I had clung to be warmed and loved. I crossed his arms as if I were folding wings.

"Little bird," I said. "You reproached Mellonia because you had to outlive her. But I am the one you punished. All of your life was loving—except for this. Where is your city, my friend?"

"In me," Romulus answered.

I turned on him angrily. "In you?" Then I was sorry. Tears ran out of his eyes. He made no effort to hide them. I thought that he was going to fall and held out my hand. He grasped it and steadied himself.

"You think I want walls and armies," he said, "and nothing more? At first I did. This morning I did, when I lied about the birds. But then I had Remus; it seemed I would always have him. Whatever I did, he would love me. He was all I needed of gentleness. Now he is gone—unless I capture him in my city. A great city, Sylvan. Men will call her Rome after me, and her legions will conquer the world—Carthage and Sardis, Karnak, Sidon, and Babylon. But her highways will carry laws as well, as armies, learning as well as conquest. Sylvan, don't you see? Remus will live in us and the city we build. Come back with me, Little Faun!"

Where is the bird of fire? In the tall green flame of the cypress, I see his shadow, flickering with the swallows. In the city that crowds the Palatine,

where Fauns walk with men and wolves are fed in the temples, I hear the rush of his wings. But that is his shadow and sound. The bird himself is gone. Always his wings beat just beyond my hands, and the wind possesses his cry. Where is the bird of fire? Look up, he burns in the sky, with Saturn and the Golden Age. I will go to find him.

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