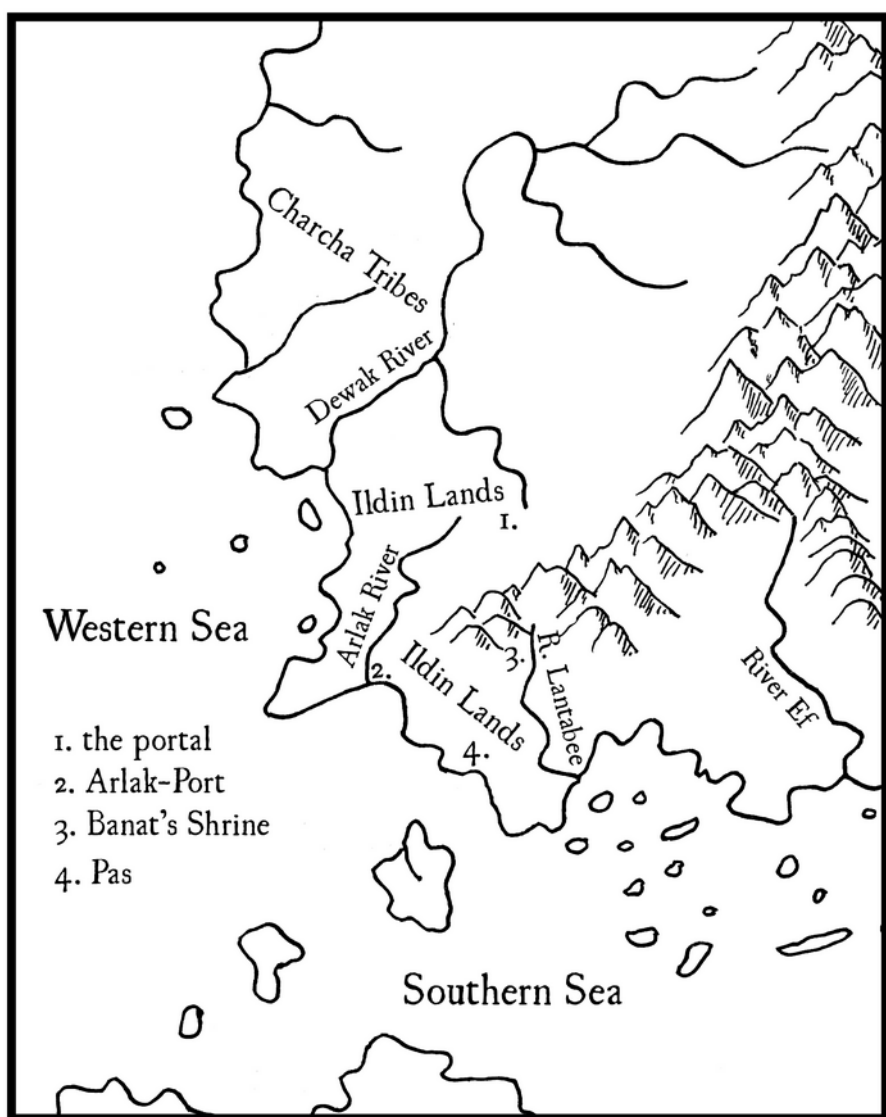


the
Ways of
Wizardry

Stephen Brooke

the
WAYS
of
WIZARDRY



Im's Way

THE WAYS OF WIZARDRY



STEPHEN BROOKE

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Aren't all stories true in one world or another?

The Ways of Wizardry

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1.

IN A RED LEATHER BOOK — *what? No, I don't know what beast supplied the leather* — as I said, in a red leather book in the loftiest tower of Hirstel, a city of lofty towers, were written the names of all the demons of the lower planes. There, well-warded, it lay in the highest room of that tower, rising above the palace of Piras Tindeval, Prince-Sorcerer.

Hirstel, where all men are wizards, and all the cats, and most of the dogs, as well, was ruled over by Tindeval. His book of power had much to do with that. He kept it in a casket of silver, with the sign of Sebuchax thereon in gold. When the book was needed, the prince climbed the long stair of his tower and coming into the room — with due propitiation of the demon Qu'orthseth — he took it from its casket and read the names therein. Thus did he remain sovereign in the City of Sorcerers.

There was a young beggar, Im, who owned only castoff and broken spells. He was undoubtedly the weakest wizard within the five city walls of Hirstel, unless one counts some of the dogs and several of the rats. Rodents have never taken well to magic, yet some must attempt it.

His poverty was no fault of his own, but could be traced to his father, who had lost his only truly valuable enchantment by gambling with a small and treacherous feline. There is little doubt that a cheating spell was employed in their game of three-penny, but it was impossible to prove. Moreover, the corrupt judges of Hirstel ever favored the winner, however he came by his success. So, the unfortunate man lost his post as garbage collector, as he no longer had a demon helper to carry any and all refuse to the far side of the moon, and passed away soon after, leaving his son without inheritance nor means of livelihood.

But Im was a bright lad, and an ambitious one. He meant to go to the top. And looking up, one evening, he saw the top — the high tower room of Piras Tindeval. What did he have to lose? He would only starve

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if he remained without magic in a city of magic, and about Hirstel lay the empty sands of the desert, vast and reputedly impassable.

What wards might lie above, what dangers? He and all of Hirstel knew the high chamber of the Prince-Sorcerer had its guardian. Yet Im began ascending, finding easy hand and footholds on the deeply carved shaft, decorated with the forms of the thousand and fourteen Demons of Droga. Now and again, Im found himself face to face with the horrifying visage of one of these, carved in the lustrous black marble, or was forced to place his hand on some repulsive element of their anatomy. Above blazed the bright stars of ever-clear skies. He could see the silvered dunes that surrounded the city walls from this vantage. What lay beyond?

Then he pulled himself stealthily through a narrow but unbarred window. There was no guard to be seen, nothing but a plain table of some dark, polished wood and, on that table, a silver chest. Carefully, quietly, he approached it and removed the book bound in red leather that he found within.

Im had but opened it when he felt a massive hand on his shoulder. "Hold," came a deep groan of a voice. The creature — a demon, obviously — stood a head taller than the tallest man he had ever seen, and was all over red, a deep wine-red. He turned to face it. What else was there to do?

Its naked body was smooth, featureless, with no obvious musculature nor reproductive organs. Where a man might have a face, was a flat, blank expanse of shining red. Somewhat like a well-polished shield, the boy thought. "I am Qu'orthseth." The words came as the wind-driven sand. "I regret that I must slay you, young man."

Im considered leaping from the window. Surely dashing his brains out on the cobblestones far below would be preferable to being dismem-

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bered by this demon. He had heard tales of bits and pieces of would-be thieves being scattered about the base of the tower.

"You couldn't look the other way and let me slip out, could you?" It didn't hurt to ask.

Qu'orthseth slowly shook its head. "I may not. The duty laid upon me is to destroy all those who enter this tower room of Piras Tindeva. To do otherwise is to break my oath."

"O, mighty Demon," said Im, "slay me if you must. First, though," he inquired, "will you answer my questions? If you do intend to take my life, then surely you are fulfilling your promise. You don't think I can escape you?"

"This is true. Of course I can kill you anytime so there is no hurry. I must admit, conversation is somewhat lacking in this room. The boss rarely comes up here and when he does, he doesn't have time to talk."

"How," wondered the youngster, "did he get you here in the first place?"

The monstrous form hung its head. Having no face, its expressions were limited. "He rescued me from prison," Qu'orthseth admitted, "and demon prison is a very bad place indeed. Far worse than being stuck in a lonely tower room for a couple centuries. As long as I fulfill my oath here, I can remain. The moment I might break it —" Fortunately, the demon had shoulders, so it added to its repertoire of expressions by shrugging. "Well, I'll be immediately whisked back to torment in my native hell."

"Ah. And your oath is to protect the book?" Im had hopes of finding a loophole.

"Not exactly. The wording in these contracts must be quite precise in laying out what is expected on each side. For himself, Piras promises to keep me free from my prison as long as I follow my own vow of slaying anyone — and the wording makes it clear that 'anyone' includes

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small animals — who enters this room. Other than the prince himself, naturally.

“I have had to knock off a few cats over the years,” the great red creature admitted, with definite regret in its impossibly deep voice. “And I like cats. People, not so much.”

Yes, yes, they were cat burglars. May we get back to the story?

Hmm, that idea wouldn't work, then. If only Qu'orthseth were tied to the book rather than the tower, he might have come up with a trick to earn his freedom. Im looked again to the window.

The demon caught his intention. “Don't think of leaping. I could catch you before you reached the ground and then I would take you apart, piece by piece, without further delay. With luck, I could make it last a while to relieve my boredom.

“But,” it rumbled on, “conversing with you is preferable. Behave and I shall break your neck quickly, dismembering you later as a warning to others.”

Im shrugged, in apparent resignation. “Would it hurt if I looked into the book?” he asked. “I might as well know what it is I am dying for.”

“It is permitted,” spoke the demon. “Be aware that no spells in the book of my master would work against me. I can not be destroyed nor turned from my duty, even by the most powerful magic of this world.” But maybe of its own world, thought Im. That wouldn't do him any good. Unless he could call up a demon of greater power?

The grimoire still lay on the dark slab before him. Im leafed through it, not hurrying. He was relieved to see it was written in straight-forward Zikem, which he and everyone else in Hirstel could readily read. “Are there many powerful demons in your realm?” he asked of Qu'orthseth.

Was that low rhythmic sound, something alike to distant thunder

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over the desert, a chuckle? “Very many. Know that they may not harm me nor prevent my actions as long as I am bound here by my geas.”

That made sense. Otherwise, the demon police would have come and swept it back to its cell. Or wherever they kept their prisoners. But demons could do other things. Hmm, there was named Sebuchax, the mighty archfiend who had built this tower for the Prince-Sorcerer. What could be built could be —

Destroyed! He put his mind around the proper spell, getting it well fixed, and then called out, “Sebuchax —”

Well, I won't give you the rest of the words for fear of blasting your souls. Then who would listen to my stories?

The words of the spell, of course, were only for focus; it is the mind that really does the work and Im had a mind that was up to the task. He tucked the thick book under his arm and waited as the walls began to crumble about him, Sebuchax — in the form of an immense ebon shadow — demolishing that which he had once created. If he were dashed to death as the edifice fell, so be it, but Im expected a different outcome. Surely enough, the great red demon caught him up and carried him to a nearby rooftop. Im was not quite certain how Qu’orthseth accomplished this, as it had no wings, but was willing to let that question wait.

“That was unexpected,” rumbled his companion.

“The tower no longer stands, nor does the room you guarded exist. Your duty there is ended.”

“But I am still obligated to destroy you, boy.” As Im had assumed and expected.

“And what will happen when you do?”

This query Qu’orthseth pondered for a few moments. It then slowly answered, “I would be instantly whisked back to my own world and prison.”

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"Then you must keep me alive, mustn't you? It is your only way to remain in this world."

What was the creature thinking? wondered Im, as its blank visage regarded him for a rather long time. "I could blast your mind and store you away somewhere," it stated, at last, "leaving that grimoire behind." It looked at the book Im held. "My master would be less likely to seek me then. He cares only for the safety of his spell-book."

Im guessed at the reason for the demon's apparent reluctance. "And how long could you keep me alive?"

"Not long enough. That sort of thing can go wrong, too, and then I would be — elsewhere."

"Ah." Im held up the leather-bound volume, "With this, I could do much for both of us. And," he went on, "prolong my life greatly." Wasn't Piras reputedly close to a thousand years of age?

Qu'orthseth nodded. "The book means nothing to me. I was to guard the room, not what was in it." From their high perch, it looked out over the desert. "Does that sand go on forever?" it asked. "I know little of your world, in truth."

"There's only one way to find out," replied Im. "So let us put as much distance between ourselves and the prince as we can, as quickly as we can."

"Agreed," said the demon, grasping the young burglar and rising into the air. "Westward?" it asked.

"As good a direction as any," said Im.

2.

“SO THIS WORLD IS QUITE empty,” said the demon.

Im had to admit it was true. “Who might have guessed my city was the only one?” They stood on a desolate shore, gazing out over a seemingly endless sea. The two had just crossed a seemingly endless desert. “Is there no life anywhere?”

“In the sea,” rumbled Qu’orthseth. “There must be life there to make the air you breathe.” The monstrous red creature did not need air itself, as far as its young human companion could tell. Im had noted no rising and falling of its chest, nor any orifice through which a vapor might pass.

Nor any other substance, for that matter. Im desperately needed a substance of some sort in his own stomach. “Life, you say? Edible?”

The demon only shrugged. Its face like a smooth, blank shield, this was one of the few ways it could physically express itself. “Poisonous, maybe, to you. I do not think your people are native to this world.”

Im had to admit that made sense. Why else would there be only their one city and naught else? “I shall need food soon or I shall perish. You know what happens then.”

Qu’orthseth did. The moment Im died, it would be whisked back to its native realm and a most unpleasant demon prison. Yes, that would inevitably happen some day but the great crimson beast would prefer to put it off. “We could return to Hirstel,” it suggested.

Both knew that was not at all a good idea. The Prince-Sorcerer, Piras Tindeval, would surely put an end to Im and send Qu’orthseth to its unpleasant fate. But at least there should be food. None would be found elsewhere in this world.

So they must leave it. “Perhaps the grimoire can show you a way,” suggested the demon. “I can not read it.”

What? No, no, Qu’orthseth wasn’t ignorant. Remember its blank face? No

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eyes. Now back to our story. Oh, and it is not a good idea to refer to a demon as a 'dummy.'

This grimoire lay at the root of their problems, for Im had attempted to steal it and set all that happened in motion. He was not the first to attempt this but he was the first to succeed. "How did Tindeval get you from your world to this one?" asked the young man, as he leafed through the pages.

"Normal summoning. The problem with that is I am not completely here. A part of me remains tethered to my place of origin."

Im was bright and caught onto what that might mean. "That is why you will be swept back there if I die." Qu'orthseth only nodded. "And we can not completely escape this world if we use that method."

"Well," came the demon's incredibly low growl, "I'm not exactly here anyway. The problem for you," it continued, "is that you might be pulled back here eventually —" Qu'orthseth considered that. "Will be pulled back here, wherever you might go. Beyond that I am uncertain but I do know your body would not retain any sustenance you might summon from elsewhere. It, too, would return to its place of origin in time."

I could not begin to count how many questions came into Im's head, but only one really mattered. "How then can we go, ah, somewhere else?" He began to turn the pages of the leather-bound book again. None of it seemed overly useful, the volume largely consisting of an exceptionally long list of demons that might be commanded. "We need a portal, don't we?" Im had come on a section that mentioned such a thing but was irritatingly sketchy about how to find and use one.

"Your guess is as good as mine," rumbled the wine-colored being. "Maybe better."

Im sat down on a smooth, sun-baked rock and stared out across the water. The sea was the color of slate; a chill wind blew in from it. The

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boy had never felt a cool damp breeze before. They did not exist in his city of Hirstel, set among the lifeless dunes of a vast desert. "So we can assume my ancestors — those of my people — came through one of these portals." He looked down at the page before him, and flipped to the next. "Or gates or doors. Tindeval's grimoire uses all those names."

The massive monster had to agree this made sense. "Therefor," continued Im, "it might be conjectured that their gate was perhaps not so far from where they live now." He read on and then shook his head. "Oh. Many go only one direction."

"Which could be why they stayed in this forsaken place." The demon's voice sounded even more full of despair than normal; at best, it was like the distant howling of a desert storm wind.

"Or the world they fled was one to which they feared to return."

They both considered that and felt it could be so. "It would have to be pretty bad to be worse than this one," felt Qu'orthseth, "but there might be food. For you, that is; I draw my nourishment from the sun of my native realm."

Im considered his gargantuan companion for a moment. "Would you still be able to if we went through a gate? It says here that it breaks any bonds that exist."

"Hmmm. I'm not sure, little sorcerer. It might free me, eh?" Its chuckle was muffled thunder. "But I would then starve!"

Im was thinking. What if he summoned a demon who actually knew something, instead of this big red dummy?

No, I didn't call it a dummy. Im did. I'm just a storyteller!

How about this one? He couldn't quite make out the meaning of some of the thoroughly antiquated words, but they suggested that this Xido was a wise and reasonably benevolent being. With a few precautions — yes, he would try it, Im decided. Better than dying here!

He went down onto the gray sand beach and drew a circle with his

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foot, adding proper magical signs to ward its perimeter. "I hope this will hold him," he mumbled, more to himself than the demon. Qu'orthseth didn't seem to be paying much attention anyway.

But then, Im had come to realize it didn't see — or sense, we should say — the world about it in the same manner as a human. Scratchings in the sand might be meaningless. It might not even be able to tell they were there. So the young man spoke the words he found in the great book of Piras Tindeva and waited.

Nothing happened. No demon appeared in the circle. It was most disappointing.

"One comes," spoke Qu'orthseth. Im looked up the beach to see a slender, sinewy man, not very tall and quite black of skin, approaching. "He has power. I can feel it."

Ah, the being he called had materialized outside the ring, too powerful, maybe, to be contained. Im must make the best of it and hope to survive. "Greetings, sir," he called. "Might you be the demon Xido?"

"Demon, my boy? I am a god! Xido the Trickster and not at all at your service." He glanced at Qu'orthseth. "How did one of those get here?"

"It's a long story, Master." The demon turned to its human companion. "You can't see both his forms, can you?"

Im shook his head. "That is fortunate," Qu'orthseth told him.

Xido had noted the grimoire, left by Im on one of the flat dark rocks. He casually leafed through it, smiling now and again. "This explains much. How came you by Tindeva's greatest treasure?"

"I climbed his tower and, ah, managed to leave again."

"Stole it? A lad after my own heart!" The god idly turned the book over in his hands before replacing it. "I could take it from you and leave you here to perish, but that is not my way. You are looking to escape, aren't you?"

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Im admitted they were. "We seek a portal. Maybe the one that brought my people here."

The dark deity considered this. "It might be safe to return. They came escaping war and wars do end. Indeed," he went on, "it would not be a bad idea for all the people of Hirstel to return one of these days. But they will not want to. This is one of those worlds where magic comes too easily, where anyone can wield sorcerous power."

Xido gave him a sardonic look. "Even boys who summon gods to them."

"Um, sorry, my Lord Xido. I couldn't tell from the book and it seemed to say you were wise."

"'Cunning' it says," Xido told him, "not that I mind 'wise.' But it's no problem, my lad. You didn't really pull me here. I was intrigued by the attempted summoning and decided to come and see what was up."

"Can you get us out, Great Xido?" asked Qu'orthseth.

"I know the way. Or used to. But there is a price." He nodded toward the grimoire. "You must give it to me."

Remembering that this god could take it anyway, Im nodded an agreement. "Do you need such a book, my lord? I mean, being a god and all." It was perhaps not the most tactful question but Im wondered a great deal at the things going on in his young life.

Xido's answer was, "I'll give it back to the Prince-Sorcerer of Hirstel. Your people would surely perish without his magic to sustain them." The deity sat down on one of the rocks. "You needn't call me lord or any of that. Xido is good enough, or even Xit." He again idly leafed through the great hide-bound book. "If you knew enough of how to use this book, you could probably summon a meal to yourself. Send one of those lesser demons you Hirstelites employ to go and fetch it from your city." He chuckled. "And if you really knew how to use the book you

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could hurl Tindeval down and take his place. Or build a tower and city of your own right here.”

Im considered this. “It sounds — boring. Now that I know about other worlds, I think I’d rather go see one or two of them.”

“Me too,” rumbled the demon. “I spent too much time bound to that lonely room.”

“I do hate to lose that book,” admitted Im.

“It might prove of little use to you in another world,” Xido told him, rising. “That would depend on the world. So let’s go.” He looked to Qu’orthseth. “I suppose you will have to carry us.”

“Where to, my lord?” asked the beast, not in any way willing to address this god as ‘Xit.’

“Back to Hirstel!” Xido laughed. “Fear not, boy, I’ll keep you safe.”

3.

THE WALLS OF HIRSTEL STOOD before them, high, shining a pale gold beneath the cloudless skies. “What do I call you, lad?” asked the god Xido.

“Im,” came the response. “Im of Hirstel.” He gazed toward the city. Not of Hirstel much longer.

“I’m no divinity of your people,” said Xido. “Do they even worship gods anymore? I haven’t looked in here for some time.”

“There is a shrine to the Ancient Urathu,” the boy replied. “Not much else.”

The god nodded. “And he wasn’t even a god, only a mighty sorcerer who ruled over you — or those like you — in another world. It was his death that sent some of you scurrying for cover here.”

“Do some of us remain there, um, Xido?”

“They do, scattered across many lands. Some are sorcerers, some have no talent, and many are very long lived. That’s a mark of your people.” He glanced at the boy. “That along with your odd combination of dark skin and blond hair.” In that Im had never seen any without that combination until Xido showed up, he did not think it odd at all.

“Incidentally, your — Urathu did you call him? — your Urathu was pretty much the ancestor of everyone with wizardly powers in that world. You included, Master Im.” Xido laughed. “Probably an ancestor of everyone, powers or not. He managed to live an extraordinarily long time and father far more children than any other mortal I’ve known.”

“But he died,” came Qu’orthseth’s cavernous groan of a voice.

“As do all things,” mused Xido. “Me too, I suspect. Let’s go in.”

The gates of Hirstel rarely opened. Why would they when nothing but a waste of sand lay about the city? “You’d best take us over, Akorzef,” spoke Xido.

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"I have not been named so in many centuries, lord," replied the demon, "and it is no closer to my true name than is Qu'orthseth."

"I could speak that true name but there is no point, is there? And it might hurt young Im's ears. Akorzef is what my own worshipers would call you but if you don't like it, there is always Cahorsus."

Ah, I see you recognize that name. So do our own people refer to the demon — if we must.

"I like that one. It sounds almost, well, godly," observed Im.

"Oh, the folk who call our red friend that consider it to be one of the most horrible of all fiends."

"It's a bum rap," claimed Qu'orthseth. "I'm not a bad guy." It picked both up and carried them to the top of the walls. A few citizens who loitered there eyed them without great curiosity.

"Then why were you in prison?" wondered the boy.

"Tax evasion." Xido made a sound that implied considerable skepticism. "Well, okay, I may have offed the tax collector too, um, and absconded with the taxes it'd already collected." A deep rumbling laugh came from somewhere inside that smooth body. "But I'm only an ordinary working criminal, friends, no archfiend."

"I know this is true," added Xido. "Qu'orthseth is just the sort a sorcerer is likely to call when he needs some hired muscle." He looked out over the city, one hand shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun. "We might as well go over to the ruins of Tindeval's tower."

The demon obligingly deposited them by the pile of broken stones; fragments of the shattered Demons of Droga were scattered across the street. A slightly portly man in a white robe who had been surveying the rubble now turned to them. A great curling beard, gone gray down the center, lay on his chest.

"I think you know me, Prince Piras," spoke Xido. The sorcerer stared at him a moment, then nodded.

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"I do indeed." His eyes went to the book, but he said nothing of it.

"This I return to you. You need it more than any other." The god handed him the grimoire. "You can get that spire of yours standing again in no time."

The sorcerer bowed and turned his eyes to Qu'orthseth. "The room you were set to guard no longer exists. How can you still be in this world?"

"Because I have not yet slain the last intruder, your highness." It gestured toward Im. "So long as he lives I remain tied here by my geas."

Piras Tindeval considered the boy, his face revealing none of his thoughts. "He is under my protection," stated Xido.

The sorcerer nodded his balding head, and broke into a smile. "I have no malice toward you, young sir. Indeed, I would ask you to take a place as one of my apprentices. No Prince of Hirstel can last forever and our people will need one with power to lead them when I go."

Im was considering this astonishing offer when Xido broke in. "You should take your people out of here. This world may drive them mad in time."

Tindeval only shrugged. "We are secure here."

"Until it becomes your grave. Think well on it, Prince of Hirstel. You know where the gates lie should you decide to use them."

"But where might they lead us? No, Lord Xido, we can go neither forward nor back."

"I know the ways." Xido considered this. "Some of them. I could show you them — even back to the world of your ancestors, should you wish."

"It is safe?" asked Tindeval. "We fled from those who hated us, it is told."

"As safe as anywhere else, now. Ah, my Prince of Hirstel, I can see you are not ready." Xido managed to look simultaneously sad and

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amused. "Call to me if you decide to go someday." He turned to Im. "You still intend to leave, don't you?"

Remain and possibly rule? The thought tempted Im, most certainly. But still, it was one city in a world he now knew to be empty. Then his eyes came to rest on Qu'orthseth. "As long as I stay here, our red friend is obliged to murder me," he noted. "Maybe we can break that geas by going through these gates of yours."

"Tis possible," admitted Piras, "and perhaps your only chance. I can not erase that obligation I placed on the demon."

Qu'orthseth's laugh rumbled. "Which is good, for I would be sent back to prison if you could."

"Then we go," said Xido. "I know this world is riddled with portals, coming and going from a multitude of worlds. That is one reason magic works so well here." He spoke then directly to Tindeval. "And why it is dangerous to your minds."

"Dangerous otherwise, as well," replied the sorcerer. "Things do come out of them at times. We have walls and wards against those."

He turned to the ruins of his tower. "No hurry on this, though I need find a means of protecting the book again. But the portals — only one lies within the walls, in the temple of Urathu. That is the way that brought us here."

"And can not take you back, as I am sure you know," commented Xido.

The Prince-Sorcerer admitted this was so. "We can not even enter it."

Xido nodded. "The other end lay close by a volcano and was destroyed. Or buried I should say. We must find another." He started to laugh. "Why I do this, I know not! I could just pop back to my home and leave you all reasonably happy in this one. But the boy," the deity said,

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turning to Im, “has a destiny, I think, and a destiny mixed up with my own, I fear!”

“The gods see things others can not,” rumbled Qu’orthseth. “The Crocodile is wise.” A rumbling laugh. “Or cunning.”

Yes, Crocodile. You do remember the demon mentioning another form, don’t you?

“I also fear,” continued Xido, “that a direct way, such as brought you here, will not be found, at least not anywhere near. But some way, roundabout though it may be, will get you to the home of your ancestors.” The dark god thought on this a moment and added, “It may or may not be exactly the one where your people originated. It will be close enough.”

“There are others like it?” asked Im.

“There are infinite others, each varying in the tiniest of details.” Xido told him. “In potential, anyway. As to whether they truly exist, who can say? They might not until we enter them. Consider this your first lesson in a different sort of sorcery than you learned here.

“It is not so easy to summon up demons in most worlds. You will need to learn to do more things for yourself.” The god looked about him, at the city of Hirstel, now falling into night, and then to its ruler. “I can understand why you and your people would be loath to leave.”

“None need leave right now,” spoke Piras Tindeval. “The stars are creeping into the heavens and it is time for a meal and rest. Come along to my house.”

“I would be most honored, sir,” replied Xido.

4.

YOUNG IM WAS RAVENOUS, HAVING gone days without food. Nor had he eaten that well before climbing Tindeva's black marble tower. Now a feast lay before him, bowls of succulent fruit, tureens of savory broths and stews, cutlets of many creatures, large and small, feathered, furred, scaled.

All this was grown in Hirstel, by necessity. As Qu'orthseth had mentioned on the shore of the gray endless sea, the food summoned from another world might not sustain one. It would be pulled back to its origin in time. And though this food was grown in the city, it is not to be believed that those vegetables and meats and pastries were quite what they appeared. Most were the products of vats of slime or beds of fungus, made palatable by skills both technical and magical.

But nutritious enough even without that. Im, as all the poorer citizens of Hirstel, had eaten his share of food that had never undergone any transformation.

Might there be some 'real' food mixed in? wondered the lad. There were small gardens here and there in the city, but producing less and less, year by year. It was not a good world for such things; as long as the tanks hidden beneath the tall, proud buildings of Hirstel operated, most did not care. As long as the deep wells, driven into the rock by demon workmen, brought up water they would go about their business and their pastimes.

Many lined the table of Piras Tindeva, hangers-on of one sort or another, a trio of apprentices, his wives. The servers, Im knew, were not human. Most would not waste magic on such things but the Prince-Sorcerer was not most and chose to display his powers. Xido was given a seat at the right hand of the sorcerer; Im, somewhat further down.

Could the deity even be sustained by the food he ate here? This whole other worlds thing was complicated.

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Qu'orthseth, of course, did not eat at all and had disappeared somewhere, enjoying its new-found freedom.

After all were well fed — and that took some time for the empty Im — he asked the god of this. “That is not a problem,” he was told. “It is only when food is brought from another world that one runs into difficulties. I am here and so is the food.”

That was good to know; Qu'orthseth had seemed uncertain. “So it would be if you could travel between worlds as I do,” continued Xido. “Few mortals can, though I could take you along with me.”

“Then I wouldn't need a portal?”

“You would still be tied to this place and be pulled back in time. Only passing through a gate can change that.”

By then, most had departed Tindeval's high-roofed hall, or were in groups that had moved away from the long table of dark reddish stone. Im had slid up the polished bench of the same stone to hear what their host and the god might have to say.

“Of course, almost any wizard knows he can not summon food from another realm,” said the Prince-Sorcerer, “but I was as ignorant as Im about how it might affect you, Lord Xido.”

“It would not be practical knowledge for you,” admitted the god.

Im noted that the three apprentices, across the table from him, were attentive to Xido's every word. How often did a deity drop by, after all?

A powerful deity? Im had no idea. More powerful than Tindeval and that was powerful enough!

“Portals have been cataloged from time to time by my predecessors,” the sorcerer said. He held out a hand, murmured a phrase, and a book appeared in his grasp. “I haven't looked at this in centuries.”

“Only the near ones, I would assume,” spoke Xido, as the magician opened the book before them. “And they would not have explored them.”

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"No, there is no telling where they lead. But there are notes about how easy they are of access. Some are no more than weak spots in the fabric dividing the worlds, and can not be entered." He turned a curious eye to the deity.

"Not even by me, most likely," said Xido. "Do any have the appearance of caves or tunnels? Those are best."

Piras leafed through the somewhat slim volume. "A few," he said. "What makes them desirable?"

"The ways easiest of passage take on that appearance. They are not truly caves in the normal sense." Xido nibbled one of the pseudo-fruit, grimaced, and replaced it. "I would wager the one in your temple looks that way."

The wizard nodded. "It does, sir. Ah, did you — may I ask if you know the great Urathu?"

"I did, and I knew your sorcerer-become-god as Hurasu. He is long dead. He came to the world where he ruled from another, and another before that."

"Through portals?" asked Im.

"Indeed. The second world he visited had almost none, a world where magic barely existed. Hurasu was nearly trapped there but he found a way eventually."

"To the world of our ancestors," said Tindeval. "Bringing civilization itself, we are told."

"Pretty much," agreed Xido. "But civilization is definitely over-rated."

"Lord Xido is one of the wild gods," spoke an apprentice.

"Is it true you can become a scaly demon?" asked another.

Xido laughed quite long. "Yes and no. My other form is that of a natural creature. One I know none of you have ever seen!" A tad more

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seriously, he continued, "But there is a bit of demon in every god, maybe. Who can say whether I am not just another monster?"

"Only you," blurted Im, who immediately wished he hadn't.

"That," said Piras Tindeval, "may be true of we who are human as well." He raised a hand and one of his demonic servants appeared. "Find a chamber for my guests," he ordered. "Or two, if they prefer."

"We can share, my prince," said Xido. "As long as we need not accommodate Akorzef, um, Qu'orthseth that is, as well."

"I can sleep on the ceiling," spoke that individual, who had slipped in unnoticed at some point. "Or standing on my head in a corner." Its laugh was as deafening as a thunderclap.

"You sleep?" asked Piras Tindeval. "I never knew that."

"In a sense." The demon did not elaborate.

The room proved small. After all, how often might the Prince-Sorcerer of Hirstel have guests? For centuries upon centuries, the only outsiders in the city had been summoned demons. Sure enough, Qu'orthseth floated up to the ceiling, ornately tiled in blues and greens and violets and depicting flowers no Hirstelite had ever seen, and rested there. "Recharging," whispered Xido. "It'll be oblivious while it connects to its home world."

They were about to settle down, in the softest bed Im had ever known and softer than any he had even imagined, when the god suddenly stiffened. "By Krat, someone is trying to summon me. And — and succeeding."

"But I thought that wouldn't work on you!" Im remembered his own attempt.

"I am more vulnerable since I entered this world in this human form. He might be able to bind me. *She* might be able to bind me. A woman. I can — almost see her." The god seemed to struggle, as if invisible hands were grasping him.

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“She would — tie me to her service like — like a common demon.”

Im looked about wildly, momentarily disoriented, uncertain. Qu’orthseth? The demon calmly floated overhead. Could he call Piras Tindeval in time?

“I can not prevent her!” gasped Xido.

5.

YOUNG IM, A FEW DAYS ago the least powerful sorcerer in Hirstel, stood erect in the middle of the chamber and spoke a spell. Eyes closed, all concentration on his words, he voiced the incantation. It must work.

When he again looked on his surroundings, Xido sat on the bed, breathing deeply but seemingly free. "How did you manage that, boy?" the god asked.

"Didn't I summon you on that beach? I knew the proper words." Even if it hadn't worked at that time and place.

"And your will was stronger than hers. I am impressed." Xido sat in concentration for nearly a minute. "Hmm, she wasn't expecting you. Surprise helped your effort."

Im sat down beside him. "Do you know who she was?"

Xido shook his head. "I suspect our host could make a guess. He would know who might have such abilities."

"And ambitions," added Im. "I could make as good a guess myself. Na is the most powerful sorceress in the city."

It was no surprise that Tindeval showed up at their door only seconds later. He glanced up at the still-oblivious demon and said simply, "I sensed a disturbance."

"One of your citizens attempted to bind me," Xido told him. "Undoubtedly to use against you. A woman." He glanced at Im but did not speak the name the boy had given him. Rather, he said, "Im was able to counter the spell when I could not."

The prince gave Im a respectful look. To Xido, he apologized. "This should not have happened. A few simple wards —" He shook his head. "I have become lax."

"Next time it might be you," warned the deity. "What does it take to wake Akorzef? Anyone could have stolen your book if it were asleep."

Though Xido smiled as he said this, Tindeval answered quite seri-

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ously. "There were alarms that would alert it. But as I said, I did not even know it actually slept." Again he shook his head. "There is no sense in me accusing the one responsible. It can't be proven and her power nearly equals mine. A duel between us is not what Hirstel needs right now!"

Then he looked quite thoughtfully at the little god sitting in his guest room. "Not I," spoke Xido, guessing the man's thoughts at once. "Perhaps I could throw your enemy down but it is not my concern nor my place. She made her attempt and failed. It is over."

"Very well, my lord," murmured the sorcerer.

"What's going on?" asked a voice that sounded as though it originated from deep in the earth but in fact came from overhead. Qu'orthseth floated down to stand by the humans.

"We were attacked," Im informed it, "and you slept through it."

"As long as Master Im wasn't harmed," replied the monster, "it doesn't matter to me. I think I'll go roam the city until dawn. I've looked down on it countless times and wondered about things!" With that it was out the door.

"Its last opportunity, perhaps," said Xido.

"I need another opportunity to sleep," Im replied, and went back to his bed. The god stood a moment in the middle of the room, seemingly in concentration, then nodded in satisfaction.

"Strong warding, indeed, Lord Xido," whispered Piras Tindeval. "I could not do half so well in twice the time. 'Tis hours till dawn so I shall leave you." Out the door he slipped, where a pair of guards, more shadow than substance, waited to accompany him.

Xido chuckled. "Now the idea was planted in his head, our prince might have attempted something of the same sort himself. I should sleep safely enough." He regarded the half-asleep boy. "I see our Qu'orthseth has put some bells on you. Doesn't want to take a chance of you meeting an untimely end!"

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"Oh?" Despite his drowsiness, Im lifted his head. "Hmm. So it has." He closed his eyes, opening them again only when dawn sent a shaft of yellow light through the slit of a window. God and demon were conversing in low tones. "Is it time to go?"

"It is," replied Xido, "if our host cooperates. Even if he doesn't, maybe."

"There is no reason he shouldn't," came Qu'orthseth's rumble. "Probably happy to see the last of us."

"No reason of which we know," said the dark god. "And he's a bit unbalanced as are all who live here. Even our Im."

Qu'orthseth chuckled. "He had to be crazy to climb Tindeva's tower and face me."

Xido but nodded. "I think the people of Hirstel will perish here. They are already half-mad, driven toward stark insanity by the powers that flow through their world." He sighed. "I'm not going to wait for an attendant. Let's go."

Down a winding staircase they went, and to the Prince-Sorcerer's dinner chamber, where he now sprawled in his high-backed chair of carven green marble. A woman sat close beside him, just to his left, leaning forward, her jutting elbows on the table. Mature but somewhat young, thought Im, no more than a century or so.

He could immediately guess who she might be. Her eyes turned to the group. "We are mad, my lord?" she asked, a trace of amusement evident in her high and slightly grating voice. "Nothing spoken goes unheard in this house."

Tindeva shot her an annoyed look. "May I present the sorceress Na?" he asked.

"Ah," spoke Xido, "I think we met before but were not properly introduced."

"My apologies for my rudeness," she replied, seemingly quite

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serious. Im wasn't so sure of it. "This youngster is the one who blocked me?" Na stared at him. Being stared at so by an exceptionally powerful wizardess made him understandably uncomfortable.

"He is," stated Xido. "Also, I do maintain that you are all somewhat mad. Especially the ordinary citizens who have not the skills to cope with the magic here, with the other worlds forever crowding into their minds."

Piras Tindeval only shook his head, seeming to dismiss the deity's words, but the sorceress Na was interested. She turned dark eyes, shaded by the heavy brows common among Im's people, toward Xido. "I have — felt something of the sort. Perhaps I, too, should seek another world."

"You, Na?" The prince stared at her. "Why?"

"What is there here for me? Be your rival and second-best for a couple more centuries and then be too old to face whichever of your apprentices comes out on top? And," she went on, "if there are better places for our people, I could come back and show them the way."

"They are unlikely to go, my lady." Xido spoke evenly but could not hide a certain sense of resignation. "However, you are entirely welcome to join us. Our Prince Piras permitting, of course." He gave a slight bow of his head to the man.

"By all means. But I'll miss you, Lady Na, and the, ah, diversion you provide." He gazed wordlessly at the sorceress for long seconds. "I don't suppose it would do any good to propose marriage again."

"None. Our little squabbles may have amused you, Piras, but you weren't the one who always lost!" Laughing, she shook her head and rose from her place. "Maybe I can win sometimes in another realm."

The Prince-Sorcerer did not answer this at once, but fixed his gaze on Im. "This boy might be just as hard to beat," he said at last.

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“Ha, then maybe he is the one I should marry!” The woman winked at Im. “When do we go?”

“After breakfast,” stated Im. There were no contradictions.

6.

“MY BROTHER KNOWS THESE PATHWAYS better than I. I’ve been too lazy to learn them.”

“Because you don’t really need them, right?” asked Im. They trudged across a terrain of sand and broken rock. All trudged save Piras Tindeval, that is; he rode in a sedan chair borne by invisible servants.

“It is so,” agreed Xido. “I can go where I wish without using a portal. That, more than anything else, I think, is the difference between a god and, well, not a god.”

“But can not the mindless little elementals do the same?” came Na’s query.

Xido chuckled. “So they can. Therefore, they must be very small gods, no?”

“Undoubtedly,” the sorceress replied. “I don’t know why I never thought of that. Or why I didn’t think to bring some protection from this sun.” She mumbled a few words and a blue and white striped parasol appeared in her hand. It matched the long skirt she already wore.

“That won’t be so easy to do in another world, my lady. I give you fair warning of this.”

“We should be near,” broke in Tindeval. “Two of those tunnel portals, a mile or so apart.”

“But neither will take us to the home of our ancestors,” said Na. “Is that right?”

“It is,” said Xido. “One could once pass directly from that world to this one, but now the route back will not be so easy.” He paused. “And finding your way here again might be even more difficult.”

“That depends on whether the doors allow passage both ways,” Im put in, a bit eager to show off his knowledge — slight though it might be.

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"Exactly," agreed Xido. "This sort generally does." They were approaching an opening among the rocks. The god considered Qu'orthseth for a moment. "I've no idea whether you can pass through here. Some ways are warded against your kind." He shrugged. "Some are even warded against humans."

"I shall await your return for, um, a reasonable time," spoke Tindeval. He sipped the cold fruit drink he held. "It is going to get hot out here."

"We should know pretty quickly," responded the god. "Let's go in." All proved able to pass.

What they found was a vast cavern, with innumerable tunnels leading off it. Na squinted and looked about for a few seconds before saying, "This isn't quite real, is it?"

"As real as any other way it might be experienced," Xido told her. "We must create a metaphor for what is actually here. If it is here." He stepped into the cave. "Stay close to that entry. You would not want to lose your place and wander eternally searching for a hospitable world."

Then, seeming to recognize something the others could not, Xido said, "Ah, I think I could find the way to my own home readily from here."

That intrigued Im. "The world of the gods?"

"Some gods. I and my siblings dwell there, and our father, the mighty Krat, and a great many monsters. It's not a good place for humans." He turned back to the entrance. "We shall not find the world we seek this way, not without too many windings and the passing through of other realms."

He led them back to the desert, where the Prince-Sorcerer still waited. Perhaps half his drink had been consumed. "Not the way, I take it? Let's try the other."

They made their way across a hill, jagged rocks standing here and

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there. Na had handed her bag, containing all she would take to a new world and a new life, to a demon who materialized at her word. Im had to carry his own pack; Xido apparently chose to. In that he had arrived with nothing but the loincloth he wore, his bag contained only food.

"It should be mentioned that we might end up just about any place in the world we seek," said Xido. "It's most unlikely a portal will take us to where your ancestors dwelt."

"So it could be the other side of the world," said Na. "It doesn't matter to me. It doesn't even matter whether we go to that world. There must be plenty of suitable ones."

"That is certainly an alternative," Xido allowed. "You'd want one with humans or you might be rather lonesome."

Na eyed Im but said nothing. The next door was an opening among the rocks, almost a stairway down into darkness. "I can not — pass," came Qu'orthseth's deep groan. It was being held back, strain though it might.

"Perhaps if I am in contact with you," said Xido. He place a hand on the creature's arm and the two came through. "That worked this time. The next gate? Who can say? But I wouldn't leave you stuck, Akorzef."

"I thank you for that, my lord. I know you have no love for my kind."

"But I do have a duty. Let's take a look at where we are." Where they were was again in the great cave.

"A different spot, I assume?" asked Na.

"Yes, in any sense that matters. A direct portal would have been nice but we can pass through this, ah, nexus again." Xido looked about and smiled broadly. "Excellent. Follow," he ordered. The deity seemed to be counting the side passages and suddenly turned into one. The world

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into which they followed him was quite different from the one they had left.

Black skies. Fire. All about them volcanoes spewed molten rock. The noxious air burnt their lungs. "It looks like home," said Qu'orthseth. "Except without the red sun filling half the sky."

"You would starve here," said Xido.

"That is true."

"I know this world," the god went on. "The gates are conveniently close together so it is much used by travelers. Breathable air helps too, though it would poison one eventually." He led them along a jagged way to their left, above a river of liquid rock. Ten minutes brought them to another gate and all passed without problem, the demon included. Again, they seemed to be in a cavern.

"We've been lucky not to run into any others who use these ways," spoke Xido. "Some for the purpose of preying on travelers. The wards that Akorzef ran into are placed just to prevent the passage of such dangerous creatures."

"Such as?" asked Im. "I've heard stories, like everyone in Hirstel, but none of us really know anything."

"We had a sphinx come out of a gate decades ago," Na informed him. "Nasty creature. We weren't able to kill it but we sent it scurrying back."

"You are fortunate to live in a rather inhospitable world or you might have seen far more dangerous beings," observed Xido. He was not paying much attention, focused on finding their next portal. "This one should open into the world of your ancestors. We were lucky it proved so easy."

"But you know that world and these ways, don't you?" asked Im.

"I do," answered the god. "That helped." He plunged into the appropriate tunnel.

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And, again, the demon could not pass. No, not even with Xido holding onto it. "Too well warded," said the god. "One reason it's a relatively safe world to inhabit."

Which is why you have never seen a sphinx nor a demon, my friends. But they are out there!

He looked thoughtfully at Qu'orthseth for a moment. "I'll come back for you. Stay put."

Then the two humans and the god stepped forth into another world, a very different world from the one the Hirstelites knew. The sky was blue, not yellow as at home. And so many clouds! It was a rarity to see even a wisp of one from their city, generally on the far horizon.

"The home of your ancestors," announced Xido

7.

NA NEARLY PANICKED. "WHAT ARE these? Some sort of demons?" Her eyes darted here and there. "They are everywhere!"

"Those are trees," Xido told her. "Like vegetables but considerably larger. Harmless." He snickered. "Unless one falls on you."

Im gazed uneasily at the towering objects. "They can't move, can they?" He thought not but was unsure.

"Not even an inch. And I ask you not to move either while I go back and attend to the demon." He turned toward their portal and laughed to see only a grassy hill before him.

"It is gone!" gasped Im.

"Only hidden," the deity assured him. "That is how things are in this world." He strode forward confidently and disappeared.

"I don't think that demon can live here," said Na, taking a seat on the ground and looking into her bag. She shook her head and put it down. "Let's wait till Lord Xido returns before we eat."

"You mean the sun, don't you?" asked Im. He looked up at the yellowish orb, apparently a little past the zenith. "It wouldn't sustain it."

"Right. Maybe Xido can get it someplace proper."

"We might have broken the geas Tindeval placed on it by going through those gates," mused Im. "That would mean it could go back to its own world. As long as it can dodge the police there."

It might have been half an hour later when Xido appeared in front of them, apparently out of some deep shadow. "No need to use the gates myself," he explained, "so I came direct."

"What of Qu'orthseth?" asked Im.

"Right now it is back where we started. It seemed the best place to leave it until I could work something out." He sat down on the ground beside them and opened his pack. "Akorzef was able to reconnect with its home world and feed so that is to the good. We, alas, have only this

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horrible food from your city. Since it came through the gates with us, it should be as nutritious here as it was there.” He tore into a loaf of mushroom bread. “There is plenty of good edible stuff around but you’ll need to learn about it. I’ll stay with you a while.”

He chewed for a time, seemingly in thought. “I told Tindeval we had found our way and sent him on home. Although he insisted on hearing the tale first and mentioned some nonsense about building a temple over the portal. Then I poked a hole between the worlds and came back to you.” Xido rose. “all right, here goes.”

“Are you going to summon Qu’orthseth?” asked Na.

“No, you are,” the god told her. “That is considerably more of an undertaking here than it was in Hirstel. You will run into unaccustomed resistance; indeed, I doubt you could do it at all unless I help.”

“Help?” The sorceress did not look happy about this at all.

“I’ll pop over and try to bring old Akorzef back with me. I might or might not be able to accomplish that — it is a rather large demon and I am one small god. But it should weaken the fabric enough to help you accomplish a summoning. Me pushing and you pulling!”

Im saw a problem with this. “Won’t it be pulled back after a time?”

Xido smiled slyly. “No, for the geas Tindeval placed on it remains in force. It would seem passing through that world of fire was not enough to break it. Not sure why!”

“Maybe the lack of sun there? It may have still been connected to the one in its home world,” suggested Na.

“As good a guess as any,” admitted Xido. To Im he said, “Akorzef is still going to be bound to you, boy, until you die. Or until we can find another solution.”

“Your very own demon bodyguard,” observed Na. “Qu’orthseth will be disappointed. It hoped to be freed.”

“It already understands and accepts this as the best way. At least

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for now. You can start, Na.” With that, Xido seemed to pull shadows about himself and disappeared.

“I wish that book hadn’t been given back to Tindeval,” muttered the sorceress, and began preparing her incantation.

“A circle?” asked Im, a tad timidly. This powerful woman was intimidating!

“Not needed. We’re not trying to keep it captive, nor is it likely to attack us.” She frowned at that thought. “Though one never knows with demons.”

“It needs me alive.”

“That is true. Me it might see as a future threat.”

She spread her arm wide, eyes shut, and began chanting. Im watched, attentive. He had never seen a great magician work, at least not from this close. But then, there wasn’t much to see, really. He knew how spells worked.

Na, however — he found himself fascinated by her. She was not particularly young, approaching what would be middle-aged among his people, perhaps a century or so old. The wizardess was a slender woman, of no great height, with perhaps the hint of a pot belly and rather large, pendulous breasts above her long, striped skirt, now somewhat ripped and ragged about the hem. She was a bit heavy in the brow and square in the jaw as was not uncommon among their people.

And a great shock of curling hair, the color of dawn’s light on the walls of Hirstel, was swept back to fall almost to her prominent buttocks. Im, we must mention, was quite ignorant of women of any sort, powerful sorceresses or not, and was, moreover, truly young, a boy in any world. But he was quite old enough to appreciate Na.

There was something in the air before her, a movement, a wavering, an opening. That yellow — surely that was the sky of their home? Former home, Im reminded himself. A moment later the blank

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face of Qu'orthseth appeared, a massive red shoulder, an arm, before the demon's entire body popped out of the rift, as if released all at once.

Xido stepped out behind it and the passage between worlds closed. "Now I can tell my sister I know what giving birth feels like," he announced.

"And I the midwife?" laughed Na.

Qu'orthseth's thunderous laugh joined hers. "I grew from a bud, centuries ago," he said, "but I do not mind being reborn here." It stopped, standing still for a few seconds. "Yes, I can still connect to the sun of my world." The demon looked up. "This one is too puny. A little better than the one in Hirstel, though, it must be admitted."

"We shall have to find a source of nourishment ourselves soon," said Xido. "In the morning." He smiled at his human companions. "I am quite sure neither of you knows how to light a fire. It is time for your first lesson."

"Can't I just say an incantation?" asked Na. She mumbled something they couldn't make out and shook her head. "I guess not," she admitted.

"Get some wood," Xido told them. "Those brown things lying on the ground." It was to be expected that they picked up some brown things that were not wood at all but we needn't go into that. Soon, the god had the sticks laid and ready.

"Now, most humans, those without magic, would have to start the fire through some physical means and you would do well to learn those. They require less effort. But we are all magicians here." He reached out a hand, plucked a torch from somewhere, and began to set fire to his stacked wood, lighting it here and there. "You can learn that sort of thing readily enough. It is how magic is done here." He glanced up at the pair. "And in many worlds."

Na gazed at the blaze that began to leap up before her and then at

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Xido himself. "There were no demons or other servitors involved in that, were there?"

"No. I just reached into another world and, um, borrowed the fire. Of course, the ashes of the brand I brought will flit back to that world later on, but not before I was able to get our own fire going. This is what you need to learn to do, both of you."

"So we shall," decided Im.

8.

“INCIDENTALLY,” SPOKE XIDO, “THE CUSTOM in this land is to keep ones breasts covered. Yes, I know, it is barbaric but so it is.”

Na looked up from her breakfast, making a most sour face.

Ah, my audience, you would not laugh so at the way a powerful sorceress might attire herself, were the Lady Na here!

Im followed the god’s statement to a conclusion. “Custom? Then there are people here.”

“There are. Not your people. We are on the other side of the world from where your ancestors lived, and somewhat north. Their home was near the equator.”

“What’s an equator?” asked Im. Na looked like she might have wanted to ask too, but was not so eager to display her ignorance.

“Hmm, I think all of that had best be another lesson. In fact, many of your race still reside there, or have mixed with their neighbors. Those were the, ah, ordinary folk for the most part, the ones not quite so long lived, not so inclined to magical powers. They resented those like you.” The dark deity paused. “No, they hated those like you. When Hurasu died — some five thousand years old, by the way — many fled the great valley where they dwelt, seeking new homes. A few went through a gate and built Hirstel.”

“You mean had demons build it,” Na pointed out.

Xido chuckled. “That is true. Others went elsewhere, wandering to all parts of this world. The largest migration settled, um, over that way.” He pointed toward the west. “Across a wide sea from here. They built a mighty empire and ruled from their city of Tesra. Maybe they still do; I haven’t checked on them for a while.”

“They are sorcerers?” asked Im.

“Some. It is not so common among them but most are quite long lived.”

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The boy eyed the demon, standing motionless nearby. "Could Qu'orthseth take us there?"

Xido turned to the red monster. "Ho, Akorze! Can you fly in this world?"

"Not well, Lord Xido," it replied. "A short distance, maybe."

"Well, there you go," said Xido, turning back to his companions. "It can't carry you across the sea. Tesra might have been a good place for you." He shrugged. "Or not. I suspect their trading ships come to the shores on this side of the sea occasionally. We can ask." A chuckle. "I can ask. You will need to learn the language here. An Ildin dialect, most likely."

Although neither Na nor Im had ever heard a human speak any language other than their own, they knew — as did all Hirstelites — something of the various tongues of demons. "Ill-done?" asked Na. "Are they like you? I mean, um, black all over?" She really meant his hair, as she and Im were nearly as dark as the god.

"There are people who look like me in this world, mostly further south. We might run into some. Not the Ildin. They look like neither you nor me. You'll see."

"Which way?" asked Qu'orthseth.

"Any!" laughed Xido. "It's been some time since I was around this part of this world and I've no idea where any cities might be found." He gazed toward the east. "Mountains over there. I know that. And sea both south and west. Up that way," he continued, turning north, "is a great river. Only wandering hunters lived there the last time I visited." He pondered. "But that has been a century or two."

"West would take us toward our own people, wouldn't it?" Im asked.

"It would, and the shores of the Great Sea. But it's not a good way to travel, due west from here. Swamp land, much of it." From their

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expressions, the god immediately surmised neither mortal knew what a swamp was. "Land that is too wet to pass easily. Like one of the vats of slime in your city!"

"Then south," said Na.

"Probably the best choice," Xido agreed. He looked the woman over. "Your parasol." He held out a hand.

The sorceress was puzzled but gave it over. In a few seconds, Xido had removed the material, discarding the frame. The result was a sort of poncho. "Flimsy stuff," he commented, "but it must do. Slip this on."

Na reluctantly did so. "I look ridiculous, don't I?" she demanded to know.

Im knew better than to answer, and even Qu'orthseth, but Xido honestly told her, "Quite ridiculous, my lady. But you won't offend anyone. Let's go." They started south through a trackless land of low hills and scrubby forest.

"The Ildin are a notably hospitable people," Xido told them as they walked. "We are fortunate to be in their neighborhood."

"If they are still here," rumbled Qu'orthseth.

"Indeed. We should have a better chance of meeting them south of these hills we are crossing."

The demon lifted its head, turning it side to side. "I sense someone up ahead." A minute later, two tall figures — more than just tall — could be seen approaching. They looked quite like Qu'orthseth except both having shiny blue-green skins. "The cops," it muttered.

"You can't take me," it bellowed at them. "I am still bound here!" This was in the language of its home world of demons, naturally. Xido could follow it, and Na, to some extent. Poor Im was in the dark.

"Only one thing holds you here, Qu'orthseth," said one. It turned its featureless face toward Im. "We can remove him and take you back."

It is to be noted that it did not actually call the demon Qu'orthseth

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but used a completely unpronounceable name in their own language. It was not a language humans should hear too much of for it might damage both ears and mind.

Gods are another matter. “You will not harm the boy,” stated Xido. “He is in my protection.”

A laugh rumbled from one of them. It was difficult to say which. “You speak our language well, Great Lizard.”

“But with an atrocious accent,” spoke the other. “We will not confront a god.” Its head turned toward Im. “But you can’t watch the mortal at all times.” With that, both turned and walked back the direction from which they had come — and then, of a sudden, disappeared.

“Back to their own world,” said Na.

“For now.” Xido looked to young Im. “You understood none of that.”

“Not the words, but it wasn’t hard to figure out what that pair was thinking.” He regarded their demon companion. “Now, you are supposed to kill me, eventually. You are bound by the geas placed by Piras Tindeval to do this, and then you pop back home automatically. Right?”

Qu’orthseth solemnly nodded.

“But what if these constables we just met off me instead? Does that mean you haven’t done your duty and face some other penalty?”

“Not so long as I intend to slay you, young wizard. Or claim that I do.” It shrugged. “Accidents do happen and a poor demon will not be held responsible.”

“In other words,” said Na, “it makes no difference.”

Xido agreed. “Either way, it’s back to prison for Akorzef. Let’s get moving.”

They headed south again, knowing not what lay ahead, but now finding and following a road through the hills. “If I can keep you alive

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for a millennium, Master Im,” rumbled Qu’orthseth as they trudged along, “I’ll be a quite old demon myself. You might even outlast me. I would not mind spending the rest of my life in this world.” It looked about at the sunlit landscape. It is likely it found it more attractive than did its human companions who were bewildered by much they saw.

“A thousand years is asking a lot,” noted Na. “Tindeval is said to be near that but I can think of no others.”

“He has used magic to prolong his years. We can do the same.”

“Won’t you miss your kind?” the boy asked.

“One sentient being is as good as another. And some are better. Ho, Lord Xido,” it called, “am I likely to frighten the people around here?”

“Undoubtedly,” the god told it.

“Ah, then I’d best duck aside for those are surely humans approaching!”

9.

TWO OF THE INDIVIDUALS COMING toward them were, indeed, human. The third was an ox, pulling a tall two-wheeled cart. When close enough, they hailed the party in a tongue neither Na nor Im understood.

“They are very light,” Im whispered to the sorceress. “But not their hair.” The pair, woman and man, and seemingly rather young, were compact, with black hair. No, the one was a dark brown, the boy noted. Their golden-brown skin, certainly somewhat lighter than the Hirstelites, reminded Im of the sun on the desert sands. That is, where they were not covered by unadorned kilt and tunic, or shaded by their wide-brimmed straw hats.

The two wondered more, perhaps, at the beast of burden. Large animals did not live in Hirstel. They had become the stuff of legend — legend that sometimes made them out to be both voracious and dangerous.

Xido conversed with the couple for some time. Occasionally they glanced toward the two Hirstelites and Im was sure he heard the word *Tesratapa* repeated more than once. That was what it sounded like, anyway.

Then a parting with smiles and bows and more glances toward Im and Na. As they rolled away, it could be seen their oxcart was half-filled with some sort of globular white-and-purple objects.

Yes, of course they were turnips. You and I would know this but Na and Im had never seen such things before. And no, I don't much like turnips either.

“They assumed you were Tesrans,” Xido told them. “Their ships do visit the coasts south of here, but not very frequently.” He gazed that direction, appearing to be in thought for a moment. “That’s some days’ journey yet but there is a village near us.”

“Tesrans. Those are our relatives of whom you told us, are they not?” asked Na.

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Added Im, "The ones across the sea?"

"They are. Tesrans still look somewhat like their ancestors but not nearly so much as you two. There has been mixing with other peoples over the centuries." He stopped and turned to his companions. "I told them you had been on a long journey of exploration and hoped to return to your people. We'd best stick to that tale."

"Safe?" asked Qu'orthseth, who slipped out from among the concealing trees.

"For now," replied Xido. "You'll have to hide quite frequently, I fear. These people do not have dealings with demons. I don't know what we'll do if we board a ship!"

"There are methods," replied the red beast. "For example." It stood quite still and began to reduce in height, slowly, and its color began to slip from crimson to a ruddy gold. When it finished, what could pass for a golden statue stood before them, a little more than waist height on Im, who was tallest of the trio.

"Qu'orthseth?" No reply came. Then the form began to expand, taking two or three minutes to return to its normal monstrous self.

"I can't speak when I do that," it explained. "Nor move nor pretty much anything else. But I can pass for a statue." A cavernous chuckle. "And I weigh as much as ever so don't think to be carrying me about!"

Xido considered this. "So we could stow you in a hold for a sea journey?"

"I'd rather be a figurehead or the like. I can still sense everything in that form."

Im recalled something the demon had mentioned. "That is your shape as a bud, isn't it? You unfold into the other form."

A deafening cacophony of a laugh welled from the creature. "It is so! I am a flower now!" A tad more subdued, it continued, "In a manner of speaking. You are astute to have recognized this, Master Im."

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The boy shrugged. "It made sense."

"So it does," agreed Xido. "But I would probably have never thought of it." The god chuckled. "Nor would I have been inclined to care."

"That's a god for you," said Qu'orthseth.

"Have you other forms?" Na asked.

"None useful to you, nor in this world. They are for, ah, reproduction."

"That sounds interesting. But indeed not useful," replied the wizardess.

"Not unless you were another demon of its realm," said Xido. "Then one of you could shake your spores on the other."

"Hmmm, yes," rumbled the demon. It seemed ill at ease with the topic.

Consider that a warning, should you ever bump into a demon, to avoid those sort of personal matters. Oh, you don't think that's likely to happen? So have others, my friend, so have others.

Im called out a warning. "More people ahead." Qu'orthseth immediately slipped into the underbrush, disappearing surprisingly quickly for a creature its size and leaving barely a quaver of a branch or stem of grass to mark its passage.

"Will they have food?" asked Im. "I want to try food from this world."

"It might make you sick at first," warned Xido. "Eat sparingly and wean yourself from the food of Hirstel. Also —" He frowned at his thought before sharing it. "There are almost certainly diseases here to which you have no natural immunity. I see many sick days for the both of you."

"As long as they don't kill us. That would upset Qu'orthseth considerably."

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"Not likely," Xido answered and raised an arm in greeting to the folk ahead. Again, he used the Ildin speech, leaving Na and Im quite in the dark.

As they strolled on into a village of a dozen or so round thatched-roofed houses — some might have been storage sheds — Xido informed them, "They offer their hospitality. They are good people, these Ildin, but we would do well not to take advantage of them. A night in one of their houses, a meal or two, but no more without payment of some sort."

"We have nothing," stated Na.

Xido nodded an agreement. "We could pay them with gold or silver pulled from another world. It would disappear eventually and that is a dirty trick to play on good people like these." He chuckled. "Especially should we have need to pass through here again."

"Perhaps an entertainment," suggested Im. He reached out and pulled a dove out of the air. The boy frowned when it popped out of existence almost immediately.

"You learn quickly," observed Xido. "Living creatures are the most difficult."

Na muttered what was surely a curse.

"You are unhappy, my Lady Na?" asked Xido.

"Am I to again be the second-best magician?" A bark of a laugh. "Third, if I count you!"

The deity regarded her, calmly, for a moment before speaking. "Na, this is an extremely large world compared to the one within the walls of Hirstel. You and Im could live on opposite sides, if you wish."

"I don't know if I even want to go to this Tesra," stated Im. "Is it any better than right here?" He spoke no more for they were now surrounded by villagers and Xido again conversed with them. They looked much like the pair they had passed earlier, not large people,

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attired in long kilts or tunics, both men and women covering up their torsos but generally bare of foot.

That there were young women among them, Im did not fail to notice. Another place might indeed be no better than right here!

Na whispered to him. "You are going to be vulnerable without the demon near to protect you."

Im knew this was true. "We have Xido." His eyes turned to the god. He didn't look like much, a small, lean man. Oh, there was a vitality to him, to be sure.

"Yes, Xido," murmured Na. "For how long?" Were there other, unvoiced questions? Im suspected so.

The god returned to them. "We can shelter in that one for the night." He gestured toward a nearby hut. "There will be a meal later. And then we can start on the lessons you two must learn!"

10.

THE FIRST LESSON WAS TO be careful not to overeat. The food in this world did indeed cause some queasiness in Im; Na became nauseous enough to lose her meal. "It won't last," Xido assured the two. "You are probably safest with fruits and vegetables now. And wine — that might be just the thing to help you acclimate."

A medicine none of us would mind taking, eh?

Accordingly, Na sipped wine through the evening and kept it down. Their shelter proved to be a storage building. "Once a house," conjectured Xido. "Too shabby now to live in but too sound to tear down." There were jars and barrels and boxes about, most seeming to contain food of some sort.

"The folks here won't mind if we help ourselves to a little of this to carry along on our journey," felt Xido. He felt, as well, that they should be sociable in repayment of the hospitality they were being shown. "Come sit outside," he told them. "We can work on your second lesson, learning some of our hosts' language."

"And you're not letting Im out of your sight, are you?" asked Na.

"Without Qu'orthseth at hand to serve as bodyguard, that duty falls to me. Your third lesson must be to learn how to use magic here so you are capable of defending yourselves." With that, Xido stepped outside to greet the villagers. His companions followed him.

"They believe I am a trader from the far south," the god continued. "Xit by name. I have guided you on a long journey."

Na laughed. "Quite long!"

As much to himself as anyone else, Im muttered, "I fear it will prove much longer."

Neither replied to that as they approached the communal fire, a small blaze in a pit central to the village. "The genders mix here,"

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commented Xido, taking a place in the circle of villagers. "Sit where you will."

Im could feel the eyes turned on him and wished his beard was fuller. He looked too much like a boy! A half-starved, ragged boy, at that, not the young man he considered himself to be. Was he not over seventeen years of age? These Ildin men mostly wore short, neat beards, and kept their dark hair closely cropped. That was not at all the way of Hirstel — perhaps he should consider cutting back his own luxuriant locks.

After all, Xido himself affected a style not greatly different from their hosts. More practical, maybe, when one was out doing things.

Women. There were women here and they were looking at him. Now there were women in Hirstel, to be sure. One of them was right here and getting her own share of looks. But Im had never noted any of them having any interest in him. For that matter, most had not interested him that much. Im was not quite sure why; those women of Hirstel had often seemed distant, unreal, in a way.

These Ildin women were very real. And he could not converse with them! He sat next to Xido, deciding that was the best way to learn a few words. Unless one of those girls on the other side of the fire might be willing to give him private lessons. He could hope, couldn't he?

"You should not find Ildin overly difficult," Xido whispered to him. "The syntax is not greatly different from your own language. That is something for which you may thank old Hurasu himself, the Vision Lord, the man who created your tongue."

"It has changed over the millennia since," put in Na, who had taken a place on the other side of Im.

Xido nodded. "It is so. And over the millennia it has also influenced the development of other languages, Ildin included." He turned to a gray-haired woman who apparently served as head of this settlement.

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“Im,” he said, pointing to the boy. “Na.” This was followed by something in Ildin.

To his comrades, he said, “This is Oerasee and when she greets you, return her words.” The woman had quite the longest nose Im had ever seen. All these Ildin’s noses stuck out rather far.

That done, Xido went back to conversing with their hosts, leaving Na and Im largely out of it. Now and again, Im would point to some object and ask his divine companion how it would be said in Ildin; man, woman, fire, food, and maybe a dozen other useful words were in his and Na’s possession by the end of the evening.

Im was again thinking about getting private lessons from one of the village girls when Xido confided, “Only a couple of these villagers have ever seen Tesrans, so there was no problem convincing them you were such. This may make them a little uncomfortable around you.”

“That’s a good thing!” opined Na, who might have sipped just a little too much wine. She snickered. “As long as it doesn’t scare the men away.”

“They’re a pretty straitlaced bunch,” warned Xido. “Best avoid anything of that sort.”

“Ha, Great Xit, I’ve seen you eying them yourself!” And them eying Xido, Im said only to himself. But the god was right, this was not the time nor place for thinking of such things. Not that he could necessarily help doing so.

Many of the villagers were rising. An end to the evening? he wondered. Yes, Xido was getting up too. Im was tired but he was also excited about all this around him. So much was new! So many possibilities in this big world. As he got up to follow his comrades to their hut, a woman jostled against him and murmured what he assumed was a word of apology. Then she slipped something into his hand.

A scrap of — what? Paper? Or maybe bark. Im wasn’t sure. He

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watched the Ildin woman walking away as if naught had happened. She wasn't bad to watch from this angle, not bad at all. And young, or almost young. A few seconds later, as the villagers dispersed to their huts, he unfolded the bit of paper and scrutinized it. A crude map, it was, a map of the village and one of the huts was clearly marked.

Marked with a picture that was somewhat crude as well, in more ways than one. An invitation? He looked up at the handful of houses. That one over there. No mistaking that.

"Xido," he whispered, "do you know which of these people live in that house?" The god did not but he asked one of those standing by, nodding as he was given the information.

"That's the home of Oerasee and her daughter. Both widowed?" He asked the Ildin man something else. "Yes, both, and a couple of children live with them."

"Oh. Thank you. I, ah, wondered about our, um, hostess. So that's her house." He nodded in a simulation of satisfaction. "We might as well get to ours."

11.

"I SHALL HAVE TO START teaching you the ways of wizardry in this world," said Xido. "I suspect you will need to unlearn as much as you learn. Especially you, Na."

Na looked half-asleep. "Um-hum. I'm forgetting stuff already." With that she pulled her blanket over herself and dozed off immediately.

"You are both talented sorcerers," continued Xido. "You'll do well here. But Na has it right — we all need a good night's rest." Soon the deity was asleep at well.

But Im knew he had placed wards around him first. Xido was taking no chances with those demon constables possibly being in the neighborhood. It was likely Qu'orthseth lurked close by, too, and its little warning spells also clung to the boy.

Of course, the demon, being but a demon, had only small magics. Great skill in sorcery was not a gift given to its kind. Im tossed for a few minutes, probably not nearly as long as it seemed to him, before sitting up. Both his companions slept. Why shouldn't he go out? Why shouldn't he accept his invitation?

Why shouldn't he explore his new world and everything it had to offer? He slipped out of his blanket and through the open doorway. It was still pleasantly warm. Temperatures dropped rapidly in Hirstel as soon as the sun set, just as days were invariably hot.

How strange night was here, full of sounds that Im had never heard in the streets of Hirstel. That murmur was wind, but not the moaning wind of the desert. This wind whispered through the trees. And all those whistles and chirps and creaks made by the creatures of the night! They were all around Im. He was in a world filled with life.

That hut over there. Would old Oerasee be awake? He suddenly felt a great misgiving about all this. A movement in the shadow of the house

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put him suddenly on alert. Ah, it was the woman who had given him the note. Or drawing, maybe he should say. Did the people here know how to write? Why was he wondering about that now?

She moved out into the moonlight. The moon here was much like that he had known in the world of his birth. It would be in a different phase back home, though, wouldn't it? The woman — not quite a girl but certainly not very old — smiled at him. Im feared his smile in return looked most foolish.

Her nose was nearly as big as her mother's, wasn't it? No matter. She held out a hand and he took it. How calloused! Ha, perhaps she was wondering why his was so soft. The woman murmured something, not very loudly, and in Ildin. That didn't matter either. He let her lead him toward the woods.

And there, she put her arms around him and her lips to his. A moment later her hands were straying elsewhere. Why is this happening? wondered Im. It seemed so strange, so unbelievable, so dreamlike. Was this Ildin simply lonely, here in this little village with no husband? He allowed his hands to stray also.

It was fortunate that he allowed his eyes to stray momentarily, as well, for he spotted two large forms moving among the trees, glinting bluish where the moonlight filtering through the leaves struck them.

Oh, do I see disappointment in a face here and there? Remember I am a family storyteller! If you want that sort of thing, go to my worthy but lecherous colleague on the far side of the bazaar.

"Run!" Im yelled. Had the young wizard taken a moment to think he would have realized the demons would have no interest in the Ildin woman. Nor would she have understood what he said. But Im was not about to stop and think right then!

Several things happened at once. The demon police rushed toward him. The woman looked like she wanted to scream but no sound came.

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And a large red body transposed itself between the pair of demons and their target. That was enough time for the Ildin to turn and run toward her village.

Im backed away a bit more slowly. He might be safer remaining in the vicinity of Qu'orthseth. The constables had halted and now words were exchanged by all three demons. Words Im did not understand. With no facial expressions, it was hard to tell anything. They might be exchanging pleasantries or preparing to murder each other.

One pushed forward. Qu'orthseth pushed back. As they grappled, the other tried to slip around them. Ah, so that was the plan. Old Qu'orthseth wasn't all that bright, to let itself get entangled in such a manner. And now Im was in very real danger.

He turned to run. There was Xido, calmly watching the whole thing. "You could handle those cops yourself with a little training," he said. "At least, banish them back to their own world. But I think I'll do more than that." The god stepped forward and regarded the approaching demon in a rather nonchalant fashion. The blue-green form hesitated.

It said something to Xido, who shrugged and replied, in the language of Hirstel, "Too late. You were warned." He reached out and suddenly one of the demon's arms started to — shrivel? Or wilt, maybe. Its shriek was that of storm winds; it immediately disappeared.

The god nodded, knowingly. "I thought it would pop back. There was probably a safeguard in place, to send them home the moment they might be harmed." The other demon had also disappeared and now Qu'orthseth ambled toward them. "What were you doing out here?" Xido asked.

"Um, I just came out to relieve myself. I guess I wandered too far away."

Xido gave him a most suspicious look but said nothing, only

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turning back toward the village. However, Qu'orthseth leaned down toward the boy. "I won't tell," promised the great crimson demon. Its whisper sounded like rocks falling into a ravine.

There was no sign that anyone in the village knew anything had happened. Nor was there any sign of the woman Im had accompanied into the woods. He slept surprisingly well the remainder of the night.

Xido was gone when he awoke. Im stepped out of the hut to see the lean god approaching. "I've been talking with Oerasee," he told Im. "She says that her daughter is in great fear of something. A nightmare, perhaps." A hint of a smile appeared. "There were great red and blue creatures in it, hundreds of them rushing out of the woods. Most odd." With that, he went on in to wake Na.

The three breakfasted together, again making the better part of their meal on the food of Hirstel. Or we should say Na and Im did; Xido had no need and ate the food the villagers had given him. "We could leave this morning or wait another day," the god told them. "I'll leave that to you."

Im wanted to get going at once; a certain feeling of embarrassment might have had something to do with that. Na, on the other hand, wanted to rest a while and learn more of the language. More of the Ildin in general, she said.

"Very well," spoke Xido. "We shall remain today. It no doubt is better to give you more time to acclimate to this world. And, indeed, to learn." He busied himself scraping the last of the egg yolk from his earthenware plate with a piece of bannock. "Not just the language," the god went on. "It's time to learn something of the magic."

He put the plate aside. "We'll start at the very beginning. You both know there are a multitude of other worlds out there. An infinite number of them."

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Na nodded, perhaps a little impatiently. "All of Hirstel learns that early. It is the source of most magic."

"And you have both built up strong defenses against those other worlds. That was necessary to your very survival in Hirstel, and even so they would have constantly impinged on your unconscious mind. That is what drives your people mad." He looked from one to the other. "What you need learn now is how to lower those defenses a little and look into the other realms."

"But we already deal with those realms," objected Na.

"Indirectly, by using spells and summonings as a buffer. Calling a demon to you is not such an easy undertaking in this world. Oh, it can be done, certainly, but there are almost always easier ways to do things."

"I have heard of those who become lost in those other worlds," said Im.

"All the more reason you need learn to deal with them," came Xido's reply. "Perhaps the most useful thing of all you might learn is how to communicate with other sorcerers from afar. And that very much involves entering other realms."

"Then we'll learn," Na decided. "When we're better rested."

Xido rose. "Understood. How are you all feeling this morning, anyway? Any problems with the food?"

Na stood as well, stretched, sighed, smiled. "Not too bad, just tired."

"My throat feels a little scratchy," Im admitted.

"Undoubtedly," said Xido, "you let yourself get too close to one of these Ildin."

12.

IM FELT WORSE AS THE day progressed. Soon, Na did too.

"We were warned," he pointed out. Na only cursed Xido and the entire world to which he had brought them.

Sick or not, Xido told them, they would be on the road tomorrow. "We'll not wear out our welcome here," he insisted. Then he fixed his gaze on Im. "Nor upset any more young women."

Na knew nothing of what happened the previous night, but she had no problem imagining something. "Ah, which one was it, you sly boy? Arrr. Arrr. Damn this sore throat!"

"Damning won't help it one bit," Xido told her. "Unless you use the proper god's name in your curse."

"Not yours, I assume," came the sorceress' reply. "These Ildin don't follow you, do they?"

"No, they have their own pantheon. I've met some of them on my travels." He shook his head, slowly. "An odd bunch. All the good ones are quite thoroughly good and the bad ones are incredibly despicable."

Im mumbled, "That says something about the people who worship them, doesn't it?" Then he sneezed, twice, violently.

"I'm sure it does. But the Ildin themselves are human and not greatly different from anyone else." He looked from one to the other. "And now, as happens with humans, they are a bit frightened. They suspect you two are sorcerers — Tesrans have that reputation to begin with and Im's escapade last night made things worse."

Na made no remark this time but was obviously curious. Im ignored her.

"The girl, er, woman is all right, isn't she?" asked Im. He realized he had no idea what her name might be. The boy felt a bit of regret now for having frightened her.

"She seems so. Oerasee's daughter believes the demons of her

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people's religion were after her for her, ah, impure desires. Oerasee herself believes it was but a dream, and I have no intention of convincing her otherwise."

"Xit," asked Na, who had taken to calling the deity by this name, "I can see we need to be on our way. But will we be well enough to travel tomorrow? I've never been so sick before."

"Me neither," added Im. A few mild ailments made their way around the population of Hirstel from time to time, little more than inconveniences.

"You'll be sicker tomorrow, both of you, but not so much you can't walk a few miles." He chuckled at their unhappy expressions. "You should be getting better after that."

"Is there magic we could use?" wondered Im. Na, too, turned inquisitive eyes toward the god.

"I've already worked some. Otherwise, you might have been sick a week or longer. Indeed," he continued, in a much more serious voice, "with you so vulnerable to the diseases of this world it could even have killed you. You must learn the proper methods to deal with this yourself."

The two mortals looked at each other. "That would be useful," spoke Na. "I'd much rather not die."

"And once you learn some basics it won't be difficult," Xido assured them. He spent the rest of that day teaching the two Hirstelites, two of the most powerful sorcerers you might imagine, the rudiments of working magic in a new world.

"You already know the theories," he had told them. "You know how it works. It's no more than a matter of applying it differently." So they practiced the things Xido showed them. So they learned enough to make a beginning, and knew more at supper than they did at breakfast.

Indeed, that is something for which we should all strive. If you have not

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accomplished it today, who is there to blame? Now listen and you shall learn even more. Will it be useful? Who can say, my friends?

Na and Im also learned somewhat of fevers and runny noses that day, and that sleepless night. By morning, the boy was coughing; Na soon was doing the same. “You are getting through this even more quickly than I expected,” observed Xido. “We should be able to travel a league or two further to the south this day. But it will be a journey of many days to the sea, even when you are yourselves again.”

And so they breakfasted there one last time — Xido, mostly, as the two invalids did not have much appetite — and gave their thanks and farewells to the assembled villagers and set off down the barely-visible road southward. “So that was the woman,” mumbled Na, as the houses dwindled behind them. “I’m sure I can get Qu’orthseth to give me the entire story.”

“There’s little to tell,” Im assured her. “We went into the woods and the demons showed up before anything could happen.”

Na nodded. “Too bad. Or maybe it was better that way. My head seems to be clearing up.”

“Mine too.” Im thought on this for several seconds before saying, “In more ways than one. I seem to be thinking more and more clearly since we have been in this world.”

The sorceress considered his statement. “That may be true. We should ask Xit about it when we camp.”

The travelers got a late start and they made an early stop, beside a narrow, rapid stream that crossed their path, flowing westward. “There is no sense in pushing it today,” Xido decided. “We can rest and continue your lessons.”

Not long after, the great red demon strolled into their camp. “I’ve been paralleling you, more or less,” it announced. “No sign of those boys in blue.”

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"I wouldn't think they'd want to get anywhere near Xido," said Im. "Can you do that to humans too?" he asked the god.

"No. Demons of that sort have a unique physiology. A simpler physiology. In a way, I was doing a crude variant on that shrinking Akorzeſ demonstrated for us."

"It will recover in a few days," added Qu'orthseth. "Unfortunately."

"And how are you doing, my felonious demon?" asked Xido. "Acclimating to this world?"

"More or less. I'm getting my magic under control, not that I have much, you understand." Xido nodded. "But I sometimes find it hard to sense what is around me. Maybe that too will get better."

Qu'orthseth tilted its head upward. "This world's sun is not enough to sustain me, of course. But I am having no problem drawing energy from my home — it would seem my geas follows me. As long as Im lives, I will be connected to both him and to my own world. The police can not touch me any more than they could when I was in Tindeval's tower."

"Perhaps we can yet remedy your problem." Xido didn't sound particularly hopeful of it.

"Perhaps. But I am better off than when I was in Hirstel. I always faced an eventual return to prison but at least here I am free to roam." A deep rumble of a chuckle welled from it. "But not too far from this boy!"

"In the long term," said the god, "that may prove beneficial to the both of you."

13.

"I AM NOT SURPRISED THAT you feel you are thinking more clearly," said Xido. "You no longer have the constant presence of the other worlds in your heads. Here, where there are far fewer gates, you need not be so guarded."

"I sometimes feel — empty," admitted Na. "And powerless."

"We'll remedy the latter," promised the god. "I can tell you two are feeling better so we can resume our lessons."

"Let's eat first," Im suggested. "My appetite is back."

There was plenty enough in their packs, food of both this world and the one they had left, but they realized there would be a need to replenish it soon. Both Na and Im tended to trust their divine companion to take care of such things.

Following the meal, he began. "Those who do not understand the ways of wizardry think that we send our spirits elsewhere. We know better. There is no such thing, only our material self — but that self can travel anywhere in infinite being. In theory, at least!"

"Have you found any place you could not?" wondered Na.

"I have found places I shouldn't have!" came Xido's reply. "Worlds so incoherent, so illogical, that most could never find their way out again. Remember," he said, "anything can be out there. Anything is out there, but your finite mind may not be able to find it. To imagine it, I could say."

"So I could send myself — um, a part of myself, right?" Im looked up at Xido who nodded an agreement. "A part of myself back to Hirstel?"

"You could and you shouldn't. We will want to stick to safe worlds for now. There are little empty places that are good to visit. If one of you and another sorcerer enters one of those, the two of you can converse, now matter how far apart you are. Even if you live in different worlds, though that is not advisable." The god did not offer an explanation why.

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"The link," spoke Na. "I know of it. All we of Hirstel knew of it but had no reason to attempt it."

"You will want to, here," Xido told her. "And you will want to be able to send a part of yourself off to do little bits of magic, bindings, openings, that sort of thing." He looked steadily at Na. "I know you can do bindings already."

"Not too successfully, Xit!" she replied, her laugh a tad nervous. "But I see what you are speaking of. I do indeed reach through other worlds to accomplish such things."

"Then you have a start. Know that you have much more to learn." The next couple hours were spent in the teaching and practicing of simple magics, until it began to grow dark.

"All this was too easy in Hirstel," said the deity as the lesson ended. "One could do such things unconsciously, and even those with little natural talent could summon demon helpers. Now, time for a fire. Maybe some more food too. Where has Akorzef gotten itself off to?"

"Here," rumbled the demon, approaching from among the trees. "I have food, maybe." It held up an assortment of lifeless creatures.

"You killed those?" asked Xido. "We won't eat anything you found already dead." Qu'orthseth accordingly threw aside a couple of carcasses, one a bit ripe. "The fish looks good."

"Easy to catch!" stated the demon. "They think I am good to eat and swim up to me."

"Hmm, the birds — really too small to fool with. And no snakes or insects, please. Too much like some of my relatives." He snickered at a joke no one else understood. "A squirrel? We can try that. First, a fire." The god started it as he had before, borrowing a flame from somewhere. "More wood," he told the Hirstelites as he fanned leaves and twigs ablaze.

"A different sort of lesson," he informed them, once the fire was

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going. "More practical, right now." The pair was intrigued as he showed them how to gut and cut up their intended dinner, using the sharp knife that hung at his side.

"We ate meat at the village," observed Na, "but had no real idea where it came from. I am not sure I like this eating of animals." Im said nothing but was inclined to agree. This squirrel creature looked too much like some of the rats he had been friendly with back in Hirstel! But both ate.

"If I'm not mistaken," said Xido, after the meal, "many priests and holy men of the Ildin do not eat meat. Maybe all those who follow the good gods. You should have no difficulty following a vegetarian diet among them, if you wish."

Im wondered just what those who followed the evil deities might eat. But he asked something else. "Would it be a bad place for us to live? Or me, anyway?" He glanced at Na before continuing. "I just want to find someplace to, um, fit into this world." The woman might be looking for more than that. She had desired power back in Hirstel.

"Or should we be heading to this Tesra of which you have told us?" asked Na.

Xido was not forthcoming with advice. "You could learn more of sorcery among the Tesrans. I can't remain here and teach you forever." He leaned back on an elbow and continued. "Not that there is a great deal of talent among their people. You two would stand out and that is not always a good thing." He furrowed his dark brow. "I doubt you have been noticed yet though it is possible."

Qu'orthseth had been adding nothing to their conversation. Im wondered if the crimson creature had gone into its replenishment state, oblivious to what was around. Suddenly, it roused. "Someone approaches."

"The cops again," said Xido. "I have warning spells in place too."

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There they were, approaching along the path the travelers had walked earlier this day. Two of the big bluish beings, striding along side by side. Although they looked exactly — to his eyes — like the two previous police-demons, Im suspected at least one was a different individual.

It was the third demon, behind them, that was notably unlike any he had seen before. Just what color? It looked a deep grayish-blue at moments and more green at others. Then he realized its exterior was a polished black, reflecting the world about it.

It stepped forward and they could see it was only slightly smaller than its companions. “Lord Xido,” it proclaimed, sounding somewhat like a deep detuned brass instrument, “we call on you to cease harboring the escaped criminal Qu’orthseth.” It spoke this in the Zikem Im understood.

The little deity only shrugged. “Take it if you wish and if you can. I’ll not stop you.” His smile mingled malice with amusement. “But touch not the boy.”

The black demon turned its featureless face toward Im. “The human is of no importance to us, one way or another. It is simply in the way of justice and must be removed, as any other obstacle.”

“What is the hurry?” asked the god. “The mortal will die on its own some day.” Im did not like the sound of that, true though it most certainly was.

“Justice should not be required to wait,” responded the demon, drawing itself up with a definite air of self-importance. “The council has decreed this and so it shall be.”

Yes, demons can sound every bit as pompous as some human beings I know. In fact, I could name — ah, perhaps I’d best not and just get on with the tale.

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“You have not the strength,” broke in Qu’orthseth. “Both I and the god Xido protect the mortal.”

“There are those we might call upon ourselves,” came the response. “Keep that in mind, both of you. Criminal and Crocodile!” it stated, in even louder and deeper tones, “you have been officially warned.” With that, it turned and walked back north, followed by the two constables. And then they walked into nothingness, disappearing back to their own realm.

14.

IM COULD TELL THEY WERE descending from the hills they had been traversing. Here, the soil grew sandier, the trees more scrubby.

"We should be running into a river before long," Xido informed them. "Off to our right somewhere. The west." He had recognized that his fellow travelers had a quite inadequate understanding of directions, having lived all their lives in the middle of a featureless desert. "It is called the Arlak, by the Ildin. That means the River of Eagles."

He pointed eastward. "The mountains are going to press closer on that side. They are not so high down in this part of the world."

"There are Ildin living in lands ahead?" asked Na.

"There are. More so than behind us. The Ildin people are scattered thinly north of the hills and up to the River Dewak." He swung an arm broadly in that direction. "Many like the idea of migrating there, for the soil is more fertile, but it is wild country and there are tribes of unfriendly men further north."

"I'll have to hide more often," said Qu'orthseth.

"True," agreed Xido. "The villages will be closer together." They came to the first of those later that day but chose not remain there. No one even asked their business as they passed by, though there were friendly waves. Xido returned these. It looked much like the last one they had seen, a handful of circular wooden houses.

The demon rejoined them when they were out of sight. An hour or so later, in a wood of spindly pines, with patches of thick undergrowth, they came to a forking of their way. "The roads have all changed since last I was here," admitted Xido. He pointed down the path to their right. "I suspect that will lead toward the river. It's a bit swampy up at this end."

He considered but a moment. "Let's stay to the left, if only because we're liable to meet fewer folk that way." That way led into more rugged

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territory over the next couple days, winding through the foothills of the ever-nearer mountain range. A handful of villages lay along their path; in some, they stopped, rested, heard the news. This gave Im and Na a chance to further their knowledge of the Ildin tongue, which Xido was teaching them, along with wizardry.

“Who rules here?” asked Qu’orthseth once. “Is there a king over all these little villages?”

“Each is independent, led by an elected headman or woman,” responded Xido. “There is no overall ruler, though the priestly orders tend to run a lot of things simply because they are better organized. They have no actual authority over anyone.”

“Priests?” asked Na. “Those are ones who serve a god, are they not?” There had been no priesthood — and no gods, to speak of — in Hirstel.

“They are. We’re bound to run into some eventually. None of mine, most likely!” The god laughed rather raucously at that.

“Surely you have some,” stated Na. “Not among these Ildin, I know, but elsewhere.” She seemed to feel it important that he did.

“Oh, some. There are still followers and still priests to lead them. Not so many as once.” The dark deity’s sigh was barely perceptible. “Some of my people — ah, I should say the people who once followed me and those like me — have abandoned their old gods in favor of a belief in Munu, an all-encompassing force. We have become little more than old folktales to them.” He chuckled. “That makes us no less powerful.”

“You don’t actually need believers,” conjectured Im.

“No, but they keep us connected to the universes outside our world of the gods. It would be far too easy to forget mankind otherwise, forget time altogether and go about our immortal ways. It is my one fear.”

There was little to say to that. The group trudged on silently for some time, following the same road. They assumed it to be the same road, although others crossed it here and there and at varied angles. At

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one crossroads, Xido dropped his pack, proclaiming, “As good a spot to camp as any.” He looked up the road to their left, leading, it seemed, into the mountains. “That way appears well traveled.”

The statement was somewhat meaningless to Na and Im. They did not completely understand yet why roads led where they did. “What might travel it?” asked their large crimson companion.

“Miners, perhaps,” was Xido’s answer. “Or hunters. Possibly even cutters of timber.”

There was not much to setting up a camp. They still had little more than packs of food — sometimes close to empty — and the clothes they wore. They dropped their loads and turned to building a fire. By now, Xido had made sure his two students had learned to make fire without any magic. He himself refused to take the easy way of borrowing a flame from another world.

But he had also taught them how to do just that trick. The pair pretty quickly realized it took too much effort and energy for anything but emergency use — for them. For a god such as Xido, it was apparently as easy as breathing.

“I’ll go forage,” he told them. “Keep watch, Akorzef.” He set off up the side trail.

“Just wants an excuse to explore on his own,” rumbled the demon.

“There might be fruit or something,” spoke Im, in the god’s defense, but he knew Qu’orthseth was right. He also didn’t much like Xido being too far away in the event of a threat. The demon was competent enough but did not have the abilities of the god.

Of a sudden, Qu’orthseth cursed loudly. Or Im assumed it to be a curse; it was in its demon language but it certainly sounded like one. There were whirring sounds. Some — things went flying by. A moment later the demon had toppled over, its legs entangled in a number of ropes. “Bolos?” it rumbled. It sounded more curious than angry.

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That changed when it found it could not remove them. “Charmed.” It sat up and regarded its bonds, nodded, and turned its attention to the group of men who surrounded them.

Men, maybe. Or something close to it. Their heads came about to Im’s chest and those heads carried thick thatches of red or brown hair on top and similarly hued beards below. Deep-set eyes peered at the Hirstelites from beneath protruding brows.

“Dwarfs” whispered Na. “I’ve seen them in books.”

“I wish they’d stayed there,” came Im’s reply.

There looked to be maybe ten of them, thick of body and holding spears and axes. Their apparent leader rubbed his exceptionally large nose and regarded the pair.

15.

THE LITTLE CREATURE ADDRESSED THEM in what seemed a rather garbled version of their own language. A question about who they were? Im answered them in the Zikem of Hirstel. "This is Na and I am Im. We travel to the sea." He chose not to name Qu'orthseth.

There was surprise on the dwarf's square face. "You are no Tesrans," he stated, in something very close to the same language. "I was not aware anyone spoke classic Zikem these days."

Na broke in with a carefully worded explanation. "We descend from an isolated group that hid away. Only now have we come out to see what the world has to offer."

The dwarf spat. "Better to stay hidden, maybe. The world gets worse every day, year by year. And I've seen a couple hundred years so I know." He turned his eyes to the crimson demon. "What's with the monster?"

"Our servant, sir, and my, uh, bodyguard, you might say." Im also looked to where Qu'orthseth remained bound. "Not too good at the bodyguard job today, it seems."

"So it does," came a deep sonorous voice from behind him. The black demon and its two minions stood there.

All eyes turned to them; all but those of Na. She was still looking toward Qu'orthseth, her eyes squinted in a frown of concentration.

"Destroy the human," came the command, "and close this case." The two blue demons stepped forward.

"What's this?" asked the chieftain. "You planning to interfere in my territory?" Immediately, spears bristled and dwarf warriors stepped forward.

"Step aside or be torn apart," spoke the black monster. "I order this as a High Magistrate of —"

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"Ain't no magistrate here!" interrupted one of the dwarfs. A couple others made rude noises.

"They really can tear you in pieces," warned Im. "Best to back off." He glanced toward Qu'orthseth. "Unless you have more of those things you threw."

"All out," admitted their chief. "I reckon we threw them at the wrong beastie."

"Ah! There!" came Na's sudden exclamation. The bolos fell from about Qu'orthseth's legs and it leaped to its feet.

By her grin, Na was exceptionally pleased with herself. "Now for these goons," she said. As Qu'orthseth careened into one of the police-demons, the other reached toward Im.

How had Xido accomplished what he did against that demon? Even if he knew, it was foolish to think Im could do the same. He had been studying them from the moment they appeared. Smooth, featureless, there was no evidence of musculature nor aught else beneath their shiny skins. How did they work? Just what were they?

Now he had to act. A binding. He didn't know what else to try. Oh, Na was attempting the same thing. Part of himself he sent roundabout through other worlds to slip an invisible bond around the demon's ankle. No good. It stumbled and shook it off, as Im rapidly backed away. If only he could hide!

Of course. He could pull fog or shadow around himself. Hadn't he seen Xido do that to cloak his transition from one world to another? Im reached into a world filled with smoke and drew it to him. If he didn't cough too much, maybe it would conceal his form. But the demon seemed to see right through it. He had known they sensed the world differently than he.

Meanwhile, the dwarfs were between him and the blue creature, poking at it with their spears. It was no more than a distraction for the

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demon, but Im could use the time it gave him. The other cop demon still grappled with Qu'orthseth, while the magistrate stood calmly watching, looking like nothing so much as the great black bag of air it was. Literally, as well as figuratively?

That would explain a few things. Xido had partially deflated the one he faced. How? By sending some of it elsewhere, Im guessed. And the being was not entirely in this world to begin with which might make it easier.

Indeed, he realized at once that it would be impossible with a creature that was completely here, tied to this realm. In passing, he noted that Na has attempted bonds as well and that the demon had shed those as easily as his own. But it gave a few extra seconds. He reached out, sending a part of himself into the world from which the blue beast came and to which it was nearly imperceptibly linked. Im knew that directing his attention there made him more vulnerable. It was close to impossible to be aware of what was going on in two worlds at once.

Where the two versions of the demon connected, where it was neither here nor there, where its substance seemed broken up in some way, was where it could be attacked. And that glowing ether surrounding it — he recognized at once it was what he was after. A spell, a bold spell, unlike Im had ever attempted before, was necessary. His life depended on it.

He reached out, with a vague recognition that his hand back at the camp was also reaching toward the demon, and tried to send the tiniest part of it to another world. At once, the demon cop halted its advance, fixing its featureless face on its would-be victim.

Im tried again. Now the creature backed away, calling out something to its companions. A moment later, all three disappeared and Im collapsed from the great effort he had made.

He heard a voice. Xido, wasn't it? "Well done. You didn't hurt it

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enough for its safeguards to whisk it away, but it could recognize what you were doing to it.”

“I could catch some sense of it,” Na put in. “It was a mighty conjuring.” There was a respect in her voice Im had not before heard.

The young wizard sat up. Had Xido been near all along? He hoped that the god would have stepped in if his magic had failed! Im realized now it was not exactly air but some other essence that filled the demons. Perhaps it was what they absorbed from their sun. Im had the slightest glimpse of the huge red orb when he sent himself forth. He strongly suspected that if he truly entered that demon world, its rays would kill him in an instant.

“It was indeed a mighty effort,” agreed Xido. “I’m more impressed that our Im figured out the physiology of these demons.”

“These are wonders,” observed the dwarf chieftain, who had gathered his men. There were many whispered exchanges among the group of dwarfs. “We would like to know more and offer you the hospitality of our home.” He turned his eyes to Qu’orthseth. “Even you, should you wish.” He did not sound overly eager to have the demon as a guest.

Before Xido or any other could answer, Im rose to his feet. “We gladly accept, sir. Lead on!”

16.

“I AM DUGANAAGA. DUG WILL do.” Dwarfs, unlike the Fay, are entirely willing to impart their real names. Neither Im nor Na knew anything of this.

“Call me Xit,” Xido told him. “Our companion, mmm, you might simply name it Red.”

“That would do,” came Qu’orthseth’s rumble.

The group followed the rising pathway eastward. Na leaned in close to Im and whispered, “Are we guests or prisoners?”

“Guests, since I accepted an invitation.” The boy chuckled. “Had I not, we might be the other.”

“What did you do back there? To that demon.”

She hadn’t seen Xido deal with the demon cops. Did she even know about what happened in that incident? “They seem to be filled up with some sort of, um, vapor? Or ether. That’s a better word, maybe. Not like a bag but like many tiny bags inside that skin.” He was trying to recall exactly what he had seen. It had all been a bit confusing and he had been in a very great rush! “I attempted to remove some of it and, ah, deflate the demon some.”

“Oh.” Na thought on this. “Is that maybe how Qu’orthseth made itself smaller?”

“Maybe,” said Im. He wondered about that himself.

He wondered about something else as well. “I think maybe they saw Xido coming and that is why they left. That demon could certainly have overwhelmed me before I did any real damage to it.”

“But you will know what to do if there is another attack.” Na nodded in agreement to her own statement. “Now I shall too.”

He would probably be able to do it better, Im thought, now that he understood it. Sort of understood it. But would he ever have enough strength to be effective? He was no god, after all.

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And there might be better ways to deal with demon visitors. That he should not forget.

The pines on either side had grown less numerous, their spindly trunks thrusting up here and there from slopes of loose rock. They were still far from the high mountains when Dug called a halt. "I'd be inclined to blindfold you," he told them, "but I don't think it would work on Big Red. Guess we'll have to trust you."

"Or kill us," whispered Na.

"We're just a small mining community," the dwarf continued. "Nothing really to hide." They turned right on a well-marked path and, perhaps ten minutes later, came to a timber-braced opening set into the slope.

"This group includes just about all the males who live here," admitted Dug, leading them in. "We saw the big red fellow down below and thought we should investigate. But we're miners, not fighters, you understand." They followed a low passage into a larger, open room. There were a number of female dwarfs, and children of many ages, most gathered around a communal fire. The smoke rose toward a roof hidden in darkness.

The women were as squat and barrel-bodied as the men and, as the women of Hirstel, did not feel a need to cover their breasts. Attire had always been a matter of personal preference and mood there, for both genders — there was always the occasional individual who, for whatever reason, would choose to go nude one day or another.

A hush and then a cacophony of voices, many fearful. A child cried. "Don't worry, it's harmless," Dug assured his people. "I should've warned them about the demon," he said as an aside to Xido.

The god gestured to Qu'orthseth to go and it inclined its head in assent, turned, and returned to the outside air. "It's better off out there anyway," said Xido.

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Duganaaga turned his head toward the tunnel down which the demon had just disappeared. "How do you think it would do against a dragon? We sometimes have dragon problems."

"Honestly, my friend, it would not care about your problems and would gladly allow a dragon to gulp down your entire tribe. Demons of its sort will do nothing unless coerced in some fashion."

The dwarf cocked his out-sized head at the god. "I assume you have coerced it in, um, some fashion."

"It's more a matter of mutual benefit," Xido told him, and spent a few moments surveying the room. "Which of the dwarfish tongues do you speak here?" He addressed Dug in something that sounded like complete gibberish to Im. The dwarf replied in what was certainly a different dialect of gibberish.

"Pretty much all of us can use the Ildin language," Duganaaga said, returning to Zikem. "Some know the tongue of Tesra. I am the only one who can speak the Old Zikem."

"Then we must use Ildin, when we can," decided Xido. "These two need to learn it."

Na had already thrown off her parasol-turned-poncho and was seated by the fire, attempting to use her minimal Ildin on the dwarf women. Most of the men had put aside their weapons and were relaxing as well. What did these people eat? wondered Im. He was ready to tackle about anything put in front of him in this world, well acclimated now to its food.

It was dark in here, wasn't it? A few torches along the walls, the central fire. The dwarfs were probably used to it. Pale people, they were, lighter than the Ildin folk he had met so far, but some had hair practically the color of his own! He was about to join Na when Xido placed a hand on his shoulder. "Women and men do not sit together among these people," said the deity. "Come join the other circle."

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The males were sitting practically in the dark, near the entrance. As a sort of symbolic protection of their home? They were using that same harsh incomprehensible language Duganaaga had spoken to Xido. The god greeted them in it. Was there any tongue he did not know?

Im became bored. He let his eyes wander about the mine. Or was it a cave? Maybe a cave originally, he decided. He also let his eyes wander to the group of women and children near the fire. The girls weren't so bad to look at, really — oh, all girls were good to look at, Im told himself. But none of that. That got him in trouble the last time.

"I'm going to check on, um, Red," he whispered to Xido and rose. There were a few curious glances but no one stopped him from going to the entrance.

Qu'orthseth was right outside. And it was floating a little above the ground. "Practicing?" asked the boy.

"Testing myself is more like it." The demon returned to the support of feet and legs. "I need to know my capabilities here if there is more trouble."

Im sat down on a rock and regarded the great creature for a few seconds. "You seemed more than a match for those cops."

"Neither they nor I are operating at full capacity in this world. But I've had more time to get used to it. I think I can fly further now," Qu'orthseth told him, and gave out one of its subterranean chuckles. "Not enough to carry you across the sea!"

"I'm not sure I want to go," was Im's reply. "I just left one city of sorcerers. Why hurry off to another?"

"No reason at all. As long as we are stuck with each other, I would prefer to explore this world."

"So would I," agreed the young wizard Im. "So would I."

17.

IM WAS PLEASED TO SEE that the segregation of the sexes was not an all-the-time thing among the dwarf folk. After an evening meal, the genders mingled in small groups, here and there, or as couples with their families. The meal seemed normal enough — that is, much like any other he and Na had eaten in this world.

“I think,” Xido confided to the pair, “our hosts had some object in mind when they invited us. Not the dragons Dug mentioned, I’m sure, but some other problem.”

“I’m willing to help,” spoke Na. “I’m willing to stay here a while and rest and learn. And maybe —” She paused. “Maybe go up higher into these mountains. I think I like them!”

“You will like many things before you are done,” remarked the god. “The sea, for one.”

That did not appeal much to Im. Unlike Na, he had seen an ocean in the world where they once had lived. It had seemed little different from the desert to the young man, more emptiness stretching away to nowhere.

Many of the dwarfs retired into alcoves carved into the walls. Those were the family groups. “Bachelors sleep out here,” explained Duganaaga. “Which of you is Na’s mate?”

The amused wizardess looked from one to the other. “Should I choose one?” she asked. “And more important, could I switch tomorrow?”

“Neither,” stated Xido, quite firmly. “We need no private space.” The dwarf leader only nodded. Perhaps he had already suspected this.

A stout old dwarf woman brought them sleeping furs and mumbled something none of them understood. Xido politely thanked her in her own tongue, and went off with his own bundle to find a spot to sleep. Im could not help notice how Na’s eye followed him.

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"You are, um, interested in Xido?"

"He is ugly," she admitted, "but he is also a god."

Im had to admit — to himself — that this was true. Then he too found a place to roll out his furs and rest.

In the morning, the dwarf men ate heartily and then disappeared in a group, deeper into the mine. "They are working a vein of iron," Xido informed the Hirstelites. "It's not greatly rewarding but enough to keep them here. Dug told me they were cutting stone not so long ago, and considers this a big step up for his tribe."

"Iron — that's the substance they use to make their tools, right?" asked Im. He was pretty sure it was but, like much else in this world, it was new to him.

Xido had to smile at the question. "It is. You didn't use much in the way of metals in your city, I suppose."

"Most things were formed of the resins and fibers we derived from the fungi," Na replied. "I was involved in overseeing that at one time. But sometimes we would send demons seeking around our world for bits of metal."

"I sometimes forget how different life was there," said the deity. "This world must seem extraordinarily strange to you. Let's step outside and look at it while the miners are at their work."

There was a pretty good view of that world from the dwarfs' front door. The sun was just coming over the peaks behind them, touching the treetops with golden light. Much of the land below them, however, was shrouded in the mists of morning. "We'll journey on to the south again when we all are ready," announced Xido. "I hope you will learn enough before we reach the sea that I can leave you."

Na and Im exchanged a glance. Both had known the dark god would go his own way eventually. They had avoided speaking of it.

"Magic and language," continued Xido. "Those most of all. This is

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why stopping here for a few days to practice is a good idea. Customs you can pick up as you go — just be careful not to assume anything and risk offense.” He considered the two for a few seconds. “It might be well to tell those we meet from here on that you are brother and sister. It will simplify matters.”

“Believable enough,” remarked Qu’orthseth. No one — perhaps not even Xido — had realized it was standing right behind them. “I was resting on the ceiling of the passageway when you passed beneath me,” the demon explained.

“You can do that again?” Xido seemed mildly surprised. “Your abilities are growing.”

“And unlikely to grow more, Lord Xido,” rumbled Qu’orthseth.

The deity only nodded, apparently understanding why this would be so. Na and Im could only guess and their guess would probably be wrong.

And so would yours. But feel free to guess anyway — I do not charge extra for it!

“Akorzef should have an advantage over any who come fresh from its world,” spoke Xido, addressing Im primarily, “and they know you are strong enough to resist now, but do not assume they will give up. The police may continue to lurk and watch for an opportunity. No more than two or three probably; it would require too much energy to send more and keep them here.”

“Yes,” agreed Qu’orthseth. “They do not have the ability to come on their own. It requires a sorcerer of my realm to open a way for them.”

“And a more powerful sorcerer might be able to shut it in their blank faces. They could always turn to others to do their work, if they think it worthwhile. Who is to say how fanatical they will be about bringing Akorzef to justice? Someone more sensible may nix the whole thing.”

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"Unlikely," rumbled Qu'orthseth. "My kind are notably single-minded."

The three humans — human in form, we should say — sat down right there and returned to those lessons in language and magic Na and Im so needed. The demon wandered about, seemingly restless, but rarely passing out of sight. "Qu'orthseth would like to be on the road again, I think," whispered Na.

"So would I," came Im's answer. "But I have something to occupy my mind. Maybe the demon is bored." He remembered Qu'orthseth telling him of the tedium of guarding the tower of Piras Tindeval. Perhaps more delays and dawdling irked the great red beast.

There was nothing to be done about that. They spent the day in their studies, more on magic than on learning the Ildin tongue, for that they could work on in the evening. The sun lay low in the western sky when the dwarf miners returned to their home.

Again, two circles, one female, one male, were formed for the serving and consumption of a supper, and talk both before and after.

"We go from mining ore to refining it tomorrow," announced Dug, speaking in Ildin rather than Zikem, at Xido's insistence. The sooner Na and Im became fluent in that language, the better, he informed them.

"Are there dangers in your work?" asked Xido, his manner seemingly casual.

"Oh, cave-ins are always a possibility," answered the dwarf chief-tain.

"But we timber well," put in one of the other miners. "We dwarf folk know our business." There were nods of agreement around the circle.

"Dragons?" asked Im. They had mentioned them, after all, and Im rather thought he would like to see one.

Duganaaga chewed on some of the coarse dark bread without

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answering for a while. Where did they obtain its ingredients? wondered the boy. He was sure these dwarfs planted no grains nor any other crops.

"Not many in these hills," he replied. "More in the higher mountains further north, maybe. They don't bother us if we don't bother them." Dug paused and furrowed his heavy brow. "Mostly. Sometimes we happen to tunnel into one of their caves, by accident. They don't appreciate that."

"Especially if they happen to have a hoard hidden away," added a fat white-bearded little man. "Dragons don't like nobody to know about their hoards."

"And there are the basilisks," said another dwarf.

"Yes," agreed Dug. "They like to lurk in the deep tunnels. We're way too big to be prey but they're bad-tempered beasties."

Xido had listened politely to all this, merely nodding in acknowledgment of the dwarfs' words. Now, he said, "I would suspect the greatest threat comes from those who are like us, be they men, fays, or dwarfs."

"It is so," agreed Duganaaga. "We must speak of this, you and I." He took another spoonful of savory stew. "Later. And I would ask you to come with us tomorrow when we begin the making of iron."

"This we shall," Xido told him, and turned back to his own meal.

18.

IM HAD FEARED THEY WOULD need follow the dwarf miners into the depths, the tunnels in which they labored to free iron ore from the rocks. It was not so much the idea of descending into the mountains' bowels that bothered him as the problem of having Qu'orthseth accompany them — the young sorcerer very much wanted his demon bodyguard with him.

No, they trooped out through the front entrance and wound their way around the hills. "We are rarely bothered in our mines," Duganaaga was saying, "but once we have smelted iron ready to cart off, it is different. It is worth stealing."

"Bandits?" asked Xido. "I've never heard of there being much of that among the Ildin."

"There's bad sorts everywhere," volunteered one of the dwarfs.

Dug nodded sagely. "That is so. But there are others out there." He waved an arm toward the lands that lay below them. "Not always humans, either."

"Ah. Fay?" It was hard for Im to tell whether Xido was asking a question or stating a fact.

"Aye, kobolds mostly. They're too lazy to mine their own." There were grunts of agreement from up and down the line of dwarfs. "Also human marauders from the north. Charcha."

Na broke in. "The tribes who live beyond the great river? I heard mention of them at the fire." The wizardess had, of course, sat with the female dwarfs and thus had been left out of most of the discussion in the male circle. She was also the only woman in this group.

"That is they," said Dug. "They have been wandering ever southward over the past couple centuries. Once, they would not have raided this far south."

"I had not heard of this folk before," was all Xido had to say of it.

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Im recognized that the god was not about to let on that he was far older than these dwarfs and had been here before. Nor that he was a god, for that matter.

"A pale people," the dwarf chieftain informed them. "As light as we dwarfs."

"But we have an excuse, bein' underground all the time," commented one of the miners.

Nearly an hour of walking brought them to a steep-sided hollow with a small stream at its bottom, flowing from a cave at the rocky, narrow head of the valley. Timbering could be seen about that opening; the dwarfs' back door, Im assumed. The whole place seemed blighted. There were piles of ash, of burnt and crushed rocks. Many of the trees had died. The rest were stunted, sickly.

Xido made a low, barely perceptible sound of disgust, somewhere between a hiss and a deep exhalation. But he only shook his head in disapproval and said nothing to the dwarfs.

"We have plenty of ore ready," spoke Duganaaga, gesturing toward several large piles of rocks, "and plenty of fuel from local charcoal burners. We are ready to make iron!"

"Pig iron, I would assume," Xido whispered to the pair of Hirstelites. "Pay attention and learn something more of this world."

"I have heard of this," came Qu'orthseth's low rumble. "It is unnecessary in my home where rivers of hot iron run down from the mountains." It turned its eyes toward the not-so-distant peaks. "These are only little bumps beside those mountains."

So they spent the remainder of the morning watching the crushing and the smelting, and the dwarfs' own rivers of hot iron running into molds in the sand by the stream. "The ingots are not usable as they are," Xido informed his companions. "Brittle, most likely. They will be sold to those who will further refine the iron."

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"And that is why they want us here," guessed Na. "So their iron won't be stolen first."

"So I would think," agreed Xido, and turned back to the work. He watched a minute or two before adding, "It is to be hoped they have depleted the veins here and will move on. This valley could recover in a few decades."

"I can feel the damage," said Qu'orthseth, turning its featureless face side to side. "The trees have no voices."

Now, don't snicker. Just because you can not hear the trees, my friends, does not mean that others are so deaf.

The dwarfs kept at their work into the night, breaking rocks and stoking their fires and singing surprisingly cheerful but tuneless dwarf songs. At last, they rested in a rude camp just outside the mine entrance. The meal was not so rude and the little men ate quite prodigiously after their day's labor.

Soon, they snored, but Duganaaga sat up for a while with his guests, huddled by the small fire. "In the past we have carried our metal down this valley to Ildin traders. They would load up their ox carts and take it on south, perhaps to Arlak-Port," he told them. "I think those traders made more from our iron than did we."

"It would not be surprising," said Xido

"Moreover, raiders of whatever origin are more likely to roam the valley of the Arlak than elsewhere. For this reason we intend to carry the iron bars across these little mountains and down to a different town."

"Can you carry them all yourselves?" wondered Na.

Dug's tone was dismissive. "Any dwarf should be able to haul a couple of these ingots all day, up and down any mountain the gods ever made. Even you boys could probably handle one on your back."

Im suspected Xido could handle quite a bit more than that.

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However, the god continued to keep his identity secret and would not advertise any such abilities.

"And you would like us along as a little extra protection against robbers," surmised the deity.

The dwarf smiled, perhaps only a bit slyly. "Three sorcerers and a demon should give any attackers pause."

"Why should I help?" asked said demon, who had remained close but partly in the shadows.

Xido shrugged. "You needn't. Just your presence might be sufficient." He turned back to their host. "For that matter, our simple presence as fighting men might help, too. I know something of weapons." He chuckled. "The boy, of course, is completely ignorant."

"It does not matter," came Qu'orthseth's rumble. "I would protect him from any physical harm."

"It is well," proclaimed Duganaaga. "We will finish our work here tomorrow and set out across the mountains the next day." With that, he lay down, pulled a worn and apparently singed blanket over himself, and was shortly asleep.

His three companions saw no reason not to do the same.

19.

THE DWARFS HAD BARELY BEGUN their smelting work, in the predawn gray, when Xido lifted his head as if he had heard something. "Men come," he announced, after a moment.

Dug and his followers peered in the direction he pointed out. "Get your spears, boys," ordered the chieftain. "Except you maintaining the fire. We're not going to lose any of our work time if we can help it!"

The 'men' proved to be a pair of Ildin women. They seemed worn and somewhat bewildered. Perhaps, thought Im, they didn't expect to meet anyone up here. Definitely not dwarfs.

Now, they hesitated so he stepped forward. "We greet you, gentlewomen," he stated in decidedly broken Ildin.

Na took her cue from him. "You are welcome here. Come on by the fire." Im was unsure they even understood his companion's speech, but the pair did advance. Fortunately, the competent Xido and Duganaaga took charge from there.

"Is there trouble?" was the dwarf's first question.

"Charcha," came the trembling reply from the younger woman, very small and olive-skinned. "A raiding party."

"We saw them in the forest," spoke her older, stouter companion.

"We were gathering firewood," interjected the first speaker, and then shut her mouth, realizing that didn't matter.

"They were passing by so we ran into the hills to find a safe place to hide." The two looked at the dwarfs and then at each other, apparently uncertain whether they actually were safe.

"You will be protected here," Xido assured them. "These Carcha are a danger?"

"We feared we would be taken as slaves!" The young Ildin shivered at the thought.

But the leader of the dwarfs was a bit dismissive. "The Charcha do

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not take slaves though they are known to carry home an occasional woman who takes someone's fancy. Those become wives." His eyes lingered on the younger woman. Dug said nothing more but he clearly thought she was just the sort the raiders might take with them.

"And even then they must be willing," added one of the miners.

Dugananga nodded. "This is so. They raid only to steal things." He chuckled. "And they will steal just about anything, whether they need it or not!"

"I take it you know something of these Charcha," observed Xido.

"We have had trade with them. We have also had to protect ourselves from their thievery."

By now, the two guests were huddled by the small cooking fire. Xido lowered his head and whispered to Na and Im, "I know nothing of the Charcha. They were not here when last I visited the area."

"Centuries ago?" asked Na, smiling.

"It is so. I might like to learn more of them — but not right now." He turned back to the dwarfs and the two Ildin. "These raiders would be interested in your iron, would they not?" he asked.

"Undoubtedly," agreed Dug. "We'll have to keep a lookout." He frowned at the thought. "I hate to take any men off the work."

"You do have us," the god told him. "Still, adding a couple extra dwarf guards would be a good idea."

The dwarf chieftain grudgingly agreed with this and set two of his followers to the task. There was no sign of any trouble through the day nor was the peace of the ensuing night broken. In the morning, the pair of Ildin women decided it was safe to work their way back to their village and made their farewells and thanks before disappearing down the hollow.

"So now begins our journey," announced Duganaaga. He looked eastward to the mountains. "We will not cross here but follow a way

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south along the slopes to a lower pass. It's little more than hills down further."

"All the way over to the Lantabee?" wondered Xido. "Or do they still call it that?"

"They do," the dwarf assured him and gave his guest a slightly puzzled look. "Was it ever named otherwise?"

"Not that I know of," came the god's nonchalant reply.

Duganaaga waited a few seconds to see if he would say more, then continued. "We may not go that far," he said. "There is a port further west along the coast. Or so we have been told."

Each of the dwarfs did carry three or four of the weighty iron ingots, strapped into cradling backpacks of sturdy rope. "You and I can help, boy," Xido said to Im. "We can bring the tails. Na, I would ask you to carry our other belongings." These were certainly meager and no great load for her, but she frowned at his words.

"Tails?" asked the young wizard.

"Those thin bits from the channels where the iron flowed into the sand molds," explained Xido. "Those are the pigs' tails."

He and Im each took some of these onto their backs. "Not too bad," Im felt.

"You may not feel so about it by day's end." The deity grimaced. "I dare not carry more," he whispered. "It would not seem natural for the little runt of a mortal I appear to be."

If the dwarfs had expected Qu'orthseth to carry a share of the load, they were disappointed. Im and his companions had known better. The demon watched all this without comment, making no move to help in any way.

Duganaaga surveyed his group. "Hmm, good enough, boys. We'll have to switch off now and then so no one ends up carrying four bars all

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the way to the coast.” With that he shouldered his own load of iron and turned himself toward the south. “Let’s be on the way!”

THERE WAS A REASONABLY WELL-MARKED pathway winding along the hillsides. A road of the dwarfs? wondered Im. Or did Ildin travel along this way?

"When do we start climbing?" asked Na of her companions, turning an eye to the ridges that rose on their left hand.

"We already are," replied Xido. "Very slightly we have been going higher. How are you holding up, lad?" This he asked of Im.

"Well enough," the boy lied.

"I could have carried some iron too," Na suddenly stated. "Don't think I can't do my share."

"The dwarfs would not like a woman handling their metal. You know they very much segregate the roles of the sexes." Xido chuckled. "To even let you come along strains their notions of what is right."

"Then maybe they need to learn new notions," she asserted, and spoke of the matter no more.

There were breaks, fairly frequent. These were heavy loads even for the sturdy dwarfs, and rugged country to carry them across. Still, they made sure, steady progress on this first day of a journey of many days, along the pine-clad slopes. It was mid-afternoon and they had made another brief halt.

"One more leg on today's trek and we'll stop for the night," announced Duganaaga. "Shoulder up those packs."

It was then that Qu'orthseth spoke for the first time that day. "Men ahead."

There was considerable clanking as the dwarfs dropped their packs to the ground and took up spears and axes. "How far?" called their chieftain.

The demon did not bother to answer. It is probable it did not care

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what happened to anyone except Im. No matter; the men came into view shortly.

"Charcha!" growled one of the dwarfs. There was much muttering among them.

Dug regarded the approaching band. "I don't think they know about the iron. How could they?"

"You know they'll take anything," one of his dwarfs reminded him. "Maybe even the woman, though she is ugly. Too skinny too."

"You don't know men very well. They like that sort," said another.

There might have been a score of warriors on the path ahead, armed with spears. Most had long knives at their sides, as well, and some carried axes. They were pale, Im noted, as the dwarfs had claimed, but not quite as light as the dwarfs themselves. Their long hair and beards seemed to be of all colors, dark and light. The leader called out in Ildin even worse than his own.

"Dwarfs! What carry?" He laughed and his men joined in. "Maybe we carry it now?" The Charcha leader was tall, taller than most Ildin Im had seen. His followers tended to be big men too.

There was no hiding their cargo, of course, with it being carried in open rope harnesses. "We take a load of pig iron south," came Duganaaga's honest answer. "Much too heavy for you to bother with carrying away, lords of the north."

Im could see the Charcha warriors spreading out into a crescent. Even he could guess that was in preparation for an attack. "Maybe so!" agreed their chieftain. "Maybe we take just some. Make loads lighter for dwarfs!" He gave the dwarf leader a sudden fierce glare. "Not even have to kill any little men."

Unexpectedly, Xido stepped forward and addressed the man in a language unknown to the Hirstelites. The Charchan leader raised an eyebrow and replied in what was probably the same tongue. A few more

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words were exchanged before the deity returned to his friends and whispered, "I do know these folk who call themselves Charcha now. Or is it the Ildin who name them so? Either way, I came on them far north of here, a quite long time ago."

"So they too sought a new home," said Im. "I can't blame them for that."

"Nor can I, lad. They were a good enough people, as mortals go." His eyes flickered to the group standing before them and back to his companions. "But dangerous on this day."

"Let's just go," suggested Na. "This is not our concern." She looked around. "And where has our demon gone?"

"Undoubtedly, it felt it was not its concern also." Xido turned his attention back to the negotiation between dwarf and Charcha.

"Like brown woman," the hostile leader was saying. "Big boobs! We take her and half iron."

On an impulse, Im stepped forward. "The woman is a powerful witch," he announced, "as am I. We shall call our demon servants if you give us more trouble." He marched toward the Charcha, hoping that Qu'orthseth would see it as a dangerous situation and come out of hiding to protect him.

He was right. The great red demon strode purposely behind him. Im smiled to see the warriors shrink away. "You see —" he began, when suddenly two powerful arms wrapped around him and carried him away.

"Can't let you get hurt, young wizard," came Qu'orthseth's matter-of-fact explanation.

Im heard uproarious laughter behind him, followed by the clash of weapons as battle was joined. Then he and his captor were among the trees.

It would do no good to complain, no good to berate the demon.

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What it had done was completely logical from its point of view. "All right, put me down."

The demon set Im's feet on the deep carpet of pine needles and stepped back. "We will wait until the danger has passed."

"There will always be danger," Im reminded it. "You are going to have to deal with it."

Qu'orthseth replied not, standing completely still but slowly moving its massive head back and forth. Of a sudden, it grabbed the boy and jerked him toward itself. Some sort of heavy missile lodged noisily in the trunk of a nearby pine.

"An assassin," growled the demon. "They've set a bounty hunter on your trail." It once more grabbed Im and darted off among the trees.

"Come out and choose to live, Demon!" A bleat of a voice arose from somewhere in the gloom of the woods. "I'd rather remove the human but I'm allowed to kill either one of you."

"Hmmp, it calls me demon! Its type are truly demonic." Qu'orthseth and Im stopped behind a massive spreading tree, one quite unlike the pines about it. The young wizard noted the large white flowers it bore, as he noted many things, but did not have time to think about them.

There. A — being of some sort sidled among the tree trunks. Perhaps it thought it was being stealthy. Im had known the streets of Hirstel and those who went unobtrusively along them, had been one such himself. He had no trouble spotting this creature. A demon?

The term demon was used to name a variety of quite different and unrelated beings. This one had little in common with the large crimson creature at Im's side. Admittedly, it too was somewhat large, but downward-curved horns sprouted from its forehead, above an almost human face. Its skin was of a greenish tinge and perhaps a bit scaly. It — no, very obviously, *he*, crept toward them. Im recognized the weapon the

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demon held as a form of crossbow, though he had never seen one outside a book.

"I do not know if its projectiles will harm me," came Qu'orthseth's low rumble. "They could do little damage on their own but it might have been provided with poisons."

Im looked up at his companion. "Would you rather die or return to your prison?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Life is always sweet, boy. If one must die it will be you."

He had expected as much, despite all the demon's moaning about the horrors of demon prison. "Let us make certain neither of us dies." He regarded the approaching assassin. It stopped now and again to sniff at the air. "How does one kill such a creature?"

"Hand to hand, I could certainly defeat it," Qu'orthseth told him. "Even in this world where my strength is lessened. But it will not let me get close enough."

"Then I must distract it." With that, Im leaped from concealment, darting toward the protection of another tree trunk. The demon-thing bounded toward him but did not fire his bolt, as the young man had hoped. Too smart maybe, too wary.

What of magic? Could he conjure up some attack before this creature's taloned hands took hold of him? And where had it gone? Im had a moment of terror before he again spotted it. It had changed color to match the brown carpet of pine needles. He must run again.

This time it took the bait and fired. From the corner of his eye, Im could see his monstrous bodyguard rushing from concealment even as the assassin released his missile. He dove forward. A pain burnt across his left shoulder.

Then Qu'orthseth was grappling with the attacker. Im sat up and

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felt at his wound. A little blood. It had but sliced across the skin of his upper back. He hoped Qu'orthseth was wrong with its theory of poison!

"Stop," a voice commanded. A slim, dark figure moved out of the shade of the tall pines.

The scaly demon relinquished his hold and looked at the newcomer with astonishment. "Lord Xido! I did not know you were here." There was awe in his voice, and perhaps fear.

"This boy is under my protection," stated the god. "Go. Go now and avoid my wrath." There was no malice in his voice; he sounded like a parent speaking to a child.

"Most certainly." The demon bowed, muttered a few words in a language Im knew not, and disappeared.

Xido regarded the spot it had occupied for a moment before saying, "It was a mafadwi, a beast-man of my own world. Rather an intelligent one, I must say. Many are barely able to grunt a few words out."

"From your world," asked Im, "or one much like it?"

"Ah, you are learning, my young sorcerer. It doesn't matter much, truly." He turned back toward the direction from which he had appeared. "Let's return to our dwarf friends."

"How went their battle?" Qu'orthseth asked.

Xido laughed. "The Charcha retreated. They didn't know they were facing a god."

21.

“GONE? YOU LET THE CHARCHA take her?”

Duganaaga shrugged. “Why should we have protected her? She was not one of us and the iron was safe.”

“And after I routed your enemy for you?” Xido scowled at the assembled dwarfs.

“They would have run from us anyway,” claimed one.

“Aye,” said another, and there were grunts of affirmation and noddings of the head.

“You will have our company and protection no more,” stated the god. “Any debts we owed are paid.”

“So they are,” agreed Duganaaga. “But it was only a woman.”

Xido sighed. “We shall never understand each other, you and I. But you had a glimpse of who I truly am. Remember that and be thankful I do not seek retribution.” He turned to his companions. “Let’s go rescue that girl.”

Im shouldered his pack, first removing all the ‘tails’ he had been hauling. “Na’s bag is not here,” he observed. “She must have grabbed it. Ow!” He adjusted the strap. “That hurts my shoulder.”

“We’ll look at that and clean it as soon as we reach a stream,” said Xido. “It didn’t appear to be much of a wound.”

Im hesitated. “Qu’orthseth said there might be poison.”

“If there was poison on his bolt, it was most likely of a sort that would kill Akorzef, not a human. You’ll be fine.”

Im hoped he was right about that. He’d just have to wait and find out. Ha, Qu’orthseth was probably a bit anxious about it too.

The trail of the Charcha was not difficult to find and to follow. Down the valley it led; whether it would turn north or south then, who could say? “The dwarfs were ungrateful,” rumbled the demon after a time. “Even I would not be so.”

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"They think differently," replied Xido. "Only their tribe matters to them, and its wealth."

"You chased away the Charcha?" asked Im. "Magic?"

"Not even a bit of it." The god said no more of that and Im decided not to press him.

However, Qu'orthseth said, "Lord Xido has exceptional strength, even in that puny body. I do not know if I could defeat him in a match of physical might."

"I'm not sure myself," said Xido. "In my, ah, other form it would be no match."

"This I know is true," came the demon's voice, low, like distant thunder. "You are as the one I fought in some ways. I could see this."

"Yes, the mafadwi are kin to the gods. Maybe we are just mafadwi ourselves." Xido shrugged. "None of us are certain, not even my father."

What? Oh, don't ask me. I don't know either!

They were descending into deeper forest as the afternoon turned to evening. "Will we stop for the night?" asked Im.

"That," replied Xido, "we will leave to the Charcha. With any luck, we'll find them settling cozily around a fire." He looked toward the demon. "I expect you to stay and help this time. When you carried the boy away you just got him into worse trouble."

Qu'orthseth slowly nodded but made no verbal assent. Keeping its options open, thought Im. Rather, the beast said, "You won't be able to see their track soon."

"Hmm, yes." Xido pondered only a few seconds before raising his left hand and seemingly grasping at some unseen object. A pale light began to radiate from that hand a moment later. "I've borrowed a little moonlight from my home. We have two moons so there is plenty to spare." The wan illumination kept them on their path for another half

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an hour, following the easily read tracks of the incautious Charcha band.

Then it faded. "That's all I can manage for now. Even gods have their limitations." Xido sniffed the air. "I don't think it matters. I smell smoke."

"Yes," agreed Qu'orthseth. "They are not far ahead. Shall we slay them all, Lord Xido?"

"No need for that. I hope to steal Na away without them even noticing." He looked in the direction of the still-hidden camp. "I wonder—" For a few seconds the deity stood still, then shook his head. "I had hoped I could communicate with Na but she has not learned enough yet, I fear." Speaking to each other from afar was one of the wizardly skills Xido had been attempting to teach his two pupils. They could now see the glow of the campfire, the dark vertical pine trunks silhouetted against its ruddy light.

What were those noises? Coughing? Xido laughed. "Our wizardess is too busy working other magics to listen for me!" They edged forward to see the Charcha camp wreathed in smoke and reeking of noxious gases. The warriors stumbled about, eyes watering, coughing and heaving. "This will help hide me," said the god, and began pulling his own concealing fog about him.

Where was Na? It was hard to see through the obscuring smoke. There, to their right, not far from the fire. It looked like her hands were bound. As Xido sidled forward, Im whispered to his demon companion, "We may need a distraction before this is done. Let's go over there." He gestured to the left.

Qu'orthseth silently nodded and followed his lead. They crept along the perimeter of the camp, Im barely able to make out the form of Xido slipping into its midst and toward the captive, and that only because he knew what to look for.

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Ah, the bonds fell from Na's wrists. She must already have loosened them — that would be among the easier of magics. But she did not want to go with her divine would-be rescuer, pointing toward something. Her bag. It lay near the fire, its contents spilled out on the ground. Of course, the Charcha had looked through it.

And now one looked through the mists and saw what was happening. A warning cry rose, as the sorceress darted toward the only possessions she had brought to this world. A couple books it appeared; whatever else might have been among her belongings was too hard to see in the dim smoke-filled light.

"Time for me," rumbled Qu'orthseth and rushed forward from the opposite side of the clearing, its bellow as deafening as a clap of thunder. It never slowed down but scooped up Na, clutching the bag she herself had just scooped up, and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the camp. This left Xido, not so well hidden now, to face the only briefly bewildered warriors.

What could Im do? Maybe the little god could handle the Charcha but it would certainly be best to avert the necessity of it. He thought back, of a sudden, to the appearance of the arch-demon Sebuchax when it had come to demolish the Prince-Sorcerer's tower. A great black shadow —

And he knew how to pull shadow in from another realm. There, and there, pile it up and around himself, create the illusion and stride into the camp, boldly. So did Im, and there are Charcha still who speak of the vast black demon who once attacked one of their, ah, hunting parties. As the men scattered, Im and Xido disappeared into the darkened forest.

22.

"IT IS MY GRIMOIRE," NA told them. "My very own spell book, nearly a century in the making." She replaced it in her bag. "I brought some other useful volumes, too. These were the most important things from my old life."

The four crouched together in the night, not so far from the camp of the Charcha. There was less noise coming from that direction now. Whether the warriors were settling down or had decided to move out, they did not know nor care.

"You know it will probably not be very useful in this world," said Xido, and turned to Im. "That was well done. Not just the pulling in of so much shadow but being able to hold it around you that long."

"Well, I just had to keep pulling in more, you know? I don't think I could do it very long." Im felt rather exhausted, but whether the efforts at magic or the emotional drain of the day's events was the greater factor in that, he was uncertain.

"Nor do I," agreed the god. He stretched out on the ground. "We might as well just grab some sleep here and now and worry about the morning when it comes."

"But you could do this, Xit," spoke Na, softly.

"Yes, I suppose so. More so if I draw from my own realm, which is easier." He paused. It was too dark to see whether he was thinking about it or falling asleep. Then came his voice again. "I have not become fully human and, so, have yet some ties to my home. They pull at me but it is nothing I can not easily control, for now. In time, the effort will become greater."

"You can become completely like us?" asked Im.

"Maybe not completely but I can cut myself off from the power of my world, from my, ah, other nature. I will lose some of my abilities if I

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do so. Indeed, I might be no more powerful than a competent mortal sorcerer. Perhaps not even the equal of you two."

"You would no longer be the Crocodile." Qu'orthseth's voice came like the wind through the pines.

"It is so," agreed Xido. He spoke no more and, one by one, they fell asleep. Even Qu'orthseth, in its way.

They found the Charcha camp deserted in the morning and tracks leading north. "Going home," said Xido. "I think they had enough."

"They didn't seem such bad sorts," mused Na. "Their treatment of me was surprisingly respectful."

"We can always call them back if you fancied one as a husband," the dark deity told her. "Otherwise, we should start moving in the opposite direction."

"Oh, certainly. I have two handsome and suitable men right here!" The sorceress looked over her male companions. "Well, the one is handsome, anyway." Which she meant, she did not say, but Im was pretty sure she referred to him.

As did Xido. "I know I'm an ugly little fellow," he laughed. "Being a god makes up for it some. Let's move."

As there was no longer any urgency — nor, indeed, a need — to cross the mountains, they traveled south and a little west, slowly descending from the hills. The pines of the highlands gave way, in places, to oaks; here and there stood a spreading giant, its massive limbs sometimes grazing the ground beneath it.

"It grows scrubbiier further south and this reddish soil gives way to white sand as we near the Southern Sea," Xido informed them. "We should start seeing more people, too. Ildin."

"Better than Charcha," was Im's assessment. "Or dwarfs."

"Especially dwarfs," agreed Na. They found a small village of Ildin

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before dark. The demon, of course, need remain hidden. As there were many cleared fields around the settlement, this became a difficulty.

"I shall creep closer after dark," it promised, as they approached. "The threat against the boy is not ended."

"Nor against you," Im reminded it. "That demon had the option of slaying you."

"Did it? I had not known this," said Xido, "but it makes sense. Those who rule in Akorzel's world would not think of breaking the letter of the law but if some other slew it, that is not on them. As to calling the mafadwi a demon — ah, I guess it is technically true." Na and Im both knew the generally accepted definition of a demon; that is, a sentient being that lives in a world of the gods. Typically, they served those gods. Ofttimes they were related to them.

They left their demon by a small, spring-fed stream, among a grove of willows. "That may or may not run to the Arlak, eventually," Xido said. "We're far enough south to find other, smaller rivers flowing toward the sea."

Then the trio entered the village and accepted its hospitality. That they could spin a tale of escape from the Charcha did not hurt but the Ildin, being Ildin, would have taken them in anyway. This village was larger than the first one they visited, Im noted, perhaps even twice its size, and a headman led its people.

There was also a priest, a nondescript middle-aged man who dressed much like the villagers. Only a pointed blue cap set him aside from them. "I travel from village to village," he told them that evening, as men and women came and went from the communal fire, "performing whatever priestly duties are needed. Formalizing marriages, blessing newborns, or just giving advice and comfort. Even writing letters." He shrugged, smiling. "So I serve both them and the gods, as I may."

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"Does a priest speak with the gods?" wondered Na, giving Xido a furtive sidelong glance.

The man laughed. "We speak to them and hope to understand their will."

"And that is that you do good," said Xido, "assuming you follow the right gods." He turned to the two Hirstelites. "Ildin gods are very straightforward about that sort of thing."

"Not the Ildin gods," came the priest's correction. "They are for all men."

Xido snickered. "So they would wish. You serve Khabata, do you not?" He was looking at the man's blue cap, which apparently held some significance.

"I do. Borob I am named, a priest of the Lady Khabata."

Xido turned to his companions. "Ildin gods are not only strictly moral or immoral, they are also rather abstract in their areas of authority. Khabata is the goddess of language, essentially."

"But much more, as well," added Borob.

"Indeed. Of thought itself, one might say." Xido considered that statement and added, "Of symbolic thought. The goddess of the metaphor."

"You understand," spoke the priest. "Do you serve a god?"

Xidos laughed. "Only one. He's a demanding fellow and gives little in return."

Talk turned to other topics and, eventually, travel plans. "The Festival of First Fruits is less than a fortnight away. I shall have moved on to another village by then and celebrate there," Borob told them.

"A festival?" asked Na. "What do you celebrate?" There had been festivals in Hirstel but they did not fall on any regular schedule. The Prince-Sorcerer would announce one when something important enough happened, or when he grew bored.

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“It is the day halfway between Summer Solstice and Fall Equinox, and marks the beginning of the harvest. Officially marks it. Crops are harvested when it is needed, of course. You three,” he told them, “could readily reach the temple center south of here by then. There will be a larger celebration there, and a fair as well.”

“Let’s do it,” said Na.

Im was not so sure. “Will it be out of our way?” He had not entirely fixed in his head just what their ‘way’ was. Xido seemed to want to get them onto a ‘ship’ — an item he had never seen — and hinted that he would then desert them.

Xido shook his head. “We’re heading south anyway. It would do you two good to learn of such things.” He chuckled. “So keep practicing your Ildin.”

“They are not so bad,” opined Borob. “I can understand them at least half the time.”

23.

"THE GODDESS CAME TO ME in a dream," announced the priest Borob. "I am to accompany you south."

"Damned meddlesome female," muttered Xido. He turned his eyes to the Ildin man. "Did she tell you too that another travels with us?"

Borob shook his head. "No matter. The Lady Khabata said to go, so I go." He smiled. "It will be nice to spend the holiday at the temples."

As they gathered their gear to depart, Im asked, "What happens when Qu'orthseth joins us?"

"We shall find out when it happens," replied Xido. "You note that not one question did he ask of who else might accompany our party; Borob is a man of faith and does not let such things concern him."

"Or he's just plain stupid," stated Na.

"Khabata wouldn't speak to him if he was," said the god. "What she is thinking, I don't know, though I'm sure she means well." He chuckled. "She always means well but even deities can make mistakes."

"This temple center is hers?" asked Im.

"The temple centers hold shrines to all the gods," was Xido's answer. "It is more efficient that way."

Na asked, as a jest, "Even those evil Ildin gods of whom you have spoken?"

"Indeed, yes. Best to keep them all together — and their worshipers."

"They have worshipers?" she wondered.

"You might be surprised," replied the dark deity, "how many choose evil when presented a clear choice. It must be liberating not to need puzzle out what is right or wrong."

Im shook his head. "Boring, I would say. It would take all the challenge out of life."

"Well said, boy!" Xido shouldered his pack. "Let's be on the road."

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Borob waited at the edge of the town. He carried not even a pack, only a satchel hung across his shoulder and a stout staff. As a priest, of course, he could expect to be fed wherever he wandered.

"You two are Tesrans aren't you?" he asked them as they set out along the rutted red dirt road. "Will you travel on to Arlak-Port after the festival?"

"Perhaps," answered Xido, before Na and Im could display their utter ignorance. "There are other sea-towns further east, are there not?"

"So I understand, sir. I have not journeyed that way." He walked on a fair distance before adding to this. "I understand your, ah, people trade along the coasts to the east, and have established settlements there. You are Bazu, are you not?"

"Not exactly, but close enough," came Xido's nonchalant reply. Then, much more loudly, he called out, "Ho, Akorzef, I think you can cease hiding now."

Moments later, the crimson creature emerged from a thicket ahead. Borob regarded it curiously for a moment. "A demon? I don't think I've ever seen one of its sort."

Xido chuckled. "I would think not. They serve none of your gods."

A deep rumble of disapproval came from somewhere in Qu'orthseth's bulky body. "We serve no gods," it stated.

"That is because the gods that created you perished long ago," Xido informed it.

"Old stories," scoffed the demon. "I believe none of them."

Borob looked from one to the other. Out of courtesy, Xido had conversed in Ildin and Qu'orthseth had followed his lead. "Gods can die?" he asked. "I mean, and stay dead? I know some are into resurrection."

"All things die eventually," said Xido. He seemed quite certain.

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“Oh, yes, I suppose that is true,” admitted the priest. “Banat tells us even time will come to an end. But not being itself.”

The little god only nodded in agreement to this — or some part of it.

“Who is Banat?” Im whispered to him a couple minutes later, as Borob strode ahead of them.

“The god of, ah, time, we could say, but much more than that. Just as Khabata is far more than words.”

“Are you the god of something in your pantheon?” asked Na. Her eyes flickered to the priest to make sure he was not listening.

Xido laughed softly. “Not in the same sense. I am called Trickster and that is specialization enough for me!” He kept his next thoughts to himself for a few moments before sharing. “But my siblings have their areas of expertise. The thing is, we carry both the good and bad aspects within us, as do you mortals.”

“As do most gods,” added Qu’orthseth, who had been eavesdropping.

“Perhaps,” agreed Xido. “But there may be infinite worlds of gods, as there are of mortals, so how can one say ‘most?’”

“One could say both ‘most’ and ‘not most’ and be right,” decided Im, after thinking on it a moment.

“And also be wrong,” added Na.

Xido nodded sagely. “I think you are both right. And, of course, wrong.”

24.

"THE ORIGINS OF ALL THE gods are obscure," stated Xidos. "Even yours, Borob."

"There are things that remain hidden," admitted the priest.

The group had chosen to camp along their road rather than seek the shelter of a village. Now they sat beside the fire, fed, tired, but not quite sleepy enough to seek their blankets. It was Borob who had been curious about Qu'orthseth's gods.

"Some say they came from within the vast red sun of that world, that they were beings of fire and energy."

Qu'orthseth nodded its massive, featureless head. "So say our own annals."

"And I greatly doubt it," replied Xido. "But anything is possible."

The demon's chuckle sounded as though it came from the deepest well ever dug. "You know I believe none of the stories, and suspect we made up those gods."

"That is your right, my red friend, but I happen to know of some who, ah, met those gods." He smirked at the creature. "You may choose to disbelieve them too, should you wish."

Qu'orthseth slowly lowered its head to the god. "Who am I to doubt, my lord? But I might withhold belief until I hear your tale."

Na nudged Im in the ribs and winked at him. The boy couldn't help but grin himself.

As for Borob, it was obvious he suspected there were things here he did not understand. But he remained placid and listened as Xido spun his story.

"Gods, as you may know," he said, "find it far easier to travel from one world to another than mortals. So it is that the deities of one realm may be related to those of another. Indeed, perhaps so far back that

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none can remember, there was one proto-god who spread his seed across infinite being.”

“Or proto-goddess,” interjected Na.

“That would have taken longer,” Im objected.

“When one has infinity with which to work, that would not matter,” said Xido. “It could have been a goddess. Certainly the descendants of that first, other goddesses and gods, found their way from world to world and sometimes bred with the beings already there. Demons, some of them, and some perhaps ordinary humans. So it seems to have been with the gods of my people, the offspring of some unknown divine visitor and the demon mafadwi folk.”

“I thought the Bazu worshiped Munu,” spoke Borob.

“These days, yes, many do, and the old gods have become legends. They were never worshiped much anyway, as they were not very good at answering prayers.”

“Are any gods?” came Qu’orthseth’s rumble.

“Some are surprisingly conscientious,” Xido told him. “Now, as to the gods of your world — they did not want worshipers. They wanted food.”

Food? All eyes went to the demon. “Yes, the demons were bred as livestock, from vegetation native to their world. They would absorb the vitality of beings such as our friend, for they could not feed directly from the red sun.”

Qu’orthseth seemed agitated — not that it was easy to tell with it. It rose and looked about before announcing, “I can do this. I do not like to, but if I was starving I might.”

“The thing is,” continued the slight god, “they put too much of themselves into the creation of your race. You are, in part, descended from those ancient gods, gods whose form was not so different from my own.”

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"Those were evil gods, to so do," proclaimed the Ildin priest.

"I will not disagree," said Xido. "And, in the end, their creations rose against them and destroyed them. Or maybe a few escaped. It is unknown." He shrugged. "And does not matter."

"This a story I have not heard before," admitted the demon. "Nor am I sure I believe it."

"It is only a story," Xido replied. "In some versions, it is said that the red sun poisoned them in time, rather than the demons rising against them. Either could be true, or both or neither."

"Aren't all stories true," asked Im, "in one world or another?"

"So it is said. Maybe that is a story too. I'm ready for sleep." With that, Xido spread his blanket — it was too warm to wrap up in it — and lay down. The others decided they might as well do the same. But there had been much to think on in that story.

"Do you suppose Xido knew some of those gods?" Im whispered to Na. "The ones from Qu'orthseth's world?"

"I wouldn't be surprised." Silence for a moment and then what sounded like a giggle of sorts. "I wouldn't be surprised by anything Xido might have done."

"He sort of admitted to being descended from something like that mafadwi I told you about."

"So? Books I have read claim we too can name beasts as our ancestors." Na sighed. "I hope there are many books in Tesra. That more than aught else makes me wish to travel there. Knowledge!"

"I haven't decided whether I want to go or not," admitted Im. "There is so much right here to learn about."

"And pretty Ildin girls," came her sleepy reply, along with a soft laugh. "Let's worry about all that when we reach wherever our little god is taking us."

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A moment later, her even breathing told Im she slept. He decided she was probably right, rolled over and fell asleep himself.

THREE DAYS WALKING BROUGHT THEM to the temple town. It could be spied from a distance, a complex built around several earthen mounds, surmounted by open stoas. This, Borob explained, was the usual pattern for Ildin temples.

"Hilltops, or even mountains, are better but where such do not occur, we raise mounds."

Xido nodded knowingly. "Your ancestors came from a more rugged land," he said. "So I have been told."

"That may be so," agreed the priest. "We are here now."

Im looked about. "So are a great many others!" A throng of Ildin filled the temple center. There seemed to be little houses made of cloth all about them.

Yes, I know they were tents and you know they were tents, but Im did not. Let him find out on his own!

Here and there were women and men who wore caps of varied design and color. Priestesses and priests, Im surmised. He tried to count and keep track of the variations, wondering who served which god of the Ildin. The pointed blue ones were followers of Khabata, like Borob, of course. What of the ones with four corners, each a different color? Or the close-fitting black ones — he saw only two of those all the day.

A light rain began to fall. "That's typical in the afternoons in this part of world," Xido commented to his pair of human companions. The demon had, of course, found a hidden spot as close as it dared but not as close as it might have wished. "We might need to find some sort of roof if we stay here a while."

Borob gestured toward a group of open sheds off to the west of the complex. "Those may be used by pilgrims who have no other shelter. I can probably squeeze into my order's house, though I am not expected."

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He seemed to ponder something, and to make a decision. “Khabata did not say how long I should accompany you. I think perhaps I shall sleep where you do.”

“Your presence is welcome, Brother Borob,” spoke Na. Her cordiality seemed a bit out of character to Im. Oh, she had proven capable of being pleasant through their journey. Im suspected Na was even a fairly decent person, beneath her ambition and acerbity. But he hadn’t completely made up his mind on it.

It was easy enough to find a somewhat private spot for the four — it seemed the custom to hang blankets or mats between the occupied spaces. They sat a while, sharing a snack of stale bread and a tawny, raisiny wine Borob had fetched, and watching the rain drip from the eaves.

“I should check in with my order,” sighed the priest after a time. It was obvious he had no desire to leave the comfort of his blanket. “I wonder if the goddess wants me to take you along.”

“If she does, she can wait till tomorrow,” said Xido, swatting at a buzzing mosquito. “That’s her temple, isn’t it?” He pointed out a mound that looked like all the others to Im and Na.

“It is. Our house is not particularly close to the mound, however. There is a quarter for the priests over that way.” Borob nodded more-or-less toward the south.

“Do what you need,” yawned the god. “I don’t think we are going to budge from here until this rain stops. And maybe not then.”

“Very well.” Borob rose and slipped off into the drizzle.

“It tends to clear once the sun sets,” Xido told his remaining companions, “although the insects do come out then. If we feel like wandering about later, we need stay together — there is still a threat to Im and his demon bodyguard is not near.”

“I’ve walked enough for a while, maybe,” mused Na. She looked out

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over the compound. "But it wouldn't hurt for me to look around on my own, would it?"

"Not at all," admitted Xido. "I'm for a nap right now." Without further words, he stretched out on the straw bedding and fell asleep.

Later, Im realized he had done the same. The sky had partly cleared and stars shone through here and there. Fires danced in the distance, around and among the mounds. And — something was going on over to his right. Gasping breaths. Words murmured — words in Zikem, words in Na's high voice. He could sense movement more than see it.

Im was no innocent. His childhood had been far from sheltered. He rolled over on his side, facing away, and tried to ignore the sorceress' throaty giggles. Eventually, he even fell asleep again, though it proved a restless sleep.

The morning dawned quite fair, a blush of eastern sky pushing the last stars off to their homes. Na was awake, sitting on her blanket. "I think we woke you last night," she said. It was not quite an apology. "And I thank you for ignoring us."

"Not Xido?" He had to ask. The god was lounging nearby, ignoring them.

"No, no, not that I would necessarily object." Her momentary smile suggested she was thinking about that possibility. "Our friend Borob. Celibacy is not among the vows of his priesthood."

"Oh." He looked around but saw no sign of the priest. "I hope you haven't scared him away."

"Off to find breakfast for us. It was the least he could do, after all." She was still chuckling over that when Borob returned, his arms filled with fruit and bread, and his face wearing a most foolish expression.

Then, Im had to laugh as well.

26.

"THE BLACK CAPS MARK THE followers of Asak," Borob informed his little party of tourists. "Not many of them, naturally."

"Asak? Isn't that an adjective?" Na was remembering her lessons in Ildin.

"No one likes to say the Evil One's name so they describe him instead. 'Of Death' the word means."

"They don't cause trouble, do they?" wondered Im. "I mean, worshipping evil and all."

"They don't dare for fear of retaliation. And cowardice is an evil so they feel they are doing their duty." Borob said this with a straight face but Im was fairly certain he joked. More so when he saw Xido smile.

"Red is Kamat," continued the priest. Those caps were somewhat bucket-shaped. "Lord Kamat is arguably the most popular of the gods with our people."

"But perhaps not with the other gods," observed Xido. "Banat would want his due."

"Indeed." Borob said no more on that. Perhaps he did not have a good answer.

"Those multicolored caps are the priests of Banat," Xido went on. "Father of Kamat some say."

"Or son or brother or maybe all at once," added the priest. "It does not matter."

"I suppose not," the dark deity replied. One could not be certain he meant it.

"He's the god of the winds, right?" asked Na.

"Among other things," answered Xido. "You must learn to read Ildin, my girl. You might learn all sorts of things and some of them even true."

Borob stopped suddenly and turned to face them. "I was visited by

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the goddess again last night,” he stated, and seeing Na’s expression, hurried on to add, “Khabata. She came in a dream.”

“With a message?” Xido’s casual tone seemed almost dismissive.

“The Lady told me to lead you to the temple of Banat and then my duty would be fulfilled. And —” He seemed sheepish about continuing but hurried his last words out, “That I have had my reward.”

“I think I like your goddess,” remarked Na.

A mound, one of the higher ones, stood before them. “This is it,” said Borob. “You may climb to the stoa if you desire.” He clearly expected them to so do.

“Might as well,” said the dark god and began ascending the gentle, grass-covered slope. “I would guess there are no priests up there.”

“Why not?” asked Im, as he and Na followed.

The only answer was, “You’ll find out.”

The temple proved surprisingly crude when they reached it. “It looks like the shed we slept in last night,” said Na. Four thick logs stood as columns, supporting a square, pointed roof. The whole thing was no more than twenty feet across. And it was, indeed, empty. No priests stood about the small stone altar nor attended the wooden statue of their god.

“Ho, Cousin,” spoke Xido, evenly and not too loud. “Here we are.”

“So you are.” A man seemed to be stepping out of a luminous fog of some sort. By this time, both Na and Im could recognize that he was passing from another world. “I welcome you all.”

The first thing to strike Im was that this individual, who was surely Banat, did not look much like his Ildin worshipers. He was *big*. His skin was golden — it might even have glowed softly — and his eyes slanted and violet. There was a vaguely nonhuman air about him. Almost the ideal of a god, Im told himself.

Then he told himself it was not ‘almost.’ Banat truly was an ideal-

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ized god, an abstraction. Xido had given hints along those lines about the Ildin gods, had he not?

"So what is this about?" asked Xido.

"My sisters and brothers are concerned about the turmoil of the demon comings and goings in this land. And your presence, Cousin Xido, though I know you like to wander among mortals." His voice was deep, yet clear.

"Ah, then you are aware of our own demon lurking out on the fringes of this complex."

Banat smiled and nodded. "You know I see all things."

"Only when you wish," commented Xido.

"Well, yes, of course. No one could see all things all the time, other than the One."

Xido shrugged. "If he exists."

"The One?" asked Na. "Who is that?"

"We define the One as infinite, all-encompassing Being. We being my brother and sister gods. Even you-know-who, though he professes to hate all Being." Banat paused after mentioning this.

Yes, he meant Asak, of course. If you had relatives like that, you might not speak of them either.

"Anyway, back to my point about seeing things. You got me off my path there, Xido."

"That is my job," answered Xido. "The Trickster helps mortals break away from their accustomed ways of thinking and doing."

"Sometimes for the worse." Both gods laughed, like old friends sharing a private joke. Perhaps they were.

As this was going on, Na had found herself staring at the little statue on the altar. "I don't truly have four heads in any of my forms," Banat informed her. "That just symbolic."

"Of the four winds, the four elements, the ability to see all things,

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past and present. That sort of thing,” said Xido. “Too blatantly allegorical for my tastes.”

“We must be who are, Cousin,” replied the golden god, apparently not at all offended.

“I suppose. My intention is to get this pair down to the sea and on a ship to Tesra. I think that’s the best place for them. Then they and the demons will be out of your way, and I can go home too.”

“The demons will not give up,” Banat told him. “I have seen this. They would be vulnerable on shipboard.”

Xido sighed. “I hope they learn enough to protect themselves. If not, I can always go along.”

“I offer you the safety of my shrine in the mountains. No demons can enter there and you would have time to teach these two.”

“No demons? It is that well warded?”

“It is. Even you might find entry difficult.” Banat gave them a wide, benevolent smile. “I’ll be there to let you in.” He pulled his bejeweled robes about himself, and said, before disappearing into a fog of shifting colors, “Ask the way. Anyone can point you there.”

Xido stared at the empty space for a few seconds, before turning to his companions. “It is up to you,” he told them. “Arlak-Port and immediate passage or a visit to this shrine of Banat?”

“The port,” came Na’s sure answer.

“The shrine,” was Im’s choice, and just as sure.

“I think this needs further discussion,” sighed Xido. “Let’s get down this hill and find some lunch.”

"THERE'S NOT MUCH AT ARLAK-PORT," reported Borob. "Ships stop there to take on loads of lumber or turpentine. That sort of thing. The ports further east see more commerce."

"Like the one the dwarfs were headed toward," said Im.

"They need not have gone all the way to the sea," Xido felt. "I'm sure there are trade centers inland." He looked about. "Temple towns like this serve that purpose to some degree."

"So it is," agreed the priest. "The road east is well marked and much traveled. You should have no trouble finding your way."

Na gave up. "Very well. To this shrine we will go. Or at least a different port!"

"To the shrine of Banat itself I can not give you accurate directions. I know it lies somewhat north of the road, in the hills above the Lantabee River."

"Which takes us away from the sea. Ah, well." Xido rose from his place by the fire. "There will be those who can direct us further as we draw near. In the morning?"

Both Na and Im nodded agreement. Borob let his eyes linger on the woman for only a moment before deciding to rise as well. "I think I shall not see you again before you go. I sleep with my fellow priests tonight, and with the memories of a festival well worth attending. Farewell." With that he plunged into the throng of revelers celebrating the eve of the Festival of First Fruits. This apparently involved much fire and much dancing and a fair amount of wine.

"We'll miss the festival tomorrow," observed Na, once Borob disappeared.

"It's all religious stuff then," Im told her, having quizzed a priest earlier. "The celebration is tonight."

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"We're not going to sleep with all this racket," decided Na. "We might as well celebrate too."

"Don't get separated from me, Im," Xido warned.

The boy nodded. He knew well there was still danger. Part of him wanted to go find Qu'orthseth and start the next leg of their journey right then. He wouldn't ask that of his companions.

"What is that stench?" asked Na, as they joined the crowd.

"Someone is burning sulfur," was Xido's answer. "I've no idea why. A ritual maybe."

"You need to be all-knowing like your cousin Banat," said Na.

"All-seeing," corrected Xido. "And to see is not to understand."

Im had to ask, "You're not really cousins, are you? That's like what you were saying about ancient gods visiting different worlds."

"Exactly. Perhaps very distantly, we are related. Maybe all life everywhere is." Xido stopped to survey the happy throng all around them. "Life is the important thing. Banat was saying something along those lines. Existence. Whether one believes that Being is an ultimate god or not."

"Not all those here believe in life," said Im.

"That is so everywhere. These followers of Asak, or of Dekata or the other gods of the Void, are just more straightforward about it."

"Dekata?" asked Na. "Is that a goddess?"

"Goddess of darkness and hatred. Some call her the daughter of Asak." He looked about. "I don't see any of her priests here. Or priestesses, more commonly."

"But anyone here could be a follower," mused Na. "Not really different from any crowd, anywhere."

"That is so." A large bonfire lay ahead, and musicians played for those who cavorted in clumsy, drunken dance, played on flute and drum

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and bells. Na and Im gaped; dance in Hirstel had been very formal, exact movements passed down from their ancestors.

Xido, however, jumped right into the moving mass, writhing and leaping with the others. Im did not think he could do so, even with the aid of much wine. Na, however, looked like she was considering joining in.

Someone slipped between the two of them, an Ildin man, nondescript save for being somewhat fat. A knife appeared in his hand and drove into Im's side. Screams. People fell back, as Im slumped to his knees. That may have saved him from a second, fatal thrust.

Na careened into the would-be assassin's back, throwing him off balance, sending him staggering forward a couple steps. The man recovered and turned back, intending to finish his work. Too late! Xido bounded forward and grasped the assailant by his neck. With one arm, he lifted the fat Ildin from the ground and shook him.

"Who sent you? Speak!" he ordered. His muscles were tensioned rawhide ropes beneath the glistening black skin.

"I serve Dekata!" the man choked out. "An assassin of the temple."

There were gasps from the crowd. It was widely believed that Dekata's priests could be hired for murders and vendettas.

Xido regarded the man dangling from his outstretched arm, gasping for breath. Then, with a twist of his wrist, he broke his neck and dropped the body to the ground.

"We leave now," he said. "How bad is the boy's wound?"

Na was kneeling beside her young companion. "I do not know. I am trying to stem the flow of blood." She was holding her own skirt against the wound.

Xido looked at that flow. "At least the color is good. Ah, his arm caught the worst of the blow."

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“And then the knife glanced along the ribs,” finished Na. “We’ll not lose Im tonight.”

“That is good to hear,” spoke the young sorcerer, before passing out.

28.

NOT ONLY DID IM SURVIVE but he was in good enough shape to take to the road east, come morning. Right arm in sling, bandages wound about his middle, he trailed behind his two companions most of the morning, wrapped in his own thoughts.

Of Qu'orthseth, there was no sign. This highway of the Ildin was far too busy for the demon to show itself, with men and women, afoot and in carts, passing both ways. It would know where Im was; the bond linking them would guarantee that.

So the demon magistrates had hired a human assassin this time. That was smart. Im had to admit it. He wondered whether the evil Ildin goddess the man served had any personal interest. Was it purely a matter of hiring a murderer? That her followers enjoyed murdering and welcomed the opportunity he understood. That they enjoyed being paid was also obvious. Yet he wondered about this Dekata.

He wondered about Banat, as well, wondered whether he had some other motive. He could speak with Xido about this, or wait until they reached the shrine.

Xido — he had been thinking of holding that Ildin up until he choked to death, hadn't he? Even through the haze of his pain, Im could see that. A unique form of hanging. Not that Im knew anything much of hanging. Executions had been exceedingly rare in Hirstel and usually involved demons in some way.

There had been no questions of Xido's right to do as he had done. A delegation of priests who served many gods had visited them early and informed them they were free to go their way. And that they hoped they would do so quickly.

"That's enough for now," decided Xido. "Let's have an early lunch and let Im rest."

Im didn't feel tired but didn't feel like arguing either. "We need to

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get back to your lessons in sorcery too,” said the god, as they settled down by the roadside. “I won’t need to teach you any more of the Ildin speech. You’re good enough.”

“I’d like to learn to read it,” Na reminded him.

Im felt that was a good idea too. “They may have books at the shrine.”

“Then that is the place to learn,” said Xido. He let his eyes rest on the boy for a moment and shook his head. “I was very angry last night. Angry at myself for abandoning my duty and not watching you.”

Neither of his companions knew what to say to that. They filled the awkward pause by attempting to appear introspective. “It’s because I depended too much on my godhood,” continued the deity. “I thought I would sense any demon that might attempt to approach. But a man — I did not anticipate that. It was Na who saved you, truly.”

Im was more than aware of that fact but hadn’t brought it up. This seemed an opportunity. “And I thank her for it.”

“About time,” she replied.

“Perhaps I should become a true man for a time,” mused Xido, “and remind myself of some things.” He raised his eyes to the pair. “Not while you are in my charge. Later, maybe.”

“You’ve told us you would lose much of your power,” said Na. Her expression clearly told she did seem to think that a good idea.

“It is so. Perhaps the most notable loss would be that I could no longer easily walk between worlds if I became human. Right now, it involves little effort. On the other hand,” he continued, “I would also have no difficulty passing through Banat’s wardings if I cut myself off from my other nature.

“Enough on that. Let’s eat and spend some time on your lessons before taking to our road again.”

It was the speaking from afar, the ‘link,’ that Xido wished them to

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practice. "The most practical skill for now," he told them. So they went into a little private world they had found — or perhaps created. There were an infinity of such places, the god told them; they should choose one for their own use. Later, as skills increased, they could go looking into other worlds.

Today, he chose not to join them but left them to practice on their own. "Someone should keep watch," he said. His tone was light, casual, but the two knew that was serious. It would not do for them all to be distracted.

It was like a small, dark room, that place they met. Neither sun nor stars graced what might have been a sky, but the palest of lights radiated from the ground — floor? — beneath their feet. Those truly were their feet, Im realized, as both he and Na were truly in that place. Only in part, yes, but physically there, their bodies existing in two worlds at once.

"I have read," came Na's voice, "that it is possible for two wizards to send themselves to exactly the same place so their minds occupy one space. So can one know all the other does." Her lips seemed to move a bit out of time with the words in Im's ears.

"That sounds exceptionally dangerous," he replied. He also knew he would someday attempt it. Not with Na, if he could help it!

"We could gossip about Xit," she went on, "since he is not listening in."

"He wouldn't care if we did that right in front of him."

"Ha, true enough. I think I caught a glimpse of his other nature when last he linked with us. It looked scaly."

"The crocodile. That's what Qu'orthseth called it. Neither of us have ever seen a real one." Books went only so far.

"We could go looking," suggested the sorceress. "Standing here is boring."

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Im felt uncomfortable with that idea. Indeed, it scared him. He attempted to change the direction of their conversation by saying, "Had we traveled on to the Arlak, we could have seen some without the need of magic. Maybe they are in other rivers here too."

Na's laughter echoed oddly in this place. "I heard of those too. I was also told they were alligators, not crocodiles. Not quite the same thing."

"Close enough," Im objected. Then a different and dangerous thought came to him. "I wonder if we could glimpse Xido's own world."

The woman standing before him almost faded out for a second. Difficulty maintaining the link — perhaps his suggestion had startled her. "That's definitely too ambitious," spoke Na. "But maybe we could just take a peek outside this closed-in space for a few seconds. Are you willing?"

Apprehension and curiosity mingled in Im. "A few seconds. Yes," he said. "Let's find some pleasant place. I saw Qu'orthseth's world briefly and wouldn't want to again!"

Each took the other's hand and they sought another world. A clear sky, a yellow sky, materialized above them. Sand lay all about. "Why, it is our home," murmured Na.

Why here? Im wondered. Was it simply easy to find because they knew it well, perhaps the first world either would picture? "Not a place I'd like to stay. Let's return to our, um, new home." He felt uneasy about this.

Before them appeared two large and rather familiar demons, their bodies reflecting an olive green color in this light. The police. Could they kill him here just as readily as if they were by his body, back beside the Ildin road? Im was uncertain of this.

"Break the link!" Na commanded. Then both opened their eyes to a curious Xido.

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“Done?” was all he asked. “Then let’s put a few more hours into our day’s travels. He looked up. “Until it rains, anyway.”

A mile or so up the road, Na leaned in and whispered, “Let us say nothing of this to Xido.”

Im nodded. “I certainly won’t.” But he suspected the god already knew.

He suspected, as well, that some demon sorcerer was keeping an eye out for them. How else did it know to send those police so quickly?

29.

IT WAS THE FIRST ILDIRIN town they had seen with defensive walls. A wooden palisade stood about the collection of buildings, many of which appeared to be storage sheds rather than houses. A single temple mound stood outside the stockade; to what god it was dedicated they did not know. Perhaps any and all.

Why was the town here? The crossroads, Im assumed. He knew enough of roads now to recognize their importance. The path they had followed met another leading north and south, more or less, before continuing eastward.

Rorak the town was named; Xido had learned that from a passing Ildin merchant, leading a donkey cart. "That's a bastard of Bazu and Ildin usage," Xido told them. "It just means 'central,' although it says it badly and redundantly."

They took his word for it — neither was interested in learning yet another language right then. "That way must lead to the sea," remarked Na, gazing down the road south.

"There is a port," affirmed Xido. "Pas, by name. It might be our destination, in time." He turned the opposite way. "For now, we go north."

Im's wounds no longer bothered him — the bandages and sling had been discarded along the way — but he was in no hurry to start walking again. Moreover, it looked like their path would lead uphill. "Can't we stop first?"

"A good idea. I'd like to ask around about this shrine before we set off again."

Na was still peering up the road north. "I see a group of men coming. All on foot." For the first time since arriving in this world, she and Im had seen horsemen along the busy east-west road. Both had to

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stand and watch in awe each time one passed them. That, fortunately, was infrequent.

Xido followed her gaze. "Our friends the dwarfs," he said. "Come to trade their iron bars." He turned back to the town gates. "We might as well go on in and wait for them out of the sun."

No one challenged their entry, nor even looked with any great curiosity upon them. "Traders from other nations must be somewhat common here," remarked the god. He glanced at the walls surrounding them and added, "And those who would take from them."

"Charcha?" wondered Im. "I didn't think they came so far south."

"More likely raiders from the sea. Possibly ones who look somewhat like me."

Inside the walls of Rorak town they did spy folk who resembled Xido. "Name me Xit to these people," he ordered his companions. "It is not a good idea to wear a god's name around those who know of him."

Im was glad to see that there were none who looked like Na and himself. They had yet to meet a Tesran and their ignorance of that city's language would betray them at once. Chances were Tesran traders would be found at that port to the south.

"You'd best check in with the headman first," they were told, when Xido inquired about finding a meal. "Neb doesn't like strangers settling in without knowing their business."

"Let's wait until the dwarfs come marching in," the dark god whispered to his comrades. "We might be overlooked while he deals with them."

Accordingly, they waited until the party of stocky miners appeared at the gate before going to stand before the leader of Rorak, who reclined on a chair on his front porch. Im could not help but notice it was a larger, grander house than the others in this town; it was not so for the headmen and headwomen of other communities.

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"Xit, eh?" queried the man, a fellow of ordinary size with a gray-flecked beard and a smooth voice. He turned his attention to Na and Im. "Tesrans?"

Na apparently felt it best not to attempt a masquerade. "Nay, sir, we are of a related people. We hope to journey on to the city soon."

"Oh. I would learn more — ah, what have we here? Dwarfs, aren't they?" he asked, squinting toward the approaching group. He returned his attention to the trio. "Feel free to find food and lodging here in Rorak. Perhaps we might speak further later on." That was obviously a dismissal so the man might attend to more profitable business with his dwarf visitors. Xido gave a friendly nod to Duganaaga as they passed.

Whether the dwarf returned it they did not know, for they did not dawdle. "The sheds over there are free to travelers," an old woman selling soup and bread told them. These were not free-standing but attached to the palisade. They purchased half a stale hard loaf from her and went to investigate.

"It will do," opined Xido. "The dwarfs will be likely to camp outside the walls."

"That man Neb will buy their iron?" Na asked.

"I would think so. They could go on down to Pas if they don't get the bargain they want here. It is not that much further to the sea."

Other travelers found spots beneath the roof as afternoon — and its not-unexpected rains — rolled on. "Shrine? Which one?" asked an Ildin woman who passed by with a basket of green apples. They had bought of her ware and asked of their destination. "There are a bunch of them up that way."

"Banat," spoke up Im. "We heard it is in the mountains."

"I'd call them hills," she said. "Lord Kamat's temple is up higher." She gave a little bow of her head when she mentioned the god's name. A

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devotee, obviously. But she did know the route to Banat's shrine, and where to turn from the main road.

Xido looked into their purse after she moved on. "We haven't much left," he announced.

"We hadn't much to start with," spoke Na. "And none when we arrived at the temple center."

"Indeed. I am thankful for the charity of the priests of Banat." Xido grimaced. "But I like not being beholden to their god."

"I'm just glad they gave us some new clothes," Na said. "Mine were rags. And blood-soaked." She winked at Im.

Dusk found Xido in a long conversation with a pair of Bazu merchants, a conversation Na and Im could not follow. The boy was weary, near to dozing off, when he sensed — a presence. "Na?" he asked. Was she trying to link?

No. It was a male presence. Some other wizard was attempting to speak with him. He caught a brief glimpse of a man who looked not unlike his own people, the inhabitants of Hirstel, before he firmly shut himself off.

Na was seemingly unaware of anything. She sat gazing out into the rain. Im slipped over to her side. "A sorcerer tried to link with me," he whispered. "A man. He might have been from Tesra." That was just a guess.

She showed immediate interest. "You blocked him?" Im nodded.

"Maybe he sensed us when we left our private place," said Na. "Xit warned we might be noticed someday."

"Should I tell him?"

The sorceress did not answer for some time, but stared at the falling rain again. "It would be wise," she finally decided.

Yes, it would.

"IT WAS TO BE EXPECTED," was all Xido had to say. "Let's be on our way before Neb remembers us."

"He got too drunk last night to remember anything, I've heard," reported Na, who had been out in the village early. "The folk here say it serves him right for trying to keep up with dwarfs."

They met those dwarfs not far outside the gates. "We're on our way home," came Duganaaga's cheerful voice. "We did good business here." It would seem he was forgetting their not-so-friendly parting — or ignoring it.

"We travel north as well," answered Xido. As to their destination, he said nothing, nor did the dwarf ask.

But Dug did remark, "You got the woman back. I — we — apologize for that." He truly did seem contrite.

Xido laughed. "Now that you have your profit! But that is all right, Friend Dwarf. Our ways are not yours, nor are yours ours."

"But right is right. By the Great Bear himself, I admit I did wrong." That out of the way, the subject was dropped. "We might as well travel together, so long as we follow the same path."

"Good enough," agreed Xido, and dwarfs, humans, and one little god marched north, the mountains again to their left.

"We will turn aside to our pass in a couple days," Duganaaga told them. "Maybe sooner. We can walk more quickly now."

"And we continue on this road," was all Xido would say.

The way rose some as they progressed. "We are in the valley of the Lantabee now," Xido informed them. "It is not slow-flowing and swampy as is the Arlak, but bounces down over falls and through rapids in its upper reaches. Perhaps we shall see something of it."

That would not be for some time, although their road wound toward the river, after the place where the dwarfs turned aside for their

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journey over the mountains. At last, they stood on the crest of a high hill and the god pointed eastward. "There lies the river," said he. A pale ribbon, glistening in the morning sun, lay far below them. "And this would be our turning, if we were told aright."

"Up there?" came a deep, hollow voice.

"Finally out of hiding, Akorzef? You could have done that sometime back." Xido looked up the narrow road, leading into the higher hills. "But yes, up there. You will not be able to get in, I think."

"Wards, very strong. I feel them from here."

"Im should be quite safe behind them. Which means you will be free to go where you will for a time."

The demon turned its head toward the young man. "I do not suppose I could convince you to live out your life there."

"Not a chance," responded Im. "I want to wander every bit as much as you." He turned to the god. "Do you suppose I could learn to create such warding? It would be quite handy!"

"I am not sure even I could match it," admitted Xido. They trekked ever upward, the path growing steeper. "If I didn't know Banat and his siblings so well, I would say it is vanity that makes them put their shrines on mountain tops."

"It is the idealized place for them," offered Im. "Just as they are idealized gods."

Xido stopped and turned about. "*Most* astute, young wizard! You understand them perfectly." He shook his head and turned to continue climbing. "If only they understood humans as well."

"That takes a god like you, Xit," spoke Na.

"My curse!" chuckled the deity. "Ah, we near the shrine."

It was by far the largest building Im had seen so far in this world, and, as the little town of Rorak, it had walls about it. But they were of stone, stone that merged with natural cliffs. A heavily ornamented

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bronze gate stood open, on the far side of a suspension bridge spanning a deep chasm.

"I can not pass those gates," rumbled Qu'orthseth. "That is certain. Hmm, there is even a spell attached to the bridge."

"I see it!" exclaimed Na. "It would tangle your feet."

"But not ours," added Im. That was something of a guess for he could but vaguely sense the ward there. "Will it affect you, Xido?"

"Not that one. The gate may be another matter." He looked across the crevice toward it. "Best you two get safely in first."

Na pushed past her young companion and hurried across. "Easy," she called from the other side. "Come on." Im followed her. There seemed no problem at the gate for them, neither magical nor human guards making their presence known. Xido gingerly stepped onto the bridge, nodded, and then walked across without hesitation.

On the far side, the demon watched for a moment and then stalked off on its own business. "So let's see if I can get through here," said Xido. He looked the doorway up and down. "Banat said he would let me in, but I may not need it."

He seemed to push against an invisible barrier and then stepped back. "No hidden traps or dangers, just a quite strong door closed against me." He laughed. "And no way to get around to open it from the other side."

"But we could," suggested Im. He sent himself questing through another world, to look at the ward from another angle, so to speak, and to loosen it if he could. "It's like the warding that blocked Qu'orthseth from this world, isn't it?"

"Most likely," came the somewhat distant voice of the god. "But Banat and his family can pass so I should be able to as well."

"Perhaps if there were more good in you," came a deep, clear voice. Im returned to see the tall god Banat come out a swirling mist at the far

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end of the bridge and stride across the span. "My touch should get you through, Cousin," said he, and laid a long-fingered hand on Xido's shoulder. The pair passed without problem.

"I do think," Banat said, "that you could get through on your own in time. Indeed, maybe even being in contact with one of these two might have done it." He nodded toward Na and Im.

Xido looked sour. "He wishes he'd thought of that," Na whispered in Im's ear.

"Come on in," said Banat, leading them into an open courtyard. A rocky crest rose in its middle and, atop that, a typical small, open Ildin temple — but far more ornate than any they had seen before. A great house stood to one side, the one they had glimpsed rising above the walls, smaller buildings to the other. "I rarely visit," the god admitted. "Just often enough that my priests don't forget about me!"

Some of those priests scurried toward them now.

“AS YOU KNOW,” SPOKE BANAT, “I am regarded as one who sees the future. That is the main reason for this shrine — to serve as an oracle.”

A man who was surely the chief priest here followed along behind them, not intruding on their conversation. When the god left them — as he surely would — they would have to deal with the man.

“I rarely reveal the future myself, of course.”

Xido spoke to that. “You know the pitfalls.”

“I do. Foreseeing is tricky. There are infinite possibilities to sort through and find the most likely. And even then —” The god’s shrug was exceedingly elegant. “It is not guaranteed to be right.”

“And who has the time?” added Xido.

“Yes, that too,” admitted Banat. “So we have prophetesses. The current one is up at the stoa. Come meet her.” The climb was surprisingly easy, as a broad, winding staircase was carved into the rock. Their priestly companion remained at the foot of the stairs, awaiting their return.

There was a young woman at the top, standing, looking out over the hills. Her gown was long, and blue as the sky behind it, and dark hair fell unbound to the small of her back. She herself was rather plain.

Mousy was Im’s first thought; that was a term used in Hirstel, for mice and rats followed humans everywhere. And young, perhaps no older than he himself. He had found it difficult to judge Ildin women’s ages.

“May I present the priestess Atima?” said Banat to the group. “This is Lord Xido, my dear. He is a god.”

She looked Xido up and down before asking, “Is he a *good* god, my lord?” The girl seemed doubtful.

“I think he tries to be, child.” Banat winked. “But don’t trust yourself alone with him.”

“I’ve behaved myself on this visit to your world,” Xido assured her.

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To the tall god, he said, "And I will continue to do so when it comes to your priestess."

"And I have every trust in your word, Cousin. You may not see me here again, as I have other concerns in other places. But feel free to remain in the safety of this house as long as you wish." He turned again to the young woman. "This is Im. He is the one whose life is in danger outside our walls. And Na, his, ah, sister, he tells us."

No, Banat did not fib, he only reported what Na and Im had claimed. You would not expect a god of pure good to lie, would you?

"I greet you Lady Na and Lord Im," Atima said.

"No titles!" objected Im. "Just Im."

"I don't mind a title, but Na will work for me," added his companion. Or sister.

Im's eyes had gone to the statue standing beyond the girl. It was, in form, as the one he had seen before, with four faces gazing different directions, but larger and of a metal he was fairly certain was gold. The eyes were what truly caught his attention — great faceted jewels, one to a face and each a different color. He could feel there was some power connected to them.

Im wanted them very much.

Banat followed his eyes. "The Jewels of the Elements," he said. "The stones are an aid to prophecy but have nothing to do with me, in truth."

"So this is where they ended up," came Xido's voice, softly. "Those were mined in the mountains near the lands of your ancestors," he said to the Hirstelites. "Near the gate that carried your people to their new world. In a sense, they are gates themselves."

"When I prophecy I come up here and rest my hands upon the image," said Atima, "and find the stone most attuned to what I seek."

"You have powers akin to ours," spoke Na.

Xido nodded an agreement. "The stones only help her unlock an

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innate ability. I have known others who prophesied. It can be dangerous.”

“Atima is well-trained. There is a long tradition of priestesses before her.” Banat gazed out over the hills. “It starts in another land, before ever men came here.”

“And did you see something of us?” asked Na, of a sudden. The girl looked to the golden god, uncertain.

“She has seen things that might involve you and Im and even our friend Xido, perhaps. That is yet another reason we wished to keep an eye on you.”

“Or four,” quipped Xido. “I suppose it could be useful to see the future but I’d just as soon not. I’ve too many misgivings as it is.”

“Ah, but to see our progress!” boomed Banat. “We have brought man up from the beasts and who can say where he will go in the future?”

Xido came close to sneering. “Progress is an illusion. There is only change, random and meaningless.”

“This is one topic on which we must disagree,” said Banat, smiling. “As we have in the past. Let’s go down to the house before I must leave.”

“Already, my lord?” asked Atima.

“Duties, Atima.” Im was certain this god took duties most seriously. “And my wife.” He allowed the priestess to lead the way down the stairs.

“How fares the Lady Vulata?” asked Xido, his momentary vehemence seemingly gone.

“Well and happy. Don’t you have a wife, Cousin?”

Xido gave him a lopsided smile. “Somewhere, I think. Were I wed to one such as Vulata, I would probably keep better track of her!”

“She is most beautiful,” sighed Atima.

“True,” agreed Xido, “but that is not so important. It is long since I heard her music.”

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"You no longer carry your flute," Banat observed. "I remember when you were inseparable."

"I lost track of it as I did my wife." The dark god seemed to look far away for a few seconds, before saying over his shoulder to Na and Im, who brought up the rear, "Banat's wife is the goddess of music but, like all her pantheon, much more. Science too and cleverness of all sorts."

"She is most assuredly more clever than I," said Banat. "Here we are. A meal together before I go? Or are you tired?"

"We would be honored to eat with you, sir," piped up Na.

"Very well. Perhaps we can even have some music. Atima plays on the harp and we have a variety of instruments in this house. Are there not other flute players in your family, Xido? I seem to remember this."

"My father Krat, of course. It is a part of his myth." They entered between wide, ornately carved double doors.

"Ah, yes, he was said to have transformed his world while dancing and playing a flute. There was some special significance to the flute, was there not?"

"It was fashioned of a bone of his mother, who died of sorrow when my grandfather — who has ever been nameless — disappeared. I was not there, of course, but I and my siblings believe she was a mafadwi."

"That is something I can not see," admitted Banat, his voice more subdued than they had heard it before. "The origins of the gods are ever hidden. Ah, the priests!" A small group of men and women in multicolored robes stood waiting. "Show my guests to their quarters. And then we feast."

IT HAD NOT BEEN AS Im had expected, nor had Na anticipated the meal they shared at Banat's house atop a hill. Nothing fanciful, no liveried attendants — the priests of the establishment sat and ate with them at a long table, and they were expected to serve themselves. Maybe that was how 'good' gods behaved.

The food, however, was excellent. That was the important thing, particularly as they had been on meager rations for some time. No dry, stale bread tonight!

Im also found himself staring at the Lady Atima, seated at Banat's side, more often than he should have. He was tired, yes, and finding it hard to concentrate on much of anything else other than shoveling in a prodigious meal.

Lord Banat would be gone in the morning but they would stay. And so would Atima, not that he cared. A weary Im dropped into his narrow but not uncomfortable bed — he found himself sharing a small cell with Xido — and slept long.

The god was gone when he awoke. Xido, that is; of course Banat had departed in the night. A basin of clean, clear water waited on the tiny table between their cots. Cold, too, he realized when he splashed a little on his face. For that matter, the air was cooler than that to which he had become accustomed. Im went searching his companions.

Who he found was Na, seated at the table at which they had dined, listening to the chief priest. "Oh, Im," she called, "come join us. I have been asking Brother Janal about his master and he is going to give me the official version."

The man, a little more than middle-aged, with a lean body inside his shapeless robe, seemed amused but began speaking in a serious tone. "Banat is the Father of the Winds, he who brings the breath of life to man from the four corners of the earth. He sits in the middle of things, seeing all with his four eyes."

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"He only had two last night," objected Im. Na hushed him.

"Some believe him the father of Kamat. Some do not. It does not matter, what with them being gods. Indeed, both ideas might be right. Banat is lord not only of the winds but also the elements." The priest stopped and chuckled. "This is by rote. I learn these little speeches for our visitors and, especially, the children."

"We know less than Ildin children about your gods," admitted Na.

"Now he is one of the good gods, right?" asked Im.

"Totally good," replied the priest. "It is his nature."

"No free will?" asked Na. "He couldn't be bad if he wanted?"

Janal laughed long and deep. "I don't have any speeches memorized for those sorts of questions!"

"So I shall answer them," spoke Xido, who had slipped in at some point. "No god is totally good or evil, not Banat, not Kamat, not even Asak. They only come far closer to those abstractions than any of the rest of us."

"Then you think Asak could some day turn to the light?" asked Brother Janal. "It is a philosophical point that sometimes comes up."

"I suppose. More likely he will be extinguished first, as we all shall be. These two need breakfast." He nodded toward Im and Na.

"There should be some left." The chief priest waved an arm toward a buffet along the wall. "We rise early and eat early." He regarded Xido thoughtfully as Na and Im went to fill bowls with what they could find. "You are a god," he stated. "Few gods are willing to walk among their people. Banat is unusual in this and we are honored by his visits; I know of no one who has ever beheld Kamat."

"I've met him," admitted Xido. "It's been long. Hmm, shorter than Banat, I think."

"That does not matter any, sir," said the priest.

"It might to Kamat," came Xido's answer. "But, yes, I take your

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meaning. Some of us like mankind and some of us, ah, don't like mankind quite as much. I fear Banat's lovely wife can barely tolerate them."

"Indeed?" The man seemed uncertain what to think of this.

"The Lady Vulata is too wrapped up in her abstractions. Perhaps the two of them balance each other out some."

The Hirstelites rejoined them. "Better get a plate, Xit," spoke Na. "We didn't leave much and if we go back we're not likely to leave any."

"I ate while you two lolled in bed," the god replied. "When you are done it will be time to start serious lessons in sorcery." He rose to leave. "Oh, and Lord Banat asked that I include Atima among my students," he told the priest. "It would be good for her to learn a little practical wizardry along with her foreseeing."

"Certainly, Lord Xido. Is the lady aware of this?"

"He said he would tell her. So, of course, he did." Xido smiled; whether at that thought or his next one, who might say? "I'm not sure how much attention Im will pay to his lessons with Atima in attendance."

"Nor how much attention Atima will pay, for that matter," said Na. "Both were sneaking looks at each other all through dinner."

Im acted as if he heard nothing and concentrated on peeling a boiled egg. The first time he had encountered one he did not know the shell came off and ate it whole.

"I am sure our host would not object." Xido nodded a goodbye to Janal and left without further words.

But the priest looked at the pair seated by him and spoke seriously. "Lord Banat might not object but we who serve here are protective of Lady Atima. Take care, young wizard." Then he, too, departed.

"All I did was look at her," complained Im. "And I wasn't even able to focus that well last night."

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“She probably looked better that way,” felt Na. “I’m going to go get seconds.”

"IM AND NA LEARN NEW disciplines in a new world," said Xido. "So must you. Things you thought you knew must be looked at again, but from a different vantage."

Atima hid most of her skepticism. "Are not the things I have learned true?"

"Indeed they are — a part of the truth." He seemed to think of something and then dismissed it with a shake of his head. "I could come up with countless metaphors to explain it but it would be better to simply teach you. You'll understand."

"Very well, Lord Xido. What I do not understand is why Lord Banat desires this." The girl sat with hands folded on a stone bench, doing her best to remain composed. Im thought it endearing.

"Call me Xit," he told her, "and don't worry about Banat's motives. Just know that it is good to learn new things."

A wary nod and a quick glance at her fellow students. What does she think of us? wondered Im. There was no time to wonder more for their instruction began.

Or Atima's instruction began. This morning, Na and Im were set to practicing those things they had learned, while Xido attempted to discover just how much the girl knew and what she might need unlearn. He called an end to the session well before noon.

"A good start," felt the god. "We can truly begin to learn tomorrow. And you two are far enough along to assist me, perhaps," he told Na and Im.

"I should think so," came the wizardess' dry comment.

"They think they are great sorcerers," Xido confided to his newest pupil. "It is true that Na was once the second most powerful magician of her world. She is but a novice here."

"Another world, sir?"

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"It is so. They may tell you the tale if they wish. I'd rather get some lunch." He added, rising, "It is true this pair is improving quickly. They may amount to something yet." With that, he left them to themselves and disappeared into the great house of Banat.

Atima turned her eyes to the two Hirstelites. "Was Im a powerful wizard too?" she asked them.

It was Na who answered. "Oh, he's but an ignorant boy of the streets."

"Who managed to break one of your spells," Im reminded her. The exchange was in jest, of course, the sort of friendly rivalry they had settled into, but did he seem just an ignorant boy, a vagabond following his master? He felt like such at times.

So, much of the remainder of the day went to the telling of their story — their journey here to the shrine of Banat, their life in Hirstel. Over lunch, they entertained Atima, and through a sleepy afternoon, and many a question was asked and answered.

Na had much the better tales to tell of Hirstel, having been in positions of power and luxury, and moreover having lived five times longer. But Im could tell his story of climbing the tower of Piras Tindeval, the event that had set all in motion. This, Na had not before heard. "That was incredibly foolhardy, boy," she sniffed, but he could tell there was a certain admiration mixed into her statement.

"It was," he admitted. Im looked at the rocky crest rising from the courtyard and thought of the jewels atop it, and thought, too, maybe he would like to climb another height one day.

So did life continue for the next several days, a class with Xido each morning, freedom to explore what they would in the shrine during the afternoons and evening. It would not be wrong to assume that both Im and Na made an effort at learning the odd pictographs of Ildin writing, for many books were there. Some also were in the Zikem they

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knew and others in languages unknown. Even the priests were not certain what language filled some pages.

Visitors would come, infrequently, and ask advice and prophecy of the young priestess. They were not privy to any of this, for she would climb to the stoa herself and seek there.

Xido knew what went on up there, however, and explained it to the Hirstelites. "She seeks among the worlds, just as any wizard might," he said. "But the prophetess stands in a place where all things are at once and tries to follow the paths from one event to another. I would suspect our Atima enters a trance of sorts. That is safer than going in with the mind fully open and aware."

"And that is one of the things that she has to unlearn," hazarded Im.

"Exactly so. She is advancing well. As are you. In time, we must leave this pleasant but boring place and get you two where you belong."

"Sounds good," spoke Na. "Soon!"

Im was not so sure. "I am told there may be no ships to Tesra until spring. It might be better to stay here."

Na snickered. "With Atima for company."

That was a part of it, yes. Im could admit that to himself. He liked the easy life here and being around the priestess. Why not stay? "We could learn a great deal through the winter," he said aloud.

"If I were willing to stay," replied Xido. "Or even if I didn't. I suppose it wouldn't hurt for you two to hole up here and read and practice your art, while I roamed elsewhere for a while." He considered this idea for a moment or two. "But I am not certain you are completely safe even inside these walls. Best I stay since Akorzef is barred."

The god seemed satisfied with that logic, for he changed his topic. "As for our Lady Atima — I have seen something growing between you two. Tread carefully, my boy, for both your sakes. Remember she will be

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an old woman in fifty years, while you may be much as you are now. By the time you reach Na's age, Atima will surely be dead."

Na near whispered, "Such things must be far worse for you, Xido, who are immortal."

He only shrugged. "To outlive a love is to outlive a love, whether one goes on for centuries or forever. There were times I allowed myself to become fully human and lived a life with one I loved. But I did not age." He said no more of it, nor did they ask, then or later.

"This is another reason for us to go to Tesra," finally said Na. "There are those there as long-lived as we."

So a fortnight passed, and more days followed.

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE trees?” asked Na.

Im peered out over the walls. “I don’t know. Do you think they are dying?”

Atima laughed. She stopped to look at the two and then laughed more. “The leaves are turning. It is a sign of autumn!”

“Will they be that way all winter?” asked Im.

“No, they fall off and new ones grow in the spring. Were there no seasons in your world?”

“There were not, nor trees either.” The young man turned back to the landscape spreading below them, forest mostly, here and there the clearing of a farm village. The River Lantabee was too distant to glimpse, even from the height of the shrine’s walls. “I read of something named snow. Will we see that?”

Atima shook her head. “Not here. Probably not, anyway. We are too far south.” She turned to point at the mountains off to the north and west. “We might see white on some of the peaks.”

She returned her attention to Im. “Did you glimpse your demon today?” One reason he climbed up here was to see if Qu’orthseth was in the neighborhood. The demon came and went, and would sometimes stand on the other side of that separating cleft, perhaps surveying the shrine, perhaps just letting the humans know he was still around.

Im only shook his head. “I wonder what it would think of snow. Its home world is extraordinarily hot.”

“I think it carries enough of its home world around inside itself that nothing here matters,” offered Na.

“Maybe so,” he admitted to the sorceress. Almost certainly so, he told himself.

He looked out over the world again. It would be good to get moving; perhaps staying on here was a mistake. Xido was certainly

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bored. The priesthood here was a little closed family; indeed, many of the priests and priestesses were married to each other. They were not a very interesting bunch.

But he and Na had the library and they had their practice. And there was Atima, whom Im did find interesting though he was not sure why.

Well, yes, of course you know why. But let us allow Atima and Im to figure it out on their own.

"I liked what we learned this morning," said Atima. "Talking from afar." She giggled. "Even if you were sitting right next to me!"

Na said, "Xido believes it the most useful of all skills. Or I think he does."

"But dangerous," added Im.

"Not if we stick to our own little pocket worlds," replied Na. "When Im and I get to Tesra we could speak with you as easily as when we sat together down in the courtyard," she told Atima.

"I would rather you were here," came the girl's answer and her eyes rose to Im's for a second.

"We'll stay a while longer," Na said. "All winter it seems. I don't mind so much now. It's nice here." She gazed at the low, not-so-distant mountains, growing dark as the sun fell behind them.

"Xido is not so fond of sitting here," observed Im. "I think we would be safe if he left, don't you?"

"Unless a human assassin walked in, posing as a devotee of Banat," answered Na. "Perhaps I need find some way of entertaining our little Xit."

Im was entirely ignorant of what she might have in mind; Atima, however, caught on at once. "A god?" she asked. We should not be surprised that she sounded doubtful about the idea.

"Why not?" replied the sorceress. "Is it too early for dinner?"

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"The first bell has not yet rung," answered the priestess. "Let's try the link again. I want to practice."

Im was not one to deny this girl and Na didn't care that much one way or another. They sat down in a semi-circle there on the stones and sent themselves forth to their predetermined meeting place. Another awaited them there.

"Do not show yourselves," Im immediately warned.

"Fear not," a voice, a man's voice, called out. It was the voice Im had briefly heard a few weeks earlier when someone attempted to link with him. "I am Holos, chief wizard to Huenoziles."

"What is a Henazeel?" came Na's disembodied voice.

"Huenoziles is Prince of Tesra — the second of that name." A pause. "A woman. Ah, she is strong! Nearly as strong as you, young wizard. I attempted to link with you before but you blocked me most effectively. For that I can not blame you. Best to be cautious!"

I could cut him off now if I wished, Im told himself. Or Na could. But he was curious.

"Only by finding this little world of yours was I able to speak with you again. Is — is there another here?" The wizard's voice suggested anxiety, even fear.

"Atima, the priestess of Banat," announced the girl. Im at once wished she had not.

"The prophetess! I have sensed you before but could not speak with you." Another pause. "It would be best if I did not now. But your friends — you are strange to me, two strong, unknown sorcerers who have suddenly appeared. Perhaps we may speak again some other time. Know that I mean no harm." And with that he cleanly broke off the communication.

"This we must report to Xit," stated Na.

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Im was in complete agreement. A bronze bell sounded in the courtyard below. "After dinner," he said.

“EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS HAVE PASSED since the death of their greatest Prince, Araziles,” Xido told them. “The city-state has been in slow decline since. I do not know this Huenoziles who rules now, nor his sorcerer.”

They were met in Na’s little sleeping chamber and Atima was purposely left out of the conference. “You should speak with him again,” the god continued, “but with me in attendance.”

“And not Atima.” Im was sure of that.

“Indeed, not Atima,” Xido agreed. “We’d best find a new world for your practicing.”

That would not prove difficult. There were an infinite number of them, the god maintained. Im wasn’t sure but he did know there were far more than he could ever hope to find and visit.

“I think he liked you,” Im said suddenly to Na.

She sighed. “Another Tindeval. That’s who he reminded me of.” Then she gave him a rather unfriendly look. “He said you were more powerful than I am.”

“He only fears strong women,” Im assured her, quite straight-faced.

“Indeed, that must be it,” she agreed, and laughed.

“It is not so bad to know the top magician in Tesra before ever you voyage there,” spoke Xido. “If he is likely to cause trouble, you will be forewarned.” He smiled slyly. “And if he is a good fellow, he can take responsibility for you two!”

The god rose from the bed on which all three perched. “That’s more comfortable than the ones in our cell, Na. And wider. How did you manage that?”

“It must be a blessing of Banat,” she innocently replied. “You would be welcome to try it out, Xit.”

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Im suddenly felt that he should leave the room, and quickly. But no need. “No, my dear, I think not.” But Xido did give the sorceress a long look before slipping out.

Na laughed again. “We do need to keep our Xit from getting bored, don’t we?” Then, sobering a tad, “And me, too!”

Im got up, saying, “It would be nice to have our cell to myself,” and followed the dark deity out the door.

Things went on the next day much as before. Xido set his two Hirstelite pupils a different field of magic to study for a while, that of sendings and the blocking of sendings and even the turning back of sendings. “Anything sent to or pulled from a world can be put back,” he lectured, “and the process is essentially the same. Practice it as you can. No need for Atima to know aught of that sort of thing.”

“I wonder if the wards will interfere,” whispered Im. He attempted to reach out and pull a little rain in. It was rather warm that morning. “No, not a problem. I guess they don’t affect inert objects.”

Na wiped the water from her face. “What of living creatures?” She brought a bright crimson butterfly to sit on her forefinger. Its wings fanned a couple times before it drifted, dead, to the ground. “I guess the air here is wrong for it.” Moments later, it disappeared, pulled back to its own realm.

“Or the warding had an affect.” He was pleased to see it was not so when he pulled a tiny vole-like creature to him. It scampered about for a couple minutes before popping back to its own world.

“I didn’t think the wards would hurt anything,” said Na, after the experiment. “They’re just supposed to block, not kill.”

Im wondered if wards could be made to kill. He’d never heard of such but then he had never heard of many things that were.

The pair spent much of the morning taking turns of one pulling items from other worlds and the other sending them back, or

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attempting to block them. "You know," Na said, "if we get good at this we can send those demons that come after you right back home." Im suspected that Xido had something like that in mind.

And he had thought about it himself. "Neither being able to send them back to their own world nor to, um, deflate them is a complete solution," he felt, "but both could help. They give some breathing room."

"Win the battle but the war goes on," remarked Na. She had been reading books about that sort of thing lately.

Im went looking for books himself that afternoon, any volumes that might tell of Tesra. There was frustratingly little in the library, which dealt largely with Ildin legend and history — when one could sort out which was which. He had concluded that some of the mysterious books he could not read were actually in the Tesran language; the alphabet was similar to that of Zikem and many of the words seemed like they might be related to ones from the language of his birth. But he didn't have the time nor desire to puzzle them out right then.

After a time, Atima came in and sat at the table beside him, watching him leaf through one book and then another. "Are you truly going to go away to Tesra?" she asked at last.

He closed the volume before him and sat and looked at it for a moment. "I think so. Oh, maybe not. I don't know!"

"If you wish to be a wizard, you should," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Is that what you want, Im, to be the greatest of sorcerers?"

He looked within himself and answered in truth. "No. That I leave to Na. Power means nothing, of itself."

"Lady Na likes to be in charge," giggled the girl.

"She does. She is responsible and would use her abilities for good. Mostly." Im felt that was so. "Na would think it her duty."

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“You will do what is right also, Im.” The girl leaned over and kissed him on his cheek, before rising and slipping away.

He would try. But what exactly was right? Im felt some obligation to accompany the sorceress Na to Tesra. After all, it was his action that brought her to this world, and they had worked together up to this point. Best to see it all through, maybe.

A part of him certainly wanted to see the city. Indeed, Im wanted to see the whole world. Knowing wizardly ways, having enough power to make his own path, that was all he needed.

And he knew that was not a path for Atima.

"IT WOULD BE BEST TO go to the little world where you first spoke to this wizard," said Xido. "Simply call his name and he can come if he chooses."

"But you will already be linked with us, right?" asked Na. It was a question the god had answered more than once but the woman was nervous about this. Neither she nor Im had sought to contact another wizard before.

"I shall," was all he said. "Are we ready?"

A few moments later, all three were in that place they had used for their private practice from the start. All was familiar, the link they had formed many times before.

"Hmm, all right," began Im. Did he sound as nervous as he felt? Best to plunge in. "Holos," he spoke. He knew it was not necessary to call out. "It is Im. The one you spoke with before." The sorcerer hadn't known his name, had he? He wouldn't reveal Na's. "And my friend."

With any luck, the man was listening. He would be paying attention to this world, maybe even leaving a tiny bit of himself here to monitor it. "Im, is it?" came the wizard's voice. "I greet you, young master, and am pleased you have returned. You too I greet, sorceress without a name."

"Na," came her voice. "I am named Na." There was no real reason not to tell, both knew. "And I greet you, Holos of Tesra."

"The little girl is not with you. That is to the good." So far, the trio had chosen not to show themselves, letting only their voices find their way in. That was not the easiest of skills, but Xido had insisted they learn it. Therefore, they could not see Holos either, whether he was similarly hiding or not. "But another —" The wizard's voice trailed off to a long pause before he again spoke. "A demon? No, no, a god, I think. One of Krat's children?"

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"You impress me, Wizard. Yes, I am Xido, son of Krat. I am responsible for these two, at least for a while longer. I shall show myself, Holos, but my companions are free to do as they wish."

Im decided if Xido was willing to appear, so should he. He was surprised to see that Na had already materialized. Had she been so all along? No matter. He turned to get a better look at the chief wizard of Tesra, a man he had only glimpsed before.

No older than Piras Tindeval in appearance but he might not be as naturally long-lived as a man of Hirstel. Xido had suggested this might be so. A curling gray-streaked beard fell nearly to his waist and his skin was dark, but not so dark as his and Na's. A soft yellow robe did not conceal that he was well-fed.

"These two have come from another world, Lord Xido, have they not?" asked Holos. "I could not have missed them otherwise." He stared first at Na and then at Im. "Especially in that they appear to be of my people."

"Divided from them millennia ago," answered the god. "In the Valley of Visions itself."

"Ah!" His eyes again swept over the pair. "But no longer bound to whatever world they were born in. I would hear the tale someday."

"We'll tell it when we get to Tesra," said Na.

"It seems the best destination for them," Xido spoke.

"I would agree," said Holos. "Do you come as well, my lord?" He did not sound overly eager to have Xido there.

"No. I will put them on a ship and be done — for now. If I visit your city later, it is likely none will know it but I." He chuckled softly and added, "As in the past."

The sorcerer smiled in return. "I fear there are no temples to you in Tesra."

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"Then we'll have to build one when we get there," proclaimed Im. "We don't know how soon that will be."

Na continued from there. "We might not take ship till spring."

"Very well. I — no, we of Tesra shall await your coming, whenever it be. I might speak with you again, Lord Xido permitting."

"It's all right with me," the god told him. "But this is enough for now." He broke the link — all the links. Im was surprised that could be done so readily but, after all, Xido was a god with the knowledge of eons. They sat together in a corner of the library. Where, of course, they had been all along.

"He seems to mean no harm," said Xido, at once. "I trust you to speak to him without me in the link. But be cautious." With that, he rose and left them.

"I think Holos was assessing a possible threat," whispered Na. "We were unknowns."

"We still are," ventured Im.

"One reason he will want to speak more and learn more. He is smooth. Holos seems as much a politician as a wizard. That is why he serves the Prince of his city." Na's smile was smug. "Believe me, boy, I know something of politics!"

"I think maybe this is more reason to wait until spring and learn as much as we may from Xido."

She nodded. "If he is willing. Yes, the more prepared we are, the better. But eventually we do have to board a ship and cross a sea to Tesra."

"With Qu'orthseth. I wonder what Holos and the Tesrans will think of us bringing a demon along?"

Na laughed. "We'd best not mention it!" Then a thought. "Maybe they could kill it. If Qu'orthseth were gone, no police would seek your life."

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That thought perturbed Im greatly. Perhaps most because he saw the logic in it.

XIDO SPENT MUCH TIME ON the walls, it seemed, gazing out across the surrounding country. "He is restless," said the priest Janal. "It is not good for a god to be pent up here."

"Maybe not for any of us," replied Na. "How do you stand it?"

"We have families. We have our everyday ways. It is little different from a life anywhere."

The routine of the shrine went on as always, and the three guests were not a part of it. Pilgrims came and went and some asked for an insight from the oracle. They would give what they could in payment; Banat asked only for generosity.

And Na and Im and sometimes Atima continued to practice the ways of wizardry, at times with Xido's supervision, at times without. The woods about the temple gradually changed color. "It is almost the time of Autumn Feast," announced Atima one evening.

"The equinox, right?" commented Im. "We need to decide soon for sure whether we're going to sail away before winter arrives."

Atima sighed. "I hope not. I would miss you."

He would miss her as well, but he didn't say so. "We must go someday."

"Then you must come back, too," the girl decided.

Im kept a long silence, eyes lowered. "I hope so," he said at last. It would not do to promise, not with his uncertain future. No, not even if this young woman wanted him to.

"You will wish to stay in far Tesra," she said. "It is the greatest city in the world."

"So say the books," he agreed. "But I lived in the greatest city of my world. Why do so here, as well? I — I do think I will try to come back to the land of the Ildin, if I can."

"Try hard," she told him.

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The two looked at each other, a bit awkwardly it seemed to Im, before Atima excused herself and went about some affair of her own. Should he have done something? The young wizard had no idea. It was late; he might as well retire to his cell.

There was no sign of Xido. No matter; he sometimes stayed up late, talking to Janal or one of the other priests. Im lay down in the dark, staring toward the barely visible ceiling. You are going to have trouble falling asleep, he told himself, despite being physically tired. His eyes were near twitching from all the reading he had been doing through the long afternoons here.

A touch. Holos? Only half-focused on what he was doing, he responded. "What do you want at this time of night?" He knew it was not the same time in Tesra, to be sure. Afternoon. The voice that answered swept away his lethargy at once. Not Holos at all, but some other man, some other sorcerer. Perhaps being only half-awake had helped him, kept him from fully engaging, forming the link. Im at once severed the connection, and found himself shaking. He had sensed a flash of malice in that unknown wizard as he broke away, but had managed to see very little else.

Xido must be told. The boy was alert now. Where could the god be? Maybe Na would know. Had it not been for the experience of the moments previous Im might have attempted to link and ask her. He did not feel quite, well, safe doing it right now. In fact the idea rather alarmed him.

It was not that far to her room, albeit located on the other side of the shrine in the women's quarters. A few minute later, he stood outside her closed door. He could hear voices. Well, Na's voice, anyway. He tried to make out the words.

He stood there, no doubt appearing puzzled, when one of the priestesses approached along the hall. She looked at Im with a faint

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smile. "Lord Xido is with her," whispered the priestess. "I much suspect they want privacy."

He looked at the Ildin woman and then again at the shut door. It didn't seem like much of surprise, really. "I believe you are right," he told the priestess.

You all thought this was coming, didn't you? Ah, yes, I see the knowing nods of the head!

He could speak to Xido in the morning. Na too. Im began to feel very tired again, as his excitement wore away. He gave the woman a little bow and plodded back to his own room.

And again, had difficulty falling asleep. But, in time, slumber came.

It might have been near dawn when the sound of Xido entering the room roused him. Or it might have been earlier than that. At once, all he had to tell the god flooded into his mind. He sat up. "Xido! We must talk."

The deity lit a small oil lamp. "About where I have been?" His face offered no clues of what he might be thinking.

"Oh, no. I know about that." Im laid out his experience of the previous evening, all in a rush, while Xido sat on his narrow cot and listened intently. "So I went looking for you and, um, found you and decided to wait." The boy's voice somewhat trailed off.

"Hmm. I almost wish you had interrupted us, though Na would not have appreciated it at all." Im couldn't help smiling at that thought. "We'll have to discuss it with her later. And perhaps with your Tesran wizard — he might know something of this. But now, I need to attempt an hour or two of sleep." With that, the god reclined and was soon snoring.

But Im was not going to get back to sleep, he knew. He sat a while, first gazing at the dark form of Xido, then at the flickering lamp. At last,

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he picked it up and, wrapping a robe about him — one of the multicolored sort worn by the priests — went out into the hall and then the courtyard. There was only the least suggestion of the coming sunrise in the eastern sky. The stars yet shone, through ragged clouds rushing before a southerly wind. It was warm, the wind off the unseen sea.

Before him rose the great rock, the original hilltop, with its stoa. Who would mind if he went up there? It had never been forbidden. He slowly climbed the stone stairway. All remained quiet below, though he could see the light in the kitchens. Then he stood beside the altar, the statue of Banat, and its eyes, the four jewels. Im stared at them, perhaps for several minutes, seeking to understand just what they were. At last he reached out a hand and touched one, gingerly. What power!

What might not a sorcerer do with these in his possession? Too dangerous for him, he felt. Too dangerous for anyone but a god and his prophetess, maybe. He let his hand fall.

Was it time for breakfast? Im descended from that high place of power and went to find out.

38.

"WE'LL HAVE RAIN LATER, I'M told," said Na. "And then maybe the first really cool weather of the year."

"A taste of the storms of winter," added Xido. The god looked at his empty plate and rose to refill it.

Im observed him for a moment. "Worked up an appetite last night?" The incidents that troubled the boy between sunset and rise were far enough away now. He could relax and see the humor in things.

Na frowned. "You know of that?"

"I went seeking Xido during the night. We'll talk about the reason when he is ready."

The expectant looks both gave the deity when he returned with seconds told him they were ready, at least. "Have you said anything to Na?" he asked. Im shook his head.

So an explanation ensued, Xido and Im taking turns. "That's not really much, is it?" said Na at last. "I mean, we don't know who it was or what he wanted." She peered at Im. "You did say it was a man, right? And you, uh, sensed he was up to no good. That's about it."

"But so much more is hidden," stated Xido. "How did this sorcerer know of you? What relation has he to Holos? Does he truly mean harm?"

"We'll have to ask the chief wizard of Tesra," felt Im. "He's probably asleep right now. And for hours to come." They had learned from their brief contacts that the man slept late and stayed up into the night. Plus, there was the time difference between their locations, some hours.

"After your lessons, then," Xido said. "Be careful and enter only your safe world for a while, until you contact Holos. Hmm, and I'd best be part of it this time."

Atima joined them for their studies that morning. Im found himself staring at the girl at times. How did she use the power of those stones? They seemed almost overwhelming to him. Such a small, young

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woman — well, yes, she was about his own age — to have such strength. Atima was much more than the mouse he had first thought her.

It was not until after lunch, when the three came together again to seek the wizard Holos that Xido said something of it. “You like Atima.” That and nothing more.

“Her abilities intrigue me,” Im admitted. “Atima deals with great forces, I can tell. She is also one of the nicest persons I have ever met.”

“I would have to agree on both points,” said the god.

“She isn’t so bad to look at either, I guess.” He knew she was not considered beautiful, not even by her own people’s standards. He laughed at a sudden thought and went on. “I felt the Ildins’ noses all stuck out too far until I met dwarfs.”

Xido had to chuckle as well. “Just wait until you encounter a troll someday. Now those are truly noses!”

“I’ve read of them,” interjected Na. “The natural histories suggest that dwarfs and trolls are branches of the same family tree.”

“It is so,” Xido said. “The People of the Earth. Even farther back, they share an ancestor with humans. But we spoke of Atima. I do not warn you away from her, my lad, I only tell you again to tread carefully and weigh all things. Now let’s see if Holos is taking his siesta.”

He was not but Im strongly suspected the wizard had been soaking in his bath when they reached out. His beard was dripping. “A malevolent presence it seemed, eh? There are many ambitious practitioners of magic all around the world and it could have been any. Even —” He hesitated, seemingly unsure whether to go on. “Even a follower of the Wizard-Lord, perhaps. Even he himself.” He shuddered involuntarily at the thought. Or maybe he was just cold and wet.

“I remember him. Just risen to power the last time I visited this realm. Torut, wasn’t it? Or has another claimed that title since?”

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"Torut it is, and he has grown in strength. He would assuredly be as interested in two new talents as was I."

"Someone we need to be aware of then, Lord Holos," spoke Na. There was an edge to her voice; she was clearly unhappy that this the first they had heard of the man.

"Tell of this Wizard-Lord." Xido might have said this evenly, his tone friendly, but it was every bit a command.

The wizard began. "Many have risen to claim the heritage of Hurasu since his death, some more powerful than others. Torut is the greatest of these and now rules over a wide empire to the west. But it is Tesra he desires."

"Is he of Tesra?" asked Im.

"Nay, he is of those who remained in the west when my ancestors migrated in search of a new home." Holos let his eyes rest on the boy. "More closely related to you, perhaps, than am I."

"You thought we might be of that people when you first sensed us, didn't you?" accused Na.

"It is so. We seek allies there, those who might be ambitious to overthrow their lord."

"And perhaps rise to be an even greater threat," said Xido, grinning. "I make it a rule to trust no wizards."

Na and Im looked the god askance, but Holos was ready to agree. "It is wisdom, my lord. I trust not even myself, for any of us can be seduced by our power."

Good advice, maybe, thought Im, but he had something else to say. "Whether this was your Wizard-Lord or no, he certainly meant us no good. That I could tell."

"Then he must have intended to strike at you then and there," replied the sorcerer, "and chose not to hide it. You were fortunate to escape."

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“Fortunate, indeed,” agreed Xido. “Or maybe more talented than he looks.”

THE WIND HAD COME TO the northwest, first driving a cold rain before it, and then howling all about the hilltop shrine. "It will be fair and sunny in the morning," promised Atima, "but windy yet."

"The weather never changed where we lived," Im told her. "Sun and heat every day, stars and cold through the night."

"The only thing that changed was the moon," added Na.

Im remembered. "There was a beauty to the moon over the desert, wasn't there?" He had gazed from the walls many a night, imagining things beyond the horizon.

"And to the stars. But the same scene grew old. What is this orange stuff? I thought it was yams but it tastes different." The difference did not seem to keep Na from gobbling it down.

"Squash," replied Atima. "In season now."

"That is something else that did not change in Hirstel," observed Im.

"How," wondered the young priestess, "did you ever keep track of the passage of your lives if it was always the same?"

Im shrugged. "I never had any problem." Each day had been an adventure for the boy, learning, simply surviving at times.

"But others did," came Na's subdued voice. "There was a great ennui among many, lost in timelessness, listening to the whispers of the infinite worlds, and caring not where went their lives." She near to whispered to Im, "We did well to go."

That, Im did not doubt. "You celebrate one of your markers of time on the morrow, right?" he asked Atima. "Will there be revelry as at the Feast of First Fruits?"

The girl laughed gaily. "No, no. We are only a little family here and not at all inclined to be raucous. Nor is the Autumn Feast generally as boisterous as some other festivals."

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"There's Xido," said Im. The god had just entered the common hall, in deep conversation, it appeared, with the priest Janal. "He's rarely late for dinner."

"Things weigh even on a god," spoke Na. She lowered her eyes and busied herself with scraping together the fragments of her meal with a wooden spoon.

"I have trouble sometimes remembering he is one," Atima said.

"I think he would sometimes like to forget it himself," came Im's reply. Na looked up quickly at him and then to the approaching Xido. She had questions to ask, the young man could tell, and he could guess what some of them might be.

Others, perhaps, he could not.

Xido spoke at once, on taking his seat. "I thought Janal should be kept up to date. Not that he can do anything about our dealings with distant wizards."

"Could he talk to his god?" wondered Im. Both Atima and Xido shook their heads.

"Any one of us would have more hope of catching Banat's attention," said the girl. She looked to their divine table-mate. "Lord Xido the most, I think."

"Possibly. My link may be no better than any of yours but I would have a better idea where to find him." He took a sip of his beer and nodded in approval. "I do not intend to try. Banat will look in on us when he feels like it. And why haven't we had any of this before?" He held up his tankard.

"It is the custom to brew the first beer of autumn for the festival," said Atima. "I have been told it is not cool enough earlier in the year."

"No, I suppose it isn't," said Xido. "I hope there is plenty of this if we stay all winter." He winked at Na. "Something else to keep me occupied."

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"Are you moving into Na's room?" the girl asked outright. The three gaped at her. "Well, everyone knows. We've been gossiping about it all day."

Na spoke lightly, casually, as if it were no great concern but only a matter of amusement. "It might be good to have someone to warm my bed, come winter nights."

"Indeed," agreed Xido, in much the same tones. "Cooler weather may call for making both beer and love."

They are fooling no one, thought Im. He glanced at the young priestess. Not Atima, not himself.

And not you either, eh? Perhaps Na and Xido succeeded in fooling only themselves.

It is to be noted that the two disappeared together, early, and were not to be seen again until the morrow. But there was much going on to keep others occupied in the shrine of Banat. Just the brisk air made everyone feel more alert, more alive, that eve of Autumn Festival.

"Never have I known a night so like those of my home," remarked Im, as he and Atima strolled out into the courtyard. The cold wind, the clear, star-filled sky; these were as he remembered in what seemed another lifetime. Yet it was only a few months, hardly any time at all. He looked at the girl beside him, wrapped in a shawl against the cool air, and liked this new life more than ever before.

"How did you come to be here, Atima?" he asked. It was something he hadn't really thought about before, too wrapped up in his own affairs and concerns.

"I showed an aptitude early. When I was barely a toddler, I am told. It was no surprise for my aunt was a prophetess too and many in the family have, ah, talents." She turned to face the young wizard. "We are not like your people, we Ildin. Such gifts are rare and I was given a teacher so I might serve somehow, someday."

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"For your own safety, too," said Im.

"That is true. The untrained are a danger to themselves. Let's sit." The pair took a place on one of the stone benches, the same benches they sat on most mornings while studying with Xido.

She gazed up at the throng of stars. "I had more ability than most and, my teachers told me, the proper attitude." Atima smiled and turned to her companion. "Airs and ambition I leave to others. Knowledge is enough."

"You have been here long, then?" Im asked.

"Oh, no. I visited from time to time since I was a little girl but only became prophetess of the shrine last year. There was a need for me." Her voice had taken on a note of sadness. Had something happened to her predecessor? She might have been one of her teachers, perhaps even one of those relatives she mentioned. That did not matter, Im realized. Atima was here now and she was the prophetess.

"And you go up there —" Im's eyes went toward the stoa on its rocky height. "And use those gems somehow."

"I do. Let's not talk about that now. It is too beautiful a night to waste on shop talk!"

Im found that he was in agreement, despite his interest in the stones and their powers. He also felt that Atima was beautiful tonight, as well. How he had not noticed it before he was not sure. He took her in his arms and found her entirely willing to let his lips find hers.

"IT WAS UNLIKE ANYTHING I had felt before when I first touched the Jewels of the Elements. I felt like they — spoke to me. Especially the blue one."

"Is that the one for water?"

"No, blue is air. Green is water."

It had been a day of festival, a simple, low-key sort of celebration, but festival none the less. No studies for anyone on this holiday, only games and stories and food and drink. Oh, and a brief religious ceremony to be sure, but those occurred every day at the shrine of Banat.

Atima and Im spent much of the day together, wandering. Having once kissed they were not loath to do so again, and repeatedly. Im would have been the first to admit he was in no hurry to be on the way to Tesra; he might even have owned up to not wanting to go at all.

Yet he was cautious. Im had been warned of the dangers of a relationship, with Atima or any woman of this land. Was he in love? He was uncertain. He loved the world in which he found himself and the girl was a part of that. He loved the mountains and their cool winds. He loved the Ildin villages and the slow unencumbered lives of those who lived there. Even this shrine he loved, though he felt a tad stifled here at times.

What more could some city across the seas offer? Power? That meant responsibility and Im sought nothing of that sort. Power — his eyes went to the great rock rising from the courtyard. Once he had climbed in search of power, climbed a tower. There was power up there too.

"I would like to touch them some day," he had told Atima, not letting her know he had already done so. Now they sat together on the stone steps leading to the stoa and spoke of other things, but Im's mind

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did wander to those gems above him from time to time. Did they whisper to him? Maybe that was his imagination.

The stars were not imagination. They shone brighter than he had ever known in this world — though not so bright as those of Hirstel, he had to admit. “The wind has grown calmer and all the moisture is gone out of the air. That is why they are so clear,” explained Atima, lecturing as she had a tendency to do. The girl had read many books and knew many things. Or knew of many things might be more accurate.

“We could see them even better from up there,” Im pointed out, motioning toward the stairs with his head. “We would have more privacy too.” He was uncertain about making the suggestion.

But Atima thought it an excellent idea. Hand in hand they climbed the way. “There’s no reason not to come up here,” she said as they neared the top. “People just don’t very much. I think some are afraid.”

Above the torches and lamps about the courtyard and buildings, they could see the stars spread across the sky even more clearly. The wide dark countryside lying about the walls of the complex was also laid out, the massed trees barely to be distinguished by the pale light. There would be a thin moon later, Im knew.

He stood there a while, arm around the priestess, and that was enough. Truly, it was. The stones might be singing behind him but they were not important to Im. Which is not to say they did not interest the young sorcerer.

Inevitably their presence found its way into the pair’s conversation. Atima told of how they helped her focus her sight. “Xido said they were a sort of gate,” Im remembered. “Not one you could pass through. My home world was riddled with such.”

“But these gates connect to all worlds,” the girl informed him. “They help me to look everywhere at once.”

“Ah!” Im understood at once. His respect for the girl grew also,

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when he saw how dangerous that might be. "It is good they are kept safe here."

"Who would steal from a god?" asked Atima, and laughed at the absurdity of the notion.

Many, he thought. There was no sense in saying it. The pair had drawn near the statue of Banat, the flicker of distant lights below occasionally revealing a contour of the golden body or a glittering facet of one of the jewels. Best he not touch it, Im told himself.

Atima reached out, letting her hand glide across one stone and then another. "Each has its own personality." Her voice was distant yet there was joy in it.

The temptation was too great; Im too let his fingers brush across the gems. Yes, each had a different feel to it, subtle, yet distinct. And — and he could sense Atima in them, almost as in a link.

They stood now side by side, her hands on stones of blue and gold, air and earth, and he touching red fire and green water. Im turned to look at the prophetess. Or did he? Maybe that was in another world. Be that as it may, their eyes locked. He could *see* so much in the woman!

And surely Atima entered him in the same way. It was as if their minds occupied one space, a space bathed in lights of red and green, blue and amber, and a golden man danced in and out of the darkness. The statue or the god or a conjuring of their own minds? Im could not say and knew it mattered little.

Their lips met and it was a kiss such as neither had known in his or her short life. Nor have most who've lived a full life, in truth.

No, not even you. Don't give us that smug look as if you understand what I'm talking about!

It was a merging; there is no more proper way to describe it, though that, too, falls far short. "We must release the link," came Atima's

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calm voice. Im was fairly sure she spoke in whatever world they occupied.

He answered accordingly. "Would that we could remain so forever!" He knew the impossibility of it; indeed, of remaining so even for more than a few moments. His hands slowly slipped from where they rested on the statue. Atima stood before him, her arms hanging at her sides.

To know someone so, her dreams her, her desires! And for her to know his, every hope and doubt and longing. "Come," she said. They descended the stairway, not quickly, but surely, knowing their destination and what this night would bring.

How much of this was Atima and how much the stones? Im asked himself, and knew it was impossible to sort the two out. He and the girl had become part of the jewels and the jewels part of them. It would fade, undoubtedly, but never completely.

To her private chamber Atima led him, a simple cell with little to mark it as hers. Im cared not, only that she was there with him. They would share themselves again, on the night of the Feast of Autumn.

41.

A FIRST LOVE FOR BOTH of us, Im reflected, but more than that, as significant as it might be. A bond had been created that only death would break. That was no romantic notion; he recognized the magic that had linked them, the magic of those four mystical gems.

Did the priests and priestesses know what had happened last night? Not the magic part, but the fact that he and Atima had become lovers? Surely eyes had spied them, had known where he spent the night. That was as it was. But there was no need to advertise it. Im had returned to his own cell and cleaned up there before going to an early breakfast on his own. Atima was not yet there.

Xido was, and Na with him. They regarded him gravely. Im attempted to ignore their attention as he filled his bowl with sweetened gruel, into which he liberally stirred dried fruit. Raisins, the Ildin priests named them and Im had become extraordinarily fond of their flavor. Just the tastes of this world had made it worth leaving Hirstel!

But he had found far more. He carried his breakfast bowl to the table where his fellow travelers waited and plopped down on the smooth dark wood bench. It was Xido who spoke. "We could feel what happened last night. Such sorcery can not go unnoticed."

Im had not even thought of that. "Do you think others, um, elsewhere know?"

"Undoubtedly," replied the god. "Were it not for the protection of the jewels, you two would have been vulnerable to attack."

"No others could enter the world you shared," added Na. That made sense to Im. Only one in contact with a stone — or perhaps all of them — would be able to go there.

"Holos had to attempt contacting me," the sorceress went on. "I brought Xido in too and we explained as best we could."

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"And now the gems have been brought to the attention of too many. Their power will tempt some."

Na shook her head. "No, Xit, they will tempt all. They tempt me."

"They tempt mortals," he clarified. "They tempt me only to throw them into the depths of the sea."

Im considered that. "They would not stay there," he stated. He was pretty certain.

"It is so," agreed the god. "But it might be millennia before they came together again and found their way to men."

"If men still existed," said Na.

"They will always exist in some world," replied Xido. He chuckled. "I should say in an infinite number of worlds. As do those stones."

"Those worlds don't concern us, do they?" asked Im between spoonfuls of hot cereal. He should have added more milk, he told himself.

"They do not. Let us worry about one world at a time. As to you and Atima, I think we saw this coming. Banat certainly must have and put you together on purpose."

"Oh." Another thing that had not occurred to Im. "I — I wonder if Atima herself foresaw any of it."

Na appeared interested in an answer to that, as well. Xido but shook his head. "It is a given of prophecy that one can not see oneself." He looked up. "Here comes our prophetess now."

Many eyes followed Atima's entrance — or so it seemed to Im. He thought she would join them but once she filled her bowl, Janal beckoned her. The girl sent a brief smile Im's way and went to sit beside the chief priest.

"You'll see her at your studies today," commiserated Na. "Assuming the old priest doesn't declare you off-limits."

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Xido only murmured, "Don't tease the boy." But Im felt a lump in his throat. What if the priests turned them out?

He needn't have feared. "All is well. The chief priest but asked after my own well-being," Atima said when she showed up, only slightly late, for the morning lesson. Atima frequently was late but it did not usually worry Im so! "And," she added, "he said Lord Banat spoke to him in a dream, to assure him things were as they should be."

Knowing looks passed among the trio. Had they not suspected the god was in on it, somehow? "So be it, then," said Xido. "Let us get to today's studies."

Thus that day passed, and the next, and they fell back into their routine, save that two couples now shared rooms and themselves in that shrine high in the hills above the Lantabee River, flowing as ever toward the Southern Sea. It was a way they must someday take themselves.

Class was ending a few mornings later when Janal approached. "Your demon," he announced, "has been standing at the far end of the bridge since dawn. Perhaps from even before dawn. It perturbs the pilgrims who travel here."

"It might want something," said Im to Xido.

"There is but one way to find out," answered the god, rising from his bench.

Atima jumped up, her curiosity unhidden. "Oh, I would like to see him up close. May I come?"

Janal clearly disliked the idea. "Is it safe?"

"It has no interest in her, nor can it pass the wards set on this place." Xido turned to the girl. "The demon is an 'it,' not a 'him,' he said. "And you may accompany us."

Qu'orthseth was indeed stationed across the chasm, unmoving. "I'd rather not step outside the warding," spoke Xido. "I might or might

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not find it difficult to get back in. We could shout across the bridge, I suppose.”

“Or I could walk over there,” replied Im. “Or partway.”

“Don’t go beyond half across,” warned the god.

The demon had apparently noticed them. “There are strange men about,” it called. Im had heard the shepherds in these hills blow upon great horns; Qu’orthseth’s voice carried as did those.

“Ildin?” he shouted back. Im was near the mid point. Best he stop as Xido had asked, though he felt the little god worried overly much.

“All men appear the same to me,” came the demon’s rumble. “But I could tell they were not as those who live here. Their speech is different.”

Xido called out something in the language of Tesra, and then, “Is that the language they use?” Im had been learning some of it, as had Na, though they conversed from afar with Holos in their own tongue, which the sorcerer insisted on referring to as Ancient Zikem.

“It is,” came the demon’s reply.

“Im! Get back at once!” cried out Xido. “It’s unsafe out there.”

Why did the god suddenly feel so? The young wizard turned and began to leisurely make his way to the gate. An arrow whistled by him. He moved more quickly then. Did another fly in his direction before he made it to safety? Im was not sure.

“Akorzef will deal with your would-be assassins if it catches them,” stated Xido.

Atima had thrown her arms about the boy and for some seconds the two only held each other. Then he asked, “More bounty hunters sent by demon authorities?”

“Possibly,” admitted Xido. “Or by someone who has become aware of you and your talent. A Tesran, maybe, or even this Wizard-Lord of whom Holos told us.”

“As if I needed more enemies. Here is Qu’orthseth back.”

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“What word?” cried out Xido.

“Two men I found,” came the demon’s bellow. “Two lie slain.” With that, the crimson creature turned and strode into the forest.

“It is well,” spoke Xido. Then, after a moment’s consideration, he added, “I do hope they were the men who shot at you, my lad.”

“A little late to worry about that,” was all Im could say. That and asking whether it was lunchtime.

"I THINK I'LL TELL OLD Holos about this," said Im.

"Now?" asked Na. The two were scraping their empty plates clean before returning them. No one had told them to do so — the clerics here were exceptionally non-demanding of them — but they had watched how things were done.

"Best time there is." They had found that right after lunch typically found the chief wizard of Tesra willing to communicate. With a seeming time difference of three hours or so and Holos's late rising, it worked well for all.

"Human assassins, was it?" the sorcerer said after Im relayed his tale to him. "And they looked like Tesrans." This was a restatement, not a question.

"They *seemed* like Tesrans," Im told him. "Heard, not seen. I've yet to see a single Tesran in person." He had felt it best to keep Qu'orthseth's contributions out of the account, which, admittedly, left some holes.

Holos did not press him on those. "More than ever," he said, "I suspect that Torut, the Wizard-Lord, is involved in this." The man had no way of knowing about the demons' desire to end Im's life; that was another matter the boy had kept to himself. Still, it seemed odd to Im that an unknown and far-off sorcerer should suddenly seek his life.

Na spoke up for the first time. Not having witnessed the encounter at the bridge, she had nothing to add there, but she mused now, "I wonder how they knew it was Im who came out into the open."

Because the demons are working with them, came immediately into Im's mind. How else? He did not say this. Sometimes it became difficult to separate thought from words while in the link and the careless said things they did not intend.

Holos, of course, had no answer for Na. They spoke briefly of a few

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inconsequential matters, gossip, truly. The goings-on in Tesra fascinated Na and she always seemed eager to hear of them. It was then that another presence made itself known.

“Atima! What are you doing here?” Im asked at once. He was both dismayed by the possible danger and impressed that she had managed to join them. But she was inextricably linked to him already, was she not?

The girl came into focus, giggling. “I wanted to see what you were up to.”

Holos spoke hurriedly. “She is too open. We should break —”

The three sorcerers knew how to block against intrusions; they did it almost without thinking. Atima’s defenses were not so well developed. Another had come in through her.

“Torut,” whispered the wizard Holos. There was fear in that whisper.

The Wizard-Lord was allowing himself to be seen, and he himself casually, and rather dismissively, regarded each of the four in turn before speaking. “I greet you, Holos of Tesra.” It was a smooth voice, a cultured voice, speaking an oddly-accented Zikem.

But this was no Tindeval nor Holos, no sorcerer who had prospered by serving his people. He was neither sleek of body nor dressed in finery. Torut wore — nothing. His body was gaunt and carried many scars, and hair and beard might not have known scissors — nor a comb — for decades, perhaps even centuries. Uncut finger and toenails curled to ridiculous and disconcerting lengths.

He is utterly mad, Im realized, as so many others driven insane by their magic.

“You would like to break the link, would you not?” asked the intruder. “But I hold this little girl. Would you leave her alone with me?” Sudden harsh and derisive laughter erupted from him. The black depths

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of his eyes fixed themselves on Im. "I know you will not. There is a bond between you. I can sense it."

"What do you want?" asked the boy. There was no sense in not getting to it.

"Your death," came the matter-of-fact answer. "Certain friends of mine have requested I see to it, and they offer me assistance in exchange." Then, in a suddenly fierce voice, Torut stated, "And I would not have a powerful new enemy in my world."

The more urbane tones returned as his attention went to Na. "You, my dear, I would have as a friend." No more did he say, but it made Im's skin crawl. Na remained impassive.

"Let the girl go," she said, her voice even and conversational. "We have no dispute with you."

"All the world has a dispute with me!" Torut's answer came with an abrupt vehemence. "I will pull it all down one of these days." Another mocking laugh. "And rebuild it only if I feel like it."

"Do you think yourself a god?" Holos's voice wavered but he seemed to be holding himself steady. The wizard could have broken away from the link had he wished, Im was certain.

"More than a god, little wizard. They draw their power from their worlds but I shall have all worlds within me! I have seen this."

"He means the jewels," came Atima's barely audible words. "He wants to possess them."

"I shall," said Torut, "in time. But now to deal with you."

What power the Wizard-Lord wielded, Im was not sure, but it was as if he had reached out and struck the girl. She gasped and staggered.

And Im felt it. Between this link and that of the stones, he was inextricably bound to the girl. He could break it, maybe, escape, leave her to — death? This powerful sorcerer might or might not be able to

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slay her from afar, but he would not hesitate to blast her mind, leaving her broken. And, in the process, perhaps drive Im to madness as well.

However, this connection worked both ways. He had been in Atima's mind. He knew the way. "Help me," he said, mostly to Na though the assistance of Holos would not be unwelcome. "I must break her link."

Think of the jewels, he told himself, and so doing told Atima the same thing. Join in them. Let the two of us be one.

Ah! The mind of Torut was opened to him and Im recoiled in shock and revulsion. Madness and hatred and despair roiled there, joined to a fearful sorcerous power. But there was much to learn as well; secrets swarmed in that darkness. A look of surprise on the Wizard-Lord's face — he had not expected me to get in, Im recognized.

It disoriented the man, only a second or two, but enough to let Im's wizardly comrades break all links, Torut fading and cursing in unreined rage.

Na and Im were standing in the courtyard. Atima lay limp on the stone pavement.

XIDO RUSHED TOWARD THEM.

"He sensed what happened," observed Na. She knelt beside the fallen girl. "She breathes evenly. We should get her inside."

The god now crouched at Atima's side. "Yes," he said, apparently to Na's suggestion, as he scooped the young woman up. "Her chamber."

By the time they reached that chamber, a crowd of priests and priestesses followed them. Leaving Na and Im to put the girl to bed, Xido held a whispered conference with Janal. The chief priest nodded gravely at his words and then shooed the curious clerics away. "She'll be fine," he reassured them. "Let her rest." Whether he believed that is anybody's guess.

Im was becoming increasingly distraught. There was no sign of consciousness from Atima. Was this all his fault? He should have listened to those warnings. And those warnings should have been firmer!

Yes, of course he wanted to blame someone. Himself, his companions, the priests, the gods. So do we all. But what is the good of that? Eh? You think he should blame Atima for her carelessness? Not at all likely, Friend!

"We must reach her mind," Xido was saying. "That may depend on you, Im."

"Me? Oh." He saw the sense in that. Who else was joined to her as was he? He gazed at the motionless girl, the girl he quite possibly loved. "Can we link when she is so?"

"Only one way to find out. When you feel rested enough." He too looked at Atima. "It might be well to let her rest a little while too. But not too long."

Im sat down. Yes, he needed to settle himself, let his mind and body return to normal; that and only that. Then he could make the

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attempt, open the bond. She had glimpsed Torut's darkness as had he. That might well overwhelm one.

Or there might be more. Im did not want to think of it but the Wizard-Lord might have truly damaged her mind. The Atima he knew could be lost. Ah, there was no point in brooding on it. "I am ready," he said, rising.

"Best you first attempt to link with her," felt Xido. "Then I shall try to join you."

Im nodded. That made sense; he should be as open as possible when he tried this. He knelt by the bed and reached out. No. It wasn't going to work. That became apparent at once.

"We need to go up to the statue," he said and knew it was so. "The jewels will open the way."

"Of course," muttered the god, obviously thinking it should have occurred to him. "I'll carry her."

Janal waited outside the door. "We climb to the stoa," came Na's curt explanation. "It is there she will be healed." The priest nodded; the power of his god was something he could believe in.

But he did not follow them up the stairs, taking a station on the bottom step. Im led the way, Xido behind, bearing the unconscious girl in his arms. Na brought up the rear, her own arms filled with blankets. The practical sorceress was not about to have that girl laid on the cold stones up there.

It was still early afternoon. The whole event, the attack by Torut, had taken but a few minutes. Na spread her load on the floor and frowned. "Holos is calling me. I'll let him wait."

"It is good that he is concerned," remarked Xido. "My opinion of the man improves."

"You will want to give him the good news after these two succeed,"

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came a sonorous voice. Banat stepped from a golden cloud. "I will stay out of your way, Cousin. I come only from concern."

Xido nodded and turned to the young wizard. Im took one of Atima's hands in his own — he did not believe it really necessary but it reassured him — and placed his other on the statue. Which stone did the girl say spoke most clearly to her? The blue, the sapphire, the jewel of the air. He let his fingers rest on it. That, too, may have been unnecessary.

He was surprised by the ease and quickness of the link. But Atima — he saw her before him but her eyes were blank, staring at nothing. "Atima," he softly called. No response. Could he let Xido in? He reached out from this world of multi-colored shifting light, the world of the Jewels of the Elements.

"Aiee! This is not a place I would willingly travel," said the god as he materialized. He glanced at the girl. "You must go into her, lad, into her mind. You have done it before, so know that you can do it again." He sighed. "And I fear I must go with you."

All three of their minds in the same space? Im had definite misgivings. But he let himself fall into — Atima? Or the stones? He wasn't sure. Maybe it was the same thing. And yes, there was Xido with him. The god seemed reluctant.

"Oh, Im, you're here!" said Atima. "It was so dark I couldn't find you."

Im could see that her eyes were screwed shut, unable to see the jewel-light all around her. "You saw things you wish you had not," he said, and took her in his arms. So to speak. Maybe his body was doing the same thing — that is the body that was in this world of the jewels, not the one back at the shrine. But right now, he and Atima were not quite real at all, but thoughts in the girl's head. Well, his head too and maybe even Xido's. Best not think too hard on that and confuse things.

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"Kiss her," came a whisper. "It works in fairy tales."

Was Xido making jokes? But he did as told. Atima clung to him, still seemingly blind. "You are safe with me," he told her. "Torut can not harm you."

Her eyes opened. "Torut! Oh, Im, I saw such horrible things in his mind, such madness!"

"Then look in mine." He was sane, wasn't he? Even if Xido had once joked that everyone in Hirstel was a little mad. "Look at the love in me."

She started back suddenly. "Is that Lord Xido?"

"It is," came the god's voice. "Do you think you are ready to come home, child?"

Atima looked about, seemingly lost. "How?" she asked, her voice but a plaintive whisper. "I don't know the way."

"Join with us and we shall take you back. You and I, Im, must break the bond that keeps her here."

"Bond? Oh, she never quite left her link, did she?" It was obvious, he thought, and then felt his mind fully merging with those of Atima and Xido. He mustn't let himself be confused by the sudden vertiginous merging of consciousnesses, the flow of knowledge and thoughts from one to another. There was so much in Xido's mind, so much more knowledge than he dreamed even existed.

It was Xido who severed the links then and brought them back to the world of men. Im had mostly been along to open the way for the god, he realized. And Atima was awake and sitting up.

"She will need to rest for a day or two, but shouldn't have suffered any damage," said the little god. He shook his head and added, "But I will not be the same."

"That is true from moment to moment," said Banat. "All things constantly change." He looked to Im, sitting on the floor beside Atima, holding her. "They will not be the same either."

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Xido laughed aloud. “That pair has been inside both Torut’s mind and my own. That is likely to change anyone. Let’s get down from this rock.”

"YOU HAVE MY GRATITUDE, XIDO," said the golden god Banat. Atima slept in her bed; Im rested on the floor beside it, rarely taking his eyes off the girl. Na had gone off somewhere, perhaps to speak to her wizard in Tesra.

"We caused all this trouble too," Xido pointed out.

"You were but a part of events. Were I to lay blame it would all be on this Torut." He gravely considered this a few seconds. "Yes. He is a man of evil."

Xido nodded, quite in agreement. "I am tempted to return to my home, gather my strength, and find my way to this Wizard-Lord."

"Even a god would have difficulty against so skilled a wizard — the greatest in this world since Hurasu himself," said Banat.

"But not his equal."

"No. He is one of many who has risen to power since the death of the Lord of Visions, two thousand years ago. You would have to face him on his own terms, sorcery against sorcery."

Xido scowled, recognizing the truth in Banat's words. "Would you do better?"

"I think not. I have not practiced the art as have you." The god paused, and glanced toward the young couple. "And it is a matter for mortals."

"Then perhaps I should become mortal a while — in one form or another." Xido made no attempt to hide the animus he felt.

Banat but smiled. "I would not want you as an enemy, my Lord Crocodile."

Na slipped in. "The old boy was actually concerned about us," she reported. "Or maybe about losing potential allies."

Im looked up. "I think we should be on our way," he announced. "We could find a ship to Tesra before winter set in."

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His companions were in complete agreement. "Or winter in Pas, if we must," Xido said. "It should be warmer than here."

"And I shall finally behold the sea," added Na.

"But we must be certain Atima has recovered." Im gave the sleeping girl a quick look and turned back again. "Then, it will be better for her if I am gone."

"Perhaps," spoke Banat. "There is much she could still learn from you. From all of you. But be that as it may — I can not keep you here."

Xido sat silently for a time before saying, "I might return and instruct her further. I do not accompany these two across the sea. They understand this. But," he went on, "we all know Atima and Im will try to speak from afar once he is gone. The girl must learn to do so safely."

"Then I thank you for this, Cousin. In return, I shall accompany you to the sea and see you safely aboard ship."

Im at once wondered how Banat might accomplish such a trip. He would stand out nearly as much as the demon Qu'orthseth. All this left his mind when Atima stirred. The girl's eyes grew wide. "Lord Banat?"

"Yes, my dear. Are you rested now?"

She nodded, and frowned as if trying to recall something. "Torut," she said at last, addressing Im. "And you and Xido came for me. Yes. So much of it seems a dream now, broken bits of memory."

Banat nodded. "To be expected, perhaps. Those memories might come back over time. Or they might fade further. Who can say?" In a more serious voice, he told her, "You must not attempt any links for a while. Prophecy should be safe, but first rest a few days."

A bell sounded, its tones muffled in this closed room. "Supper! I'm starving," claimed Atima.

"I could fetch something," began Im.

"No need." Out of bed and on her feet, a brief wobble, a laugh. "Good to go!"

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"And I need depart as well, but for only a while," announced the god Banat. "If I return not before you depart, I shall meet you on the road." With that, he drew his mist about him and disappeared.

"You are leaving?" Atima was surprised and, maybe, fearful.

"It is best we are on our way," came Xido's voice. "You are vulnerable as long as we stay here." Im was thankful the god said 'we' rather than 'Im.'

But it *was* he, mostly. "Let's talk about it later," he murmured. "I'm hungry too."

"We all have much to sort through in our heads," said Xido as they made their way to the priests' dining hall, down the high-vaulted, stone-walled passage. "Even I."

A ripple of whispered exclamations and exchanges greeted their entry. Janal rose from his place — just another seat along one of the long tables, for none took precedence here — and came to the four. "It is good to see you are well, Atima," said he. "Come and sit with me. All of you."

They could see a space was already being cleared, priests sliding down the benches to give them room. Plates and tankards filled, they joined the chief priest. "So you leave us?" He digested this bit of news. "I hope it is not too late. The winter storms will soon be on the sea."

"But fewer pirates," replied Xido. "There are dangers in every season."

"Pirates?" asked Na. "Why have I not heard of pirates before?" She seemed annoyed and perhaps with good reason. Im thought he would have liked to have known of them too.

"They are few," explained Janal. "Little profit in piracy along our coasts."

Xido nodded in agreement to this, adding, "But more along those near Tesra."

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"I would not know of that," said the priest, with a shrug. "We are more likely to see slave raiders."

Na grinned across the table at Im. "You'll have to learn how to use weapons, boy."

"Or how to swim," came his response. "Both of us."

She snickered. "Not a problem for our Xit. We need him along to give us a ride if there is trouble."

"My dear," said Xido, in the most polite of tones, "were I in my other form I would be much more likely to devour you."

"Hmmp. Well at least you are useful for some other things."

"I WARN YOU ONCE AGAIN, do not reach out to me until Xido is with you." Im stood at the great bronze gate, holding Atima's hands in his own.

Two days they had, two days of saying farewell, and now he and his companions must be on the road. Banat had not yet reappeared but Im's demon bodyguard waited on the far side of the bridge. It would have been easy enough for Qu'orthseth to recognize they were leaving.

Two days with no more lessons but much knowledge to assimilate, much in Im's mind and much in Atima's, things that had crowded in during their links. Im slept restlessly, dreamed strange dreams. Atima, he was sure, was the same. Even Xido seemed a tad off at times; he had to deal with what he had glimpsed, second-hand, of Torut in Atima's mind. As did Im.

But the god had also entered the world of the jewels. That seemed to have more disturbed him than aught else. Perhaps the bond that had been created with Atima and Im had something to do with it, or maybe there was just something about the stones that was disconcerting to a deity.

A kiss and Im turned to cross the bridge, resume his journey to far Tesra. I will return, he told himself. Atima and he were so bound together now he would not be able to stay away. Im did not regret that fact in the least.

"No danger ahead that I can sense," reported Qu'orthseth. "We go to the sea now?"

"We do," spoke Xido, and the four travelers set forth, down the road they had climbed a season before. There was even less traffic now summer was past; the demon rarely need hide itself.

"I spy the river," said Na, toward noon. "That means we are near the main road south, right?"

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Xido glanced toward the east. "It should. We could follow it down to the port at its mouth or we can go back past Rorak and on to Pas. That is closer."

"The sooner we reach the coast the better chance we have of finding a ship," returned the sorceress. "I'd say Pas." She gave a questioning sidelong look to Im.

"Sure, Pas," he said. His mind was elsewhere, on a hilltop far behind them.

By the end of the day they had traveled well down that road south. Though they had money now, thanks to the priests of Banat, the choice was made to camp by roadside, avoiding inns and company of all sorts. "There are bound to be more attacks on us." Xido said this in a matter-of-fact fashion as he fanned the fire he was starting. "We shall need to remain vigilant. Even with Akorzef here." The demon was standing a little way off, giving no indication of its thoughts or intentions. Nor even that it was alive.

As they ate a meager supper, Na asked, "There have been many mentions of, um, Hurasu since this Torut popped up. Did you know him, Xit?"

"Urathu you named him in Hirstel, didn't you?" asked the god. "And even put up a shrine for him. You remembered him better than this world, as powerful as he was, as much as he shaped its history." He stared into the fire a few moments. "I knew him, yes, but not well."

Xido turned and called to the demon. "Are you old enough to have known him, Akorzef?"

"Before my time," rumbled the red beast. "I have heard he dealt rarely with demons or gods."

"Yes, that is so. He feared any outsiders finding this world, which he considered his own. He avoided reaching beyond it." Xido gave a wry smile. "That is why I never sought him out but only visited now and

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then, disguised, to follow his progress. I had more followers here then and took an interest in things.”

Im leaned in. “Was he the greatest wizard ever?”

“Perhaps in this world, though he was not born here. If others were more powerful, they chose not to assert themselves as did he.” The god raised his eyes to the two wizards, saying, “It should be recognized that most sorcerers who have followed were descended from him. Maybe all of them. Indeed, just about everyone in this world may have some of his heritage.”

Does that mean you and me? It just might be so!

Na considered this and then gave Xido the oddest of looks. “And how many might have some of your heritage, Xit?”

He laughed loudly. “Rather few, my lady. I can choose whether my, ah, lovers will become pregnant and have generally chosen against it. This is not something I have discussed with other gods at any length but I think it is true of most of us.”

“Perhaps just as well,” muttered the wizardess.

But the subject fascinated Im. “Would your children be gods?”

“Anything is possible. They could be monsters, like that mafadwi that attacked you, or simply human. Well, maybe not simply. Some powers are to be expected.”

“You said you were related to that mafwhatzit?” asked Na.

“So it seems. In the mafadwi, two natures, human and beast, mingle. How this first came to be, none know; it is lost in a dim and distant past. We who call ourselves gods of my world can separate those natures, but inside perhaps we are still mafadwi.”

“And,” came the low groan of Qu’orthseth’s voice, “some of us can see it.”

THE ATTACK CAME THE NEXT morning. Their old adversaries, the demon policemen materialized in the road before them, two blue-green creatures as before — and, as before, not necessarily the same two. Qu'orthseth was set to charge them.

"Halt," ordered Xido, "and stay near. I fear this be a trap."

"Distraction," muttered Na. Her reading of books on military subjects was again showing. "If there are human attackers, deal with them. Im and I can handle your constables now."

"I'll send mine back before yours," challenged Im. "I've got the one on the right."

"Behind us!" roared Qu'orthseth. Three, no, four men were stepping out into the way, naked swords in their hands. There was no trusting to arrows this time; these assassins were going make certain of things.

Na's target popped out of the world of mortals, seconds before Im's. "Drat," the boy grumbled.

Na snickered. "At least we both out-magicked the demon sorcerers who sent them. More trouble coming!" They turned and spied the approaching men. There was not much to do but cower behind the protection of the crimson demon. It would have been so much easier in Hirstel, where they might have called up a number of demons for defense.

Here, they were not able to call up much more than smoke and shadows. Both knew that might be necessary before things were done. If only he could pull shadow in around those men rather than around himself, thought Im. Was that even possible? He'd never heard of it being done but decided right then he would investigate — someday!

He pulled his belt-knife from its sheathe, feeling quite as useless with it in his hand as he had without it. What did he know of fighting?

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Something else he should learn. Xido, similarly armed, stood waiting a little ahead of him and Na.

The demon silently launched itself at a pair of their assailants. Xido lunged forward to engage another, knife against sword. "Let's hide," Im whispered urgently to his companion. Both began at once to pull in concealing smoke — that was easier than shadow, though perhaps less effective. Plus, those hiding in it had to breathe it in!

It was also not so hard to look out of a shadow and see the world around one. Not so with a smoke cloud. Im could see a momentary flash of light on a sword as one of the assassins plunged into their screen. Beyond, he thought he glimpsed another sprawled on the road before everything outside the smoke became invisible. He and Na and the swordsman would be stumbling about in here until someone ran into someone.

So don't stumble, he told himself. At once he threw himself to the ground. Ah, it was easier to breathe there. And Im could see more, too, for the smoke was thinner. He continued to pull more in, all the while, and assumed Na did the same.

Ankles. Skinny brown ankles. That's Na, Im told himself. Over there, another approached. Did he spy the woman? Hands and knees, the boy scuttled to a position behind those legs, legs he could barely see through watering eyes. From his crouch, he hurled himself against the back of the man's knees. Down he went and Im was atop him, stabbing the assassin far more times than was necessary.

Of course, he had stopped calling smoke to himself through all this and the cloud grew thin about him. Im rose to a kneeling position to see Na regarding him with what he thought was a rather witless expression, her mouth hanging a bit open. Over to his left, Xido, the demon, three bodies. So that was that. He suddenly felt shaken and sat down there in

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the road, beside the prone body of the man he had slain. Ildin, wasn't he?

Xido strode over and surveyed the dead man. "Well done," was his only comment. "Are you all right, Na?" the god asked. She nodded only.

"Up, boy," he said, extending a hand to Im.

The young wizard let himself be helped erect, and then looked again at the other three men. "All Ildin?" he asked.

"So it seems. Hired assassins, maybe from Dekata's temple. The demons were to draw Akorzef away and then we were supposed to be easily slain." He smile grimly. "That was good sorcery from both of you. And you had best clean your knife, Im. It wouldn't do to let it get rusty."

He and Qu'orthseth tossed the bodies over the low cliff along the east side of their roadway. For a moment, Im suspected they were competing as to which threw theirs the farthest. But Xido wouldn't do that, would he?

"We have plenty of day left," announced the dark god, cleanup finished. "Let's be on our way." On toward the south, as before. All was the same, Im realized, despite the fact that he had killed a man. It hadn't changed him at all. That fact seemed odd, in its way.

But others would see him differently — maybe. Na, for sure. He caught her looking his way, her expression now thoughtful, more than once during the afternoon. As the sun fell toward the west, she walked close to him and said, "I had forgotten you were the brash boy who climbed Tindeval's tower. You could have been a great ruler in Hirstel, had you chosen."

He had to laugh at that thought. It seemed ridiculous now, though once he might have craved such a position. "Leaving the city of sorcerers is one decision I shall never regret."

Na nodded. "Nor shall I. And I have you to thank for it."

That was so, in its way. "You decided to go."

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“As did you. And see where it has led us!”

“And changed us.” Yes, it was his decisions that had truly changed him; climbing the tower, calling a god, leaving his world. Each of these led to the next and ultimately to Atima and the Jewels of the Elements. But for now, another choice, another destination, far Tesra.

In time, that path would lead him back. Im knew this in his heart.

THERE WAS A VISITOR BY the fire in the morning. Why had Qu'orthseth allowed him into the camp?

The hooded man noticed Im. "Your demon thinks I am trustworthy," he said. That voice — Banat. But he seemed a normal Ildin man. Well, not quite normal. The god was still strikingly handsome and his eyes the same unearthly violet hue.

His speech had awakened Xido. He looked his fellow god up and down. "You make a much finer mortal than I, Cousin," he remarked, and disappeared into the brush to relieve himself.

Im had to stare a bit. "Is this an, um, illusion, Lord Banat? Or truly your form?"

"I do not have two forms as does Xido. But I can diminish myself so."

"Diminish —" There was no point in asking for an explanation. But another question stepped forward. "Your powers, too?"

"That's not a polite question," interjected Xido, returning to the camp. "And yes, Banat's powers are diminished but he can resume them and his godly form at will."

"It is so," came the Ildin god's amiable agreement. "The two go together. Or I should say, they are the same thing, a part of me I have left in my own world."

A surprisingly clear explanation, thought Im. Would that Xido were always so straightforward. Na sat up and stretched, then cocked her head at the visitor. "Why did I settle for you, Xit?" she asked.

"Because I am not nearly so virtuous as my cousin Banat," the god replied. "By the way, what should we call you?"

"Vulo will do. As it has in the past." Xido smiled at the name; it took Im a moment to figure it out. A play on his wife's name, wasn't it? The goddess Vulata.

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"I intend to walk with you the rest of the way," Vulo-Banat continued.

"I hope you brought your own coins," muttered Na.

The god laughed. "It hadn't occurred to me! And then, any I brought from my realm would go back there eventually. I would cheat no one."

"Except us," spoke Xido. He held his hand out to the fire. "I would guess you rebuilt this, Vulo? It would be nice to have a hot breakfast."

"Remember I eat no meat," said the god Banat. "As my priests."

"Don't we know it? Weeks of such fare at the shrine and none for us to carry on our journey."

Im spoke. "I shall not eat meat again." He had just decided this at that moment, though it had been on his mind since the first time Qu'orthseth had brought slain animals to them.

"It didn't hurt us to do without," Na added.

"Speak for yourself," was all Xido had to say about that.

That day, Qu'orthseth found more and more frequent need to conceal itself, as they traveled south on the increasingly busy way. "I travel in parallel from here," it announced. "Two gods can keep the boy safe enough and I shall be near."

"The boy has shown he can defend himself as well," answered Xido.

The demon regarded Im for a moment. "This is true," it admitted, and turned to disappear into the woods. There was still much forest about them, but they were out of the high hills and passing by more patches of farmland. The villages were much as those Im had seen before, the round wooden houses, and none with defenses.

Too, inns of a sort appeared. These were not houses but open-air kitchens and sheds where one might obtain a meal and camp. It became more convenient to stop at these than to sleep by the roadside. Na and Xido would gossip with fellow travelers, but Im found himself more

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often in the company of the rather reserved Banat. No one seemed to note anything particularly unusual about the god-in-disguise, though women invariably eyed him. So did some men, for that matter.

“Xido and I shall attempt to thoroughly ward your ship before you leave,” the god told him, one evening. “It should keep you safe while you are at sea.” Banat glanced toward their companions, sharing beer and news with a group of traveling merchants. “For that matter, you and the Lady Na could most certainly do a decent job of the warding yourselves.”

Maybe so, thought Im. “We must stow Qu’orthseth on board before raising any wards. It could not pass them.” Not if they were sufficiently strong.

“Yes. You and the demon are stuck with each other.” Banat said only that but Im suspected he knew much more.

“For good?”

“There are many possible turnings of that road.”

“Ha, my, uh, Vulo, that sounds like the sort of thing Atima would say to supplicants at the shrine.”

Im had meant it as a jest, but Banat answered seriously. “Sometimes, young wizard, there is nothing else that can be said.”

THEY DID NOT HALT AT Rorak, but passed by its stockade, crossing the east-west highway and following their own road on toward the south. Toward the port town of Pas, which none had seen — save maybe Banat, and he said nothing of it. What could they expect?

Xido told them what he had learned from talking with travelers. “It lies on a broad shallow bay, protected by a point over that way.” He gestured to the west.

“The end of the chain of hills we recently left,” said Na. When the others gaped at her, she added, “I saw a map at the shrine.”

Im had seen maps but hadn’t quite understood them. But he hadn’t tried very hard to do so.

“There’s a big, um, island off the coast. That’s solid land in the water, right?” Having never seen the sea, Na was understandably not quite sure. “Some Ildin live there but not many and they mine brimstone,” she rushed through this last bit of information.

“Brimstone? Not particularly useful,” felt Xido. “But minerals from the mountains make their way down to the harbor, like the iron of our dwarf friends.”

“*Your* dwarf friends,” corrected Na.

“As you will. It is a good fishery too,” continued the god. “I suspect that is the most important trade in Pas.” He gave Banat a look. “Do you eat fish?”

“I do not. Nothing that is conscious, Cousin.”

Xido shrugged. “It is easy enough to make them unconscious.”

There came a surprisingly abrupt change in the landscape, a place where the soil went from a reddish-brown to an almost white sand in the space of a mile or two. The scrubby landscape changed as well, with many clumps of small palms springing up along the way. “We near the sea,” Banat announced. “I have been catching its scent for some time.”

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Xido sniffed and nodded in agreement. "Still a day's walk, maybe?"

Im had no idea what they were talking about. The air was full of smells and he could not sort them out. "There is less traffic on this way," he said.

"I suspect the port is little used when winter comes," answered Xido. "It will be luck if a Tesra-bound ship happens to be there."

"But," replied Banat, "a fisherman might be willing to make the voyage for a price."

Xido thought it possible. "That might attract less attention. What say you, friends, would you care to cross the Western Sea in an open fishing vessel?"

"Would there be room for Qu'orthseth?" asked Im. That was necessary.

"Probably not," admitted Xido and Banat nodded in agreement. "You and Na do have a knack for recognizing the impractical."

"And we recognize that we won't find out if there is a ship till we reach Pas," stated Na.

Reaching Pas came the next day. There was a defensive wall here as at Rorak, but this was of stone, not wood, and encircled only a small area near the middle of the town. The rest of it sprawled around those walls and down to the sea.

Qu'orthseth had joined them these last few hours. Now all stood on a low rise before the road descended into Pas. "It will be hard for you to conceal yourself around here," said Im. There was little cover for a large demon.

"I can hide under the water," it said. "I would rather not. Hard to sense what is going on."

"It may be time to turn you into a statue," Xido told the demon. He looked the creature up and down. "Banat and I could easily lug you into the town in that form but it might raise suspicions about us."

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Na had a better idea. "You need a wagon."

"Yes. Not right away. Just keep out of sight for a while, Akorzef, and we'll check things out."

The crimson beast turned its head toward the port town. "Many men here, Lord Xido. There may be danger."

"Undoubtedly. Let's go." The demon watched the two humans and two gods walk away before turning to seek a place to lie up and await what would come.

"I shall be a priest," announced Banat as they neared the buildings. He pulled a two-peaked green and purple cap from his bag and slipped it on. "Of Vulata, naturally."

"Naturally," agreed Xido. "Does that mean you will play a musical instrument?"

"If necessary." He stopped and gave Im and Na a looking over. "You two could pass as Tesrans. That is unless you meet an actual Tesran. There may be such here."

"It is hoped there are," added Xido. "With ships."

"Yes, indeed. So we'd best stick to the essentially truthful tale you've been telling all along."

Im rattled off their cover story. "We come from an isolated folk related to the Tesrans and have journeyed far to visit the great city."

"But let's drop the part about me being his sister," suggested Na.

"Okay, Mom," said Im.

"No one would ever believe that!" she sniffed — and was probably right.

There was many a curious look as the four proceeded up the main street. This Pas actually did have streets, and was definitely the largest town they had seen so far in this world. That the streets were of sand must be admitted, and that there may have been no more than five or six of them. This street led them down to the bay and docks.

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One quay of rough stone jutted out into the water; several docks on piles flanked it. Na stood and looked out in wonder. "That's the sea?"

"More or less," said Xido. "I can't see the island you mentioned. Must be too far away."

"So many birds!" There were, it was true, gulls and pelicans and other birds of shore and sea, lining the pilings and railings and rooftops.

"They's startin' to show up for the winter," a nearby lounge offered. He gave Na and Im a good looking over. "You two wantin' the Tesran ship? It's still here." He waved an arm toward several vessels further down the shore. "Not much longer."

"Thank you, good sir," spoke the priest Vulo. "The largest one, I would assume," he said less loudly to his companions.

Largest, yes, but none would be likely to call the Tesran ship 'large.' It was a broad, round-bottomed tub with two masts, the square sails furled. A single steering oar was mounted at the rear, to the left, and there were ports for oars if rowing proved necessary. Not many of these. None of this meant a thing to Na and to Im.

"That's the pennant of Tesra up there," said Xido, pointing at a strip of blue and white cloth drooping from atop one of the masts. "They're loading cargo, it seems." Men were coming and going and the Hirstelites could make no sense of any of it.

But they could see that many looked like themselves. Some more than others. "Tesrans at last," whispered Na.

"Is the captain aboard?" called Xido. His call was in Tesran so Na and Im caught only the most general gist of it.

A stocky dark man with a short beard came to the rail. "I'm captain here. What do you want of me?" He seemed none too inclined to be friendly. That is until his eyes fell on the Hirstelites. He said something to them they did not understand.

It was then that Banat took charge, addressing the man in Ildin.

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"This pair is not of Tesra," he explained and proceeded to give him their agreed-upon and essentially true story. "They wandered down from the north," he went on, "and I and this Bazu trader —"

"Xit's the name," interjected Xido.

The man nodded. "Call me Mak." He turned his attention back to Banat.

"Yes, Xit and I took them under our wings, so to speak, and accompanied them down here to find passage." Banat raised his eyes to look over the ship. "It seems a fine vessel. Are you bound for Tesra?"

Captain Mak laughed. "No ship that sails the Central Sea is bound for Tesra, lad. We would have to sail it across a wide stretch of hills! But, aye, we are headed in that direction." He regarded Na and Im. "So you two want passage? Can you pay?"

"Not a problem," spoke up Xido before they could say anything. "And they are expected by the chief wizard of Tesra, Holos, who might throw in a bit of a bonus."

"Oh." Mak looked at the duo with new eyes. "Wizards?"

"I'm afraid so," chuckled Xido.

THE CAPTAIN'S CABIN WAS SNUG. "I'll be even more crowded when I evict my mate from his cabin and move him in here," he said. "But I have to put you somewhere." He frowned at the pair. "You aren't a couple though, are you?"

"We've spent months on the road together," Na was quick to tell him. "We won't mind having to share a room."

"Cabin," Im corrected her. He was picking up nautical terms as quickly as possible. "Um, there is some cargo, a small statue we wish to deliver to Holos. It should be along shortly."

Another frown from Captain Mak. The expression seemed to be a frequent visitor to his face. "I don't know if we'll have room in the hold for any statuary."

"It can be lashed to the deck, sir," volunteered Im. He knew nothing of such things but that was what Qu'orthseth had said it would prefer, wasn't it?

That seemed to satisfy the man. A couple flagons of beer seemed to have helped his mood as well. He leaned back, belched discreetly, and asked, "Where exactly be this home of yours located?"

Na answered. "It is in a great desert. We passed over mountains and came down from the north."

"Yes," added Im. "We ran into some people who call themselves Charcha on our journey."

"And then down through Ildin lands and eventually here," the sorceress concluded.

And every bit of it was true, wasn't it?

"How'd that priest get mixed up with you?" Im suspected the sailor disliked priests for some reason.

"We were taken in at the shrine of Banat, up in the hills," immediately responded Im. "He and Xit offered to escort us down here when we

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left.” This bit hadn’t been planned but it fitted into the story well enough. Moreover, it was also the truth.

Mak nodded. “The Ildin are good people. Even the priests. As for Bazu —” He shrugged.

Competitors, thought Im. And sometimes pirates too, right?

“I’ll have your cabin ready on the morrow,” promised Mak, “and we sail on the next day. Have your statue here or it will be left behind. I need to go check on my crew.” He paused. “If you’ve no place to stay the night, you’re welcome to sleep on deck. The weather’s good enough.”

“Thank you, sir,” responded Na. “We’d best go find our friends.”

Xido and Banat had hired an ox cart and gone off to collect Qu’orthseth in his golden statue guise. How soon they might return, the two magicians had no idea. They wandered along the waterfront a while, taking in yet another new aspect of their new world. “It was probably quite unsafe for those gods to leave you alone,” remarked Na.

“I have you to protect me,” Im answered, though he was a bit distracted. It *was* odd — neither gods nor demon available if anything happened. Maybe they felt he and Na had learned enough to take care of themselves. And they would have to do just that, soon enough.

A little Ildin man, wrapped in a long and shabby black tunic shuffled close to them. Glittering eyes, dark, glared at the pair from beneath bristling, overarching white eyebrows, and an equally white beard fell to his waist. “Wizards, aren’t you?” he asked. “Me too. I’m the top man around here, just so you know.”

“We are pleased to meet you, sir,” said Na, her politeness not completely concealing a certain amusement. “I am Na and this is Im.” The boy gave him a nod. He was still thinking about their vulnerability.

The fellow seemed slightly taken aback by their attitude. Perhaps he had been expecting a fight, had been ready to protect his little

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domain against newcomers. "Balakal," he introduced himself. "I would be honored to have you visit my abode."

Na looked to Im, who shrugged. "Why not," she said, laughing, and they followed the wizard Balakal to a room as shabby as he.

How did he know they were sorcerers? wondered Im. It was not something that was usually evident, especially if one had any sort of training in control. It was the untutored, who let their minds wander to other worlds, perhaps without even knowing it, who could be sensed. But the boy didn't think on this question; perhaps he should have.

"Wine?" asked the wizard. "I have some decent stuff. From vineyards up in the hills, none of that flatland swill." He set out three mismatched earthen tumblers and filled them from a small amphora. The wine proved to be, indeed, decent.

"Do you have a good practice here, Balakal?" asked Na, quite politely. Im knew her interest might have been partly feigned but she was in a good mood and apparently liked the wine. So did he. They were both glad that things were finally working out, that they would be on to the next leg of their journey. Across the sea and visiting the greatest city this world had ever known!

He felt lethargic. I'm just tired, he told himself, and shouldn't have gulped down this wine. But I could have another cup, couldn't I? Then he — felt something else, recognized a subtle touch of magic. This fool was attempting to bind them!

And had perhaps succeeded. "Come into my town, will you?" old Balakal cackled. "I'm the only wizard here!" Beside him, a pair of blue-green demons materialized. The best wizard in Pas took one wide-eyed look at them and fled.

Seconds to act, Im knew. The demon sorcerers who sent these two had felt he and Na were weakened and thought to take them by surprise. Na seemed stupefied, staring at the intruders.

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Bound by that old charlatan? Not he! Im looked to the bindings the man had attempted and swept them away with a thought. He stood to face the advancing demons and knew — anger.

Yes, anger it was, ready to explode. He had had enough of this, of being hunted, of being attacked. He reached out and felt his power as never before. One of the demons howled, holding up its shriveling hand. It winked out of the world and, a few seconds later, so did its companion.

Na gaped at the empty space where they had stood. “You deflated it,” she murmured. “I don’t feel very good. I think — oooh — oooh — oops.” She giggled. “I guess our host can clean that up. Hmm, I’ve been bound, haven’t I? Pretty ineptly.” Na made a gesture and rose. “Let’s get out of here. I think I wouldn’t mind sleeping on a ship deck tonight.”

"THAT SHOULD DO," FELT XIDO. He stepped back to view the 'statue' of Qu'orthseth, thoroughly lashed to the deck, just before the main mast. "We can get you two settled in now."

"Settled in?" scoffed Na. "All we own we are carrying. Or wearing!"

"He means the wards, I think," said Im. "We should be part of that and see how they are constructed."

"After last night, I don't think you need any warding," she answered. "Only demons can get at us at sea, right? And you can handle those."

"One sort of demon," spoke Banat. "What if a mafadwi of Xido's world showed up? We'd best protect you against any visitors."

Around them, sailors and stevedores were loading the last of the cargo, getting it stowed in hold and on deck. There were planks of some exotic wood none of them could name. "It must come here from the south," conjectured Xido. "Certainly doesn't grow in these parts."

"These ports are often where traders from the south meet those from across the Western Sea," remarked Banat. "The Ildin themselves do not produce much that the world desires. Aside from the silk." There were bales of raw silk among the goods; many Ildin villages cultivated the silkworm along with their other crops.

"And I see someone does buy that sulfur," remarked Xido, as a tub of the yellow mineral was carted by. "Let's get to our work. You take the lead, Vulo; if the wards are half as good as those you laid at the shrine, they will do."

The job was thorough but, no, not quite the equal of those at Banat's shrine. Those the god had built up over years. Here, they had taken less than a hour. Even with all four working, only so much might be done.

"Enough," Xido decided. "Let's to a tavern and toast our farewells."

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"But no drugged wine," said Na.

"You should not have gone with the man in the first place, I am sure you know," chided Xido. "Someone must have pointed you out and given him the idea that you intended to supplant him here."

"Possibly a follower of Torut," Banat added. "So there are surely other enemies in this place."

In a low-ceilinged dive near the docks they raised tankards of sour ale. "Now we go our different ways," spoke Xido. "I shall return to the shrine and check on the girl, but not remain through winter, I think. It is time I went home for a while." Banat said naught but did raise an inquisitive eyebrow. "But I'll return and teach her, as I promised. And you," he went on, addressing Na and Im, "will see me again, I am sure."

"Do you think you and I could link and speak safely to Atima before I sail?" asked Im. This had been on his mind for a while. It should be all right with the god there, shouldn't it?

"No reason not to." The dark deity looked about the common room. "I don't think anyone will pay any attention."

"Atima!" he called, from their private meeting place, the world only they knew. "Atima!"

She coalesced before him. "Hi, Im! Oh, Xido too." She did not seem so pleased about that.

"I am sorry I can not give you privacy, my girl," the god apologized. "It is safer if I am here."

"That's all right. You're coming back soon, aren't you?" He nodded. "And you not so soon," Atima sighed, returning her attention to Im.

"I set sail for Tesra in the morning," he told her. He glanced side-long toward Xido. "Maybe you can get this god to assist you in speaking to me on my journey."

"He'd better!"

"We'll see," was all Xido said.

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Im took Atima in his arms. It was not as good as being with her at the shrine, but still it was a part of their own being, really Im and Atima, who held each other. A kiss, a farewell, and they let the bond dissolve.

"That may have to last a long time," spoke Xido when they returned to the world, to the table in a tavern where Banat and Na were gossiping of something or another.

"I didn't know if I would even have that when I left the hills," Im said. "It will do."

Na and Im reported to the ship and took possession of their tiny cabin that night, ready to sail with the dawn. It was little more than a bed and a door, with a ceiling too low for either to straighten up. Im decided to sleep on deck and Na followed him a few minutes later.

"Too close in there," she said, spreading her blanket by his.

A sailor keeping watch told her, "You'll be happy to have a snug cabin and bed when we get out into the Central Sea. 'Twill be too cold and wet for sleeping here."

On a falling tide, before sunrise, the sails caught a light breeze and the ship eased away from the docks of Pas. Ahead lay Tesra, and the two travelers turned their faces toward the city of their destiny.

That is a good place to stop, is it not? I shall continue the story of Im, and of Na, and perhaps even of the little god Xido on another day. You know where to find me on that day, my friends!

AFTERWORD

I hope you have enjoyed THE WAYS OF WIZARDRY. This tale is set nearly a thousand years before the events of THE EYES OF THE WIND — where I introduced the god Xido — and serves, in a sense, as a bridge to that novel from my Malvern and Mora series.

As those novels, it is set in the world of my DONZALO'S DESTINY sequence. The technological level is meant to be similar to the early Iron Age. The magic, however, is the same.

It is not necessary to read any of those other novels to understand this one. Of course, I hope you will!

Expect to see more of Im and, perhaps, Na. And, most certainly, the god Xido.

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Author Stephen Brooke lives in an old farmhouse in the Florida Panhandle. He is the author of more than twenty books, as well as an artist and musician.

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