



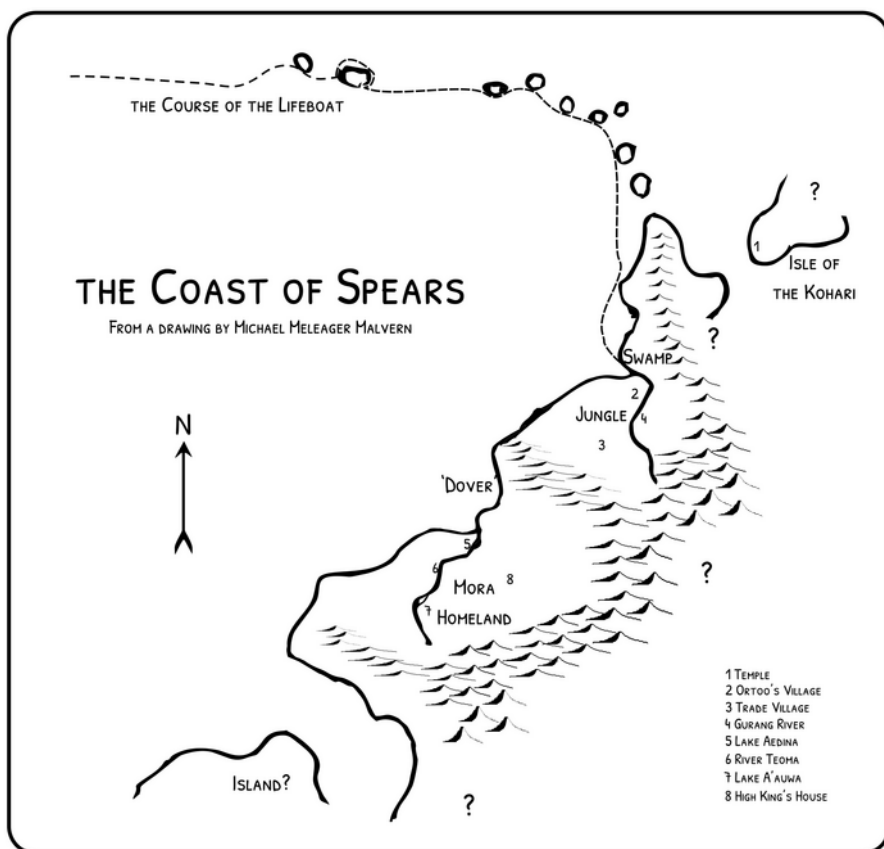
COAST OF SPEARS



STEPHEN BROOKE

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SPEARS**

*"I knew this was not the world
to which I was born."*



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Arachis Press 2015

Coast of Spears

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PART I. BOATS

1. The Pacific

THE PANAMA CANAL is the newest Wonder of the World. We passed through it on a Tuesday.

"The wide Pacific," stated James L. Nathan. We stood on the teak-planked foredeck, as his yacht was steered into the open sea. "What do you think of the world's greatest ocean, Malvern?"

"I've seen it before, sir," I replied, "while sojourning in San Francisco. It certainly seems more, ah, pacific, here."

"Don't let that fool you, my boy. I've seen many a storm in these waters." He glanced toward me and then back to the horizon. "Frisco? I know the port well. Were you there painting?"

"Boxing," Nathan knew of my brief career in the ring and knew, as well, that I preferred not to speak of it. I had left that, and the name I wore then, behind me. Now, I was known as — no, had become — Michael Meleager Malvern, an established society painter, approaching comfortable middle age, and a friend of wealthy and powerful men.

I had painted every member of J.L. Nathan's family at some time, facile, pleasing portraits of the man and his wife, each of the children. My favorite subject, however, had become his daughter, Amelia. Miss Amelia Corrine Nathan, her father's darling

Amelia chose that moment to join us there on the deck, accompanied by the yacht's second officer, Mr. Nesmith. Here, as in her father's home, she had no shortage of male admirers.

J.L. fumbled a few moments with his pipe, lighting it and drawing deeply, before acknowledging them. "This is going to spoil you youngsters," he said to Nesmith, "being able to pass through a canal rather than having to sail around the Horn." I knew the man

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well enough to recognize the jest in his remark, but the young sailor seemingly was not certain how to take it.

So he chose to respond indirectly. "I felt honored to be here for the opening, sir. An historic event, to be sure!" The officer removed his cap and pulled forth a kerchief to wipe the perspiration from his brow. His closely-cropped blond hair was damp and matted. "The pilot is ready to leave," he continued. "Do you wish to see him first, Mr. Nathan?"

"No, not necessary, my boy. I trust Captain Logan to deal with that sort of thing. Amelia," he went on, turning to his daughter, "where is our Mr. Bath today?"

"In the shade, Father," she replied, with a gay little laugh. "The sun does not love George." The sun did love Miss Amelia Nathan, who was becoming as brown as the girls on those South Seas islands we intended to visit. That would never have done back in New York, of course, but here she did not seem to care.

Mr. Nesmith, perhaps unconsciously, frowned at the mention of George Winston Bath, the Nathans' other guest on this voyage. It is quite possible that I did too.

"Let's all get into the shade," said Mr. Nathan. "Young Nesmith will be as red as a boiled lobster if we keep him out here much longer."

"I must be back to the captain," stated that individual, with a respectful nod toward his employer. "Miss Amelia." His nod here came closer to being a slight bow and was more than merely respectful. Me, he barely acknowledged before turning away and hurrying aft.

J.L. linked his arm with that of his daughter and both strolled toward the spot where Mrs. Nathan and George Bath relaxed in the shade of a striped awning. I followed in their wake, having nothing better to do at that moment.

Judith Nathan had become enamored of that relative novelty, iced tea, and a pitcher was, as customary, near at hand. Alas, there

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was no alcohol to be found aboard (unless one knew to befriend the steward), so I allowed a glass to be poured for me and settled into one of the canvas chairs.

"Say farewell to the Americas," spoke Mr. Nathan, after draining his entire glass of tea. "We voyage directly to Tahiti now and it will be long before we raise land again."

"Do you think, sir," asked Bath, seeming hesitant to express his fears, "that the war will find its way out here? The Societies are French territory, aren't they?"

The latest news we had heard in Panama had not been promising. It seemed that all of Europe might be going to war. "I have no doubt that unpleasantness will be over before they even hear about it on this side of the world," responded James L. Nathan.

"One thing is for certain," I chipped in. "We ourselves shall hear no more of it for quite some time."

"And that, Mr. Malvern, was the point of this voyage, wasn't it? To get away from the concerns of civilization," Bath drawled, all his misgivings now seemingly gone. "I daresay I shall be a bit bored these next few days with no land in sight."

"Make that weeks, George," came our host's correction. "The Pacific is a vast ocean."

"Oh, that is rather a long time." Bath stopped to blot a drop of condensation that had fallen onto his spotless white linen trousers, and then looked up with an innocuous smile. "Someday perhaps we can dispense with these laggardly boats and fly across the ocean in aeroplanes."

"I wouldn't trust one to cross Long Island Sound, much less an ocean," opined J.L. Nathan.

"You're such a stick-in-the-mud, Father!" claimed Amelia. "And you're a fine one to speak of flying, George, when Michael is the only one here man enough to have ever gone up in an aeroplane."

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I was not going to confide that I had been terrified at the time.

“Artists are all mad,” responded George Bath. “Mr. Malvern has but proven that.”

I chuckled with the rest of them, hiding a sudden apprehension. Amelia had never before spoken of me as ‘Michael’ in the presence of her parents. I do not know if J.L. either noticed or cared but his wife had most definitely caught it. I was well aware that Judith Nathan did not approve of me in general and as a friend of her daughter in particular.

And, after all, was I one to pay court to Miss Amelia Corrine Nathan? More than ten years her elder, hardly a man of wealth — though comfortable enough — and following a trade some considered less than reputable. No, Amelia was for someone like George Bath, born to money and a place in society.

At least in her mother’s eyes. J.L. had little use for the fop, but his daughter seemed partial to said fop and J.L. was not one to thwart his Amelia. How he felt about me, I truly did not know.

But he had invited me on this voyage.

2. *Suitors*

I BLAME IT all on Gauguin. He gave a generation of artists the dream of painting in an unspoiled paradise, an elusive South Seas dream.

Most of us knew such a place did not really exist but the idea was there, none the less, pulling us toward other, more exotic shores than those of our homelands. That was, at least in part, what placed me on the “Double Lucky,” James Nathan’s yacht.

The name? It came from the craft’s length of one hundred and forty-four feet, twelve times twelve. Nathan had never seemed a particularly superstitious man to me and I suspect that the name was somewhat a private joke. It was a lovely little ship, constructed expressly for J.L., with a single funnel and more sail than one usually saw in new vessels.

Let me say that I am greatly in favor of sails. I know that is an antiquated attitude but I grew up sailing small boats on Lake Ontario and, more recently, amusing myself in a catboat along the shores of Long Island. I have never been able to paint sails as well as I might wish.

The sails were out now, as we made our way toward that fabled island of Tahiti. Naturally, the steam engine was also working and we made good progress, or so I was told. It had been a week since we watched the peaks of Panama fade and disappear behind us.

I had been half-heartedly sketching but my drawing board now lay forgotten in my lap as I gazed out over the seas. James Nathan sat down beside me and, as usual, fumbled with lighting his pipe before speaking.

“What do you think of Mr. Nesmith?” he asked, without any preliminary conversation.

I wasn’t going to say it outright, but I did not much like Alexander Nesmith. I did know that J.L. had taken an interest in young Mr. Nesmith, son to one of the captains of the Nathan Line and rising through his company’s ranks on his own merits.

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"He seems competent," I offered, trying to think of what else to say. Why had I taken a dislike to the man? "One of your future captains?"

"Maybe." Nathan paused to smooth his prodigious mustache. "Maybe more than that."

"Amelia." It was a statement, not a question. I had sensed something of it and it might have been at the root of my dislike. Or I might just have disliked him anyway.

He slowly nodded. "She likes him and he is obviously interested in her. I fear, though, that his own advancement may be his foremost motivation."

"There is nothing wrong with being ambitious, sir. I dare say neither of us would be where we are without some ambition."

J.L. laughed aloud. "Where would you be without it, Malvern?"

"On a hay farm, most likely. And my name would still be Miller."

"It's a good name, my boy. Malvern is mighty fanciful."

"I chose it, I'm willing to admit, from the pages of an atlas."

"I was nothing more than a first mate when Judith and I wed. Neither of us was born into money," continued Nathan, "but I suppose we were both ambitious. Our ambition now is to ensure the happiness of the last of our children. The others are all well enough wed and settled." I knew all of them and I knew that this was true enough.

"I will readily admit that I chose Nesmith for this voyage to throw him and Amelia together. I ask you, Michael, not to judge me for that, for your invitation came from the same motivation." He sighed. "Mr. Bath, on the other hand, is here at my wife's request."

It was my turn to laugh. "Three suitors, then, and no one else around for leagues? Perhaps we should organize a duel on the fore-deck."

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"If it were fisticuffs, I suspect you would win."

"Mr. Nesmith is a rather large fellow and somewhat younger than I am, sir." I became serious. "Do you truly consider me a suitable choice to pay court to your daughter?"

"As a man, you would be my first choice and I know that of you three, you best love Amelia. But I also know you have your demons and self-doubts. I know you might never give her the happiness she deserves." He pulled on his pipe and stared toward the horizon before again speaking. "It is really up to Amelia. I would not stand in the way of any one of you, if she made a choice."

He nodded toward the water. "There looks to be stormy weather ahead. We may need to shift our course." Nathan turned again to me. "If nothing comes of our little trip, so be it. We all see something of the world and you get to paint. When we make port at San Francisco after our circuit of the Pacific, those who wish can board a train to return home."

"If Tahiti is as alluring as claimed, I might never make it to Frisco," I quipped.

"Ah, Malvern, that is one thing I can never see you doing." James L. rose. "I need to go talk to Captain Logan about that weather," he said, glancing again toward the horizon, and departed.

Could I put aside my career as society portraitist as I had once put aside Mike Miller, former pug? I knew that I had excelled as neither, though I had known adulation as both.

At a show at the Armory back in New York last year, I had seen the future of art. There had been no place in it for me.

3. *Pumping*

ON MY ARRIVAL in New York, nearly a decade before, I had studied briefly at the studio of Robert Henri. Briefly, for the Realism he and his followers espoused proved not greatly to my liking. I had seen reality enough already, and was ready to escape it.

I had always drawn. Often, I amused myself by sketching the world around me and my fellow boxers, in the gym, in fights. My little drawings caught the eye of a sports reporter who chanced to look over my shoulder one day and soon I was producing them for the newspapers. The money was, well, money, and I always needed more of that.

It wasn't long before I stepped out of the ring permanently, in favor of a more successful career than that as pugilist. As I threw myself into the study of art and painting, I discovered a knack for creating facile and pleasing portraits. Or perhaps it was as much curse as gift. Either way, I put aside who I had been and became who I am.

And it was rewarding but not entirely satisfying. Maybe that as much as anything, even as much as the presence of the lovely Amelia — whom I think I did love — had led me to accept the invitation to voyage with the Nathans. Maybe I could find something I needed along the way.

We had departed New York Harbor in the spring, with the intention of reaching Panama for the official opening of the Canal. That gave time for leisurely visits in Florida, in Cuba, time to observe and to paint and to learn. I learned that there was nothing there for me.

So now we were bound for the isles of the Polynesians before eventually reaching Australia. James L. Nathan had interests there and was quite willing to combine commerce with pleasure. Indeed, most of the rest of the trip would involve Nathan Line business as we voyaged through the Philippines, coasted up China and Japan, and then recrossed the Pacific to Hawaii and on to California.

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I thought I very might well take up Mr. Nathan's offer of boarding a train home when we reached San Francisco.

The storm he had spied rapidly bore down upon us, a massive wall of cloud extending laterally as far as one could see. I knew enough of storms to feel fear.

Exhilaration, as well, exhilaration of a sort I had not felt in years.

Our captain — or *his* captain, J.L. Nathan — chose to attempt to outrun it. There was certainly wind enough for the sails, and the engine provided power to its full capacity. None the less, the tempest crept ever closer, engulfing us at last. There was naught to do but try to ride it out, keep the "Double Lucky" turned into the towering waves so it might not be swamped or capsized. Our sails were useless now; all depended on the single steam engine to prevent us from becoming just another piece of flotsam borne along by the tempest.

"I've ridden out typhoons before and in less worthy craft than this," Nathan told his family and guests, gathered in the main salon. "We'll keep her nose into the wind and come out the other side." I am certain he believed this. James L. Nathan was that sort of man.

Through the darkness of that day and the greater darkness of the night that followed, we battled onward. The storm winds grew ever stronger.

Amelia and George Bath spent much of that time close to each other and I was unwilling to intrude, to either comfort or to cling, and kept my distance. What could I offer? The two seemed of a sudden so young, children in comparison to myself.

Idle and helpless — would that there were something I could do!

At that moment, Captain Logan entered the cabin, water dripping from his oilskins and dark beard, and gave me just such an opportunity. He motioned for George to join the two of us.

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"Gentlemen," said he, "our crew has been at the pump all night. Do you think you might go below and help?"

"Doesn't the engine power the pumps?" asked Bath.

"It is tasked enough already. As are my seamen."

"We'll do what is needed," I told Logan. George Bath nodded agreement with only a moment's hesitation. I suspected that George would be a bit useless but he would try. The occasional game of tennis does not quite prepare one for this sort of work.

Indeed, my own life might have grown a bit too sedentary. Reaching the pump, we found that only two could work at a time, one on each end of the handle. One of the sailors we relieved was a giant of a fellow I had sketched a couple times, Beck by name. We had become friendly over the course of this voyage.

"Get some rest, you two," ordered the captain. They slumped wearily away. Logan turned to us. "If you can work even half an hour it would help. More, if you are able." He looked upward. "I must be back to the pilot house. I'll send Bailey down to check on things in a while." Andrew Bailey was our steward, a man who had served J.L. Nathan for many years.

The two of us pumped in silence for a time. It was hard work, and monotonous, and our footing was sometimes precarious as the yacht pitched and rolled with the waves. After a while, George spoke. "At least we are getting some exercise, eh? I should get in shape. When we get home, I think I shall join the war in Europe as a volunteer. Perhaps with the Canadians."

If we get home, I thought, but did not say. Instead, I asked, "You do not agree with Mr. Nathan that this war will last only a few months?"

He shook his head. "Not with all of Europe taking one side or the other." He peered into the bilge. "We're staying ahead of it, aren't we?" George asked.

"So far," I allowed. We pumped on for several minutes without speaking.

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Then, suddenly, we were not staying ahead of it. There was water about our ankles, and rising.

"This is not just from the waves and rain. We've sprung a leak," I told my companion, as calmly as I was able. I tugged at the line that rang an emergency bell in the pilot house. In seconds, Andrew Bailey was hanging on the ladder, staring down at us.

"This is not good, lads," said the old salt. "Did it happen all of a sudden-like?"

"Yes, yes," called Bath. "Has something given way?"

"More'n likely," the steward replied. "Keep pumping as best ye can and I'll go tell the captain."

"If it rises too much, the pump will no longer operate," Bath said to me. I recognized the truth in what he said; apparently the young man had a certain amount of mechanical knowledge. But then, didn't his family make their fortune manufacturing some sort of machinery?

"So keep pumping," I gasped out, as I put all the effort I could into rocking the handle.

But the water inexorably climbed higher, to our calves, to our knees. James L. Nathan himself was the next to survey our situation from the ladder. "It's hopeless, men," he called to us. "Get out of there and we will seal this compartment."

"There is an auxiliary pump on the deck," George remarked, as we clambered out of the pump room. "It might be put to use if we weather the storm."

"If this breach grows no larger, we might yet do so, lad," said Nathan. "Let us pray that only a rivet or two has given way." He fastened the hatch behind us. "If it rises to the engine room we will be dead in the water."

Even over the howling of the wind, we could hear a sudden groaning of the steel hull. At the same time, I could feel the rhythm of the steam engine, the heartbeat of the "Double Lucky," stutter and falter.

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“She’s coming apart,” Nathan stated, and there was anger in his voice. “I curse the Gordon Yard that built her.” He spoke to Captain Logan who had joined us in the passageway. “We’ve no choice but to take to the boats.”

“In this storm?” the captain objected. “That would be suicide!”

“We will not stay afloat long. Get everyone together.”

Captain Joseph Logan saluted his employer and turned to carry out his orders. Suddenly, he held up a hand. “Listen,” he told us. The howling of the cyclone wind had abated.

“It’s the eye of the storm!” exclaimed Logan, as we stepped out onto the deck. The seas were still huge but the winds had slowed to a whisper. I knew enough to realize that the tempest would soon return, as fierce as ever. There was little hope of surviving.

But this was our best opportunity to get to the boats. It would be impossible once the typhoon resumed its wild rampage.

4. *Two Boats*

WE WATCHED THE “Double Lucky” buckle as a mountain of water fell upon it. Then she was gone, disappeared into the depths of the ocean as had many a ship before her.

Two lifeboats, stout dories, we had, more than large enough for crew and passengers — sixteen of us, all told — and well-provisioned. J.L. Nathan and his employees were not lax in such matters.

For now, we had a line from the one boat to the other. Whether that could or should be maintained once the storm returned was questionable, but we did not wish to be separated. In one was the captain, the Nathan family, George Bath, and a trio of seamen. I was in the second boat, under the command of the second officer, Alexander Nesmith, along with the steward, cook, engineer, and the balance of the sailors. J.L. had specifically asked me to board this lifeboat; I think he wished me there in case young Nesmith had any problems.

Around us stood a circle of cloud-wall, towering into an indeterminable height of mist. It flickered constantly with lightning. How soon would it again engulf us, doom us? There was little time to consider that as we attempted to keep our boat headed into the waves, pulling on the oars as we passed over one crest after another.

The rope! It had snapped and our boats were drifting apart. Perhaps that was for the better, as not having to synchronize our movements eased maneuvering through the swell. But we would try to keep them in sight.

The whole sky was lit up, as bright as the sun. Brighter, maybe, but it was cold light, not warm. Then a great flash and all was dark. It was as though we had passed from one world to another and some of my boat-mates, I suspect, thought it was the world after this one. I know I heard prayers.

Where was the other lifeboat? For that matter, where were we?
How had the stars come out?

We looked up, one by one, and I heard the gasps. These were

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men of the sea, men who knew the stars. Unknown stars blazed above us in this sky, in constellations no man could name.

The sea on which we floated had become suddenly calm. Nesmith rose from his place by the tiller and surveyed it, turning a complete circle, with a spyglass, attempting to peer into the darkness. "No sign of the other boat," he reported. "Ship your oars, men, and we'll rest until we have some light."

"If there ever be light here," murmured one sailor.

"The sun is a star, man," replied one of his mates. "If there are stars above us now there is bound to be a sun, too." I recognized the voice as that of Bobby Beck. His logic, if not completely convincing, did sound reasonable.

As fortune had it, he was correct. It was not that long before we saw the first hints of dawn on the horizon. I noted Mr. Nesmith checking his compass and nodding. Apparently the sun still rose in the east.

Then he addressed us, and honestly. "I have no idea where we are, men, nor which direction to sail. Let us look at our provisions first, have some breakfast, and then try to figure things out."

The provisions proved to be more plentiful than I had expected, food and water enough for weeks. They were accompanied by some tools and even a pair of firearms, a shotgun and a rifle.

There was also a mast and sail carefully stowed. We would not have to depend on rowing.

"Let's get this up," ordered Nesmith. Stepping the mast was no problem but the men seemed rather baffled by rigging the sail and had no idea of the dagger-board's purpose. Twentieth Century sailors, they knew little of actual sailing. Certainly less than I did.

With a few suggestions from me, and the aid of that old tar, Steward Bailey, they got it right after a while. I did not want to step on Nesmith's authority nor seem to take charge. Still, I knew he was eyeing me.

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He beckoned me to join him by the tiller. "You know how to sail a small boat, don't you? The Admiral mentioned it to me." The officers of the Nathan Line often referred to their employer by that name, though not to his face.

"I've never sailed the open seas," I responded. "Only lakes and coastal waters."

"That's more than any of the rest of us. I think we will need to depend on you, Mr. Malvern." He picked up a chart that lay on the seat beside him. "As I told the men, I have no idea where we are. I have no idea which way should be our heading."

"We could continue our westerly course. Sooner or later there should be land."

He nodded. "The same could be said of going east, and it might be closer. Anyway," the young officer continued, "there is a whole continent that direction and we couldn't miss it."

"True enough." I looked at the ocean lying about us. "The winds seem more favorable to a eastern course, as well, at least for the time being. But which," I went on, "might the other boat choose?"

Nesmith shrugged. "Maybe they are asking the same at this moment."

If they have survived, I said to myself. There is no guarantee of that. I looked at my companion — was he thinking the same?

"There is a sextant with the charts," he said finally. "I shall try to determine our bearings and make a decision accordingly."

5. Sightings

UNFORTUNATELY, ALEXANDER NESMITH's readings of our position were quite baffling. We couldn't be where they put us. But then, those stars shouldn't be above us.

For that matter, there might be no assurance that a continent lay to our east. Nor in any direction.

So any direction was as good as another and Mr. Nesmith took my recommendation of the most favorable winds. Eastward we sailed, day after day of tropical sun, night after star-filled night, I at the tiller.

I fear that the crew, despite my efforts to discourage them, began to see me as their leader. Nesmith did little to prevent that and became ever more withdrawn, forced so into inaction. He took to an attempt at fishing, spending hours dangling a lure fashioned of strips of cloth over the side of the boat, trolling for whatever might be swimming below. There had been fishhooks aplenty among our supplies.

Once, and only once, he pulled an odd looking fish from the water. None of us were certain what it was and we were loath to attempt eating it. Had our supplies run a little lower, we might have felt differently.

"See that odd cloud?" asked Andrew Bailey one afternoon, pointing southward. "I've seen 'em before. There will be a volcano under it, mark my word." Sure enough, that night we could see the glowing belly of the cloud, reflecting the fires below it. Where there was a volcano there would be land, I told Mr. Nesmith.

"Set your course," he ordered, eager to at last be doing something.

Only a desolate and barren cone, smoking ominously, protruded from the waters. It was a great disappointment to all but Nesmith.

"Where one island lies, there are likely to be more," said he. "Get out the oars, boys, and let's see if there is a landing spot." A

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sheltered strand of black sand was found between jutting piers of lava rock. "Pull her in here," Nesmith ordered, and leaped from the boat as soon as we touched shore. Alone, he began to climb the steaming slope, stopping from time to time to survey the ocean with his spyglass. He was no more than halfway to the top when he turned back.

"Another island lies to the east," he reported, "and more beyond it, I think. It was hard to make out. Here, let's push off this beach and be on our way!"

In minutes, we were back into open water, with sail set. "Is it a real island, sir, or just another volcano?" asked someone — possibly the engineer.

"I couldn't say," answered Mr. Nesmith. "It certainly looked to be larger."

Andrew Bailey spoke. "If it be a chain of isles, they might all be volcanoes."

"But not necessarily active," I added.

"Aye, true," said the steward.

I could see that we were passing over areas of shallower water, reefs or underwater ridges. There were small, brightly colored fish darting below us — we had seen no such sea-life previously.

"Listen," called Bobby Beck. "What is that sound?"

I recognized immediately what the young sailor's ears had picked up. "Breaking surf!"

"And there is our island," called Nesmith, standing in the prow of our boat and pointing forward. The isle lay low and might easily have been passed by had he not spied it from the volcano's heights. "We need a way through the reef. Steer for the other side, Malvern."

We found that the waves wrapped themselves around this speck of solid land and broke even on the more sheltered side, though they were smaller there. The danger was not so much the

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breakers themselves as the possibility of tearing open our dory's bottom on the coral reef below them.

We nearly completed a circumnavigation of the island before spying a channel. I gestured toward it and our leader nodded. "Row for it, lads," he called to the men, "and we'll sleep ashore tonight!"

A swell gently pushed us part way through the passage before dissipating in deeper water. In moments, we were beyond the reef and could now see that the channel opened into a broad lagoon. Indeed, the entire center of the island was water, surround by a somewhat narrow ring of sand and palms.

"An atoll," remarked Nesmith, somewhat matter-of-factly. "I've always wanted to see one." He gave no further orders so I chose a landing spot, steering toward what appeared to be the highest land. Further up the lagoon, I could see another, narrower channel to the open sea.

Samuel, the cook of the "Double Lucky," took a good look in all directions. "Praise Jesus there's no volcano here," he said, after his careful survey.

Mr. Nesmith smiled at the remark. "All this was once the cone of a volcano," he told the man.

"Long asleep," I added, noting his consternation on receiving this information. Then the bottom of our boat was scraping sand and all hands jumped out into the shallow water to pull it up onto the beach.

One of the sailors screeched. "Careful, lads," warned Andrew. "This water swarms with jellyfish." Fortunately, it was no more than a sting. I knew that some jellies carry deadly venom — and had encountered the man-of-war on occasion — and decided to stay out of the lagoon's waters as much as possible.

Other than coconut palms and crabs, our little island seemed rather barren. None the less, it was good to have solid ground beneath our feet, and a fire burning in the night brought a bit of

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cheer, cheer we had not felt in many days. Even those strange stars above seemed less disconcerting now.

The next morning, we explored what little there was to explore. Bobby Beck accompanied me along a stretch of the outer beach, where Andrew Bailey already stood, looking out across the water. "An island," the old steward suddenly announced, pointing eastward.

Beck scanned the horizon, trying to make it out. "Where?"

Bailey laughed. "No, man, look up. It is huge!"

And there it was, a blue that differed only slightly from the blue of the sky, a distant mountain rising from the ocean.

6. *A Landing*

THE REMAINDER OF that day was spent preparing for the next leg of our journey, the trip to the island we had spied. The boat was hauled out, turned over, and found to be sound. Provisions were checked over. Nesmith insisted on adding a number of coconuts to these, although I suspected there would plenty enough of those to be found at our destination. It is best to be safe, I suppose, and our water supply was beginning to run low – no fresh water was to be found on this atoll nor had we seen much in the way of rain since our disaster.

We also broke out the two guns that were among the lifeboat's supplies. "There's no telling what or whom we might encounter over there," said Mr. Nesmith. We all agreed it was best to be prepared.

But I had to ask the practical question. "Have any of you experience with firearms?" I queried the group.

It turned out that Samuel had served in the war in Cuba, but only as a cook. The rest had even less knowledge of guns. I, having grown up on a farm, had handled a shotgun from time to time but considered myself no marksman.

Nesmith and I looked over the weapons. The shotgun seemed intended for a youth or a lady, a small double-barreled piece in twenty gauge. "I guess it made sense to include a gun like this," the officer observed. "Something that anyone could use."

I nodded my agreement. I could see Amelia wielding such a weapon. "Small for either of us, though," I said, lifting it to my shoulder. "We would find it uncomfortable for our length of arm." I put it down and reached for the rifle. "A Krag." Opening the bolt and peering inside, I added, "We will need to degrease both of these before use."

"You'd best take charge of it, Malvern. Once again, you are the knowledgeable one."

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"And you are still in command, Mr. Nesmith. Remember that."

He smiled wryly. "How long will that last if we are stranded here for good?" He took up the rifle and sighted along its barrel at various imaginary targets. "I had best be the one who carries this." He handed it to me. "Get one of the men to clean them up. Samuel," he laughed. "He knows his way around grease!"

The man turned back to the preparation of our boat.

He had as good as made me his second in command since the wreck, even without formally saying anything. I am sure that both he and the crew saw me as such. It was not a position I wanted but I was stuck with it, wasn't I?

Well, that was as it was. The next morning, early, we rowed out the channel and into the ocean. With a good breeze we might make it to our next port within the day.

But we were becalmed. The oars came out and we slowly made our way toward that nebulous peak rising from the ocean. It still seemed distant as dusk overtook us.

An evening breeze sprang up, and there was a wedge of moon. Was that the same moon we all remembered? I could not swear to it, but it was of the same size and brightness as ever. "Shall I chance sailing on?" I asked Nesmith. He nodded a sluggish assent. The man had become badly sunburned over the course of our voyage and it was taking a toll.

We cruised on through the night, taking care to set a man on watch in the bow. Before dawn, before we could see land, we heard the crash of the surf. I took in sail and ordered the men to their oars. Alexander Nesmith seemed dazed and said nothing, staring out across the dark water.

We held position as best we could until the rising sun revealed before us not just one mountain but a veritable range. This was a very large island, if island it truly was. The face it turned toward us here was one of inhospitable cliffs.

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The wind had once more slackened so we rowed southward, paralleling the coast. "We'll find a landing spot, men," I assured the sailors. "It can't be all cliffs!" I knew it could be all cliffs, however. I had read of such islands.

We rounded a point of jagged lava rock to behold a wide bay, inviting beaches of golden sand, and waves rolling gently. One could not have imagined a better spot to make land. Still, there might be dangers lurking beneath the surface of things, reefs under the water, wild animals or men on the land.

"Mr. Bailey," I called, "will you take charge of the rifle? I fear Mr. Nesmith is incapacitated." So now I truly was acting in command. I made certain the shotgun was within my own reach at the tiller.

There seemed to be something of a channel through the outer reef ahead. I knew enough of waves and coastal waters to recognize that there were two or three reefs or bars between us and the beach, but none seemed overly shallow nor dangerous. At least, not from this vantage — it might be different when we were among them.

"Pull! Pull hard!" I shouted, as a feathering wave came up astern. Good, we had caught it — or had it caught us? — and were riding it toward shore. I angled the boat carefully toward the channel I had spied. Too sharply and we might overturn — yes, we were out into the deeper water of the passage and the wave, unable to break here, passed us by. It would be the shore break that posed the greatest danger now, where the waves expended the last of their energy on the shallow sand bottom. There was no passage except straight through that.

"Make sure everything is well secured," I ordered, "including Mr. Nesmith."

It looked like one spot was as good as another to attempt the landing, nor did there seem to be any noticeable lulls in the waves, so I called for the men to pull again and ran us onto the beach without taking on too much water. We dragged the dory up as far

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as we might. It was not a small vessel and we were only seven able men at that point.

“Get a rope out and secure the boat to one of those trees.” I pointed toward the nearest group of palms. “And get Mr. Nesmith into the shade.”

7. Climbing

"IF ANY MAN of you thinks I should not be in charge, say something now," I told the group. "Mr. Nesmith never named me as his second and I will step aside if you prefer another." None spoke, so I continued. "Very well. Mr. Bailey, I would like to appoint you my second in command. Any objections?"

"No, sir," replied the steward.

The rest of the men nodded their agreement, though I had not asked them. If I was in charge, it was my decision. Bailey was knowledgeable and the best choice.

"I am hoping that Mr. Nesmith can resume command in a few days." Their former leader lay sleeping nearby on a bed of palm fronds. I had every confidence that he, young and of good constitution, would recover quickly from his sun-poisoning. Here, he had shade, and there were falls of fresh water coming down the cliffs behind us.

"Very well. I intend to go inland and explore tomorrow so you will be in charge here, Mr. Bailey. I shall take Beck and, um, Geitz with me." Mr. Geitz was our engineer. "Do you two feel up to it?"

"Aye, sir," said Bobby. "It will feel good to stretch my legs."

"That it will," agreed Mr. Geitz, better known to his comrades as "Dutch," though he was as much a natural born American as any of them. More than some of them.

"We'll be doing more than stretching them," I warned. "I intend to climb as high as we can and see if we can get our bearings."

The way up through the cliffs that lay behind the beach proved easy enough, and the land appeared to slope more gently after that. Much of the way ahead was jungle, however, and I knew it would take time to move through it. We stood now atop the cliffs and I surveyed what I could of the island through the spyglass.

"Not much to be seen from here," I reported. "Just the bay."

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The beach below us was a long arc between two rocky points. What lay beyond those was hidden.

"No cannibal villages, I trust," joked Dutch.

"This isn't 'Robinson Crusoe,'" I informed him.

The third member of our party spoke up. "More likely to meet headhunters in this part of the world, says Mr. Bailey."

"That's a pleasant thought, Bobby. Let's hope we find neither." The little shotgun I carried would be of minimal use against them and the rifle remained at our camp. "Ready to climb?"

The way was not as difficult as I had feared, for the shade of the high forest canopy discouraged much undergrowth. I did not know the names of the great trees around us, and still do not, in any language I then spoke. There were monkeys far above us, I am sure, and many birds of many colors.

Climbing higher, we encountered more brush as the jungle trees thinned. I pointed toward an outcropping of reddish rock. "There is a good vantage point," I told my companions. "Let's see if we can reach it." There was a great deal of mountain still above us but I had never intended to climb to the top, nor even near it.

And it was already past noon. Though I had warned Bailey we might, I did not wish to be away from the camp overnight. Maybe later, but not on this first reconnaissance mission. We worked our way across a steep slope to the rock.

It did provide an excellent vantage. I could not be completely certain but it seemed that we were correct about being on a good-sized island. In the distance, across the glittering water, one could just make out the form of more mountains, perhaps an isle even larger than this one, perhaps the mainland.

I could see no signs of human habitation, no villages, no roads, no smoke.

Putting the spyglass away, I said, "Nary a cannibal in sight, Mr. Geitz. I think it is time to head back."

"Don't be too disappointed, Dutch," Bobby told him.

8. *Creatures*

WE HAD MADE it to our beds soon after darkness fell, and some of the men were still seated about the fire as I fell asleep, weary from our outing. I knew I would be sore for days, as would my companions; none of us were accustomed to such an exertion.

Nesmith seemed much better when I checked on him in the morning, weak and tired, but lucid now. I began to tell him of my exploration but the man fell asleep before I got far into the tale. His skin was peeling badly and I am sure that it was painful. The more he might sleep, the better.

Then I called the group together and told them of what we had seen.

"Another island?" asked Andrew Bailey. "Will we be bound there?"

"When Mr. Nesmith is well and we are all rested, it would seem the thing to do. There would be no point in it right now." I spread my arms to gesture at the beach around us. "This is as good a spot as any to recuperate and get our bearings."

"Aye," agreed Bailey, "one island's much the same as another."

Samuel broke in. "We've seen pigs at the edge of the woods. Would it be all right to shoot one?"

Fresh meat? I could see the appeal, and our supplies were dwindling. "I'd rather save our ammunition for emergencies," I said. Which was definitely true, but I was also concerned about the noise of a gunshot, even if we had seen no sign of humans. "But if you can take one any other way, I would certainly welcome the addition of a pork chop to my mess." He and a pair of his mates immediately began a whispered council as to the best method of capturing a wild pig.

"We should be gathering other food, too," I told them. "Fruit and coconuts, naturally. Some of you could try fishing and I doubt that pigs are the only meat in the jungle."

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“What, you want us to eat monkey?” asked Dutch. “Then I would feel like a cannibal!”

Samuel turned back to me from his conference. “The land crabs are good eating. I’ve had them in Cuba.”

“Can we be sure the ones here are the same?” I didn’t want to take a chance of poisoning my crew!

“They look the same, sir,” he answered, suddenly doubtful.

“You try one first,” suggested Bailey, “and we’ll eat ’em if you survive.”

They scattered to their foraging. There was no need to rein them in or impose a regimen at this point. Let them recuperate a bit first. When Nesmith was up and about, he’d probably exert some authority.

Pigs. A spear, maybe? It was too bad no one thought to include a bow and arrows along with those guns. I was no archer but I recalled Miss Amelia Nathan being quite adept with a bow. It was the sort of thing in which young women of wealth dabbled. Young men, too – George Bath had sent a few shafts into targets as well.

But back to the pigs. I knew of snares but had no idea how to set one. Maybe a pitfall. Anyone could dig a hole in the ground, but how did one convince a pig to fall into it? Drive it, maybe. Yes, as they did with grouse and such at those shooting events some of my society acquaintances enjoyed. I would suggest the idea when we gathered this evening.

“Mr. Malvern.” The voice was low but I heard it. Nesmith was awake. I turned from my reverie to face the young officer.

“I understand that you have discovered another island.”

“That I have, Mr. Nesmith, lying east of us.”

“And no sign of anyone here. No sign of – of the other lifeboat.”

I shook my head. “None.”

“We must go there. They might have landed on it.”

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I shrugged. "They might be on the other side of this island, for that matter. And you," I continued, "are in no condition to travel for a while yet."

"Finish your explorations, then, but let's not linger here."

After making sure the man was comfortable, I ambled — just a bit painfully, I'll admit — down to check on our boat. As I went, I was considering yet another food-procuring scheme, fish being the object this time. Perhaps we could rig some sort of net. There were few of the jelly fish here we had encountered at our last port of call, so we could wade into the water. I had seen sea turtles, too. I knew there were those who ate them, though the idea did not much appeal to me.

All was well at our vessel, still secured properly, and ready to launch when we should decide to depart. Getting it out through the shore break was bound to be a struggle. I'd worry about that when the time came.

"Ho! Ho! Watch out there!" There was a commotion back in the direction of the camp. Men were running toward it, so I did the same.

What was that? A lizard? Yes, the biggest lizard I had ever seen, as big as a crocodile, and it was purposefully stalking the helpless Nesmith.

No, not helpless — he had the Krag. With a loud hiss, the monster charged. Once he fired, and twice, and it barely seemed to notice. A third and last shot came with the barrel only inches from that fanged maw. It reared up, shaking its ruined head side to side, and fell back. Dead?

Yes, dead. We gathered around the creature and its slayer. It was a lizard, certainly; we could see that. But such a lizard, a full fifteen feet or more in length, and with a pebbly skin of mottled olive and black.

"A monitor!" exclaimed Andrew Bailey. "I've ne'er seen one even half this size."

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I regarded our Mr. Nesmith with new respect. "Saint George has naught on you, sir," I told him, only half-jesting.

"Dragon slaying is all in a day's work, Mr. Malvern," he replied. He looked at the lizard's carcass. "Another reason to hasten our departure from this island, I would think."

With a smile, I replied, "They might be larger on the next."

Samuel also considered the dead creature for a moment. "Do you think it's good to eat?" he wondered.

9. *Up High*

THE MONITOR LIZARD was, if not exactly good to eat, not that bad, and decidedly chewy. It was certainly a welcome change from tinned meat.

"I do think it is time to be done with this island," I told the assembled company. Nesmith was with us this time, but declined to join in our council. "When I am well enough," he had told me.

"We need to see more of it before we leave, to make sure we miss nothing." I did not have to say it for all to know that I spoke of the other survivors of our shipwreck. Assuming they had, indeed, survived. I think we all preferred to think they had.

"Do you think we should sail around it?" asked one of the seamen, Dugan by name.

"Or take another hike up the mountain?" This came from Beck.

"The only way to be sure you have missed nothing," asserted Andrew Bailey, "is to walk all the way around."

Bobby scoffed at that. "If there were beaches all around, we might, but most of it's cliffs."

"I plan to climb again," I announced. "Further to the east, and then up that ridge." I pointed toward it. "We should be able to see most of what we haven't already from there. And," I continued, "if it looks like there is any reason, we can descend the other side and investigate further."

"You're talking a journey of days, then," stated Bailey.

"Most likely," I agreed. "I and two or three men. By the time we get back, Mr. Nesmith may be ready to travel." I nodded in his direction. "And to take command. While I am gone, I expect the rest of you to stock up on whatever provisions you can find on this island."

We set off the next day, I and Dutch Geitz again, this time accompanied by Dugan. From the ridge, which we scaled by mid-afternoon, we could indeed see much of the island that had been

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formerly hidden. Beck was right about most of it being surrounded by cliffs, but that might actually have made circumnavigation by foot an easier task. The 'high road' could have been traveled more quickly than a series of beaches.

We had no time for either. We followed the ridge upward that day and the next. The terrain became a treacherous scape of eroded lava rocks. Once, I pointed out a peak to the north of us. "I would say that is a volcanic cone." Geitz was in agreement; I had included him in this exploration because he had some scientific knowledge. Dugan was along mostly to carry things.

And I had left Bobby Beck behind because I felt better knowing he was there to defend the camp, if need arose. He was not only physically impressive but had a good head on his shoulders.

We camped there that night. It was surprisingly cold — we would not want to spend a night at any higher altitude. I decided to climb until noon the next day, take one last look, and turn back. There proved to be nothing to see, and no reason to explore further. Rather than retrace our path, we descended the side of this ridge, into a wide jungle valley, on a course southward that should take us back to the camp.

Were we alone in that jungle? I wondered then. I wondered later.

Maybe there were natives there who never showed themselves. Maybe it was only the monkeys or some other shy creatures. I thought I saw a figure once, too large for a monkey, surely, but not quite a man, that disappeared into shadow.

Since, I have seen things, things that haunted other jungles, other mountains, and I knew this was not the world to which I was born. Then, I did not yet understand this.

Around the middle of our fifth day, we found our way back to the camp on the beach. Alexander Nesmith was well enough to travel and he had, indeed, taken command.

10. Harbor

WE WAITED UNTIL high tide to launch, not that there was much in the way of tides here. Once we got beyond the inside breakers, it was easy enough to chart a course out through the reefs and into the open ocean.

“Raise the sail, Mr. Malvern,” ordered our rejuvenated commander, “and set a course eastward.”

Some of the men looked askance at Nesmith, but I saluted him good-naturedly and followed his directions. Yes, they were just what I would have done anyway and, yes, for all intents I was the one still running things. But that didn’t matter to me.

I should have realized, perhaps, that it mattered to others. A heavy swell rolled from the north, waves that reminded me far too much of our shipwreck. We dropped into some very deep troughs on our passage. Still, our little dory made the journey in good time.

Mr. Nesmith and I had decided it might be best to sail around this island before landing, and give things a good looking over. We pulled close to what we assumed — correctly, as it turned out — was its western tip on mid-morning of our second day. To the south, the seas seemed to be in turmoil, breaking on an inhospitable shore of jagged rocks and reefs extending out into the ocean. We turned north and coasted past low cliffs, broken by the occasional cove and small beach. Here and there, waterfalls poured from cliff-top into the sea. There was no sign of any humans.

Further along, the land rolled more gently, but seemed equally empty. The heavy swell was directly impacting the northern shore so we would not have attempted a landing even had we so desired. I was glad to turn south again, into calmer waters, as we rounded a prominent point. We sheltered that night in the lee of that cape and started down the eastern end of the island at first light.

Ah, here were the beaches like that from which we had just departed. “If we find nothing on the south side, we might want to

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come back here to make our landing,” I told Nesmith. He nodded in a rather noncommittal fashion.

We again saw nothing that suggested a human being had ever set foot on those sands. Soon the coast was curving back toward the west. A bay opened to our starboard, or maybe more of a great lagoon. We sailed past it, Nesmith scanning the shores with his spyglass. It appeared easy of entry, with a deep channel.

And beyond it, where a steep-flanked point marked its western boundary, lay the same wild seas and rocks we had seen on first encountering the isle. Nesmith looked at that turmoil and then at me. “Best turn it around, Mr. Malvern,” he said to me, “and enter that lagoon.”

My thoughts exactly, Mr. Nesmith, I said only to myself. In a quarter of an hour we were safely in the bay.

Mr. Bailey whistled. “Now this is a true harbor! A ship could moor in here.”

I pointed to a spot where a stream cut through the sand and emptied into the lagoon. Nesmith nodded, so I turned our boat toward it. I could do this all under sail — the men need not touch their oars. It was just a little act of pride, a bit of showing off, after not asserting myself through our island-to-island voyage.

The prow of our boat ground into the coarse, dark sand, and my crew — the crew, rather — jumped into the shallow water to pull it up the beach. We were just to the south of the stream’s mouth. I could see that its source was a low fall a short distance inland.

Nesmith followed my line of sight. “A good spot for our camp, up there by the waterfall,” he announced. “Let’s get this boat unloaded.”

There was not only a fall, but a shaded pool below it. It was a most idyllic sort of setting, the sort I had come on this trip to the South Seas hoping to paint.

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But so empty. "Are we the only people in this world?" I wondered, speaking only to myself.

"This world?" asked young Nesmith, who had stood close enough to hear my near-whispered question.

"Let's not pretend that this is the earth to which we were born." I spoke what I am sure every man of us knew in his heart.

"I do not know. But there are people here. We will find the other boat." I do not think he felt nearly so sure as he attempted to sound.

It was important to him, though, that I could see. Maybe it was a connection to what he was before, an officer of the Nathan Line, a man who knew his place. Here, he was adrift.

Locating the Nathan party was as good a mission as any for now. But sooner or later, success or failure, we would need to find another.

We were practiced now at setting up camp, and Mr. Nesmith's direction was largely unneeded. Palm frond lean-tos were erected to shield us from the frequent rain showers. Firewood was gathered. Our provisions were safely stowed.

In the morning, we would explore this new land. Tonight was for solid sleep on solid ground.

11. *Discoveries*

“THIS WOULD MAKE a good base of operations,” said Dutch Geitz.

Francis Dugan shook his head. “But there are no women.” I mention that his name was Francis here solely out of courtesy, for I never heard any man address him as other than “Dugan.”

“Aye, that’s a problem. I was hoping for some native girls on this island.”

We walked slowly eastward along the beach; Nesmith was simultaneously leading a party in the opposite direction. The plan was to explore the arc of this bay before turning our attention inland.

There was nothing but the sand, almost black here, the remnants of ancient weathered lava flows. That this isle, as the others we had visited, was volcanic in origin I had no doubt. Between the beach and the jungle wilderness stood a fringe of coconut palms and a round-leafed shrub that Bailey named a sea-grape. Samuel corroborated that, adding that their berries were edible.

We could live here indefinitely and use this as our base. But what would be the point?

The beach was gradually giving way to a salt-water marsh, mangrove trees appearing at the water’s edge. “We can go no further this way,” I decided. In the back of my mind, I recalled reading of crocodiles inhabiting such marshes. The petite shotgun I carried would be of little use against such beasts.

We were still a good distance from the wide inlet to the lagoon. There was higher ground there, and open sand. “If we want to go out there,” I said, nodding in that general direction, “we’ll have to use the boat. Let’s turn back.”

On our return, I chose to walk higher on the beach, passing among the palms. If there were sign of humans – or any other creatures – to be found, they would more likely be here than on the

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broad swath of sand we had earlier traversed. Nothing was to be seen but birds and lizards and the occasional land crab.

I gazed inland toward the rugged mountain backbone of this isle. This was definitely a larger island than the last but perhaps not so high, not so steep. Older and more worn from millennia of tropical rain?

That tropical rain was pouring by the time we reached camp in the mid-afternoon. The men squatted in their rough shelters, waiting it out, but there seemed an eagerness about them, an excitement I had not seen that morning. Nesmith motioned me toward him.

"We found the remnants of a fire, Malvern," he announced. "We are not alone."

I pondered this surprising and portentous news for only a moment before raising my eyes to his and asking, "Was there any other sign? Any indication as to whose camp it might have been?" Could our missing friends have found their way here?

"Only ashes. I want you to come with me in the morning and we shall search the area more thoroughly."

"Strangers may be hostile. We should post a watch from now on, day and night."

The man frowned. "Yes, of course. No point in letting hope get in the way of common sense, is there? Anything to report from your jaunt, Mr. Malvern?"

"Nothing of substance." I thought of that marsh area. "We might want to warn the men against swimming in the lagoon," I added. "It looks like crocodile habitat over on the east end."

This time, Nesmith laughed. "It's good to have you along to do the worrying for me, sir. Every leader should have a pessimist at his side!"

"I'll do my best to dash your hopes frequently, Mr. Nesmith," I promised.

12. Messages

HOW LONG AGO had this fire burned? With the frequent rains here, all traces of it would wash away within a few weeks. I would have guessed this one blazed only days before.

This did make me apprehensive. There could be unfriendly natives in the vicinity at this moment, maybe even Mr. Geitz's cannibals.

Or J.L. Nathan and his party might have found their way to this island. If so, where had they gone?

"Everyone leaves garbage behind them," Bobby Beck remarked. "If we can find it, it may tell us a tale."

"True," I said. Recently, I had watched many a man casually toss a bit of refuse into the campfire. Perhaps one of those who sat around this fire did the same. I got down on my knees and began poking through the ashes. There, a soggy white nubbin — yes, it was the butt of a cigarette.

I held it aloft. "George Bath was here," I announced. The men crowded around me to see my evidence. It was convincing.

Nesmith's momentary look of elation quickly faded. "But there is no sign of their boat anywhere. They must have departed." He looked out toward the ocean. "Where?"

"Spread out," I told the men. "There might be more to discover around here."

Samuel was the one who found it. Into the trunk of a nearby palm was carved a message: SEPT 14 SAILING EAST and, below that, NATHAN.

I have to admit that I was not certain what the day and date were. Mr. Nesmith knew. "That's three days ago," he said. "We missed them by hours."

"Then we must make up the time," I answered.

"Yes, yes. We shall leave immediately." He quickly thought better of that. "Hmm, no, at dawn. Back to the camp, men! We need to make ready."

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"Hold a moment," I asked, and drew my knife to carve an inscription below the other: SEPT 17 MMM. There was always the possibility that they might return.

There was only the faintest hint of light as we rowed out of the lagoon the next morning. There was no course to fix this time, no island we had glimpsed from afar, only a guess at the proper direction: east.

The direction we had sailed from the beginning. It seemed the proper direction for we encountered shallow reefs and small islets along our way, suggesting that we still traveled through an archipelago. But no larger island had yet loomed after two days voyaging.

"Where are we headed?" grumbled Dugan, as we shared a meager supper on the evening of the second day. "We had a snug harbor back there."

Young Gordon Watkins, who rarely offered any opinion of his own, nodded in agreement. Gordie was little more than a boy, and this had been his first time at sea.

"And what good would it have done to stay there?" asked the third of our seamen, Bobby Beck. "Do ye want to grow old on a deserted island?" Bobby was Canadian born, but when he became vehement about something, a definite Scottish heritage showed up in his accent.

"Better than losing our way out here," offered Dutch Geitz. "Do we have any idea where we're headed, Mr. Malvern?"

"East," I told him, and then chuckled at the look the group gave me. "Our destination is a question for Mr. Nesmith, men. I just point the boat in the direction he desires." That was an obvious evasion but they did not press me.

I do not know if Nesmith listened to any of this. He and Andrew Bailey huddled in the prow, having their own discussion. Bailey knew something of the South Seas but I feared the South Seas we now sailed were not the same.

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Morning brought discovery. Bailey, despite having the oldest eyes aboard, first spotted the mountain rising from the sea, east-north-east to our course. We were scanning its southern coast before the sun reached its zenith. It looked inhospitable and we spied no practical landing spot.

"I doubt they put ashore here," said Nesmith. By then we could see that other islands lay beyond. "Do you think we should make a circuit of it, Mr. Malvern?"

"Almost certainly a waste of time, Mr. Nesmith."

"Agreed," he said, putting away his spyglass. "Set a course for the next island. That is what Captain Logan would have done."

The next large isle lay somewhat northerly, but we passed several smaller as we headed toward it. Many of these lay south of our course. "I suspect yon sea-hill is an outlier," was Andrew Bailey's opinion, "and that we'll find more on a southern course." By now we could also spot larger islands toward the south and east.

"How can we know on which they might have landed? We can't search them all!" spoke Nesmith in clear frustration.

This island seemed as unlikely as the last and we again passed by, scanning its shores with the spyglass, and then taking a new south-easterly heading. Soon another good-sized, and more promising, island rose before us.

Here, we made a landing.

13. *Captives*

WE CLIMBED. It seemed the most sensible way to take our bearings and the peak of this island was not so high.

It was good to be again on solid land and it was also an opportunity to replenish our water and, perhaps, other supplies. The men were set to these tasks, under the direction of the able steward, and Nesmith and I went to make our reconnaissance.

A panorama of islands, emerald gems set in a turquoise sea, opened before us as we stood on a high, rocky crest. One, far larger than the others — mere islets, mostly — lay a bit south of east. I could just make out the ghost of another beyond it.

But we saw nothing on this island that suggested our friends had ever landed here. "I wish to sail around this isle tomorrow before moving on," said Mr. Nesmith lowering his spyglass. "We must make certain we have missed nothing."

I was in agreement and somewhat absently nodded my head. There was something there, just below the horizon that had caught my eye. "May I?" I asked, holding out my hand for the telescope.

Yes, I thought, when I focused on it. I pointed. "A boat, I think." It was hard to make out the tiny speck, far off on the glittering water.

Nesmith took his turn peering through the glass. "And I think you are right, Malvern. Could it be our missing friends?"

"That is possible." But it could be a native craft. At this distance, one could not even be certain it was not a whale.

"I've lost it," reported my companion. "It seemed to be on a heading for that next island. We must follow, and quickly."

'Quickly' involved the better part of a day's travel back to our camp. This time, there was no awaiting the dawn. We launched in the dark of the night, eager now, every one of us, to follow that other boat.

Mid-morning brought us close again to land. Nesmith stood in the prow of our boat, scanning the shores and coastal waters.

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Suddenly, he turned and cried out, "Lower that sail at once! To oars, men!" He beckoned me to join him, handed me the spyglass, and pointed.

Boats, two of them, and not fashioned in any yard known to civilization. It had been wise to take down the sail so we might not be readily spotted. They were moving eastward ahead of us.

That there were men in them, we could see, but not what sort of men nor whether they wielded oar or paddle. It was simply too great a distance to make out much other than the square sails that rose above them.

"Do you think it safe to follow them, Mr. Malvern?" asked Nesmith. I returned the glass and he raised it again to his eye.

"If we keep to a cautious distance. We will soon fall behind if we do not employ our sail." I paused. "And to do so would be dangerous."

"I would prefer not to have an encounter on the sea. We might do well to make a landing and scout from there."

I saw the wisdom in this. Our Mr. Nesmith was growing more sure in his command.

The two vessels disappeared around a low headland. There appeared to be good sheltered landing spot just to this side of the cape so we rowed into it. A narrow beach lay hidden, surrounded by cliffs of lava rock.

"Make the boat fast here, boys," ordered Nesmith. "With me, Mr. Malvern."

We climbed to the higher ground, to behold an extensive open beach beyond. Far distant, we could see the boats we had followed, apparently pulled up onto the sand. Was there a third boat there too? We would have to get closer.

It was slow going, keeping to the tangled jungle above the beach. Eventually, we reached a good vantage spot atop a cliff not too far distant. It could be clearly seen now that there were three craft lying on the sand and one appeared to be our missing lifeboat.

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Nesmith peered through it at the scene below. "It's them, Malvern. I can see Mr. Nathan and the women. Yes, yes, they are all there!"

He continued his report, attempting to keep a even voice. "Are they captives? There are men all around them — some sort of niggers — the captain is objecting to something —

"Oh! Oh, God, they have killed Captain Logan!"

The young man was momentarily stricken, staring out into space. I took the telescope from his hands. There lay Logan on the sand, a spear through his chest. I could see his slayer casually pull it from the body and wipe the weapon clean on the sand. Were he and his comrades laughing?

Dark men, in long kilts of some sort. They were gesturing to their captives to seat themselves on the sand.

Nesmith seemed to have recovered from his shock so I returned the spyglass. He might feel less helpless, holding this symbol of his leadership. Had he ever before seen violent death, much less that of someone he knew and respected?

For a few seconds, he looked through the lens; then, turning to me, he asked, "What is to do, Malvern? Will they kill them all?" Left to his own devices, I am sure the lad would have settled down and made the proper decision in a minute or two. I did not feel we should take even that much time.

"Back to the men, as quickly as possible. It will take all of us to mount a rescue."

"Yes, of course."

Mr. Nesmith was ready to organize a mission by the time we returned to our boat.

"I counted ten," I told them. "Not too many for us to take, with surprise and firearms on our side."

"Mr. Malvern and I shall carry the guns," said Nesmith. "The rest of you must find whatever weapons you can, even if no more than a club."

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This was no longer the age in which every sailor carried a knife, but there was a hatchet and blades among the lifeboat's toolkit, as well as a hammer and pry-bar that might be employed against our foes. Bobby chose this latter as his armament. Andrew Bailey sensibly began to sharpen a number of bamboo shafts he had gathered into rudimentary spears. He continued with this task after we launched.

We would row in under cover of darkness and take them by surprise. I felt there was a pretty good chance of this working — surely they would not be expecting any sort of attack. Soon, we spied the faint light of their fire, seemingly burnt down to coals.

Beaching our vessel, we cautiously crept forward.

They were gone. Boats, natives, captives. All that remained was the smoldering fire pit and the body of Captain Joseph Logan, its head hacked from its shoulders.

"Headhunters," whispered Bailey.

Dayaks? I had never seen a headhunter of Borneo but the men we had spied might fit their description. It did not matter — there were practical questions.

"Where have they gone?" was the most obvious of these, voiced by more than one man.

Mr. Nesmith chose to make an answer. "It would seem they do not live here but only encamped. There must be a village somewhere." It seemed a reasonable assumption.

"Elsewhere on this island, do ye think?" asked Andrew Bailey.

We all considered that question. "Would they have bothered to camp here if a village were near?" I finally replied. "They would have gone on home."

"Then they have gone home to some other land," said Nesmith, "and we must follow."

14. Pursuit

AT DAWN, WE buried what remained of Captain Logan.

Mr. Nesmith spoke a few words. With Logan's death, he was, strictly speaking, now the acting captain of all the "Double Lucky" crew, and he knew his duties. Indeed, I think he clung to them as the one sure thing he had left.

Our only consolation was that there had been but one body to inter and our only hope was to wander further down this archipelago, looking for signs. Nesmith was constantly in the bow, spyglass in hand, 30-40 Krag rifle within reach.

We were not searching for survivors now, but villages. Such settlements would mean fires and rising smoke. We saw no such sign as we passed by more islands, large and small. This did not mean there were no villages there, but we felt it best to voyage on. Our course turned more southerly.

Rounding yet another large isle, prepared to circle eastward along the curve of its coast, we at last saw other humans. Far too many humans. A fleet of humans, in boats with square woven sails. That these were of the same people who had captured the Nathan party, we had no doubt.

This did not mean they were necessarily inimical to us nor that they were of the same tribe.

"They are shaking spears and some have nocked arrows," reported Nesmith, peering through his telescope. I did not need his order to turn us south and run.

And they pursued. All at first, but the bulk dropped out within an hour or so, leaving a trio of vessels in pursuit. Perhaps the others had an errand — or a war — somewhere else to which they must attend.

Another island, perhaps the largest we had yet encountered, passed quickly by, and at some distance, to our port. Yet further off, we could just glimpse a great land mass, a range of mountains.

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Could this be, at last, a continent, or just a very large island such as those in the Dutch Indies?

It mattered little at that point. What did matter was that our wind hold. So long as it was a matter of sails, I could outrun those native boats. They fell ever further behind, despite a vigorous use of paddles. Perhaps we could lose them completely, come nightfall.

Perhaps we did. Unfortunately, the wind grew calm as the sky darkened and we had to take to the oars, hoping to increase the distance between us. Somewhere between midnight and dawn, we heard the crashing of waves and knew we had drawn too near a shore or reef. We could not risk more movement until we had light.

Light showed us that the coast had curved back to the west and that a point of land rose before us. "I can steer us around," I told Nesmith, "but it may take some time." And a certain amount of tacking. "The men had better get back on the oars." A light breeze had sprung up. I was hopeful for more.

We had drifted far too close to those rocks and I could see there were more underwater, dangerous shallow reefs I must veer around.

"The hounds have caught our scent again," stated Mr. Nesmith. Rather a poetic way for such a man to put it, I mused for a second, before returning my attention to sail and tiller. I did glance quickly in the direction he had indicated, but could see nothing.

That was not to last. Our maneuvers had given the natives a chance to catch up and they were angling toward the tip of this cape, attempting to cut us off. I could see only one hope — a passage between the cliffs of the headland and a great rock that stood off its tip. The only other choice would have been to again tack, and that would have brought us within range of spear and arrow.

Were I a praying man, I would have prayed mightily right then. Even if I were not a praying man, perhaps, but I did not have

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time to think about prayers. I am sure some part of me was fervently hoping that the water there was deep and not rock-riddled.

Close. Close — and there was a rock just breaking the surface to our port. I must steer even closer to that wave-battered tower. Bobby Beck stood with an oar and gave us a powerful push away from the rock, as I came around and into open water.

A good crew at the oars and a good breeze in the sail sent us speeding away, again increasing the distance between pursued and pursuers. Their clumsy sails did not permit them to turn as did we, and they must need swing wide of the cape. Would they follow us on southward?

Yes, they had been too close to their prize and would not now be so readily discouraged. All the morning, they persevered, but fell further back until we could no longer see them. None of us doubted that they were still there.

To our left stood the rugged coast, rising to mountains that seemed to grow ever higher as we passed. That coast curved back eastward here, into a broad bay, but I headed us due south, and west of south, best using the available winds. As those winds shifted later in the day, our course turned more eastward; at the same time, the shoreline curved back toward us and rocks gave way to a tangle of mangrove.

How long could we keep at this? We must seek a sanctuary, a place to hide or, if need arose, to defend. This land offered nothing, no place we might find shelter, no harbors, not even a beach. We sailed on.

15. *Escape*

ANDREW BAILEY SCOOPED up a handful of water, sniffed it, and then cautiously put it to his lips. "Brackish," he reported, letting what was left fall back into the sea. "More fresh than salt, I would say."

"A river, then," said Dutch. "A big one."

"Probably flowing down through this swamp." The shore was thick with mangrove, with many passages appearing to cut through it.

"There must be a main channel," Mr. Nesmith decided. "Let's find it." We knew it wouldn't do to go up one of those narrow ways and find ourselves stuck in the mud.

We could feel the current, see the debris it was carrying into the ocean. We could tell it was slowing our progress. This was work for oars, now, though I kept the sail in play as much as possible.

Part of me felt that it was too dangerous to be clinging to this coast. The open sea gave us the best chance of eluding our savage pursuers. If those caught up to us here, we would have no place to run.

Except up a river, if we found it. And would we be safe there?

Another heavy shower overtook us. They came and went quickly here; I understood that this was common in the tropics.

I understood also that our young commander did not wish to travel too far away from the place where the Nathan group had been taken captive. I am sure he had hopes of rescuing them, somehow. I doubted the possibility of it.

We knew now there were other people here. We could go somewhere, perhaps find tribes more friendly, and settle in. If there were a way of getting home, that, too, could be investigated, in time.

A broad opening lay before us, possibly one of many river mouths. I looked toward Mr. Nesmith, who seemed to momentarily hesitate. Then his decision was made for him. As the brief storm cleared, we saw three boats in the distance.

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“Up the river, men!” he ordered, and reached down to pick up his rifle. We both knew that this lifeboat, even with all eight of us pulling at the oars – though only six were rowing now – could not outrun the paddlers in the craft behind us. The sail was of no service in this channel.

Nesmith aimed the rifle and fired. Of course, his shot went nowhere near his target, and those who followed us were barely disconcerted by the noise of it. Could I get him to relinquish the weapon to me? Not that I was any marksman but I knew firearms better than he.

I looked enquiringly toward him, but he ignored me, face set, and chambered another round. It was likely that we would all be skewered by arrows before he ever managed to inflict damage on our enemies.

“Mr. Malvern! Look!” Gordie Watkins, although rowing hard, inclined his head toward something to our starboard. There, in a dugout canoe stood a slender black man. He gestured for us to follow and turned his craft into a channel through the mangroves. I did not wait for Nesmith’s order. “Row!” I called, and steered us toward it.

PART II. RESCUES

16. Refuge

THROUGH A MAZE of passages the canoe led us, and into a secret space, closed all about by seemingly impenetrable jungle. I doubt not that our pursuers followed us a way, but we never heard them come anywhere near where we hid. Perhaps fear of becoming lost caused them to turn back; perhaps they did get lost and are still there.

Our savior spoke to us. I am sure he attempted at least two languages, maybe three. We knew none of them, nor did he understand either English or my very shaky French. So of necessity we all resorted to gestures.

I decided to introduce myself in the clichéd fashion of an adventure tale. "Mike," I said, pointing to my chest. Using "Malvern" here did not seem particularly useful.

"Mika," he repeated. Close enough. "Oorto," said he, indicating himself.

"Oorto." I gave him a little bow, though I knew not whether the gesture would mean anything to him. Even such simple acts as the nodding or shaking of the head, I had read, could have a different significance in other cultures.

The man — more a boy, truly — was quite dark but his features were not those of an African, or at least those Americans of African descent that I knew. What was most surprising was the mass of curling blond hair atop his head.

"I've seen his like in the Solomons," Bailey whispered to me. "Aye, even down to that hair." So that was a mystery cleared up for me.

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I gestured toward young Nesmith, who sat somewhat bemused in the prow. "Nesmith," I informed Oorto.

The officer rose, dryly remarking, "I suppose it would asking too much for him to address me as Mr. Nesmith."

"Nezama?" said Oorto, rather doubtfully.

"Nesmith," repeated the man in question.

"Nezama," Oorto stated, more sure of himself now.

"It will have to do, I suppose," said Nesmith. "And what do we do now?"

"Get out of these bugs, I hope," said Dugan, slapping at his neck.

"Our new friend must have a village." Nesmith gave him a thoughtful look. "I doubt that he lives alone in these swamps."

"He may be doubtful about bringing such a disreputable bunch home with him," I said.

Dugan laughed at that. "I wouldn't blame the boy one bit."

About then, Oorto pulled back a branch to reveal a concealed path way. There was no misunderstanding his raised eyebrows as he pointed down it — that must be a universal gesture. "So, shall we follow him?" I addressed the question directly to Mr. Nesmith.

Who shrugged. "We might as well. Gather up as much as you can carry, men." Then another thought came to him, and he added, "Be on your best behavior as guests. I know the lot of you are sailors and haven't seen a woman in a while. That will be no excuse if you abuse their hospitality."

Oorto's people lived in huts, a dozen or so, plaited of tough grasses and raised on stilts above the swamp. By the time we reached their village we were quite turned around and not a one of us could have found our way back to the boat. Perhaps it was just as well that Nesmith decided it unnecessary to leave a watch with it.

It was growing dark, as well. We ascended to an open platform, floored with bamboo but with a ring of clay at its center

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where smoldered a small, smoky fire. That we had been seen coming was apparent, for a rather large group awaited us there.

Our guide spoke at some length to them and then they spoke among themselves at even greater length, the women seeming quite as free as the men at expressing their opinions. No one showed the least bit of malice or disapproval towards us, however. Maybe we were no more than a great curiosity.

Then, of a sudden, they dispersed and Oorto beckoned for us to seat ourselves by the flame. He pointed toward his mouth, turned, and crossed a suspended walkway to enter a hut on the adjoining platform.

"They're going to feed us, it appears," I remarked.

"Fattening us up for the cannibal feast later," joked Dugan. We chose to assume he joked, anyway.

Mr. Nesmith addressed us. "We should share some of our provisions to demonstrate our good will. What have we brought?"

Not much that was appetizing, as it turned out. The fruit gathered days ago had long since gone bad and been discarded. We had dried a good bit of coconut meat and still had some biscuit and tins of meat or vegetables. Andrew Bailey drew forth a bottle. "I rescued this from our wreck," he explained, "and was saving it for the proper occasion."

Oorto and a young woman — his wife? a sister? — returned, bearing trays and baskets. They were accompanied by an older man, his great curling beard touched with gray, who watched silently for a while. Once he seemed satisfied, he left without speaking.

"That is a man in charge," I whispered to Nesmith. "I hope we made a proper impression."

We sat in a circle about the fire. The purpose of its plentiful smoke, we learned, was to discourage the clouds of insects. All of Oorto's people constantly reeked of it. Before us were placed slabs of polished wood and dark, rounded cups. These latter I surmised

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were made of some sort of seed pod. Baskets of fruit, dried meat of unrecognizable origin, some sort of roasted yam, were passed from man to man. I motioned for Oorto and his companion to join us but he held up his hand in refusal.

Bailey pulled the cork from his bottle and poured out a portion of rum into each of our wooden cups, save that of Samuel, whom all knew to be "on the wagon." He raised his to me in salute. "That was a pretty bit of sailing you did today, Mr. Malvern."

Dutch agreed. "You saved all our skins, I reckon."

"Or our heads," added Bobby Beck.

"Mr. Malvern is the true sailor among us," said Nesmith.

I shrugged. "I've known boats since I was a boy, sailing on Lake Ontario."

"Then we have something in common," said Bobby, "for we've both sailed the lake."

"You were a freshwater sailor, Beck?" asked Dugan.

"That I was, shipping out of Toronto. I landed in Buffalo one day and decided to head down to take a look at the ocean." He gave us an exaggerated grimace. "And ended up here."

I knew Buffalo. My first fight had been there, when I was still a welterweight. For that matter, I had grown up not that far distant from the city.

"We all have our fates, it seems," Mr. Nesmith said, and downed his drink.

17. *The Diwarna*

MORNING ALLOWED A closer look at our hosts. I thought them a handsome tribe, mostly slender and straight of spine. Only a minority had the light hair of Oorto, most being dark, and all curly or wavy. Both sexes wore simple aprons, woven of the same grass as their homes, that did little to conceal anything. I realized in time that they served more for protection than modesty. They were hunters, for the most part, and gatherers of nature's bounty. I saw no agriculture.

But, indeed, what crop might one cultivate in a swamp? They called themselves, I soon learned, Diwarna, but I never learned much other of their tongue than such proper names. It seemed an exceedingly complex language.

Oorto set himself the task of teaching us to communicate and it didn't take long to recognize that the language we learned from him was not the one spoken by the people around us, his people. Whose was it, then, and why did he think we should know it?

"It sounds something like what the Kanakas speak," opined Mr. Bailey.

"Maybe a trade tongue," suggested Dutch Geitz. "A pidgin." We learned later that this was on the mark.

Most of us learned enough to get along, eventually. As always, some students prove more adept than others. I fear my ability fell somewhere near the middle of the class. Young Gordie was soon conversing freely with our hosts.

But well before then, we needed to know about our boat. The obvious way to communicate, since we did not have the words, was with pictures and I was, after all, an artist. I opened up the little sketchbook I had always kept with me, and drew our boat for Oorto.

He took the journal from me and leafed through the pages in apparent amazement. Soon a crowd gathered around him, whispering to each other excitedly. From time to time they glanced

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toward me with looks that suggested respect and maybe even fear. I did not know it, but from that moment they considered me a great shaman.

Taking the book from Oorto, a bit impatiently, I pointed to my drawing. "Boat?" I asked. He understood, smiled, and pointed off into the swamp. It seemed we would have to wait for anything more from him or his people.

I had seen some of the art of the Diwarna, patterns of stylized lizards and birds woven into their ubiquitous grass mats. And crocodiles – those appeared frequently. I had little doubt that they were plentiful in this watery home of theirs, and little desire to investigate.

To one side of the village, the direction from which we had arrived the previous day, lay higher land that one might traverse by foot. The other side stood over the water, with canoes tied below the elevated huts. We watched these come and go during the morning, men and women both paddling away into the swamp and returning with game or fruit or stacks of reeds. Around noon, our friend Oorto motioned for us to follow him into the jungle.

Once again, we thoroughly lost our bearings within minutes and it was a complete surprise when our lifeboat suddenly lay before us. Nesmith immediately stepped forward to board it.

"Watch out," cried Beck, taking his arm and pulling him back. "There's a croc!"

A modestly sized reptile floated close by. "Not a man-eater," said Bailey, chuckling at their alarm. "Look at the long snout – that's made for catchin' fish." He eyed our guide. "I 'spect Oorto would put a spear in it and take it home to eat if we weren't here." The crocodile slowly disappeared beneath the pool's surface.

Somewhat more cautiously than before, we boarded our boat. Oorto pushed his own canoe away from shore and began paddling through the concealing undergrowth. "We'll have to back out," said Mr. Nesmith. "The passage is too narrow to turn around."

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Not much further on, Oorto turned into a side channel and we were able to bring the boat about to follow him. It might have been no more than an hour or so, but that time rowing through the gloom of the swamps seemed interminable. All around us, so many insects hummed that they would have drowned out normal speech. We, however, did not speak but traveled on in silence until we rounded a jungled island and found ourselves in the water beside the Diwarna village.

Nesmith ordered us to unpack everything on the dory and bring it up onto our platform. "We need to take inventory, boys," said he, "before we make further plans."

"Let's hope those plans include resting up a while," muttered Dugan.

As it turned out, they did. We had no other choice, really, but to stay here and try to learn. This was our world now, but we were innocents, knowing nothing of it. How could we act without knowing the lay of the land, learning who lived here? Could we even survive?

I knew that Nesmith remained anxious to find out where the Nathan party had been taken. And I knew he had some nebulous idea that we might rescue them.

There are bound to be differences in any group of people you might throw together. A ship's crew is no different. Race was a barrier of different height for different men. And though perhaps not an overt racist, our leader had a distinct strain of unselfconscious snobbery within him. "We can not remain forever among these darkies," he announced, as we discussed our plans.

"But maybe we could take some with us," Dutch Geitz said to the rest of us, later. "Females, that is."

18. *A Visitor*

“WHO IS THAT?” hissed Dutch. “It’s not one of those damned head-hunters, is it?”

A large, golden-skinned man rode impassively in a long dugout paddled by a pair of Diwarna. We had been at their village somewhat more than a couple of weeks by this point, doing little other than eating, resting and attempting a crash course of their language.

Oh, we tried to help out, not wishing to seem parasites, but we understood little of their ways and their lives. Beck and Watkins, being the youngest and most active of our crew, had accompanied the hunters on a couple of occasions.

I peered at our visitor. “No, he doesn’t look the same.” But there were resemblances; he certainly more resembled those Dayaks – or whatever they were – than our hosts.

The stranger disembarked and clambered up a ladder, with considerable agility for so massive a man. I could see now that he sported intricate tattoos from head to ankles. I also saw that the paddlers, who followed him up to the platform, were not of this tribe.

There were other Diwarna, or their relatives, somewhere else. I suppose that should have been expected but I simply hadn’t thought of it.

The tribal elders greeted their guest. These included the man who had observed us that first night, Oorto’s father, Oorloso. I had learned that the Diwarna have no chief nor king, being ruled by a council of the more experienced men and women. I had learned as well that the young lady who had served us then was his daughter, Demba. But that has no bearing on the subject at hand.

“Mika!” called Oorloso, and, almost as an afterthought, “Nezama!” It hadn’t taken long for Nesmith to see that the Diwarna tended to defer to me rather than him, though I truly did try to discourage them.

“Come with us, Gordie,” I told young Watkins, thinking we

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might need his aid in translation. Although there was much faltering and misunderstanding as we tried to communicate, we learned that our visitor was named Hareata, and his people, the Mora.

The Mora dwelt somewhere to the south of us. When I tried to learn at how great a distance, the Diwarna could only tell me "far." I did manage to determine that there was a range of hills or low mountains between us. A report of us had crossed those hills and his king had sent Hareata to investigate.

We spent some time stumbling about each other's meanings but eventually understood enough. Our story was related to Hareata, in turns by us and by Oorto. The Mora showed much interest when we spoke of the capture of Nathan and his group, and of our own escape. He smiled broadly at the description of that event.

"We have heard of these captives," he said. "They are to be sacrificed on the Day of the Sun. All the tribes of the Kohari will gather then." The Kohari, it seemed, were the native people we had encountered on our voyage. We had not heard the name before as the Diwarna had persisted in avoiding any mention of them. Had I such neighbors, I would not wish to speak of them either.

"The Day of the Sun? Might that be the solstice?" wondered Nesmith.

"Maybe," I replied. "I didn't think they paid much attention to that down here near the equator."

"We have some time, then." He looked the Mora envoy in the eyes and announced. "We must rescue them."

Hareata placed his broad hands on the young officer's shoulders. "Good! We will help."

We were astonished. "You would war with the Kohari for our sake?" Nesmith asked.

The big man laughed. "We are always at war with the Kohari!"

19. *Disagreements*

"It's MADNESS," SAID Dutch Geitz. I was not certain that I disagreed with the engineer.

"There's nothing in it for us," added Dugan. "And plenty to lose."

"You're talking mutiny," Bailey warned.

"We're not on ship anymore and need answer to no one. That ended when the 'Double Lucky' went down," was Dugan's retort.

Mr. Nesmith stared blankly at the two recalcitrant men. Had he never suspected that his authority might be questioned one of these days? Andrew Bailey supported him, yes, and now Bobby Beck chose to show he felt the same. He went to stand next to the man he considered his commander.

Samuel and young Gordie seemed undecided. They would probably follow whoever came out on top in this disagreement. That left it to me.

I sighed and spoke. "You have all heard it enough times — we need to stick together. Not just we eight but those from the other boat too. We're all in this."

Dutch, who was inclined to be more thoughtful than his pal, said, "We lost all that along with our ship, Malvern. This is a new world and we have new friends to stand with."

"And what will they think of ye, now?" rasped Bobby.

"Maybe they'll call us cowards, maybe they'll call us wise. But they won't call us dead for no good reason," Dugan practically shouted the last words.

"I'll call you coward, now!" Beck yelled back.

Dugan started forward but I stepped in front of him. Nesmith simultaneously put up an arm to halt Bobby. "Out of my way, man, or I flatten you," the sailor growled. He was a burly fellow, about my height, about my age, but outweighing me.

Dugan brandished a fist and when I showed no intention of moving, swung on me. The blow was easily avoided. A jab, and a

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jab again, a wide right, not meant to land but to distract, and then a left hook to his jaw. The seaman dropped.

It had been ages since I'd had the chance to throw that combination, back when I had been Mike Miller, middleweight prospect. It made me feel good and a bit ashamed, at once.

Dugan was not out, only dazed, but he showed no signs of wishing to continue. Dutch helped him to his feet. "Mr. Nesmith is in charge," I announced. "I intend to follow his orders." I was pleased to see Gordie nod. Samuel shrugged — that was acquiescence enough from him.

And, perhaps most importantly, Francis Dugan took my hand, silently shook it, and went to sit with his erstwhile ally. Through all this, Nesmith regarded me in a thoughtful and perhaps not entirely friendly manner. "That's all for now, men," he finally said, and left us.

My left hand hurt. That punch had undoubtedly left it bruised. I gingerly felt it over and was thankful to find nothing broken.

Now all this occurred in an open space and a whole village of Diwarna watched what went down. They are not a violent people but I do not think they disapproved of my action. I can honestly report that I saw children mimicking my boxing moves for several days thereafter.

And whether he was but naturally effusive or saw me as a fellow warrior, Hareata embraced me fiercely before boarding the canoe that would take him on the first leg of his journey home to report to the High King of the Mora.

We had been told much of the Kohari by him, including the fact that the language we had been learning was, in fact, a pidgin of his own and the Kohari tongue — of which there were several dialects. It had become the common trade language for this part of his world and when the Mora did not war with the Kohari they apparently did business with them.

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The coast we had skirted down as we ran from the Kohari was a great peninsula, he informed us, and most of their villages lay on its far side or on a large island beyond. A high mountain range that few had ever crossed separated us from them. Their villages were many and they were a far more numerous people than his own. "That does not matter," he boasted, "for one Mora is worth at least three Kohari."

And otherwise of his people, he said only, "We came from the sea."

20. *The River*

“THERE ARE OTHER villages of your people, are there not?” I asked Oorto. We could converse reasonably well now.

“Yes, Mika, both in the swamps and beyond.” He looked toward the east. “It is said that many more of us live beyond the great mountains.”

“I thought that the — that your enemies dwelt over there.” It was bad manners to mention the Kohari.

“Only in the north. There is great valley high in the mountains, our dream-stories tell us, where a god rules and all live in peace.”

That sounded rather unlikely to me. Yet I asked, “How can one reach this valley?”

“Follow the river through the mountains, toward the rising sun.” He smiled. “This is only what I have heard in tales, my friend.”

I nodded in understanding. Tales must be taken for what they are and no more. “I would like to see more of your people and of this land.”

“Does Nezama wish this?”

“He might, if you brought it up.” Nesmith would possibly resent such a suggestion from me. “Tell him his crew has become too idle.”

Oorto laughed long. “I would rather take just you in my canoe.”

“He might welcome that too.” Indeed, it might be the better plan.

“Nezama is frightened by you.” Frightened? I realized that there was some resentment but wasn’t sure about fear. I spoke no answer.

“You are a powerful shaman,” the Diwarna stated. “All my people see that in you. Even if you do not see it in yourself.” He gave me a sideways look. “You should seek a vision.”

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"And where would I do such a thing?" I asked, pretending to myself that I was only humoring him.

"If you travel with me, I shall show you."

Nesmith liked both ideas. "We shall take the boat into the river and give the men some time at the oars. Then you and Oorto can part from us and explore on your own." So we all found ourselves in the boat with a trio of guides and Oorto's canoe tied behind. He and I were to part from the group after a time.

There was no grumbling from the men, now. The night before, Dugan had come to me and apologized. "I lose my temper, Mr. Malvern," he said, quite sincerely I believe.

"It's all right, Mr. Dugan," I assured him. "And to be honest, I am not sure that you and Dutch were in the wrong.

"But I do believe we need to stick together."

He thought on that and slowly nodded an agreement. Then he chuckled and remarked. "That is quite a punch you have, sir."

"I've had — practice." I had no desire to elaborate.

As we prepared to cast off, Oorto's sister Demba came down to the dock and threw her arms around Gordie. The young fellow reddened a bit at her affectionate farewell, but he was not too embarrassed to pull her close. Such things were bound to happen when young people were thrown together and I, for one, saw no reason not to approve of it. Some might have felt otherwise.

Our guides steered us through the swamp to the river's broad main flow. In the language we had been learning, this river was referred to as the Gurang. The Diwarna had a much longer name for it in their own tongue.

The men were tested, beating against its current. Suspecting that Mr. Nesmith wanted them to get the work, I did not offer to raise the sail; indeed, I took an oar myself, and Nesmith pulled beside me. Our Diwarna friends looked on with amusement.

"Hareata did not seem to think this boat would be useful in our rescue mission," I said to him as we rowed.

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“He said the same to me,” replied Nesmith, “but he has not seen it under sail.”

“We do not know what sort of vessels the Mora use. Perhaps they are more advanced than those Kohari boats we saw.”

“That is possible.” Our oars dipped into the dark water several times before he spoke again. “I still do not quite understand why they intend to aid us.”

“As far as I can tell, it presents an opportunity to show up their enemies. Raiding and stealing their prisoners at an important festival would be quite a feat.” I did realize that there might be reasons that ran deeper but what those were, I could not say. “They seem to fight as much for bragging rights as anything else.”

“Savages.”

“Back home, a whole continent is going to war for nothing more.”

We rowed on.

21. *Villages*

NONE OF THE Diwarna villages were directly on the river. That would make them too vulnerable to discovery and attack. Although the Kohari did not frequent the Gurang, as it lay far from their own homeland and too close to that of the Mora, they did visit at times, both to raid and to trade.

How did one know which they intended? Oorloso had told me that we would know if they came as warriors. He left it at that.

The swampland behind us, we passed now through jungle, what some name a rain forest. There were defined banks to the river, at least here and there, though in places its edge still disappeared among the great overhanging trees. Animals would, at times, be spied along those banks, wild pigs, a beast I believe was some sort of tapir, others I could not name at all.

And the crocodiles were always with us, in great variety of size and breed. Which were the deadly ones, we did not know — best to distrust all of them and keep out of the water.

Ahead, our guides told us, the river became “angry.” This we assumed to mean rapids or falls. As ever, their estimation of distance had only two measures: far and very far. They argued some as to which applied here. We never found out, for we turned aside before reaching that area, through more winding channels that the Diwarna seemed to know as well as the walkways in their own village. These channels led us to a larger village of their people, situated, as was their own, on stilts above the water.

As we glided toward their docking area, I noted a canoe that differed in many ways from the simple dugouts of the Diwarna. I pointed it out to Nesmith.

Oorto saw the craft. “There are Mora here,” he announced. “They have come up the river.” I had already come to understand that most communication between these two peoples was overland. Not always, apparently.

It was not a large vessel and, in fact, a dugout canoe like those

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moored about it. What most set it apart, other than being of slightly greater length, was the addition of an outrigger.

"That's a sea-going vessel," said Andrew Bailey. "If we had made it to Tahiti, we would have seen canoes like that aplenty."

It also, unlike the plain dark Diwarna canoes, had many designs painted along its length. These were not unlike the tattoos that had covered Hareata's body.

"Do you reckon that's the sort of boat we'll be taking when we go to fight those Kohars?" asked Dugan. No one knew, no one answered.

We soon saw the Mora, a pair of young men, as they came out of a hut to watch our arrival. It was easy enough to pick them out as they stood a head taller than most of those around them. Hareata, apparently, was not of unusual size as Mora go.

But they had not nearly as many tattoos decorating their bodies as that individual, nor were they as bulky. Give them some time, I told myself.

One stepped forward as we climbed to the platform above the dock, correctly picking out our leader. "Hail, Nezama," he said. "We have been told of you."

The other explained. "Lord Hareata passed through here on his way home. He is a great storyteller." I use the word "lord" for the honorific they added to Hareata's name, but it could as well have been "chief" or perhaps "noble."

He turned to me. "Welcome to you, Taona Mika." I did not recognize the title he gave me.

I allowed Nesmith to make the official answer. "Hail to you, friends." We all gave each other the standard Mora greeting of placing our right hand on their left shoulder and vice versa.

"I am Maneata," said he who had first greeted us, "and this is my brother, Poneiva. The elders come; we shall leave you to them." The pair stepped aside to allow a group of Diwarna to approach.

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Much of the ensuing conversation, following a formal greeting, was with our three guides in their own language.

Our crew was used to the Diwarna by now, and not shy about them. Soon most were spread across the platform, conversing and making themselves at home. Mr. Nesmith, as our leader, must need attend to the elders – even if he had no idea what they were saying – but I found myself idly standing by the two young Mora.

“Friend Poneiva,” I asked, “what has brought you to this land?”

“We have come for the crocodile.”

“To hunt it?”

“To trade for it,” said his brother. “We hope to carry many hides home.”

“Most come over the hills to trade,” continued Poneiva. “It is more dangerous by water but our cargo can be much larger.”

“So we decided to chance the river,” Maneata said. “We saw no Kohari, but we could outrun them even more easily than you. No canoes are more swift than ours.”

I could see the obvious problem with that. “Laden down for your trip home that will not be so true, will it?”

Somewhat abashed, Poneiva answered, “This is so, Taona.” That name again.

“It is worth the risk,” asserted his brother. “We will both have wealth.” He grinned at Poneiva. “And wives.”

The official reception apparently over, Nesmith approached me, Oorto at his heel. “This is where we part, Mr. Malvern. I’ll take the men down river in the morning.” He looked back the way we had come. “I think this jaunt did them good. I think it did me good, for that matter.

“You still intend to head inland with Oorto, I assume.”

“Yes, Mr. Nesmith. As far as the large village he says lies further south. It should be only a few days.”

“Perhaps by the time we are reunited, all will be ready for our

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expedition north." Nesmith chafed to be on the move against the Kohari. I had hoped that this trip would, among other things, take his mind off that for a while.

In the morning, he and the boat departed, the two guides aboard to help them find their way back, leaving Oorto and I to begin our own journey.

22. *Visions*

WE PADDED THE dugout along what seemed a fairly well defined small river, leaving the swampland behind us. That this was a tributary of the Gurang, I had no doubt. It was a sandy and shallow stream, and we occasionally had to slide the canoe over bars or snags.

The landscape around us slowly shifted, the trees still growing thickly but not quite so tall and with solid ground beneath them. Now the river widened into almost a small lake. "We stop here," said Oorto, directing his canoe toward the right bank. "The tribe that dwells in this land does not stay in one place but wanders here and there. This is one of their camping places." I helped him pull the dugout far up away from the water. We would travel on by foot, it seemed.

There were stone fire rings, the ashes within them quite cold. I made a small blaze, starting it with the flint and steel I had borrowed from the lifeboat's kit. Oorto paid close attention; I suppose my stock as a shaman rose even higher.

"What does Taona mean?" I asked Oorto later, as we sat by the embers.

"Healer," he told me.

"Ah. That seems an odd title to bestow upon me."

"I think, Mika, it is because you healed your tribe when it seemed ready to break."

More a diplomat, then. Not quite the meaning I had thought. "It is a Mora word?"

"Yes. Their words are strange to the Diwarna. What we think means one thing sometimes means another."

Come morning, we set off with all our gear and provisions along a seemingly well-traveled pathway. I had fashioned a rudimentary rucksack from one of the bags we had brought from the "Double Lucky," long since emptied of its content of dried peas. Oorto carried a package wrapped in his people's ubiquitous woven

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grass fabric, which he mostly balanced atop his head, steadying it occasionally with his left hand. In his right, he carried his long spear and thrower.

We passed through terrain that grew more open, trees scattered through grasslands. I could now see the high mountains, far off to our east. These past weeks they had been hidden by jungle and by distance. Were they as tall as the great Rockies I had once crossed?

And, for a moment, I thought I saw something flying, too distant to make out its winged form, but seemingly almost impossibly large. If it were an eagle, they grew far larger here than any I had ever seen, larger even than a condor. I pointed it out to Oorto, who shaded his eyes, watching until it disappeared. "Gerifanu," he said, and resumed walking.

I suspected that he did not wish to discuss the "gerifanu" so I did not ask what the devil it was. Indeed, it could have been a devil for all I knew.

Later, squinting into the afternoon sun, I spied another oddity. Ahead of us, a heavy post stood in the ground, slightly taller than I, and covered with stylized carvings. An exceptionally large crocodile skull was affixed to the top. I would not have wanted to come upon the beast that supplied it.

Oorto stopped before it. "It is time to seek your vision," he stated. "We sleep here tonight."

I can not say that the idea appealed to me. What was the significance of this totem?

"Is this a — one of your gods?" I asked him.

"Of course not, Mika. Everyone knows the gods can not be seen." He regarded the post. "This was a very large crocodile." The boy laughed aloud at my expression.

Then, with great seriousness, he announced, "This is a place of power. Some enter the dream-story here."

I assumed that was some sort of trance or similar shamanic

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business. I did not completely dismiss such a concept for I was up on all the theories of Dr. Freud and knew the subconscious mind was a powerful thing. But I was too civilized for any of this to have an effect on me.

And so I slept there below that great white toothy skull and, yes, I did dream.

I dreamed that someone far away was looking down at me, seeking, calling, and, perhaps, trying to decide who and what I was.

I saw what seemed a great fertile valley, all ringed about by precipitous walls.

Come, spoke a distant, disembodied voice.

I woke and looked toward the mountains.

23. *Trade*

I STILL SAT staring eastward when Oorto awoke. "You have dreamed," he said at once.

I was reluctant at first to admit it. It seemed — ridiculous. But I turned to my young friend and spoke. "A voice from beyond the peaks beckoned me." I looked back to those mountains.

"That is a powerful dream, Mika. I too dreamed but I do not yet understand my visions." He hesitated. "There are certain plants — but no, this is not the time to seek more in dream."

There was more to Oorto than I had realized. Was he a shaman among his people? A shaman in training, perhaps, considering his age.

We set out again. By noon, I thought I could see, very faintly, a line of high hills further south. My companion saw where I was gazing. "We will not go that far. Our destination is very near."

"Another village."

"Yes, Mika, another village. The biggest village in this land. The biggest I have ever seen, but I have never traveled beyond it." He sounded as though he wished he might.

I suspected that such a village would still be quite small by my standards. "What would lead men to live here?" I wondered.

"Trade," answered Oorto. "Those who come and go across the hills built this village."

"You have come to trade here?"

"Often. I always bring something, hides or mats, but that is just an excuse to visit. Curiosity is what truly draws me."

This somewhat explained Oorto's apparent sophistication. He had never struck me as just a simple hunter of the swamps. Still, he was an illiterate savage living among illiterate savages.

As much a campsite as a village, the settlement of scattered huts was nestled in a shallow valley. A small spring-fed pond explained the choice of the location — this village was a sort of oasis

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on the route toward the hills. It was near dark when we approached it.

Yes, it was larger than those Diwarna villages I had seen before, but many structures had a rather temporary look about them. A few, however, were more solidly constructed, incorporating heavier timbers and even stone. Around them, I saw more than one Mora, including an imposing older woman in an enveloping cape. "That is Pua," Oorto told me. "She serves the king of the Mora."

"You can sleep here," he said, dropping his parcel near a large rock-rimmed fire ring. Several Diwarna sat or slept around the flickering flame. "I go to see a friend." Obviously, he was not inviting me to accompany him.

Was there a trace of embarrassment in Oorto's manner? "I — may not return tonight," he said, and disappeared into the dusk. I wondered a little about that but quickly fell asleep. Then I wondered about nothing.

I was awakened by the bustle about me, although it was not yet quite dawn. That odor — tobacco? It was a stench I had not encountered since I was aboard the "Double Lucky."

Beside me sat the Mora woman, Pua, puffing on a great, dark cigar. Her cape — made of many feathers I could now see at this closer vantage — was drawn close about her against the fog of morning. "You are one of the men from the sea," she said, on seeing I was awake.

I sat up, taking my bearings. I could see that Oorto was not among those around me.

Not waiting for an answer, she continued. "My people came from the sea, many lifetimes ago." Pua blew forth a cloud of smoke. "They searched for a way to return to their home but never found it."

Was there an implication here that I and my party faced the same situation? "I think I might know of that home," I answered.

"It matters not, now, Taona Mika." The Mora rose to her feet

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and I did the same, to stand beside her. We were of a height. "Come later to see me," she said, "when our friend Oorto returns to you." Her bearing suggested that Pua was accustomed to both giving commands and having them obeyed. She left without further words.

And for that I was thankful, for I very much needed to relieve myself. By the time I had attended to that chore and returned, Oorto awaited me. I told him of my visitor.

"It would be well to address her as Lady Pua," said the Diwarna when I finished. "She is an important Mora." Again, as with Hareata, I give a rough translation of her title. In a quite matter-of-fact manner, Oorto then told me, "If she wishes to make love, that is up to you. Pua will not mind if you decline her offer." He chuckled. "Not too much."

Around the village, I could now see fields, planted in yams, melons, and other easily-grown crops. I had wondered of the origin of those yams we ate back at Oorto's village.

"The tribe that once roamed here has settled down, in part," he told me. "Many still prefer to wander and hunt, but this remains their home." We wandered ourselves, watching men and women, predominately Diwarna, but also Mora, haggle over their trade goods. At last, we ended up at the large hut — no, call it a house — of Lady Pua and her entourage. "Pua has authority over all the Mora who come here," said Oorto. "None may trade or pass without her permission."

Pua awaited us on a sort of porch before the dwelling. She had put aside her feathered cape, wearing now only a rust-red cloth wrapped loosely about her loins and allowing her breasts their freedom. I noted that these bore as many tattoos as the rest of her body. Pua was a large woman and certainly not slender, but certainly not undesirable, either.

We shared a noon meal, seated there on woven mats. Might Oorto have carried one of these south to trade, once? The food

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was, for the most part, starchy and not particularly flavorful. But there was beer. I think it was beer, or something much like it. That definitely raised the Mora a notch in my estimation.

“Have you found a wife here yet?” Pua asked me. When I answered in the negative, she sighed and informed us, “I miss my husbands.”

“I daresay they might miss you,” I answered.

She laughed at that. “They will find other women to console them in my absence.” There was evidently much I did not know of Mora marriage customs.

Lady Pua put a large, caramel-colored hand on my thigh. “Come again, later. I too need to be consoled.”

And I did. Who was I to insult a representative of the Mora nation, after all?

24. *Plans*

I MADE MY farewell to Pua in the darkness and went to find Oorto. It was time we headed ourselves back to his home. By the time the sun rose into the sky, we were well down the pathway.

For the Lady Pua had told me that a great war party of her people was preparing to raid the Kohari. We needed to be ready.

Soon, we were once again in the canoe, heading north toward the jungles of the Gurang's basin. We stopped nowhere until we were able to tie up beside the lifeboat, there at Oorto's hidden village, deep in the swamps.

I gave a full report to Nesmith, leaving out, naturally, references to both my unorthodox diplomacy and my vision beneath the crocodile totem. But Oorto spread the fuller tale among his people and some was bound to get back to my own. Mr. Nesmith never made mention but the sailors tended to be less discreet.

By this time, there had been liaisons between some of them and Diwarna women, anyway. It should be noted that the Diwarna are a surprisingly straitlaced bunch, and monogamous in their marriage practices. But humans are humans, wherever we find them.

It was on something of this nature that Nesmith came to me the next day. His men's occasional trysts were one thing, but he was concerned about the seriousness of the romance between Gordie and Demba. "Could you look into the affair, Mr. Malvern? If possible, I think it would be better if I remained out of it."

I realized that something of this sort could cause trouble. It would not do to upset our hosts here.

So I went to see Demba. She was a slender girl, perhaps sixteen or so, and certainly pretty enough. Unlike her brother, her waves of hair fell nearly black on either side of her strong cheekbones. I asked her outright of their affection for each other and of their intention to marry. "It seems that your father approves?"

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"Oh, Oorloso does not mind at all. He does think Gordie looks sick because he is so pale. Like the belly of a catfish, he says!"

I had to smile at that. Young Watkins did not tan as well as some of his fellow seamen. "And does your brother object?" We most definitely needed Oorto's good will and I, moreover, considered him a friend.

She giggled. "No, but I think maybe he is a little jealous of me. Gordie is very handsome." I had never thought of Oorto in that way before but, yes, I could see it now. Maybe it went with being a shaman — I didn't know and still don't.

Rather than follow that line of thought, I asked her, "Oorto has gifts, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Mika. A vision led him to the river when you fled before the Kohari. He knew there would be those who needed his aid." Demba's dark eyes met mine. "I am pleased that he found you." She smiled and added, "And Gordie.

"Our mother was a shaman before him," she continued. "A great shaman. And Oorto will be even greater." I knew better than to broach the subject of her mother, whom I already knew had been taken by a crocodile years previous. Even great shamans, apparently, can not see everything.

Nesmith listened to my report, nodded, and never asked more, being somewhat distracted with preparations for our going to war alongside the Mora. We needed weapons for the men, maybe some sort of armor as well. For that matter, we all needed clothing — what was left of what we had worn on the "Double Lucky" had largely turned to rags.

But, by and large, we were not yet willing to don Diwarna aprons. Loin cloths, perhaps, as worn by the Mora. All that could wait.

We had the two guns. The Krag would most certainly be useful, but I was for leaving the shotgun behind with Samuel and Bailey. It had been decided that those two older men had best not

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accompany us; for their own safety, we said, but for our own as well. They might need a gun if we did not come back.

The Diwarna were not a warlike people and we had no expectations of any of them accompanying us. It was not their way and I would not have suggested it. Nor did they produce much in the way of weapons. Most men — and, sometimes, women — carried long spears, often launched with a thrower, for hunting in the jungles or skewering fish. Beyond that, simple knives of polished flint or volcanic glass completed their equipment. We could not look to them for armaments.

They did not have the bow. I wasn't sure whether the Mora used it either, but we well knew that it was a Kohari weapon. I would have given much for one of longbows we shot with on the lawns of Long Island estates, an age ago. There was no time to try to reproduce one, nor to instruct the men in their use.

So that left arms that would serve for closer combat. Spears, more heavily built than those of the Diwarna, were the most obvious of these. Some sort of clubs or maces might be useful. As far as blades went, we had only a small hatchet and a couple of knives.

Or was that so? Our swamp-dwellers had their stone knives and I knew well that they were sharp. Indeed, both Mora and Kohari would be using stone points on their weapons; metal was quite unknown to them. At the least, we could arm our men with flint-bladed knives. And surely there were other sharp points about — what of all those crocodile teeth?

I would have to put the men on it. They were bound to come up with ideas of their own.

There was one other thought I had and that involved crocodile hide. What better protection could we find than that thick, horny reptilian skin? We would have to fashion armor of this readily available material, breastplates at the very least, helmets perhaps or even shields. More might be too cumbersome.

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We would be ready when the time came.

25. *On the Move*

THE TIME CAME.

A Diwarna canoe brought a young Mora man to the village, a man I recognized. "Poneiva!" I greeted him.

"Hail, Mika. I have been sent to fetch you. Your leader is here?"

"He is. So you and your brother made it home safely, I see."

A frown crossed his broad face. "The Kohari caught us off the coast and we had to dump all our hides into the ocean when we ran. Now I have a reason of my own to desire their blood!" He grinned fiercely at that thought.

Nesmith had joined us by now. "Mr. Nesmith, you will remember Poneiva."

"Welcome to you, Friend Poneiva," said Nesmith. This was a proper and polished greeting, according to Mora protocol.

"I thank you Lord Nezama." The boy had been prepped for this meeting with an honorary title to bestow. "The time has come for your men to join the fleet of my people." He indicated the Diwarna who had brought him with a nod. "Tundoo here will guide us out to the sea and we will sail your vessel south to meet them."

This was news, as they say. We had both been expecting — for no good reason, really — that a Mora boat would come here for us. But this plan did make more sense.

I said to Nesmith, "Maybe leaving Mr. Bailey and Samuel here is not the best idea, then."

He agreed. "They should stay with the boat, wherever it is." He turned toward the next platform and spied Dutch. "Mr. Geitz," he called, "tell the men to assemble at once. And bring their equipment."

Dutch's expression did nothing to hide the fact that he still disapproved of this expedition, but he answered, "Aye, sir," and followed the order.

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"Tomorrow is soon enough," laughed Poneiva. "I need to eat!"

"And we need to ready the boat," replied Nesmith. "But yes, eating is a very good idea too."

"The Diwarna may be happy to see so many hungry mouths finally depart," I remarked.

Poneiva remembered something. "Oh, I have presents for them, as thanks for their hospitality. Did you bring them, Tundoo?" Tundoo looked at him as if he were a madman; no Diwarna would think to carry someone's luggage. "Later, then," said the Mora. "I brought flints. Easy to transport in a small canoe and greatly prized here."

They would be safe residing in the bottom of the dugout. No Diwarna would think of stealing someone's luggage either.

While Mr. Nesmith entertained our guest, Bailey and I oversaw the loading of the lifeboat. We would leave nothing for no one knew whether we might ever return here.

This perturbed young Gordie. "I should marry Demba right now," he said.

The steward did not agree. "If you fall, it would be unkind to her."

"Better one night married," I replied, "than never at all. I'll talk to Oorloso and see if it can be done. And Mr. Nesmith, of course." Not that I saw any real reason for him to be informed. I clapped Watkins on the back, though I tend to avoid such shows. "Don't worry, my boy. You'll find your way here again."

When he heard the news, Poneiva was delighted. "A wedding! We must feast!" Such enthusiasm discouraged Nesmith from raising any objection, if he'd had a mind.

There was feasting, within reason, and dancing. Diwarna dancing proved rather simple, stamping of feet to a tuneless chant. I somewhat regretted that we had no musical instruments. No, not even so much as a harmonica had accompanied us from the "Double Lucky." Once the young couple was sent away, we feasted

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on into the night, and Poneiva gave us songs in a high voice and an incomprehensible language. I wished a bit for some of his people's beer and told him so.

"Lady Pua will be glad to have you come drink her beer again anytime," he told me with a grin. Poneiva had come over the hills and through Pua's trade village on his way here, so he had heard that bit of news.

Despite having a late night of it — Gordie, not the least — we made ready to depart early the next morn. I could see Demba watching us from the platform above as we slid away from the docks. We'll have your husband back to you, child, I promised in my heart. Soon, we were rowing through the dark waters, Poneiva and Nesmith in the bow, I at the tiller, and Tundoo paddling ahead of us. When we reached the open flow of the Gurang, the Diwarna silently turned his craft and disappeared back into the swamps.

From here, the young Mora would have to guide us, and we would be have no place to hide if danger arose. It was rather unlikely that it would, felt Poneiva. A single Kohari canoe would not think to attack us and he had heard we could outrun them anyway. A breeze billowed the sail and I knew that was true.

Down the coast we sped, with a good wind behind us, through all that day and into the night. The shore, hour after hour, remained a saltwater swamp, an impenetrable mangrove maze. How far was it to the Mora's coast, and to their fleet? It was early morning when we saw a high headland before us. The mangrove continued to grow right up to its cliffs.

"That is Ahurataca and it is where the hills between my land and that of the Diwarna meet the sea. Beyond, lie the coasts of the Mora." Our guide stood, his eyes fixed southward, as I steered our craft around the rugged point.

26. *Canoes*

"THERE LIES THE fleet," said Poneiva, pointing toward a multitude of triangular sails. Behind them rose cliffs of white, the ocean breaking against their base.

"Dover!" exclaimed Mr. Bailey, and we forever after referred to the spot as such.

Mr. Nesmith surveyed the fleet of canoes before us. "I did not expect them to be so large," he mused. None of us had. Some were veritable ships, but all fashioned of a single log each. I had seen trees in the jungles of the Diwarna that might have served as their building material.

"Nezama! Mika!" came the hail from a smaller canoe that approached, sporting the typical outrigger arrangement.

"Lord Hareata," responded Nesmith, as the vessel drew alongside. I noted that its sail was, as were all I had seen in this world, a woven mat.

I must say that Alexander Nesmith seemed in his element here, on the sea, with a chain of command both above and below him. He was no longer the drifting vessel of recent weeks.

"You must come aboard our canoes," said the Mora chief. He looked our lifeboat over and then spoke to Poneiva. "Guide them to a safe landing," he ordered, and motioned to his paddlers to carry him back to the fleet.

Here and there, bits of beach were to be found at the base of the cliffs. To one of these Poneiva directed us, in a shallow cove. There were Mora canoes drawn up onto the narrow strand. "Your boat can be left here," he told us, "and we will return to the fleet in canoes."

"What of Andrew and Samuel?" I asked, indicating the two men. "They are to stay with the boat."

The Mora looked at the pair and recognized the reasons for this at once. He then looked to the top of the cliffs and made a signal to someone there. Before long, a rope was lowered. "Can they

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climb?" he wondered and immediately decided not. He might have been surprised had Mr. Bailey attempted it; the old salt was still agile and no weakling.

But instead a loop was tied around one and then the other and each was slowly hoisted up the precipice in his turn. "There is a watching post above," reported Poneiva. "They can wait there for our return."

Our dory was unloaded by now and we and some of the Mora men who had loitered on the beach pulled it as far up the sand as possible. Poneiva gave the craft one last looking over. "The Kohari build their boats of pieces of wood, too," he said, "but not so well. I would learn of this."

"We shall gladly teach you what we know when we return," promised Nesmith.

We were ferried out to the fleet in small dugouts. How many canoes were out there waiting to sail against their enemies? I was sure of twenty or so when I attempted a count, a handful of them quite large, the rest of a more modest size, but certainly bigger than those in which we were riding. Such a fleet could carry at least two-hundred men, probably somewhat more.

And now, another six. It seemed odd that they would want us along, wait for us before launching their raid. But the raid itself made no sense to me. What did they care about us or our captive friends?

"This is the canoe of King Arierona," Poneiva told us, as we pulled alongside one of the largest vessels. "You will sail with him, as do I and my brother." With a most serious tone, he addressed our four seamen. "Your customs are not our customs so I warn you not to offend the king. Do not touch him nor even allow your shadow to fall on him." The Mora turned to Nesmith and myself. "You two are not seen as commoners so you need not be so careful. But allow the king to take the lead."

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“So keep your distance, boys,” said Mr. Nesmith. To me, he added, “I think we had best do the same, as much as possible.”

I nodded my agreement and we clambered aboard the big outrigger canoe. It had two masts and I saw now that one of the mat sails here was indeed triangular, as on the smaller canoes, but the larger formed a trapezoid, with one side somewhat longer than the other and battens running through it for support. I saw also that they would allow far superior handling to the affairs the Kohari employed.

As the men brought their equipment aboard, Maneata came forth to greet us. He looked upon our weapons with interest. Dugan had fashioned himself a sword of sorts, a heavy flattened wooden club with a row of crocodile teeth affixed down each edge. How effective it might be, I did not know — and had some doubts — but it was certainly a fearsome looking armament.

Maneata examined it and then exhibited a similar weapon but edged all with the teeth of the shark. “Mine is sharper,” he stated. “I hope that many Kohari will wear my shark lei.”

“I reckon my croc will bite a few,” replied the sailor. The combative and mercurial Dugan was now chafing to get at the Kohari, his earlier doubts all forgotten.

Many of the Mora warriors aboard carried small clubs, fashioned variably of stone or hardwood, and others had short, stout spears or stone axes. “Will you only fight at close range?” I asked of Maneata.

“There are longer spears stowed away for throwing. Shields, too, for protection against the missiles of the Kohari. But if we surprise our enemy, those will not be needed.”

“How is it possible to surprise them with so large a fleet?” Nesmith asked.

“We will swing deep into the ocean and come unexpected from the north. The Kohari do not venture out so far and will not

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spy us.” He laughed and shook his shark-toothed sword. “Not until our war cries announce us!”

27. Roundabout

THERE WERE THREE commanders in this flotilla, each with his own squadron of canoes. One of these was Hareata; another was Arierona, in whose flagship (so to speak) we rode. Over these two ranked Temani'itu, brother to the High King.

Arierona was a king — not the High King of the Mora nor one of his relatives, but chief of one of their tribes. He was a slighter man than seemed the norm for his people, who tended to flesh, and seemed good-natured, if a bit formal in his manner. A couple hours after we boarded his vessel, he called Nesmith to him and both were paddled over to the long canoe of Lord Temani'itu.

"A final council of war," reported Nesmith, on his return. "Mostly, our route was discussed, using a map made of sticks and strings. I could make no sense of it but I suppose we must trust their navigation.

"And when we arrive, they expect that we and the men of this boat will be the ones who retrieve the captives, while the rest of them fight. Not that anyone is quite sure where they are kept."

"It's at some sort of fortified village, I hear." The Mora warriors readily gossiped.

"Yes, on a large island beyond that point where we turned south. Incidentally," he added, with the ghost of a smile, "I met one of the Lady Pua's husbands. He sends his regards."

The fleet departed from the Mora coast in its three groups, seemingly not bothering to keep each other within sight. That they trusted their navigation skills was obvious. The course followed was far west of north.

"This will take several days, I would think," Nesmith told me.

I agreed and was concerned. "They seem to be cutting it very close. The solstice is near."

"I suppose it wouldn't do to arrive early and loiter about in Kohari territory. We shall have to trust their judgment."

We used the time to fuss about some with our armament. All

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had knives of some sort; I and Dugan carried the two steel blades and the rest had to rely on flint or quartz weapons. The little hatchet we had given to Dutch.

Gordie, the slightest of the bunch but athletic and reasonably tall, had practiced much with the light spear and was good at throwing it, so he was outfitted with three shafts and a thrower, in the Diwarna fashion, as well as one of their light stone axes.

Dugan, of course, had his crocodile sword, and both he and Dutch carried heavy spears. Bobby Beck had a spear too, and a great, knobbed mace-like club he had fashioned. He cut an imposing figure in his hide armor and bearing such weapons.

Naturally, Mr. Nesmith held the Krag. At the closer ranges we expected, it should prove effective despite his lack of skill. As we had agreed, the shotgun had remained with our boat.

I too had a spear, though I was none too confident in its use, and a stone ax. But Arlerona gifted me — and I learned later that it was a very great gift — with one of the small Mora clubs of hard, polished wood. Watching the warriors practice with this weapon, I had seen it was used as much to jab and thrust as it was to swing. Indeed, the movements were not far removed from those of boxing.

I was far from adept after a couple days of its use, but it would be tethered to my wrist when we touched foot to Kohari ground. Of this I was certain.

The canoes steadily coursed west of north for two days before trending more northward. In time, an isle arose on our horizon. “Isn’t that where you shot that big lizard, Mr. Nesmith?” asked Bobby. It indeed was. The island came and went on our near starboard, our heading now become due north.

“What lies north from here?” I asked Poneiva. “Are there other lands?”

“No, Mika. We know of islands that lie in that direction.” He pointed northwestward. “But no one lives there. We will not see them on this voyage.”

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For we were curving more easterly, making a great round-about in the open ocean. We saw no more islands, and the weather remained benign, although we passed through seas of tremendous size and power. The Mora seemed unperturbed by mere waves.

A call came from the lookout. What his words meant I could not say, for the Mora spoke their own language among themselves, not the pidgin we had learned, and none of us knew much of it yet. Not even Gordie, who had a knack for such things and could get along in the Diwarna dialect of his new wife.

It did not take long to figure out its meaning, however, for he pointed to a distant square sail. A Kohari boat. We swept down upon it as a falcon on a sparrow. A whole covey of falcons. The lone mariner was terrified when the Mora canoes surrounded his vessel.

“What will you do with him?” I wondered. I feared the worst.

“He is a fisherman, not a warrior. We have no quarrel with him,” replied Maneata.

Poneiva added, “And he could not hope to reach land before us.”

They spoke truthfully. The king questioned the man and returned him to his boat. “Sail north,” he ordered him. “If we see your boat again, you shall sail no more.”

We did not see his boat. But in less than two days time we saw a coastline rise distant before us.

28. *The Temple*

THE MORA FLEET assembled, as if sailing the vastness of the ocean without our modern instruments had been no more difficult than crossing a pond. The island that lay on our horizon they named only the Island of the Kohari. I was sure the Kohari had their own name for it, and learned it in later days, but that is of no consequence to this narrative.

"The temple lies near the southwestern tip of this island. The coast before us has few inhabitants for most of the Kohari villages are further south or on the mainland." These words were spoken by Hareata, who had come aboard our canoe to speak with Arierona. "Lord Temani'itu wishes to draw close tonight and slip in just before dawn."

Arierona felt it a good plan. Nesmith and I kept our silence, whatever we felt. "There will be a great crowd there for the festival," said the chieftain.

"Perhaps an advantage," said Hareata. "Perhaps not. We shall find out!"

"At least the gates will be thrown open. They would not keep the people out on such a day."

"A day when they execute prisoners?" I shook my head.

"Sacrifice, them, Taona Mika. They make sacrifice to Mihasa, the Sun Bird, the highest of their deities," Arierona told me.

Scenarios of sacrificial methods passed through my head. "Are they – are they tortured?"

"No, their goddess demands undamaged sacrifices. They have probably been well-treated and well-fed but they will now behead them all, even the women."

"And then their skulls would join many others in the temple of Mihasa," Hareata said. "But we will deprive them of their trophies."

"We thank you for that, my lords," spoke Nesmith. "We still do not truly understand why you are aiding us. Nor, for that

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matter, why so important a noble came to find us in the swamps.” We knew by now that Hareata was a confidant of the High King.

Arierona spoke to his companion. “You should tell them, Lord Hareata. You carry the authority of the High King.”

The Mora noble considered this for a moment and began. “There has long been a prophecy of a hero who would come from the sea. Most pay little attention to old prophecies.” He chuckled. “But recently, a priestess — a very important priestess — had a vision that the time of the prophecy was at hand.” The look he gave Arierona certainly held some meaning, a significance we did not then understand. “And you appeared. Might one of you be that hero? We do not know.

“We do know that heroes make the High King nervous. If you — either of you — shines too brightly tomorrow, you might wish to walk carefully.”

“We are more than just we two,” I said quietly.

“Indeed, Mika, but the others have not drawn attention to themselves.”

“Not yet,” remarked Arierona. “They will soon have opportunity.”

When night came, a dark and overcast night — for which we all gave thanks to our various gods — the fleet slipped southward along the coast. What of a landing place? I wondered. Would the Mora sail into the their enemies’ own harbor?

They did. Perhaps that was the best possible plan. Certainly, the sudden appearance of near three-hundred fearsome Mora warriors would throw panic into any group — all the more, this crowd of festival-goers, unsuspecting and unarmed. As Maneata had promised, our war cries announced us.

There was a tall palisade of logs about the temple town but, as expected, the great gates were flung open for the celebration. We stormed in, meeting no resistance, only shrieking women and men who fled in terror. Ahead of us was the altar of Mihasa, high on a

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platform supported by ornately carved timbers. Fires burned in the courtyard before it, and torches all about.

The altar, too, was carved wood. Around its base wound the representation of Bagap, the snake who was both husband and enemy to the Sun Bird. Above, stood Mihasa herself, a stylized bird of hammered and burnished copper. It was the first metal I had seen used anywhere in this world.

Where might the prisoners be kept? Close, surely, somewhere in this temple compound. Arierona himself led our party that was to find and retrieve them, some two-score men, including we six castaways and the brothers Poneiva and Maneata.

A scowling priest — it was an obvious assumption that he was of that caste — wearing a wide ornate collar bustled out of one of the doorways, displeased by all this sudden commotion. On beholding not the worshipers he had expected, the anger in his face swiftly became fear.

“Take him!” yelled someone, as he turned to flee. Many hands were laid on the Kohari before he could scurry away. “He’ll know where they are!” It required little persuasion for him to reveal the location, quivering hand pointing the way.

They were held in a small separate house behind the temple building. Warriors guarded them, but only one was fool enough to stand against us, the rest running from our advance. I noted several of our Mora give a respectful salute to the man we had just cut down; they appreciated courage.

We could hear battle coming from without the temple now. King Arierona motioned Nesmith forward; it would be best the prisoners first see his face rather than the fierce tattooed visages of the Mora!

Out they came, and seemingly in good enough condition. Six — who was missing? “Where is Gonzales?” asked Dutch.

“Dead of a fever,” one of the sailors replied. What was his name? Diggs. Yes, Jack Diggs. There were all three of the Nathans,

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Bath, and the other seaman, Henry Wise. All without a stitch of clothing upon them — perhaps Mihasa required her sacrifices so — and pale from their confinement. All except Wise, that is, who was black of skin. Three Kohari, fellow prisoners and no doubt intended for the same fate, followed them out of the hut, looked about, and ran for their lives.

“I hope those devils have someplace to go,” remarked Mr. Nesmith.

“We certainly do,” I responded. “Let’s get out of here.”

Arierona took one of the torches blazing nearby and tossed it onto the roof of our friends’ erstwhile jail. “Burn it!” he cried. “Burn it all!” This was, I am sure, meant to help cover our escape, not so much destruction as distraction.

We left a trail of fire behind us as we hurried the rescued prisoners toward the boats. The way out might not be so easy as that in; the Kohari fighting men had managed to achieve some degree of organization and outnumbered us. There was battle in the open yard before the altar.

A somewhat one-sided battle. The Mora broke through their enemies easily and without loss, scattering them in the process. Those short clubs, the staff-like spears, struck with deadly purpose. My own club, the one presented me by Arierona, found a target more than once.

Our men did not participate much in the fighting, for Nesmith had them form a guard around the Nathan party, and the relatively few blows they struck were in defense. We were outside the gates, now, and ready to strike for our canoes and the safety of the ocean. Behind us blazed the temple of the Sun Bird.

29. *Flight*

NOW WAS THE greatest danger, for our backs must be turned to our enemies. Moreover, the sun was rising, exposing our position and numbers. Other Kohari warriors had formed ranks before us, hoping to block our way to the canoes drawn up onto the sand.

In a way, this was fortunate, for those behind us could not use their bows for fear of striking those ahead. Do not think we escaped unscathed, however. Many Mora and, indeed, some of our own seamen, bore wounds. Those badly hurt were supported by their comrades.

We crashed into the mass of Kohari that stood between us and the sea. They proved brave enough to withstand us for a few moments; then they broke. Yet those moments were enough for a tragedy. A spear thrust pierced the chest of our friend Maneata, who crumpled to the sand.

Then Bobby Beck, as tall as the tallest of the Mora, as fearsome of appearance in his crocodile breastplate and helm, snatched the fallen warrior's short spear from the ground and felled the Kohari who had incautiously stepped in, stone ax in hand. Did the fool think he might take the head? Onto his broad shoulders he lifted the body, a man as heavy as he, and fought his way forward.

The beach! We were there and pushing the canoes away from the sand, away into the sunrise and the golden sea.

A hail of arrows, poorly made, badly aimed, but still deadly, followed our retreat into the ocean. Now that we were under way, powerful Mora paddlers speeding us toward open water, no Kohari boat could hope to catch us. Dugan stood and shook his crocodile sword toward those on the shore, roaring insults that neither Kohari nor Mora understood. An arrow found his throat.

He pulled it out, stared at it quizzically, and fell backward.

I knelt beside the stricken man where he had fallen. Was it that bad? There was not that much blood; surely the point had missed anything vital!

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The Mora men who knelt beside me knew better. "It is poisoned, Taona," said one. "There is no chance." Francis Dugan never spoke again and was buried in the ocean he had spent his life sailing.

He was not buried alone. The body of Maneata joined his.

"I thank you, Beka," Poneiva told Bobby, "for not allowing my brother to be left behind." He presented him with Maneata's short spear, the one Beck had carried away from our raid along with his body. "I wish you to have his spear."

Bobby took it solemnly. "I couldn't let those Kohari have his head. Maneata was my friend."

Poneiva stepped forward and embraced the sailor. "The gods took one brother from me and gave me another," he stated.

I heard that one other Mora warrior died of his wounds on our voyage home. These three were our only losses.

There was no need to swing wide of land on the way back, for we feared no pursuit. "In time," said Arierona, "the Kohari will mount a raid of their own. We insulted them greatly." But for now, we were safe. None of their vessels would have a chance of overtaking this swift fleet of Mora canoes.

We cut much closer to the northern point of the mainland, passing between it and the archipelago through which I had once sailed. Down the coast, past the mangroves of the Gurang's great valley, we went. Gordie spent much time looking shoreward there. "We'll get you back to Demba," I assured him. "We've done our duty in rescuing the Nathans and are free to follow our own ways now." So I felt, though I knew not whether any others agreed.

The Nathans — they seemed well enough, considering what they had been through. We had to clothe them in Mora loincloths, with extras to drape about the women's shoulders (though none of the Mora men could understand why they would wish to do so). I am sure that all were pleased to be again clad, whatever the origin of their raiment.

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For that matter, the rest of us had, for the most part, switched to the same sort of garment. Even Nesmith, although he never abandoned his officer's cap. With his complexion, he really should have adopted one of the broad-brimmed grass hats the rest of us wore.

Before his capture, J.L. Nathan told me, he had used the sextant in the life boat and had been baffled as to their whereabouts. "There should be no land here, much less a continent," he complained. "I can not figure out where we are."

"Nowhere," I answered. "Nowhere in the world we knew."

He sighed. "So I fear. I have watched those strange stars too many nights."

I realized that I no longer even noticed the difference. It was dusk, and some of those stars were coming out. "There seems to be an evening star here, the same as we remember," I said, gazing toward where it stood low on the horizon. We reclined near the center of Arierona's canoe.

"Our captors called that Lugan. It is their god of sleep. Or maybe of death — I was never quite certain."

"I think the Mora venerate it too. Maybe that is a constant in any world." I asked him then, "You learned some of the Kohari language?"

"There was not much else to do and some of their people were locked up with us." He reflected quietly for nearly a minute before speaking again. "Sometimes, one would be taken away and never return. The others told us what happened to them and that it would be our turn soon." He turned his head to look me in the eyes. "Very soon. We were all prepared to die, my boy."

"We did cut it close, didn't we? You must complain to our hosts about that."

"I have only thanks for your Mora. Even more of those if I could get some tobacco from them." He scowled. "Those Kohari smoked horrible black cigars that had the stench of hell about

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them, but even one of those might have been better than nothing. They refused to share."

"The Mora are generous," I informed him. "They pride themselves on it. I'm sure one might gift you with a smoke."

"A civilized people," observed James L. Nathan.

"That they are," I agreed. "They even have beer."

30. *Loss*

HIS BEST FRIEND here was dead. Dutch had plenty of reason to be in a sour mood.

And I had talked them into joining the rescue mission that got Dugan killed. There had been no real reason they needed to come; the Mora would have done the job just as well without them. I did feel – what? Remorse?

But that was buried beneath the joy of bringing six prisoners out of Kohari hands, alive and well. That was done, now, and that was good. We could move on to other things.

As I had told Gordie, I told Dutch that it changed our situation. “A bit late for that, isn’t it Mr. Malvern?” he growled. Things would have to work out as they would, so I left him alone.

As to those six former prisoners, they would soon be in a land and a culture that was new to them. It was fortunate that they had learned enough Kohari to readily pick up the trade pidgin, but more was needed than that. How would the women fit in here? How would any of them, any of *us*, fit in, now that there was no longer a mission on which to focus?

There was no going home, of that I was sure. Not everyone was yet willing to recognize or accept this. They would; no point in worrying about that. They would see that they had to find their places here, sooner or later.

Even Gordie, with a Diwarna wife, had no real place yet. Would he be willing to live in the swamps, hunt and fish with his spouse’s people? I doubted it.

We were not far now from the Mora homeland. All these questions must soon be faced.

“Amelia became thoroughly disenchanted with me during our time of captivity,” George Bath told me, as we watched the coast slide by. “I wasn’t heroic enough, it seems. I suppose that leaves things open for you now, old man. You have certainly proven the hero.” I realized that I had little interest anymore in Miss Nathan.

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Maybe being around her would bring back some of the old feelings but I doubted it.

"Don't discount our Mr. Nesmith," I told Amelia's former suitor.

"Hmm, yes. I'd rather see her with you." He asked then, with a certain reluctance. "Are we stuck here? I mean — forever?"

"I think so. It's not so bad," I assured him. "Find yourself a native girl and settle down." The Mora women would eat this boy alive, I thought to myself.

"I've yet to see any, aside from the temple girls," said George. "Some of them were lookers."

"If one in particular took your fancy, we can always take you back." I pointed toward the south. "I can make out the headland that marks the beginning of Mora territory," I informed my companion. "We'll be there soon."

"Home for you?"

"No, I've not set foot on Mora land yet, aside from a few minutes on a beach. We lived in that jungle we've been passing by."

"It looked most unpleasant."

I shrugged. It hadn't been that bad but I was not anxious to return.

In a few hours, we would be below the white cliffs of our very own Dover.

PART III. THE MORA

31. Dover

“Is NEATANU YOUR king?” asked Hareata. This was about as close as the Mora could come to pronouncing “Nathan.” They would not even attempt “James.”

This could require delicacy. I wouldn’t want to inflate the man’s importance, but neither did I wish to make him seem of no consequence. And I most certainly did not intend to imply that he had any authority over us. “No, Lord Hareata,” I replied, “but he was a very powerful and wealthy noble in our land.” I made sure to use “was.”

“Ah. Then I shall consider him my peer.” Status was important to these Mora, and knowing each man’s caste and station. We were watching a man swiftly descend a lengthy rope dangling from the cliff top.

On reaching the sand, he came and spoke to the noble in their own tongue, of which I still had but a meager understanding. “Your men have gone inland,” Hareata reported. “There was no reason for them to stay here with the lookouts.” That would be Samuel and Andrew, the two we had left behind.

“We will meet with them later, then.” If J.L. Nathan was to be a noble, I decided, I would speak of him as such. “Lord Neatanu is the owner of this boat.” I extended an arm toward the beached lifeboat, exactly where we had left it beneath the chalky cliffs. “It is his decision where to sail it now.”

Hareata chuckled at my carefully chosen words. “Not only a healer but a politician! But you do not truly serve Neatanu, do you?” he asked. The question seemed casual but I understood its import.

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"I was his guest, not one of his, um, retinue." I was uncertain of the proper word.

"And a suitor of his daughter. I have heard this, Taona Mika, from those who sailed with you."

"That was true, Lord Hareata, but perhaps no longer."

"She will not lack for new ones in our land. Let us return to the fleet." We paddled our small outrigger back to King Ariersona's canoe. Just the two of us — a Mora noble does not disdain such tasks and I think he had wished to speak with me alone.

Most of the Mora fleet had already disappeared into the south, leaving a half-dozen canoes behind, floating off the cliffs we had dubbed Dover. "I have accepted the invitation of the Mora to visit their land," James Nathan told me when we gathered. "I and my family shall sail with the king." He gave a slight bow in the direction of Ariersona. "But we need to bring along the boat."

"Could you sail it south, Malvern, you and Nesmith? Take whichever men you feel you need."

"And I will send Poneiva with you as guide," said Ariersona.

"Certainly, sir," replied Nesmith, before I could answer. "Let's give Wise and Diggs some exercise at the oars."

"If we get a good breeze, we may not need the oars," said I. "How about Beck and Watkins to round out the crew? I think we would need no more. And," I added, "perhaps Mr. Bath would like to take a boat ride with us."

"I'll ask him," promised Nathan.

I looked to young Nesmith and held out my hand to him. "We voyage again, Mr. Nesmith." I was thinking it might well be our last together. We shook without further word.

We were soon ferried in to the beach and once more launched the lifeboat into the surf. This dependable old hull had carried us far. "It could use some work," felt Nesmith. "We should pull it out and give it an overhaul when we reach our harbor." I could have said that there might no longer be a "we" but saw no point.

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I had chosen to leave Dutch with the Mora, but that meant also with the Nathans. I thought he might be just the man to be talking with J.L. about life here, and our experiences. He would give it straight.

But George Bath did decide to accompany us. "To whom would I talk if you were gone?" he asked. "The Nathans and I ran through all our topics of conversation while we were locked up together."

The coast curved slightly eastward as we followed it, the high, pale bluffs still rising to our port. "This is becoming a bit of a harbor," observed Nesmith. In fact, from time to time we saw fairly wide beaches below the cliff, with many small canoes pulled up onto them.

"Fishermen," Poneiva told us. "They come down ropes to reach the sea."

"Couldn't one build a ladder?" Nesmith wondered.

"It is forbidden. There must be no way for enemies to climb the cliffs."

In time, the shore turned back somewhat to the west, making for even more of a harbor, and coming to another, smaller point. "Beyond, lies the Great Falls," Poneiva told us. What these were, we had no inkling.

Coming around the point, we learned. At the end of a wide bay that lay before us, a river plunged down over a succession of cliffs, a torrent of water falling to the sea.

"This is the River Teoma," announced Poneiva. "And the gateway to my homeland."

32. *The Falls*

THE MORA HAD arrived sometime before us and their canoes were drawn up onto the wide beaches that lay below the cliffs. Those cliffs extended past the waterfall on either side, lining this great harbor.

We pulled the lifeboat up onto the sand. "Well, we're here. What now?" wondered Bobby.

"I'm going to head back to Demba, right away," declared Gordie.

Mr. Nesmith coldly stated, "You will go when I say you can go, Mr. Watkins."

I had to speak. "You have no real authority over the boy, nor over any of us," I told Nesmith. "Certainly not anymore. Our voyage is at an end as surely as if we had pulled into New York Harbor."

"Will you then lead them, Malvern?"

"Not I. Nor do I mind if they choose to follow you, Mr. Nesmith. But that is the thing — they may choose." I turned to young Watkins. "I think I too will soon find my way back to our Diwarna friends. Perhaps we can travel together."

"Gladly, sir," he responded. Bobby Beck seemed to approve of my words but Jack and Henry, being new to our situation, seemed more puzzled by the exchange than anything else.

All this, of course, had been in English, but Poneiva certainly caught the gist of it. The tensions that existed in our group would always have been obvious. A few minutes later, he found the opportunity to speak to me alone. "Your men should take care in choosing whom they follow. Mora warriors are allowed to renounce their allegiance, but must be taken on by a new lord or become outcasts."

"Should I find someone to serve?" I asked him.

"Oh, no, Taona. We know you a priest and priests have no masters but the gods. But the others must take service elsewhere if

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they leave your Neatanu. And he himself must pledge his allegiance to a greater lord if he wishes to remain in our land.”

How they “knew” I was a priest I did not intend to ask. I think Hareata may have decided that and none were willing to disagree. “Some of us may not choose to live here. Gordie intends to leave.”

“Gordie may bring his bride here. Mora have taken Diwarna wives in the past and they have always been welcome.” Gordie, incidentally, was one name with which the Mora had no trouble, though they did tend to slip the hint of a vowel between the “R” and the “D.”

“Oh? What about Kohari wives?”

“Those too. There is more of their blood among us than you might think.”

If these three peoples had been trading among each other for generations, there was bound to be mixing. Not always willing, either, I would assume.

We gathered all our belongings we could carry from the boat and hiked along behind Poneiva’s broad back, halting at last where several open huts stood in the shadow of the cliff. Even here there was no permanent way, but rope ladders were lowered for us. “Do you suppose Mrs. Nathan clambered up one of these?” asked Bath.

“More likely they hauled her up, as they are doing with our goods.” These were being hoisted in baskets or nets of rope.

Nesmith refused to part with his rifle, but slung it over his back before climbing. “Is that a weapon?” Poneiva whispered to me. “He never uses it.”

It was true. He had fired it not once during our attack on the Kohari. I think it had become a symbol to him, a reminder that he was a leader. And I suspected that he had not employed it because he knew it would become useless once all the precious ammunition was gone.

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I attempted to explain that to our Mora friend. "Every weapon wears out in time," was his only comment.

We climbed the cliff. I had long been curious to see what lay hidden above the walls we had sailed past. Before us lay a rolling landscape, some in forest, some cleared, spread across a wide shallow valley. To our right, the river cascaded down toward the ocean. I could see that there were other, lower falls or rapids further up its course. I could see villages and cultivated fields beside it.

"This is the land of King Va'aru," said Poneiva. "Further up the Teoma lies Arierona's realm, and my home." He pointed toward the east. "The High King dwells there, halfway between the river and the mountains."

"And what lies beyond the mountains, friend?" I asked, gazing in the direction he had indicated.

"The land of the gods, some say." He faced me, head cocked questioningly. "Why do you ask, Mika?"

"I — dreamed once that I was called there."

"There are others among my people who might better answer you about such things. But it does not matter, for the mountains can not be crossed."

"That has been said of many mountains before men climbed over them." The rest of our party had come up and now gathered around us.

"Come," said Poneiva. "Your friends await you in the house of Va'aru."

33. *Lakes*

THE COMPOUND OF King Va'aru was beside a modest lake, narrow but somewhat lengthy — a widening of the river above a waterfall. Aedina, they named that lake, and below it the Teoma rushed on toward the sea. Upstream, the river became more tranquil, and canoes plied its broad waters.

"One may paddle almost to the great lake A'auwa, where dwells my family," Poneiva told us. "Arierona will be there by now to tell them of Maneata's death." He reflected silently for a moment. "We shall be there ourselves soon. You are all welcome in our home."

He led us on to the high-roofed house of the king. Va'aru himself came forth to greet us, Hareata at his side. These Mora were, as goes the cliché, as alike as two peas in a pod. Quite large peas.

I wondered momentarily if the two might be related but then had no time to give it further thought, for others came forth from the house of Va'aru. That house was of construction much like all the others I had seen in this world, but more massively built, framed with great timbers, post and crossbeam. Yet walls and roof were of the same familiar thatch and mat.

Behind the pair of nobles now stood the Nathans and all their party, looking much the better for their time here, clean, well-clothed, hair and beards trimmed, and — perhaps not so surprisingly — a pipe once again in James Nathan's hand. Nesmith and I stepped forward to greet our host; Poneiva held up a hand in warning to prevent the sailors from following us.

But the king waved them forward. "All are welcome in my home!" Va'aru, it seemed, was not so concerned with tradition and position as was Poneiva's ruler, Arierona. Still, I learned that there was as clear a line drawn between noble and commoner here as elsewhere in the Mora nation.

"Your Neatanu has told us many tales of his voyages upon the

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ocean,” said Hareata as we entered the open central hall of the king’s house. “He is a great sailor.”

“That he is, Lord Hareata,” I replied.

King Va’aru eyed me. “Our cousin tells me that you are as well, Taona Mika.” Cousin? So they were of the same family.

“I have some skill with a sail, sir,” I answered, “but Nezama has been our leader.”

Neither Mora noble chose to comment on that. A feast was spread, in the fashion of these people, on mats placed upon the floor. Each guest was discreetly guided to a spot suitable to his rank — Va’aru at the head, a woman I assumed to be his wife to his left, Hareata at the king’s right. In fact all those to the left of the monarch were women. Apparently this segregation of the sexes was custom. I remembered that Pua had placed herself to our left when she shared a meal with Oorto and me, though I had thought nothing of it at the time.

Beside Va’aru’s queen — did he have more than one? I wondered — sat Mrs. Nathan and Amelia. Other women, of whom I learned neither name nor position, took places beyond them. J.L. Nathan was seated beside Hareata, then Nesmith, then I. Had I not made a point of mentioning that Mr. Nesmith was our leader, might our positions have been reversed?

To my right sat Poneiva and various Mora men I assumed to be nobles, before the places of the various members of the crew of the “Double Lucky.” I suspected “commoners” such as they would normally have no seat here, but we were all honored guests of Va’aru this day.

There was one exception. Directly to Poneiva’s right was the place of Bobby Beck. The Mora noble had named him brother, adopted him into his family, and he would forever more be of that rank.

“In time, you must see the High King,” Hareata told us, between mouthfuls of roast pig. “Not all of you, but the leaders.”

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“Maitoa may come to you or you may go to him. Either way there is no great hurry,” added Va’aru.

“In truth, it might be better not to hurry,” said Lord Hareata. “Learn our ways and language first. That is why,” he continued, “we are sending you on to be guests of Arierona.”

To this, the king added, “If you wish. You are welcome to stay here. You are welcome to go straight to the High King or anywhere else.”

Hareata seemed just oh-so-slightly annoyed by his royal cousin’s words. I think he wished to keep a tighter leash on us and I think, also, he might have had some reason to want us at Arierona’s home. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity.

“Sir,” I said, directing my words in the general direction of Va’aru, “our young Gordie wishes to return to the land of the Diwarna and his new bride. I thought to accompany him on his journey.”

“Is that not the direction you are traveling, Hareata?” asked the king. He took another deep draft from his bowl of beer, wiped his lips on the back of his hand, and belched deeply before continuing. “Taona Mika could accompany you.”

The idea pleased the Mora noble. “I would welcome your presence, Mika.” His brow furrowed for a moment. “It is a long walk to the swamps. It will take you weeks.” There were, of course, no draft animals among the Mora. One need walk, paddle, or be borne in a litter to travel anywhere.

“Others do it, Lord Hareata,” I replied. But they were used to long treks.

“Are you sure you will not accompany us, my boy?” asked Nathan. He was getting better at this pidgin we were using to communicate. Now, we all would be expected to learn the Mora tongue, as well.

“I shall return, sir,” I told him. “I have no plans to settle down

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among the Diwarna.” Though I could do worse, I added, to myself. Why should I feel any responsibility to Nathan or his family?

But no — there was the riddle of the mountains. I could not ignore that, nor the riddle of this world and why we were here.

“For now, we all go the same direction,” Hareata told us. “Up the river. We leave in the morning.” He spoke to Nesmith and me, pointedly excluding Poneiva. “Come sit with us for a time and we shall lay our plans.” We followed Nathan and the two Mora out onto a veranda where all three stuffed prodigious bamboo pipes with tobacco and puffed silently for a minute or two.

Neither Mr. Nesmith nor myself was a smoker so we waited patiently. Both of us had experience with such men.

As the smoke rose, I recognized another aroma mingled with that of the tobacco. This I recognized as the marihuana I had known certain acquaintances to use, back in that former life that was so quickly fading from me.

Though I knew well what it was, I asked of the men, “Lords, what is the other herb mixed with your tobacco leaf?”

“Why, Taona, it is kalina,” replied Va’aru. “Have you it not in your homeland?”

Nesmith was quite puzzled by all this, but J.L. Nathan chuckled. “We do indeed, sir, we do indeed.” He gave me a wink. “I’m taking my tobacco straight, Malvern, but these Mora gentlemen seem to enjoy the addition.”

“We learned of its use from the Kohari, it is said,” remarked Hareata. “And also of the ropes that can be made from the same plant.”

“Yes, the ropes are good,” agreed Va’aru, taking another deep puff. “And so is kalina.”

He turned to Nathan. “I shall miss you, Neatanu, and your stories of the sea. Arierona will take good care of you but take you care not to offend him. He is a prickly one.”

Hareata took up the narrative. “We will all take canoe in the

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morning and proceed up the river. Soon, though, I must turn aside into another stream that will carry me east. You may accompany me Mika, you and whatever men choose to follow you.

“The rest will continue to Lake A’auwa and the home of King Arierona.” He sat quietly a moment, puffing. “Both are long journeys.”

“We have already journeyed far, sir,” I observed. “Very far, indeed.”

34. *Upstream*

THE CANOES FOR our trip up the river were, unlike those we had seen the Mora use previously, without outriggers. We shoved out onto the placid waters of Aedina at dawn and were soon passing between jungled banks, where the Teoma flowed northward. The lands of Arierona lay well south, the most southerly of all Mora realms, where the great valley rose toward the mountains.

My own path would lead me in the exactly opposite direction. Before we left, Dutch had come to me. "Mr. Malvern," he said, "I'd like to come with you and Gordie, if you'll have me."

"Are you certain, man? It is going to be very long way by foot."

"I don't think I can stay here with Nesmith, especially if he starts thinking he's in charge again. Nothing against Mr. Nathan, you understand," he assured me, "but what use is an engineer to him in this place?"

So it was decided that the three of us would strike out for the valley of the Gurang. The exact path was uncertain but we did know the direction.

Our immediate path was certain. Less than two days' paddling brought us to a fair-sized tributary stream, the spot where we must part with the rest of our company. We and Hareata's small retinue turned up it in four canoes, leaving the others in the able care of Poneiva. It might be months before we again saw them.

This smaller river was broad, shallow, and slow of current. It also contained its share of crocodiles but I noted that they all seemed to be of the variety we had learned to be harmless. None the less, I was disinclined to trail my hand in the water. Hareata had insisted that I travel in his canoe — which he paddled with the rest of us — that he might learn more of me.

And, perhaps, I would learn more of him and his world.

"You will see the Lady Pua when you return," he said as we stroked along, a statement rather than a question.

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"I would think so. You know Lady Pua well?"

"Extremely well, Mika. Her brother is husband to my sister."

"A man of importance, I assume?" I was beginning to realize that all these high nobles were related to each other in some way.

"He is the High King."

Now that was a surprise. Maybe it shouldn't have been.

"I will soon turn aside to go to Maitoa's house," he continued. "It would not be too far out of your way should you choose to accompany me."

"But you might better continue up this river and make your journey across the hills. You can visit the High King on the return trip." He paused for a few seconds, gazing at the stream ahead of us. "I will send a man with you as a guide. He can take you as far as Pua's home. Beyond that, it is up to you."

"I thank you, Lord Hareata," I replied, and left it at that.

I noted that the land on either side of the river grew more open. This was still a country with a great deal of rain, so it was not in any way arid, even compared to the jungle behind us. It was simply higher, better drained, and firmer beneath the foot – indeed, rather rocky at times. We arrived at the place where we would part from Hareata and his men, where a great rounded rock, the color of old blood, rose beside the stream.

"This is considered one of our sacred places," the Mora noble told me. "It is also a good place to leave one path and take another." A few huts stood at the water's edge. We had passed other small villages along our way, but never stopped.

"I travel east from here but the river will continue to wind its way north. Mostly north. Heho will know where you should leave it." I knew the man he named, a silent, unobtrusive fellow. I would assume that he was competent.

Heho's flat, dark face spoke of his Kohari father, a prisoner of war and slave who had eventually been taken as husband by a Mora woman. To his people, this did not matter. I had learned already

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that caste and position in their society was inherited through the mother. What I hadn't yet realized was that adoption could set much of that aside.

We pulled all the canoes save one far up onto the bank. There were many here, stored for their owners as they came and went on the river. "Take care in the wild hills," warned Hareata, as we made our farewells. "Men are not a danger, for the most part, but strange creatures are known to lurk there."

I recalled that distant winged beast Oorto and I had spied. What had he named it? I would have to ask him.

"And," continued the Mora, "beware the mountains. I have been told that they call to you, yes. Nothing good comes from the mountain peaks. Now I bid you farewell." He wrapped me in his massive arms, released me, and turned away without further word.

There was still plenty of day left, so we four launched the remaining canoe and once more set forth up the river. There was also still plenty of river left, day after day of paddling. It was better than walking, certainly.

But walk we must, in time. Heho pointed toward a collection of huts on the left bank and we steered the canoe to a landing. Several craft were pulled up onto the pebbly shore.

Gordie looked about. "We must be well inland by now, wouldn't you think, Mr. Malvern?" he asked.

Before I could answer, Dutch told him, "We've been moving parallel to the coast, lad. I don't think we're much further from it than we were days ago."

I added, "But much closer to Demba." The boy smiled at that.

"Taona," said Heho, "this is the start of our road across the hills." He pointed eastward. "The river turns toward the rising sun so it is no longer our way."

This little village was, it seemed, a jumping off point for those who went to trade with the Diwarna. Marihana they named the village and we talked late about the fires with traders coming and

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going, before seeking sleep. We would attach ourselves to a group traveling north on the morrow.

There was much interest, not surprisingly, in the pale-skinned strangers among them. Many had heard stories of us, and some of those stories had described us as heroes. There was not much we could do about that.

In the morning, we four shouldered our pack-baskets and joined three Mora heading our direction. They were far more heavily laden than we, bearing trade goods. "Their burdens will be even heavier on the return trip," Heho told us. These people needed some good pack animals. I had seen dogs about; perhaps they could be trained.

Better than being eaten, which I knew to be the fate of some.

Dutch's mind approached the problem differently. "These Mora don't know about wheels, do they? I could build them a cart." He pondered that a while as we walked along, trying to keep up with the untiring Mora. "Or a wheelbarrow. That would be a good starting place."

"Maybe you could push me along," said Gordie. "Say, are those mountains ahead of us?"

"More hills than mountains," I answered, "for which we should be grateful. I have seen these hills from the far side."

The young sailor brightened at that. "Then we are close!"

The rise to the range of hills was long and gradual. Not so on the other side, our companions told us. "But there is a well-traveled path," we were informed by Heho. "I have walked it many times."

Sparser was the countryside through which we now passed than any I had seen in this land. By no stretch might it have been referred to as dessert, but groves of trees were scattered through grasslands here. Grazing animals could, at times, be spied in the distance. Some sort of deer or antelope, perhaps? They never drew close enough for me to be certain.

Then we were into the hills themselves, following our winding

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road over ridge and through valley. "This would be a good spot for bandits," I whispered to my comrades, "if such existed in this world."

"It wouldn't be worth the bother of robbing this bunch," opined Dutch, nodding toward our companions. "Didn't your Mora friend say something about dangerous beasts?"

"I've seen no signs. But something might prey on those animals we have seen."

Heho fell back a stride to speak with us. "We come to the pass," he said. Before us, the road climbed into a gap between two rocky peaks.

An hour later we stood between those high hills and gazed north into the valley of the Gurang.

35. *Arrivals*

TO EITHER SIDE of our path through the gap, the hills stood steep, often rising to a crumbling escarpment. Were these cliffs an extension of those we dubbed “Dover,” wrapping around the north side of the Mora highlands?

Our way down was not quite so steep, but led us across slopes of loose rubble. “Your wheelbarrow would be of no use here,” I told Dutch.

“Unless it was used to move this earth around to make a real road,” he replied.

I laughed. “I could see getting the Diwarna to do that!”

Suddenly, a sound that lay somewhere between a screech and a roar echoed from the cliffs.

“Gerifanu,” whispered one of the Mora. We looked up to behold a large winged creature fly away with its prey. We must have surprised it on a fresh kill.

Was it bird or something else? It had a long, most un-avian tail, but the wings definitely bore feathers. A ruff or mane of sorts stood out from the neck. At the distance, I could tell you no more details of its appearance but I could see that the creature it carried in its mouth – beak? – was some species of antelope.

This gerifanu was a very large beast, indeed, and most certainly a dangerous one.

Heho informed us, “It usually hunts smaller prey than man, and would not attack seven of us at once.” A rare, and rather wry, smile crossed his dark face. “But it will be good to arrive at the village.”

That was more than a day’s journey, or even two, but it was a journey that ended. I spied the familiar huts from a considerable distance, approaching from this southwestern side, Pua’s big house rising above the rest. And above its high roof beams, I could see another storm of the tropics moving our way from the river lowlands. “We’d best hurry to get some cover,” I told my compan-

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ions, not that they needed my words to hurry forward – getting wet might be pretty much of an everyday occurrence in this land, but we could see frequent lightning flashes in the belly of that storm.

Soon we were sheltering under one of the large, open thatched huts where traders transacted much of their business here. A few minutes later, as we waited out the downpour, I noted a man darting from one sheltering roof to another. In time, he made his way to us.

A slender man, dark but not Diwarna. Was he? “Hail, Ulani,” came the greeting from one of our company.

“Greetings, travelers.” This was all in the Mora tongue. I was beginning to get the hang of it, a little, but was thankful when he addressed me in the common pidgin. “Greetings to you, Mika, and your friends.”

Well, the man’s name was Mora, that I knew. And he spoke the language. Perhaps, as Heho, he was of mixed blood. “The Lady Pua asks your attendance,” he continued. “We can wait until the rain lets up; she will understand.

“I am Ulani,” the man continued. “I am a friend of Oorto. This one is Gordie?” he asked, nodding toward the boy. Without waiting for an answer, he went on. “I sent word to Oorto that you were on your way, as soon as I heard of it.”

“You expected us?” I asked.

“Swift runners brought news by another path, directly from the house of the High King.”

He was a young man, scarcely older than Gordie I would have guessed, ordinary of height but pleasant of countenance. Even handsome, some might say; I had the passing and impractical thought that I would like to paint his portrait.

The storm had subsided to drizzle, at least for the moment. “This seems as good a time as any,” I decided. I glanced toward our guide.

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Heho held up a hand. "I will wait here. The lady will want to speak to me later of Lord Hareata, I have no doubt."

Ulani smiled knowingly. "And to hear all the gossip, too, Heho. I might wish to hear some of that myself."

As we sloshed along the muddy way toward Pua's residence, Ulani said, "Heho is one of Lord Hareata's trusted messengers. He often visits here."

"Do you serve Lady Pua?" I asked.

"I — do business with her," Ulani answered, and said no more of it.

The torrential rain held off just long enough for us to settle onto Pua's porch. Today she was wrapped in her feather cloak against the chill. So this is the sister of the High King, I thought to myself, as I regarded her.

What might said High King think of our dalliance a few weeks earlier? From what I had seen of Mora customs, I would suspect the answer to be "nothing."

Ulani joined us in our conversation and the repast that Pua inevitably spread for any guest. Our talk was of little things and eventually meandered to Gordie's marriage and to Oorto.

"Ah," spoke Pua, "Oorto and Ulani have long known each other. He is — husband? Is that the right word?" she asked.

Ulani shrugged. "Lover is good enough, Lady Pua."

"Young Oorto wandered here years ago and met our Ulani. That was before I was the envoy." She gave the young man a broad smile. "They are both good boys. I am happy for them."

Dutch, unlike Gordie and myself, had known nothing of Oorto's private life and seemed a bit taken aback by our offhanded discussion.

"Indeed, Lady Pua," said I. "Consider yourself a lucky man, friend Ulani."

"I do, Taona Mika."

I chuckled. "That title again. I still do not quite understand it!"

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“Do not expect the Mora to explain it to you,” said Ulani. “They know what it means and that is sufficient for them.” He busied himself with peeling a juicy greenish fruit before speaking further. “I am not sure I completely grasp all its connotations myself.” I would have described Ulani’s speech as “bookish,” had the Mora such things as books.

“Literally, it means ‘healer,’” he went on, “but one might also say ‘teacher.’”

“Hmm, teacher — yes,” agreed Pua. “Or one who gives good counsel.”

Ulani nodded. “Maybe even ‘shaman,’ in some senses of the word. Lord Hareata does consider you a priest, doesn’t he?”

“That he does, for some reason.”

“Priests know things, Mika,” stated Lady Pua. “You seem to know many things.”

“One might define a shaman the same way among my mother’s people,” Ulani said.

“As our friend Oorto?” I asked.

“Oorto is more than a shaman. He is a sorcerer.” The young man said this with considerable conviction.

“What’s the difference?” asked Gordie, who had largely remained out of the conversation to this point. But we were talking about his brother-in-law, after all.

“A shaman is a person of knowledge. A sorcerer sees beyond men’s knowledge.” Ulani turned to me. “Oorto told me of your vision. Know that any can receive a dream but few can send one. He believes a powerful sorcerer spoke to you.

“And he thinks it is your destiny, and his as well, to go to him. His own dreams have shown him a land beyond the mountains.” He shook his head. “I hope that he is wrong.”

“He would be a fool to leave you, beloved Ulani,” said Lady Pua. “Let the mountains keep their secrets; there is enough for any man here below them.”

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We spoke then, once more, of small things until we took our leave.

So that is where Oorto found such sophistication, I thought, as we walked to the camping area. He would be just a hunter of the swamps save for Ulani and the Mora here. I should know more of Ulani.

I asked Heho of him.

"Ulani was born here," he told me, "of a Diwarna mother. His father was a Mora trader, who made sure that the boy was taken care of and well-educated." He scratched at an insect bite before continuing. "I believe the father is dead now. Anyway, because of his mother he is considered to be Diwarna, not Mora. Yes, Taona," Heho said, with a ghost of a smile, "just the opposite of me.

"Therefor, he also can not be an official member of Lady Pua's retinue. But he acts as her agent, and as her representative to the Diwarna who live here. In many ways, Ulani runs this village."

Many thoughts filled my head later, as I sought sleep. I knew now where Oorto had gone when he left me on our first visit here; he had been at the abode of Ulani. The boy needn't have hid it from me. Would I see him soon? And then morning's light woke me.

I went to the stream below the little spring-fed pond and washed myself. Several men, both Diwarna and Mora were already there, and more joined us shortly. Gordie wandered down to the water's edge after a while and splashed his face. "What now, sir?" he asked. "Do we head for the swamps?"

"We would never find our way to Demba and her people without a skilled guide," I replied. "We must wait here."

He stood and gazed northeastward. "Someone is coming over the hill," he announced. "I can't make them out with the sun in my eyes." Then he gasped in sudden recognition.

"Demba!" called Gordie.

She rushed into his arms, as nicely as in any romantic novel.

36. *Departures*

OORTO, NATURALLY, ACCOMPANIED his sister. "It is good to see that you live, Mika," said he, "despite your wanderings."

I shrugged and smiled. "Had I stayed in your swamps, my friend, I might have been eaten by a crocodile. There are dangers everywhere."

His expression grew serious. "Yet we may one day choose to seek out more." I knew of what he spoke, but neither of us acknowledged it, nor even glanced toward the distant mountains.

Instead, I looked to our newlyweds. "They will need to find a hut of their own, I think."

Oorto also gazed, somewhat absently, in their direction. "I have a friend who can provide them with a place."

"Ulani, you mean."

"Yes, Mika. You have met him, then." I nodded, even if it were not a question. "I should go see him."

"By all means, my friend. He seems a good man. And a knowledgeable one."

"He studied with one of the great Mora storytellers as a boy. Ulani knows many things, including how to be one of a people who will not have him." He clasped my hand, and went without a further word.

"Come on, you two," I called to Demba and Gordie. "Let's find some breakfast."

Dutch had already started in on his morning meal — he must have been up and about before me — and greeted his young companion's bride. "Will you be going back to the swamps, now?" he asked.

"We will return to my people for a time," answered Demba. "My brother thinks that best."

Gordie was agreeable. "But it need not be permanent," he added.

Dutch looked at the pair, and then at me, before speaking.

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“Mr. Malvern, I don’t want to go to the swamps with Gordie, and I don’t want to go back to the Mora with you. Not right now, anyway. I think I might like it just fine here. Maybe I can show these people some things.”

“I would have neither reason nor right to object,” I told the engineer. “If they are willing to have you, that is.” I looked about. “Where is Heho?”

“He got called to that Pua’s house before sunrise.”

“Hmm, then I suspect Ulani would be there as well. I hope that Oorto found him.” I sat down on a ragged grass mat. “Nothing to do now but wait. And eat.”

Demba looked about the village quite wide-eyed as the morning sun revealed more and more of its wonders to her. She had never been here before nor seen so large a community. Without her brother or her people near her, she became shy and clung to Gordie’s arm.

“Is it safe to have huts right on the ground?” she whispered to him. “What if a crocodile came in?”

This was in the Diwarna language, which Gordie understood fairly well, and I only well enough to get the gist of it. He answered in the same tongue. “No crocodiles live here, my love. It is too dry.”

It probably would have been possible for a croc to come up the stream to the village pond, but I felt it best not mention this. And there were, no doubt, other dangers in this land. Snakes? Poisonous insects or spiders? I realized I was quite ignorant of such threats.

We gossiped for a time, and the girl grew more at ease, telling us all the news of her home village. It might have been an hour, maybe more, before Oorto and Ulani, and Heho as well, joined us.

“The Lady Pua would like to see you later,” Heho told me. “Alone.”

“She will be busy for a while. Late morning would be an appropriate time,” Ulani advised.

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When I arrived at the Mora noble's house, which seemed filled with an unusual bustle, she came straight to the point. "A messenger has come from the High King and I am returning to his house. You will accompany me." This was obviously a command, not a request, but delivered in a friendly, matter-of-fact manner.

"Certainly, Lady Pua. I have done what I came for." Though in the back of my mind, there had always been a thought of returning to the swamps with Oorto. I would forget that for now.

"After, you can make your way onward to your friends at the house of King Arierona. It is possible that my brother will also travel there." She sighed. "But not I, nor will I see much of you once we reach my home. Come visit me this evening, Taona?"

"Certainly, Pua," I replied. "Do we leave soon?"

"At dawn. If you are not too tired!" She laughed loudly at her jest. I suppose I chuckled a bit myself.

"I'd best go arrange everything with my friends, then."

"Lunch first," the Lady Pua decreed. "And maybe a nap."

On my mid-afternoon return, Dutch proudly displayed a tiny wheelbarrow, its wheel a disk of polished hardwood. "It's only a model to show how it works." He frowned then. "They could use better drills. It took forever to make a hole for the axle!"

"Anyway, sir," he continued, his enthusiasm fully returned, "I showed it to Mr. Ulani and he wants me to make a real one for him. Wants me to stay and work for him, he does."

"You might try bamboo for your construction," I suggested. "Certainly easier to work with."

"And lighter," he agreed, and then laughed. "It's a far stretch from minding a steam engine to designing wheelbarrows!"

In the gray of the next dawn, I left Pua's sleeping mat and house, to make my farewells to my friends. We would leave within the hour. Not that any of these people had any idea of what an hour was. Let us just say that we intended to leave soon.

"We shall remain here a day or two more," Oorto said. "Then

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I shall guide my sister and Gordie back to our home.” He embraced me, and whispered, “Ulani says there is rumor of war. That is why Pua takes you to her brother. Be careful!”

I embraced Gordie and little Demba in turn, shook hands with Dutch, and turned to begin my journey back to the land I had just left. Ulani stood beside the Lady Pua, and greeted me in the traditional Mora fashion, his right hand on my left shoulder. I reciprocated.

Pua, however, embraced him so hard I thought the young fellow might be injured! And then we were on our way.

Lady Pua had a small retinue of four men, one of whom was Heho, but we joined with a company of six traders heading back to the Mora homeland. All these were heavily laden, some using tumplines across the forehead to help support the weight of their pack-baskets.

Pua walked with the rest of us, nor did she show any less stamina. These were people who spent their days on their feet; few “civilized” men could keep up with them. I could not have, only a short time previously, despite the athletic training of my younger days.

Indeed, I was not completely sure I could keep up now.

We followed the same pathway by which I had come to Pua’s village, and crossed over the hills through the same gap. This time, the trip remained uneventful and no fearsome beasts appeared. But on reaching the far side, the trading party continued southward toward Marihana and the river, while we who accompanied the Lady Pua angled more easterly on a route new to me.

One less traveled, too, it seemed. At times I was not certain we followed a path at all. Again, we passed through grasslands, broken by the occasional spreading tree.

The first night after parting with the traders, we camped on that savanna. As we prepared for sleep, beneath the vast sky ablaze

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with stars I could not name, I asked Pua, “Will you return to the land of the Diwarna?”

“I do not know, Taona. That is for the High King to say.” She gazed up at those stars for a while. “I would miss little Ulani.”

Then Pua raised herself onto one elbow, turning to look at me. “I have considered adopting Ulani but my brother might not approve.”

“What of his birth mother?”

“She wanders with her tribe. Ulani does not know their ways; he has been without family since his father died.” Pua’s voice, though little more than a whisper, became quite adamant. “He should be among the Mora.”

She settled back, with a sigh. “And I should be among those who sleep.”

I agreed and soon slumbered myself. Hiking all day almost guarantees a solid night of sleep.

Two more days we trekked on. Suddenly, Heho held up a hand to halt us. “Meat,” he whispered.

The man had spotted some unwary creature nearby. I could use a bit of fresh meat, I reflected, after living largely on dried fruit and strips of odoriferous cured fish. He disappeared into the tall grass with a throwing spear.

To reappear, bearing a small animal across his shoulders. A deer? I gave a close look to the creature he dropped onto the ground before us. No, some sort of antelope, I thought, with its cloven hooves, tufted tail, a little beard hanging below its jaw, and — a single horn growing from the center of its skull. A unicorn.

Smaller than I might have expected from all the stories, and not at all horse-like. I was only a tad shocked — that was something that happened less frequently to me these days — and also more than a bit uncertain about eating this beautiful little beast.

But I must admit, unicorn proved pretty tasty.

37. *The High King*

MORE DAYS OF travel through an empty land followed, until we came at last to a land that was not empty. A small village rose before us, beside one of the many streams that tumbled down from the distant mountains.

It seemed that the Mora had much room in which to expand, here in the northern part of their country. I admit that I had wondered, on visiting their trade village in Diwarna lands, whether they might one day impinge upon that peaceful people's home. I thought it unlikely, now. There was not enough population to create a need for migration across the hills.

Lady Pua was received with much deference and ceremony by the villagers. They kept their distance and even avoided looking directly at her. "They are very old-fashioned here," whispered one of her attendants to me. "They keep all the taboos."

I was reminded of Poneiva's warnings to us, and the ways of his king, Arierona. "Are there many such traditionalists among your people?" I whispered back.

"More out here in the countryside," he replied. "The High King attempts to discourage the old ways."

I nodded, though not completely understanding. Was this Mora politics? And if so, would I or the other castaways have a part in it? I remembered that prophecy of a hero from the sea.

Well, if called upon to take sides, I would be inclined to support whatever side Pua was on. At least for now.

We did not take canoe; not yet. These streams we crossed now were too swift, too tumultuous, nor did they run quite the right direction. More villages appeared on our path, and we must stop at each. Pua, I think, resented the delays.

I, for one, did not resent the opportunities to rest. These villages were set in a lush land, now, and there was much cultivation. Bananas and papayas grew everywhere. At last, we came to a broader river and canoes were provided to us.

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Paddlers, as well — we would not need to exert ourselves for the rest of our journey. My canoe was shared by the taciturn Heho. I did not mind that we spoke little. It was enough to watch the riverbank slide by, an occasional hut set among fruit-laden trees, flowers everywhere, and the constant calls of a hundred kinds of birds. This was paradise; it was as simple as that.

“We are almost there,” Heho informed me as we pulled close to the shore. “We walk the rest of the way.”

There was a crowd, a reception, awaiting us, our arrival obviously expected. A litter or sedan chair, festooned with white blossoms, had been sent for Lady Pua’s use on this final leg. She chose to walk beside it until we were near our destination, conversing with some of those who had been sent to greet us. That they were men of importance I had no doubt.

At last, Pua seated herself in the chair and motioned me to her. “You must walk by my side, as my honored guest,” she told me. “No, on the other side.” So we entered the compound of her brother, the High King, Maitoa.

Maitoa was not just large. He was huge. One would also have to admit that he was obese. He wore a high crown made of feathers, gold and crimson and green, towering above his already considerable height.

A wide smile split his broad and craggy face. “Welcome, little sister!” he roared. As soon as Pua’s feet touched the ground she was wrapped in his arms. I must say, she did look a little girl beside him.

King Maitoa spied me. “Welcome to you as well, Taona,” he said, and placed his right hand on my left shoulder. I knew it to be great sign of respect for him to greet me thus as an equal — and very much unexpected. I greeted him in kind, hoping I was not breaking any taboo in so doing.

“Come,” he ordered, turning back to his sister, and I followed the two of them into the house of the High King. Once inside there

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was an affectionate greeting between Pua and three women I at once guessed to be Maitoa's wives. A guess that proved correct.

"Are my husbands here?" asked Lady Pua.

"They are with Lord Hareata," answered one of the wives.

"There is going to be a war," whispered another, as though it were a secret. "They went down to Va'aru and the fleet."

"It is so," said the High King. "You have no husband's arms to greet you on your return. But you could always add another," he told her, winking in my direction. It might have been a joke, but I am certain Maitoa would have liked to tie me to his family and faction.

Pua ignored the jest and answered quite soberly. "He is meant for another, I think." And then lightening, added with a smile, "He is rather young, too."

That I would not touch — one should never discuss a lady's age, in whatever world one finds oneself. But I doubted that she had even as much as ten years' advantage on me. I spoke. "Lord Hareata has decided that I am a priest. Do priests marry among your people?"

"Some do, some don't. It depends on which god they serve," answered Pua. "Kohari priests take wives, don't they?" she asked her brother.

"They certainly take concubines," replied Maitoa, furrowing his massive brow. "Wives, I am not certain of."

"And the priestesses take lovers too," volunteered one of the wives.

"Other women, sometimes, I hear," said another.

"Maybe one will come and kidnap you," giggled the third. I wondered which of these three was the sister of Hareata.

"Let's eat," said the High King of the Mora. "We will feast tomorrow. Only a snack now." The "snack" was spread in all its glory across a veranda on one side of Maitoa's house. His house was

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the largest I had seen yet in this land though, admittedly, still smaller than the temple of the Kohari.

But we had burned that to the ground so perhaps it no longer counted.

There were as many guests for this meal as at most feasts, as well. Relatives, nobles, retainers — I had no idea who was who. But the High King insisted that I sit at his right hand, and placed Pua to his left, ahead of his wives. I could not but wonder if that was his custom or an honor for the day.

Certainly a temporary honor for me. Of that I had no illusions. And the High King wished me near so we could speak.

“My sister wants to adopt a Diwarna boy, she tells me. Do you know of him?”

“Ulani, sir. He seems a fine young man.”

“I am sure of that, Taona. But would he make a good High King?” He said this with great seriousness, but Pua would not let him get away with it.

“It is true, Mika, that it would make the boy eligible to rule, but the kings would never elect him. My brother is just playing with you.”

I had no idea of the process of choosing a High King of the Mora. “Your son would become High King, Lady Pua?” I asked.

“One of mine, or those of my two sisters. If the kings do not like any of them, they can cast an even wider net, as long as it is a descendant of the female line.”

Ah, so this was also something that depended on the mother’s status. “I understand, Lady. This was never the way of my people.”

“You inherit through the father, like the Kohari?” asked Maitoa. He shook his head. “How can they be sure who the father is?” he wondered.

“Oh, you know the Kohari keep their women locked up so no other men can get at them,” interjected one of the wives.

“Not all the time, Panoha,” replied a smiling Pua. Panoha —

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that, I recalled, was the name of Hareata's sister. Yes, this plump woman showed a definite resemblance.

"We shall worry about the half-Diwarna boy some other time. I think we should send you on to Arierona's home and your people," said the High King. "Hareata should be headed there by now."

"There is — war coming, sir?" I asked.

"So Hareata and Va'aru think, and my brother Temani'itu, as well. They are the ones who keep an eye toward the sea." He regarded me for a moment. "And so they saw you, Taona Mika."

"Many wonder if you are the hero from the sea who was foretold. And some think you will bring back the old ways and cast the High King from his place." Maitoa chuckled and shook his head. "Now that I have heard much of you, now that I have seen you with my own eyes, I know you to be no enemy. But you might yet be a hero."

"We are weary from our journey, Brother," spoke Pua. "Perhaps we should rest now."

"Yes, yes. The evening star is already showing herself. Go and sleep a while, but return later if you wish. There is always food and company here." The High King turned to his wives. "Will you show Taona Mika to his chamber?"

"You too must come back later, Sister," he said to Pua. "There is more of which we must speak."

I followed the three women to my room, much like every other Mora room I had occupied, hanging mat walls, bamboo floor, roof beams exposed above me. There was a window, for which I was thankful. Even with their open construction, these houses could be sweltering at times. Many Mora chose to sleep on their porches.

Also typically, the only mattress was a grass mat on the floor.

Panoha turned and spoke to me. "Do you wish one of us to

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stay, Taona? We would not expect you to sleep alone in the house of the High King.”

Another wife agreed. “That would be inhospitable!”

I considered it, yes, I did. “I thank you, my ladies, but I am too worn from my travels. I need sleep now.”

They nodded understandingly and left. I would like to think that they seemed just a little disappointed.

38. *The Moon*

THERE WAS A MOON. For that I must be thankful.

But, at the time, I resented it for it made sleep difficult. I awoke after no more than a couple hours and could not return to my slumber with the lunar light shining through my window. Perhaps I should get up, as the High King had suggested, rejoin those who sat conversing or listening to songs in the cool of the night.

A noise — someone attempting stealth was at the threshold of my chamber, the faintest of shadows among shadows. Had one of Maitoa's wives returned?

No, the shape was that of a man. As the facets of a jewel, something gleamed in the the figure's hand, reflecting the pale cool moonlight. Then he lunged forward; had I not been awake, a sharp stone knife might have found my heart.

I lunged myself, taking his legs from under him. The weapon flew from his hand to clatter on the floor. The assailant drew himself up and flew, as well, out the window and into the night.

Maybe it was his yelp of surprise when I knocked him down, or maybe it was just the noise of our brief struggle that brought a pair of burly warriors to the doorway. "Someone tried to knife me," I told them, as calmly as I could make myself. One immediately hurried away.

"Are you harmed, Taona?" asked the other.

"No," I replied, "and I fear my attacker escaped unharmed as well." Other than a few bruises, perhaps.

The High King himself, disturbed by this affront to his hospitality, headed the group that returned with the guard. An oil lamp was held high, allowing discovery of the dropped weapon. It was a knife of rose quartz, a ceremonial weapon, apparently.

"A priest's blade," said one.

"He intended it to be a sacrifice," whispered another.

"Did you see his face, Mika?" asked the King.

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"It was too dark, sir. He was no more than a shadow." I reflected on all I could remember of the assailant. "Not a very large shadow, though."

"And not any sort of a warrior or he would not have fled so quickly," mused the monarch. "Let me see that knife." It was handed to him.

Maitoa held the weapon and pondered it, as if it might give up its secrets to him. Then he raised his head, ordered, "Have the High Priest attend me," and left the room.

I knew little enough of the Mora gods and goddesses, other than the fact that there were such. Quite a few, in fact, and many very minor. "Which god does this High Priest serve?" I asked of Pua, when I saw her among those who had gathered.

"All of them," she told me. "He is the High King's representative before the Spirit World." Lady Pua gave a low laugh, and added, "Though the High Priest would rather think of himself as the Spirit World's emissary to the King."

"Ah." I thought I understood. "Then there is, shall we say, a certain competition for power between them?"

"Exactly, Taona. You have seen things as they are."

Understand that I had and have nothing against religion. I knew from history that the power of religion had often been the strongest force opposing government tyranny. I knew also that the greatest tyranny could come as a result of their collusion.

So I was, at least in theory, in favor of an independent High Priest. But not if he was involved in trying to assassinate me.

That individual was soon standing before Maitoa, and not alone for he motioned a pair of attendants forward. Between them they dragged a terrified young man. I could spot a gash on one arm, perhaps the result of leaping through the window.

"A fanatic, my Lord Maitoa," spoke the High Priest, gesturing toward the captive. "We found him cowering at the shrine, too frightened to either fight or run." His face, his tone, made the

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priest's distaste obvious. "I assure you that the priesthood was not involved in this affront."

Pua whispered to me. "He probably took my brother's favor toward you as a sign. Most of the priests are waiting until they learn more of you and your friends."

"What do they expect of us?" I whispered back.

"Many think the hero from the sea comes to bring back the old ways. The High King has some uneasiness about this."

I nodded. Maitoa's words earlier had suggested as much.

The High Priest was still speaking, his monologue having turned into a mild harangue against all things modern. His position, I suppose, let him get away with it as long as he did not go too far.

I wondered how many others than I were noting that his peaked feather crown — not so high as that of the king, but still impressive — was rather askew. He ceased his speech at last.

"Taona Mika!" called the High King. "Come to me."

"Look upon your would-be assassin," he said, when I came to stand beside him. "The crime this priest has committed carries the punishment of being buried alive. The crime against my house and hospitality, that is. The attempt to murder you would normally call for bludgeoning."

"Which shall it be?" he put to me.

The High King studied me carefully as I thought on it. "I would not have any man suffer," I finally replied. "I choose the quicker death by the club."

"Clubbing can be prolonged, if the executioner so desires," answered Maitoa, "but, yes, I think it preferable too. We can bury him alive after he is dead," he decided, and chuckled at his little joke.

He motioned to a giant of a Mora, bearing a great knobbed club. Two warriors grasped the condemned man by his arms,

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forcing him to his knees with his head thrust forward. One swing was all it took.

Above us, the moon still shone in the heavens, promising that I would sleep no more tonight.

39. *A'auwa*

"THE SHORTEST WAY to A'auwa is overland. Or you might go down-river to meet the Teoma and then pass up it to the house of King Arierona. That is easier and does not really take that much longer."

How I wish they had horses here, I thought to myself. Walk or paddle? "I have heard that the River Teoma becomes harder of passage in its upper reaches," I replied to Heho.

"This is true. You would end up walking some anyway."

"We would end up walking, my friend. Which do you prefer?"

"I have served as a messenger since I was a boy, Taona. I am used to being on my feet."

"I am not, but I want to get there by the quickest way. We shall walk," I decided.

"Only quickest if you can keep up with me," Heho said.

It would be only we two setting forth from the house of the High King. But I knew that King Maitoa himself would soon be setting out with an army, traveling down toward the Teoma. Rumor put a Kohari fleet off the coasts of his nation.

Would the very large monarch be on his feet, as well? I could not see him carrying that mass all day. Canoes would take him part of the way, of course, even if his men marched. And there were always litters. I would hate to be one of his bearers.

Our stay in his house was brief, only the one day and part of another, but eventful enough. There would be a great feast tonight and I and Heho would depart in the morning. I was glad of having him as my companion on this trip. The man was both competent and good-natured. And not talkative — that was best of all.

Again at the right hand of Maitoa, I feasted late on many kinds of fruit, on roast pig and on fowl, on several sizes of fish, on yams and melons and great bowls of beer. This latter, I had just discovered, was brewed of millet, the only grain known to the Mora.

And again, across from me sat Lady Pua and King Maitoa's

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three wives. Handsome women, all of them, and it was not just millet beer that made me think so. But there would be no time for dalliance with any woman before Heho and I set out.

Ha, I would not even have thought of such a thing, half a year ago. Would Miss Amelia Nathan be shocked or might her attitudes have changed as well? I would find out soon enough.

There were youngsters at this feast, the High King's sons and daughters, none older than perhaps their mid-teens. The girls were strung out beyond their mothers; the boys sat to my own right. Of course, none of these would be in the line of succession to Maitoa's position. What became of such children? Surely they would have ambitions.

Not that it was of concern to me now. I was more interested in the talk of war, of Kohari boats glimpsed here and there, of possible invasions and counter-invasions. Know that I am a peace-loving man, despite my career in fisticuffs, and had no desire to take part in any more battles. That at the Kohari temple had been quite enough for me!

As a supposed priest, I was not expected to go to war anyway. Not that I couldn't, or wouldn't. From the talk, I learned that the most likely spot for an attack was the southwestern coast, the realm of a King Hei'iro, where the cliffs were not so high and steep. However, if the Kohari swept that far down the coast they would be spotted long before they attempted to land and would face a more-than-ready Mora army. They were not trusting enough of either their boats or their navigation to swing wide into the ocean, as had we on our own raid.

After the feast, I dozed only an hour or two before Heho and I set out. It was still dark, more than an hour until the dawn, but the Lady Pua came to see me off. Her brother Maitoa and I had made all our goodbyes and the High King was undoubtedly snoring somewhere in his great house.

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"It may be long before we meet again, Taona Mika," she said. "Who knows where our futures might take us?"

"Do you think you will return to the land of the Diwarna?" I asked.

"It is possible. My brother would no doubt send me back, if I asked." She sighed. "But life can be wearisome there. I grow bored as, I know, would you."

"I do believe I will pass that way again, some day, but not to stay." She understood the implications of that.

"You must seek answers. This I understand." Pua embraced me. "I bid you farewell, Friend Mika."

"And farewell to you, Friend Pua," said I, and turned to my guide.

It was rich land through which Heho and I traveled, and well populated, at first. Then it grew sparser, both of people and vegetation, as we climbed into a more rolling countryside. This marked the divide between the river behind us — I had never heard its name mentioned — and the valley of the Teoma ahead.

There was an advantage to traveling with one of the official messengers of the High King — everywhere, we were fed and lodged without question. Naturally, there were many curious glances at me, with my strange looks. Not so much my coloring, for I had tanned as dark as many of the Mora, nor my hair, as there were plenty of sun-bleached heads among them; no, it was in the face that we differed. Oh, not so greatly, but enough that one could tell I was not of their people.

I sometimes forgot that fact, so used to them had I become.

I had progressed in their language, as well, and insisted that Heho speak to me only in that tongue. It was a bewildering language, complex in grammar and meaning, and I might never be truly fluent in it. I consoled myself with the fact that the Diwarna tongue was even worse.

The way was tiring, the way was uneventful. Eventually, I saw

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that we descended. One evening, I glimpsed a distant reflected light, the setting sun captured in the surface of a wide body of water.

"It is A'auwa," said Heho. "The sacred lake."

Sacred why? I knew only that it figured in many of the Mora tales and legends. "A day's journey?" I asked.

"Maybe."

A day and a half it proved to be. Maybe by himself, Heho would have made it in a day. We stood above that lake now, reminiscent to me of the Finger Lakes of northern New York state that I had known as a boy, or even of great Champlain itself.

"There lies the house of Arierona." Heho pointed to the far shore. Of course it would be on the other side. "We can be there by evening. Truly," he said, with a completely straight face.

Once again we were in an extensively cultivated countryside, and passed down the trail toward A'auwa between lush fields of yams and millet and taro. We saw many pigs, and both chickens and ducks were plentiful.

And the lake, when we reached its shore — I would call it majestic, maybe, if I were in that sort of mood. But mostly it reminded me of my childhood home. I think that might have been the first time since arriving in this strange world that I felt homesick.

We were ferried across, not in a canoe but on a raft — a true ferry that regularly carried goods and people from one side of the lake to the other, propelled by great sweeps. Slowly we progressed, the calm dark waters passing beneath us. How deep?

Then we were on the southern shore, climbing onto a floating dock before a collection of huts and the house of Arierona rising behind them. A man came ambling down to us.

"Welcome, old boy," said George Bath.

40. *Reunions*

A MORA GIRL came up to stand by his side. "Are these your friends, Bafa?" she asked.

"Indeed, my dear. This is the Mr. Malvern I have been expecting to show up one of these days."

She whispered something in his ear. Bath laughed. "She thinks your friend is handsome, Malvern. I guess you didn't impress her as much!"

The girl punched his arm. "Don't tell him that, stupid Bafa!"

George rubbed his triceps. "I get no respect from the ladies here. Come along and we'll get you to the king."

I could not help but note the lingering glance between my companion and Bath's as we started away. Perhaps the life of a courier contained many such glances.

Word of our arrival had reached the ears of King Arierona and he awaited us before his house. His greeting was formal and I saw no sign of the rest of our castaways. "We will speak at length tomorrow," he said. "You will wish to rest, but first share a meal with me." It was a decent enough spread, though nothing to compare with the feasts in the High King's house, or even that of Va'aru. Our talk was sparse, and small, and no mention was made of the Nathan party.

Not surprisingly, Arierona had paid absolutely no attention to my comrade, so Heho slipped away; he had no official messages for the king and no real reason to be there. I would like to think that he found his way to George Bath's pretty young companion.

But he did find his way back to me. "It is best I sleep in your chamber, Taona. We want no more visitors with knives.

"Lord Hareata is here," he continued. "I must deliver my messages to him tomorrow and bear any words of his back to the High King." I should point out here that these messages were all memorized, word for word. The Mora had no writing.

Dutch Geitz might bring these people the wheelbarrow but

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what if I gave them the written word? That would be even more valuable, would it not? Or would it do them any good?

I awoke to the sound of a hushed conversation. Who? Hareata sat on the floor, speaking with Heho, and nodding occasionally. I got myself onto one elbow and watched for a while before they noticed me.

"The greetings of a new day to you, Taona," said Hareata. "It is good to have you here. Have you seen your friends yet?"

"Only George. The one they name Bafa here." I had to smile a bit at that name.

"The useless one," commented Heho. "Or so someone here called him." I suspected that someone was female.

I wondered if Bath would remain useless if I were able to get him a bow made. There was another piece of technology to consider, and more immediately useful than writing. I determined to explore it as soon as possible.

"Not entirely useless, Heho," Hareata said. "I hear he has become an accomplished fisherman and spends many days on the lake. It is a calling many do not understand, for it is a solitary one."

Heho nodded thoughtfully. "I know of solitary callings. Sometimes, they are a way to escape those about us."

"I will have a message for you to carry back by tomorrow," Lord Hareata told him. "The High King will be on the move by then, will he not?"

"Most likely, sir. Certainly by the time I reach him."

"Of course, of course. You will have to meet him on the road." He turned to me. "Come breakfast with me, Friend Mika." He looked at Heho. "I would ask you too, my friend Heho, but Arerona would not approve of your presence." He sighed. "I console myself by remembering that he is a good man, despite his views."

"Do you know anything of my party, sir?" I asked as I followed Hareata to his promised breakfast. "And I am considered

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worthy of eating with you?" I added, that question having arisen from the jumble of my mind.

"You are considered worthy of eating with anyone. Did you not sit at the right hand of the High King? Right now you are seen as the equal of the High Priest. If that changes — and be aware that it may — you must be ready to recognize it. As to your other question," he said, "they are scattered about but have been told of your arrival."

I had been quartered in a long, low house adjoining that of the king. We passed from the one building to the other. Compared to those I had seen previously, Arierona's house was not impressive, not high, but rambling, and had the appearance of greater age, with wood seemingly polished from years, if not generations, of use.

In a low-ceilinged room, a corner of the house open to the outdoors, a meal was spread, a buffet of sorts. The king was not among those present but there were many others there, of all ages and both genders. Among them was Bobby Beck and our friend Poneiva — brothers, now. A trio of young women were eating across from them.

"Mr. Malvern!" called Bobby. How the boy had changed! Most notably, he now bore several tattoos. I noticed immediately that they duplicated some of Poneiva's decorations — perhaps some sort of tribal or family identification. "Sit with us." He had spoken to me in the pidgin; did he even think to use English, or had he considered it impolite?

Hareata nodded an assent and we joined the group, the Mora noble making sure to steer me to the spot our rank required of us, to the left of the two young men. He would respect such protocol in the house of Arierona.

"This is Malvern," Beck announced to the girls, who apparently already knew Hareata. There was no chance they would be able to pronounce the name.

"Marawerana?" attempted one. They all giggled at that — it

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would seem it had a humorous meaning in their language. (Which I later found to be something like “Moon-melon Face.”)

A tall girl, whom I noticed held the place of honor in their seating arrangement, decreed, “I shall call you Marareta, which means ‘Moon King’ in our tongue.” The girls chattered rapidly in their own language; I could only catch an occasional word.

Poneiva now spoke up. “Taona Mika, meet our friends. This is E’eva.” He indicated a pretty, bright-eyed young lady. “She is my betrothed.” They looked upon each other fondly, a little too long for the comfort of the others. “And this is Miruhata. She was to marry my brother, Maneata.” The woman he indicated was more serious in her expression, but I detected a hint of mischief below the surface. “But now she has accepted the suit of my brother Beka.” Beck smiled broadly; the girl less so.

“And Rahaita is betrothed to none,” he said indicating the tall girl who had given me a new name, “though many have asked. She is the daughter of King Arierona.”

“Give Aranu some time,” spoke E’eva. “He’ll wear her down.”

“Congratulations, Beck,” said I, and shook his hand.

“Now we need to find you a wife, Taona,” declared Poneiva.

Hareata chuckled. “The Lady Pua would gladly take him on as a third husband, I think.”

“Oh, too old!” objected Rahaita.

“And too fat,” added Miruhata.

“There’s nothing wrong with a little fat,” E’eva said, looking at her somewhat hefty husband-to-be.

“Beka will never be fat,” Miruhata stated. “I won’t let him.” She winked at her intended.

“Did you have a wife before you came here, Marareta?” asked Rahaita.

“No, never. I — was paying suit to one of those with whom we traveled. Amelia Nathan.” I don’t know why I mentioned this to them, as I had no interest in Amelia now.

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“Amirea?” said E’eva. “All the young men have been courting her ever since she arrived. They don’t understand why she won’t sleep with any of them!”

“It is puzzling,” agreed Rahaita. “Maybe now that you are here she will have some fun,” she told me.

Momentarily, I found myself without an answer to this, and I think it had nothing to do with Miss Amelia Nathan. It was this young lady in front of me.

“Not with me, my ladies,” I replied, probably after too long a pause.

“Don’t leave her to Nezama,” said Miruhata. E’eva wrinkled up her nose and nodded in agreement. Mr. Nesmith apparently received no love from these two. Rahaita seemed more noncommittal on the subject.

“Nesmith rubs a lot of people the wrong way,” said Bobby. “But we already knew that, sir, didn’t we?”

41. *Masters*

THE POSITION OF Poneiva's family in regards to Arierona might best be described as vassals — minor nobility who gave the king their allegiance. They did not directly serve him nor were they part of his household, holding their own lands. Beck was, I felt, fortunate to have been taken in by them.

But what of the rest the Nathan party?

After our breakfast, Hareata hurried off to attend to his diplomatic duties and the girls disappeared to wherever Mora girls might disappear. Beck and his brother had no pressing need to go anywhere, having come to Arierona's house primarily to visit their fiancées, and so we strolled down toward the lake, telling each other our news.

"Bafa is out on A'auwa again," spoke Poneiva, shading his eyes. "He can not hide there forever."

"He'll make a decision eventually," Beck said. "Maybe having Malvern here will help."

I gazed toward the canoe disappearing into the morning haze. He probably did think himself useless, as Heho's friend called him. "The boy does have talents," I said. "He needs to find what those are."

"Not as a warrior," said Poneiva. "And he will not practice with weapons."

"I remember that he was quite good with a bow." As was Amelia. "Your people never use those, do they?"

I remembered, as well, that he was reputed to be a good shot with firearms. Would that he had been with us to use the Krag, rather than Nesmith!

"It is a Kohari weapon," responded Poneiva. That was enough for him to dismiss it.

"But an effective one," I reminded him, and changed the subject. "Have the others found their places here?"

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"Mr. Nathan officially gave his allegiance to the king," said Beck. "He's considered some sort of noble here."

"A noble of Arierona's household," Poneiva further explained. "Not a holder of land." Was there was an implied superiority of the latter? "The king has given him a house for his family and retainers."

"Retainers?"

"Diggs and Wise and Mr. Bailey. They didn't know what else to do so they named Mr. Nathan as their lord," Beck told me. "Samuel lives with them but has not officially chosen a master."

"So he and Bath and Nesmith remain without a formal place in Mora society." Very well. I had an understanding of how things stood with my fellow castaways now.

"But Nezama practices the arts of the warrior with Arierona's men. I think he might ask to serve the king," said Poneiva. "And he spends time with the king's daughter, as well."

Any interest he might have had in Miss Amelia Nathan had vanished then, along with her former status. Power attracted Mr. Nesmith more than a pretty face ever could.

I looked out across the lake. "I think I would enjoy sailing here. Is that an island up there?" I pointed toward the southern end of A'auwa.

"Yes, Taona," replied Poneiva. "It is a sacred place." He pointed north. "Another lies there, near where the waters of A'auwa tumble down into the Teoma. Both are taboo, even for you, so think not of visiting them."

"Who is that coming?" asked Beck, addressing himself as much to the world as to us. "Ah, Hareata. And Mr. Nathan, I think — yes, it is."

The pair approached slowly, walking down the shallow slope from Arierona's house, and paying more attention to their own conversation than to us.

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"Hello there, Malvern," called James Nathan, as they drew near. "Good to see you again."

"And you, sir. I hear you have made some major decisions since arriving here."

"Yes, I pledged myself to King Arierona, though Lord Hareata here urged me to hold off. I wanted to get about and start doing things." He glanced quickly toward his companion and back to me. "I've been introducing odd bits of nautical technology that I know to those who use the lake. Some traditionalists do not like new ideas but the king sees their usefulness."

"Arierona is a practical man," admitted Hareata.

"He is," agreed Nathan. "I wish George would join me. He knows more of mechanical things than I do."

I nodded. It was true.

"Then maybe, Friend Neatanu," said Hareata, "he should be elsewhere."

"Maybe. But I might miss all those fish he catches."

"Some may make an appearance at the feast tonight." He spoke then to me. "You are invited, Mika; indeed, you are the guest of honor. There will be much talk and planning." Looking to Nathan, he continued, "We will want your counsel, too, Neatanu, though you must sit far below us when we eat. When I motion to you, come and take a place behind me and Mika."

Then, in far less serious tones, he again addressed me. "Arierona's daughter has named you anew. Marareta is a good name and you might do well to use it."

Beck laughed of a sudden. "Did you know, Mr. Malvern, that Mika means 'moon' in Diwarna? 'Moon King' goes right with that!"

I did not. It had never occurred to me that it was anything more than a mispronunciation.

Poneiva, however, thought this was significant. "The moon

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favors you,” he stated. “She saved your life in the house of the High King, did she not?”

Hareata’s look was skeptical. “Mika saved his own life, I hear. But it might mean something — or be made to mean something.”

Something political, I assumed. Divine favor always looks good on ones resume.

42. *Followers*

ALL OF OUR people had gathered by afternoon, the Nathan family, the sailors. Even George Bath had returned from his fishing, and with a large catch. I felt there should be a council of sorts, before we scattered again, and that I should give them news of Gordie and Dutch.

I should have been shocked, I suppose, to see that both Nathan women now went with breasts exposed, just as the Mora around them, but I was too used to it. Indeed, after a moment of surprise, I barely noticed.

Which is not to say I did not notice at all.

Judith Nathan had a body as angular as her face, broad-shouldered, almost gaunt, and large breasted, and along with her woven skirt wore the same air of confidence I had ever known. She had become Hueta here, which was not particularly similar in pronunciation to Judith but was already a perfectly good Mora name, meaning something like “light of dawn.” Judith showed considerable facility with the Mora tongue, conversing readily with the women around her.

Amelia, on the other hand, had the compact frame of her father, although what covered that frame was quite differently distributed. I will only say that I could understand why young Mora men would be paying her attention.

I greeted the seamen — Diggs and Wise, whom I barely knew, Samuel and Andrew Bailey. These latter were known to the Mora as Samua and Andarua. There was no chance that they would ever be able to pronounce “Bailey.” It was good to see them all again, those familiar faces that were what was left of the world I had once known.

And there was Alexander Nesmith, with his worn officer’s cap perched on his head. He looked healthy, though he still seemed unable to tan decently, and well-muscled.

“You were right about me not trying to cling to my position,

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Mr. Malvern," he confided. He swept an arm toward the group of sailors. "I am without any crew whatsoever now, but that does not matter. It is indeed a new world with new opportunities."

He smiled, somewhat wryly. "The only man who has hinted he might want to follow me is our Samuel." The cook stood nearby, a nondescript little man with receding black hair and sparse beard. "He looks a bit like one of these Mora, doesn't he, being half-Chinese and all?" came Nesmith's offhand remark.

I knew the "Chinese" to be a supposition. Samuel's mother had been a whore and his father an unknown. He himself had grown up in an orphanage.

Nor did I think he looked particularly Mora. No more than the rest of us. "He may think you a rising star, Nesmith." I saw no reason to call him "Mister" any more. That went with his officer's status.

In fact, I almost addressed him, without thinking of it, as Nezama. How that old world of mine was fading!

"I'm looking around for opportunities," he admitted. "I don't think I will want to settle down in this Arierona's service. Though his daughter is certainly attractive."

"Remember that she is not in the line of succession here," said I. "One of Arierona's nephews should be the next king."

"So I understand. But a good connection is a good connection." He sauntered off to converse with Bath. Despite the ease of our exchange, I could not help but feel there was still tension between us, and possibly resentment as well.

Almost immediately, Samuel approached me. "Could I talk with you, Mr. Malvern?" he asked. I nodded an assent.

"I — I don't know who to sign on with, sir. I'm no fighting man and not much use to anyone here. Not even as a cook." He seemed to be working up to something, and finally blurted it out. "Could I be your man, Mr. Malvern? I could take care of your things or cook for you or whatever you need."

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Although I had no things to take care of, I assumed that a priest — a supposed priest — could have retainers. Or maybe acolytes. My lack of knowledge about Mora society was once again evident. “Why not, Samua?” The last couple minutes had led me to decide to henceforth use Mora names. “And call me Taona from now on. That’s my title here.”

After a time, we made our way to King Arierona’s feast, held beneath the stars, those who were invited and those who were their attendants. Yes, ones attendants could sit at a suitable distance behind one, ready to serve when called upon. This meant my new follower, Samuel, could accompany me.

But Bath and Nesmith, Wise and Diggs, had no place at the king’s meal. Bailey served as Nathan’s attendant; I could see J.L. seated well below me, with his wife and daughter opposite him. Even Beck and Poneiva were given a higher place.

I and Hareata sat at the right hand of King Arierona. For this night only; I recalled Hareata’s warning that my status here could be a fluid thing.

Did I care? I had no great desire to sit high at the feasts of the Mora, to speak at their councils, to fight in their wars. I would as soon grow melons and sleep in a hut by the river.

We feasted and I ceased thinking of such things for a while. I would rather think of the rather lovely Rahaita who was seated across from me, just a few places down. Was one of the older women between her and the king her mother? Or was it that tall and rather striking woman just beyond her?

I could not help noticing that the young man on the other side of Hareata also spent much time looking at Arierona’s daughter. I am sure she noticed him too. Both of us, I suppose.

As we worked our way through the many courses and dishes, a man came and whispered in Lord Hareata’s ear. He nodded and indicated for him to seat himself behind us. Then to me, he

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confided, "It is good I have not already sent Heho on his way. There are new messages."

At last, a priest gave a long speech that seemed to mark an official end to the feast. I felt fortunate that they did not think that I should fill such a role. Perhaps I should be prepared if called upon some day! Hareata motioned for Nathan to join us, as the feasters slowly dispersed, some sitting and conversing in groups, others slipping away to the many fires burning in the night, where singers and storytellers held court.

There were a dozen of us, perhaps, seated close about Arierona. Hareata turned to the messenger and demanded, "Speak!"

What we heard at that council changed many things.

43. Invasion

AMONG THOSE WHO had sat with the council — though he did not speak — was the young man I had watched eying Rahaita. I nodded my head toward him as we parted and asked Hareata of his identity.

“Aranu, son of King Hei’iro. He was sent here by his father to learn warrior ways in the service of Arierona. That is the custom for princes.”

“He also studies the king’s daughter,” I remarked.

Hareata laughed. “Yes, they have been lovers. I think he is out of favor with Rahaita right now. Still, a marriage would not surprise me.”

We walked. “But it is his father who concerns us now. How much of our talk could you understand, Taona?”

“Enough. Not enough to give any advice, however.”

“You did well to offer none. But,” he told me, with what seemed complete sincerity, “when you have learned more, I think I will want to hear your words.”

Samuel was trailing behind us at a discreet distance. “Your man?” asked the noble.

“He is, sir.”

“One priest is an oddity but two is an order. People will see you differently now.”

I had wondered whether priests had servants or only lesser priests. Apparently, it was the latter. “An order that serves no god,” I said.

“Make one up.”

I had to laugh at that, and Hareata joined in. “Poor old Samua is really quite religious,” I told him. “We may need to introduce his Jehovah to your people.”

“We can use the help of any gods you have,” he replied, “even ones whose name I can not pronounce. War is upon us.”

“An invasion — that I understood quite well, Lord Hareata.

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And the Kohari somehow managed to sneak around to the south without being seen?"

"That is so. Ah, we have reached your chamber. Has Heho returned? No, it seems not." He seemed a bit miffed. "If you see him, tell him to attend me first thing in the morning."

I did see him, sometime in the middle of the night, entering our room with a flickering stone lamp in his hand. I gave him Hareata's message.

"I have already spoken with the Lord Hareata, Taona," he answered. "I leave now with his words for the High King."

It was long before I again saw my friend Heho.

There was some buzz in the morning, though not what I might have expected. It was more an undercurrent of excitement and anticipation. Most of those around me had someplace to go and something to do.

Would Nesmith? With no lord, what part could he play in the fighting to come? I supposed he still had the Krag, too, hidden away somewhere.

I found him in a whispered conference with young Aranu. And yes, the rifle was slung over his shoulder. "Ho, Malvern," he greeted me. "I am going to be leaving with Lord Hareata. He says if I am his guest, I can also fight for him." He paused, thinking perhaps how to better explain his plans. "Our relationship will be like when we fought at the temple."

There was disapproval on the prince's face. "Why do you not choose a master, Nezama? My father would take you on."

"Ha, I know you too well, Aranu. You want me far away from Rahaita."

The boy reddened. It was probably true but not something one should say to one's face — at least not to a proud Mora's face. It could have been taken as an insult, had Aranu chosen.

And I would not have wanted to insult the young warrior. He was not small of stature nor was he slight of build. But he let it go.

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He let Nesmith go, as well, striding away with a cheery wave to me. I think we both scowled at his back. Then we eyed each other uncertainly for a few moments.

"You have known Nezama long," he said.

"Too long," I replied.

Aranu threw back his head and laughed. "Maybe any amount of time is too long!"

I smiled at that, and shrugged. "He is not a bad man to have beside one in an emergency. He is certainly brave enough." Should I say more? I did. "But I doubt that Nezama will ever choose any master other than himself." I could see this about him, now. The chain of command he had trusted had disappeared, leaving him to his own devices.

"I think you are right, Taona," said the young fellow. "Come and eat with me, and we shall talk more."

"Call me Marareta," I told him.

44. *A Plan*

"A SPUR OF the mountains marks the southern border of the Mora," said Aranu.

I could see those mountains, very distant, from here.

"Beyond them lies little but a narrow, desolate and rocky coast. I have visited that coast for it lies near my father's lands." He gave a small smile. "Many seabirds nest there. We sometimes go to gather eggs."

What I would have given for a good map! Maybe I could attempt drawing one. "And that is where the Kohari are?" I asked.

"Yes, some of them. It is not an easy place to land. The watchers did not realize that a boat or two at a time were slipping around the headland to the south, while the rest of the Kohari sailed back and forth off our cliffs."

"So they were watching those, expecting them to attempt a landing." A good strategy, I thought. Better than I might have expected. Better than the Mora expected, too — they had underestimated their enemy.

"Now we know they are there," he said. "But that puts them in striking distance of here. Arierona is concerned about taking warriors away from his own land and leaving it vulnerable, so that he might help the High King fight an invasion elsewhere." Aranu looked quite concerned. It took me only a moment to realize why.

"The main force will most likely land on your father's coasts, won't they?" I asked. I remembered that it was not protected by the high cliffs that rose elsewhere. "There will be an attack from two directions."

He nodded soberly. "They may choose to cross the mountains here, or further west, closer to my own home. They become little more than hills there, so it would be easier for them."

"What if we went over the mountains ourselves first?" I murmured, mostly wondering to myself. "Yes," I said, more loudly,

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“a small company of Mora could surprise them and drive them into the sea!”

Aranu seemed excited by the idea. “Should we go to the king?” he asked.

If he, the son of a king and a ward of Arierona, were uncertain, then I was positive we should not. “Let us take the plan to Hareata first,” I counseled. “If he likes it, we go to Arierona.” Hareata had said he would want to hear my words, hadn’t he? Now he would.

It took some time to seek him out, as the High King’s counselor hurried from one meeting to another. Fortunately, he immediately saw merit in our plan.

“Who will lead this attack?” asked Arierona, when the idea was brought to him. “I must take what men I am willing to commit to the south, and Ponu will stay here with enough to protect our home.” I knew Ponu to be the eldest of his nephews, and one of those who might one day rule here.

There was a pause. “I will,” Hareata announced. I am certain he decided at that very moment, but what better way to show his complete trust in the plan? And I could not have thought of a better leader for us.

Us? When had I decided to go?

“The force must be small,” said Hareata. “Able to move quickly.”

“Fifty men I can spare. No more,” the king said. “I will leave it to you two to choose them.” Hareata nodded in approval.

As we left them, Aranu whispered. “I think we have spoiled Nezama’s plan to go west with Lord Hareata.”

“Maybe he will choose to come with us.” We might put that rifle to good use. “I do want Poneiva and Beka in our company, but you know the fighting men here better than I.”

“They are good men. And Nezama is welcome, if he wishes to

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come.” He became thoughtful. “We should keep this quiet, and tell most only that it will be a small separate force.”

“Agreed.” So, we parted, he to recruit, I to — what?

“Marareta,” came a voice from behind me. I turned to see Rahaita. What did she hold?

“I have heard that you sought a bow,” she said. That information had probably come to her from Miruhata or E’eva and to them in turn from their future husbands. She held out a bow and quiver of arrows, obviously Kohari. “This is for you.”

She went on. “My aunt gives them to you. Pana’a. You saw her by my side at the feast last night.”

I remembered well. “I thank you, Rahaita, and I thank your aunt,” I said, taking the proffered weapon.

She tilted her head and asked of me. “What do intend to do with them, Taona?”

“They are for my friend Bafa. He is a renowned archer.” I could not actually say archer, as the word did not exist in her language. But I got the meaning across.

Rahaita nodded soberly. “Then maybe he will stop fishing?”

“Maybe,” I admitted, and laughed.

She smiled in return. “It is time.”

Bath, not surprisingly, I found by the lake, rubbing some sort of oil into the bottom of a canoe.

“Waterproofing?” I queried. He nodded absently in reply. Then I held out my acquisition to him. “Do you think you could shoot this?”

He took the bow and quiver from my hand and looked them carefully over. “Dreadful fletching,” he muttered, and then sighted along an arrow. “Could be worse,” he allowed. Then he held the bow. It was quite long, as much so as an English longbow, but of a lesser wood. “Not really much of a draw to it,” said George. “I doubt that it is very powerful.”

“Let’s find out,” I said.

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He strung the bow, twanged the cord a couple times. "Too limp, but it will have to do for now." Raising an eyebrow, he said, "I daresay it hasn't been drawn or shot with in ages."

"Probably so," I agreed. "How about that palm over there?"

He nocked an arrow, drew and released. The shaft sank into his target's trunk.

George Bath smiled broadly. "I say, we need to get Amelia down here!"

45. *Crossings*

"IF I HAD known you meant to draft me into your army, I might never have touched that bow," declared Bath.

"You will now be a great warrior, Bafa," declared Poneiva. "All the girls will want you."

"I had no problems with the girls before, I assure you."

"They only pitied you," the young Mora assured him in turn.

"Ah, but does it matter, Friend Poneiva, what bait attracts a fish, so long as it bites?"

A rather morose Nesmith sat to one side of us, carefully cleaning his rifle. "I hope you intend to shoot that this time, Nezama," said Bobby Beck.

The former officer showed his clear annoyance both at being chided and at the use of this name. "You're an American, man," he spat out. "Speak like one."

"Canadian," Beck reminded him. "But I am Mora now, with a Mora brother." He put his arm around Poneiva's broad shoulders.

Nesmith said no more but bent back to his task.

"Here comes Aranu," I told the group. "What news?" I called to him.

"The men are gathered, Hareata is ready, and we march in the morning," was the reply. "And I need a good night of sleep."

As did we all, no doubt. But a nervous George Bath had a question.

"Just how many men are we likely to be facing?"

"Hundreds, certainly, Bafa," Aranu said. "But they will never expect an army from the east, even so small an army as this."

I added to this. "And as Hareata once told us, any Mora is worth at least three Kohari."

"Only three?" spoke Poneiva "From anyone other than the Lord Hareata I would consider that an insult!"

We marched in the morning, though to call it a march is misleading. Sometimes we ran, even Hareata, who was neither

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young nor light on his feet, maintaining the grueling pace. It would take days, no matter how we hurried.

I was glad that my walk to the Diwarna country and back had prepared me for this. At least in some degree; I wondered that George managed to keep up.

In two days we were among the mountains. They were not large mountains, though higher than the hilly range between Mora and Diwarna. We stopped to consider our path over them.

"Aranu is not the only one ever to gather seabird eggs," said Poneiva. "Some of us know ways through the mountains."

It was good that the Kohari were unaware of their existence, for those ways proved surprisingly easy of passage. Soon we stood in a narrow gap, the highest point of our journey, and gazed south toward a sullen gray-green sea.

Aranu was uninterested in that sea. He scanned the west, hand shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun, hoping to see some sign of the invaders.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Not even their boats."

"Wait until night," answered Hareata. "The Kohari may be so incautious that they will have fires."

In this, the noble was correct. Veteran of many a campaign, Hareata knew his enemy. We had continued our march into the night, attempting to keep to the higher ground, even if the going was more difficult. One of the warriors suddenly gave a low call and pointed toward the southwest. He had spotted the distant flicker of a campfire.

"We would not have time to reach them before morning," said Aranu. "Should we follow until tomorrow night and attack their camp then?"

Hareata thought this the best course. Some of Arierona's warriors, however, had other ideas. "We know ways by which we might get ahead of them," said one.

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"They probably seek an easy way over the divide," felt another. "We could set an ambush in the hills."

Our leader nodded. "Sleep a few hours and then we shall follow when we can better see our enemy," Hareata ordered. "There will be opportunity, one way or another." There seemed to be general agreement with this.

We moved closer to their encampment in the morning. It seemed that the Kohari were not on the march, but were sending out small parties to scout a way over the mountains. There was a great longing to ambush those parties among our men, but we all knew it best to wait.

Our own scouts reported several hundred enemy warriors camped not far inland from a narrow, rocky beach, but no sign of their boats. "Their leaders have left them here with no way to go but forward," said Nesmith, who had offered no previous opinions nor advice.

We agreed to the likely truth of this insight.

"I doubt they have much in the way of supplies, either," he added. "They would have to move soon."

Move they did. That afternoon, the Kohari began their march toward the mountains.

"They have found a way," murmured Poneiva, and waved one of Arierona's warriors to him. "Hatiu, do you know the pass where they intend to cross?"

This Hatiu, of all of us, best knew these mountains. Poneiva had immediately suggested him when we chose the men for our mission.

"I do. These Kohari are making an ambush far too easy for us." The Mora warrior smiled wickedly. "The gap they have discovered opens near the border between Arierona's lands and those of Hei'iro. The way through it is very narrow."

46. *Ambush*

I HAD NOT had a good look at the Kohari before; not during that dark and chaotic fight at the temple. I could see now that they were a varied people — one would be as black as the Diwarna and another might have passed for Samuel's brother. Their hair was near uniformly dark but varied from straight to quite curly. Most carried spears; many had bows.

I think there might have been perhaps three hundred enemy warriors, maybe more, going two abreast as they wound their way up to the pass.

Nesmith was stretched out on a high outcropping beside me, sighting down the barrel of his Krag. "Once again, I think I won't need to waste any ammunition," he said. "Spears should suffice." He looked to a nervous George Bath, crouching beside us. "And arrows," he added.

George seemed oblivious to the remark. He had never killed a man, nor attempted it. Could he bring himself to release his arrows at the men below us?

Around us, a dozen Mora were ready, each equipped with several throwing spears. The rest of our company was below, prepared to attack that column from both front and rear with their deadly clubs and stout staff-like spears.

It was I, from my vantage, who was to call for the attack, while Hareata and Aranu led the two groups below. "Stand ready, old man," I whispered to Bath. "It's for you to take the first shot." I waited a few seconds more, seconds that seemed the longest I had ever known, and then told him, "Now." We both rose to our feet.

"Attack!" I yelled, as loud as I could, though my standing had been the real signal to the others. Bath drew his bow and shot. A rain of spears fell on the Kohari from the heights around us. The number of warriors this attack dispatched did not greatly matter; the point was to create fear in the hearts of our enemy.

Battle cries rose from below as the Mora slammed into each

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end of the column. There was terror among the Kohari and no organized resistance — little resistance at all. George continued calmly nocking arrow after arrow and releasing them until his quiver was empty. Club and spear and stone ax rose and fell in the defile below us, and the wails of the Kohari rose and fell as well.

We slaughtered them all. It would not have done for any man to escape home and tell of the pass they had found, but I admit that I did not have the stomach for it. Not one Mora was slain, nor even badly wounded.

We looked down on all those who lay dead. “I might as well have taken a nap,” quipped Nesmith, “considering how little a part I played in this.”

Bath looked like he might be sick, now that it was all over. “It is no joking matter, man,” he snapped. He looked down again. “I felt no more emotion than I might have shooting at a bullseye,” he mused. “Is this what war is like?”

I recalled his expressed desire to volunteer for the war in Europe, oh, so long ago. Ha, less than a year, wasn’t it?

We clambered down to join the others, who were scavenging the supplies and equipment of their dead foes.

“Where now?” I asked Hareata.

A grim laugh came from the Mora noble. “The Kohari expect an army to cross over these hills. Let us be that army!”

PART IV. CONFLICT

47. In the Dark

“WOULD WE CROSS here?” I asked, looking toward the gap above us.

“Further west,” replied Hareata, “so we might get behind our enemy.”

“Or be on his flank,” Aranu said. “I know a good place to cross.”

George came up to us. He had picked up many arrows, choosing only the best made, and a better bow for himself. Then he had thought to look over the other bows and chose another. Perhaps for Amelia?

“You slew many Kohari,” Aranu told him. “Your arrows rarely missed their mark.”

Bath only nodded. He would need time to understand how he felt about what had just taken place. “Do you want a bow, Malvern?” he asked, holding out one of the weapons.

“I was never very good with it,” I replied.

He shrugged and slung it over his own shoulder. “Maybe I should have picked up some extra strings, too,” the young fellow said, frowning.

“No time, Bafa,” Hareata told him. “We go.”

As we started west, I saw large birds descending into the narrow valley we had just quit. Petrels or vultures? It didn’t matter, I suppose.

For two days we picked our way along that rock-strewn coast before turning again to the mountains. Or hills, now, for the peaks were definitely lower.

The way through which Aranu led us was difficult and well

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hidden. "Do we know where the Kohari army is over there?" asked Nesmith, as we ascended to the pass.

"We don't even know if they have landed," I told him. "The last Hareata heard, their boats were still moving about offshore."

"You would think they couldn't get past the Mora fleet."

"There will be diversions," said Poneiva, "and Temani'itu and his canoes will be trying to guard the entire coast, not knowing where they might go. Also, they can keep us at a distance with their arrows when they do attempt a landing," he admitted.

We crossed the hills in the midday, and night was upon us before we stood again on more level ground. Hareata had sent scouts ahead of us to seek for information — there might be either Mora or Kohari warriors out there in the dark.

It proved to be the latter. A Kohari force was spotted in the last light of dusk, traveling east along the base of the hills.

"It is not their main force, I think," reported the scout. "There were not enough men."

"Possibly a group sent to flank our army," felt Hareata. "If the High King does not have them in position yet, these Kohari could do much damage."

"Then let us prevent them," said Aranui. "How near are they?"

"We could be upon them well before the dawn," the scout told him. All around, smiles appeared on Mora faces. Had I been a Kohari, those smiles would have greatly frightened me.

"I surmise that this group of Kohari is rather larger than the last," George Bath whispered to me as we sped toward our enemies' position. "And we'll be out in the open. Do we have a chance?"

"They *are* Mora," I reminded him. "We'll have surprise on our side, and the cover of darkness." But I wondered too if this attack was not foolhardy.

We struck at the middle of their column. "One end will not know what the other is doing," said Hareata in explanation of this tactic. "Uncertainty can bring panic."

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And we did instill some panic among those invading warriors. How could not a sudden onslaught of fierce, tattooed Mora strike fear? But they did not run, no; the Kohari stood and gave battle. If not for their confusion, they might easily have overwhelmed our small force, for they numbered in the many hundreds.

A few of our men had slipped around them and launched quick attacks near the front and rear of the column, only to quickly retreat back into the night. Bath was among them, releasing arrows into the Kohari ranks. Nesmith, however, kept the Krag firmly in place on his back, and used one of the short Mora spears. His training with the warriors of King Arierona had made him quite adept with it.

Then, the enemy broke, attempting a fairly orderly retreat. This did not last, and order turned to panic, retreat to rout. We pursued only a short distance, so that they would not regroup. Satisfied that they had fled back toward the coast, we gathered in the light of a red dawn.

"They have withdrawn," spoke Aranu. "We will see no more of them."

A warrior spoke. "Had they known how few we were they might not have fled."

"We are fewer now," said another. "At least six lie dead, and more badly hurt."

Hareata surveyed his small troop, then addressed them. "Those we drove back might yet reform their ranks and return eastward. But we have done well to at least delay their march. Now we must find our own army and tell of all this." He looked toward the wounded men, lying or seated upon the grass. "Those who can march, come. Those who can not, we must leave you."

The wounded Mora completely understood this. They expected it, as the way of a warrior.

The rest fell in behind their leader and started north.

48. *A Duel*

WE MET WITH the main force of the Mora toward the middle of the next day.

Hareata immediately left us to speak with their commander — the High King, just arrived himself. The rest of us found Arierona and his men and joined them. There was no rest for us; the army marched westward.

We soon learned the situation, for it was common knowledge among the men. The enemy had come ashore further north than expected, nearly in the lands of King Va'aru, perhaps hoping to draw the Mora away from the positions of their flanking groups — groups our small band had destroyed or turned.

"The cliffs are not so high where they landed, but still they needed to bring ladders to scale them. Many Kohari died climbing to the top," Arierona told us, when we were called to him. "Some think their target was the house of Va'aru, which they hoped to plunder and destroy in revenge."

He continued. "The High King sent a force to intercept the men you attacked. They will finish them off for you." Arierona smiled at that. "You have done well and brought great honor to my house. And to that of your father, Aranū," he added.

"Have you news of Hei'iro?" asked Aranū.

"He guards your home, should the Kohari turn that way, and stands ready to move north if needed." The king smiled even more broadly. "We may drive them his direction so he does not feel left out."

We were not that far inland when we actually met the invading army; they had struck easterly, perhaps with the intention of reaching the Teoma and Lake Aedina. This area of the Mora homeland they knew somewhat, for Kohari did sometimes come to the Great Falls and travel up the river to trade.

Most often, however, that trade took place on the beaches

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below the Mora's protecting cliffs. Nor were Kohari merchants allowed to travel further inland than Aedina.

Now they seemed to have fallen back, closer to their landing place, and "dug in," in a sense. When they became aware of our army's approach, they erected barricades, and stood ready with shield and bow. It would not be easy to drive them back, especially with the Mora's usual close-combat tactics.

Nesmith still carried our spyglass, and handed it to me without objection or comment when I asked. Through it, I could see their priests haranguing the men, urging them to bravery. It was they, of course, who organized the many tribes of the Kohari, often at war with each other, to attempt this attack. Our raid had been an insult to all, occurring on both neutral and sacred ground.

Night was come, and great bonfires blazed in both camps. Would we attack them in the morning? From time to time, men from either side would come forth to hurl insults toward their enemies or to challenge them to individual combat. Several contests took place, and the Mora did not win all of them.

Then, a huge Kohari, in armor of lacquered leather, stepped forward and brandished a spear like a tree trunk. "Send forth your hero from the sea!" he roared.

"That should be me," Beck said, and started to rise. He did look fearsome in his crocodile hide armor, a heavy stone ax firmly in his hand.

But Poneiva put a hand on his arm to stay him. "You are not well enough versed in the arts of the warrior," objected the Mora. "There is no need to fight him."

"Hey! What are doing, Bath?" Nesmith suddenly yelled.

George had snatched the Krag from beside him. "You need a David for yon Goliath," he proclaimed, stepping forward, though not very far forward. Calmly, he raised the rifle to his shoulder, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. The big Kohari buckled, falling face forward.

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"Much more effective than a sling," remarked Bath, as he handed the Krag back to an astonished Nesmith.

"Now all the women *will* want Bafa," Poneiva commented.

There came a moment of silence on both sides of the battlefield. Then cheers arose among the Mora. If we had chosen to attack at that moment, I think the Kohari might well have turned and fled toward their boats.

Cool heads prevented that. Hareata himself came to us later. "I care not which of you uses your Karag," he said, gesturing toward the rifle. "Just be certain it is used tomorrow."

"I am quite willing to leave it to Nezama," replied Bath. "I have my bow."

Nesmith seemed to take it all good-naturedly. "I know I am no marksman, but I can't miss a whole army."

"It would help, I think, if you could pick off one of those priestly leaders," I told him. "Demoralization and all of that."

"I'll see what I can do." He glanced toward George. "Mr. Bath has already demoralized them pretty well."

"Yes," agreed Hareata. "The Kohari fear us, but it is better if they fear us even more!"

"I doubt that I get more than a few shots off before our own men get in the way," said Nesmith, when our Mora leader had departed.

"Probably so," I answered. "We should get some rest. I think the Kohari will challenge us to no more duels tonight."

49. *Battle*

BY THE STANDARDS of the war back in Europe — was it still raging? — the armies that faced each other across this meadow were not very large. I am certain there were at least two thousand Kohari, quite possibly more. The Mora force was smaller, less than half that, but with more fighting men on the way. Our enemy had no expectation of reinforcements, so the sooner we clashed, the better for them.

It began with a rain of arrows. We had camped beyond the somewhat limited range of the Kohari bows, so the archers had to move forward from their more protected position. We had but two choices — either retreat from those missiles or charge.

Being Mora, there was no doubt that it would be charge. Nesmith aimed the Krag in the general direction of the enemy, and got off no more than four rounds before the advance of our warriors blocked further firing. It would have been more effective had he managed to get closer before shooting, but that was not to be. Nesmith took up his spear and joined the charge.

Bath, however, did move forward a good distance before planting his feet and drawing back his bow. He was at a distance that he could drop arrows behind the rudimentary ramparts of the Kohari. The arrows of one man might not do much damage, but they had expected none.

And I guarded young George while he went about his business of archery. No skilled warrior was I, to go rushing upon the Kohari with the others, but I might protect the boy if one of the enemy reached him. Let him concentrate on his shots.

Their main tactical advantage neutralized when the Mora overran their archers, the Kohari began to fall back, still fighting doggedly. They would not be easy to dislodge; this was no mountain ambush, no surprise attack under cover of darkness. They were fighting men, as surely as the Mora.

Was that Nesmith, stepping back from the fray? Surely he

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would be no coward — no, he was fumbling with the rifle he had kept slung over his back. I looked where he pointed the Krag as he raised it to his shoulder — there, on a bit of rise behind their men, was a group that must be some sort of leaders. Priests? Chieftains? I could not make them out at this distance but I could see their high headdresses, and bits of burnished copper jewelery that caught the rays of the morning sun.

There are four of them, Nesmith, I thought. You can't miss!

He did not. Whether he hit the man for whom he aimed, whether or not the shot was fatal, one did fall. The other three, knowing nothing of bullets, did not know how to hide from them. So they turned and ran.

Their army followed. The Mora pursued.

Many Kohari died. Many others surrendered. They would, if lucky, be ransomed; if not, they became slaves.

And many fought all the way to the coast, holding their attackers off with shield and spear. Yes, and even managed to make it down the cliffs to their boats. I heard that some leaped from those cliffs at the last moment, rather than be captured.

Although the Mora canoes are faster and more maneuverable, they are not so good in an actual sea battle against the heavier Kohari boats and their archers. Moreover, most of Temani'itu's fleet was not close. So it was that some Kohari sailed home from that day, and spoke of the heroes from the sea and the gods who favored them.

It was long before they again raided the homeland of the Mora.

"Good shot," I told Nesmith when I saw him, quite a bit later.

"How could I let Bath have all the glory?" he asked. "And I had to reclaim the gun, you know. Until I used it successfully, no one would respect my ownership of it."

True. I might have questioned his ownership, though. Didn't

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the Krag really belong to James Nathan? It didn't matter; Nathan would never think to claim it.

There were many dead on the field, a field that stretched a couple miles from our original lines to the coast. None from our immediate group was among those dead, although both Beck and Aranu carried wounds serious enough to keep them from any action for a while. Aranu bore a deep slash on one leg; Beck a fractured forearm.

Fortunately, the Mora were knowledgeable of the staunching of wounds and the setting of bones. There should be no lasting damage.

"I shall rest in my father's house for a time," said Aranu. "Expect me to return, friends."

"I know Rahaita does," Poneiva said.

"I hope so," admitted the prince. "Know that you are welcome, too, in the house of Hei'iro. But," he added, "know also that he is even more traditional than Arierona. You must observe all the old ways."

"Most of which I don't know," said I.

A bit later, when we left Aranu to rest, Poneiva confided to me that Hei'iro was a leader of those who opposed Maitoa's ways. "Some think the title of High King should pass to the family of Arierona. He is the wealthiest and most powerful of all the Mora kings, and his family has ruled the longest.

"Others," he continued, "speak of supplanting the High King with his brother Temani'itu. Maybe that is why Maitoa keeps him out at sea so much!"

"A marriage of Rahaita and Aranu would have considerable significance, would it not? Even though neither has any claim to rule."

"It would. I think Lord Hareata once hoped Maneata or I would win the daughter of Arierona. Our father is a friend, and

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favors his party." He sighed. "We should help with the dead, Taona. The Mora we must bury; the Kohari can go into the sea.

"It is the last and least pleasant part of any battle."

50. *Heroes*

ARIERONA CHOSE TO stay in the west for a time longer, but we set out for his home by Lake A'auwa. "We will have our weddings soon," enthused Poneiva. "Both of us."

"At the same time?" I asked.

"It seemed like a good idea to combine them, Marareta," said Beck.

"Yes, we can have one large feast for less expense than two smaller ones!"

We three traveled up the Teoma in canoes with several other warriors of Arierona. It had been requested that Nesmith and Bath, our heroes of the recent battle, remain with the king and Hareata a while longer, at the house of Va'aru.

"What do you know of Rahaita's aunt?" I asked on a sudden impulse.

"Which one? She has many."

I could not think of her name. "Ah, she is a tall woman, taller than Rahaita, I think. She sat beside her at the feast just before we left."

"Oh, Pana'a." Poneiva seemed reluctant to speak of her.

"Yes, that was the name. She provided Bafa's bow."

"That does not surprise me. Remember, Marareta, that island you saw in A'auwa? Pana'a lives there. She is a priestess.

"And she is the one who prophesied that you would come from the sea."

"I didn't know that, Brother," said Beck.

"There are many things you do not know, Brother," responded Poneiva, "but one thing for both of you to know and remember is that for any man to touch foot to her island is death."

"I'll consider myself warned," I told him. I remembered something. "Didn't you say there was another sacred island?"

"There is, and it is for men only. Its priests are an odd bunch

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who never leave their isle and have given up women altogether.” He literally shuddered at the thought.

“Then I take it that the priestesses are, um, not celibate?”

“No, Taona,” he laughed. “Pana’a is not.”

We stroked along without conversation for some time. I had not previously traveled this part of the river, having turned aside with Hareata on my last trip. It was wide, and cultivated fields lay on either side. “This is still the kingdom of Va’aru?” I asked.

“We left it yesterday. Avatu rules on that side,” he said, swinging an arm toward the right side of the river. “And over there, the land belongs to the High King.” He nodded toward the left. “We’ll be in Arierona’s realm in a couple more days.”

And so we were. Soon after, we reached the first of the cataracts that would force us to abandon our canoes.

“Some take to the water again above these falls,” one of our traveling companions told me. “There are stretches of calm river between us and A’auwa, but also more falls.”

We all chose to walk the rest of the way. The land rose considerably as we paralleled Teoma, which we glimpsed occasionally to our left. At last, I heard a subdued roaring.

“That is where the river falls from the lake,” Poneiva told me. “Would you care to see it?”

Beck said, “It’s no Niagara, Marareta, but it’s pretty impressive.”

“Sure, why not?” Niagara — one natural wonder of our home that both of us knew. In many respects, the Great Falls where Teoma emptied into the ocean rivaled Niagara. Perhaps in height, though not in breadth and volume. We turned from the main way, leaving our fellow travelers, and followed a path down toward that roar.

It was one of the highest falls I had ever seen, all one torrent rushing through a notch in the cliff above us, a crenel in a fortress battlement, and falling to a pool of the deepest blue below us.

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“Pana’a we name this fall. Yes, the same as Rahaita’s aunt. It is the custom for a prophetess to take on the name when she weds A’auwa.”

Was it my questions about the woman that inspired Poneiva to lead me here? “Do your people ever swim here?” I asked. Why that thought came to me then, I did not know.

“At times. It is not prohibited, and some think it promotes fertility.” The Mora chuckled. “I suspect that E’eva and Miruhata will bathe here before our wedding.”

“But I wouldn’t recommend diving,” said Beck, looking toward the top of the falls.

We returned to our road, which wound up a steep way, veering to the west, before turning back to follow the crest of a low cliff overlooking A’auwa. I had never before been at this northern end of the lake.

Poneiva pointed. “There is the other isle of which I spoke, the one of the priests.” It lay perilously close to the falls. Getting a boat to and from that island would be tricky. But monks such as these — and I know no better name for such men — might find that a good thing.

It was not far, then, to the house of Arierona, and the travel was pleasant along the lake. As before, I felt a kinship for A’auwa, so like those lakes I had known as a boy.

“Your are late, heroes!” called a girl from the roadside. “The others are already at the feast.”

“If I’d know there was to be a feast, I would never have agreed to turn aside,” declared Beck. “But we can’t be far behind the others.”

“We will have the opportunity to feast again when Arierona returns. And Bafa and Nezama with him, no doubt.”

“I fear they will eclipse us when they arrive,” said I. “We’d best get as much adulation now as we can.”

Indeed, we three had done little in any of our recent battles to

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stand out. We were only warriors among warriors. But that is enough, isn't it?

A great outdoor feast was spread, overseen by both of Arierona's wives. I could not keep track of which was which, but I knew now that neither was Rahaita's mother, who no longer lived. Drowned one night in A'auwa, it was said, when she swam out from the shore and never turned back.

Some claim she tried to reach the moon reflected in the waters. Others whisper that she shared the prophetic gifts of her sister and that it drove her mad.

I was greeted by Samuel. I had almost forgotten that I had taken him on, having left him behind immediately after. "I'll be your attendant, sir," he said, and squatted a discreet distance behind where I sat to eat with the other returned warriors. We were all equals, and all guests of honor this night.

We were all heroes.

51. *A Visit*

I HAD BEEN thinking of Bath's bow. Not as a weapon I might ever use — that I would leave to others.

No, I was thinking of how that bowstring twanged and of how it was similar to a harp or a lyre. The Mora had no stringed instruments. Few instruments of any sort, truly. Drums and similar noise-makers were most common, along with bamboo flutes.

There were also trumpets of a sort, made from great conch shells, but these seemed only to be ceremonial in use.

And who might play a harp in this land? Why, the Nathan women, of course. Amelia had, as any young lady of breeding, a history of music lessons. I had never discerned any signs of talent in the girl, but that hardly mattered. Her mother, as well, liked to bang away on a piano.

So I found myself, the morning after I arrived at the house of Arierona, sitting by the lake and thinking such pointless thoughts. Chances were I would never attempt the making of a harp. I might attempt nothing for a few days, but just lie here by A'auwa.

My friends would not permit it. "You must come to our house," said Poneiva. "We would be greatly honored."

If he was going to put it that way, how could I refuse? So I, with Samuel in tow, set off straightaway for the house of Poneiva's parents. I suppose I should say Beck's parents, too. I never even had the chance to sit down with J.L. Nathan, only glimpsing him at the previous night's feast.

I was somewhat surprised by the distance. It was nearly a full day's walk further to the southwest, closer to those mountain we had recently crossed. No wonder Poneiva knew of ways through them. The land was lush enough, and many little streams ran down from those mountains.

"Let my father greet you as an equal," said Poneiva, "and as our superior. It will make matters simpler. He will call you Taona and you should first greet him as Lord. Lord Amapa. After that,

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relax and address him by name. Father is not at all a follower of the old customs.”

He looked at Samuel and smiled. “Just be unobtrusive, Samua. I know you are good at that.”

Samuel saluted, though I doubt Poneiva understood the significance of the gesture.

The home of Amapa looked rather like a rambling farmhouse. I suppose it was a rambling farmhouse, in truth. Poneiva’s father came forth to welcome me, placing his right hand on my shoulder. “Taona Marareta,” he said, “I welcome you to my house.”

“I am honored to be your guest, Lord Amapa,” I replied, and reciprocated his gesture of greeting. That went well enough, I thought. Now I can relax.

“My wife, Rahina,” he continued. Now this was new; not one Mora had ever introduced his wife when we met.

“Lady Rahina, I greet you,” I said, with a slight bow of the head. I hoped that was close enough to proper manners.

“Welcome, Taona,” said she, rather timidly. Perhaps, I reflected, they didn’t get that many visitors of rank — or supposed rank — out here. Rahina was somewhat petite, sturdy of build, plain of face. But I could plainly see the lost Maneata in that face.

As Poneiva was reflected in his father’s. I wondered if there were any other children; I had never spoken of it to either Poneiva or Beck.

I quickly learned, as a girl of perhaps fourteen launched herself at Poneiva, who wrapped her in his embrace. “My sister Teme,” he told me. She embraced Beck, as well, though perhaps not quite so fondly. I would think it hard to replace one brother with another.

We soon sat at the obligatory feast of every visit to a Mora home. I suppose they didn’t consider them feasts at all, just shared meals. I noted men who could only be Kohari among those who served. “Are those slaves?” I whispered to Poneiva.

“Yes, Taona. We keep more slaves than some. Most, my father

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releases after a few years. A surprising number do not wish to return to their Kohari rulers and settle down here with Mora women.”

I, of course, thought of Heho. “The women do not mind that they are of another people?”

“Most respect the fact that our captives were once fighting men. And often they are the widows of Mora warriors. Warriors leave many widows. Too many widows.”

A related question came to me. “Are there ever, um, female captives?”

“That is very rare. We Mora do not raid for slaves, as the Kohari are known to do. But now and then a Mora man does bring home a willing wife from the north, Kohari or Diwarna.”

There was unmistakable and unfeigned sympathy in his voice. “The status of any children born here to such a mother is, well, difficult. They belong to no family.” Then Poneiva seemed to think of something. “It is good,” he said, in a much more cheerful tone, “that Neatanu has become a part of King Arierona’s household. Now Amirea is one of us, as will be her children.”

Amelia — no doubt she would wed some Mora eventually. I could not see her forever spurning their suits.

“We will leave the day after tomorrow,” Amapa was saying. “I hope the king will have returned by then.”

“It would not do for him to miss the wedding of his cousins,” said Rahina.

“Cousins?” I asked. “You are related to Arierona?”

Teme laughed. “Not us, Taona. The brides.”

“Though we are rather distantly related to the king,” added Amapa, with an indulgent smile toward his daughter. “All the noble families are connected in some degree.”

“E’eva, Miruhata, and Rahaita are all cousins,” said Poneiva. “Our wives-to-be come from Arierona’s side of the family. Grandchildren of his uncle.”

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Hareata must consider that a good thing, I told myself. Not quite as good as one of them wedding Rahaita, but tying them to the royal family, none the less.

Yet not in any way in the line of succession.

“Ah, I see,” I responded to this information. “If they are relatives of the king, then we should expect quite a wedding feast, shouldn’t we?”

“So we hope, Marareta,” said Beck. “So we hope.”

52. *Brides*

ARIERONA HAD ARRIVED only hours before we did. The wedding – and attendant feasts and celebrations – were to be three days hence.

Much of that would take place at the king's house, although the brides were not immediate family. Perhaps the fact that they were the closest friends of Arierona's daughter played a role in that, and that they had in large part grown up in the king's home.

With Arierona were the returning heroes, Bath and Nesmith. There would be an immediate feast for them, and for the king, for that matter.

"We met the High King," said Nesmith, when I had a chance to speak with the pair. "Quite an imposing fellow."

"And he spoke highly of you," added George Bath.

"Still sees you as a potential brother-in-law, I suspect." Nesmith came close to snickering. "Then we had to go down to the Falls and show the Mora canoe makers how our dory was built. They were very interested in that keel, and the purpose of it."

George broke in. "I was wondering if there was some way we could get it up the river."

"It would need to have been dismantled and hauled up the cliffs," Nesmith told him. "I'm afraid the boat is deteriorating there on that beach. Needs caulk and paint and all sorts of things that used to seem important to me."

"But I say, let it rot, Malvern. It is time to build new, here, and we don't have to be lackeys of some nigger king. We should be kings."

His vehemence, I must admit, amused me more than anything else. "I think the Mora would have something to say about that," I replied, perhaps with a tinge more sarcasm than required.

I had never seen malice so evident in the man's face. Alexander Nesmith usually did a good job of hiding his resentment, but he did not bother now. "They won't stop me," he stated flatly, "and you most certainly will not either."

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Then he again tucked away his emotions. "It needn't be here. I'm thinking those Kohari would be a much easier people to bring to heel. A handful of Mora to follow me, any of our own people who want to join, and we could carve out a kingdom up north." He shrugged. "Just a thought, really."

"It would be much simpler to marry the king's daughter," said Bath. From his tone, I assumed it an attempt to lighten things. "And don't say you haven't considered it, old man."

Nesmith chuckled despite himself. "Yes, yes, I have. I'll admit it." He turned to me. "So Beck will be wed in a few days, will he?"

"Yes, he and Poneiva. You know the brides, of course."

Both nodded. "The boys have done well for themselves," opined George.

I agreed. "Just the sort of girls they need."

A little later, I saw those girls as I sat by the lake, attempting to sketch. I didn't seem to have much of a heart for it anymore, and spent most of my time simply gazing out across the water.

"Taona!" called Miruhata. "We come to ask a favor of you."

"Of me?" What could these young ladies possibly require? And what else could I say but, "Certainly."

E'eva spoke. "We need a man to serve as our, um, guide. Is that the right word, Miruhata?"

The other considered. "Maybe. Or protector." She smiled and looked at me. "As our taona!"

"Yes," said E'eva. "Our taona when we go to Pana'a."

I immediately surmised she meant the waterfall, not the woman. "You wish me to accompany you?" I asked.

"A family member might normally be asked," Miruhata informed me, "but ours are all away somewhere or too busy with something."

"Or too young," added E'eva. "My brother wanted to come but he is only eight!" Both giggled a bit at the idea of such an escort.

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“And you are a priest,” Miruhata stated.

I might be considered a priest but I knew nothing of these people’s rituals. “Is there anything I must do other than accompany you on your journey?”

“No, Taona, you only keep watch while we bathe, so none disturb us.”

“It is best to bathe when the moon is above,” said Miruhata.

“Oh. Tonight is Arierona’s feast isn’t it? I should be there. Tomorrow evening?”

“Yes, tomorrow, Taona. We will be at the feast for the heroes, too.” All that settled, they headed off, chattering of their wedding plans to each other.

It seemed an odd request. Who would have thought to suggest me for this role? Still, I liked the idea of playing some part in my friends’ wedding.

Soon, I was with those friends at the house of the king. Bath and Nesmith now ate at the right hand of Arierona, honored guests, and I took a place further down. Still well above Nathan, it may be noted; Poneiva and Beck sat to my direct right. None seemed to object. I think Poneiva wished to make the point that I should be considered of higher rank than he.

His father, however, was a few places higher up.

Perhaps Poneiva also wished to take the opportunity to converse. “I thank you for accompanying our brides,” he said. “It is only symbolic. No one would think of actually disturbing them in the Pool of the Moon.”

“I think about disturbing Miruhata quite frequently,” admitted Bobby.

“You know we must keep away from them for the three days before the wedding,” admonished Poneiva.

“I admire many of your customs, but not this one,” the young sailor grumbled.

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“Oh, you will find more to dislike, my brother. There are many taboos about when you may or may not be with your wife.”

“Hmmp. It’s no wonder the Kohari outnumber you,” said Bobby Beck. “No wonder at all.”

53. *Grooms*

“BAFA ASKED US to visit him this morning,” said Poneiva.

“Maybe he is going to throw us a bachelor party,” suggested Beck.

Poneiva knew nothing of bachelor parties. Indeed, rather than indulging in merriment, Mora grooms underwent purification rituals on the eve of their weddings. While this pair sweltered in a sweat lodge, their brides would be enjoying a moonlight swim.

What we found was targets set up in an open space beside the lake, and all the Nathan family – plus a handful of curious Mora – waiting for us. George and Amelia held Kohari bows.

“I intend to try building better bows for us,” said Bath, “and maybe for our Mora friends as well, if they will use them. And arrows – I can definitely make straighter-flying arrows.”

Though George had a diploma from Columbia, attesting to a degree in the liberal arts, he had imbibed engineering from his family at an early age. He could do what he was saying.

Amelia drew back and let fly an arrow toward one of the straw rounds. Had George made these as well? Her shaft struck near the center; Miss Nathan was always the best shot of all of us.

Wisely, I noted, her torso was covered up today for protection against the bow string. Maybe I should tell the Mora that was the reason for the custom, and that all our women were great archers.

I took a couple shots, one of which actually hit a target, before leaving the pair to attempt to teach archery to their other guests. Looking about, I noted to James Nathan, “Nesmith is not with us?”

“No, we did not invite him.” He moved closer and spoke in a near-whisper. “Judith is very down on the man, for tossing over our daughter.”

“I think maybe she is well rid of his attentions,” I replied.

“And I agree.” He smiled and looked toward his daughter. “Amelia does not seem bothered in the least.” Then he gave me an

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appraising look, but said nothing. I'm sure he wondered whether I was thinking of again paying Amelia court.

I looked toward his daughter, as well. No, I would not be a suitor, I thought. Let her meet some worthy Mora man. Or maybe even recognize that the young fellow beside her was pretty worthy.

Oddly, thoughts of another young woman came into my mind. No, again; it would not do for me to seek the daughter of a king.

The daughter of a king accompanied E'eva and Miruhata when I met with them that afternoon.

"I will come along to protect the protector," said Rahaita, with an easy laugh. Does she distrust me? was the first thought that came.

It is more likely that she just wants to be with her best friends, I told myself on my second thought.

"It will be dark by the time we arrive," said Miruhata. The walk to the falls took two hours or so, I remembered. I said little as we walked beside the lake, allowing the girls to ignore me and speak of what they would.

"We are there, Taona," whispered Rahaita. Distracted, I had not noticed that we were at the path leading down to Pana'a and the Pool of the Moon. It was dark, the moon not yet in the sky, and the jungle lay all about us, full of the buzz of insects, the scent of the blossoms of the night.

We descended into the valley, down past where I had stood and looked up at the falls. They glittered where the now rising moon touched them with silver.

Down to that deep, hidden pool we went, the Pool of the Moon, and when we arrived the two brides turned to me, there beside it.

"Give us your blessing, Taona," asked E'eva.

I had half-expected to be called upon for something like this, eventually, so I had prepared. Hadn't I seen priests enough, both in

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this world and the one I used to know? Raising my hands above them, with an appropriate gaze skyward, I spoke. "I ask the blessings of the gods upon Miruhata and upon E'eva, and that the Pool of the Moon may give them all they wish of it." Then I looked down at the two girls, and said, "I offer my own wishes for your happiness, as well."

The two giggled, doffed their loincloths, and dove into the dark water.

"Not bad," offered Rahaita. "Let us go sit up further while they swim."

We found a good spot, a flat spot, with a small stone image of some god or another at one side of it, and sat down. We could just glimpse the pool through the branches, and could hear the girls laughing.

We spoke not for a minute or two.

"Why is your nose lopsided, Marareta?" my companion suddenly asked "Was it a wound of battle?"

For a moment, I thought to answer in the affirmative — it was nearly true. Instead, I said, "I know there are athletic games among your people. It was in something similar that this happened." I put my hand to my crooked nose. Crooked thanks to a nasty right cross.

"Oh." She considered this. "Athletes are so vain!"

I laughed loudly. "Even more vain," I told her, "are old athletes who brag of the victories of their youth."

Now, she joined in my laughter.

How old was she? Maybe a year or two older than her cousins splashing below? Close, then, to the age of Amelia Nathan. And how old was Amelia, now? Surely there had been a birthday since we came to this land, so she must be twenty.

Twenty — so young.

Best I think of other things, speak of other things. "Your aunt took the name of this waterfall, I am told."

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"Yes, as did those who came before her." She sat silent for a moment, chin resting on drawn-up knees, before turning her head toward me. "Do you wish to know of her prophecy?"

"Yes." Of her prophecy, of her, of whatever might help me better understand this world.

"The prophecy is much older than my aunt, as old as our people, maybe. She only said that its time had come."

"Do you — do you think she was right?"

"Of course, Marareta. She is always right." Rahaita smiled then, and that smile held mischief. "That does not mean the old prophecy is true, however." She looked off toward the pool. "They are coming out of the water. We can head home now."

I was not sure I knew any more than before. Never mind; the dripping brides had joined us and we began to climb back toward the main road. None of us spoke much as we passed along the shores of wide A'auwa, lying calm beneath the moon.

Perhaps this was not the paradise of Gauguin I had sought; no, it was better.

Near their home, we parted, they turning to the house of Arierona, I continuing by the side of the lake. Near the docks, Beck and Poneiva reclined on the ground.

"We are exhausted, Friend Marareta," said Poneiva. "Will you sit here with us?"

"Gladly. I am worn myself." I dropped to the grass beside them.

Beck raised his head to look at me. "Take my advice, and don't get married in this land. It's not worth it."

"You will feel differently tomorrow, Brother," Poneiva said.

"Maybe," replied Beck.

We sat by the lake, looking out across its waters, and saying no more. Was that a light I spied on the distant island? I was growing too drowsy to think about such things. The island of

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Pana'a and her fellow priestesses. She would be at the wedding, wouldn't she?

Of course she would, I thought, as sleep took me.

54. *A Wedding*

ALL THREE OF us slept there on the shore of A'auwa. Why not? It was a good night for it.

But I was troubled by dreams, dreams I barely recalled on waking, dreams of distant mountain peaks where flew strange creatures, and of a rich land that lay below them. I awoke to see someone seated beside me and fleetingly recalled a similar awakening, far north, and a woman who placidly smoked a cigar.

"Aranu!"

"Greetings, Taona." The two grooms beside me still snored.

"I did not expect to see you so soon," I said. "How is your injury?"

"Nearly healed. It could not keep me from being here for the wedding of my friends."

"Beka has healed too. He no longer wears his splint." I gave him and Poneiva a glance. "They had a hard night, I understand."

"In the sweat lodge. So I heard. While you, my friend," he said with an easy laugh, "spent your evening in the company of three lovely women."

"Well, it was a long walk," I countered in my defense. But a part of me envied these sleepers, who would wed two of those lovely women tonight. Why had life never been so easy for me to enjoy?

"A canoe approaches," said Aranu.

That was common at this spot before the house of Arierona. As it drew nearer, it became less common, for the five paddlers were all women. My companion recognized them. "The priestesses of the isle."

The last thing I was thinking of last night, wasn't it? Here is Pana'a, come for the wedding. Those with her varied in age, two gray-haired, one but a teen.

"Are those all of them?" I whispered to Aranu.

"I think there is another," came his reply. "They always leave

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at least one on the island.” He chuckled. “Maybe in case one of the gods comes calling.”

The activity had awakened our sleepers. Poneiva groaned.

“You both need plenty of beer,” proclaimed Aranui, “to replace what you sweated out last night. Come with me.”

“Makes sense,” said Beck, and followed him toward the house of the king. Poneiva yawned and stretched, nodded a sleepy good morning in my direction, and did the same.

I turned my attention back toward the priestesses. Pana’a was motioning for the others to go on without her, as she turned in my direction. Without a word, she came and sat down beside me.

“My Lady Pana’a,” I said in greeting.

“Pana’a, only,” was her reply. “It is a title in itself. You know whence comes the name?”

I nodded. “I accompanied your niece and the brides to the falls known as Pana’a last night.”

“You acted as their guide?” There was some surprise in her voice. “That is good. Yes,” she repeated, barely audible, “that is good.”

She looked like Rahaita, some, but her features were bolder, her nose more prominent, her eyebrows thick and dark. I doubted that Pana’a was much older than I.

I realized suddenly that I was staring at her. Pana’a realized it too, and laughed. “Yes, I am the one who foresaw your coming.”

“Which of us then is your hero from the sea?” I spoke lightly, jestingly, but did wonder.

“Perhaps all of you.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Good enough,” I replied.

She rose, and I rose beside her. “I should go to the brides,” she said. “I shall see you at the wedding, and the feast. And perhaps after, as well.”

With that, she left.

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And I was left at loose ends, so I lay down and slept a while longer.

By around noon, festivities were in progress. Nothing strenuous, of course, until after siesta time, but guests were gathering, storytellers were entertaining, food was being placed before us. The wedding, I understood, took place at dusk. The party that followed would last until dawn.

I wandered among the throng. They were of all stations, for everyone was invited to the festivities that preceded the wedding. At the ceremony itself, and the feast after, only those of high status would be welcome.

"Marareta," came a voice. It was Teme, Amapa's young daughter.

"Yes, Lady Teme?" She snickered at my formal address. I smiled back.

"Do you know Beka well?" Teme asked.

"I do. He is as fine a man as any I know. If any of us," I confided, "is this hero from the sea, it is he."

She frowned. "I wish he hadn't become my brother."

Ah, she resents him, I thought. But no —

"Because then I would marry him!"

"Oh. Yes, I see. You've been cheated, haven't you?"

"Exactly, Taona!" she exclaimed.

"My dear Teme, we both know things may not go as we wish. You lost a brother; perhaps you should simply be happy that you gained one, too." I wished I could think of something to say with more depth to it, but it was not necessary.

"I know." I think she sniffled a little, before giving me an impish look. "Maybe I should marry you," she said, and I think she might have been half-serious.

I pretended to ponder her suggestion. "I'll tell you what. If I have no wife in, um, four years, and you have no husband, we shall consider that possibility. Agreed?"

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“Agreed, Marareta,” she said, and sauntered away, rather taken with herself, I think.

So, on the day my friends were to wed, I had become semi-betrothed to a fourteen-year-old. Who could say? She might be worth a four year wait.

But for another man, a younger man. There were plenty of those about.

The sun fell low in the sky. Dusk here, near the equator, was a brief affair; one minute it was light and, it seemed, the next it was dark. Attendants began lighting torches all around King Arierona’s gardens. There was a great flowered bower at one end of those gardens, and within it stood the High Priest of his realm. A conch horn blew. The two brides, the two grooms, approached him.

Should I have been disappointed by so brief and simple a ceremony? It was over almost before I realized it was happening. Ah, well, it left more time for the feast to follow! The two couples led us to it, taking the places of honor, even above the king himself. On no other day might that be so.

I did not worry much about my position among those who feasted and let an attendant lead me where he would. It was surprisingly far up; as guide to the brides last night, it seems, my stock had risen again.

And I was pleased to find that it put me nearly across from the priestess Pana’a.

55. *The Priestess*

THERE WAS STILL song and merriment from without, but I was content to be with Pana'a, I in her arms and she in mine. This room, I assumed, was hers when she came here. None intruded upon us.

"It has been long since I felt so, beloved. Perhaps never before," she whispered. "I wish for more." The priestess raised herself onto her elbows and looked into my eyes. "You wish for more. I sense it."

She sighed then. "But we are not for each other, Marareta. I am given to A'auwa and can marry no man. And you — there is another for you. I have seen it."

That roused me from my drowsy content. "Can you tell me who she is?"

"That is for you to learn yourself."

How like a prophetess, I thought, to leave things open-ended. Yet I believed Pana'a to have a true vision. I would have scoffed at the idea, not long ago.

"This does not mean we can not be together at times," she continued, laying her head on my chest.

I smiled. "Are not men who visit your island slain?"

"Only if someone finds out about it," she answered. "We priestesses do not mind visitors at all. In fact, if a man comes to our home, we all make love to him. Then we sacrifice him to the Moon." She laughed loudly at the expression on my face. "I am joking, Marareta. But if the king knew that any man had set foot on our island, he would have him killed. Crushed, I believe, though it has not happened in my lifetime.

"Anyway, it is much simpler for us to come to shore if we have a lover. I used to swim across, sometimes — it is not so far — but now that reminds me of my sister. She, too, had the gift of sight but could not master it."

Her voice held much sorrow, the sorrow of one who under-

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stood the forces that drove her sister to her death. "My niece may have this gift, as well. Sometimes, I think we should bring her to our island and train her. She would succeed me as prophetess, then, one day." She shook her head. "But all my visions tell me this would be wrong. Rahaita has another fate."

"It seems a difficult gift," I said. "More a curse, maybe."

"It is who we are. Nothing more and nothing less."

We made love again before sleeping. Outside, there was still music and dancing and feasting.

I half-feared that I would wake alone. But no, Pana'a was there with me. "There is no need for me to hurry back to my island," said she, "but I must before dark. There are duties."

She wrapped a skirt about herself in the gray light. "Right now, I have a duty to bless the brides after their first night with their husbands. It is supposed to be for fertility or some such, not that anyone believes that this was truly their first night together." Pana'a hurried away.

I lay there a while, thinking. Could I be content as the occasional lover of this priestess? I had to honestly answer, yes. It was no different from many a marriage I had seen.

Yet she had said there would be another for me. I chuckled to myself — maybe she had seen Teme.

At last, I rose, intending to find some breakfast. Samuel sometimes brought me something, but he had no idea where I was. Or I hoped he didn't; he had been attending me last night and might have noticed with whom I left.

I stepped out into a hallway, to come face to face with Arierona. The king looked askance at me, for a moment, before laughing and continuing on his way. At least I needn't worry about his disapproval.

On Arierona's veranda, where one might always find food, I also found Amapa and his family. That is, Rahina and Teme; Poneiva and Beck would not be expected to abandon their brides so

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early this morning. "Come sit with us," called the noble, motioning to me.

Teme glared at me from beneath her black eyebrows. Ah, I thought, she knows where I spent last night. Betrayed already.

She would get over it, I was sure, with so many Mora boys scurrying about this place. There was an exchange of pleasantries with all, and then Amapa got right to the point.

"Why do you think you and your friends were sent to the house of Arierona?" asked he.

I had not really thought of it before but now the reason seemed obvious. "Pana'a."

"Yes. It seemed also a good idea to get you to some place well away from the coast, and Arierona is seen as a neutral figure in most disputes. But the kings needed to better understand why you came and it was felt the prophetess might be the key to this.

"Perhaps what happened between you two should be no surprise." He faced me and stated, "I would speak of it to Lord Hareata, but not if you wish otherwise."

"He would learn anyway, would he not?"

Amapa nodded. "This is true, but best he hear it from a friend — a friend to both of you."

And an ally in whatever politics was involved. "As you will, Friend Amapa," I told him.

I spent much of the day dawdling near A'auwa. There was little for me to do here and little inclination on my part to seek more. Sooner or later, I must, even if it meant settling into some sort of priestly role. I looked out over the water and wished again for a little sailboat, so I might spend my days on the lake, hiding away as had Bath.

And it could carry me close, now and again, to the isle of the priestesses, even if I might not land there.

In the early afternoon, Pana'a and her attendants returned to their canoe. Would she even acknowledge me, out here in the open,

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before the other priestesses? I need not have worried; she came to me. Tenderly we embraced.

“I must go, my Marareta,” she whispered.

“You will return?”

“As often as I may, as long as I may,” she promised, and turned to her retinue.

I watched them paddle away, across the waters of A’auwa.

56. *A Death*

MAITOA WAS DEAD.

That was the news a messenger bore to King Arierona. The High King, a guest at the house of Va'aru following our battle, had simply not awakened one morning.

Maitoa was by no means an old man — closer to forty than to fifty, I would have hazarded. But I had seen men like him before, men who indulged themselves and grew fat and died before their time. New York was quite full of them.

What would this mean for Pua? Or for Hareata, for that matter? Both would lose much of their authority, I suspected.

Unless, of course, one of Pua's sons was chosen as the successor. Who might be the next High King?

"The money — if these people used money — seems to be on Temani'itu," Nesmith told me. The brother of Maitoa, guardian of the coast and seemingly not aligned with any faction, did seem a likely choice. All of Maitoa's nephews were still young men, and untested.

Nesmith had begun to gather a following of sorts, not that he had any sort of official standing in the realm of Arierona. Many seemed disaffected Mora, men without family ties or wealth, those of mixed-blood, outcasts. I think perhaps Nesmith saw himself as a kindred spirit to those men. It seemed that he was speaking to them of finding a new land for themselves.

"Still thinking of going after a kingdom in the north?" I asked him outright.

"Maybe, but the situation here may be fluid for a while. Opportunities might arise." He paused and gave me a sidelong look. "But I have heard tales of a rich land up the Gurang, in the mountains. Yes, that interests you, doesn't it Malvern?"

It had, indeed, and I didn't try to hide it.

"If nothing else presents itself, maybe I'll lead some men up there. Better than sitting here the rest of my life."

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I, for one, wouldn't mind seeing him go. Nor would Aranu, for they remained rivals for Rahaita.

His daughter's interest in the young officer might be one reason Arierona tolerated Nesmith's presence, allowed him to remain without a declaration of loyalty. But I think he also practiced a policy of interfering as little as possible with his prophesied guests from the sea.

Aranu — with Beck and Poneiva gone with their brides to the house of Amapa, he was my most frequent companion. I saw little of Bath, or any of the rest of our shipwrecked party these days. Our lives ran now in different directions.

It was this son of a king who explained to me how the new High King would be chosen. "There are nine kings," he told me. I knew of four of them; the rest apparently ruled further to the north. "They will choose the High King from the eligible candidates."

"The sons of his sisters."

"Yes. Or Maitoa's brothers, the other sons of his mother. If they like none of those, they might look to cousins. The family of the High King will make suggestions and can object to the choice, though it has been long since that has happened."

He halted, seeming uncertain whether to say more. Then Aranu said, "My father was opposed to the ways of Maitoa. This you know. It matters not whether I agree or disagree, for I am pledged as a warrior of Arierona. I will fight as he says fight, if it comes to it."

I knew completely well that Aranu could renounce his allegiance to Arierona and return to his father or, for that matter, any other master who would have him. But I did not call him on this, for I very much suspected that it was Rahaita who kept him here.

"It might come to war?" I asked.

"Unless most of the kings can compromise on one man. If it is near evenly split, some may not accept the choice."

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"It may depend on Arierona, might it not?" I asked. Back in the United States, we would have called Arierona a "moderate."

Aranu was surprised that I understood the situation. "Ah, no wonder Hareata named you Taona," he said. "You were meant to stand at the right hand of a king, Marareta, and whisper in his ear."

I couldn't help but laugh. Hardly the career I would ever have expected for myself! "I would prefer to whisper in the ears of beautiful women," I told him.

"I would rather speak aloud to Rahaita," he said, frowning. "But she will not listen to me. She lets Nezama be her companion." Aranu sighed. "At least she has not taken him to her bed."

I, too, was thankful for that, though I couldn't quite sort out all the reasons for it.

"Will the kings meet somewhere?" I asked, rather than pursue the topic of Rahaita.

"At the house of the High King," he replied. "You have been there, I know."

And I would go there again. A few hours later, Arierona called me to him.

We sat in the shade of the largest hibiscus I had ever seen. I might have liked to paint that great flowering bush — tree? — at another time. "Taona," said he, "I would have you accompany me to the meeting of the kings."

"I, sir? Of what service would I be?"

"If nothing else, you know the Lady Pua and could be useful in dealing with her. But I think your words on many subjects might be worth hearing."

Was this the king into whose ear I was meant to whisper? I must have visibly shown my doubts, for Arierona smiled, saying, "My daughter thinks you are very wise."

"Who am I to dispute the words of Rahaita?" I answered, returning the smile.

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“I often ask that myself,” admitted the king. “We leave the day after tomorrow. Be ready.”

57. *Taking Leave*

I WATCHED NESMITH take his leave of young Rahaita, in a corner of her father's garden, intending not to intrude on either this day. But, seeing me, she came to where I stood.

"You do not like Nezama," she said, without any preliminaries. Rahaita liked to be direct; this I had already recognized.

"No, Rahaita, but that is all I will say of him."

She looked towards Nesmith's dwindling figure and back to me. "I only dally with Nezama in hopes that another will value me." I assumed she meant Aranu.

"Aranu does value you," I told her. "There is no need to make him jealous."

"I do not speak of that boy!" she stated with considerable vehemence, staring straight at me. How could I miss her meaning?

But I, being fool or coward or maybe both, chose to pretend that I did. This was far too complicated for me to deal with right then.

"Oh, uh, perhaps, Rahaita, the one you wish to value you does, but, um, does not think he should make it known."

"Then I must spend more time with Nezama, must I not?" she asked. With that, she turned around and walked straight away.

All around was bustle as Arierona's entourage prepared for travel. The king would take about two-hundred men with him, almost a small army, leaving his nephew Ponu once again in charge here.

But I paid little attention to all of it. Rahaita? No, no, that could not be. What of Aranu? What of Pana'a?

But Pana'a had told me there would be another. Surely not this girl, her own niece? I was suddenly thankful that Arierona would be taking me away from all this tomorrow, perhaps for many weeks.

But my problems this day were far from over. Aranu searched me out, finding me once again seated by A'auwa.

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He stood menacingly over me. "I found Rahaita crying for your love. You have betrayed me!

"I will fight you for her!" he declared.

"I would that it was you she loved," I told him. "I turned her away."

"She is crying because you would not love her?" He considered this. "That is not right, Marareta. Rahaita should be loved." He sat down beside me, his anger forgotten.

"By me? I am practically an old man. And there is another." I turned my eyes toward the lake.

He also looked toward the isle of the priestesses. "One who can never be truly yours, friend. Is that enough?" Aranu seemed to reach a sudden decision. "If Rahaita will not love me, then I can think of none better than you."

I was going to neither agree nor disagree. Instead, I said, "I leave with Arierona in the morning. Maybe that will give everyone time to sort things out in their heads."

"I remain here. Perhaps I can make her forget you," he laughed, but we both knew better. "Poneiva and Beka should be on their way back too, with their wives. It will do Rahaita good to be with her friends again."

That, I was sure, was true. A much calmer Aranu clapped me on the back, rose, and went about his business.

As he left, I couldn't help wondering how many punches it would have taken to put the boy down, if we actually had fought.

Why did I linger still by A'auwa as the sun dropped lower into the west? I hoped, of course, hoped that a canoe would appear out there, bringing Pana'a to me before I must leave. Out there on the glittering water, rippled by the afternoon breezes, I would see it.

Dusk approached. Fool! She would not come. Then I looked to my right, and there stood my priestess. "I crossed over further south," she whispered as she sat and put her arms around me, "in a small canoe, so I would not draw attention." We kissed.

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“Do you hunger?” I ask.

“Only for you,” she replied. “Let us to my room so I might devour you.”

I had not eaten in some time, but was not inclined to refuse.

After a couple hours, we did wander out and fed ourselves. Sitting on Arierona’s veranda, lit only by a pair of torches this late at night, we shared fruit and cold meat. It did not really matter what we were eating.

“Something has happened,” Pana’a said somewhat abruptly. “I can sense it.”

“Nothing of importance,” I murmured. “Just the need to journey away tomorrow.”

“There is more, but we need not speak of it.”

We did not, but returned to her quarters and our love and, in time, sleep.

In the darkness before the dawn, Pana’a rose to leave. Leaning down to kiss me goodbye, she whispered, “It is Rahaita. Now you know the one I saw for you.”

“No, that can not be,” I objected.

The priestess smiled. “Did not the girl tell you that I am always right?”

58. *Kings*

OUR WAY TO the house of the High King was not that by which I had come from it. We veered further westward and followed the waterways. This was in part because it would have slowed us down to ferry Arierona's troop across the lake, a few at a time.

They need a bigger ferry here, I thought. I had thought something similar when I had crossed many weeks earlier. But I had done nothing, nor made any suggestions. Too many other things had come along, wars and weddings and love affairs.

A messenger met us when we were about halfway there, a man I recognized — Heho. "Maitoa was just laid to rest beside his ancestors when I left," he told the king. "They raised a great mound for him."

"Suitable for a great king," said Arierona. "Whatever arguments we may have had, Maitoa was an able ruler and a renowned warrior in his youth." He looked to Heho. "Have you need to hurry back?"

"Only if you have a message, sir," Heho replied. "Otherwise, might I travel with you?"

"Certainly." Arierona paid him no more attention, so he fell in beside me.

"You still have no attendant?" Heho asked.

"I would not make poor old Samua walk this far," I told him.

"Ah. Then I will stay with you. It is best to have a position in such a retinue." He smiled. "Especially a position near the leaders."

"How is our Lady Pua?" I asked the man.

"Well enough, for having lost a beloved brother." He remained silent a few seconds. "She hopes to place her son Ve'eta on the dais of the High King.

"Hareata is there too," he continued. "He no longer has a position in the High King's house, so he is part of his cousin Va'aru's delegation."

"He would favor Ve'eta," I said, mostly to myself.

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Heho shrugged. "I am not privy to such things, but I think the consensus is for Temani'itu. It is expected that he would not have a long reign, being older than Maitoa and almost as fat."

"And objectionable to no one," I added.

Upon reaching the house of the High King, two days later, we found that this was not to be; Temani'itu had refused to be considered for the title and favored his nephew Ve'eta.

This young fellow had not been at the house of the High King on my previous visit, but I saw him now beside his mother. No more that twenty could he have been, but as over-sized as any in his family. Arierona gazed upon him for a while before saying, "I should have brought Rahaita with me. Ve'eta would make an excellent son-in-law."

I was not certain how serious he was but he was right about one thing — Rahaita should have accompanied us.

As a councilor of King Arierona, I was at the meetings of the nine kings of the Mora, held in the great central room of the High King's house. It immediately became obvious that two supported Ve'eta, two opposed him adamantly, and five remained undecided. This last group included Arierona, but I knew he tended to favor the young candidate.

"He is an untested boy," objected Hei'iro, "and does not honor the old ways." This latter was his real objection. Hei'iro was a thorough traditionalist.

Revaru, who ruled the area just north of the High King's land, expressed vigorous agreement. I could see that he was going to follow Hei'iro's lead, no matter what.

Anana and Va'aru praised the young man as a warrior, which was, it seemed, the only thing he had ever excelled at or even tried. I would not have voted his way, had I not met Ve'eta and found him intelligent and generous. Of course, the fact that his mother stood beside him might have prejudiced me.

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There was no time to renew my acquaintance with Lady Pua, nor even to meet either of her husbands. But it was good to see her.

The problem, in part, was that all the other nephews were even younger, and none of the eligible cousins had much support. At last, one of the hitherto neutral kings, Ruapata, rose and suggested maybe it was time the title of High King passed to another house. He named no names but looked directly toward Arierona.

That man rose to address his peers. "My family has no claim and makes no claim on the office of High King," he proclaimed. "I support Ve'eta."

I wondered if maybe it had been a ruse to force Arierona's hand. Even more so when Ruapata almost immediately also acclaimed Ve'eta and I saw a smile come to the face of Lord Hareata, who sat inconspicuously behind Va'aru. So that made four in the boy's favor.

At that point, it was decided to end the council for the day, for these kings grew peckish with some regularity. There would be politicking aplenty before tomorrow, however. Arierona turned to me. "Was I maneuvered?" he asked.

"I think so, sir," I replied.

He sighed. "I intended to vote for Ve'eta anyway. I just wanted more time to explore the issues." Arierona had a long list of grievances to air.

"Will he be elected?"

"The question is not whether but by how many. If we end up five against four, we may face war."

"Avatu will vote with you, won't he?"

"Yes. I think only fear of Hei'iro on his border keeps him from saying so now. He waits to see if more commit."

"King Arierona! King Arierona!" cried out a voice.

"That is Aranu," I said. "Here!" I called. "Aranu!"

The young warrior stumbled his way to us. Had he run all the

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way from A'auwa? "It is your daughter, my king. She has been stolen!"

59. *A Kidnapping*

RAHAITA? I DID not need Aranú's next words to know who was responsible.

"It was Nezama. He and many men broke into your house to take weapons and supplies. And they took Rahaita, as well!"

"Why? Why would he do this?" cried the anguished father.

Heho had brought water for the weary Aranú. During the pause, I spoke. "Nezama has talked of making himself a king," I said.

Arierona, calmer now, nodded gravely. "So I had heard. I should not have given him so much freedom." He looked to Aranú. "What has Ponu done?"

"He sent out men in pursuit as soon as we recovered from the attack. Nezama had his Karag and used it to create fear and panic in your household. Then Ponu ordered me immediately to come to you, so I know not what success they had." The young Mora warrior looked from Arierona to me. "Marareta," he haltingly continued, "our friend Bafa tried to stop him. He was badly wounded."

I felt my heart become lead. "How is the boy?"

"He lay near death in the house of the king when I left. I fear his spirit feasts now with those of other brave warriors."

Arierona put a hand on my shoulder, a very uncharacteristic move for the aloof monarch. "I will remember and honor his courage." He asked, then, knowing he must, "Did my daughter go willingly?"

"No, sir," reported Aranú. "She fought against Nezama. He chose her as a hostage, Lord Ponu thinks."

That made sense, but I suspected — and I am sure Aranú did as well — that Nesmith wanted Rahaita as more than just a hostage. If he managed to set himself up somewhere, having the daughter of a king beside him as wife would be of great advantage.

Royal lineage aside, Rahaita herself was certainly desirable. I

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could not see that as Nesmith's main motivation, but I knew as well that he was not immune to it.

By now, Aranu's tale had probably spread all through this crowd. Some would sympathize with Arierona; others might be thinking how to turn it to their advantage.

Hareata had come to stand beside us. "Where do you think Nezama and his men might move now?" he asked me.

"I think he will linger in the empty lands near the mountains, to see how things go and whether he might take advantage. It is not by accident that he chose this time to act."

"He did speak of the lands east of the Diwarna," said Aranu.

"Yes, he promised his followers a land of their own. If things do not go well for them, they might head there."

"Someone should go north," said Hareata, "and be there waiting for them."

"I will," volunteered Aranu.

"And I," I blurted out, to immediate regret. Why would I do that? Did I feel some obligation?

Well, yes, I did have an obligation to these people. I did owe Arierona. I was willing to let it stand at that — if there was more to it, I could figure it out later.

"I shall go, too," I repeated more firmly. "I know Nezama and I know the area better than Aranu. Heho would serve well as a guide for us."

"You can not leave, Arierona," Hareata reminded him. "You must trust others to deal with this."

I could see anger and resignation at battle in the king. "I will send a troop with you," he finally decided. "Now Aranu must rest. Eat with me tonight, both of you and we will speak. You, too, Hareata, if you can."

I accompanied Aranu to a room where he might sleep, Heho leaving us to fetch food and drink for the man. I would ask no more questions of him, though I could think of many. That could wait

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for the evening. And tomorrow? I would hope to be on the way north.

Our meal was late, for Aranu slept long. There were the four of us, and Heho sat silently in the shadows.

"How many followed Nezama?" was the question I had been waiting to ask.

"Twice-twenty, maybe. There was far too much confusion to be sure."

"Not so many," felt Hareata.

"But Nezama has his weapon," Aranu said, helping himself to more papaya.

"The Karag," said the king. I wondered how many cartridges he had left.

"And he has Rahaita," I reminded them. "Who would dare attack?"

"He would not harm her, for then he would lose an advantage," Hareata pointed out.

Areirona saw the logic in that, and nodded. Nesmith and his men would not be likely to hurt his daughter.

"Unless their track was found, none of this matters." I had to raise that possibility.

"And so we send you north, not knowing what has happened," said Hareata. "Heho, is there another pass through the hills?"

"There are many, Lord Hareata, but I doubt that they are known to any of Nezama's men."

"We must rely on that likelihood, then. To the hills, as quickly as you can, to do what you may."

"I shall petition all the gods for the safety of Rahaita, and for yours," spoke Arirona. "And I shall ask that they receive Bafa, who proved again that he was not useless. Now you must rest."

60. *Hills*

A SCORE OF Arierona's men followed us toward the hills.

We had seen no sign of Nesmith, nor had we expected any. If he and his followers were heading toward the pass, they would come from further east.

We followed a path similar to that I had journeyed with Lady Pua. Maybe it was even the same path. Heho would know; I did not care.

Swiftly we traveled, urgently. Were we ahead of or behind Rahaita's kidnappers? Through the grasslands where I had seen my first unicorn, on toward the north we went.

I did recognize the place where our path met the well-traveled road of the traders. We would not be far now from the gap through the hills. We should be watchful for signs.

"Men have passed through recently," said Heho. "Many men. Whether traders or warriors, who can say?"

"Are there any footprints of women? I know they sometime travel north too," I told him, "but it could be a sign of Rahaita."

He shook his head and smiled ruefully. "Rahaita is a tall woman. Her footprints might look no different than the others."

True. I was not thinking things through. I must not allow myself to become sloppy.

There was a lifetime of discipline behind me, as a sailor, as a boxer, as a painter. What good had any of it done if I grew lax now — now when it truly mattered?

We climbed toward the pass, up the long, easy slope that gave no warning of the steep way on the far side of these hills. It was getting late and I hoped to cross over before dark. Heho and another knowledgeable Mora checked the way ahead of us from time to time, but found no sign. Or no sure sign of anything other than the passage of unknown men.

Then, a huddled conference of the two. "There has been turning aside here," said Heho, looking to the slopes on either side.

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"An ambush!" was my immediate response. The men became at once alert to the danger. It was good that we had not gone further into the gap, where the way was narrower and the walls steeper.

I heard a signal from somewhere above us, unmistakably Nesmith's voice. A rain of spears fell and so did three of our men.

Being Mora, they immediately counter-attacked. I would have called for them to retreat, to regroup, to get beyond the range of those spears. Too late; they were half-way up the slopes, Aranu at their head. There was fierce battle along those ridges, and both sides lost men.

Where was Nesmith? And how many men had he? Surely not the forty Aranu had estimated. This looked like maybe half that.

Most importantly, where was Rahaita?

Suddenly, an impact, a searing pain in my shoulder, the report of a rifle. I went down.

"You will not stand in my way again, Malvern," Nesmith called, as he disappeared over the crest of a gray hill.

"Marareta!" cried Aranu, and I saw him half-leaping, half-sliding down the hill toward me. Then I believe I lost consciousness.

When it returned, it was night and a fire was burning.

"You will not die, Taona," Heho assured me with a smile.

I did not smile back. "How many did?" I asked. I knew we had suffered a defeat, but how bad?

"We lost seven men," reported Aranu. "That many badly wounded, as well."

There was a dressing of some sort on my shoulder, the ubiquitous mat cloth of this world. I ached greatly.

"The missile passed through you," said Heho. "We do not think it a lasting hurt."

"And our attackers?"

"I think more than a dozen slain. We will be able to better tell

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in the morning," Aranu said, and then shook his head. "The rest were able to slip away into the darkness."

Heho spoke. "Not more than five or six, Taona, but Nezama escaped with them. And he still holds the Lady Rahaita." He looked to his right. "There are others who need my help. Sleep."

He went off to care for other wounded. I could hear groans from the other side of the flames.

By the morning's light, they gathered the bodies of our attackers, thirteen in all, and quickly dispatched two sorely wounded men who had been left behind. Fifteen, then. What had become of the large force of which Aranu had told us?

So perhaps it was not a defeat, but we had not freed Rahaita. And where would Nesmith go now with his captive?

Due east, of course, toward the headwaters of the Gurang. It was his only course.

"You should follow," I told Aranu. "Leave the wounded here. We will find our way."

"No, Taona Marareta. We will all go to the village that lies ahead. There we can make our plans."

I was in no position to object. I must trust Aranu in this.

By now, I suspected that my wound was not bad. Certainly not so bad as some others. I would be able to walk, but not to be of help. Chances were the bullet had struck mostly muscle and had broken no bone.

I could thank those anatomy lessons I had taken as an art student for knowing the muscles through which it might have passed. And I could thank Mr. Nesmith for still being an execrable shot.

Four men had to be borne. As we crawled along beneath the equatorial sun, it came to me that Heho was no longer with us.

"He has gone ahead to seek help," Aranu told me. "There should be many Mora in this village of yours."

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I nodded. "At the rate we are going, a group of traders might overtake us from behind."

"Either way would be acceptable, Taona, either way."

As it was, a group did come out from the village and met us when we had passed perhaps half the way. Among them was Dutch Geitz. "I should have built some carts big enough to roll you home!" he said. "But I guess we can carry you."

Carry us they did, those in need. The rest of our journey took half the time it might have otherwise. But I did chafe at the delay in following Nesmith.

Even if I were in no condition to do it. Aranu and Heho and the uninjured men could be on his track.

Early in the afternoon, I spied the high roof of what had been the house of Lady Pua. And I wished she were there to welcome me.

61. *Mountains*

HOWEVER, ULANI WAS there to welcome us. Beside him stood Oorto.

“Ma’are is now the official head of the Mora here,” said Dutch, “but she lets Ulani run things.”

I did not remember a Ma’are — she must have been sent after Pua’s departure. I thought her wise to allow Ulani to be in charge. Ulani, in turn, had been wise to give Dutch free rein, for I saw more than one wheelbarrow trundling goods about the village.

We gave each other our greetings, I embracing my old friend Oorto. “Are your sister and her husband about?” I asked him then.

“Demba and Gordie are at our home,” said he. “They are well.”

“But Gordie travels here frequently,” Ulani told me, “sometimes bringing his wife with him. He has become one of my most valued traders among the Diwarna.

“I have invited them to live and work here. It would give Oorto more reason to visit me.” He gave his lover a sidelong glance before turning to our wounded men. “Let us get them into the house.”

So, I decided, I would take a day or two to heal in this village, get our wounded tended, and then follow Nesmith. There was little doubt which direction he had gone. East to the mountains; to the north and west was jungle and swamp, with nothing to offer him.

That night, a messenger came, having traveled swiftly from the south. From him, we learned why Nesmith no longer had his two-score men when we met.

“The men of Arierona’s house pursued them into the foothills of the great mountains, surprising them in their camp and slaying several, but Nezama drove them back with his Karag, and many escaped. After that, their track was lost in the rocks.”

Heho sniffed. “I would not have lost it.”

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The courier smiled. "I doubt it not, Friend Heho. Now we can tell them where Nezama went."

"Arierona may send many men now," felt Aranu.

"Not if war comes. Ve'eta was named High King, with six for and three against. There could still be conflict."

I slept little that night. My shoulder pained me, true, but more troublesome were the thoughts that filled my mind. Did I really care enough about these people, about this world, indeed, about Rahaita, to continue on this path down which I had been rushing? Had I just been caught up in it all? Maybe I should step back. There was nothing for me here.

I could convince myself of that, I thought. I who was not so much a self-made man as a made-up man, a man who had facility for many things but never much passion for any of them — must I create myself again, on this unknown coast?

At last I slept, but woke with no more certainty than before.

"I think Heho should remain, to carry a full report back and shepherd the wounded men home," said Aranu as we shared a morning meal.

I nodded. Why not? It seemed the reasonable course. "Is that acceptable to him?"

"It is. We have six men in good shape to travel." Aranu looked at me with some concern. "Do you think you can, Taona?"

I could, I knew, but should I? This was the opportunity to turn aside. "I — am uncertain," I finally said. "You would follow Nezama tomorrow?"

"Yes. We will leave as early as we might." He paused. "We do not know this land. Your friend Oorto has volunteered to guide us."

Ah, Oorto. None of this was his concern. Could I let him take on this task, and not I?

We all held council later, and I asked him of it. "My dreams

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call me to the mountains, Mika, as they call you. This was always intended for us. All has led to it.”

I was and am no believer in fate. I said nothing; there was too much at conflict within me to find an answer.

Ulani was not one to hide his own anguish. “Let me come with you!” he pleaded.

Oorto shook his head. “This is not your journey, beloved Ulani. Stay, and take care of my sister and Gordie when they visit. Tell them I will – I will try to return.”

“You must return. I will tell your story, as my master Isa taught me.”

Aranu turned to practical matters. “Nezama could not have but a handful of followers now. Perhaps no more than three or four.”

“How could they find their way in this country?” I wondered.

Heho, hitherto silent, spoke up. “I know that one of those with him has traveled here as a trader. And,” he added with a slight smile, “the mountains are not hard to find.”

No, they were not. I looked eastward toward them, toward those high distant mountains, and made my decision. “We shall leave in the morning.”

The time had come to unlock the secrets of those peaks and of my own heart.

Afterword

There will be more novels centered around the Malvern character — that should be evident from the ending of COAST OF SPEARS. It should be noted that this tale is set in the same world as my Donzalo's Destiny novels, though in a far earlier age.

As with the Donzalo books, part of the underpinnings here go very far back. Maybe all the way back to when I played shipwrecked sailor as a kid, my bed serving as lifeboat. But I had yet to imagine any beautiful Polynesian women back then!

I hope you have enjoyed.

Stephen Brooke