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Tailchaser's Song

Written by Tad Williams

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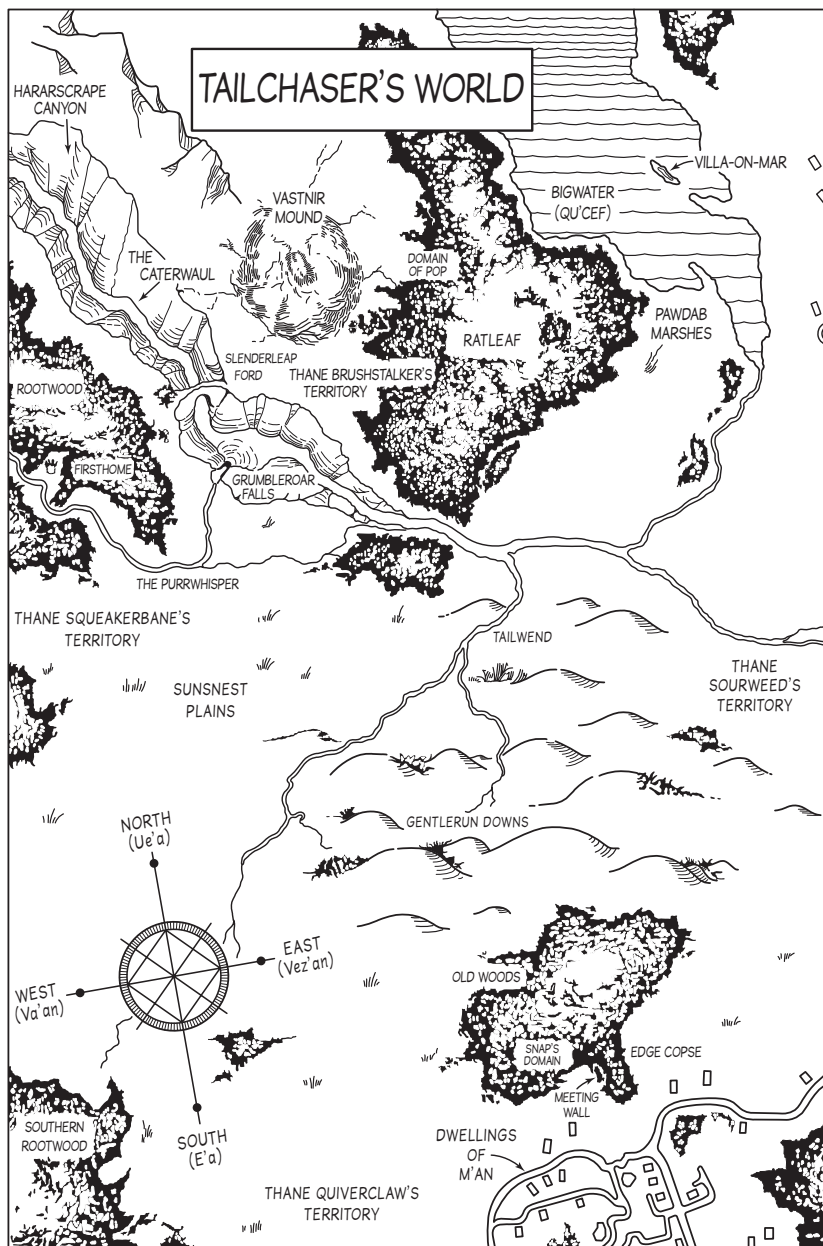
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*Dedicated to my grandmothers,
Elizabeth D. Anderson
and
Elizabeth Willins Evans,
whose support has meant so much,
and to the memory of Fever,
who was a good friend,
but a better
cat.*



For I will consider my cat . . .

For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.

For this is done by wreathing his body seven times around with elegant quickness . . .

For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.

For this he performs in ten degrees.

For first he looks upon his fore-paws to see if they are clean.

For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.

For thirdly he works it upon the stretch with the fore-paws extended

For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.

For fifthly he washes himself.

For sixthly he rolls upon wash.

For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted on the beat.

For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.

For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.

For tenthly he goes in quest of food . . .

For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.

For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.

For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.

For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.

For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.

For he is of the tribe of Tiger.

For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger . . .

For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.

For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion . . .

For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements . . .

For he can tread to all the measures upon the music . . .

– Christopher Smart

Chapter I

... make no mistake
We are not shy
We're very wide awake,
The moon and I!
—W. S. Gilbert

The Hour of Unfolding Dark had begun, and the rooftop where Tailchaser lay was smothered in shadow.

He was deep in a dream of leaping and flying when he felt an unusual tingling in his whiskers. Fritti Tailchaser, hunterchild of the Folk, came suddenly awake and sniffed the air. Ears pricked and whiskers flared straight, he sifted the evening breeze. Nothing unusual. Then what had awakened him? Pondering, he splayed his claws and began a spine-limbering stretch that finally ended at the tip of his reddish tail.

By the time he had finished grooming, the sense of danger was gone. Perhaps it had been a night bird passing overhead . . . or a dog in the field beneath . . . perhaps . . .

Perhaps I am becoming a kitten again, Fritti thought to himself, *who bolts in fright from falling leaves.*

The wind ruffled his newly groomed fur. Piqued, he leaped down from the roof into the tall grasses below. First he must attend to hunger. Later it would be time to go to the Meeting Wall.

Unfolding Dark was waning, and Tailchaser's belly was still empty. His luck had not been dancing.

He had held motionless, patient watch at the entrance to a gopher hole. When an eternity of near-silent breathing had passed, and the inhabitant of the burrow had still not presented himself, Tailchaser had given up in frustration. After pawing in annoyance at the hole mouth he had gone in search of other game.

Luck had been completely absent. Even a moth had eluded his pouncing attack, to fly spiraling up into darkness.

If I can't catch something soon, he worried, I shall have to go back and eat from the bowl that the Big Ones put out for me. Harar! What kind of hunter am I?

A faint wisp of scent brought Tailchaser to an abrupt halt. Absolutely motionless, all senses straining, he crouched and sniffed. It was a Squeaker – downwind, and very close.

He moved as delicately as a shadow, carefully picking his way through the undergrowth, then froze again. There!

A jump and a half before him sat the mre'az he had scented. It squatted, unaware of Tailchaser, and pushed seeds into its cheek – nose twitching nervously, eyes rapidly blinking.

Fritti lowered himself to the ground, his upraised tail lashing back and forth behind him. Hunkered, he drew himself up on his hind legs and poised for the strike – unmoving, muscles tensed. He leaped.

He had misjudged the distance. As he landed short, paws flailing, the Squeaker had just enough time to give a chirp of terror and then drop – *floop!* – into its hole.

Standing over the escape route, Fritti bit his own foot with embarrassment.

As Tailchaser licked the last scraps from the bowl, Thinbone bounded onto the porch. Thinbone was a wild tabby, gray-and-yellow patchwork, who lived in a culvert across the field. He was a little older than Fritti, and made much of it.

'Nre'fa-o, Tailchaser.' Thinbone leaned over and sharpened his claws lazily on a wooden pillar. 'Looks like you're being fed well tonight. Tell me, do the Big Ones make you do tricks for

your supper? I've often wondered how it worked, you understand.' Fritti pretended to ignore him, and began cleaning his whiskers.

'I notice,' Thinbone continued, 'that the Growlers seem to have some sort of arrangement: they carry things for the Big Ones, and leap around a great deal, and bark all night for their dinner. Is that what you do?' Thinbone stretched nonchalantly. 'I'm just curious, you understand. Some night – oh, I admit it's not likely – some night I might be unable to catch dinner, and it would be nice to have something to fall back on. Is barking very difficult?'

'Be quiet, Thinbone.' Fritti snarled, then gave a sneeze of laughter and leaped on his friend. They wrestled for a moment, then broke apart, batting at each other with their paws. Finally, tired out, they sat for a moment reordering their fur.

When they had rested, Thinbone sprang away from the porch and bounded into the darkness. Fritti put one last patch along his flank straight, then followed him.

The Hour of Deepest Quiet was just starting, and Meerclar's Eye was high in the sky above, remote and unblinking.

The wind shivered the leaves on the trees as Tailchaser and Thinbone made their way across fields and over fences – pausing to listen to night sounds, then galloping across wet, glimmering lawns. As they came under the eaves of the Old Woods that flanked the dwellings of the Big Ones, they could smell the fresh scents of others of their kind.

Over the top of the rise and past a stand of massive oak trees lay the entrance to the canyon. Tailchaser thought happily to himself of the songs and stories that would be shared by the crumbling Meeting Wall. He thought also of Hushpad, whose slim gray form and arching, slender tail had been on his mind almost constantly of late. It was fine to be alive and of the Folk on Meeting Night.

Meerclar's Eye cast a mother-of-pearl light on the clearing. Twenty-five or thirty cats were assembled at the base of the Wall – rubbing against each other in greeting, sniffing the nose of a

new acquaintance. There was much mock fighting among the younger Folk.

Tailchaser and Thinbone were greeted by a gang of young hunters who stood casually about on the edge of the throng.

‘Great you’re here!’ cried Fleetpaw, a young fellow with thick black-and-white fur. ‘We’re just about to have a game of Hop-in-the-Air – until the elders arrive, that is.’

Thinbone jogged over to join, but Fritti lowered his head politely and moved toward the crowd to look for Hushpad. He could not locate her scent as he slid through the milling group of cats.

A pair of young felas, barely out of kittenhood, wrinkled their noses at him flirtatiously, then ran away, sneezing merriment. Ignoring them, he bowed his head respectfully as he passed Stretchslow. The older male, who lay majestically prone at the base of the Wall, dignified him with a lazy blink of his huge green eyes and a desultory ear-wiggle.

Still no Hushpad, thought Fritti. *Where can she be?* Nobody missed a Meeting Night if he could help it. Meetings were only on those nights when the Eye was completely open and at its brightest.

Perhaps she will come later, he thought. Or perhaps even now she was walking with Jumptall or Leaf-rustle – extending her tail languidly for them to admire . . .

The thought made him angry. He turned and cuffed a juvenile tom who had been prancing and capering at his heels. It was young Pouncequick, who gave him such a look of dismay that Fritti immediately felt sorry he had done it – the rambunctious kitten was often a nuisance, but well-meaning.

‘I’m sorry, Pouncequick,’ he said, ‘I didn’t know it was you. I thought it was old Stretchslow, and I was going to teach him a lesson.’

‘Really?’ gasped the young one. ‘You would have done that to him?’ Fritti regretted his joke. Stretchslow would not find it very funny.

‘Well, anyway,’ he said, ‘it was a mistake, and I apologize.’

Pouncequick was charmed at being treated as an adult. 'I certainly will accept your apology, Tailchaser,' he said gravely. 'It was an understandable mistake.'

Fritti snorted. Giving the young cat a playful bite on the flank, he continued on his way.

Halfway through Deepest Quiet the Meeting was well under way, and Hushpad had still not made an appearance. While one of the Elders regaled the assembled multitude – now swollen to almost sixty – Tailchaser sought Thinbone, who was sitting with Fleetpaw and the others. The Elder was describing a large and potentially dangerous Growler who was running wild in the area, and Thinbone and the other hunters were listening intently as Fritti approached.

'Thinbone!' he hissed. 'Will you come over and talk to me for a moment?' Thinbone yawned and stretched before ambling over to Fritti's tree-root perch.

'What is it, then?' he inquired amiably. 'Is it time for my barking lessons?'

'Please, Thinbone, no games. I can't find Hushpad anywhere. Do you know where she is?'

Thinbone considered Tailchaser as the Elder droned on. 'So,' he said. 'I thought you seemed a little preoccupied. All this over a fela?'

'We were doing the Dance of Acceptance last night!' said Fritti, stung. 'We didn't have a chance to finish before the sun came up. We were going to finish tonight. I know she was going to accept me! What could have made her miss the Meeting?'

Thinbone lowered his ears in mock terror. 'An interrupted Dance of Acceptance! Skydancer's Whiskers! I think I see your fur falling out already! And your tail is going limp!'

Fritti shook his head impatiently. 'I know you think it's funny, Thinbone, and with your string of tail-waving females you don't care about a real Joining. But I do, and I'm worried about Hushpad. Please help me.'

Thinbone looked at him for a moment, blinking his eyes and scratching behind his right ear.

‘All right, Tailchaser,’ he said, simply. ‘What can I do?’

‘Well, I suppose there’s not much we can do tonight, but if I can’t find her tomorrow could you perhaps come out and have a look around with me?’

‘I suppose so,’ replied Thinbone, ‘but I think that a little patience will probably – ouch!’

Fleetpaw had come up from below and butted his flat head against Thinbone’s haunches.

‘Come now!’ Fleetpaw cried. ‘What is all this deep discussion? Bristlejaw’s going to tell a story, and here you sit like two fat eunuchs!’

Tailchaser and Thinbone bounced down after their friend. Felas were felas, but a story was nothing to sniff at!

The Folk squeezed closer around the Meeting Wall – an ocean of waving tails. Slowly, and with immense dignity, Bristlejaw mounted a crumbled section of the wall. At the highest point he paused, and waited.

Having seen some eleven or twelve summers, Bristlejaw was certainly no longer a young cat, but iron control was in all his movements. His tortoise-shell fur, once brilliant with patches of rust and black, had dulled somewhat with age, and the stiff fur jutting from around his muzzle had gone gray-white. His eyes were bright and clear, though, and could bring a sporting kitten to a halt from three jumps away.

Bristlejaw was an Oel-cir’va: a Master Old-singer, one of the keepers of the Lore of the Folk. All the history of the Folk was in their songs – passed on in the Higher Singing of the Elder Days from one generation to another as a sacred trust. Bristlejaw was the only Old-singer within some distance of the Meeting Wall, and his stories were as important to his Folk as water, or the freedom to run and jump as they pleased.

From his position atop the Wall he surveyed the cats below for a long time. The expectant murmurings quieted to soft purring. Some of the young cats – tremendously excited and unable

to sit still – began frantically grooming themselves. Bristlejaw flicked his tail three times, and there was silence.

‘We thank our Elders, who watch over us,’ he began. ‘We praise Meerclar, whose Eye lights our hunting. We salute our quarry for making the chase sweet.’

‘Thanks. Praise. Salutations.’

‘We are the Folk, and tonight we speak in one voice of the deeds of all. We are the Folk.’

Caught up in the ancient ritual, the cats swayed gently from side to side. Bristlejaw began his story.

‘In the days of the earth’s youth – when some of the First were still seen in these fields – Queen Satinear, granddaughter of Fela Skydancer, ruled in the Court of Harar.

‘And she was a good queen. Her paw was as just in aid of her Folk as her claw was swift to harm for her enemies.

‘Her son and coregent was Prince Ninebirds. He was a huge cat, mighty in battle, swift to anger, and swollen in pride for all his youthful years. At his Naming the story had been told of how, as a kitten, he had slain a branchful of starlings with one blow of his claws. So Ninebirds he was Named, and the fame of his strength and his deeds stretched far.

‘It had been many, many summers since the death of Whitewind, and none living in the Court at this time had ever seen any of the First. Firefoot had been wandering in the wild for generations, and many thought him dead, or gone to join his father and grandmother in the sky.

‘As stories of Ninebirds’ strength and bravery began to run from mouth to ear among the Folk, and as Ninebirds began to listen to those ignoble ones who always cling to the great Folk, he began to see in himself the greatness of the Firstborn.

‘One day it was told throughout the World-Forest that Ninebirds was no longer content to be Prince Regent at his mother’s side. A Meeting was declared to which all the Folk were to come from far and wide for feasting, hunting, and games, and at this meeting he would assume the Mantle of

Harar – which Tangaloor Firefoot had declared sacrosanct but for the Firstborn – and Ninebirds would declare himself King of Cats.

‘And so came the day, and all the Folk gathered at the Court. While all cavorted and danced and sang, Ninebirds sunned his great body and looked on. Then he stood, and spoke: ‘I, Ninebirds, by right of blood and claw, stand before you today to assume the Mantle of Kingship, which has gone long unfilled. If no cat has any reason why I should not take upon myself this Ancient Burden . . .’

‘At that moment there was a noise in the crowd, and a very old cat stood up. His fur was shot all over with gray – especially about his legs and paws – and his muzzle was snow-white.

“‘You assume the Mantle by right of blood and claw, Prince Ninebirds?’” questioned the old cat. “I do,” answered the great Prince. “By what right of blood do you claim the Kingship?” queried the old white-whisker. “By the blood of Fela Skydancer that runs in me, you toothless old Squeaker-friend!” rejoined Ninebirds hotly, and rose from where he lay. All the gathered Folk whispered excitedly as Ninebirds walked to the Vaka’az’-me, the tree-root seat sacred to the Firstborn. Before all the assembled Folk Ninebirds lifted his long tail and sprayed the Vaka’-az’me with his hunt-mark. There was more excited whispering, and the old cat tottered forward.

“‘O Prince, who would be King of Cats,’” said the ancient one, “perhaps by blood you have some claim, but what of claw? Will you fight in single combat for the Mantle?” “Of course,” said Ninebirds, laughing, “and who will oppose me?” The crowd goggled, looking about for some mighty challenger who would fight with the massive Prince.

“‘I will,’” said the old one simply. All the folk hissed in surprise and arched their backs, but Ninebirds only laughed again. “Go home, old fellow, and wrestle with beetles,” said he. “I will not fight with you.”

“‘The King of Cats can be no coward,’” said the old cat. At that Ninebirds cried in anger and leaped forward, swinging his

huge paw at the old gray-muzzle. But with surprising speed the old one leaped aside and dealt a buffet to the Prince's head that addled his wits for a moment. They began to fight in earnest, and the multitude could scarcely credit the speed and courage of the old cat, who opposed such a great and fierce fighter.

'After a long while they closed and wrestled together, and although the Prince bit at his neck, the old one brought up his hind claws and scratched, and Ninebirds' fur was scattered in the air. When they broke apart, Ninebirds was full of surprise that this lean elder could do him such harm.

"You have lost much of your pelt, O Prince," said the old one. "Will you renounce your claim?" Angered, the Prince charged, and they fell again to fighting. The old one caught the Prince's tail between his teeth, and when the Prince tried to turn and rend his face, the elder pulled his tail from his body. The Folk hissed with astonishment and fear as Ninebirds wheeled bloodily around and faced the old cat once more, who was himself wounded and panting.

"You have lost your fur and tail, O Prince. Will you not also yield your claim?" Maddened by pain, Ninebirds flung himself on the ancient one, and they wrestled – spitting and swiping, blood and tears glistening in the sun. At last the challenger wedged Prince Ninebirds' hindquarters beneath a root of the Vaka'az'me.

'As the dirt settled, an excited shock ran through those watching – in the last battling, quantities of white dust had been knocked free from the coat of the challenger. His muzzle was no longer gray, and his paws and legs shone the color of flame. "You see me revealed, Ninebirds," he said. "I am Lord Tangaloor Firefoot, son of Harar, and it is by my command that there is no King of Cats."

"You are a brave cat, O Prince," he continued, "but your insolence may not go unpunished." With that, Firefoot caught the scruff of the Prince's neck and pulled, stretching his body and legs until they were thrice as long as a cat's are meant to be.

He then pulled the Prince loose from the tree root and said: "Tailless and hairless, long and ungainly have I made you. Go now, and come never more to the Court of Harar, you who would have usurped his power. But this doom I lay on you: that you shall serve any member of the Folk who commands you, and so shall all of your descendants, until I release your line from this bane."

'And with that Lord Tangaloor went away. The Folk drove the misformed Ninebirds from their midst, calling him M'an – meaning "out of the sunshine" – and he and all of his descendants went ever after on their hind legs, and do today, for M'an's forelegs have been stretched too far away to touch the ground.

'Ninebirds the usurper, punished by the First-born, was the first of the Big Ones. They have long served the Folk, making us shelter from the rain and feeding us when the hunt is bad. And if some of us now serve the disgraced M'an, that is another story, for another Meeting.

'We are the Folk, and tonight we speak in one voice of the deeds of all. We are the Folk.'

His song finished, Bristlejaw leaped down from the Wall with a strength belying his many summers. All the assembled Folk respectfully bowed their heads down between their forepaws as he left.

The Hour of Final Dancing was drawing to a close, and the Meeting broke up into small groups – the cats saying their farewells, discussing the Song and gossiping. Tailchaser and Thinbone hung on for a while, discussing plans for the next evening with Fleetpaw and some of the other young hunters, then took their leave.

As they frisked back across the fields they stumbled on a mole stranded away from its burrow. After they chased it a bit, Thinbone broke its neck and they ate. Bellies full, they parted at Fritti's porch.

'Mri'fa-o, Tailchaser,' said Thinbone. 'If you need my help tomorrow I'll be in Edge Copse at Unfolding Dark.'

‘Good dreaming to you, also, Thinbone. You are a good friend.’

Thinbone gave a flick of his tail and was gone. Fritti hopped into the box left for him by the Big Ones, and sank into the sleep-world.