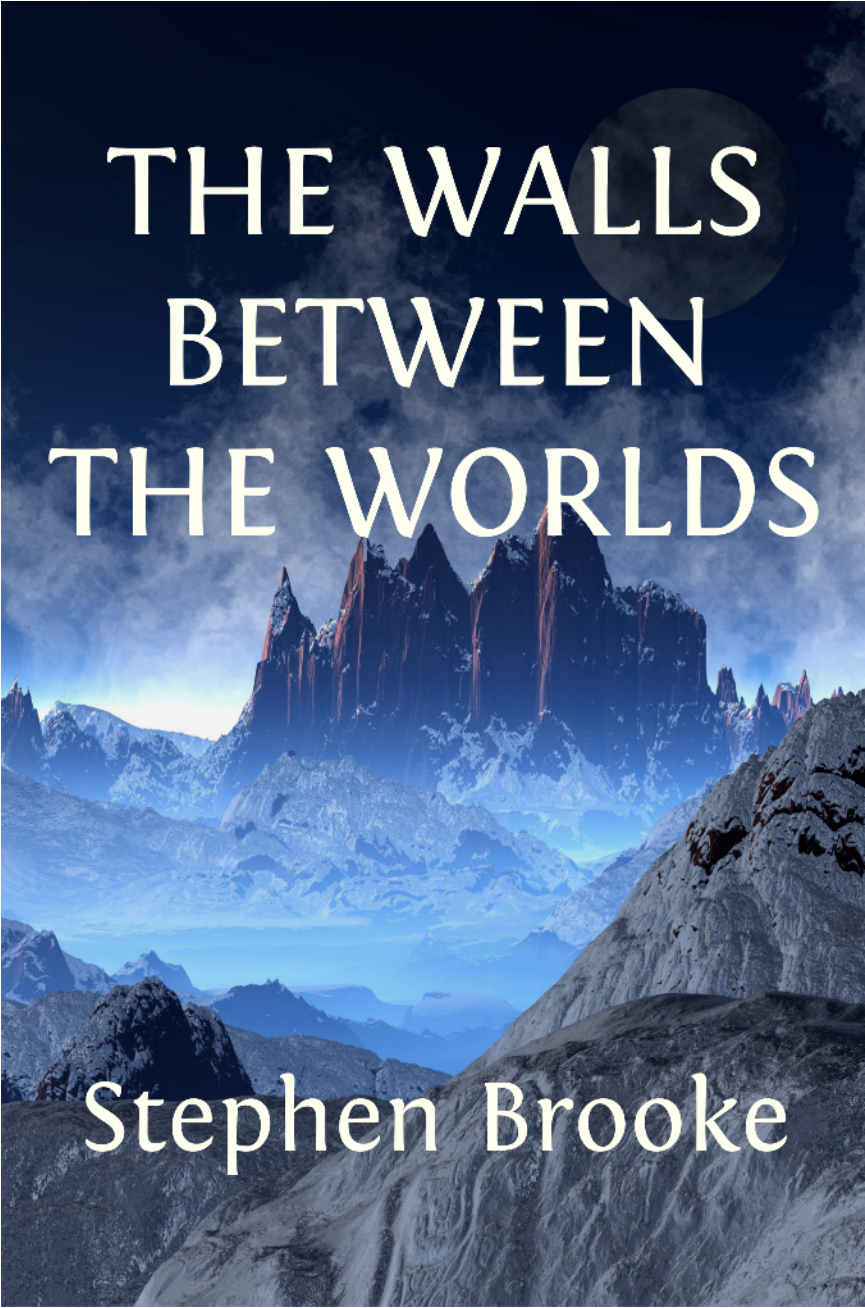




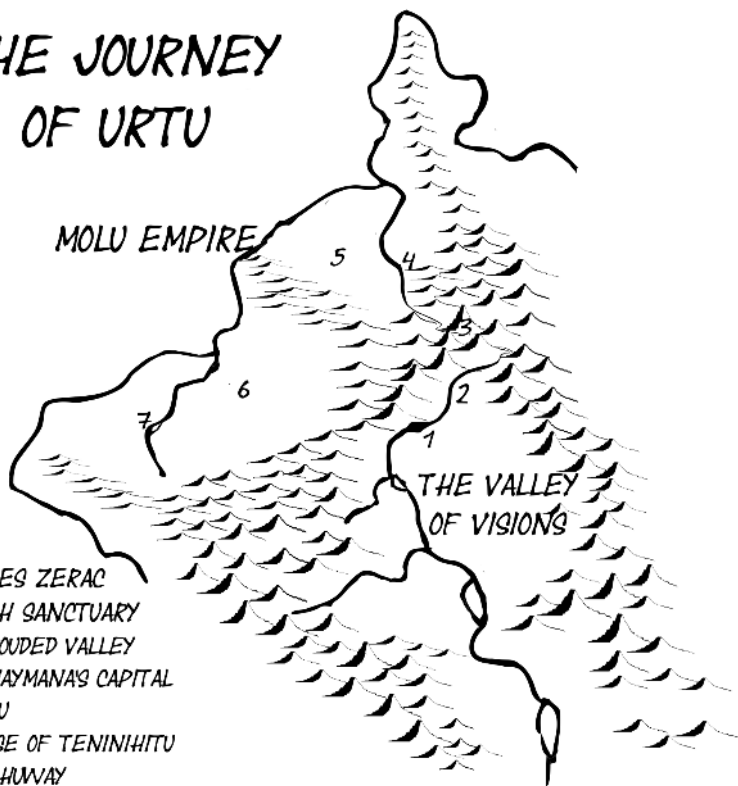
THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Stephen Brooke

THE
WALLS
BETWEEN
THE
WORLDS

THE JOURNEY OF URTU

MOLU EMPIRE



- 1 LADES ZERAC
- 2 HIGH SANCTUARY
- 3 SHROUDED VALLEY
- 4 PANAYMANA'S CAPITAL
- 5 INTU
- 6 HOUSE OF TENINIHITU
- 7 AHAHUVAY

THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS



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Arachis Press 2021

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Arachis Press
4803 Peanut Road
Graceville, FL 32440

<http://arachispress.com>

I. THE HEIR

ONE

IN HIS GREAT KEEP ABOVE Lades Zerac, the Lake of the Sky, the Lord of Visions was dying. Carved from the gray stone of the mountain was that keep and it had stood for millennia, home and refuge of the mightiest of all sorcerers. His son sat on a simple three-legged stool beside his bed.

One of many sons Hurasu had fathered over five thousand years of life was Urtu. As other sons before—most long passed from this life—he had been named for an old friend of the Vision-Lord, a man who had also gone into the darkness in the distant past. Now it was Hurasu's turn to do so.

The ancient sorcerer gazed from a window upon the Lake of the Sky, sparkling far below them. In the distance, sails could be seen; most commerce moved along the far shore where the great river Tez both entered and exited the lake. "My friend Malvern taught me to sail, two thousand years ago," he said. "And I taught my people." His eyes turned to Urtu. "I am sure you have heard that tale before." A faint smile came to the thin lips. Parchment-colored skin was stretched tight across angular features, high cheekbones and jutting, hawk-like nose standing in sharp relief in the clear morning light. Hurasu's short hair and beard were white, his eyes dark and sharp.

"I thought perhaps there finally was one who could rule my realm after me," said Hurasu, "but there is not much of a realm left. Already it descends into chaos at the rumor of my impending death." His gaze returned to the window. "My heart has grown weak. It complains constantly and one day soon will simply say 'enough' and I shall go."

"Go where, Father?"

There came a curt laugh. "You know as well as I none have seen that destination. Yet, if existence be infinite, none of us ever end. There not only can but must be worlds where we live again. Ha, infinite hells and infinite heavens await me." Hurasu pondered this for a moment. "Or I am already there, in infinite timeless being."

The young man—truly young, despite being of a long-lived race—

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knew all this. He had discussed it before and only sought to engage his father's mind. Urtu was not only Hurasu's son but was undoubtedly descended from him in many lineages. The sorcerer had begotten a vast number of children, the greater part of them here in this valley where he ruled. All sorcerers were descended from him, it was said; he had brought the heritage with him from another world, lost Atlantis.

He had brought as well the heritage of long life, though there was no connection between that gift and the one of sorcery. No descendant of Hurasu had rivaled the wizard's five millennia of life, though a handful had reached several hundred years. And there was his appearance, quite different from the typical dweller in the valley of the Tez. Urtu shared some of that appearance, being the son of Hurasu, but was darker. His hair was as black as his father's had once been, but with more wave to it, and he was a bit taller and lankier than his compact, wiry sire. He could not hope to match Hurasu's legendary strength; even now, the youngster suspected, he would lose if he arm wrestled the ancient wizard.

"You have promised," spoke Hurasu, "that you would not attempt to make yourself lord of the valley on my death. I hold you to that."

Urtu nodded. He had, admittedly, given the idea some consideration.

"In time, perhaps," continued his father. "Do as did I, more than once, when my enemies grew too powerful."

"Leave and wait to see what happens."

"Yes. When the time was right, I was able to return. More than once!"

It was a pattern repeated in Hurasu's long reign. Urtu knew the histories. "But I have not as much time at my disposal as you," he said, smiling.

"I know this. Hmm, no, not for certain, eh? You might live as long as me." Both knew this to be quite unlikely. "You will have children, I would hope. If not you, then perhaps one of them will rule someday. But the powers gathered to contest my realm are too great for you to oppose now."

"Then should I wander the world as have you?" asked the young man. "Or retreat to someplace like Ten Serac?"

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"I wish you to leave the valley. Bring me that chest over there. The ebony one." Hurasu nodded in the direction of a small cask resting on a table. It was a simple unadorned box, all of the black wood. The lid simply rested atop it, without hinges. Urtu could tell when he picked it up that lid could not be removed by any but a highly skilled sorcerer. He thought maybe he could do it if he had enough time to study the binding spell.

He carried it to his father, who sat looking at it for a few seconds. "I would assume you have wondered about this box."

Urtu had to laugh. "There are many things of yours I have wondered about."

"I fear you must continue to wonder about most of them. And most are of little importance. This, though, is my most valued possession." He lifted the lid and set it beside him on the bed. "And now I pass it to you."

The younger wizard peered into the chest. Four jewels lay within, nestled in white cloth, each a little less than the size of a hen's egg. Each was of a different hue and he could sense the power in them. Suddenly, he realized their identity. "The Eyes of the Wind. I have read of their legend."

"And perhaps doubted it? They have not been seen nor used in centuries." Hurasu picked up the one of a deep golden color. "They came to me during the great trouble of ten centuries ago and aided me in reclaiming my realm then. When I die, everyone will wish to possess them. That is why I entrust them to you now. Carry them to safety. Use them or not, as you see fit, but not right away. The danger would be too great."

"Should I go when you pass?" Urtu did not relish mentioning that but it was needed.

"No. Immediately. I wish you to take these gems from this room now and leave my house. If we wait longer it might be too late." Hurasu replaced the golden gem and held the open cask out to his son. "Best to slip them into your belt pouch and return the box to its place. None need know you have the Eyes—none save you and I and my Thun. She has been informed of this plan. Go now."

Urtu placed the jewels, filled with fires of red, gold, blue, green, in

his pouch. He could feel them there, both their weight and their presence; they could be a distraction were he not careful. Giving a farewell nod to his father—for Hurasu would not tolerate any sentimental show of affection—he stepped out into the hall. The Thun, Hurasu's First, his highest aide and a powerful sorceress in her own right, waited.

"You should be away before night," she said. "It is to you to decide what direction."

"Up the river, first." Urtu had already decided that. Then? He would see. Whether it would truly be safer anywhere other than this keep he did doubt. He would trust his father on this. Perhaps he had seen something to come.

If so, then he should take away the only person here for whom he cared. "My mother," he told the Thun. "I must see her before I go." The woman but nodded. His mother's rooms were near, as one of the Vision-Lord's wives. He knew the way well. He had lived there himself the better part of his young life. Down a high-arched gray hall he hurried.

The woman looked up as he entered without announcement. "Hurasu?" she asked at once.

"Father yet lives. He claims he will depart soon."

There was sadness in the smile that greeted his words. "How long is 'soon' for one who has lived five thousand years?"

Urtu took a seat beside her. His mother looked young; at eighty she seemed little changed from thirty. How long she might live could be only conjecture. At least a couple centuries seemed likely. She was tall and had a mass of curling golden hair. "Father has ordered me to leave. I could take you with me as far as Ten Sarac. You should be safe there when—when he passes."

He could see her hesitation. "You have no duty to remain with him till the end. And none would question my departure if they believe I am taking you to a safer place."

"No duty other than love," she replied. "I do love Hurasu, as have most of his other mates over the millennia. Not all, maybe! But I feel you are right in this. I shall go with you." She rose from her seat, a low cushioned stool. "Let me gather some things. And I must say goodbye

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to my husband, if I am never to see him again. Not speaking from afar, but in person.”

Urtu was well aware his mother could speak to the sorcerer from her own room, if she—and Hurasu—desired. As could he. She was a quite competent wizard.

He left her and continued to his own quarters, no more than a small cell, windowless, deep in the fortress. There was little he wanted and less he needed. Money. He must take all his meager wealth. Perhaps he should ask for more before departing. The Mayor would be a better choice for the request than the Thun but it wouldn’t hurt to bring up the subject with both. His weapons. Urtu was handy enough with them. He buckled the bronze sword about his waist, and a dagger as well. The spear? Best to leave it. If he needed anything else later he could obtain it at Ten Serac, High Sanctuary, his destination now.

Once he arrived at that keep, well up the Tez, things would go as they would go. Urtu made no plans, though he thought upon the many possibilities. He threw some clothes into his sack and strapped on heavy sandals. Nothing more needed done so he returned to his mother’s room.

There was not a long wait. She entered in the company of the Thun. Urtu could see there had been tears. Tears from both women. Hurasu would hardly have been able to fault them for this. Maybe he would cry himself, later. There was no time right now.

“Sunas will accompany you,” said the Thun. “That is agreed. A place for you on one of the boats is being arranged.”

“No others?” asked Urtu. “Attendants? Guards?”

“No. It is best you be as unobtrusive as possible. There will be some coin awaiting you at the docks and more at Ten Serac, should you need it.”

He might have known it would be unnecessary to ask for this. Others here were far more practiced at arranging such things.

The Thun stiffened suddenly. “Someone attacks our lord,” she stated. “Ah, it is over. His enemies continue to probe but he is yet too strong.” She looked to her two companions. “It is likely you will catch someone’s attention too. Keep your warding up.”

“Do you know who it was?” asked Sunas.

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The sorceress shook her head. "They were too well hidden. And now it is time you were, as well."

TWO

THEY HAD CROSSED THE LAKE as the sun set, for the boat that would carry them upriver waited at the docks there. Urtu wished one of the swift galleys that patrolled the waters could have conveyed them. Secrecy demanded they go on the regular ferry, a slow tub propelled by a few oars. Its square sail added little to their progress for the wind blew against them.

So it was quite dark when they bumped against the pilings. Night fell quickly here; Urtu knew that it was not so in some places. He had read this. He had also seen it when he sent a part of himself away, as wizards do at times.

That it was night did not matter. Things had indeed been arranged for them, a place where they might rest before continuing their journey, with luggage someone had deemed useful to the travelers. In that luggage was an adequate supply of the triangular coins of gold and of bronze.

Also tucked into a bag was a book. Urtu recognized that book as one of Hurasu's most prized possessions. That the ancient Lord of Visions would part with it impressed on him as not before that his father was near his end. And that he saw Urtu as his heir.

Perhaps the latter only because there was no other available. It was not a book of arcane knowledge. There was little of magic in it. Rather, it told of Hurasu's journeys. Maps filled many pages, maps to far lands, maps of great oceans Urtu had never seen, not even in visions. Might he now? Might he stand on the shore of some distant blue sea, climb unknown mountains standing vast against the sky? There would be no better guide than this volume.

Urtu did not sleep but sat leafing through the book by the light of a polished stone lamp. He and his mother had been shown to a room in the house of the administrator here. Life and business seemed to be going on as usual, despite the turmoil further down the river. The upper valley was only a fairly small part of the Vision-Lord's sprawling realm. Hurasu had once told him that realm had grown too large for him to properly rule over it. He must depend on his bureaucracy and his military, but had little trust in the abilities of either.

It was as he sat reading that his father reached out to him, calling him to speak from afar. When they spoke from afar, it was accom-

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plished by sending a part of themselves—an actual physical part—to another world where they might meet. Many of these worlds were used by Hurasu and those who spoke with him, and he had given them numbers so others could not so readily follow them there, randomly using one or another meeting place.

It was not so easy remembering and envisioning each so one might go there. Especially in that most were quite similar, consisting of a single room ‘somewhere’ in infinite being. There were, of course, an infinite number of such rooms available. Urtu went to the proper one, standing now in two worlds at once.

His father showed himself. That was not always so; Hurasu was more likely to present himself as a disembodied voice. He had been cautious about such things for millennia and the caution had served him well. *It was a good thought to take your mother along*, he said at once. *I should have had it myself.*

Do you think she will be safe in Ten Sarac?

Safer than here, I would think. Someone will occupy this fortress after I am gone. Most likely more than one someone. It will be a prize contested by those who seek to take my place.

You were attacked yesterday.

Merely tested. Most of my enemies know I am dying and have no particular reason to hasten my demise. It would not be worth the trouble. The attacks, when they come, will be on those around me. My Thun. She would do well to hide herself. As should you. Ward yourself for a time and speak to no one from afar.

Urtu nodded. He should be able to see that. *I thank you for the book.*

To whom else would I entrust it? I fear for my library in the days to come. I fear much that I have created will be lost. The old man—and he looked older than ever Urtu remembered—paused for a moment. *Yet I did create a civilization here where primitive tribes wandered when I first came to them. I think they were every bit as happy as their descendants.*

There may be much unhappiness for a while.

That is so. I think we shall not speak again. Farewell, my son.

With that, Hurasu broke off the dialogue before Urtu could

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respond. The young man's attention returned to the room in which he stood, by the Lake of the Sky. Farewell, he said only to himself.

Before dawn, Urtu and his mother were at the docks, ready to continue their journey. The boat they boarded was more a barge. It had no oars nor sail to propel it, but must be towed. Such boats were borne down the upper Tez by its current but going up the river they were pulled by teams of the shaggy upland oxen, trudging along the stream's margin.

Most of the way, that was. Across Lades Zerac and through the swift section of the river just above the lake, it would be towed by a smaller boat with many oars. The Tez ran placid for some distance beyond. There were other rapids further up the river, and a falls where they would have to disembark and board a different boat above it, but it was not necessary to abandon its stream entirely until one was above Ten Sarac. Urtu still had no idea of his own course beyond that place.

He peered across the lake. Through the mists, lying low on the water, shifting gray and gold in the light of the rising sun, he could just make out the keep and the town below it. The House of Hurasu—the House of the Mountain, Per Girad, some named it for it was indeed a part of the mountain rising steep behind it. That mountain and those beyond it marked the boundary of the great valley of the Tez, the Valley of Visions, the realm of Hurasu. It was a long journey over them to the lands of other men.

Urtu did not know whether he would see that house again. He might as likely see the lands beyond the mountains. Everything was possible at this moment.

"There has been not the least rumor of trouble upriver," the skipper of the barge was assuring Sunas. "None of that has reached us here." He stroked his great grizzled beard. "So far. We trust the Lord to keep us safe."

That Lord would soon be beyond any ability to keep anyone safe. There was no point in saying this to the man. He had certainly recognized Urtu and his mother as important individuals but would not know their identities. No names had been given. Certainly he knew not that they were wife and son to his ruler. A ruler who was as a god to many, even here in the upper valley where he was frequently seen.

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Or had been frequently seen. A long narrow boat, a galley with many oars on each side, began to move them across the lake, easterly. The Tez's course would be east and northeast from here, winding up to its source in the mountains.

Well before they neared that source they would reach Ten Sarac.

THREE

IT WAS A JOURNEY OF some days. Urtu had time to read from the book his father had left him. He had traveled to the fortress of High Sanctuary several times before so the sights along the river held little interest. Occasionally he saw a griffin cross the sky above them, probably a tamed one from Hurasu's rookery at the keep ahead of them. These were used as messengers, primarily, for not everything could be done through wizard-speech. There were only so many wizards, after all, and they could not be everywhere.

Nor were many to be trusted. Sorcerous ability often went hand in hand with madness. Being able to see into the infinite worlds—and worse, not being able to keep them out of one's head—was too much for some minds and even more so if they were not properly trained to block them from an early age. Powerful and quite mad sorcerers had arisen from time to time to challenge Hurasu.

As had ones who were more or less sane but ambitious. The Lord of Visions had planted the seeds of rebellion every time he planted his own seed, so to speak. His many descendants were ever a danger to him. Could Urtu have become one, twisted by power and ambition over the centuries? That was a fear that gnawed at many wizards. It lingered somewhere in his own mind, rarely thought upon—to do so would be unhealthy—but there none the less.

But he would not be tested. Not now. He hoped he seemed a danger to no one, that he and his mother would be forgotten if they did not call attention to themselves.

Ten Sarac, High Sanctuary, rose to the right of the river's flow, a tall rocky bluff honeycombed with passages and chambers. A tower rose at its crest; Urtu knew that to be the griffin mew. This place had indeed served as a sanctuary for Hurasu over the centuries, not only a retreat in times of trouble but one where he could escape the tedium of rule. The sorcerer had ever been willing to admit it bored him at times. He had been willing to neglect his people, turning to other interests, or traveling for decades.

Did Urtu care about his people? The people of the Valley, he should say. They were not necessarily his people. He did not know if he had any great interest in bringing peace to them, or seeing to their welfare. Nor did he see a duty to them. In truth, he had little ambition to rule.

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At best, he would have maybe a tenth of his father's lifespan and he wished to waste as little of it as possible doing things he didn't enjoy. Being the new lord of the Valley would most certainly be one of those things.

"I should remain here," said his mother as the fortress came into view, "whatever you may choose to do. Oh, I know you have other plans, Urtu, and I have no place in them." She gazed up at the towering rock. "I can even help defend this sanctuary, if the need comes."

"I would not think fighting would reach here. The area is not strategically important."

"A dead end," remarked Sunas, smiling. "And there remains plenty of empty land up here where one may disappear."

"Still, you know it would be wise not to talk from afar and attract attention."

"Yes, my son. I am aware of this." Of course she was. Yet it had to be mentioned. "Some have reached out over the days of our journey. I think they were only concerned friends but I blocked them."

The Steward of High Sanctuary himself came out to greet them. He was no wizard and no wizard-speech had told him they would come, but a message had arrived by griffin. Hurasu preferred to appoint stewards of foreign birth, men or women who had found their ways over the mountains, so they might greet others who had done so. This keep was the outpost closest to those mountains and the most common path across them.

The steward today was born of a people who called themselves Molu. He was a large man with skin the color of gold, who had wandered across the mountains simply to wander. His folk rarely crossed these days; the Molu were great sailors and now their ships came to port at the faraway mouth of the Tez. There was no reason to find a dangerous route among the mountain crests.

Little had Urtu and his mother to carry ashore. Both had traveled light, without servants. Someone did take Sunas's bag now, as she walked toward the keep, conversing with the steward. Urtu followed behind with his own luggage and his own thoughts.

Would this be such a bad place to remain himself? He could allow

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the world outside to go its way for a while before making a decision. It could be as good a spot to fortify as any, if he chose to remain longer.

A petite woman came running from the entrance. Surely one of the griffin riders; they were all small and most female. The great birds themselves were great birdbrains and needed a rider to direct them. She handed a note to the steward. He perused it quickly and handed it to Sunas.

She in turn, turned to Urtu. "Your father is dead," she announced.

So soon. Hurasu had been right in hurrying him away from the keep. He must have known the end was so near. Or feared it was. "It will soon be known throughout the realm," he said. He might be called upon to act sooner than he had hoped,

The steward stood regarding the young man for a moment. "You are the heir," he stated. "We are yours to command."

"There are no others to follow me. Hurasu saw this. It is why he sent me away."

"For now," added his mother.

Urtu could only shrug at that. He felt with a growing certainty that the Valley of Visions would not, could not, be reunited under one leader. Whether he might attempt to reclaim some part of his father's legacy was a question for the future. But some would remember his existence and search for him now, hoping to eliminate a threat, a rival. If he remained hidden he might be forgotten. In time.

They made their way into Ten Serac without further speech. Several flights of winding stairs took them to their rooms, modest cells hewn of the rock. It was cool in these subterranean halls and chambers; too cool, felt Urtu. He was fond of warmth.

"I ask a few minutes to speak with you later, sir," whispered the steward before he left him. "I have something for you of your father's."

He didn't have time to ask when and where. No matter. He would undoubtedly learn. Had the Steward of Ten Serac expected him to take command? Did he think he would lead an army forth? Certainly, others might. Yet others were unaware of his existence. His name would mean nothing in the far south, where even Hurasu's control had ever been nebulous. The center of the Vision-Lord's power had been the upper valley, the lands that lay above Lades Favin, through most of

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history. The old capital, Spur Fulerad, lay further north on the shores of another, smaller lake, Lades Zelar, amid a broad, flat, extensively cultivated land.

No, he could call no army to serve him. He must do something, though, make some decision. He idly picked up his father's book, which he had taken care to keep on his person. It would not do to lose it. Nor the Eyes, to be sure. He could feel their presence. Indeed, he had found he needed to place them a short distance away from himself when he slept or they disturbed his dreams. He did not know his mother stood in the doorway until she spoke.

"We are invited to eat with the steward," she said. For the second time, Urtu suspected. "His people place a high value on hospitality and feasting, I have heard."

He laughed. "As have I, Mother. It is legendary. But—" He gathered together what little he knew of the Molu before going on. "I understand they are not as they were in the past. The days when Hurasu visited among them or when Malvern lived in their land."

"Your father enjoyed his time with them, by all accounts. By which I mean his own! He certainly enjoyed the women."

"He seemed to enjoy the women wherever he went." Perhaps he should not have said that, not that Sunas was unaware of it.

She changed the subject abruptly. "You are strong in sorcery," she said. "As strong as any I have known save my husband. Hurasu thought he had at last an heir worthy to follow him and powerful enough to accomplish it."

"Yet he advised me to flee and wait."

"Had you only been older! You might have had time to establish yourself as his successor."

"I am not sure the Valley needs a wizard to rule it," he stated. "Let those who see the everyday world be in charge of the everyday world."

"Perhaps we should. Do you know the way to the dining hall?"

"I always get lost in this place. We might as well go get lost together."

FOUR

THERE WERE, OF COURSE, PEOPLE who could point them the right way. Servants, soldiers, staff of all sort, wandered here and there in the halls of High Sanctuary, about their own business. The steward, when they found him in his dining hall, had not laid a feast for them but provided an ample meal. The man had an ample appetite to accompany it. Only his wife sat with them, a woman who appeared thoroughly of Valley heritage, dark of skin, with curling hair of the common straw color.

They sat on cushions on the floor, which was not common in the Valley. "It is the way of my ancestors," the man explained. "I am old-fashioned, as my people go. That was one reason I roamed from my homeland. There I dwelt close by the mountains where the old ways were still strong."

Urtu would have heard more of that land but the steward would not be drawn. Rather would he speak of what was happening here in the valley of the Tez. "Below Favin," he said, "I hear a number of warlords contest for power."

"So too do we hear," spoke Sunas. "Or I hear." She glanced toward Urtu. "I suspect my son is better informed than either of us."

"Yet there is not much more to say of the situation there," Urtu told them. "I could name some of those vying for control but that means little."

"Ah, but who will rise to claim the rule of the upper valley?" wondered Sunas.

"That will matter even to us here," the steward said. There was little more to be said of that. They could but wait, those who dwelt at Ten Serac and in the upper reaches of Tez. Urtu could not wait. He felt the need to fulfill the mission his father had set him, to get the Eyes to a safe place. They rested now in the small leather pouch on his belt, ever present, ever just on the periphery of his consciousness. Such power could not be allowed to fall into the hands of any who contended for the rule of the Valley of Visions.

"Perhaps I should release my prisoners," continued the steward.

"Not the mad ones, I would hope."

"No, my lady Sunas. Not those who are too mad. Nor those whose minds have been destroyed by contesting with the lord of the valley."

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There were some of those here, Urtu knew. Hurasu had sent a handful of sorcerers to the keep over the years, men and women who had challenged him or used their powers unwisely or were simple driven mad by them. Most lived comfortably enough. They were certainly not mistreated.

A couple, he believed, were his siblings. Half-siblings. "Do you think someone might try to make use of them?" he asked.

"It is possible. Some I am assured are extraordinarily powerful."

"I would kill them all," spoke Sunas, her voice flat.

"Mother!" The steward seemed somewhat taken aback too.

"It is the safest course."

She might be correct but Urtu was not about to condone her statement. "Perhaps I could help you look them over and come to some decisions," he told the steward. "Before I go. I think that should be soon."

The steward nodded. "I know you must not remain. I do ask you to remain a few minutes now, Lord Urtu. There is something we must discuss."

"That is a hint that we should go, I think," Sunas confided to the steward's wife. She rose. "I thank you for your hospitality," she said, and swept from the room. The other woman followed.

Urtu did not need to wait long for the steward to speak. "Your father left something with me for safekeeping some time back." He gazed at the ceiling, calling back the memories involved, before continuing. "Two or three years it must have been, the last time he came himself. The lord knew his end was near even then."

He undoubtedly knew further back than three years, thought Urtu. The steward continued. "Or it may be that he no longer had the strength to use this weapon." At that, he reached beneath a bunched-up piece of woven, deep red carpet beside his cushion.

A sword, in a plain black leather scabbard. Urtu recognized it at once, though he had not seen it since he was a child. Hurasu's legendary sword, the sword that remained without rust, without stain, for millennia. A sword from another world. Only a very few knew that last fact. "Hurasu's last message to me said to give it to you." Which he did, handing it to the young man.

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Urtu slid the blade from its scabbard. It was of no known metal, shining silvery, quite unlike the bronze weapons common among his people or even the new iron ones. For a moment, he imagined himself brandishing that sword, leading an army, regaining his father's realm. No. He replaced it. "I'd best keep this hidden for a while," he said. "Until I am on my way."

His way where? That he must decide swiftly.

"I am told you are among the most powerful of wizards. You know, my lord, that some will see you as a threat for that reason and seek your life."

For other reasons, as well, the jewels he carried not the least of them. "And so I shall remain here no more than another day. I—I shall go upriver," he decided. "Maybe I'll even cross those mountains you once did." He stood and gave the man a little bow. "If you wish, I could look over those prisoners with you in the morning."

The steward rose too. "Certainly, my lord. I shall arrange all that is needed for your journey. But I will not," he added, frowning, "let any know where you are going. It is too late to keep them in dark as to your identity. It will be known you were here."

"It will be known that I came and I went again, and perhaps that is not such a bad thing. None should molest you or my mother."

"Perhaps so."

Finding his cell proved almost as difficult as finding the dining chamber. Urtu was not too tired to pull out the sword and look it over again, by the flickering illumination of an oil lamp. This was the weapon his father had carried with him from the world of his birth, more than four millennia past. Long and straight was its blade, sharp of edge and of point. Not a speck of corrosion appeared on the gleaming surface, not a single nick in its edge, though Hurasu had carried it around the globe more than once, used it in uncounted battles.

He would never be the warrior his father had been. Urtu had skill in weapons—some felt he had spent too much time learning of them at the expense of wizardry—but the strength and abilities of Hurasu had been greater than those of any man of this world. Nor was Urtu likely to match him as a sorcerer. Not that it was impossible. His father had conceded that one equal to him might rise some day. There had been

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greater than Hurasu in the world from which he came. That was one reason he had fled it.

Urtu put the sword away with his other kit. He had little to carry but he would welcome the weight of that blade on his hip. Not until he was some distance from Ten Sarac would he wear it openly, though. He looked at Hurasu's book for a moment, thinking maybe to open it and read a few pages more. There would be time for that—and much to read. He blew out the lamp and fell into sleep.

FIVE

BEFORE BREAKFAST, URTU HAD CLIMBED to the griffins' tower. Some, knowing little of the creatures, thought them part lion, thanks to the ruff about their necks, the coat of short tawny feathers. Never mind that most of those knew nothing of lions either. The griffins were birds and nothing more. Extremely large birds. Hurasu had called them 'primitive,' closer to the ancestral stock of all birds. Urtu had no reason to either believe or disbelieve the assertion.

It had to be admitted that their long, decidedly not birdlike tails added some credence to it. These griffins were bred here but wild individuals were sometime captured to introduce fresh blood to the lineage. The one male in the rookery was such—all the others were females, his 'harem.'

It stank greatly. The griffins nested on ledges around the inside of the tower walls and their excrement was regularly swept and shoveled off the edges to the floor far below. From there it went to the fields but its odor lingered.

The Master of the Mew joined him. "I suppose, sir," the man said, "you have no idea what will become of us now."

He was a diminutive fellow, probably a rider of the griffins himself when younger. "This place is valued too highly for any to wish to harm it," replied Urtu. That was true. It was also true that with Hurasu gone, some warlord or another might wish to remove the griffins to his own domain. That he would not mention. Nor that the dragons would love nothing better than to see it destroyed.

As others, this man seemed filled with nameless fears and uncertainties. People throughout the valley were stunned by the news of their lord's death. It was hard to imagine their world without him. Hurasu had reigned for millennia; it was as the end of one world and the birth of another. Never mind that those people had at times revolted and sought the death of their Lord of Visions.

He had held the valley together until his natural death, building it from a few wandering hunters and gatherers into a great nation. Hurasu liked to tell the story of how that began, how he had shown a tribe how to plant the seeds of a melon and thus introduced agriculture to them. Much more had he introduced over the centuries that followed. He took them from tools of stone to those of metal. They

built houses and then towers. He gave them a language of his own creation, though he admitted it owed much to one he had learned in another world—not his own but one he had passed through on his way here, lingering for a couple centuries.

“When I was little, I wished to ride the griffins,” said Urtu. “As do most children in this part of the valley. I envy you who have done it.”

“I miss it, yes, I do, my lord. But I do have my memories of flying above the mountains or across the wide valley. I am no poet to put it into words. Maybe flying is poetry itself, without the words.” He sighed. “My daughter is a rider now.”

Would Urtu even see this place again? He looked up at the roosting griffins. If he went into the mountains he would be sure to see wild ones. Maybe too many! That, too, would be a worthwhile experience, to stand upon a high, snow-covered crest and gaze out over the world. He had seen marvels in visions but that was not the same.

“I thank you,” he told the master and took the winding stairway back down into the keep. He needed food. He needed to prepare for his departure. To say farewell to his mother and maybe to the land of his birth.

The steward came to him as he breakfasted in the soldiers’ mess, on stewed fruit and yogurt and coarse barley bread. This was one space in the keep Urtu knew well. He had taken meals here before and it was easily found on the lowest level, where the soldiers came and went from their posts and patrols along the river.

“I have looked over my records of the prisoners here,” said the steward without preamble, taking a seat across the table. “I am not sure which are truly mad.”

“I sometimes think all sorcerers are,” Urtu replied. “Except myself, of course.”

The steward only laughed at this. “Give yourself some time, young man.”

Urtu sobered at once. “That is the fear we all live with, my friend. I know there are some here who are hopelessly lost in the infinite worlds.”

“Not many. They tend to neglect themselves and perish, despite our efforts.”

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“Isn’t there a rebel Hurasu had to blast a few decades back? Before I was born but I’ve heard the stories.”

“Ah, she too has died, for much the same reason.” He gave the young wizard a sharp look. “A sister, wasn’t she?”

“One I never knew.” One who had thought herself capable of besting Hurasu and who had paid the price. Perhaps that too had been a sort of madness.

“Three of my guests are simply criminals who also happened to be wizards,” continued the steward. “It would have been no good to keep them in an ordinary prison so they were banished here. They are largely free to move as they will in the keep. And they do help me some with the others and even when I need a wizard to speak from afar for me.”

“I’d say let them go, if they want to go. As Hurasu’s supposed heir, I could even give them official pardons if you want everything legal.”

“I am aware of this, my lord. It is why I bring these cases to you.”

He should have recognized that. Urtu did not yet think of himself as a leader. He’d as soon never have to again after this day. “They haven’t done anything violent, have they? Murder?”

“Just thievery and swindling. One might or might not have attempted rape. He certainly trespassed in a woman’s private chambers.” The steward gave him a sly smile. “Your father believed it was with her approval but he couldn’t let the young fellow get away with it.”

“Misuse of powers is misuse of powers,” agreed Urtu. “So who else is there?”

“A couple minor wizards who served a rebellious general some years back. Hurasu did intend to pardon them eventually. That was his usual custom.”

“And to take them into his own service if they were willing. Yes. Those we can certainly turn loose—but I will not take them into *my* service.”

“The Thun might be able to make use of them,” observed his companion. “I’ll ask her.”

Urtu thought if his father’s First had any sense she would flee the House of Hurasu and not attempt to resist whoever wished to take up

residence there. She might be able to match most rival wizards but she could not call an army to herself. "Does that leave anyone else?"

"The rest are all mad to some degree. Or were mad—one or two might now be able to function outside Ten Serac."

"Then we should take a look at those one or two and decide. I'll take your word for the others."

"Certainly, Lord Urtu." The steward rose and gave him a broad grin. "For one who claims he has no desire to rule, you do it very well."

Half an hour later they were strolling down a hall a couple floors higher in the keep. "The first we shall visit seems quite sane," spoke the steward, stopping before an open door. "In fact, there has been no trouble at all for years. Our resident wizard has worked with her and feels she has her powers under control now."

An attendant, a stout young woman, ushered them in. The woman seated in the room was older, but not old, and seemed normal in every way. She greeted them pleasantly. Then her attention focused on the pouch at Urtu's waist. The woman stared at it for only a few seconds, her face contorted. "The jewels!" she shrieked. "You carry the Eyes! Let me touch them! Let me touch them!"

They backed out quickly as the attendant subdued her. She continued to rave and claw at the air. "You have the Eyes of the Wind with you?" whispered the steward.

"It was supposed to be a secret. To get them away to safety was a task my father set me."

"Ah. That unfortunate woman once stole into Hurasu's chambers and touched them. She was drawn to them, he told me, and that was what drove her to madness." He shook his head. "And now you are discovered. It would be best to slay her at once."

"No. She is mad. Who would believe her?"

"One who sought what you carry, perhaps. But so shall it be." The steward sighed deeply. "Now I know she can never be released from here. It is unfortunate."

In fact, thought Urtu, the attendant would be a greater risk than the madwoman. Best not say that. The steward might think she needed to die too.

Could the sorceress truly have been cured had Urtu not brought the

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jewels to her? There was no way to know but the young wizard doubted it. Unless—perhaps the Eyes themselves could cure her. He did not have knowledge enough of them to attempt it, nor would it be wise at this time, when he was trying to hide them. They passed up the hall to another chamber.

“Your father was not certain this man is mad at all. He has but a small talent for sorcery of any other kind but he does have troubling, prophetic dreams.” The steward hesitated before adding, “He claims the gods speak to him.”

“So do the folk-priests and shamans with their little shrines to local deities,” Urtu pointed out. But Hurasu did discourage that sort of thing in wizards. The Vision-Lord had been notoriously chary of attracting the attention of those who dwell in other worlds, gods included. That might have been because he originated in another world himself. “Let’s see him.”

The steward rapped on the wooden door. A cheerful voice gave an immediate invitation to enter. The young man seated on a mat in the center of the room wore a long gown; his bushy golden hair and beard were long and rather unkempt, and dark eyes looked up at his visitors from below heavy brows.

“He is dead, isn’t he? I have seen it.”

“He is,” said Urtu. “I am his son.”

The prisoner scrambled to his feet. His eyes for a moment went to the pouch at Urtu’s waist. He too senses them, thought the sorcerer. I’d best not tell the steward or he’ll want to execute him also. The fleeting thought brought a slight smile to him.

“I greet you, Urtu. You have come to let me out, right?”

“This you have seen?” asked the steward.

“No, only hoped it!” An easy laugh followed.

“I might as well release you,” spoke Urtu. “You have done no harm, I understand, and you do no good here. Tell me, what god speaks to you?”

“I should say Woran, shouldn’t I? That’s who the shamans claim to hear, whether they do or not. And maybe I have heard that voice.” He seemed to drift to some other place for a moment. “But there are others, whispering to me, others whose names are only questions.”

Urtu gave the man a long look. "You might be useful to the Thun. Probably not. I will give her your name anyway if you wish to go to her. What is that name?"

"Tira, my lord. I shall begin packing at once." He spread his arms to indicate his meager belongings.

"Tira?" asked Urtu when they stepped back into the hallway. "A woman's name?"

"Oh, that too. He thinks he is a woman. I have had the others to be released brought to my audience chamber," he told Urtu. "We can speak to them now."

In that chamber, a simple chair stood upon a low dais, the steward's rod of office leaning against it. The steward picked up the rod but chose not to sit. Perhaps he would have were Urtu not there. Then he turned to the prisoners.

They numbered five. Three men stood to one side, two women to the other. They all seemed somewhat young. "Those three are the crooks," said the steward, gesturing toward the men. "Tell the Lord Urtu what you did and perhaps he will show leniency."

One man piped up at once. "The oldest wizard scam in the world. I pulled gold from another world knowing it would go back to it after a while."

"Pretty much what I did too," admitted another. "With some personal touches."

"That's what got you caught," observed the third.

"And what is your excuse?"

"A jealous husband," came the matter-of-fact reply.

The steward cleared his voice. "It is believed," he said, "but could not be proven that Kerazes here was also using his abilities for burglary."

Urtu raised an eyebrow. "Sending part of yourself around through another world to unlock doors?"

"It's possible, my lord. Not that I'm admitting to anything."

"That takes considerable skill," he said and turned his attention to the women. "What of you two?"

"We were seduced," proclaimed the one.

"By Olun," chimed in the other.

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“A rebel leader?”

“No, my lord,” interrupted the steward. “The leader was General Keru, who was defeated and duly executed. Olun was his wizard accomplice, still at large and possibly involved in the current turmoil.”

Another powerful sorcerer vying to take the place of his father, Urtu guessed. That was of no importance right now. But he asked, “He is a man of great power?”

The women surprisingly giggled at this. “No, my lord. She is a woman of great power.”

That also was of no importance, though somewhat interesting. “Would you serve her again if we released you?”

Both shook their heads vigorously. They did not seem to like that idea at all. But once seduced can be seduced again, he told himself. “The steward will send a message to the Thun at Lades Zerac telling her you are free. You may serve her if you wish and if she will have you.” He turned to the men. “The same for you.”

And now he himself must prepare to leave.

SIX

URTU HAD MADE HIS FAREWELLS to his mother in the afternoon. She had seemed somewhat distracted and thoughtful, only nodding as he also apprised her of his plans, which involved a certain amount of deception. Now he was ready to begin his journey from Ten Sarac. The sun stood nearly overhead.

An early start would not have aided him in his intended deceptions. He wished to be seen by many, starting on the way downriver, back toward Lades Zerac and, perhaps, the House of the Mountain. Let it be known—or at least suspected—that he intended to get involved there, now his mother had been escorted to safety. He openly boarded one of the boats. That would be expected of him; it would have seemed odd to walk, though many did travel that way.

Unexpected was that the six freed prisoners set out at the same time, in the same direction. On learning this, the steward had been prepared to hold them back until the morrow. “No,” Urtu had told him. “Just send a couple soldiers along with us.” That too would be expected. None but the steward and his mother knew what he truly intended to do. The soldiers, however, would have to be given some secret instructions.

Those mustn’t raise any alarm when he disappeared in the night, but go on with the others the next day. Urtu thought maybe it was fortunate the prisoners would be traveling along with him today. An observer might not note that one man was missing tomorrow.

So he went forth from High Sanctuary onto the wide and swift River Tez. The sword of Hurasu hung over his back, wrapped in a cloth, concealed from the eyes of his companions, while his own familiar bronze weapon hung at his side. The Eyes remained safe in their pouch. He and all his companions had been provided with several days rations. Urtu also carried a small fortune in gold and bronze coins—a fortune that might prove of little actual value to him.

Those who had been freed were reticent about speaking to him as they watched the shores slide by. To some, Hurasu had been as a god, and he was the closest thing to Hurasu that existed in the world now. Yes, even though these sorcerers knew better. It was of no matter; in a few hours he would leave them, probably never see any of them again.

There were no other passengers; the boat carried mostly freight.

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Four steersmen manned the long sweeps. These served mainly to keep the vessel in the middle of the stream, not to propel it, and usually only two were on duty, dipping an oar now and then to keep themselves moving in the proper direction. Occasionally, they need move over a little when a boat going upstream, pulled by the plodding oxen, passed. Little else of interest occurred, in the seen world, but Urtu for the first time felt someone probing, seeking him. He was far too well warded, yes, and far too strong for it to matter. It had been expected eventually. It made him uneasy, none the less. He needed to be away, far beyond the reach of those who sought him or what he carried.

All traffic stopped on the river with the fall of night. That was a matter of safety, allowing the boats to be tethered to the shore wherever they might stop without worry of another ramming them in the dark. "A few smugglers in canoes or the like may pass by under cover of night," one of the crew told him. "They're no concern of ours."

Of more concern were the logs that came downriver. Most of those were already cleared from the stream this far down but one did occasionally slip through. As the sun set, they pulled over to the right side of the river and set up a camp. One could sleep on the boat, to be sure, but there was no reason not to have a fire and a bed ashore. There were places along the stream used for this by long custom.

When all seemed to sleep, Urtu gathered his things and prepared to slip away. As he crouched over his pack, a shadow loomed from the dark, a blade flashed. Another shadow loomed up and smashed the first shadow over the head with a heavy piece of firewood. "He was going to stick a knife in you, it seems," said someone. Who, he could not tell for the night was dark and the coals of the dying fire cast but a faint ruddy light.

He could make out just enough of his would-be assassin's face to know he did not know him. Should he clear out and leave it to others to explain what happened? He stood holding his gear, indecisive for only a few seconds.

"You're not going to lose us that easily," came a voice.

"That's for sure," spoke another.

"Kerazes?" He recognized that high-pitched voice.

"Tira says he saw you sneaking off in a dream."

"*She* saw him," came the first voice, which was surely Tira himself. Herself.

"And I was watching you when this fellow came creeping up." That might be Pulases. No, Krankanides.

"I owe you. Who else knows of this?"

"All of us." It was one of the women this time. "We want to come with you. To serve you."

"There is nothing for us, down there," said Kerazes. He might have nodded in the direction of Per Girad but Urtu couldn't see him.

"There is nothing for you where I am going. I'm not even sure where that is."

Tira spoke again. "I would not have been told you were going if we were not meant to go too." There was admittedly some merit to that argument. Not much, but some.

By now, the soldiers had awakened. Inevitable, with the noise that was being made. Urtu went to them to explain the situation. "So," he finished off, "it would be more trouble to keep them from accompanying me than to permit it. You two may go where you think you should now and report back to Ten Serac when able. Probably best you take my attacker back with you." He doubted anyone could get anything from him. He wasn't even sure he breathed. Krankanides had hit him pretty hard.

"I don't like this, sir," said one.

"Neither do I." With that he turned and started back upriver. On foot, this time. He assumed his band of criminal wizards followed him into the night.

Dawn proved his assumption to be correct. He halted, saying, "I doubt any of you have hiked much lately."

"Going up and down the stairs in Ten Serac is pretty good exercise," said one of the swindlers.

"Hmm, I suppose it is. Still, I think we should halt for a while. We are still below the keep and I don't want to walk past it in the daylight."

"We're going into the mountains?"

"So it seems." That was enough for them to know, and he himself knew little more. Should he attempt to speak from afar with someone in Ten Sarac, the official wizard there or even his mother? Let them

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know of this change in plans? No, no, he had been warned not to chance revealing himself with wizard-speech. The soldiers would get back in a few days and explain things.

“Let’s get away from the road and catch some sleep.” The road was not heavily traveled but it was used. Soldiers patrolled it too. Some of those had been pulled away from this remote district to serve further downriver. Where they were headed was even more remote. There would still be travelers, though, and, yes, soldiers. It might not be as important to hide from them above Ten Serac.

The steward had sent word up the road to let him pass without question, and given him a token for identification. This entourage following him might give some trouble. He would just have to see how that went. They slept or relaxed most of that day in a copse near the pathway, watching an infrequent passer-by. At dusk, Urtu led them out.

They passed the lights of Ten Serac in the night, unseen by the soldiers there, and continued north.

SEVEN

“MOTHER!” IT WAS INDEED SUNAS standing beside the road.

“I expected you sooner,” she said, surveying Urtu’s ragtag followers. “I see things came up.”

“But why are you here?” he asked.

“So I may accompany you. I felt everyone would be safer if I did not remain at High Sanctuary. Myself, most especially, but also the steward and his people.” Her voice fell almost to a whisper. “And I could not be used against you if an enemy took the place.”

Urtu could admit the sense of this—to himself. He was not going to let his mother know he approved. “I assume it is generally believed you are still there.”

“To be sure. These are the prisoners you released, are they not?”

“They are. These ladies are Thisa and Zerana,” he said, indicating the sorceresses. “Pulases. Krankanides. The reputed thief and self-proclaimed seducer of women, Kerazes.” He gave the little wizard a wink. “He hasn’t had any luck with the two here.”

“They’ll come around,” claimed Kerazes.

“And Tira. She is a prophet.”

Sunas did not blink at the use of ‘she.’ “You are sisters, are you not?” she asked Zerana and Thisa. They did look much alike.

Zerana answered, “We are, my lady. Our mother was the wizard Acnaxula.”

“Ah, I knew her. I was very young then.” She pondered the pair briefly and then gave her son a sidelong look. Was she was again thinking of getting him married to someone? This was not the time for that. And not with either of those two. Nor both, as would have been his father’s way.

“We need to keep moving,” said Urtu. “Come along, whoever is coming along.” A few minutes up the road, he said to his mother, “I don’t know anything of Acnaxula. I think I have heard the name. I think also you knew those two were her daughters.”

“A potent sorceress. A second or third cousin to you, I believe. Acnaxula was embroiled in some plot and fled to Tul Sunac before you were born.”

The Great Rift. He knew it to be a long and dangerous journey. “She made it there?”

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“She did. Some have spoken to her there from afar.”

Urtu wondered if he was speaking with one of those now. “That is one destination I have considered.”

“Only as a last resort, I would think. And only when you have further honed your powers in some safe place.” They walked on a short way before she spoke again. “In honesty, you would do as well to challenge for rule of the Valley of Visions as that of the Rift. There are many powerful sorcerers there and most are not good people.”

“Ha, then maybe they need me to clear them out!”

“Even your father was unable to do that. Sorcery alone is not enough.”

He had to smile at that. It had been a favorite saying of Hurasu. “And I could perhaps command an army in our own valley.”

“You have it in you. Men would follow you.” She glanced back at their little party. “Already they do.”

If only he knew where to lead them.

Though one could continue by boat some distance above High Sanctuary, the river grew ever narrower, the water ever swifter. There were no more high falls but one came to dangerous rapids. In time, it moved away from the road, rioting through a deep gorge below. It was simpler to walk or ride an ox cart or even take a horse in these parts. Horses were scarce; there had been none in the Valley until a couple centuries earlier when they had first been introduced from the south.

They no longer bothered to hide themselves over the following days. The soldiers they met looked at their passes—the steward had given tokens to both Sunas and Urtu—and sent them on without questions. The stone pavement was well-maintained, even up here, though the road, rising more and more steeply, was no longer the broad, much-traveled thoroughfare on which they had started this journey. Fields became fewer, forests thicker. It was old, this road, millennia old. Hurasu had built it early in his reign and it passed over the mountains, though few had ever traveled that way.

Another Urtu, the Urtu for whom he had been named, had been one who came across to the Valley of Visions on that road, an age ago, from a tropical land that lay beside a great sea. With the legendary Malvern he had come and they had fought in Hurasu’s wars and that

first Urtu had learned much sorcery of Hurasu. He had read what Malvern had written of their journey and their sojourn, and left in the Vision-Lord's library. Would all that be lost? Would it matter?

From time to time he looked into the book his father had left him. He would need to read it more thoroughly when he was able. And the road wound on, into the hills, into the mountains. Somewhere up there the stones would stop and only an earthen pavement would lead them forward. That too would become obscure and readily lost in time, as it crossed the high passes and snowy ridges, the great glaciers, before descending again, the road no more than faint traces and ancient markers the knowledgeable might seek.

Huts stood here and there along the way, erected by the army. Sometimes they were occupied, sometimes not, but they were welcome to spend their nights in them regardless. Those nights grew colder. Urtu and Sunas had known where they were headed and carried suitable clothing and blankets; the others were unprepared but Urtu had managed to purchase some of what was needed along the way. That gold he carried had proven useful. They sat huddled in one of the huts, a small fire barely warming them, as Urtu searched through the book for knowledge of this area.

"There are three fairly good ways across the mountains, according to my father," he announced to the others. "One leads up from behind the keep on Lades Zerac so we can forget about it."

"I wonder if that is why he placed it there," murmured Sunas.

"The view would be reason enough for me," Urtu replied. "Our other two routes divide a bit further up this road, beyond the end of the pavement." He read on without saying more aloud for a while. Yes, one was the way Malvern had come, the true ancient road of Hurasu. The other was longer and steeper but fewer perils lay along its way. Malvern and the first Urtu had returned to their home by that path, to the land of the Molu. Or the Mora, as Hurasu styled it in this old account.

"You must go to the place of power up there," said Tira, of a sudden. "The volcano."

"That is the more dangerous way." But Tira undoubtedly had a reason for what she told him.

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It was Sunas who spoke. "Some of our people are there already. We should go to them." She looked to Urtu. "I thought that was the reason you came into the mountains."

"I know nothing of this," he admitted. His father certainly didn't tell him all his secrets.

"Hurasu discovered those stones you carry there," Tira said, and then frowned. "Or they were given to him. I am not certain."

"Or he carried them past the place from some other land. The annals are not clear at all, even if he wrote them."

"Stones?" asked Zerana. Thisa's interest seemed piqued, as well.

There was no reason to hide them now. "I carry the Eyes of the Wind. They must be beyond the reach of any who would misuse them."

"I doubt I have the power to either use or misuse them," said Pulases. Krankanides nodded his head in agreement.

Urtu carefully removed the gems from his pouch, one by one, and set them on a blanket before him. Everyone but Tira craned forward for a better look; she backed away with something like fear in her eyes.

"I feel them," whispered Thisa. "I've been feeling them all along and didn't know what it was." Urtu suspected the sisters did have power enough to use the Eyes. And they might well be inclined to misuse them. Kerazes he wasn't so sure of. The man seemed to have abilities but had never applied himself to learning to use them.

"I might be tempted to misuse them myself," said his mother, with a laugh. "You'd best put the baubles away now."

Urtu slept with the stones close to him that night and though he felt their presence they did not disturb his sleep. The next morning he strapped the sword of Hurasu to his waist for the first time and strode on with it at his side. His bronze blade he handed over to Krankanides, who seemed to have the most skill with weapons. Not that that was saying much.

EIGHT

A GRIFFIN SPIRALED DOWN TOWARD them from the clear deep blue heavens. Surely not a wild one; such would not attack a large group. They rarely preyed on humans at all, but sought four-legged meals. Never the less, Urtu wished they had spears to defend themselves.

It leveled off and soared past them, close enough they could spy the rider on the great bird's back. She waved to them and then winged to the south. "The steward keeping an eye on us," remarked Sunas.

Urtu wasn't comfortable with anyone keeping an eye on them. He also hoped none of these sorcerers in his company were speaking afar without his knowledge. There was really no way he could be certain as long as he kept himself locked down, allowed no slightest part of himself to enter other worlds.

They were past the point of regular army patrols. Every year or two a party would be sent up to maintain the road. Soon they would be past where even those halted. But the way was still readily followed. There was a road. There were stone cairns, which supposedly would continue to mark their way beyond the road.

"This road has been used recently," remarked Karazes. "Used quite a lot."

By those his mother had mentioned? wondered Urtu. How many were there up in the mountains? And why had he known nothing of them?

A few minute later, Thisa came to a halt. "I hear voices," she claimed. "Many voices. It is almost as if they are shouting at us, to get our attention."

Sunas came to attention, listening. Urtu wished she hadn't opened herself, even here, far from most danger. "It is the little people of the mountains. I did not know any remained."

The little people: Malvern had referred to them as goblins or kobolds in his narrative. Those were words of a language Urtu did not know. He did know they could speak from afar but none among them were great wizards. Any competent sorcerer could safely reveal himself to them. "Speak to them if you will, Mother," he said.

She did so, for two or three minutes. "The Fay spoke of the death of Hurasu," she reported when she returned to them. "They felt it. They also feel the presence of the new lord." There might have been a touch

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of amusement in the glance she gave her son and just maybe a touch of pride. Urtu could only snort.

"None dwell near here now but they promise to send some to guide us. And to protect us. They say a band of unknown men is in the area."

"Sent after us?"

"More likely sent to investigate what those already in the mountains are up to."

Those already in the mountains. Again. And near a place of power? Urtu realized he may simply not have been paying attention to some things that were going on. "We will pass through what Malvern long ago named the valley of goblins. I have read none of the little people live there now."

"A long valley leading up to the highest pass," stated Karazes. He grinned at Urtu's surprise. "I too have read old books, Lord Urtu."

"It is good to have one so knowledgeable at my side," came Urtu's dry rejoinder.

The plump little wizard bowed. "I am honored to serve. Consider me your Thun."

"Sharpen your skills and I might." Urtu started forward again. The others, including a crestfallen Karazes, fell in behind. Of course, no one could sharpen skills while they were traveling and attempting to conceal themselves. Urtu did hope the man would work on them when he had the chance. Karazes did have potential.

There was still forest here, conifers mostly, in the valleys. The crests of the rugged hills, around which the road wound, were bare of trees, but carpeted with blooming heathers and grasses. A marmot might be seen dozing in the sun from time to time and crows called raucously to one another. One man could probably make a life on what this land provided, hide away here and forget the rest of the world. Another man than Urtu. He felt called to travel on, travel to lands unknown. And there were the Eyes to consider.

Of either wandering men or goblins they saw nothing the next two days. Soon they no longer saw the road itself, except as a faint path, occasionally marked with a cairn. Yet others had passed through here. Their signs could be seen.

Where forests failed and only scrub and barren dun slopes remained

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they stood at the entry to the valley of goblins. There, perhaps unsurprisingly, a goblin awaited them. He was a wizened, pale little creature, about half the height of a man and completely naked. Beady black eyes shone from a pinched face, on either side of the long pointed nose. His hands and feet were large in proportion to the rest of him; Urtu knew they were diggers, burrowing into these hillsides.

No, not these hillsides. Not anymore. Too many men found their way up this far now and the shy little people had hidden themselves away in less accessible valleys. Or had left this world altogether, some of them, it was said.

They did not see this goblin at once. He had sat on the hillside beside them, looking them over, unnoticed until he hissed, "Many wizards!" The goblin spoke Zikem with only the trace of an odd accent.

"That we are," said Urtu, taking but one step forward, raising a hand in greeting. "Wizards all."

"Like those in the Shrouded Valley. You go there, lord?"

"We do." So that's where the others were, eh? He had read of that valley and knew it lay on the road across these mountains. "There are men ahead of us? Not wizards, I would assume."

"Only one. He is not very good. We have been playing tricks on him." The little fellow frowned. "Then one very powerful came and stopped our fun. She frightens us. It is good she is far away!"

"Olun?" asked Sunas.

"Even so, my lady. She has made herself the new Wizard-Lord."

"Wizard-Lord?" Urtu had not heard that title before.

"Ruler of the Rift," Sunas told him.

"So that's where she went," Thisa remarked to Zerana.

"We might have known," replied her sister.

Urtu recalled that their mother was there. He must dig into that later. Or if he journeyed on, leaving this band of wizards behind, none of that would matter.

"We talk while we walk," said the goblin, starting up the valley. "Hurry, hurry now." Urtu did hurry to catch up and then walked beside the creature. A small stream flowed down the center of the valley, falling over the rocks from shallow pool to shallow pool.

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Rivulets trickled down the largely barren slopes to join it here and there.

There didn't seem to be much food available. Hadn't he read somewhere that goblins raised mushrooms underground? That might have been no more than a fanciful 'fact' someone had created. "How many men were with this wizard?" he asked. That was more important at the moment than goblin cuisine.

"Thirty-seven we count. Thought they were army men, Lord Hurasu's men, at first. No. Not."

"Carrying weapons, then."

"Even so, Lord Urtu. You are Lord of Visions now?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Ah." They spoke little more.

It grew colder as they climbed toward the high pass, bitterly cold, and the air grew thin. They wrapped themselves in everything they had, all save the goblin who remained nude. The stream became little more than a damp ribbon in the center of the ever narrowing valley, a valley becoming almost a ravine, freezing at night and remaining frozen until the sun was high. At least there was a clear sky and the high steep slopes kept some of the wind from them. They could hear that wind, crying as it passed over the jagged rocks jutting from the ridges above. At night the stars shone clearer than any had ever seen them.

"We are near the top of the world," said Tira, gazing up at them. "Yet they are as far away as ever."

"You mean I won't be able to pluck one and take it home?" joked Kerazes.

"It would burn a hole in your pouch," came the prophet's completely serious reply.

Then they stood in the pass itself and truly were at the top of the world, and at the end of the world they knew. A new one lay before them.

NINE

“MY PEOPLE CONSIDER CLOTHING AN abomination but here even I must protect my feet,” spoke the goblin, lacing on heavy moccasins. They did not know the goblin’s name for his race never shared those, keeping them secret. Sometimes one would use a human name for a while if he must deal with humans.

They had descended through another valley beyond the gap until they reached the great glacier that now stretched before them. The Ice Giant it was fancifully called in old tales. Almost none knew Hurasu himself had named it so. It would take two days to traverse its frozen, jagged surface. That was why the goblin now donned moccasins.

That it could be crossed was not questioned. Many had done so. A fair number had also perished in the trying. A storm could come up and blind a traveler. There were great bears, great white bears one did not see until they were almost upon one. There were hidden crevices where one might break through the snow and fall beyond any chance of rescue. Urtu had read enough, even if he had no practical experience, to make sure everyone was tied together. Everyone but the goblin. He refused to be tethered to big clumsy humans who might drag him into a pit.

And somewhere ahead of them were other travelers. Fighting men, serving a distant sorcerer. That sorcerer must have allies nearer at hand, allies in the Valley of Visions. Urtu was convinced the sisters Zerana and Thisa had no part in it. That did not mean they might not go back to their old mistress one of these days. They would bear watching.

They huddled together on their first—and with luck, only—night on the ice, in a crude snow shelter. Even the goblin seemed to appreciate the warmth of the human bodies. He had also shown them the trick of scooping out a depression that the cold air could sink into, with them on a shelf above it. It was still extremely cold, and difficult to sleep. Urtu had seriously considered pulling a light from another world and pushing on through the night. But he couldn’t hold one nearly long enough and the others would be less adept. They might not know how at all.

However, he did open a way to let in a little heat from another world now and again. All things pulled from another place would sooner or later pop back but heat or light was not a problem. No doubt

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the energy did return to its origin in some way, eventually, but it warmed them now. This was the first time he had opened himself to other worlds since speaking afar to his father by Lades Zerac. Urtu felt he could chance it now.

His mother said nothing of it. Maybe she felt the same. She certainly felt cold.

Not being able to sleep much, they spoke. "Olun is a odd sort of name, isn't it?" asked Urtu. "A title from the old languages spoken before Zikem, the kind of title shamans adopt, not mighty wizards."

"It names one of the aspects of Woran," spoke Tira.

"The Storm," Zerana added to this.

"Yes, the Storm. And yes, shamans may name themselves that way. They believe the Rainbow Snake lives in them and they in it."

Sunas spoke. "I've never understood whether Woran is male or female."

"The Rainbow Snake is both," said Tira. "That makes her particularly meaningful to me."

"And you to Woran maybe," said one of the sisters.

Urtu knew far too little of these ancient beliefs, beliefs that went back to before Hurasu's arrival among those who became his people. The Vision-Lord had been highly skeptical of all gods, having met several and even claiming to have fathered a child by one. "You believe Woran sends your visions?"

There was some hesitance. "I do not know. I sense another."

"All this is enough to make me convert to Tetratism," said Sunas. "Where are you finding that heat, Urtu? Maybe I could try retrieving some too."

He showed her a world of jungle. A volcanic world would have given more warmth but that warmth would probably bring a stench with it. "Oh, that's a lovely place," she said. "I'll let in a little now and again to spell you."

"Don't wear yourself out." This was not easy magic and took its toll. Too much of it could exhaust one and make them unfit to travel tomorrow.

"I should learn that," whispered Kerazes, and nothing more.

Before sunset of the next day, they descended a stairway of broken

rock where the glacier stood above a placid lake, reflecting blue-black in the fading light. Not one bear had they encountered nor had anyone fallen in a hole. They did, however, fall down more than once and all had their bruises.

"This lake is the source of a great river flowing west," Urtu informed them. "Not as great as the Tez but mighty still." He looked into the mists concealing the land beyond. "And this, as might be obvious, is the Shrouded Valley. It might be well for us to camp right here." He looked back over his shoulder. "But not so close, maybe, to that big block of ice."

"It is warmer here," noted Sunas.

"And stinkier," said Krankanides. "It smells of sulfur."

"The ground is hot in places," the goblin said. "I will have to cover my feet a little longer."

"You will return over the glacier now?"

"I go with you to your people in the next valley and return home by another route. I do not live near the place I met you."

"We thank you and your people for guiding us," said Urtu.

"And guarding us, I suspect," added Sunas.

Urtu had the same suspicion. He had felt unseen goblins had accompanied them much of the way. Not across the glacier, maybe.

"We do this from friendship with the Lord of the Valley, though he is now gone. Always was he good to the little people and gave us his protection." He fixed his beady eyes on Urtu. "We hope his son will be our friend too. If he chooses to rule, we will serve him as we are able."

"Choosing to rule and being able to rule may prove very different things, and neither is of consequence at the moment. I am concerned about those men who went before us. Are they close?"

"I will ask," said the goblin. He left them for only a few seconds, speaking to some one of his people somewhere. "They are in the—village? No, camp. That is the word. They are in the camp of the wizards who came here. My people have been keeping an eye on those though we do not reveal ourselves to them."

It was more than likely the goblins resented a settlement of humans here in their domain. Bad enough they passed through now and again.

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“Then we must go see them in the morning,” said Urtu, “but perhaps not let them see us. Unless their sentries already have?”

“No, my lord. They do not bother to watch. Why would they?”

“Because any self-respecting commander would. I would have placed a sentry here.”

“As your father would have,” spoke Sunas. “There is power in this place. I can feel it.”

“It is one of the places where the walls between the worlds grow thin,” Tira stated. “I think you will need to be cautious about those jewels you carry, Lord Urtu. They yearn to speak to those other worlds. To enter them.”

“That may have something to do with it.” Sunas was gazing to the southwest, where a red light filled the sky.

The volcano. Places of magical power were not infrequently places of physical power. He pondered the dark cone, barely visible as night deepened. “Will you slay them all?” asked the goblin, breaking in on his thoughts.

Urtu had to smile at the absurdity of the question. “Not even my father would have attempted that.” Or would he have? Maybe he shouldn’t be so sure.

“You have his sword and you are a powerful sorcerer. You have some of Hurasu’s strength too. We have seen that.”

“You are naturally stronger than the run of men,” said Sunas. “Your father told me few of his children have ever shared so much of his heritage.”

“Some of that may come from you, my lady,” said Kerazes.

Undoubtedly. The blood of Hurasu flowed in his mother’s veins too. As it did in every one of Urtu’s companions here. He chose not to speak of that. “I do carry the sword of Hurasu but I would do well to conceal it now. As I shall my identity. I trust all of you to say nothing of who I am. Call me, um, Cunos for now.” It was nothing more than the first name that had popped into his head and had no particular meaning to him.

“And now,” he said, “let us sleep.”

TEN

SOME OF THE WEARINESS, SOME of the soreness, of their arduous journey had been banished by a long rest. Some remained. "Our provisions are low," remarked Krankanides as they breakfasted. "It is good there are others in this place. Be they friends or enemies, at least they can feed us!"

"Do we also hide our identities from them?" asked Thisa.

"There would be no point," Sunas told her. "As the old saying has it, the best lie is the one closest to the truth. I will be who I am, the wife of Hurasu, seeking refuge. You who were prisoners in High Sanctuary chose to accompany me."

"And I am one of you," said Urtu. "Another freed prisoner, a wizard who misused his powers." He grinned. "And one loath to give out any details of his transgressions."

"So Lady Sunas is our leader," said Krankanides. "Very well." All seemed to approve of the plan.

"You humans have a gift for deception," the goblin observed. He spoke this solemnly but Urtu thought he detected amusement. "I shall have no need to lie but will simply disappear before you meet the others."

"Then we must say goodbye now and thank you again," said Urtu.

"You seem to trust greatly your ability to improvise," came an unknown voice. All turned to see a lean, very dark man in a loincloth regarding them. "I have been keeping an eye on those ahead of you. I think they may be important but am not sure why!"

The man was of no people Urtu knew. Certainly not of the Valley. "You are a sorcerer?"

"He is a god," whispered Tira.

"Yes," agreed the goblin. It was noticeably trembling in the being's presence.

"I suppose I am," said the god. "Your father and I were acquainted, boy, though we mostly went our own ways. What he was doing in his little valley seemed interesting so I'd check on him now and again. When I remembered."

"You are—Lord Xido?" It was a guess but Urtu thought it a good one.

"Right the first time. Hurasu must have jotted down something

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about me, eh? I am sorry to hear of his death.” Xido shook his head with a melancholy smile. “But all mortals die. I have seen them come and go in their millions and their millions. Enough of that. Just know that I will be around, continuing to watch. Whether I shall act, I’ve no idea.” With that, shadows seemed to grow around him and the dark god disappeared into them.

They stared at the empty space for a few seconds. “Is he the one who has been speaking to you?” Urtu asked Tira.

“No. I am sure it is another.”

“I wish he’d stayed longer,” said Zerana. “He was nice to look at.”

“Even though he was sort of ugly,” agreed her sister. “What sort of god is he, Lord Urtu? I’ve never heard of him.”

“Call me Cunos and leave off the ‘lord.’ His people live somewhere across the seas. That is all I know of them. My father mentions him in his annals, that he would sometimes visit the Valley of Visions and wander unannounced and unknown. Hurasu never bothered him but knew he was there.” Was there anything more? “Oh, and he can turn into a crocodile.”

“I much preferred his current form,” remarked Thisa.

“It was nice, wasn’t it?” asked Sunas. “Are we ready to move? I guess I’m the leader now.”

Urtu chose not to respond to any of his mother’s statements. He wrapped the sword up the best he could to disguise its shape. He should hide the Eyes better too, he decided. There were plenty enough places to slip them into the layers of clothing he wore. He might not need so many layers now, though. It felt almost too warm in them.

It felt warmer yet as they walked through the misted valley. Urtu kept to the rear of the group, the goblin walking at his side. There was no need for it to guide them as they paralleled the stream flowing from the lake. Steep rock walls rose on its far side. This was the beginning of a great river. The Gurang, they called it, right? Urtu thought he would like to see where that river flowed, to follow it to the sea. He should have taken the Tez itself down to the sea sometime, shouldn’t he have? He’d never found the opportunity for such a trip. And, too, it was a dangerous way in these troubled times, as bandits and warlords staked their claims along its flow through the lower valley and beyond.

As the goblin had told them, the ground was hot beneath their feet. Too hot, sometimes, and detours were necessary. Hot springs dotted the way, belching steaming, sulfurous water. The noxious mists lay close about them. It would be a good place for an ambush.

But a good place to defend against an ambush too, as one could slip away from danger unseen. "Keep close together," he heard his mother order.

"What is that I hear?" someone asked. It was hard to recognize voices. They all had the same hollow sound to them here. "A roaring?"

"We must near the falls," he called to the others, "They lie at the end of the valley." The mists grew thinner here and the massive cone of the volcano could be seen almost directly to their right. Their path led again close to water. Urtu stepped over to the gravelly bank and dipped a hand. It was warm, almost hot.

"I leave you now, my lord," said the goblin, and turned aside. His form was soon lost in the fog, as the form of a man took shape before them. At least the leader of that armed band had enough sense to post a sentry here. Two sentries. They did not wear the tunics of the army, though they were similarly equipped otherwise, with heavy leather vests, spears, short bronze swords.

"Halt!" cried out one of them. "More wizards?"

"Even so, sir," spoke Sunas. "Come to join our comrades here."

"Hmmp. There was no word of this." He looked over the little group. He did not seem to find them interesting.

"Nor should there have been. We fled the turmoil of the Valley that followed the death of Hurasu."

"The Lord of the Valley is dead?" A whistle. "There has been no word of that either."

"I'll bet our wizard knows," said the other sentry.

"Maybe, maybe not. I don't think his boss tells him much. You'd best run down and inform the captain before we let them onto the stairs."

"Right." The second sentry hurried away, off to their right somewhere. Stairs. Hurasu's book told of them, leading down the low cliffs overlooking the next valley. The valley that had once been home to the First Children, those ancestors of men like himself. They were all gone

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now, though Hurasu had attempted to preserve this place for them. Perhaps none remained anywhere in this world.

“So things are bad back home, are they?”

“So we hear, sir. We were away from the center of things and decided to leave before the troubles reached us.”

“We were prisoners at Ten Serac,” Zerana added to this. “All save the lady here. She led us to this place.”

Urtu could only admire the way the sorceress had twisted the true story just enough to make a plausible lie. He still did not fully trust her, nor her sister. Which is the older? he wondered. Both were surely older than he, yet young in appearance. He might well be the youngest of this company.

The sentry was now eyeing his mother. “You’re someone important, aren’t you? I can tell.”

“That is astute of you, sir, but I’d best save my name for your leader.”

“Yes, of course, um, my lady.” If she was important, he was taking no chances by being too familiar.

A hazy sun had risen partway into the sky before the other sentry returned, two other fighting men in his wake. “We’ll escort you down,” said one of these, “Follow me.” The other fell in behind them as they did as instructed. Urtu had removed enough of his outer garments now and wrapped them around the sword that no suggestion of its shape remained. He had no concerns about the man walking at his heels. Down stairs cut into the rock of the cliff face, connecting natural ledges and galleries, they descended. There were mists below, as above, but not so thick nor so noxious. This seemed mostly straightforward fog. Mists curled down the cliff face beside them, pouring from the valley above. A fog-fall, thought Urtu.

But some hot springs and geysers bubbled here as well when they reached the valley floor. There was more vegetation; indeed, it could even be described as lush, though most consisted of conifers. It was not far to the encampment, a few huts lying along the river bank.

Men and women, wizards and warriors, mingled there. No animosity, no conqueror and conquest, was evident. But Urtu knew those men with swords were conquerors. There was no doubt they

were in charge here. He could count no more than twenty soldiers in the camp. Two sentries at the top of the valley. Probably two more stood guard at the other end. That meant a squad of twelve was off somewhere else; that fellow with the longer sword and red cloak would command three such squads.

His first words to the company were, "Is it so? Hurasu is dead?" He gave the man at his side a disapproving glance. The wizard with his command, no doubt, and probably every bit as much in the dark.

"It is so, sir," Sunas informed him. "I am his widow, Sunas."

The wizard's eyes widened, but not at her words. "Thisa! And Zerana! You are no longer captive?"

"No, Barazes. We escaped," said Thisa.

"She is being dramatic," came at once from Zerana. "We were released and chose to follow the Lady Sunas here. All of us were prisoners."

"At High Sanctuary?" asked the captain. There were nods so he continued. "I am Pun and I am in charge here. I have no orders concerning you, my lady. That is for others, though I am sure my wizard will inform his mistress." He looked about. "This place is full of wizards, as you know. I wonder if any of them had this news."

"I do not think any of them have spoken afar to anyone since we have been here," said Barazes. "They avoid calling attention to themselves."

"As do we." The captain, a thickly built man with a closely trimmed golden beard, turned back to Sunas. "We are here merely to keep an eye on things, my lady. The doings of these wizards caught the attention of our mistress."

"Make yourselves at home but remain close. The weather is always mild, it almost never rains. Yes, the fogs are rather persistent but a roof is not proof against those. We will surely speak again later." He gave Barazes a sidelong look. "After my own wizard sends his report along."

"Say hi for us," called Thisa as they stepped away.

ELEVEN

"I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA why these sorcerers camped up here," Sunas told the others. "I wasn't about to let Captain Pun know that, of course."

"I would assume it has something to do with it being a place of power," spoke Pulases. "Even I can feel it and I am probably the least talented of us all."

"You're not so bad," Zerana assured him.

"But Kranky *is* more talented," stated Thisa.

"We were both stupid enough to get caught," said Krankanides. "All the talent in the world is useless in the face of stupidity like ours."

"That's the smartest thing you've ever said," opined Pulases. Urtu had a suspicion these four had a long history together at Ten Serac before ever he knew them.

"Barazes is a servant of Olun," said Thisa. "So these soldiers are hers too, right?"

"Though it is likely there is an intermediary in the Valley who hired them," Urtu said.

"Maybe we could find out what has happened to our mother. Barazes could ask."

"She has refused to speak to us for years," said Zerana.

A sigh arose from Sunas. "I spoke from afar with Acnaxula from time to time, for we were old friends. Your father did not object, Ur—um, Cunos. Indeed, had she returned he would surely have pardoned her. The last time I reached out I found only incoherence and fear. Someone had blasted her mind." The sisters stared, stricken. "Now we know Olun rules in Tul Sunac, we can assume it was her work."

It was Thisa who gasped, "But why would she do this?"

Sunas shrugged. "Perhaps your mother challenged her. Perhaps Olun simply feared she would."

Zerana turned to her sister. "Now we shall certainly never serve her again."

Thisa slowly nodded. "But she needn't know that."

The news of Hurasu's death spread through the camp. The wizards had indeed not known of it nor anything that had recently happened outside this valley. A deputation of two came to Sunas in due course, a man and a woman. They brought tea. Urtu greatly approved of that.

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Tea had been another gift of Hurasu to his people. One of his greatest, felt the young man. The Lord of Visions had sampled some in another land two thousand years ago and liked it so well he went in search of the trees to bring some back to his valley. At least, so he claimed. It was cultivated widely in the upper reaches of the Tez now.

He had some trepidation about this meeting. Urtu knew these wizards who now visited and some of the others in the camp. They would surely recognize him. It was unavoidable so he might as well reveal himself now and trust their discretion. To be sure, many here were also acquainted with his mother.

"This is Cunos," said Sunas as soon as they sat down together. "He will remain Cunos. Make sure everyone knows this."

"Certainly, my lady," said the man. "Another prisoner who followed you from Ten Serac, isn't he?"

"Even so, Hunush. Pirasana, I greet you." Tea was poured. "So, what is all this about? I don't even know why you are up here at the top of the world."

"Though we would guess the volcano plays a role," said Urtu.

"It is what lies beneath the volcano," spoke Pirasana. "A gate opens on its slopes. A gate to another world."

That, in itself, was not so unusual. Gates were scattered about the world. The Rift was said to be full of them. "It leads someplace desirable?" asked Sunas.

"One would not think so at first look. It is a world of desert and nothing but desert. But it is rife with its own gates to other worlds."

"Hurasu discovered it, a thousand years ago," Pirasana let them know. When he was here with the Eyes of the Wind, thought Urtu. Surely they did not come to him through that gate.

Hunush took up the narrative again. "The world has been named Hirstel, not by Hurasu but by some of those who first ventured through the gate, a few centuries later. The Vision-Lord would not enter it."

Urtu understood that. Hurasu feared few things but being trapped in another world was one of them. It had taken him nearly three centuries to escape the one where he dwelt before coming to this one.

"Hirstel," continued the wizard. "The name applies to all the world;

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the city being built there we name Per Hirstelam, the House in the Great Desert.”

A city? That was somewhat astonishing. How could a handful of wizards build one in another world? Pirasana saw the questions in the looks they gave the pair.

“We have found it easy to command demons to do the work, in a way that is impossible in this world. The ease of all magic there tempts many to make it their home permanently.” She glanced toward her companion, perhaps to note his attitude toward this idea. “More so now with our world here in such turmoil.”

Hunush nodded agreement. “It would be a good place to hide until things settle down.”

“And if they don’t settle down, it might not matter.”

It could be seen Hunush didn’t quite agree with that attitude. “In the mean time,” he said, “this valley seemed a good place to hide. Then Pun and his men showed up a few days ago.”

“You know whom they serve.”

“Sarad. A competent wizard, I understand, and something of a politician. Hoping to fill Hurasu’s place now?” He let his eyes rest on Urtu for a moment.

Sunas turned her head to her son. “Should we tell them?”

“We might as well.”

“Sarad is but a lieutenant of Olun. She pulls the strings from Tul Sunac.”

“Perhaps,” said Hunush after a moment’s thought, “living in Per Hirstelam is not so bad an idea.”

Urtu broke the silence that followed. “Are any of your people here competent with weapons? It may come to fighting.”

“Maybe a few.”

“For that matter,” asked Sunas, “how many are there of you?”

“Over a hundred, but many have had the sense to stay in Hirstel since these men showed up.”

Urtu managed to hide his astonishment at the number. He had expected no more than a handful. Again he wondered why he had known nothing of it. “You could ask who thinks they might be able to fight,” he said to them. He did not intend to issue commands.

When the two wizards had left them, he remarked to Sunas, "Sarad, huh? We figured there was someone in the Valley involved."

"A man of vanity and some fair amount of talent, as I remember. I would not be surprised if he considered himself an ally of Olun and she considered him a subordinate."

"We must remember there are others than Olun contesting. Others perhaps her equal." She seemed a somewhat distant threat, hidden in the Rift. Olun might engage in wizardry from there but not command great armies.

"But none as mad as she. And therefor perhaps none as dangerous."

But danger was not on Urtu's mind. Not personal danger. The Eyes needed to be kept safe from any and all sorcerers who might wish to possess them. That was the true danger. Let them fight their wars as they would but do not let any wield such power.

No, not even himself. Not unless no other choice came, not unless desperation forced him. Hurasu had recognized the jewels' inherent dangers. Once he had used them, only once, and then hid them from men. That had been a desperate time, to be sure, a time when great forces had been released, shaking the foundations of the world. Such a time might come again.

He shook himself from his reverie to see his mother watching him. "Do you think we could use wizardry against these soldiers?" he asked.

"Draw forces from another world? Yes, some here could accomplish that. You and I, of course. With a little training, I am sure Karazes could. He has asked me to teach him, by the way."

"Probably thinking of seducing you," muttered Urtu.

"Oh, to be sure. Thisa and Zerana, though strong wizards, I fear have not been trained in that magic."

"Hurasu always discouraged it in wizards. His cautiousness about other worlds, I suppose."

"And maybe his pride in being able to handle anything that was thrown at him without needing much magic. The events of a millennium ago changed his mind some about such things. He told me so."

Urtu nodded. His father had written this down in his annals as well. "The real problem, I suppose, is bringing something against the soldiers without hurting anyone else."

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“I suppose it is. Let’s think on it for now.”

“Agreed.” But he would bring it up with their companions on the journey. His army.

TWELVE

"YOU WOULD NOT ACTUALLY EXPECT me to let you go visit this other world," said Pun.

"We had to ask, Captain," replied Sunas.

"No one goes in for a while. I would bring out those already there but they threaten my men with demons. I've seen just enough to take that threat seriously. Be all that is it may, Lady Sunas, you are of particular interest to those who give me my orders." He turned to the wizard Barazes. "What was it your mistress said of her?"

"In truth, very little, Captain. She did not seem very interested. However, our other, um, commander—"

Sunas supplied him with the name. "Sarad."

Pun laughed. "That could hardly be kept secret from her. It's all over camp."

"Yes. Sarad mentioned her son. He would very much like to locate the boy."

"And kill him."

Barazes spread his arms. "I do not know the mind of Sarad."

It was all Urtu could do to keep from laughing. He was hiding himself in plain sight this morning, as he and Zerana sat in attendance to his mother.

"He traveled a short distance down the river with us," piped up Zerana. "But we turned back the first day and joined Lady Sunas on her journey here."

Sunas gave her the appropriate dirty look. Don't ham it up, Mother, thought Urtu.

To be sure, every word Zerana had said was true. "So he intended to go back to Per Girad or some other stronghold?" asked Barazes. "Raise an army, maybe." He rose at once. "I'll report this to Lord Sarad. It's not much but there is unlikely to be more." The wizard squinted at Sunas. "Unless you've talked to your son from afar since."

"On my word, I have not."

"Not that you would admit to it. Oh well." With that, Barazes was away.

"I believe the wizard insulted you two or three times," said Captain Pun. "I couldn't keep track but I apologize for all of them."

"Mostly he insulted my intelligence," said Sunas.

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Pun laughed heartily. "Sarad's boss saddled us with him. The big boss. She's interested in the two women who came with you, he tells me." He glanced at Zerana.

"I believe they served her once. That's why they were locked up."

"Ah. No concern of mine but it's good to know they're on our side. Understand I've no interest in your son, wherever he might be. Or I've no orders. That's what matters."

Sarad. Urtu wondered briefly if he was the one who sent the assassin Krankanides had clobbered. It could have been some other ambitious enemy. There was no telling who all the players were; that was another reason to step away and let them work things out among themselves.

"Maybe you *should* be interested in my son. Urtu is a far better man than Sarad could ever hope to be."

"That may be so, my lady. Well, no. I know it is so. But it was Sarad who offered to pay me."

Urtu couldn't keep himself from remarking, "There's no arguing with that."

"Perhaps he'll offer to pay more of us," said Zerana.

Sunas scowled at the both of them. Still too theatrical, Mother, thought Urtu.

As they returned to their little hut, a framework of sticks covered with fir boughs, Urtu said, "We will need to deal with Barazes."

"Let me take care of that," replied Sunas. "You must not chance revealing yourself."

"I could take him," proclaimed Zerana. "It would give me great pleasure to blast his mind."

"It would be even less desirable for you to reveal yourself. Olun should not know you are her enemy, if she gets involved," Sunas told her. "It is to be hoped she does not have a chance to be. I need not hurt the man. We only need to keep him from interfering when we try to take the camp." She turned to her son. "I do not see how we can pull anything from another world to help us."

Urtu chuckled. "We are going to use demons."

Sunas looked doubtful. "That rarely works. If they are willing to serve at all, they tend to be pulled back to their own worlds at inoppor-

tune moments. Or are you thinking of bringing some through that gate?"

"That's too far away, isn't it?" asked Zerana. "A day's march, I've heard."

"You'll see," promised Urtu. "I'll need Karazes's assistance. Can you prepare him to pull fog from another world, my lady?" He felt it wise not to address her as Mother, here.

She nodded. "It is not difficult. How long he could keep it up will be uncertain."

"My sister and I could do that too," spoke up Zerana. Urtu only nodded. They might be able to help. Kranakanides and Pulases he wanted focused on this world, with weapons in their hands.

And Tira? He had no idea what she might be able to contribute. The prophet had remained subdued since they arrived, speaking little. All the sorcerers here would have to be alerted and ready when he acted, whether to use their powers or to grab sticks or weapons—Urtu was sure some were concealed around the camp—and attack the soldiers.

But all would depend on Urtu's own part in it. He remembered how the god Xido had pulled shadows from somewhere around himself. That had been a new trick to Urtu but he had experimented a little since and found he could do the same—and more. He could shape those shadows to conceal himself and that in itself was good. His ability to shape them further would be put to the test soon.

Soon. Tomorrow morning if possible, he decided, before anything might change. There was much to arrange. When they were returned to their hut he unwrapped the sword of Hurasu. It would surely see use. For now, he concealed it beneath a blanket, ready to his hand. Word must be spread through the camp. All must be ready.

THIRTEEN

THERE WAS ALWAYS MIST HERE, some rising from the warm stream flowing through the valley, more drifting down from the valley above, the Shrouded Valley. They would attempt to shroud this valley this morning.

What the intentions might be of Captain Pun and his distant masters, Urtu had no idea. It was best not to wait and find out. Hidden weapons were now in the hands of the sorcerers who had encamped here, mostly knives and cudgels; all swords and such had been confiscated by Pun's men, as had been any weapons carried by his own party. These were not particularly well guarded, lying in one of the huts with a single man on duty before it. That had been enough till now.

Now they waited on the wizard Barazes. His habit was to speak from afar each morning, the sorcerers here had told them, opening himself to any messages from those who gave him his orders and, it was believed, communicating with a network of spies in the Valley of Visions. What he learned of them he undoubtedly passed on to Olun in time. What Sarad might be told was uncertain.

"It is time," whispered Sunas. "I shall intrude on our little wizard now."

"Bring down the fog," he told the trio who stood near him, the sisters Thisa and Zarana, the sorcerer-thief Kerazes. At once, they sent part of themselves to worlds where fog was thick, each a different world, and opened ways for that fog to come to them. It billowed forth, thick, white, a wall of mist that began to engulf the camp. They could not do this very long, he knew. Time for Urtu to act.

He reached into a place of deep shadows in another world, shadows deeper than the darkest night he had ever known. These he pulled to him, piling them one on another, shaping them into great grotesque forms, and releasing them at the edge of the advancing fog. They would hold together no more than seconds, Urtu knew. That might be enough to create the fear and panic he desired.

Then he took his sword in hand and he himself advanced. The time for magic was past.

So he had thought. His mother's voice sounded in his head, on the edge of his consciousness. *Barazes is stronger than I thought*, that voice said. *He is—calling Olun.*

Break off, he told her.

He holds me. He is stubborn.

Barazes would not break the link his mother had created nor, apparently, permit her to. Could she use force, blast him, break his mind? Maybe not soon enough. He had little doubt Olun could turn such forces against Sunas if she entered that link also. His mother was a potent sorceress to be sure but there were those more potent.

He did not hesitate but went to where his mother and Barazes contested. Another presence? He suspected it was a minion of Sarad—maybe even Sarad himself—and that he only watched, not wanting to involve himself. Urtu spoke not but directed his will against Barazes. *Cunos? No, you are Urtu! Olun will reward me well if I destroy you, boy!*

His elation turned to fear in seconds. Urtu took all that was the wizard Barazes and sent it elsewhere, blasted it from him to wander nameless through infinity. He had never done such a thing before, though he knew of it. He had acted without thinking, unleashed power he barely suspected he possessed.

So, said another. Would you do the same to me?

It was a cold voice yet it sounded amused. There might have been an edge of madness to it and Urtu had no desire to engage its owner in combat. It would be combat he might not win. He blocked her at once, and he and Sunas left that place. But she would know his location now. So might Sarad who could present a more urgent danger. Urtu turned his attention back to the world in which he stood, holding the sword of Hurasu. He knew he had been gone but a few seconds.

“Forward!” he shouted. Urtu could hear fighting around him in the mist. Pun came toward him, leading a knot of somewhat demoralized men. His shadowy ‘demons’ had done some good. He leaped to the attack against the enemy captain, the man’s bronze sword shattering as his own silver blade struck it.

“Lord Urtu!” Pun dropped what remained of his weapon and fell to his knees. His men did not hesitate to do the same. The same was happening throughout the camp as the mists cleared.

“That was easier than I expected,” said Sunas, walking up to him,

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Kerazes at her side, grasping a sword he had taken from some soldier. "Except for the Olun part."

He nodded. "We underestimated Barazes."

"It was a terrible thing you did to him. I could feel it. I—I don't know if I could do that to anyone."

"Olun would have done it to you. Where is the wizard?"

They found him lying by the river, his eyes staring into nothingness. "Totally destroyed," murmured Sunas. "He will die, unable to even eat. This is worse than what Olun did to Acnaxula. At least some part of her remained."

"That might have been for a reason," said Urtu. He looked at the wizard for a few seconds before running his sword into his heart. Both Sunas and Kerazes, and even Pun, gasped. "It was kindness," he told them and turned away.

He would not have administered such kindness not long ago. Was he himself on the road to becoming one like Olun? The man would have starved, he told himself. He would have died slowly, a reminder to Urtu of the terrible thing he had done to him. Maybe that was the reason he had made the decision to end his life now. "Let's see what's to be done," he said, and turned back into the camp.

Casualties were light; in fact, none had been killed though minor wounds were widespread. That was not counting Barazes, and Urtu preferred not to. He strove to put the wizard out of his mind. The sorcerers had, after all, outnumbered their captors almost three to one. They had needed only a leader to get them to act.

"Where is the other squad?" he asked.

"They guard the gate," someone said.

"Even so, lord," said Pun. "Twelve men watch at its entrance."

"You will come with me to this gate," Urtu told him.

Pun bowed. "As you wish. I would serve you, Lord of the Valley. Let me be your man. Let us be the beginning of your army."

Urtu thought he should be amused. He found it difficult at the moment. "And what of your Lord Sarad?"

"I doubt he will pay us after this day."

Would Sarad send more men now, to seek him? That would surely depend on how his fortunes were going in the Valley. Urtu would

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move on; this he knew, this he had decided. These people here, though, this band of sorcerers, might be in danger. Their city in another world might offer the refuge they needed. His mother could be safe there.

Pun's men remained unarmed, for now. That was sensible. The next morning they set off toward the gate to Hirstel. The sentries stationed there might or might not obey the commands of Pun. The captain might even renege on his surrender and order them to fight, though Urtu doubted it. Yet he brought a good sized company of armed men along, to be certain of things. All those who had accompanied him from Ten Sarec were with him. They might not be needed but they wanted to see this new world, this wonder hidden in the mountains.

The route to the gate began in the Shrouded Valley, near the top of the stairway. There they turned to their left after climbing, following along the cliffs, northward, until those cliffs became a jumble of jagged volcanic rock through which they made their way. The path was well marked and appeared well-enough used. Used for centuries, it seemed, a secret to most.

Hirstel. All-encompassing Desert. Maybe Great Desert or Desert World better reflected its use here, Urtu felt. The place couldn't be completely lifeless if there was good air to breathe.

The sun was falling behind the high dark mountains when they at last reached the camp on the slopes of the great volcano's cone.

FOURTEEN

IT HAD THE APPEARANCE OF a cave or tunnel, partway up the slope. "So we'll be able to leave this gods-forsaken place?" asked the guards at its entrance. "None too soon."

They were less happy to comply with the order to relinquish their weapons. "There be griffins about here," they complained. "Huge ones."

"Aye, and dragons too. I've seen 'em."

"Kek, Bogzo, I tell you that was just a condor."

"And I've heard manticores lurk up here in these mountains."

Pun scoffed. "I've seen no griffins except the little ones that hunt rabbits. I've seen nothing bigger than rabbits."

Pirasana leaned in and whispered to Urtu, "There are some leopards. They also hunt those rabbits." She had been chosen their guide for this trip; Hunush remained in charge back by the river. "I'll go in first and clear things so they don't set any demons on you." With that, she disappeared into the side of the volcano.

Urtu felt a hand, hesitant, on his shoulder. It was Tira who whispered, "Do you think you should take those stones through there? They don't belong in that world, I think."

She might be right. "I won't chance leaving them out here."

The prophet shrugged. "I'm not sure I want to go in. Maybe I don't belong either. I—I would be separated from whatever speaks to me, I think."

"The Rainbow Snake maybe?" Urtu turned to her. "Tell me, Tira, does Olun also serve Woran? Her name—title?—suggests it is so."

"It does. We serve different aspects, if she truly serves at all." Tira smiled. "And if I truly serve at all. Still—there may be some bond between us. Some rapport. I do not know."

Pirasana returned, with a man whose white beard fell to his waist. "Lord Urtu, this is Tuthev, our leader here."

"I know Urtu," said the venerable sorcerer. "Or I knew him as a little boy."

Did he? Urtu did not remember the name but the man did seem familiar. "You knew me as Thun then. I served your father before the one who now holds that title." Then, gravely, "I have just been

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informed of Lord Hurasu's passing. My condolences to you, young sir, and to you, Lady Sunas."

"Thank you, Tuthev," she responded. "It has been long indeed since we have seen each other."

"I have dwelt here since I left Per Girad. But come and see this world of ours."

They followed him into the tunnel. Urtu felt, of a sudden, as if he had walked into a wall. "I can not go forward," he called after the others. "Something blocks me."

Tuthev returned and peered at him. "Most extraordinary. Never have I heard of such a thing before."

Sunas gave her son a thoughtful look. "It is not you, I think, but what you carry."

Tira had been right. The Eyes of the Wind did not belong in that other world and apparently they knew it. He was reluctant to be separated from them. More reluctant than he would have expected, but he stepped back and handed the pouch to Tira. "Take care of them," he said, and strode forward. Nothing prevented him.

They stepped out of the tunnel into a city. It was built of great blocks of tawny stone, what there was of it. Urtu could see it was not very large. Still under construction, too. Here and there a monstrous being carried about a chunk of stone far too large and heavy for a human. "How do you get these, um, demons to work for you?" he asked.

"Many are glad for an excuse to leave their home hells," explained Pirasana. "When we offer them a way to escape, even if only for a while, they tend to be willing to be summoned."

"And there are various bribes and threats that may be employed," said Tuthev. "I suppose a few would have to be considered slaves. Kidnapped and coerced to work a while before we will return them. With solemn promises not to retaliate, of course."

"Though one can never be quite certain which vows will hold a demon," added Pirasana.

"Quite so. But things have worked pretty well so far in Per Hirstelam. Hurasu did not completely approve of our colony but

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permitted it to exist. I think he was curious as to how it might turn out. Of course, everyone here has powers. It is a city of wizards.”

“So this is what’s been going on,” came a voice from behind them.

“Lord Xido,” said Sunas.

“Xido? The Lord of Visions spoke of you,” said Tuthev. If he was surprised he hid it well. “What might we do for a god, my lord?”

Pirasana came close to scoffing. “A god is naught but a powerful demon,” she said.

“And you would set me to building walls, my lady?” asked the dark god, giving her a bow. “There seemed to be interesting things going on so I came to look,” he told them, and did just that, peering at the walls, the cloudless sky. “Maybe not all that interesting. I think I might know this world. Let me get a better look.” He bounded onto one of the great blocks of stone lying there and from it to the top of a wall to survey what lay beyond it. “Yes, yes. I’ve passed through here. It’s not good for much else than moving from one gate to another.”

Urtu noted more than one of the large demons cowering away from Xido. The god hopped back down to them, a far longer leap than a man could safely make. Enormous strength certainly existed in that lean and not particularly large body. The god would be far stronger than Urtu. Far stronger than Hurasu had been, too.

“It is a dangerous world for sorcerers,” Xido went on when he stood again beside them. “Madness follows magic.”

“We all know how to protect ourselves,” sniffed Pirasana.

The god shrugged and smiled. Then he cocked his head at Urtu. “Your baubles are not with you.”

“They refused to pass through the gate.”

“Indeed? Now that *is* interesting. I must investigate those stones one of these days.”

“Hurasu was said to have come by them somewhere around here. I thought maybe they had come to him through this gate but that seems unlikely now.”

“Most unlikely,” agreed Xido. “Hmm, I don’t think I want to pass between the worlds from here. I’ll go back through your gate first.” With that, he turned and reentered the gateway, which was housed in a small open stone building.

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“Pass between the worlds?” wondered Zerana.

“I think that means what he does when he disappears into those shadows,” Suna said. “And the shadows are just camouflage for what really takes place.”

Why did the god need a gate at all? That was something Urtu might learn another day. “It gets hot here, doesn’t it?”

“And rather cold at night. But it never rains. Or at least it hasn’t for centuries.”

Urtu looked up. The sky was perfectly cloudless but had a bit of a brownish haze.

“We see a wispy cloud or two sometimes toward sunset,” Pirasana went on. “They blow in from the sea, we think. There are seas but none close.”

“It’s possible it even rains over them,” said Tuthev.

“But no animals? No birds?” wondered Sunas.

“Not a one. Again, there are the seas and there is life in them. And, um, things come through other gates now and again. They usually go back after a look at the place.”

“But not always. That’s why we have walls.”

Sensible, thought Urtu. But to him they looked more like the walls of a prison.

FIFTEEN

"I CAN DO THINGS IN Hirstel," said Kerazes. "It seems I can reach out to—to anywhere and find what I need."

Sunas nodded. "Magic is definitely easier. Or maybe I've just become a very good teacher!"

They were not in Hirstel now. Urtu had refused to remain there overlong. He felt uncomfortable in the city and, too, disliked being separated from the Eyes. Those were again at his waist. Tira had been most eager to hand them back.

His mother looked at him now, pensive. "But you will not stay, will you? Hirstel is not the place you seek."

"It is not. I will follow Hurasu's ancient road onward, through the mountains and to what land lies beyond." His eyes went around the circle of those who had accompanied him all the way from Ten Sarec. "I would not expect you to follow me there."

Guilt appeared in some of their expressions but, no, they did not intend to go with him. "You are not abandoning me. Follow my mother now and keep her safe."

"I will go with you, Lord Urtu," spoke Tira.

"I know," he replied. Tira would not leave this world, would not leave the Eyes. She might even have some loyalty to Urtu himself, though he did not depend too strongly on that. "I will return to the river and send everyone still there to this place. When they depart, my journey west begins. Mine and that of Tira. Get all the sorcerers safely into their new world and then return their weapons to Pun and his men. Where they choose to go then is their affair."

"And we will all be hidden away if more men are sent by Sarad or someone else. Safe, for the time being," said Zerana.

"Safe maybe forever," Thisa told her sister. "I don't believe I'll ever want to leave Hirstel." She gazed rather fondly on Pulases.

"What of Olun?" asked Zerana. "What of our vengeance?" But as she spoke this, her own eyes settled on Krankanides.

"Leave her to me," said Urtu. "You helped win a battle here but now the war moves elsewhere."

He had thought—for only a little while—he might go back the way he had come, back into the Valley of Visions, but decided at last it was not time. Maybe it would never be time.

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But it was time to leave here. One day only would he remain, then head back to the camp by the river. One day to say goodbye. He might never see any of these people, his friends, again. He might never see his mother.

His mother spoke to him the day of his farewells, as he prepared to hike away come the next morning. Already he chafed, thinking maybe he should be on his way.

"There is a new hardness to you," she said. "But I wonder if it was always there, waiting to be awakened."

"The part of me that is like my father?" He knew some saw it as that. Maybe his mother did.

"There is some of that, maybe, but you are not Hurasu. You choose your own actions and only you are responsible for them. It was you who acted against Barazes and you who are responsible for what happened. You know this and it weighs on you, does it not?"

"Perhaps I could have defeated the wizard without destroying him. I don't know. I only know that I acted and there is no point in regretting that now. No point." He shook his head. "Will people deem me something more and something less than human, when I use such powers? Will they see me as a monster now for what I did?"

"It is not only the destroying of his mind but what you did after. That was very human and that shocked some. Even me—but I saw in it just the sort of thing Hurasu would have done."

"I had already killed him, hadn't I? The sword changed nothing." He breathed deeply before saying more. "It was kindness."

"But it worries your heart, my son. I can tell."

"It does. I admit it."

"You have more of your father in you than ever I had realized. He could be the most generous of men but also the hardest, the most ruthless, when it was needed. Calculating—that is the word. Do not become one who weighs all things for their value to you."

A slight smile came to Urtu's face. "Were I one who lived five thousand years I might become another Hurasu. He saw life passing, all those he knew being born and dying, yet going on himself. What value could he put to those fleeting lives? I know it became a burden to him at times, a weariness. It is in his annals."

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“And so he wandered to escape it, even as you will do now.”
“Ah, but what do I escape?”

II. THE EMPIRE

SIXTEEN

“THERE IS SOMEONE IN THE road ahead of us.”

A palm rose to shade Tira’s eyes. “So there is, my lord. Coming this way? Mmm, no, standing waiting for us.”

Urtu unconsciously loosened his sword in its sheath. Nearly two weeks had they been following the ancient way through the mountains, paralleling an ever-widening, tumbling river, descending toward the unknown lands beyond. Often, their road was no more than a narrow ledge along a cliff face. They had seen no one until now.

“It is Xido,” he said as they drew nearer. What was the god doing here?

They would find out soon enough. Xido raised his hand in greeting as they approached. “I knew you’d be coming along here soon. I didn’t want to join you further up where it is cold.” The lithe deity wore only a loincloth.

“Join?”

“Yes. I’ve decided to accompany you into the lands below. I suspect you could use a little assistance. Do you speak the language?”

“I know the pidgin spoken by those Molu who trade on the lower Tez.”

“That’ll probably get you by. Of course, I speak every language. That’s a god thing.”

Tira’s eyes narrowed. “Wouldn’t there be infinite languages in the infinite worlds?”

“A good point. I should say I know every language I’ve come across. We’re able to learn them instantly when someone speaks them to us. Take them right out of their heads.”

“That must be handy,” felt Urtu. Then he thought it through. “Can you read our minds, then?”

“Not in the sense you’re thinking right now,” replied Xido, who then snickered at his joke. “At least no one in my pantheon.” The god did not seem interested in explaining further, and joined them as they continued along their way.

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“By the way, Urtu,” he asked, “do you speak the language of dragons? I know your father could.”

“In theory. I’ve never met a dragon to try out my vocabulary on.”

“If ever there was a man who thought like a dragon it was your father.” Xido gazed toward the sky. “Just asking because I saw one cruising up there half an hour or so ago.”

That was not terribly unusual in the mountains.

“The language of dragons?” wondered Tira. “There is only one?”

“So I understand,” Urtu told her, but his eyes went to the god. Maybe he knew more.

“There is but one dragon tongue, it is true, wherever in the world they roost. They are great travelers, you know, and stay in contact with one another. Especially in mating season, not that mating ever needed a lot of words!”

“There it is again,” said Tira, pointing toward a form high above, barely to be made out.

Urtu gazed up at it. “Are you sure?” It could be a condor or griffin or a great eagle, even.

“He’s right,” said Xido, peering upward. “Oh, she’s right, isn’t it? My apologies, prophet.”

“As you will, lord.”

“No my lass. As you will. Don’t allow me to cow you just because I’m a somewhat powerful deity.” There might have been a touch of—what? Bitterness, perhaps, in the last of those words. “I have seen much in my thousands upon thousands of years and in more worlds than I can count. I have no problem with who you are. Now this dragon—I wonder if it has been on the lookout for you.”

“If so, it has found us,” said Urtu.

“So it seems. If that dragon is a spy, there would have to be a human somewhere about directing it. Dragons do not speak from afar. Thank any and all gods for that, myself included.”

“Maybe back at the valley where we camped. It is likely men were sent there.” After Urtu had slain Barazes and revealed himself. He’d prefer not to speak of that.

“Maybe. Or on the road following you by now. I wouldn’t worry about them. We are almost to inhabited lands and an armed band

would not dare pursue you there. But a dragon might yet attack. Two or three dragons even.”

Two. A second flier had joined it and both were spiraling down to them. “I need some of my father’s griffins,” said Urtu.

“If you were half your size you could have ridden one across the mountains.” When the dragons were nearly to them, Xido reached out a hand and casually retrieved a sword from some world. It would go back there, sooner or later. Later, it was to be hoped.

“Will they shoot their fire at us?” whispered Tira.

“They can’t do that while they are still in the air,” Urtu told him. All the sources had agreed on this.

“They have to plant their feet,” Xido added to this.

One dragon lit in the pathway a little ahead of them. The other settled onto a crag above. They were not overly large creatures. Long, yes, three times the height of a man or more, but their bodies were slender, almost snaky, covered with short, rough fur. They looked less impressive when the wide bat-like wings were folded.

The dragon before them scrutinized Xido. “A god you are?”

“So I am.”

“We were not paid to fight a god,” it said to its companion.

“Maybe I could drop a rock on it,” came from above.

“Maybe I could wring both your necks,” warned Xido.

Naught but an animal’s growling would all this seem to Tira but Urtu found he could catch the gist of their speech. That he would be able to speak to the dragon in the same language—and be understood—was uncertain.

“Maybe so, little god.” It eyed the sword in Urtu’s hand. “The sword of Hurasu. It has drank of dragon blood in ages past. Yet we have covenants with the Lord of the Valley. How comes his sword to your hand, man?”

Fortunately, he did not have to attempt speech. Xido announced, “Hurasu has passed beyond. This is his son and heir, a powerful sorcerer and warrior in his own right.”

The dragon perched above called, “Forget Olun. We must spread word of this to our own people.”

“Agreed,” he called back and returned his gaze to Urtu. “Hurasu

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was the greatest of all mortal men. Never will there be another like him.” With that he leaped upward, spreading his wings, and flew south, his companion following.

“That could have gone worse,” felt Xido. He dropped the sword to the ground. It would go where it belonged on its own. “But he made a point of the fact that you are not Hurasu’s equal.”

“I’m not.”

“In some things. So, Tira, what did you think of dragons?”

“They’re—smelly, aren’t they?”

“That’s the stench of their so-called fire. Hope one never directs it at you.”

Tira nodded. “They are also beautiful.”

“Yes, they are. Let’s move on.”

SEVENTEEN

“ARE YOU KNOWN HERE, LORD Xido?”

The broad Gurang River stretched below them, thatch-roofed houses and cultivated fields lying on either side. Dusk was falling, and here and there a light might already be seen.

“It is long since I walked this land and I did not call attention to myself then. Men did not yet live in this place. All this was wild.” He stood surveying the scene for the better part of a minute. “Nor, I think, do my, ah, worshipers get to these parts much.”

“Your worshipers, lord?” asked Tira.

“The Bazu some name them. In many ways they are the counterparts of the Molu, traders and people of the sea on their far side of the world.” He started forward. “I doubt this road will be watched. None expect travelers from the mountains. Oh.” The god stopped short. “Do not call me Lord Xido nor even Xido here. Don’t use the word lord at all. I am Xit and I am your servant. You, Urtu, lead here. You better look the part.”

“It is true,” agreed Tira.

“Shall I go back to being Cunos?” asked Urtu.

“You might as well. It’s as good a name as any. There’s no need to hide the fact that you came over the mountains. It might even be to your advantage. The traveler Cunos with his entourage, his humble servant Xit, his priest—hmm, I guess you might as well stick with Tira.”

“Thank you, Xit. I’m fond of the name even if I was not born with it.”

“And no one will know what it means. It would be something like Marahina in the language spoken here, if it hasn’t changed too much. That’s also the name of one of their goddesses. Her title, more properly.”

“Perhaps I should learn more of her. Though I do not feel she is the one who speaks to me.”

“I would not think so.” Xido had one more warning. “And best let none know you are sorcerers.”

“What is that delightful aroma?” asked Tira as they approached the huts of a small village.

Xido sniffed. “Coconut oil. It is used much in lamps here.”

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Tira nodded but did not seem quite satisfied with the answer, felt Urtu. It was more than likely the sorcerer had never seen a coconut. She might not even know what one was. Though a rarity, some did come up the river to the House of Hurasu.

He pointed. "There's a coconut palm." Their graceful forms rose here and there among the huts.

"You will see far more of them closer to the coast," said Xit. "We are still in the uplands. I remember a place not far below here where it was common to cross to the other bank. There are no fords further down the Gurang, for it becomes a mighty river."

"The place of the river dragons," said Urtu. "I've read the account of Malvern."

"But no river dragons would remain to play in its pools. They are shy of people and seek the wider and deeper parts of the Gurang now."

"That is disappointing."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Hmmph, more rain. It does rain a lot here. More than you would be used to." Large drops spattered around them, on them. "No more than in my own home though. It is a world of jungle."

Heavy rains were rare in the upper valley of the Tez. It was not a land that received much rain of any sort, closed behind its mountain walls, and much of the water there flowed down from those mountains, shared through an extensive irrigation system. Here and there a spring arose, oases in what was once an arid land. These, perhaps not surprisingly, were even now sometimes revered as sacred places.

"There may be shelter at the ford, if customs have not changed too much," continued the god.

"We may need no ford," said Urtu. "That looks to be a bridge ahead." It proved to be a suspension bridge between two low bluffs, spanning the stream. Such bridges were common enough in the upper reaches of the Tez and its valley.

Xit looked it over, as much as was possible in darkness. "That is new to me. So is this wide road continuing on this side of the river. Few lived here in other days."

"Do we cross?" wondered Tira.

"In the morning," Xit decided, "for here is the shelter I had hoped

for.” A low thatched hut, open on all sides, stood to their right. “These always existed through this realm, along the roads and rivers for the use of those who traveled and traded.”

“It seems none travel or trade tonight,” said Urtu. “We’ll have it to ourselves.”

Shortly they were settled in, eating of the meager store of food they still carried. It would be good to find fresh supplies in this land tomorrow. It would be good to sleep dry here tonight, listening to the rain drip all around, another leg of Urtu’s journey complete. Where now?

Tira sat looking out at the rainy night. Thunder rumbled in the distance. “Torrent-wrapped, Snake comes,” she murmured.

“In the rains of storm,” said Xido.

“You know the hymn?”

“I’ve heard it from time to time. There are a great many verses. No one knows them all—except maybe me.”

“And Woran?” asked Tira, smiling.

“She does not pay attention to such things. The Rainbow Snake is too protean, too primeval. She barely thinks at all in the sense you and I would define it.”

“You have—seen her?” Despite sitting next to a god at the moment, Tira seemed awestruck by this.

“Seen her, seen him. Both at once, you know, but definitely not neuter as some demons are.” Without further preamble, Xido began singing, chant-like, his deep voice ringing in the night.

In the Time of Dreaming, in the ever Now Time,
in the dawn and sunset dwells the Rainbow Snake.
From the darkened places of deep springs Snake rises;
arching through eternal skies she calls the rain.

In the Time of Dreaming, Snake creates the valleys;
where she passes rivers run between the mountains.
Where she rises springs bring water to the deserts,
bring life to the world from deep hidden places.

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In the Time of Dreaming, Sun sends thirst to slay men;
water holes hide from him and his burning spears.
Then the Snake awakens, hears her children crying,
hears the men and women, hears the trees and grasses.

In the Time of Dreaming, torrent-wrapped Snake comes,
coiling, writhing, dancing in the rains of storm;
with her tongue of lightning, flicking in the darkness,
and her colors arching as she journeys on.

In the Time of Dreaming, in her cave Snake teaches
all the ways of power, all the ways of magic,
all the ways of woman, all the ways of man,
all the ways of blood are known to Rainbow Snake.

Mother and our sister, father and our brother,
making and destroying, swallowing the sun,
in the Time of Dreaming, in the ever Now Time,
in the Was and Will Be is the Rainbow Snake.

Tira sat silent for a minute or more before saying, "Some of those verses I have heard, some not. I thank you for all of them, Lord Xido."

Xit scowled at the use of his title. "Let's get some sleep now," he said. "I expect the morrow to be full."

EIGHTEEN

"OUR ORDERS ARE THAT ANY who come over the mountains are to be taken to the emperor."

Xit turned to relay this to his companions. Urtu had caught some of it, Tira none. "I shall introduce us as I explained yesterday," he said.

"Tell them I am Hucan," Tira said. "A priestess of the goddess Woran."

"Hucan?" asked Urtu.

"Another aspect of Woran, her name when she comes as Rain," explained Xit. "I believe our Tira saw signs in last night's deluge."

"As Olun has chosen to name herself for an aspect of Rainbow Snake, so have I," she said.

A pair of fighting men, golden of skin and seemingly of the same people as the steward of High Sanctuary, had come across the suspension bridge as they were eating their breakfast. They had taken all Xit told them without question. Questions weren't their job.

All five crossed back over the bridge and followed a decent, though dirt, road westward along the river. It was still somewhat a wild river here, not navigable. They passed through another small village, set among cultivated fields. "We are still a little above the ford," Xido told them. "Again, no villages nor fields were here when last I passed this way. Centuries, that has been. Quite a few centuries. I've no idea where the Molu emperor resides."

"Where the High Kings had their house in the time of Malvern, do you think?" asked Urtu. "That would be somewhat south of here." He had seen a map, read the accounts. He still carried his father's book too; he might consult it later.

Xido only shrugged. The god seemed entirely willing to wait to find out. "Ah, we approach the ford," he said a short while later. "I would expect a village there these days."

There was not only a village but another suspension bridge. Beyond the low falls that marked the upper limit of navigation on the Gurang, lay docks and, tied to them, a handful of small boats. One house, taller than the others but of the same post and beam construction, rose close to the water. It was to this their guides led them, and there they exchanged words with one who was seemingly their superior. Their duty done, the pair disappeared. The officer, a short, plump man,

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smiled as he approached the travelers in greeting. The smile briefly became a frown when his eyes fell on Xido but he made no comment. "Welcome to the Empire of the Molu," he said. "It is long since any passed over the mountains."

"With good reason," spoke Urtu, hoping his pidgin would be understood. "It is a long and difficult way. We are pleased to have reached its end and ask your hospitality."

He had, to be sure, rehearsed that speech for weeks, anticipating their arrival in a new land. "I am Cunos, a noble of the valley beyond the mountains," he continued. There was no nobility in that valley, at least not in the part from which he hailed, but Xido had suggested Urtu style himself so. These people would expect a social structure not unlike their own. "My servant Xit," he went on, nodding toward Xido. "He serves as my translator if my knowledge of your language fails me. And the priest Hucan."

"Welcome again, welcome all." The man hesitated. "We have heard there is turmoil in your homeland." Such news would be old news, having traveled here by water, yet it might be as fresh as any Urtu knew.

"That is, in part, why we left that homeland, sir." No need to tell this fellow more than that.

The Molu officer nodded. "We'll have you on a boat downriver in no time," he said. "Unless you would prefer to rest here a while?" Urtu couldn't tell how the man felt about this. He might have wanted to hear their story. On the other hand, he might just as well prefer to pass the responsibility for them on to someone else.

"We could learn something by staying and gossiping for a day," said Xido, in Zikem.

"Or gossip on the boat," Urtu replied. Switching back to Molu, he announced, "We are eager to visit your capital. Let us be on our way."

It turned out the officer would be able to get their story anyway, as he accompanied them onto the boat, along with a single soldier. Perhaps he considered them too important not to keep a personal eye on them—and take personal credit for delivering them as well. The boat was of modest size, built of planks though many of the smaller craft tied up beside it were dugouts. Its bottom was flat.

A pair of boatmen hoisted a trapezoidal battened sail once they had

rowed the boat away from the docks. It flapped lazily in the light breeze. The oars were already shipped. It seemed the current of the great river—yes, already great even here—would mainly serve to move them along. A woman stood at the steering oar at the stern, chewing a wad of something, its dark juice occasionally dripping down her chin. Low rocky bluffs lay to their right; to the left, the lower banks gradually gave way to swamp.

Xido's attention went to the short sword at the Molu officer's waist. "Iron," he observed. "I have seen only bronze otherwise."

"That it is," said the man, with at least a trace of pride in his voice. "And not cheap. The ore is mined right up here in these hills." His hand swept toward the north, the right bank. His own eyes went to Urtu's sword but he politely did not ask any questions about it. Nor did Urtu offer any information. He was thinking it might have been wise to have wrapped it up again. Too late now.

Then the Molu squinted at Xido. "Your people know something of iron, I understand."

"Not where I come from," was the response and the subject was not pursued further. Instead, the story of their journey across the peaks filled the rest of the voyage and if Xido—the main narrator of the tale—exaggerated here and there, no harm was done. Even less harm was done by the parts he left out.

Gurang grew wider and darker. Urtu surmised the darkness came from the water flowing into it from the swamps on their left. Other boats came and went, many laden with goods, some fishing or about business of their own. Great black-green armored crocodiles lazed here and there, on the banks, floating in the water. Were their unblinking malevolent eyes fixed on him? He felt if he fell into the water he would be unlikely to come back out. At least not all of him. The young man had read of the reptiles, to be sure, but the reality of these monsters was chilling. There were crocodiles far down the Tez but none in the upper valley.

Nor were there the clouds of insects that swarmed about them, buzzing, dancing on the muggy air, biting any exposed flesh. With some relief he beheld the Molu capital about mid-afternoon, lying on the northern bank. A town of modest size, it was, above the rocky

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bluffs. Docks lay below, floating docks, with stairs and ladders down to them.

"There was a small fort here when last I floated by," said Xido. "A stockade, a few houses."

"And in what form did you float by?" whispered Tira. It might have been a serious question but she tried to make it sound otherwise.

"Oh, had I been a crocodile I would not have observed nor remembered such things. I would think this still more a fortress and administrative center, than a place of commerce." The god looked up at it. "It commands the river."

It does, thought Urtu, but one must not forget those mines in the hills behind it. Their escort spoke first to an officer on the docks, who sent a messenger up the stairs, and then to another officer who descended to them. It was difficult to distinguish any rank as all wore similar loincloths. Maybe something could read in their many tattoos —by one who knew how.

In turn, this officer dismissed he who had brought them. He seemed somewhat disappointed by his instructions to return upriver. "With me," said their new chaperon. The steep stairs, as the docks, were of wood, and fixed only at top and bottom, hinged, to dock and to the lip of the low cliff above. It was a height of twenty feet or so. Urtu wondered if the Gurang's levels changed much with the seasons.

Unlike the villages they had passed, the construction around them here was not of post and beam, though most structures had thatched roofs. Warehouses, thought Urtu, at once. There was no mistaking that. Many were open-sided, and stacked and stored goods might be seen within them. The houses beyond were more like those he had known in the Valley. None were particularly ostentatious. All sat on stone foundations.

And beyond them rose a large structure all of dark gray stone. A fort? A palace? Both maybe. The wide paved avenue before them led directly to it.

"These walls are rather low," Xido commented as they passed through the main entry. Neither it nor any other opening they spied was arched. Thick pillars supported arcades and porches in an appar-

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ently haphazard assemblage of two and three story buildings, all joined to some degree.

Two women came forth and held a quick, whispered conference with their escort. He nodded and turned to them. "The emperor will see you in the morning. I will show you to your quarters."

NINETEEN

"I'D HEARD YOUR PEOPLE LOOK like the Diwalnu of the swamps," spoke the woman at the emperor's side. "And this fellow does." She nodded toward Tira.

"Whereas *you* look more like a Bazu," said the woman on his other side.

"And so I am, my lady," said Xido. "Xit is my name. My travels led me to the valley beyond the mountains and there I took service with this nobleman."

"All Bazu are pirates," proclaimed the emperor. "However, I am not worried you will raid any of my ships here."

Appropriate laughter came from the crowd of courtiers. Even the two women smiled though Urtu guessed they had nothing to gain from it. One was older, the other more nearly the age of the emperor. He was a young, large man, a bit fat. His name was Panaymana. Panaymana the Third, they had been informed, but he should be addressed only as 'your magnificence.'

"And you," the younger woman said to Urtu. "The blood of the Vision-Lord must be strong in you. We have heard stories of his appearance and that many carry his heritage. How come you out of your land, noble?" She put enough emphasis on the last word for Urtu to know she was skeptical of the title.

"There is turmoil and war beyond the mountains, my lady. We chose to escape and see what else the world has to offer."

"War?" The emperor brightened up. "How fares the Lord of the Valley?"

For a moment, Urtu thought to pretend ignorance. But what was to be gained by that? "The Lord Hurasu is dead, magnificence. Many struggle now to take his place."

He noted the quick glance the two women gave each other. They might well already have heard this. The others in this room had not and a murmur arose. It subsided abruptly when Panaymana held up one broad hand. "And what is your intent now, travelers? Do you wish to live with us? Serve me, perhaps?"

"Your magnificence, we had no plans beyond crossing the mountains."

"Ah, to have no obligations! Maybe I should cross the mountains and see what is on your side."

"As did the legendary Malvern," said Urtu.

"Malvern?" He frowned in puzzlement over the name. The older woman whispered something in his ear. "Oh, Malaleta. An ancestor of mine. To think, your ancestor and mine had an adventure together hundreds of years ago!"

Urtu thought it best not to say it was two thousand years. Nor that his own father was the one to have an 'adventure' with Malvern.

Emperor Panaymana turned his attention to Tira. "This one is a priest? And he knows not our language. What is his name, Lord Cunos?"

"Hucan, magnificence. She serves Woran, the Rainbow Snake."

There was an immediate scowl. It took Urtu a moment to realize it had nothing to do with Tira. He had contradicted this young ruler, albeit indirectly and inadvertently. The emperor might think he had been made a fool.

Fortunately—or maybe not—there came a distraction when an officer of Panaymana's guard entered, carrying the sword of Hurasu. Urtu had been told no weapons would be allowed in the emperor's presence and with some reluctance left it in an antechamber. The young monarch was immediately taken by the weapon's appearance. "I heard of this and asked to see it. It is iron?" he asked.

"I believe it is forged of an alloy that includes iron, magnificence," he replied. Hurasu himself had been unable to tell him more than that. A sort of steel, Malvern had conjectured.

"It is a remarkable blade. We shall keep it a while, Lord Cunos, just to study it. And to keep you from using it, in case you are an assassin someone sent to me." It took a few seconds for the courtiers to recognize this joke, but Urtu had smiled at once. That was, he suspected, a good thing.

And he would not complain about Panaymana's possession of the sword. It would come back to him, one way or another. None the less, he was unhappy about returning to their rooms without it. Without anything being accomplished either. Would they be allowed to journey on? Were they prisoners here?

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“We need to teach Hucan the language of these people,” Xido announced, as soon as they were settled around the lunch brought to them. The emperor almost always held audience in the late morning, they had been informed, before his own lunch. His stomach told him when it was at an end.

“I need to learn it better myself. But will we be here long enough for it to matter?”

“Who could know? She might even decide to stay.” Xido turned to the sorcerer. “You couldn’t understand what we were going on about but you were the cause of a bit of a, ah, misunderstanding with the emperor. Don’t concern yourself about it. These people are far more tolerant of those such as you than the ones you left behind in your valley.”

Urtu helped himself to another golden-hued fruit he couldn’t identify but found he liked, before saying, “Hurasu was not at all pleased with the paternalistic turn society took in his realm but knew there was little he could do to change it from the top.”

Xido nodded agreement. “It had become rigid.”

“He did try to nudge it in his desired direction.”

“When he wasn’t an absentee ruler. And I believe he sometimes let things develop as they would out of curiosity. An experiment only a man of his longevity could conduct. I’m sure you know, Urtu, that your father created his language without gender.” The dark god glanced quickly at him and saw no disagreement. “But over thousands of years his people inevitably changed that language. That, too, the Lord of the Valley could not prevent.”

“And now we have more contact with those who live outside the Valley. The language of the lower Tez has changed till it is hardly Zikem at all.” He considered Tira. “No matter where any of us end up, knowing the pidgin the Molu speak in many ports would be useful.”

“I need to be able to learn as quickly as Xit does,” Tira told them.

A rap came on the door, followed by a captain of the guard. The one who had handed Panaymana his sword, Urtu noted. No reason to dislike him for that, though he felt an urge to. “The Ladies Panahona and Malama,” he announced. The two women who had stood by the emperor entered. “Shall I remain, my ladies?” asked the soldier.

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"Outside the door will do, Moyoa," spoke the older. There was no knowing which was Malama and which Panahona.

Moyoa gave them a little bow and stepped out. He left the heavy wooden door ajar.

It was the first time Urtu had seen anyone bow to anyone here. They had been told to make no obeisance to the emperor. He decided to do the same with these women.

"I am Malama," announced the younger. "Sister to Panaymana. Panahona is our mother."

She barely looked old enough, though it was difficult to judge these short-lived folk. The emperor was surely less than twenty years. Though Panahona was a slender woman, Malama looked as if she might go the way of her brother in time. Now, one could certainly state that she was tall and regal and not at all bad to look at. Neither was. Both were golden of skin and black of hair, and wore the long skirts of patterned cloth that seemed common here, leaving the breasts bare.

"Welcome to you, my ladies," he said and decided to get right at the question that most mattered. "Is the emperor angry with me?"

"Oh, no," Panahona assured him. "His anger was not particularly turned toward you. He feels his attendants should inform him of things."

"But I never said anything to them."

"Ah, but they should have asked. Or so my son thinks." The woman gave a careless shrug. "That matters not now and is probably forgotten."

"Something else has taken his interest," said Malama.

Panahona smiled. "Along with his afternoon nap."

Malama was not to be deflected. "It is the sword of Hurasu, is it not?"

"It is." There would be no point in lying. "You recognized it, my lady?"

"It is hard to mistake." It took Urtu a moment to realize she had answered in Zikem.

It was Xido who broke in now. "You have spoken afar in that tongue, I would hazard."

"Even so. I have the gift though neither my mother nor brother

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share it. And Panahona is scowling at me so I had best return to my own language.” This last sentence she had spoken in Molu. Her mother acknowledged it with but a thin smile. “I know you are a wizard,” Malama continued. “Maybe your friends too, but if so, they are as well warded as you. And so, none of you could sense me either, closed in your shells.”

“It seemed the sensible thing to do,” Urtu told her.

“So it does, Lord Cunos. I will not speak your true name though I believe I know it. There are those who seek you.”

And the jewels he carried. Did this Molu noblewoman know of those, too? She did not seem to sense them, as had Tira.

“Their reach does not extend to the empire,” stated Panahona.

“I hope not,” said her daughter. “We have enough problems.”

On that, both women seemed in agreement.

TWENTY

"YOU ARE TO TAKE A meal with the emperor," Moyoa informed them. "This is a great honor." One he didn't seem to think they deserved. Urtu suspected he saw them as prisoners, not guests.

At least their door remained unlocked. It was understood they should not wander. Not yet; this meeting with Panaymana might decide their actual status. Though the captain had not been forthcoming with any details, the palace staff was entirely willing to gossip.

"Not a feast," they were told by the man who loitered outside their door. An attendant, supposedly, a spy, certainly. "A small private supper, most likely, up at the emperor's retreat."

"Retreat?" asked Urtu.

"In the hills up that way." He waved toward what was probably the north. One couldn't tell what way was what, deep in this pile of stones. "Most of the nobles and important folk have places up there."

"The Ladies Malama and Panahona live at this retreat too?"

"Not on your life. Panahona has a house of her own and Malama stays at one of the shrines, much of the time. It's not *her* shrine, you understand."

"Of course." He felt it better not to reveal his ignorance. A shrine—the emperor's sister was a priestess, perhaps?

And a sorceress, certainly. In time, more would be revealed. Of this Urtu was fairly sure. It was nearing dusk when an escort came for them. Through the halls of the fortress they wound and out a way they had not seen before, facing the hills.

There were indeed buildings set here and there among those hills. Around them grew gardens and ornamental trees; where the land remained wild there was thick scrub with the occasional palm poking up from it. A thin soil, he decided, and not well suited to farming.

Panaymana's house was not particularly grand. Not being the official residence but a 'retreat,' maybe there was no need for it to be. Urtu was also beginning to suspect this spot on the river had been intended as a temporary capital. Maybe a temporary capital that had of necessity become somewhat permanent. In a sense, the Molu equivalent of Ten Serac.

"I am not at all sure how this Panaymana will treat me," whispered Xido. "He may consider me a servant and not fit to share a meal." He

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glanced sidelong toward Tira. "The priestess Hucan should be acceptable."

Indeed, the emperor's interest, gossip had it, had been aroused. The plan had been not to refer to her gender at all but Urtu had let that 'she' slip out without thinking. Perhaps it had been just as well.

A short entry hall led directly into the emperor's dining space, a large-enough room by most standards, but hardly imposing. The thick wooden pillars marching down both sides of the room suggested the post and beam construction that had once been standard in this part of the world—and still was, for the homes of the more lowly. Here they rested on a stone foundation rather than extending into the earth, and self-supporting walls stood around them, bearing much of the weight of the roof.

Soldiers remained, around the walls. Of their not-so-friendly friend Moyoa there was no sign this evening. A gray-haired woman came close to Urtu and whispered, "Is the Bazu your attendant? It is the custom for such to sit behind their master."

For a moment, Urtu toyed with the notion of having Xido play such a role. No, it would raise difficulties later, maybe. "He serves but not as personal attendant," he replied.

"Ah. I shall place him near the foot of the table then. This is satisfactory?"

"It is. I thank you." It never hurt to thank underlings and it cost nothing. She must have a fairly high place here, too.

And he should simply be thankful the woman had bothered to consult him. She now directed him to a place, with Tira at his right hand. They were both close to the head of the low table—it stood no more than a foot from the floor—and seated on cushions. Xido settled further down.

Urtu remembered that it had been customary at the time of Malvern for all the men to sit at one side and the women on the other. In those days, the ancestors of the Molu had laid their feasts on mats, not tables. Maybe Tira should be on the other side of this table? No, for Panahona entered and took a place to his left. Malama sat directly opposite of her. No room remained for anyone above them except at the head of the table. There was little doubt who sat there.

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Panaymana ambled in shortly after, gave his guests an amiable nod, and took his place. Two attractive and quite young women settled in kneeling positions behind him. Panahona leaned in and whispered to Urtu, "His attendants and concubines. We have yet to find the boy a suitable wife."

"I greet you, Lord Cunos," said the emperor settling himself into a comfortable position. "And your retinue."

"And I greet you, your magnificence." That out of the way, they got right to the business of food.

That was supplied in plenty, in great bowls along the length of the table. No attendants served it out; that was up to the diners. There was much fruit and much of the fruit was unfamiliar. Citrus did come up the Tez but most of these would not be likely to survive a long journey. Bananas he recognized from illustrations. He didn't know about these big ones that seemed to be baked. And that must be fresh papaya. Urtu had partaken of the fruit in dried form. Mulberries he knew well; they thrived and were eminently useful on both sides of the mountains.

There was no bread. Neither barley nor wheat, common in the Valley, were cultivated here. Rice he recognized; that did come up from the lower Tez in some quantities. Another reddish grain he wasn't sure of. Millet? He knew millet beer was common here.

And there was plenty of beer for them. Some sort of wine too. Not made from grapes. A thick paste that seemed to be liked by everyone. They dipped their fingers into it and licked the gluey stuff from them. Not much flavor.

Yams. Those were good. Several sorts of flesh. Duck, that's what that was. Pork. No mistaking pork. Undoubtedly chicken in that bowl over there. He might sample it later. It was the best meal he'd had since leaving the House of the Mountain, above the Lake of the Sky.

Panaymana personally handed food back to his attendants. From time to time he laughed when one would whisper in his ear. They whispered to each other much also but did not address any of the guests. Urtu could not miss the unfriendly looks they sometimes gave the emperor's mother and sister through the meal. He was quite certain Xido would note them too. Not much got by the god, even if he didn't always seem to grasp some of the practicalities of mortal life.

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From time to time, a remark would be made about something, a random question addressed to Urtu. If there was to be serious talk, it would come later. "Do you take coffee?" asked the emperor, as consumption began to slow "Despite everything, we still have some good southern coffee here."

Urtu knew of coffee. He had never tasted it. It was Xido's voice that was raised in answer. "The folk across the mountains know nothing of coffee, magnificence. They are drinkers of tea."

"We do have tea about," said Malama. "Some is grown in the northern provinces."

"Which are again in rebellion. Unfortunately, so are the southern ones," grumbled Panaymana. "Do you wish tea, my guest?"

"I would gladly partake of your coffee, magnificence."

The emperor nodded, satisfied he had satisfied the duties of hospitality, and ordered coffee brought to the table. Again, Panahona leaned toward Urtu. "Tea would have been no problem. My daughter is fond of it and makes sure she has enough about at all times."

Panaymana continued to consume an occasional mouthful of this or that, but seemed sated. "Master Xit, you know coffee?" he asked.

"I do, your magnificence. I understand the best is grown in the shadow of the mountains in the far south—and that is also where it was first cultivated in the Molu lands."

"I've heard that story," grunted Panaymana. "I don't know how much truth there is to it, but I do know it is the best. We grow an inferior sort on this side of the hills."

"My brother means the hills traditionally dividing the the south from the valley of the Gurang," stated Malama. "He does not remember you may not be familiar with our empire."

"And I," spoke Panahona, "would argue that there are places on this side of those hills that can rival the south. The Valley of Lanada, for example."

"I know of that place," Urtu said. "It is spoken of in the annals of Malvern." There was no need to mention that one of the ways across the mountains began and ended there.

"It has some importance in our history," said Malama.

"As a refuge for more than one emperor. It would make a pleasant

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refuge from the heat of this place right now.” Panahona glanced at her son as she said this.

“You know you may go if you wish, Mother, but I remain here. The mines are the main source of our power and should not be left to others. Ah, the coffee.”

It came in a large ceramic jar, ornately decorated. Urtu knew the Molu were renowned for producing such ware. Small bowls matched it, and a plate with a brownish lump. He puzzled over that for but a moment. Sugar. Cane Sugar. Little of that ever made it to the upper Valley, where they had long used syrup made from a grain as a sweetener.

Panaymana himself poured out the dark steaming liquid and passed the bowls to his guests and then his family and, last of all, the girls who sat behind him. All this before he filled a bowl for himself, and bent his head over it, savoring the aroma.

The emperor obviously had a great liking for it. Urtu sniffed tentatively at his own serving. Tira was being cautious too but Xido was already sipping his, having added a generous amount of sugar. Was there coffee in whatever world dwelt this god?

Maybe he came to this one just to enjoy such things, human things. Who could understand a god? Urtu had no idea why he had attached himself to his own journey. Perhaps the jewels he carried had something to do with it. He couldn’t think of anything else that made sense.

Hmm, not so bad. He didn’t think he would like sugar in it. None the less, he would prefer a cup of tea. Maybe he could prevail upon Malama to share some of hers.

“It is time to talk,” announced Panaymana.

His mother gave him a stern look. The young emperor turned to his even younger attendants and motioned a dismissal with his head. Both rose and left him, again with not the friendliest of looks for his family.

“Very well,” said Panymana then. “My mother wants me to concentrate on business!”

“And not to have too many ears listening to that that business,” said Malama. “Everyone out but our guests. Yes, you soldiers too.”

Their officer looked uncertain about leaving the emperor along with these strangers. “Go,” ordered Panaymana. “They aren’t going to assass-

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sinate me.” As the men filed out, he told Urtu, “It is a very real concern here. You,” he called to Xido, sitting at the other end of the table. “Come up here and join us. I suspect you are an important part of this and not just a servant. There, by my sister.”

The god slid onto a cushion beside Malama. “Very well. As far as assassinations go, perhaps I should have one such as you as my body-guard, Lord Cunos. You and your shiny sword! But here, where indeed there are not too many ears I might call you Urtu, eh? Malama has informed me of your identity. How she knows such things I do not understand but she is priestess and prophetess so I believe her words.”

“Lord Urtu understands such things quite well,” spoke Malama.

“Yes, yes, a sorcerer.” His eyes went from one side of the table to the other. “All of you?”

“It is so, magnificence,” said Xido.

“And you have enemies so you might do just as well to remain here. Or do you hope to reclaim your kingdom, Urtu? By the way, you needn’t call me magnificence in private. We two are equals, aren’t we? Both rulers of great nations, even if you are in, ah, exile at the moment.”

This sudden volubility of Panaymana amused Urtu. It made him seem more a boy. “I might someday attempt to return to my father’s realm,” he said. “That is unlikely to be soon.”

“Remember,” Malama told her brother, “Urtu may be very long lived. He can afford to wait on things longer than we are willing.”

“Oh. Now that I hadn’t thought of. But that works even better, doesn’t it? Yes, stay with us and be one of my captains.” This he said eagerly, seriously, but followed it with a laugh. “After we set my empire to rights, we can see about getting you back to yours!”

Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad idea. He had no other plans, after all. Urtu looked across the table to Xido but could read nothing in his countenance. “Let me think on it. A day or two, no more.” Though unsure it was wise, he had to ask, “And if I choose to go, we will be allowed passage?”

Panaymana’s look of displeasure, little more than a tightening of the jaw, came and went so quickly one might not have noticed it—one less

schooled than Urtu. "Sure. Why not?" Urtu wasn't completely certain he believed the young emperor. About that, he could do nothing.

"There is another matter," said Panaymana. "My sister wishes to travel to the south, to the shrine of her goddess. None would hinder her in this, for her person is sacred, but those are disputed lands right now and my soldiers might not be welcomed. I would ask you to escort her."

Urtu could not conceal his surprise. "Yes," the emperor went on. "You and Hucan could readily pass for Diwalnu. That my sister would be attended by such might seem a little unusual but certainly not suspicious. Xit would have to remain, of course. And, um, your sword."

"I will tell you at once I do not like that condition."

"We might say it would serve as a hostage of sorts. I know you would never abandon it."

Malama's eyes had widened, just a little, at this last bit. It seemed likely her brother had come up with it on his own. Urtu suspected the idea of him serving as her bodyguard was her own, however. Hers and maybe her mother's.

"This, too, I shall consider," he told the emperor.

TWENTY-ONE

"YOUNG PANAYMANA IS NOT AS much of a fool as one might think on first acquaintance," said Xido. Malama looked him askance but the emperor's mother laughed.

"He will make a good ruler in a few years," she said. "He came to the throne too young."

"But he has you and your daughter to guide him," said Urtu. "I get the feeling he would appreciate less guidance."

Malama's smile told him she was well aware of this. "He'll be getting rid of me for a while. If we both left the boy alone he might take it into his mind to marry his concubines. One or both of them."

"Not that it would be a terrible thing," said Panahona. "Just not right now. Not until he has a suitable first wife. Then he can take all the lesser wives he desires."

"What would make a suitable first?" Urtu was no more than curious and perhaps a bit amused. None of this meant anything to him. Not as far as he could tell.

"Definitely not one of those silly girls!" stated Malama.

"Indeed not," agreed the older woman. "Family. His wife must bring political ties with her, important ties, to help pull our nation back together."

"And it would be hoped their son would inherit a united realm?" Urtu knew a marriage was unlikely to actually achieve such an end.

"Oh, no," Malama said. "No child of Panaymana will rule the empire. Panaymana's father was not emperor. Succession here remains through the mother's line, as it was in the days of the ancient High Kings. Panahona's brother ruled before him."

"Your uncle. Would then your own son be likely to rule in his turn?"

"Though I might have a son someday, I will not marry, being a priestess and prophetess of Malahina. That would make any bid to rule less likely to find support."

"It is not an impossibility," stated Panahona. "You should take an important man as a lover, to strengthen his claim."

Malama laughed. "But not necessarily to father my hypothetical child!" The glance she then gave Urtu suggested she had some thoughts about who might make a proper father.

His eyes went to Tira, who sat patiently, understanding none of

this. He would not object to another journey. "Very well. We shall accompany you, Lady Malama. We shall have to teach Hucan your language." But Malama knew Zikem. It would be good to know more of how she learned it.

"We shall inform my son," said Panahona, rising from her cushion. "Not that any of us doubted you would agree."

"Except maybe you," added Malama, with a too-knowing smile. "We shall prepare at once. I would rather have had you with your sword at your side. Yet, it might have attracted too much attention."

"Swords can be concealed," Urtu told her.

As soon as the two were out the door, Xido snickered. "The girl is more interested in another sword you carry, I think."

"It would be wiser to keep it concealed too, I think."

"These are Molu. They are freer about such things than you are accustomed to." He looked about them at the stone walls. "I hope they let me out of this room when you are gone."

"You may walk through those walls anytime you wish," Tira reminded him.

"But who would remain to keep an eye on the Sword of Hurasu? And maybe on some other things—hmm, yes." Of what he was speaking, Urtu had no idea, nor was he sure he wanted to know.

Urtu alone was invited to attend Panaymana that afternoon. After his nap, he assumed. The emperor met him in an open courtyard of the fortress, by an open gateway and flanked once again by mother and sister—and a number of armed men. "We are pleased you agreed to do us this favor, Lord Cunos. We prepare for your departure. Tomorrow morning! Yes, so soon!"

"There would be no point in dawdling, your magnificence." In that, Urtu was completely sincere. Best to get this done.

"Though your sword remains here, we found you an excellent blade to carry in its place. Bronze, though, not iron. It is at your shrine, Malama, isn't it?"

"Everything is there we need." She gave Urtu an up and down look. "Except proper attire for my retinue. We need to get you out of—what do you call that thing?"

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"A tunic, my lady." It was so much everyday wear for him he had given it no thought.

"A nice flowered salung, you think?" she asked her mother.

"Don't some Diwalnu go naked?" Panahona answered. "That might be nice."

"Now be nice to the boy," said Panaymana. The emperor stopped and squinted at his guest, before stepping closer. Urtu could see some of the guards stiffen at this proximity of the two. "Are you a boy?" whispered Panaymana. "I know your people have incredibly long lives."

"I've no more than four or five years on you, I would think," he replied. It might be a couple more than that but he had decided to keep the difference to a minimum. Urtu *was* a young man in any land.

Panaymana only nodded and stepped back. He might have looked a little relieved to have cleared this up. "You can accompany my sister to her little shrine and work out the details," he said, nodding to the portal to the outside, "and I shall see you when you get back. If she is willing to release you!"

"I'll go with you," spoke Panahona. A pair of guards fell in behind.

"This is as much my personal retreat as a shrine to Malahina," said the priestess as they walked, their way rising into the hills. "Although another is officially in charge of it."

"And we travel to another shrine in the south?"

"Yes. It is where I am supposed to live but being sister to the emperor gives one some privileges. If I am named High Priestess one of these days—"

"And you will be," interrupted her mother.

"I won't be able to abandon my sisters like this."

"Don't assume," Panahona said, "that Malama's birth gives her any special status as priestess. She is a powerful prophetess, the most powerful of her order."

Malama chose to make no comment on this. The shrine looked much like the other houses behind the keep, except for a grotesque wooden statue standing before it. Grotesque to Urtu's eyes. The goddess? Or maybe some sort of demon guard to ward evil from the place. What he knew of the Molu religion was dated, to say the least. It

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was certainly not the same as what had existed in the time of Malvern. Since then, two once separate cultures had melded into one. The Mora and the Kohari they had been; now they were the Molu.

Not that there wouldn't be differences between the southern and northern ends of their wide-spread culture. That extended beyond the boundaries of empire.

An open courtyard lay within the shrine. Another, more pleasing statue stood there. Slightly more pleasing. Two quite young women sat on a bench. "Fellow priestesses," Malama explained. "Novices I have been training. These two will accompany me as my attendants. They have not yet earned names so call them simply sister." She saw the immediate question in Urtu's eyes. "No, Malama is not the name my mother gave me."

"And when you are named High Priestess you will have yet a different name." This was conjecture but it had been so, long ago.

"Mother is eager for our current leader to pass, I think. She is still young and vigorous and quite competent—and I have no desire at all to replace her right now." They had passed through the open yard and entered a way on its far side. "There's the sword my brother promised," she said, waving an arm toward a weapon leaning against a wall. "Let us sit down and discuss our journey over tea."

It was good tea, Urtu had to admit. And preferable to coffee.

TWENTY-TWO

IT TURNED OUT DIWALNU TYPICALLY wore a sort of kilt. Proper ones had been found for Urtu and Tira, cut longer in the front than back. "Bark cloth?" he guessed. No one wore it in the Valley but the process of making it was not so different from that of the paper they did produce. "From the mulberry?"

"Maybe," thought Malama. "It could be kumu bark."

"I do not know that name," he admitted.

"A large fruit, cultivated widely in the north. Usually cooked but rather flavorless however it is prepared."

They would not need to don the kilts at once. Tomorrow or the next day would be soon enough. They—Urtu, Tira, Malama, the two novices—had climbed down to a boat before dawn and launched into the Gurang. It was little different from the boat that had brought them to Panaymana's capital. Maybe slightly smaller. Oars propelled it upriver only a short distance before it bore right into what seemed nothing but swamp.

Ah, but here and there were markers. And there was a sluggish stream here, its movement betrayed by an occasional eddy about a tree or snag. Oars were still needed though the woven sail caught some breeze. Urtu could not name the great trees that rose from the water around them. So he asked. The man at the stern gave them a disinterested look and said, "Cypress."

"Their wood is used in the boats of the imperial navy," said a wiry woman at the other end of the boat, holding a long pole and surveying the course ahead. "This craft is mostly made of kumu wood. Cheap and light but doesn't hold up nearly as well." She chuckled in a disconcerting manner. "If we run it into a snag it'll fall apart and we'll all be crocodile food."

"I'd best not distract you then," said Urtu.

"Right," agreed the helmsman.

Better to use his time to give language lessons to Tira and not think about those toothy monsters swimming somewhere below him. No more than a couple hours later there was a stream with clearly defined banks, a small river of dark water. Villages appeared here and there. Then the largest town Urtu had yet seen in this land, with a fortress

rising behind it. "This was once the capital of the empire," Malama informed him. "The original capital, some say. We will get off here."

"The boat can't go further?" he asked, gathering his meager gear.

"Some distance. The river grows shallow and smaller craft are mostly used above here. We'll go by land now. It's all solid ground over here though swampland comes and goes on the western side." She surveyed her little group standing on the dock. "Now remember you are my bodyguards. Girls, you follow behind me." With that, Malama marched into the town and straight toward the walls of the fort.

They were greeted at its gates, obviously expected. Messengers must have been sent ahead. This was no secret trip; there was more safety in Malama being known than unknown. She would be granted passage without question and, in theory, none would molest her. In actuality, Urtu had been warned—by pretty much everyone—that there were those who would not respect her status as a priestess and might hope to use her in some way. As hostage or as captive for ransom, perhaps. There were even be those would seek her death simply as an enemy to whatever ambitions they might have. His position here was not ornamental.

They were led to their quarters. "You and Hucan in the antechamber," Malama said after looking the rooms over and giving her approval. "We women beyond. Our meals will be brought so we need not venture out until our departure tomorrow."

"I might have liked to look this place over. But it is more sensible to stay close."

"I don't like sitting in a room either. Perhaps some other time on some other trip to some other place! Now—" She looked over her pair of guards. "It wouldn't hurt for Hucan to continue to use her name, whether it's her real one or not. Nor does it matter much which gender she claims. You, however—Urtu is actually a Diwalnu name. An old one, not used much anymore, but Diwalnu none the less."

"I knew that. My father named me for a friend who came of that people."

"It would be best if you simply addressed me as 'my lady' and the girls as 'sister.' Hmm, Hucan is a priest, right? And a sorcerer. We can claim she is a shaman and call her 'sister' too. Or is that too much?"

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"Maybe," agreed Urtu.

"Yes, I suppose so. We probably should have a different name for you though. It needn't be a Diwalnu name at all. People would believe you to be of mixed heritage." She regarded him a moment before deciding. "Samuc. We had an old gardener by that name when I was a little girl and I was rather fond of him."

"Then Samuc I am from now on. Call me if you need any digging, my lady."

"Oh, do I need some digging. But never mind that. Why, Samuc, did I make you blush? You are dark and it is hard to tell!"

The rooms were windowless and close and made of wood. Old wood; this whole place seemed ancient. Windowless was good, from a security standpoint. But there were no bars for the doors. Urtu suspected these people knew nothing of locks. He certainly had seen none. By the light of a small stone lamp burning palm oil they partook of the meal sent to them.

"Is this that kumu fruit you mentioned?" he asked Malama. It was certainly flavorless.

"That it is. The food of those who can afford no better." She was silent for a moment. "Things may not be going well here if this is what they offer us."

One of the novices giggled and whispered to the other. "What are you saying?" asked Malama. "You needn't hide your thoughts from me."

"She said it was what they feed prisoners, my lady."

"Ah, maybe it is! But it is filling. Let us get some sleep. We start early tomorrow."

There were mats for their sleeping. Thin mats. A few cushions had been added to these in the room the priestesses shared. Urtu directed Tira to spread his near the door to their chamber and settled down himself next to the opening to the hall. They had no lamp in the antechamber; the woman had carried that into their own room and for a while he could make out a dim light around their door. Then complete darkness.

Maybe it had been the darkness of sleep. He wasn't sure. What he was sure of was that something had awakened him. Maybe Tira had

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gotten up. Maybe one of the women had some reason to come out, though there were pots in both chambers for use in the night. If one could locate them in the blackness. No, there still shown a faint halo of light around their door. A door that remained closed.

Someone moved in front of that light. "Tira?" No answer but the shadow before the door hid itself in the shadows of the room. "Ho, Tira!" he cried, and immediately rolled across the floor before the intruder could locate him from his voice. One intruder only, he hoped. His sword was lying here somewhere but his knife had remained at his waist. Now his hand found it. He listened.

But Tira had awakened and sat up when he called out. "What?" she asked. "Is it morning?"

"There's an intruder in the room!" Whoever that intruder might be, they bolted at that moment for the door. Urtu reached out, got just enough grip on one ankle to make the person stumble but not fall. He leaped to his feet but they were out the door before he could attempt to grapple again.

He dare not pursue the intruder into the hallway. His duty was to remain close to Malama. Her door opened, cautiously. "What is the commotion?" came her hoarse whisper. By the lamp light, Urtu could see a bronze dagger in her hand.

"An intruder. They escaped."

She stood silent for some seconds. "Were they interested in you or in me?"

"There is no telling. It could have either."

Or, just possibly, the jewels that hung at his waist.

TWENTY-THREE

“ONE REASON I TRAVEL SOUTH is to sound out possible matrimonial choices for my brother. I am not only priestess but emissary on this trip.”

“So we do not travel only to your shrine.” Another detail that had been neglected when he was coerced into making the trip. “Does it come first or last?”

“That is yet to be learned. We might wander back and forth for years!” She laughed at his disgusted expression and rested a hand lightly on his thigh. “I would not mind much wandering with you.”

He was *not* going to return the sentiment. “Are we ready to ride on?” he asked.

“I am and I’m the one who matters! You and Hucan ride much too well for Diwalnu fresh from the swamps, you know. Especially Hucan.”

There had been horses ready for them in the morning, including an extra to carry baggage and supplies. Another unexpected surprise for Urtu, and Hucan’s familiarity with being on horseback was an even greater surprise. He himself had never ridden that much. The novice priestesses were far more comfortable in their saddles than was he.

“Do you think anyone will notice?”

“Maybe not, but some people tend to be curious. Some people are paid to be curious.”

“You might have done better to travel with men who would not arouse suspicion.”

Malama had risen but of a sudden sat down again. “I have seen you, Urtu of the Valley of Visions. I had seen you in dreams of prophecy. You are important. Important to me, important to my nation. And—others have spoken to me of you. I think I need to keep you close.”

“Oh.” It was not a clever response. He might think of one of those later. His eyes went to the novices. “Those you travel with are prophetesses too, aren’t they? They have the heritage of sorcery.”

“They do. And they are well-trained. I do not think they will accidentally betray anything.”

“I much doubt there is any reason for me to close myself off from my own powers anymore. I may attempt to speak with Xit from afar later.”

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"He is a powerful sorcerer? I can see nothing of him."

"More powerful than you can imagine."

"I have a very good imagination. Perhaps I'll show you sometime."

Once again, Urtu had no ready response so he said only, "We'd best get on our way."

This time they managed it. There was a decent enough road leading south, in parallel to the river. A stone pavement went only a couple leagues beyond the town, where it became dirt. Traffic of all sorts followed it, going both ways, horses, ox carts, and many on foot. Small boats plied the water to their right. Villages came and went.

There were shelters to stay in at night, as they had used on the river, that first night after coming out of the mountains. Malama's status also allowed her, she said, to lodge at any official residence or outpost. "I would as soon not," she told Urtu. "For the sake of the horses, I might, but we travel quickly enough it may be unnecessary."

Travel quickly they did. This certainly was better than the slow climb Urtu had made by foot into the mountains, not long ago. They made it to a small lake, with a good-sized village by it, by nightfall. "The last place, really, if you travel by boat. It's all overland from here."

Urtu nodded, not paying particularly close attention, looking about. Would there be someplace to stable or corral their horses? Or should they just be tied somewhere for the night? Then, a feeling. A feeling of other worlds hovering close, almost merging with this one yet just beyond reach. A feeling of unknown forces flowing near, where one might be lost in dark eddies of time and space.

"Is something wrong?" asked Malama. "Why do you stare so?"

"This is a place of power. Not great power, but it is here none the less." He searched his memory. "Oh!" A sudden realization. "The Place of the Crocodile. Where my father first called to Malvern over the mountains."

"Malvern was a sorcerer? That is not in any of the stories."

"No, he was not. Hurasu spoke to him in his dreams."

"I have only heard of this being done. Never have I known one capable of it."

Urtu nodded. It was rare indeed, requiring tremendous ability. But this locus of power might have helped. The Place of the Crocodile—

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what better spot to reach out to a crocodile god? He would try it later. The first impact of the place was wearing off and they should get themselves settled.

"You do not feel the power here?" he whispered to the priestess.

"I know the Diwalnu have long considered this a sacred spot. I hesitate to open myself to it right now."

Which was sensible. They saw to getting themselves settled in a camping spot—the weather was dry enough they needn't use one of the shelters—having the horses corralled and fed, and preparing a small meal for themselves. This latter the novices had taken care of by the time the other chores were done. "There are vendors here," they reported, "but they charge too much."

Malama laughed at this. She was an emperor's sister and didn't worry much about saving a copper coin or two. None the less, she complimented the girls on the meal they had prepared from what they had brought along. "It is never good to be wasteful," she stated, "and, after all, why else did we carry food with us?"

But later she assured Urtu, "Tomorrow night will be another matter."

"This night I am going to attempt to speak with Xit," he replied. "Just me for now." If Xido approved, they might let her into their conversations some other day.

"I understand."

He sat down, close beside the lake. It was a small, shallow, sandy lake, more a widening of the river—what was left of it—than aught else. Many canoes were drawn up beside it, belonging to those who had gone on by foot after paddling this far. The country around them had become patches of scrub and grassland, with cultivation here and there. Vegetable gardens mostly.

Xido. This was not something the two did, speak from afar, but the god had told him where he might find him, where he might call to him, if he wished. He might or might not be listening. He reached out to that place, sent a slight of part of himself there and spoke the crocodile god's name. It was a vertiginous sort of place he had come to, high steep mountains, somewhere.

Not there, came Xido's voice. *Come with me to talk.*

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They went to a typical world for speaking from afar, a world that seemed no more than a small dimly lit room. Maybe that was all it was. Urtu had been told there were an infinite number of such places and it was a good idea to switch from one to another regularly to avoid being followed by other wizards. *So how are things at the palace?*

Panaymana is happy. Moyoa is unhappy. His lover has left him for another.

You know this how?

Because she left him for me. I speak of the Lady Panahona.

That is dangerous. Very much an understatement, that was.

Xido snickered. *Not so much for me. Maybe for you! What do I feel?* There was an uncomfortably long pause. *Do you stand in a place of power?*

He felt something too and it was akin to what he felt when he first opened himself to the Place of the Crocodile. Yet there was something new. *I do*, he replied. *Not a very strong one.*

But you carry the Eyes. They are reaching out to the worlds. To all of infinity at once—aiee, leave!

With that, Xido broke the link and Urtu left that little world to find himself curled up, quivering, by that pleasant little lake. The others crouched around him. There were curious onlookers beyond them. “You carry some powerful talisman,” stated Malama. “I never sensed it before but now I can feel it there.” She pointed to where the jewels hung at his waist. The novices nodded behind her. They had felt them too.

And Tira looked more shaken than Urtu himself. She had ever shown a particular sensitivity to the Eyes. He sat up, breathing deeply and steadily, calming himself. “Yes. I carry the Eyes of the Wind.” Malama drew her breath in sharply. “Someone has spoken to you of them, I would surmise.”

“She has. She yearns to possess them.”

“But she is far away, and I have them and will keep them safe. That, more than any other reason, is why I left my home.”

“Then we shall help you keep them safe, Urtu, son of Hurasu. That woman shall not know where you are!”

But it was too late for that. As he had broken away, he realized that

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another had also sensed the jewels and he had no doubt it was Olun. Before she had known only of his existence, had seen only his personal power. Now she would know he carried the Eyes.

Could she reach as far as the Empire of the Molu in her desire to possess them?

TWENTY-FOUR

"THIS VILLAGE IS THE LAST place the emperor's power remains fairly secure. Beyond, things grow more unsure." It was a modest village, beside a modest spring-fed lake. More a pond, perhaps, and the source of the stream they had followed. There would not be enough water to support a larger population, here in a shallow bowl of a valley set among the grasslands.

A small fortress, little more than a blocky house, rose in the midst of the town. The stones to build it must have been carried some distance. This place, too, Urtu recognized from the accounts in his father's library. The 'trade village' it had been called; he doubted it wore that name now.

As if she sensed his thought, Malama said, "This village was long referred to as the door to the north. Now it can just as accurately be called the door to the south. Or as Intu. Most would name it so."

He had to smile at that. The word meant nothing more nor less than 'door.' "Doors will be opened to you here, I would assume."

"If we wish. The emperor's representative in yon house will expect me to pay my regards and perhaps take a meal."

Urtu scanned the structure. "It is not really a fortress, is it?" It might be held for a while. It would not stand long to a serious attack.

"There would be little point in fortifying or defending this place. It's strategic value is nil. Better to let it carry on its immemorial tradition of trade and leave it alone." Crowds taking part in that tradition milled about them as they rode down the central street. "The town remains busy regardless of what might be going on elsewhere. It does remain very much a center of trade between north and south, and a place to rest for those who travel from one to the other."

All five dismounted before the administrator's house. "We should all present ourselves," said Malama. "You may be sure Himonacuna was informed of our coming."

There were few trees in the place. Too dry, Urtu assumed. He had spied what he knew to be mulberries near the pond. Those he knew well; they were widely cultivated in the Valley, not only for their fruit but to feed silk worms. Did they produce silk here? He knew varieties of the tree served in many other ways, as wood, as material for bark

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cloth and paper. Roots were even used as rope sometimes. This he had read and the information might be long out of date.

And, of course, their shade was ever welcome. An older woman, somewhat small, almost desiccated in appearance, came forth, flanked by a pair of warriors, a plump man hovering behind. "We greet and welcome you, Lady Malama," she spoke.

"And we greet you, Lady Himonacuna," said Malama. "I present two novices of Malahina." The girls silently nodded a greeting. "Samuc, my bodyguard, and Hucan, a shaman of the swamps. We remain together, whether it be in your best guest quarters or in the stables."

"Rooms have been prepared. My steward will show you to them. You will eat with me, my lady?"

"I would be honored but—it might be best if the girls had a meal in their room. The shaman, too. She speaks only some dialect of the swamps which her friend understands."

To be sure, Malama also understood the 'dialect.' Perhaps it was as well no one knew that.

Lady Himonacuna looked the two pseudo-Diwalnu over. "Once, it is said, many Diwalnu traded here. We see few now, but you are welcome."

"Indeed," said Malama, "the town was founded for that purpose. There was no other folk in the north, in those days. None of our people yet dwelt in the valley of the Gurang."

The emperor's representative in Intu took this history lesson without comment. Perhaps she knew it already. Perhaps she did not care. Urtu suspected Malama had spoken of it more for his benefit than that of Himonacuna—to let him know she was a woman of knowledge. They followed the fat steward to their rooms, on the second floor of the place. "Some sleep on the roof when it is not raining," he told them. "It is cooler."

The rooms, adjoining, were sweltering, despite having windows. It had looked like rain, though. Urtu, in his short time on this side of the mountains, had learned this was the tail end of the rainy season. "I don't much like separate doors to the hallway," he announced. The

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door between their chambers must remain open if he was to keep watch; the events of two nights previous were making him cautious.

And this place, as the one at which they stayed before, had no bars nor locks for the doors. Windows—those too were dangerous but he would not recommend shutting them on this hot evening.

The steward gave him a nod of approval when he finished looking their quarters over. He apparently appreciated a man thorough in his craft. "If you wish," he offered, "I can have sentries posted in the hall."

"An excellent idea," said Malama. "Now when do we eat?"

The meal proved unremarkable and Urtu largely ate in silence, while Malama and their host gossiped of things inconsequential. Both diligently avoided all politics.

Then, back to their rooms. There was little he could do about them. At least rain was falling outside and cooling things some. Whether that might prevent an intruder from attempting to climb to the windows, who could say? Urtu decided the best solution was to sleep in the open doorway between the two rooms.

Malama only shrugged. "As you will. It is to be hoped our sleeping arrangements can change when we are on the other side of the hills." Then a slightly disquieting smile. "Not here. Not yet."

And maybe never, thought Urtu. Not that Malama was in anyway undesirable. Attractive, intelligent—but sister to an emperor. It is not good to become involved with such people. Not when you have plans to move on.

He did intend to move on, didn't he? He settled on his pallet and tried to sleep. He was restless. When he did sleep at last, bad dreams came. The face of Barazes, the sorcerer he had slain, haunted him. Urtu thought he had forgotten the man and what he had done to him, amid all that befallen since. Yet there he was, staring, mindless, until he put an end to him.

At last Barazes disappeared into the blackness of deep sleep. But he was not forgotten, come morning, as dreams so often are.

TWENTY-FIVE

“ONCE,” SAID MALAMA, “INTU WAS a center for the making of ceramics but that has moved elsewhere. Though clay sources remain in the area, there are others in more convenient spots.”

“Fire is needed,” Urtu observed. “Wood is scarce here.”

“You understand the ways of trade. Too few fighting men have that ability.”

“I do not consider myself a fighting man, my lady.” But what did he consider himself? He hoped she would not ask for he found he had no answer. “I see herds here,” he said, hoping to prevent himself from being their topic.

Lean white cattle grazed on either side of their way. Very different they seemed from the heavy shaggy reddish creatures that pastured in the upper Valley. Some had been seen on the way to Intu but more were here, as they rode south. In the distance now, Urtu could glimpse a low range of hills, the hills long considered the divide between ‘north’ and ‘south.’

There had been no intruders in the night—none save in his dreams. That had left him more tired than he would have liked. Too, he was sore with the riding. They all rode astraddle their steeds, on thin saddles, the priestesses hiking up their long skirts. Travelers they passed, moving both directions, but only once did someone pass them by, riding swiftly on a horse. “One of my brother’s couriers,” remarked Malama. “I assume there is someone on the other end of his ride to receive the message.”

“Things are bad ahead?”

“They are bad everywhere. We will camp before crossing and go over in the morning.”

The place they stopped, where the road rose to a gap through the hills, was more a camp than a village. Many there were travelers, bound one way or the other, some with carts, some with nothing more than back packs, but most intent on commerce of some sort. Some were even doing commerce on the spot, haggling with each other over this or that.

The little party had settled down, horses tended, when Urtu heard a call. Xido, hailing him from the world where they had last spoken. *May I bring Malama?* he asked the god.

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You might as well. My news concerns her.

He returned all his consciousness to the world in which he stood and asked, "Would you like to speak afar with Xit?"

"Show me where."

She followed him to the little dim-lit universe. *I do, um, not do this very much*, she said. What might have been a nervous laugh followed. It sounded odd here.

I understand this, said Xido. *You are prophetess first, not sorcerer.*

Even so, she agreed.

My news, the god continued, *is more for you than for the boy. There was an attempt on your brother's life last night.*

Assassins? Is he safe?

Yes, assassins. Two attacked while he took a meal with Panabona. I, ah, dealt with them. Panaymana is unscathed.

You dealt with them. Very well. She did not seem doubtful of this. *But how did you happen to be there, my friend Xit?*

I was taking the meal with them. I live with your mother now.

This was something Urtu had neglected to tell Malama. She gave him a suspicious glance but said nothing.

Your own journey has been uneventful? asked Xido

We had an intruder of our own two nights ago. What he sought we have no idea. Maybe my life. Maybe those jewels Urtu carries.

You know of those now.

They were revealed when we were at—what did you call that place of power, Urtu?

The Place of the Crocodile.

I know of it, said Xido. *It has nothing to do with me.*

Malama gave him a long look. *There are very old tales of a little black god who would roam the lands without revealing himself.*

I've heard those myself. Urtu—there are place of power where you are bound, too. Be wary of them.

I'll attempt to guide him, offered the priestess.

You had better, for both your good.

Xido, er, Xit, spoke Urtu. *What was that place where we first met, before you brought me here?*

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That was my own world. Not at all a good place to speak but I'm always paying attention to it if anyone calls.

The world of the crocodile god? asked Malama.

And all his family. Don't attempt to blunder into it now you know the way. They might be hungry. With that, Xido abruptly broke off. A few seconds later, Malama and Urtu returned to their own world.

"I am glad your brother is safe," said Urtu.

"As am I. It is good—Xido, did you say?" She snickered at his expression. "It is a good thing *Xit* was there, whatever he is up to with my mother. Assassination is a constant concern. Our uncle was murdered and Panaymana did come to the throne far too soon. There are those who would dispute his sitting on it."

"Your uncle was a good ruler?"

"An abysmal one! Much of our current trouble comes from his policies. Or lack of them. He would not let my mother guide him."

"As you both attempt to guide your brother."

"Yes, attempt." Malama sighed. "Sometimes we are successful. But we can not talk him into quitting his mean little capital. He won't leave his precious mines."

Urtu had recognized this. "He overestimates their importance. It is in the people that power rests, not metal."

"My brother needs one such as you to guide him." The priestess might have smirked. "Through me, of course."

"Of course, my lady." Then Urtu stepped out onto a thin limb. He expected it to support him. "And perhaps also to help you provide him with an heir?"

She stared at him, seeming more uncertain than aught else. When she could come up with no ready answer, Urtu continued. "I am not blind, Malama. At least not to things so obvious."

The priestess broke into laughter. "It is, isn't it? But all of that would not be enough. It is you I want, Urtu, not just your counsel and your child."

And that was exactly what he feared. "You realize any child of ours would be a sorcerer. Possibly a quite powerful one."

"Yes, I suppose so. It is a little too soon to speak of such things, isn't

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it? Nothing has happened between us and—and from your attitude I have not been sure anything ever would.”

“When it comes to my future, I am even less sure of things than you.”

TWENTY-SIX

THE PASSAGE ACROSS THE HILLS was easy, the road good, the gap low. Beyond lay the land of which Urtu had read in the ancient sagas his father had gathered and had transcribed, the land of the Mora.

Yes, the word Molu was nothing more than Mora, reshaped by the millennia. But the people—were they the same? Those he had met who called themselves Molu were not. Not truly; they were a merging of two cultures. Here in the south, though, the old Mora ways might be stronger. He looked into the valley of the Teoma, or whatever name the river wore now, that of the great Gurang behind him at last.

“Is—now go—um, Malama with?” asked Tira in her quite rudimentary Molu. She had been practicing much. The pair of novice priestesses had been willing to converse with her, or at least to talk about themselves.

Urtu sensibly answered in Zikem. “We’ll stick with her. I can’t think of anything better.”

Of their direction from here, he had no idea. Nor did he know much of the governing of this land ahead. He did understand kings still ruled here, as in the ages past, but under the the authority of the emperor. Some, apparently, wanted to change that.

Some had thoughts of claiming the imperial title themselves.

Tira continued, now in their own language. “Wizards are much scarcer in Molu lands, are they not?”

“Nowhere are they as common as in our homeland.”

“Your father’s heritage.” She seemed to muse on this for a moment. “Which I carry myself.”

“As does Malama and quite possibly every other sorcerer in this world. Maybe simply everyone in this world, considering how long Hurasu dwelt in it.”

“And all wizardry comes from that heritage.”

“Most of it. This my father told me, that others from outside this world have descendants here as well but none nearly so numerous as his own.” Urtu smiled slightly at the thought that he himself gave evidence Hurasu had continued to create descendants almost to the end of his long existence. “Drops in an ocean of Hurasu.”

“Hmm. Does this then explain why the gift can vary so?”

“We can only guess at this. You listen, my lady?”

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"I do. There is much lore I might learn of you, Urtu."

"And I am ignorant of this land we enter." He added the slightest touch of sternness to his voice. "And best not speak that name. Samuc has served well enough so far."

"Very well, Samuc. Follow me and you will learn much of this land."

So they rode down into the southlands. The way fell gently on this side of the hills, where it had risen more abruptly on the other side, in broken cliffs in many places. Urtu saw that it seemed a populous and prosperous land. There was little sign of conflict. Not yet. "There are rulers here," Malama told him, "who are friendly and there are those estranged from the empire in some degree. Which are which may change from day to day."

"And some in open rebellion?" So he had surmised from talk at Panaymana's capital.

"Sometimes open, sometimes simmering. Fortunately, the main rivals for my brother's throne are all in the north, and not popular here. None will find much support." Her brow wrinkled into the slightest of frowns, before she added, "Indeed, part of Panaymana's problem is that he is perceived as a southerner. Whether correctly so or not."

"Your shrine is also of the south."

"That is true. We who have gifts are mistrusted by some in the north."

Urtu considered that for a moment. "So it is good we journey south?"

"Indeed! We shall pass by the place of the old High Kings. You would know that from your annals, I've no doubt. The emperors consider themselves the successors of those ancient monarchs."

"Does one of your brother's prospective wives live there?"

"In fact, she does." They rode on a minute or two before she added to this. "I will only be sounding out possible brides and their families. We will not be taking anyone back to Panaymana!"

"That is good. Any woman destined to wed the emperor would be a target for his enemies."

"And so we are as discreet as possible. There are those who would not let my own status as priestess get in the way of their ambitions."

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Urtu understood. Understood enough; if Malama openly served as ambassador to those prospective brides, she too might be a target. "Surely some would suspect your mission when they see whom you visit."

"Which is why the first is on our route to my shrine. Almost."

They camped along the way that night, halting early, still almost in the shadow of the hills. "Tomorrow we ride to the ford of the Teimi," Malama informed him. "Not a long way but best to go easy on the horses after the last few days."

He had no objections. She knew both the land and horses better than he. Already, it looked a different, lusher land than that they had just left. Mostly grassland here still, but small streams had been crossed and trees—or at least shrubs—grew along these. Palms rose here and there, as did villages. Rose, too, the calls of many birds.

Urtu felt he liked this land, a land of which he had only read before. He would know better when he had seen more of it. The camp settled, the horses tended, a light meal was being shared when Tira approached him and Malama. "One of your girls speaks from afar with someone," he reported. "I have been watching and this I know for certain."

The priestess accepted this; there was no reason to doubt. "You are the most skillful among us, Samuc," she said, turning to her companion. "Perhaps you can discover what she is up to."

He bowed his head slightly. "I shall watch."

TWENTY-SEVEN

WATCH HE DID, THAT EVENING and through the next day, but saw nothing. By afternoon they reached the largest stream he had yet seen here. "The River Teimi?"

"It is. We are at a great bend in its flow, where it turns east and runs down to the Teoma."

"Ah, that name has not changed since the time of the annals I read in my father's library. This river—" He nodded toward the water. "Is known as the Teiri in them."

"Tei—lee? Tay—eeyee. No, that's not right either, is it? It is hard to fit into my mouth, Samuc."

"Yet so your ancestors spoke it."

A town sprawled along the river, primarily on the side from which they had approached. It did not seem fortified. "Will you need to speak with someone official here?"

"I suppose I should. As Intu, this is an imperial town, not under the control of any local king or noble, and there is an appointed administrator. Memiuna the place is called."

As it turned out, no more than a few words of greeting proved necessary. A place in the official's house was offered to them for the night, but Malama courteously declined. The man seemed relieved.

"We shall use one of the public shelters on the other side," the priestess told her little troop. "It is drizzling a bit too much to sleep in the open!"

Urtu suspected she would have preferred that, to be away from the crowds here. "We could take to the river here," she continued, as the horses splashed through its wide but shallow flow. "Riding will give us more opportunity to change our path, when need come."

So again they found themselves beneath a thatched roof, in an open post and beam structure. It was the largest such Urtu had seen, one of several similar long, low buildings close by the water. "Not too crowded," he remarked.

"Traffic will increase now the rainy season is slackening," Malama said. "Memiuna is a major jumping-off place for trade to the north. Goods come up Teimi this far but then must take to the roads."

It was as darkness was falling Urtu felt one of the novices reaching out to someone. He had been keeping himself so closed, so guarded, he

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had missed this before. Now that he opened himself—only a little—he could see it readily enough, for the young priestess's own wardings were not strong. It was doubtful she had much training in such things. He followed her, unseen, unsuspected, to her meeting place in some other world. There he had half-expected to discover Olun. No, it was another, a man.

A man more skilled, most certainly. He must be cautious, attempt to listen without revealing himself. He would not even attempt to see this wizard. Not yet.

We are camped at Memiuna, she told him. I am not sure where Malama travels next. She does not share with us.

We care little of your priestess's agenda. What of the man? He remains with you?

Both of them. Um, I guess the one isn't a man? He confuses me. She confuses me?

The unseen sorcerer chuckled. *We know of Tira. My mistress holds her of little importance. Although—she might be one we could bring to our service in time. That matters not now. Our concern is with Urtu.*

She calls him Samuc but when he came to our land he named himself Cunos.

Noted, though it may be of little importance. Remain observant even of little things. It is best to know as much as possible. He carries still his objects of power?

He does. He keeps them close. She giggled. And Malama keeps him close.

A moment of amusement, oh so brief, led to the slightest lessening of Urtu's guard. He realized at once the distant wizard had sensed him.

And he struck. Not so easy was it to breach this man's wardings. Far more powerful was he than the girl to whom he spoke. More powerful than Barazes with whom he had contended not so long ago. He did not wish to destroy, however, only to learn. For a moment, before the man's defenses were in order, he saw enough. He saw that he was indeed one of Olun's followers, a deputy of sorts who dealt those like this young Molu woman.

Urtu could have forced more. There was no need.

Urtu, the wizard said. I suppose the girl's usefulness is at an end.

With that, he launched an unanticipated attack on the novice. Had Urtu not whisked her away at once, she would not have survived. She would have been as he had once left Barazes.

The two opened their eyes, sitting at some distance from each other. The girl stared at him. "You are fortunate I did not leave you there," he told her. "It might have served you right." Not that he ever would have. No need for her to know that.

"I thank you, master." Then she cocked her head at him. "But you being there created my difficulties."

That was true enough to make him smile. The girl did not seem very contrite, did she?

"What's all this?" came Malama's voice.

"Your novice was speaking to one of Olun's minions," Urtu reported, attempting to sound as matter-of-fact as possible. The girl's fellow novice looked at her with something akin to horror.

"I was only, um, amusing myself. I couldn't see any harm in it and it was all so interesting," the culprit said in her defense.

"So are most first seduced," said Urtu. This he knew of. It was an old tale. "You placed yourself in danger, as well as your mistress." And himself. He did not think she would care about that.

Malama shook her head. "I am disappointed."

"I followed her and learned what I could," Urtu went on. "I could see he was of my people." Whether of the Valley or the Rift, he did not know. The wizard's accent revealed nothing nor had there been time to search for the information. "But he spoke your language fluently. Did he give you his name?"

"Zal. So he claimed. He never told me much more nor where he was."

Urtu had to laugh. "Zal means nothing more than Two in my own tongue," he told her. "Most certainly not his actual name."

"Let us speak," Malama said, her voice low. She and Urtu went aside a little. "I know this Zal," she said. "I have spoken with him myself."

"Were you, too, curious?"

"Maybe I was. Especially about Olun. The girl may never have spoken directly to her."

"She has done no harm, I think."

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“No, I suppose not. But I am disappointed in her.”

The novice had not moved from where she sat. She now looked with not-quite-concealed concern as the pair approached her.

“I could order Samuc to slay you on the spot but somehow I think he would not obey.” proclaimed Malama. “We shall leave it to the High Priestess to deal with you.” Nothing more.

The evening went on as if naught unusual had happened. Later, Urtu saw the sister of the emperor sitting by the Teimi. The skies had cleared; the moon danced on its broad surface. She shouldn’t have gone so far away from the others.

And he shouldn’t have let her. He said nothing of that as he took a seat beside her. “Will she be executed?”

“Oh, certainly not. But it would not do to turn her out of the order and let her get into mischief. I suspect she will be restricted to our shrine at Ahahuway. For a time. She might well yet become a priestess of the isle.”

Urtu was pleased to hear this. The girl had been no more than foolish. “You also have spoken from afar with dangerous people.”

“You won’t report me, will you?”

“No, my lady. But if it became necessary, I would slay you.”

“I believe maybe you would. I’d best give you no reason!”

TWENTY-EIGHT

“THIS IS ANOTHER PLACE OF power.”

“The shrine over there houses a rock that is revered by some. It holds no power, however; that comes from the place itself.”

“The Blood Stone?” asked Urtu. The annals claimed the name had no sinister connotations, referring to nothing more than its color. He should get out his father’s book and see if it had aught to say of the matter.

“So is it known. We shall turn from the river here.” Their path had followed the course of Teimi all the day. Much traffic passed both ways on the river, small canoes, big barge-like boats. The dirt road was less busy and few villages stood along it. The countryside was growing noticeably more lush, at least that which lay riverside, with trees rising all along the Teimi’s banks, palms, mulberries, and many which Urtu did not recognize but seemed to bear fruit. Bananas rose up in patches, especially near the occasional huts.

“Will it be expected that you turn?” he asked.

“I think no one will be greatly surprised.” There was a brief and perhaps slightly weary smile. “I am not so very important, Samuc, that many spies will be watching me.”

“But some.”

“Yes,” agreed the priestess. “Some. This is a good place to stop and rest, but we should travel on today.”

A good-sized town lay around the shrine, and many craft of many sizes were drawn up on the sandy banks of the river. A major road toward the south had its terminus here, while that they had ridden today—and the river it paralleled—ran eastward. “Will you stop at the shrine, my lady?”

She shook her head. “The priests here would not welcome me.” They had turned and rode now their new way. “Our shrine lies at the end of this road. More or less. So none should be surprised we turned here. Nor would there have been surprise had we taken to the water at Memiuna; though a longer way, that too would have taken us to Ahahuway.”

“You said our way would lead past the house of the old High Kings.”

“And it would have been inconvenient to stop and veer over to it

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were we afloat on the river. Also, sure to be noticed. As would choosing to continue on the road east; that would have seemed odd, though only slightly suspicious. Ah, here are the public shelters. Let us rest our horses a while."

Not to mention ourselves, remarked Urtu to none but himself. Days of journeying was telling on all of them. Certainly on the two girls. He had come to think of the novice priestesses as Sister One and Sister Two, since they had no other names. Sister One, she who had transgressed, was the taller of the pair. She had been subdued this morning. The ramifications of her choices were perhaps becoming more clear to her. There was far less chatter between them than usual.

If anything, Sister Two was even more subdued. She had ever been the shyer of the two. Now she seemed angry with her friend. Maybe she felt betrayed by her. Or, at least, let down. Life is full of such disappointments, said Urtu, again only to himself. He might be only a little older than these two but he had learned much of life. A son of Hurasu had little choice not to.

Older. Four or five years? Maybe even a couple more than that. The two could still be in their teens. Nor was Malama that much older—most likely a year or two younger than he was. But, as Urtu, she had been trained for such a life since she was born.

It was likely he would still seem young when all three were old women. So had been his father's life, outliving everyone he knew, everyone he loved. Until his own mother. He should attempt to speak to Sunas sometime soon, shouldn't he? It would be safe enough now.

So why not right now? They were going to rest here an hour or so. He should let someone know before attempting it, even though he chafed at having to be responsible to or for anyone. As soon as the troop settled in the shade, the horses tied, a late lunch being consumed—bought in the town, despite both novices shaking their heads over the extravagance—he announced, "I am going to speak afar with Sunas."

"Sunas?" asked Malama.

"His mother," Tira informed her. "It would be good to know how she fares. I—I would that I had the skill for it."

"Then come with me. I'll see to it you don't get lost."

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"May I come too?" asked the priestess. Urtu hoped Sisters One and Two didn't ask also. They might need a bigger world to meet in.

"You two keep an eye on things. Don't hesitate to call me back if there is the least hint of trouble." Urtu was skilled enough to keep tabs on both worlds at once but it didn't hurt to have them watch. And it gave them something worthwhile to do.

He felt little of the power of the Blood Stone site from here. A safe distance, he was sure; he should be able to keep the Eyes on his person. "Tira and I first," he told Malama. "If she is willing, I will bring you in." If she even answered. There was no guarantee she was listening for any calls. There was no guarantee of anything.

Yet she responded at once, in the world the two had last used. *It is about time you checked on your poor mother*, she scolded. *And Tira! It is good to see you well*. She stopped and looked at the sorcerer. *You're quavering a bit. You're not at all used to doing this are you?*

I am not, my lady. I could not have done it now without your son's help.

Hmmph. He should have had you trained by now!

Difficult to do when we all locked ourselves down, Mother, Urtu told her.

I suppose that's as good an excuse as any. Is there someone else impatient to join us? I feel someone and I'm pretty sure it isn't Olun.

The priestess Malama. May she join us?

You can always bring a girl home to meet Mother.

Are you all right? You sound almost, well, intoxicated. Urtu was beginning to feel concerned.

She stood silent for a moment. *You are right. It is this place. Hirstel. The very air of it intoxicates a sorcerer, with so many gates so close around one, with magic so ready at ones fingertips. Let me compose myself, my son.* Then she giggled. *I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of your girlfriend.*

Urtu almost chose to break off at that point. No, he told himself. You may find no better chance to speak and learn how things go. He called Malama to their meeting place. *Mother, this is Malama, a priestess of the Molu.*

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I greet you, Malama. Excuse me if I seem a bit giddy at times. It seems to be a consequence of being in the world where I currently stand.

You are not in our world? Malama seemed surprised. It was unusual. More than unusual.

I am not. Urtu can explain that to you. So, you seem to be having no difficulties on your journey, my son.

An innocent enough statement, on the face of it. Sunas's tone suggested otherwise. *None of great consequence and all else would be far too long a story for now. I accompany Malama to her shrine at this time.* Urtu was unsure he should but added, *She is sister to the emperor.*

Ha, power ever draws power. This does not surprise me at all.

It is so, agreed Malama. *I think only Urtu is surprised.*

Both women laughed and Urtu suspected he was the butt of their joke. *How fare you, Mother?* he asked. *Do you expect to remain in Hirstel much longer?*

The pause was uncomfortably long. Sunas seemed reluctant to answer. *I believe I may never leave, my son. I have become a leader of those here and—I have taken a husband. Kerazes.*

Kerazes? He could come up with nothing better. Perhaps there was no need, for much was implied in the one word.

He is living up to his potential in this place, one of the most powerful of us all. And he is a sweet little fellow, really.

No need to explain that. I congratulate both of you. But stay in that place?

For now, anyway. We hear of nothing but war and ruin in our home. Also, more troops came to the Shrouded Valley. We all remain in Hirstel, where it is safe, with guards on our door.

Sarad's minions?

So we assume. We do not speak to them.

I too congratulate you and Karazes, said Tira. *Do my other former companions in captivity fare well?*

They have chosen to marry and remain also. Marry each other, of course. You probably knew which was fond of which.

So a city of wizards and nothing but wizards, Urtu mused. *And there will be children, I would think. Hirstel is the sort of experiment my father would have enjoyed observing.*

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Don't pretend that you wouldn't. There is just a little too much of Hurasu in you, my son! She turned her head to Malama and confided, *Urtu can seem rather cold and calculating at times, as could his father. This does not mean he doesn't feel the passions other men do.*

I look forward to seeing this other side, the priestess replied. Which could mean nothing or a great deal; her tone did not give any clue.

I can imagine. But maybe I shouldn't! Where fare you two now? You three. I mustn't forget you, Tira.

We five, in truth, Urtu told her. *There are a pair of other priestesses*

Novices, interjected Malama

Yes, novices. One has been in contact with Olun. He was not going to mention that Malama had also spoken to their enemy. *The Wizard-Lord knows a little more of me than I might have wished.*

Thisa and Zerana have suggested they reach out to her, pretending to be yet her followers. Pretending they know not of their mother.

Olun might be suspicious of them since the incident with her soldiers. And with Barazes.

She would probably be suspicious anyway. I have counseled against this. For now.

His mother's mood had settled. He had little doubt Sunas would soon adapt to her new home and learn to deal with its peculiarities. Could all those who dwelt there?

We travel now to the shrine of my order, by Lake Ahahuway, said Malama, answering Sunas's almost forgotten question. *And we should be on our way.*

Urtu considered mentioning that Xido had joined them. No point. That was one of those many things that might make up a tale for another time. *Yes, we must go. I will help you, Tira. Just follow me back. Farewell, Mother.* With that he left.

"Let's get the horses," he said.

TWENTY-NINE

THIS MAN WAS A KING. Moreover, he was of the lineage of the ancient High Kings of the Mora. Teninihitu knew well why the priestess Malama came to his house.

So did his daughter. The travelers had veered from their road on the second day, taking a path to their right, angling more westward. The great house of Teninihitu—which Malama revealed was once the house of the High Kings or at least stood in the same spot—was set among the fields in a populous, heavily cultivated land. It was not in any way fortified; that surprised Urtu enough that he said something of it to Malama.

“It has been long forbidden. Only the emperor may erect walls and fortresses.”

He suspected not all of the emperor’s subjects obeyed this rule. Though if they didn’t, they were no longer his subjects, perhaps!

Teninihitu himself stood on his high porch, watching their approach. “This king has long been friendly to us. It does not hurt to strengthen alliances.” She looked toward the waiting figure. A girl or young woman stood beside him. “He also has a daughter of the right age. Close enough to the right age.”

“Will he remain an ally if nothing comes of your visit?”

“We can only hope so. Remember now, you are my bodyguard and not expected to take part in our talks. Not unless one of us addresses you. But you are expected to stay close to me.”

“That leaves it up to you to manage the horses and such,” he told Tira, over his shoulder. “Good luck trying to make yourself understood!”

“Speak much no,” essayed the wizard in his rudimentary Molu. “Girls some stupid Hucan help?”

“We shall,” promised Sister Two.

One gave only a distracted nod of her head. She remained subdued. Then, “Don’t call yourself stupid. You’re nowhere near as stupid as I am.”

“We won’t argue with that,” Urtu told her. Malama looked him askance but the girl actually smiled. It was good she recognized he spoke in jest. He felt no ill will toward her.

Urtu followed close behind—but not too close—as they

dismounted and climbed three wide wooden steps to the king's porch. "Lady Malama, I welcome you," he spoke.

"I greet you, Lord Teninihitu. My lady Lohatini."

"Hi, Malama." The princess was young. Sixteen at best, thought Urtu. Short, somewhat plump, but pretty in her fresh, round-faced way, with dark arching eyebrows and a wealth of black hair. Not much like her father who might not be exactly tall but was gaunt enough and erect enough to give that impression. More so when he stood by his daughter.

The king's eyes went to Urtu. "An attendant?"

"Samuc is my bodyguard, not my attendant. Such is necessary in these days. With your permission, he will stand nearby."

"Certainly, my lady. I understand well the need for protection."

Lohatini was giving him a good looking over. "You might need to protect him from me."

"This isn't the man Malama came to speak with us about. Am I not right, my lady?" He seemed take no other heed of his daughter's remark. "Let us get inside."

"Indeed so, Teni," she said, entering the tall doorway between the two. Urtu followed at no more than two paces. "My brother seeks a wife."

The girl snickered. "You mean you seek a wife for him."

"And your mother," Teninihitu felt he needed to add. "Is the Lady Panahona well? She would always be welcome to stay here a while. A long while, if she chose."

"I do not think that will happen, Teni," spoke Malama, her voice soft.

Not as long as she had an imperial son to keep an eye on. And a new lover. Whatever hopes this king might harbor were likely to remain hopes.

Teninihitu nodded vaguely in response. "I'll have my stewards prepare rooms for you and we can discuss things over a meal, when you are rested. You travel with novices?"

"Two. They can share my room or not, but my bodyguard must be able to remain close. I mean this as no criticism of your hospitality, my lord."

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“And I shall not take it so.”

“The other is a shaman serving me, not of any importance but you should know who is in your house, I think.”

“Not that I ever do!”

The stewards had already learned what was needed through the combined efforts of the Sisters and Tira. Their rooms were together. They were also on the lowest level—the only level, in fact. This was a rambling single-story house; only its high roof made it seem otherwise. It was of the old post and beam construction, the sort of house that had been built here for thousands of years. It might be thousands of years old itself, pieces of it replaced as needed, until not one original part remained—yet the house itself was ancient.

Urtu did not at all like the open construction, the wide windows, the flimsy walls that were little more than woven mats. These rooms were no better for defense than sleeping in the open. Worse in fact; outdoors one could see things coming.

“At least I can sleep near you,” he said, after an inspection. “That should keep Lohatini away.” This he meant only as a little jest.

A jest that was answered seriously. “Not only Lohatini. Her father is entirely likely to suggest I share his mat.”

He could only raise his eyebrows at that. “I thought it was your mother who caught his fancy.”

“Oh, he won’t let that get in the way.” When he found no answer for that, she went on. “I’m sure it was obvious we are old friends. In the days before Panaymana was named emperor, we stayed often in the south. My uncle would as soon we were not at his court.”

“So they know your brother.”

“Which may or may not be a bad thing. At least, there won’t be any need for him and Lohatini to get acquainted before making a decision.”

They were called to the king’s table before very long. Again, it was a low table and the diners sat on cushions; these were only Malama, the king and his daughter, in a modest private room. The walls here were not mats, it seemed, but panels of bamboo. Not as flimsy as they appeared, he was sure. Urtu took an unobtrusive post near a wall; the priestess had told him that would be normal and expected.

As for Tira, the Sisters were taking her in hand and arranging all that was necessary for their own feeding and recreation. They should be safe, though Urtu didn't like to let them long out of his sight either.

Not unexpectedly, there was no food offered him. He'd have to see about that later. In the mean time, he had to watch the three Molu fill themselves on fruit and yams and fish and all the dishes that found their way to such meals. And yes, plenty of beer. He'd come to appreciate the millet beer here. They ate and they gossiped of nothing of much importance. Urtu felt certain that would change.

"So," spoke Teninihitu at last, "shall we speak of Panaymana?"

His daughter looked up from a melon slice. Mostly rind remained; that and a certain amount of juice running down her chin. "Panny's not so bad."

"And grown into a man since last you saw him," said Malama. "All in all, an improvement on the boy." She gave Lohatini a long look. "As is the woman on the girl."

The 'woman' took well to flattery. She looked pleased with herself for some time as Malama and Teninihitu talked on. The gist of it was the king had no objections to a match if his daughter didn't.

"We should probably talk first, though, don't you think?" asked that daughter. "Not that I don't know I'd make a good wife. Whatever Panaymana might think!"

"No doubt," agreed the priestess. "But he does already have two pretty young concubines on whom he dotes. Any wife would have to put them into their place right from the start."

"I would dismiss them!"

"Oh, no. That would only serve to displease the emperor. It is enough for them to know his first wife is truly first."

Lohatini nodded in understanding. "Ah, put them in their place. Firm but kind! Yes, yes. In fact—" She appeared to ponder the subject deeply before continuing. "I would insist he marry them, so they know that place. Wife Two and Three!"

Malama was being unsuccessful in hiding her amusement. Perhaps that was why she turned to him. "Samuc. Your father had many wives, did he not?"

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“He did, my lady, but he put none above the others. All were equal in his household.”

Lohatini was astounded. “But—how did he expect them to behave if none was allowed to rule over the others?”

“Oh, he beat them regularly.” So far as Urtu knew, his father had never lifted a hand against a woman. Of course, over the five thousand years before he came along, many things could have happened.

“Hmmpf. Beating them would be *my* job as first wife.” Having made that clear, she helped herself to another slice of golden melon.

There was further talk, mostly about the business side of it, and it was quite clear nothing was agreed nor settled save that young Lohatini approved of Panaymana as a future husband. There had never been any doubt her father would as well.

“Perhaps not at all a bad match for Panaymana, even if she is a bit spoiled,” said Urtu as they returned to their quarters. He didn’t know if Malama cared about his opinion but was willing to give it anyway.

“As a woman, she is nearly perfect for my brother. Oh, younger than I would prefer but I think we can not wait on this. Politically, it is not as good a match. Her father is not among the more powerful rulers.” From her voice, he couldn’t tell whether this was more an annoyance or a serious obstacle. “But her mother came of an important family. That’s in her favor.”

“Dead?”

“Divorced. Of course, there is no telling whether Panaymana would agree.”

“If he has any sense, he will. But you are going to visit other prospects, are you not?”

“At least one. She lives near Ahahuway so we can return to our road toward the shrine.”

That was good to know. Even better would be to know where to get some food.

THIRTY

FORTUNATELY, MALAMA KNEW PERFECTLY WELL where to find a meal for her bodyguard. "There is always food on one of the porches," she told him. "Any time of the day or night. It is an old custom in noble houses. The south porch, around back."

"We ate there," said Sister Two.

"But I will not leave you unguarded."

"Then we'll all go. Who's hungry?"

It was late and only a few sat on the open porch, lit by scattered palm-oil lamps. Beyond, torches burned at the edge of a garden. This was as the accounts spoke of the Mora ways, an age ago. Even to eating from mats was it the same; perhaps only the nobles used tables and this was as the peasants had taken meals from time immemorial.

A buffet lay on one side of the porch. "A bit picked over," a sleep-eyed servant informed them. "Nothing new till morning." But there was enough, and more. They filled bowls and settled around a mat. Whether they broke any customs Urtu knew not, nor did he care. He was ravenous.

Light rain fell, dripping from the ragged eaves of the palm-thatched roof. "I could live in such a place," he murmured, as much to himself as anyone else.

"I would hope it is so," said Malama, not much louder.

But it wasn't, was it? Not yet, not now.

They could sleep right here if they wished. Many did, on this and other porches around the king's house. The novices already seemed to be dozing. "We should get you to your room," he told Malama.

She nodded, stood. The others rose too; probably best they stayed together. Separate rooms they had, though they lay side by side with only the thin mat walls hanging between. One could easily have been removed to create a doorway. But no need—in an emergency, Urtu felt certain he could push right through them. By agreement, Tira slept by the way into the novices' room and he the same in Malama's chamber. There were no doors, only mats hanging across the openings.

As for the windows, they would just have to hope anyone coming in them would be noticed. He followed the priestess into her room. Did he expect what followed? Perhaps there had been hints through this evening. Perhaps Urtu was not altogether surprised to find Malama in

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his arms, his lips to hers. This had been coming since they left the Gurang, waiting for the proper time. Later, they fell asleep to the drip of the rain. It fell all night and not one assassin attempted to come in the window.

They did not hasten away from the House of Teninihitu the next morning, breakfasting late, making farewells, but in time the journey south had to resume.

It was a silent ride for some time. The others had recognized things had changed between their leaders. They had probably recognized why, too. Malama rode close to Urtu, asking, "Do you think they heard us last night?"

"Those mat walls are very thin," he said. "It might have been hard not to."

"True." She glanced at the others, who were studiously avoiding looking at them. "Mostly, I think they just wonder why it took so long."

"I always take long," he told her.

"Not that, idiot-from-across-the-mountains. I meant for us to be together."

"Oh. We had to make Lohatini and Teninihitu jealous."

For that, she punched him. "I undoubtedly deserved that," he admitted. "Really, do you think it should have come sooner?"

"I had hoped it would but now—no. It was the right time."

On they rode. This was not as the roads they had traveled before, but a winding dirt path from village to village, fording the occasional small stream, farm fields and groves of fruit trees on either side. Dogs, unaccustomed to horsemen here, would yap and chase after them, turning back only when they were certain they no longer posed a threat. The men and women paid less attention. Tall palms lined their way. Stands of bananas towered above huts. Malama had to point out the kumu trees, the source of the large fruits he had tasted, as well as wood and bark cloth. "They grow well in the lower lands such as this. Further south, where it rises higher and cooler they do not thrive."

"I got the impression it was a food on which the poor subsisted."

"There is some truth to that. It is much more common outside

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these lands, the southlands. In the islands and along the coasts north of the Gurang, everyone eats it.”

“You’ve seen much of those lands? I understood they were in rebellion.”

“When my uncle still ruled. I was young.”

“Hmm. From the look of these men ahead the south is also in rebellion.” There were at least half a dozen standing in the road. He knew more might be hidden. Spears, a few held. The rest, clubs or staffs. Knives would hang at some waists.

“Are they going to attack us?”

“Not unless we make them, I would think. If their intention was to kill anyone they would have remained hidden and ambushed us. Listen, all! We will seem to approach cautiously and when we are near, we charge. Have your sword in hand, Tira, and use it if you have the need. You to the right, me to the left. Rest stay to the center. We’ll try to burst through before they know what is happening and ride away hard. Ready?”

It might not matter that much, but Tira was right-handed, so better to have her on the side of their wedge where she could better wield her weapon—however ineptly she might do so. Urtu was trained to use both hands with equal proficiency. They slowly drew near the men. One stepped forward, raising a hand for them to halt.

“Now!” He drove forward, trusting the others to do the same, drawing sword. He swung but made no contact as the would-be assailants scattered. They were through.

“Ride! Ride hard!” He heard a whistling sound and knew someone had launched a slung stone their direction. “Anyone hit?”

No answer. All four were riding alongside him. The baggage horse too. So no one lying dead in the road behind them! “All right! Slow down a little. Follow my pace.” He wanted more space between them and those men.

After some time he called for them to return to a normal traveling speed. Questions burst out of Malama. “Did some enemy note my trip to the House of Teninihitu, do you think? Did they intend to slay me?”

“They might have hoped to kidnap you, assuming they knew who

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you were. And if they did, they might have had orders to kill if they couldn't capture." Urtu much doubted they knew of the treasure he carried or had any connection to Olun. They wouldn't have tried to talk if they did.

"Or," mused Malama, "they might have been a rebel band or followers of some local noble who would have stopped anyone on the road."

"That could be. I intend to stop on lonely roads for no one, be they peasant or king." He gave the priestess a sidelong look. "Even were you to order me otherwise."

"Then I shall not attempt it."

Before evening, they rejoined the main road south to Ahahuway. Though none said so, it is assumed all were relieved.

THIRTY-ONE

"I HAD FEARED THE LAKE would no longer be as it was when Malvern and others described it, that the falls would have moved back, that the water level might have dropped. Yet it remains a great body of water." Urtu sat his horse on a grassy ridge above Ahahuway, surveying the broad lake. "Does the shrine remain an isle?"

"It does. Give it another two thousand years and maybe your changes will come. It is true the high falls of Panaha no longer exist. Not as they once were."

He would have liked to have seen them. To swim in the pool below them too, maybe. "If you are named high priestess will you also be named Panaha? Or has that changed as well?"

"That is the same. So we address she who leads us now."

Urtu would meet her, he assumed. A town of some sort on the far shore could just be made out in the waning light. "How do we get across?"

"There is a ferry but I would prefer to ride around the south end. Either way, we need wait for morning. There are shelters for us below."

He thought he might have ridden through the night, being so near. He was also quite willing to rest here. Here with Malama, near their destination at last. Things would change now, this he knew. Things that had been pushed aside since they left Teninihitu and his daughter.

He was certain the desire he felt was mirrored in her. These past few days on the road had been no place to speak of them, to act on them. That would be another journey, one on which they had taken only their first steps.

Rain fell that evening, off and on, as they settled in one of the communal huts, horses tended, a meal shared. A waxing moon finally broke through the ragged clouds as the skies cleared, its reflection glimmering on the surface of Ahahuway.

"I will swim," stated Malama, rising. Urtu had no choice but to follow her down to the edge of the water. None others came, perhaps tired and disinterested, perhaps not wishing to intrude. The priestess doffed her skirt and waded into the dark lake.

She turned to see him standing, watching her. "Aren't you coming in?"

"I will not leave what I carry," he called to her, "nor chance losing it

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in the water.” He had not been parted from the jewels since his visit to Hirstel.

“Maybe you *should* lose it,” she replied before turning and diving. He saw her stroking across the moonlit surface, swimming straight out. The faintest glimmers of light arose on the far side of the lake, possibly bonfires or massed torches. He doubted anything less would be seen at this distance. Too great a distance for Malama to swim, even if she was headed that direction. Too great a distance for almost anyone.

Urtu knew he could swim it. He had swum across Lades Zerac once, and that was a rougher and colder body of water than this, and nearly as wide. His strength and stamina did not equal his father’s but it was greater than that of most men.

His hand went to the Eyes in their pouch. I’ll not be dictated to by a bag of stones, he decided, and slid off his kilt, his sword belt. Last of all—yes, a tad reluctantly—he hid the pouch beneath a nearby rock, sprinted to the water and dove in. He swam long beneath the surface before bobbing up near Malama.

“Ah, you have joined me! What of your precious baubles?”

“What baubles? The most precious jewel is within my grasp!” He dove for her but allowed her to elude him. For a time, they swam side by side in the cool water. Tiring of that, they floated, gazing up at the moon.

“I can feel your sacred isle even from here,” he told her. “It is a more potent locus than any I’ve encountered in this land.” More powerful than he had encountered anywhere. Only the Shrouded Valley, with its volcano and gate to Hirstel could rival it and that was different. Here, one could sense the infinite worlds more clearly than ever before.

“Some claim the full moon increases the power,” Malama replied. “That is when we seek the most important prophecies, but I think that has more to do with the priestesses than with the isle.”

“Maybe I should ask for a prophecy.”

She answered, with seeming seriousness, “I shall try to dream for you when I am there.”

They slowly paddled toward the shallow water. There, waist-deep, Urtu embraced her, yearning for her. “Come,” she said, taking his

hand. They made love in the grass there by the sacred lake, naked beneath the moon and stars.

"As good as last time," she murmured sometime later.

"Better," came his breathless reply.

"Yes, better," she agreed, laughing. Then, a moment, speechless but filled with their breath, with the lapping of the water on the shore, with the buzz of night's insects. "Yet—"

"Yet somehow unsatisfying." He had recognized this. Recognized it in both of them.

"Yes. That may lie in us, Urtu. We are both too much in control of ourselves, too unwillingly to let go."

"That might be. I don't know—maybe we are unable to be fully satisfied. Maybe we expect more than we should."

She nodded. "Yet I can think of none I would rather be with the rest of my life."

"Nor I." That was truth. It did not mean he intended to be with her. The future remained far too complicated to figure out tonight. He rolled over and retrieved the gems from their hiding spot. Even answering the call of his passions he had made certain to be near them.

"I know it must have been difficult to leave those. It flatters me that you value me so highly." Then she snickered. "Or maybe it was just unreasoning lust."

"Maybe we should try to figure out which. Want to give it a try?"

"An excellent idea!" The priestess laughed, pulling Urtu to her. He tossed the pouch down beside them, the jewels spilling out—and felt them reaching out, reaching toward the isle out there in the dark, near the other side of Ahahuway. It was as he had sensed them when he was at the Place of the Crocodile.

Malama's breath drew in sharply. She felt them too. "No," she said, sitting up. "I am afraid."

He turned onto his elbow and looked at her. "It might be a way to find what we feel is missing."

She only turned her gaze out across the lake.

"But we can look some other time."

"Thank you," Malama whispered. They slipped on their clothes and returned to their friends.

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As he fell into sleep, Urtu had to admit to himself he, too, had been afraid. It was a fear he intended to face.

THIRTY-TWO

YES, HE NEEDED TO BETTER understand the gems he carried. Them and much more. Would it be foolhardy to explore them here? Nowhere would they be more open to him. Nowhere would they be more dangerous to him.

It was a question to be answered later. They entered an area of forest as they rode south along Ahahuway's shore. "This place of trees is ancient," Malama told him, "and within it are many shrines to many gods. Through every time of troubles, the sacred groves have survived."

"There is no inherent power here." He felt nothing but the still-distant sacred isle.

"Only in the priests and priestesses who serve. They are not as you and I, Urtu, yet their gods do speak to some of them."

"In dream." Even as Tira's unknown gods spoke to her.

"Yes. It is much nicer to have a god like Xit who comes and talks in person, isn't it?" It was the first time the priestess had directly referred to Xido's divinity. She might not be certain of it yet and Urtu was not willing to make her so. That was Xido's business.

"This is near where coffee is grown?"

She laughed at the abrupt change in topic. "Further south yet. Closer to the mountains. I doubt we shall visit there on this journey. Another time? Who can say?"

Not Urtu. He glimpsed a shrine among the trees here and there. Some of those who traveled along this shaded way, mostly on foot, were surely pilgrims. A gong sounded, a slow cadence echoing through the trees. It was impossible to determine from what direction it came.

He had not seen much of musical instruments here, though people often sang. It was somewhat the other way around in the valley of his birth. Soon after they emerged from the woods, Malama announced, "We turn here." A short distance down a road to their right lay a bridge across the Teoma, just above where it flowed into Ahahuway through a narrow gorge. It was a substantial bridge, sturdy enough to ride across, but just narrow enough Urtu might have preferred to dismount and lead his horse.

The priestess was having none of that. She might well have galloped to the other side, were there not soldiers there signaling them to stop.

"Both sides belong to King Anaku," she told him, "but this is a

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convenient place to ask travelers their business in his realm.” There was a pause before she added, “His sister is another one we wish to approach about Panaymana. Now let me do the talking with the guards.”

That was brief and uneventful. The men of Anaku were used to dealing with priestesses of the Sacred Isle and letting them do as they would. Then they set off north, along this side of the lake. The way was lined with tall pines.

“This is the most ancient of all the kingdoms, its rule unbroken for millennia, and possibly the most ancient of kings’ houses,” Malama informed him. “You and Hucan will need to be lodged in the king’s house, I would think. No men are allowed at the shrine. I am not sure how the High Priestess might feel about letting Hucan in. Best not to test it.”

“This king has a sister, you say?”

“Yes. Fetua. She has never met Panaymana but knows me fairly well. She is an important woman, far more important than little Lohatini. It is entirely possible her son could rule this kingdom someday.”

“So this would be a good political match.”

“The very best but Anaku may not see it that way. Neither might my brother, for that matter.” They rode on a little way before Malama added, perhaps a tad irrelevantly, “Fetua is quite beautiful. Also quite stupid.”

“Some men would consider that a good combination.”

“So I know! Not Panaymana. His concubines are witty and entertaining.”

“Are they? I had only eyes for you in his house.”

“Ha, I saw where your eyes went, Samuc! You’d like a pair of the same sort so don’t deny it.”

He chose not to, though it wasn’t really true. “Ah, but they would have to be second and third wives and I would depend on you to beat them.”

Malama sighed deeply. “I can never be a first wife.”

He had spoken without thinking and now there was no more to say. In time they came to the House of Anaku. It was much like the House of Teninihitu, perhaps lower and more rambling, but of the same

construction, and it sat on a low hill overlooking the lake and docks. The Sacred Isle could readily be seen from its front porch, though through a screen of pines, rising from Ahahuway at some distance.

A town stood all around and along the lake. "I doubt much the king will come out to greet us," said Malama. "We should present ourselves first at his house, however."

"Anaku knows why you are here?"

"Maybe not. I have come and gone at the isle before. And, too, the king is not particularly friendly toward my brother." She reined in her horse, gazing up at the house. "So you might imagine he also does not like the idea of me leading the priestesses someday. I think he sees them as *his* priestesses, a part of this kingdom as far back as this kingdom existed."

"And maybe as rivals to his authority?" Urtu guessed.

"Maybe. There are many independent priests here, as you saw, and I believe it irks him." As they dismounted, attendants came forth to take the horses. When Urtu gave them a questioning look, she said, "I am known; there is no question that we will be treated as welcome guests." The slightest of smiles came and went. "Even if a bit unwelcome. Follow. Yes, you too, sisters."

A woman had come out on the porch as they walked up the slope. That meant nothing to Urtu. She appeared to have no attendants nor be any different than others going about their business around the house and compound. The two soldiers posted at the door seemed indifferent to her.

"Hohina has come forth to welcome us. This surprises me."

"Someone important?"

"Hohina is cousin to Anaku, and wife to one of his captains. She pretty much runs the household here. And more, it is said. Anaku becomes bored by politics."

This Urtu could very much understand and sympathize with. "What of his wife? Or is it wives?"

"He remains unmarried. There is a halfhearted search for a wife now and again but Anaku would rather not be bothered."

"He, ah, likes women?"

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At this, Malama laughed. "Oh, yes. Of that there is no question. I think there is also no question Hohina knows of my mission."

The woman was handsome enough, in her way. Now another woman emerged from the house to stand beside her—a woman who might, as the over-used sayings go, take ones breath away as well as knock ones sandals off. The two awaited them before the great doors.

"Fetua herself," murmured Malama. This Urtu had already guessed.

"I greet you, Lady Hohina. Lady Fetua."

"I greet and welcome you, Lady Malama, and those who travel with you."

Fetua stared at them until Hohina gently nudged her. "Oh. I greet you all," she announced. Her voice was as beautiful as was her appearance.

And that was exceptionally beautiful. Tall. Slender yet just voluptuous enough for balance. The face was finely chiseled, with great dark eyes. Urtu searched his memories for any who might rival her and found none. Not the woman beside him. But he would prefer Malama any day, wouldn't he? This he recognized at once.

"I have brought two novices to the Isle," spoke Malama, "who served at our shrine in the north. Also the shaman Hucan and my bodyguard, Samuc." She appeared to weigh adding something more to this. "Officially, my bodyguard. I consider him a valuable counselor, as well."

The look Hohina gave them suggested she knew he was more. Suspected, at least.

The look Fetua gave him suggested other things. "You are all most welcome," said the king's sister.

III. THE ISLE

THIRTY-THREE

THEY HAD BUT GONE TO a chamber where the women might converse, when a servant announced, "Panaha."

"Your mistress is an unusual hurry," commented Hohina. She only nodded an approval to the attendant. Urtu doubted the high priestess was ever made to wait.

A middle-aged woman, small and wiry, entered. One young priestess attended her.

"The blessing of the goddess on all," she said. "We welcome you home, my daughter."

"It is good to be again by Ahahuway, Panaha," came Malama's reply. She nodded toward the novices. "These two return as well, prepared for their vows. There are things I must say to you of that later." Sister One tried not to look guilty but probably made it worse.

"Indeed. We must speak as well of what this one carries." The high priestess looked directly at Urtu. "We have felt the presence."

"Yes. This is my bodyguard, Samuc." Urtu nodded to Panaha. "And this is Hucan, a Diwalnu shaman."

The high priestess gave her little more than a glance. "But not truly Diwalnu, is she?"

Malama apparently felt it best to be honest. "From across the mountains, as is Samuc."

"She has the soul of a woman. I can see this, the gods can see this. The king may not see this. Best not give him yet another complaint against us and allow her on our isle."

Urtu was uncertain whether Fetua understood any of this. The king's sister remained composed, serene, even. It is something she has learned to do, thought the young man. To not reveal herself. Perhaps she is not as stupid as Malama thinks.

"Come to us when you can. I know you have business of your brother's to discuss first, though you should put such aside." She turned to the two novices. "You will come with me now."

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They meekly followed. At least Sister Two seemed meek. Urtu wasn't as sure of One; he was sure she was no longer his responsibility.

"So," said Hohina when they were gone, "your brother's business. I would guess it has to do with Fetua."

"Me? I don't know her brother."

"But the emperor knows of you and your beauty." It probably wasn't a lie; she had surely mentioned it to him at some time.

"Then he should come, not you, Malama." She smiled rather sweetly. "Though I like having you here."

"They only seek your permission," Hohina told her. "And that of your brother."

"I don't think he likes Panaymana, does he?"

"Their differences are all political. And you could help make them into friends."

There was no change of expression, only a slightly perplexed, "How?"

"An alliance of marriage."

"Oh, of course." The slightest of frowns creased her lovely face. Urtu felt that should never happen. It was replaced at once by her smile, which was much better. "It would be even better if you married my brother."

"I have taken vows," was all Malama had to say.

"Oh, Anaku would make dreary old Panaha release you." That settled in her mind, her face returned to its usual placid beauty.

"I have considered approaching Teninihitu about his daughter," said Hohina. "I know well you stopped and spoke to him."

"I did. But they are also old friends. Anaku and Lohatini?" She shrugged. "It wouldn't bring you much, politically."

"Nor you."

"That is true. And Fetua *would* bring much." She glanced at the king's sister. It was impossible to tell what she thought of it all or if she was even listening. "A good match otherwise? I'll be honest and say I am not sure. That is why I come only to learn at this time."

Urtu could already have told her Fetua and Panaymana would be a disaster. Maybe the priestess knew this in her heart.

"We have both learned all we can for the moment," spoke Hohina,

rising from her mat. "Know that I am not necessarily opposed to your, ah, proposition, but Anaku's thoughts must be known before we go further."

"Once you tell him what they are," said Fetua.

Hohina laughed. "You surprise me sometimes."

"I do?" The woman seemed to have no idea what she meant by the comment. "Was I being clever and didn't know it?" She turned to Malama. "I think that happens sometimes."

"It does to all of us," the priestess told her. It was unlikely Fetua caught the jest behind it. She simply smiled and nodded.

"So, you will sleep on your island tonight, Malama? We must find a room for these two. You don't mind sharing, do you?"

"No," stated Fetua, rather emphatically—at least for her. "Give each a room and do not be stingy of my brother's hospitality."

Hohina might have been surprised a second time. "Very well. I'll send an attendant with you. You have things with your horses you probably need to fetch too. And I shall speak with you again, Malama, when we have something to speak about."

In the hall, the king's cousin conferred briefly with a rather burly servant, who duly took charge of them on reaching the front doors. Hohina and Fetua disappeared into the house. "Hucan," said Urtu, "will you see to our goods while I walk with the Lady Malama to the lake?"

"To be sure." She switched to her rudimentary Molu. "Stables, um, sir, if will?" The two of them headed around the north side of the king's house.

"She put one of the house guards in charge of you," commented Malama. "Hohina is being cautious. He and others will undoubtedly keep an eye on you."

"So would I if you brought such riffraff to my house. You go out to your isle at once?"

"Best I do. This does not mean I shall spend much time on it while I visit Anaku's house. I may not even sleep there after this night. And now—what thought you of his sister?"

"Not so much stupid as incredibly prosaic. And incredibly beautiful."

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“True, both. Still, though, not very smart. Anaku can also be oblivious to all sorts of nuances. Do not try to be witty around him.” She meditated on something as they descended toward Ahahuway. “It would be right you know we were lovers. Anaku, I think, took it more seriously than I.” A sigh. “Were I not a priestess, I *do* believe he would have sought me in marriage.”

“Another reason he might not be pleased with having you near at hand as high priestess. But Fetua likes you.”

“And both bore me terribly! Is it very bad for me to say so?”

“As long as you do not tell Fetua.”

“Yes. I would never hurt her.” Dusk was near, the sun setting at their backs. They stood among the tall pines lining the lake shore. “This is one of our canoes,” she said. “Help me push it into the water. I could swim the distance easily enough. But don’t you attempt it. It is death for a man to set foot on the Sacred Isle.”

With that, she settled into the craft and paddled away. He turned back to the great house, its shadow lying long before it.

THIRTY-FOUR

THOUGH IT WAS BUILT IN much the same manner, this house smelled different than Teninihitu's. It took Urtu little time to recognize the pervasive scent, riding beneath a host of others, as that of pine. With all those plantations of tall trees they had passed, this should not have been surprising. Otherwise, the rooms were much the same. Smaller, and further away from the central part of Anaku's house. Tira and he had quarters side by side, but connected only by the hall outside.

And as that other house, there was a buffet laid on a porch. They need never worry about finding a meal. Their guide had told them—jokingly, it seemed, but they weren't certain—that he thought some of those here had simply moved in unannounced and no one knew who they were. "But I'll have my eye on you two," he said. "If you're still here in a couple years, I might ask you to leave!"

Not that they wouldn't stand out, looking nothing like Molu. There were curious looks and whispers. Urtu expected the whole house to know who they were by the morrow. As for the reason they were there, rumors would fly and some might even hit their target.

"They are a bit stuffy," he commented when they returned to their rooms. "No windows."

"Wouldn't that make them safer?" asked Tira.

"Except we do not know who might occupy the rooms on the other side of these flimsy walls." It was no great matter, now he no longer need keep Malama safe. Perhaps he'd sleep on one of the porches tomorrow night or even by the lakeside. Others he saw doing this. Best to stay where they had been put tonight.

And he was weary. He fell asleep almost as soon as he lay on his mat.

Someone spoke. *Urtu*. A woman's voice. Familiar?

Who? He wasn't in his room, was he? But neither was he speaking from afar. There was none of that to what was happening.

This is interesting.

Should he raise his wards? But he couldn't. There were no wards to raise.

No need for that, she said. We are not speaking from afar so neither of us is in danger from the other. I speak to you in dream. Your dream! I am quite awake.

He could see nothing, only hear a voice. *It is Olun, isn't it?*

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It is. I've never done this before, she went on. Not spoken to someone conscious in a dream. I have sent images or words into heads on a few occasions, mostly to those who have no powers. You know how this is done?

I do. You send a part of yourself around through another world and—into another head, in a sense. Why was he speaking so casually with this madwoman? My father did this but I have never had reason to attempt it.

It is rarely of much use. Unlike when we meet from afar, two brains can not truly share a space.

So how do we now speak in dream? She must be telling the truth about that. He really was dreaming. He also began to have suspicions as to how this particular dream came to be.

The Eyes, I would assume. They have powers none of us will ever be able to fully grasp. There was a pause. Being dream, it could have lasted a second or an hour. But why this happens now and not before I do not understand. It was as if your dreaming mind called to me.

I sleep near a place of power, the Sacred Isle of Ahahuway. I have known none that rival it.

I have heard of this isle. Potent indeed it must be. I would we could explore its power, Urtu! I do not wish to be your enemy.

Yet it seems we are. As you were my father's.

That I did not wish either. He—he spurned me. He loved me and then he spurned me. I hated him! But you I do not hate.

He must ask his mother if she knew anything of that. If he remembered any of this on awaking. Dream could flit away with dawn, as other winged creatures of night. Was Olun gone? Her voice no longer sounded and his dream faded into darkness.

He sat up, wide awake. Recall it all, he told himself. Remember every word and repeat it so it might not be lost. This he did. Perhaps it was not necessary, for his dream remained vivid, unlike others. Was it still night? It was hard to tell in this room; only a little light found its way in during the day, filtered through the walls of woven mats. He pulled back the cloth that hung across its entrance and looked out into the hall. Dark there too, save the glimmer of a lamp somewhere down the corridor.

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"Urtu?" He could just make out Tira, standing at the way into her own room.

"Yes. Did I wake you?"

"Not now. Your dream did. Let us talk of it."

"Come in." They found seats in the darkness. "You saw, er, heard my dream?"

"Only bits, a word here and there, and all as if someone spoke far away. It was Olun?"

"It was. If you experienced it too, then it is less likely it was only a dream from my own mind and I truly spoke with her." He recognized it could still be a possibility.

"I too dreamed," spoke Tira. "Before yours. Again a god whispered to me. I think it is a god. And no, I do not know his name."

"His?"

"Yes, the voice is masculine. Never had I heard it so! Before, I was not sure he spoke in words at all, though I understood."

"The power of the Eyes and Ahahuway combined."

"Yes. He tells me that I also must guard the gems. That I am a part of the plan for them."

"His plan?" Urtu did not overly trust the plans of gods.

"Or that of the Eyes themselves. He somehow seems connected to them."

"Let's go get something to eat. And I need to relieve myself. It is barbarous of these Molu not to have given us chamber pots."

"They have strange taboos when it comes to such things," agreed Tira.

It proved to be near dawn and a fresh buffet had been laid. Perhaps it was always somewhat fresh in so large and busy a house.

They had barely settled down with bowls of fruit and boiled millet when Malama came hurrying up the steps from the garden. The great hibiscus that grew there were yet only dark shapes. She sat down at once, saying, "Panaha is upset with you. Troubling dreams visited the priestesses last night and she thinks your jewels are responsible. She did not say whether she shared in them but I suspect she did." She paused, possibly for dramatic effect, more likely to catch her breath. "Because I did. And much more clearly than the others."

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“You shared my dream?”

“Not in the sense that I was in it. But I think I heard it all. I was even nearer to the locus of power than you, after all.”

“But farther from the jewels,” Tira pointed out.

“True.” She looked at their bowls. “I should get some of that. I paddled off without eating. Anyway, Panaha sees our presence as disruptive and she may ask us to leave.”

With that she got up to seek her own breakfast. “Only the king can make us leave, I think,” Urtu whispered.

“But Malama will do what her high priestess tells her.”

She returned to them with not one but two heaping bowls. As she took a seat, a tall and strikingly handsome man came out of the house, exchanged pleasantries with a breakfaster or two, and went to the buffet.

Malama leaned in, conspiratorial, and informed them, “It is Anaku. He likes an early meal but is more likely to eat with his soldiers.”

The king is nearly as beautiful as his sister,” Urtu whispered.

“So he is,” sighed Malama.

THIRTY-FIVE

THE KING HAD NO MORE than spoken an hello to Malama and remarked they should talk later, before going off to sit with a group who were surely fighting men. He paid no attention to her companions.

"I miss my yogurt," said Urtu. Tira heartily agreed.

"Yo-gu-lut?"

"A delicious food made from milk. Your people do not drink milk at all."

"Milk is for babies," declared Malama. "I'll stick with beer."

"What have we here?" asked Tira.

A bedraggled Sister One was coming up the steps. Malama at once rose and went to her, followed by Urtu and Tira. Anaku also noted the girl and came over.

"How did you get here?" asked the priestess, her voice stern.

"I swam." Her own voice became distinctly defiant as she declared, "They want me to sit there on their island and—and feel sorry for what I did. But I don't! I don't want to be a priestess. I want to be free like —" Her eyes went to Urtu. "Like Samuc."

She was referring to the fact that he was a wizard, Urtu was sure, and free to exercise his gifts without the restrictions of an order of prophetesses. The king did not understand that and was briefly puzzled, but chose to ignore it. "You have taken no vows?" he asked.

"No, my lord."

"Then you are free to do as you will in my kingdom. It would have been more complicated otherwise." There was no indication Anaku was being anything but completely serious. He gave the girl a closer scrutiny. "You are Isana, aren't you? Daughter of Vaharo, the bard?"

Isana gave him a look that held a certain amount of suspicion. "I am, my lord."

"A great man," he gravely stated. "We mourned his passing. Now you must be our guest; get some food and come sit with me and my comrades."

The former novice did so but not without giving them a triumphant final look.

"Anaku only knows her father was a great bard because others told

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him so,” commented Malama. “But he does recognize Isana is a comely girl. Are we ready to go?”

As was expected of them, they returned their bowls and scraped any scraps of food into a tub. This would be go to the chickens or pigs—no one was sure which. “Let’s go down into the gardens and talk.”

The gardens where Malvern wed the daughter of another king, two thousand years ago. Oh, there was no guarantee they lay in just the same spot now but they could, couldn’t they? “Panaha will be unhappy but, as the king said, there is nothing she can do about the girl. Nothing official. She will no doubt blame me for the situation.”

“Should she?” asked Tira.

Malama laughed. “Probably. I should have noticed she was not happy with the idea of being a priestess. But there is so little other choice for one with our gifts.”

This, Urtu suspected, was part of the reason she had been drawn to Olun in the first place. Isana chafed at the thought of spending her life at—though not always on—the Sacred Isle. Perhaps Malama did as well.

As he began to chafe at wandering pointlessly in Anaku’s gardens, lovely though they might be. Malama noted this. “We wait for someone or another to call for us. Or for me. I have business here and that comes before all else.”

Urtu had his own business and, in his way, was as eager to get to it. The Eyes of the Wind, the Sacred Isle, Olun and Panaha and, especially, Malama. There was much to learn, to understand, to simply sort out.

It was the high priestess who found them there, coming alone to them. “I have been told of the girl,” she said simply.

“Anaku has extended his protection to her. I would not press him.”

“He probably sees it as another petty victory over us.” She might have said ‘us’ but Urtu could tell she meant ‘me.’

Only Malama’s eyes smiled. “I am not sure the king thinks in such terms. You know he is not one to examine his motives.”

Panaha gave one quick nod of acknowledgment. “You understand him better than I. You understand people and politics, and I know not whether that is a good thing or not for a high priestess.”

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“Neither do I,” admitted Malama. “And who knows if I’ll find out?”

“It is most likely you will be named my successor.”

“Many years from now.”

“So I hope! But you must step away from your family’s concerns. Soon.”

If she truly wishes the office, thought Urtu. He could recognize that Malama was ambivalent, that she might be unconsciously sabotaging her own chances at it.

The high priestess turned suddenly to him. “In two nights, when the moon is full, we will seek a prophecy for you. I know you came not seeking one but I also think maybe it was intended.”

He wasn’t sure whether he should thank her. Maybe after the prophecy was delivered! “You still wish to speak with me of what I carry?”

“In time. Where is the girl, anyway, Malama?”

“Anaku took charge of her. That bothers me not.”

“He is an honorable man,” stated Panaha. “Still, I will have to speak to him of it eventually. It would be better if you did not,” she warned, and with that turned and walked from them.

“You do trust the king?” asked Urtu. “He will not attempt to, um —”

“Sleep with her? Oh, well he might. But he would never force his attentions on a woman. Panaha is right—he is an honorable man. That is because he believes he is one.”

Urtu gave that some consideration. “It is not always an easy thing to believe.”

“Your concern about the girl shows you have at least some honor to your name, my Samuc. Except that’s not your name!” She snickered over that. “And despite her speaking with your enemies.”

As he had done himself last night. So many things he could have asked Olun but came not to his mind! That was the way of dream. “So Panaha is out of the way and we wait for Hohina? Or Anaku himself?”

“Either or both.” She thought on that. “Probably not Fetua, however. We’ll want to work out a few things before speaking to her again. Or if we don’t work them out, there will be no reason to.”

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They waited not overly long before a message came requesting the priestess's presence. "Only the Lady Malama," stated the servant.

"You two enjoy the rest of your day," she told them. "Swim, sleep. Eat more. Chase after pretty girls as long as I'm not watching. Oh, not you, Tira!" She seemed a tad embarrassed. None of them had ever asked into the wizard's love life nor if she even had one. Urtu decided to keep it that way, at least for now.

Though he would certainly like to see her happy, wherever and whenever this journey ended. This quest—for what did Tira search?

"I've seen enough of flowers," he told her. "Shall we explore? I would like to see if anything is as it was in ancient times."

"Things remain the same in our homeland, where we build in stone. Here, I would not think so."

Urtu could have pointed out that far more in the Valley of Visions was built of mud bricks than of stone. "The house seems to be in the same place. But the porch is not as it was described in Malvern's annals. Perhaps you are right, Ti—Hucan. At least the lake is still there. Shall we swim?"

"No, I think I shall just sit on the porch and look at the garden and maybe nap or maybe eat some more. Or both."

Urtu was half of a mind to join his friend in doing nothing but chose to walk down to the lake. He could do nothing later.

Many did nothing there. Some sat, some smoked bamboo pipes. Some napped in the sun, some swam and then napped, remaining nude. Boats did come and go, only small ones, canoes, in front of the king's house. Some might be fishermen. He could see the Sacred Isle clearly enough. Did the priestesses swim too? He knew they came ashore frequently enough, sometimes to visit lovers.

Again he was faced with the dilemma of the jewels, should he decide to enter the water. The closer he came to the isle, the more he felt their presence. What if he swam or canoed out close to it? The actual locus, the place of power, might not be precisely on that rocky island at all, but only near where it rose.

"Don't you know whether you want to go in, Samuc?"

To turned to see Fetua, not that he didn't recognize the voice. Had she seen him come down here and decided to follow?

"I do not, my lady. I carry something valuable and don't want to get it wet but neither do I want to leave it on the shore."

"Oh." She took this as explanation enough and offered no advice. "Malama and Hohina and Anaku meet privately to speak of things. They have asked me not be there."

"Me too."

"I think they are talking about me."

He smiled. "I know they are."

She did not smile in return but stood staring at the lake, her expression unreadable. There might not have been anything written on it. Then she glimpsed someone and brightened. "Ho, Barandi!" She turned to Urtu. "One of our house guards. Watch our things while we go into Ahahuway," she ordered the man, as she unfastened and dropped her salung.

"Well, come on," Fetua said when he did not immediately respond. Why not? He undid the belt with its knife—the sword remained in his room—and slid off the kilt. The pouch he left hidden inside it. Not without some uncertainty! But he would trust this guard. Malama had said they would be watching them, hadn't she?

The part of Fetua he had not seen before was as pleasing to the eye as the rest of her. She even swam beautifully, not athletically but smoothly and gracefully. They swam together and spoke little and then dried themselves in the sun—Urtu making sure to collect the Eyes first.

After a while she stood and pulled her salung back up, fastening it below her breasts. "You are clever, like Malama and Hohina," she said. "I will not understand your jests. Instead, you must say beautiful things to me. That is the way to make love to me, Samuc." With that, Fetua left him there.

It was early afternoon. As good a time as any for another meal. Tira was not on the porch. No matter, they would run into each other sooner or later, at their sleeping chambers if nowhere else. He was full and thinking of another nap when Malama emerged from the house. "Go get me some food," she ordered, plopping down beside him. "I'm too worn out."

"I live to serve, Lady Malama." Off he went and filled three bowls—

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for he could probably hold a little more himself—and carefully balancing them, returned to their mat.

“They talk and talk and finally decide we should talk some more!” she complained.

“That is better than deciding not to talk some more.”

“True enough. They did agree to put the question to Fetua. Just to see how she might feel about it before going further. By the way, I saw you with Fetua. We sat on a small porch with a view of the lake.” She managed a smile. “I think Anaku was glad you were keeping his sister entertained.”

“Anything for your cause, no matter how distasteful.”

“Oh, as if I believe that, you fickle man!”

“Stay with me tonight, whether in my room or by the lake. I will show you how, um, unfickle I am.”

She shook her head. “Anaku has invited me to share his mat tonight and I would not, ah, hurt his feelings nor reject what he considers an act of hospitality. I need him to be friendly to our cause.” She seemed a little surprised by his expression, which might have been somewhere between disbelief and displeasure. “Do not fret, my Urtu. You know there is nothing more than an old friendship between us.”

“On your part.” He had his emotions firmly in hand now and could discuss this. It was unusual for him to lose control for even a few seconds.

“Yes. I know there are other feelings that Anaku might not even recognize in himself.” There might have been a trace of mischief in her voice as she added, “It would be good to keep Fetua happy with us, too. If the need arises.”

And his mother had told this woman *he* could be calculating! But Urtu knew the customs on this side of the mountains were not the same, that things were seen differently.

“Now I need a nap,” stated Malama, and stretched out right there. She was asleep by the time he had returned their bowls and come back to her. Urtu sat and watched her for a while, until he, too, dozed.

THIRTY-SIX

“SHH. ISANA IS ASLEEP.” So Tira warned him when he came to his chamber’s entry.

“Here?”

“She knew not where else to go and no one seemed willing to help her. I told her she could probably just claim any empty room but she asked to stay.”

“It’s stuffy in here,” said Urtu. “I think I shall sleep outside.” In truth he felt restless. Maybe being in the open would be better. “There is no rain.”

“I understand the rainy season is over. It still rains but not as much.”

“And still more than at home.” If either could still call the Valley of Visions home.

“But we knew when the rains fell heavily in the mountains, for the rivers rose.”

Urtu only nodded to this. He carried his oil lamp into his own room. The light blanket he had carried here might be useful tonight. Best to bring it along. And his sword. He would feel safer with it beside him. “I’ll leave the light with you,” he whispered, and left Tira and the sleeping Isana.

For a while, he sat in the garden and listened to a singer, for he was not yet sleepy. The man was not as the bards of old, those of which the annals told, but sang romantic songs and strummed a stringed instrument of some sort. Did anyone here even know the old epics anymore? Some had been written down for his father’s library. Someday, those would disappear, as do all things. It might already have happened, for all he knew.

Then he found a place on the lawn, up the slope a little from Ahahuway, and lay down. He was not the only one to choose this place on a warm night. He could see them, here and there, by the light of the almost-full moon.

The moon had set when he awoke again, and only the stars gave light, shining brilliant in a cloudless sky. Urtu sat up and looked out over dark Ahahuway. Maybe a swim would be a good idea, to wake him up before he went to seek breakfast. He rolled up his blanket and ambled toward the lake. Oh, he would have to be cautious about the

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gems again, wouldn't he? They were becoming a nuisance when he was beginning to enjoy something like a normal life.

At the edge of the lake he could see a dark shape launching a canoe. A woman, he thought. Then another shape and the glint of light on metal. At once he drew his bronze sword and charged, yelling out a challenge. Best to let the attacker know he was there; it might turn him from his victim. It also might unnerve him.

Not one, two. One rushed toward him, his own sword in hand. Urtu batted the blade aside and careened into the man, not stopping as he sprawled onto the grass. The other held only a knife but he lunged at the young wizard. His lunge ended on the point of a sword. He slid off the blade with a faint gurgle as Urtu turned to see what had become of the other. He was gone, run off, no doubt.

The noise had attracted attention and now a call had been raised for the guards. Urtu went to their victim—or intended victim. She lay crumpled, half in the canoe. “A torch, someone,” he called out, as he picked her up and laid her on the shore. Malama.

“The Lady Malama was attacked,” he said loudly, to anyone here who might be in authority. Let us get her into the house.” There was a gash on her arm, bleeding profusely. That must be bound up. Most likely, a defensive wound, as she put her arm up to block an assassin's blade. He could see no other harm by the torch light. Oh, a great knot on her forehead, perhaps from when she toppled into the dugout canoe.

“Does anyone have a cloth?” One was passed to him—his own blanket he had dropped when rushing forward. He wrapped it around the wounded arm, in hopes of slowing the bleeding. Then four men, soldiers, scooped her form up, locking hands beneath her, and hurried toward the House of Anaku.

Urtu followed, not so quickly, as the impact of all that had just occurred started to effect him. He stopped and took a couple deep breaths to compose himself, before going on.

“The healers have her,” one of the soldiers told him when he stepped into the great entry hall. “In that chamber over there but you shouldn't bother them.” It was the same little room in which they had conferred with Hohina on first arriving.

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Anaku rushed in, with Hohina and a man Urtu suspected of being her husband at his heels. "She had just left me," the king said. "Who would do this?"

"Those who do not wish to see an alliance between you and her brother," said Urtu.

Anaku turned to his cousin. "Why can't you explain things that simply?"

"They aren't always simple. But this time, I suppose they are."

An older woman came to the doorway of the chamber. "It is not so bad," she informed them. "The cut was long but not deep. We have staunched the bleeding and I think the lady is in no danger there. As for the blow to the temple?" She shook her head. "We may not know until she regains consciousness." If she regained consciousness. Urtu knew that was the unspoken conclusion to her statement. Whether Anaku recognized that, he did not know.

He did turn to Urtu. "I understand that you saved her."

"It was only chance that I chose to sleep near the place she was attacked, my lord. And I did what any man would do."

"But you did it well," spoke the captain who was probably Hohina's spouse. "You are a trained fighting man."

Yes," said Anaku, his interest diverted of a sudden to this new topic. "I have been told you are not Diwalnu but a great captain from beyond the mountains."

Either Hohina or Malama might have seen fit to speak of this to the king. Urtu wasn't bothered by it but chances were word would spread throughout the House of Anaku now.

"I know not how great but I was indeed a leader of men in the Valley of Visions."

"You must come and train with me later. Once we know Malama is safe."

"There is much blood on you," Hohina noted. "Why do you not go wash yourself? We will let you know if aught changes here."

Yes, he might as well. He could smell it on him. The lake? That would be simplest. The sun was edging over the horizon when Urtu waded into Ahahuway, not going in far, not even to his waist. His kilt could use the washing too and the Eyes would be safe enough, though

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they were not on his mind. As he splashed, dunking his head beneath the surface, a long canoe loomed from the morning mists.

All the paddlers were women. "Samuc!" called she in the prow. "There was a signal that our presence was needed. Do you know what has happened?"

Panaha, and several other priestesses. The better part of the dozen or so in residence on the isle. "Malama was attacked. She is with the healers now. They—think she will be all right."

"You were not there to protect her?" There was no accusation, or at least none in her tone.

He had waded ashore now, and helped pull the canoe onto the sand. "She chose not to be in my care," he said.

"Ah. Do not blame her for this," spoke the high priestess, stepping out.

"I know I should not." But it was hard not to—when he was not blaming himself.

"Panaha! My greetings." It was Hohina's husband coming toward them.

"You have news, Winduku?"

"Yes. Samuc has told you what happened?"

"Enough. What of Lady Malama?"

"She has awakened and demands to see you, Samuc."

"It is a good sign she is back to ordering people around," said Panaha.

"But we'd best not tell her so," Urtu replied and set off for the house, waiting for no one. He did not quite run but he did bound up Anaku's front stairs. Nor did he wait for any permission to enter the room where Malama waited. The healer was sewing up her arm when he barged in.

"I am told you—ow—you are the one who saved me," she said. "I don't remember any of it. Only putting up my arm and then falling over. Must it hurt that much?"

"I am afraid so, my lady." She did not look up from her work as she continued. "The lady took a long but shallow gash on her arm," she told Urtu. "It will take some time to heal completely. She should not travel."

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Malama took up the subject. "So we'll be stuck here longer than I planned."

"What of her head? Your head?" He wasn't sure which to ask.

"It hurts terribly," Malama told him. "That will go away, won't it?" This was obviously aimed at the healer.

"It should." That was not too comforting. Better though than 'it shouldn't.' "It may need the rest more than the arm. But not sleep. Try not to sleep for a while."

Or she might not wake again. Urtu knew of this. "I shall do my best to keep you awake."

"No. That will be our task. The Lady Malama will rest on our isle," stated Panaha, framed in the doorway, "when she may be moved. This afternoon?"

"I would think so, my lady. There, all finished up. I don't think it even needs a bandage but do keep it clean!"

"Then I can go?"

"You may be unsteady on your feet, girl, but yes. Lean on this heroic fellow."

"Anytime," said Malama.

THIRTY-SEVEN

“SHE WILL NOT SPEAK TO you from afar while she is on the isle. It is not forbidden, exactly, but everyone knows it shouldn’t be done.”

Urtu stood with Isana and Tira, watching Malama being conveyed to the Sacred Isle. It was but noon. “Know you much of speaking from afar?” he asked the girl.

“Not enough! You must teach me. And Hucan. She has been very patient.”

She had. Urtu had let too many other things distract him, not that they hadn’t been important things. He had no doubt Isana could learn such skills, even if the priestesses did not emphasize them in their training. Both the novices would have been gifted or they would not have been chosen to serve as prophetesses—and not just any prophetesses but the elite who lived on the isle in Ahahuway.

“Maybe after some lunch,” he said. “And a nap.” There was likely to be much free time while Malama healed. He looked out over the lake. It might be nice to sail. Or even swim across. “Let’s eat.”

He was sound asleep when someone shook him. Urtu’s hand went at once to his sword, which he still carried. A gay laugh. “Don’t chop my head off, Samuc!”

Isana, it was, kneeling beside him. “That’s what usually happens to those who disturb my naps,” he told her. Someone stood behind the girl.

“Blame Winduku,” she said. “He forced me into committing so heinous a deed.”

“Then all is forgiven. Winduku, I greet you.” He did not know if the man should have any title before his name. None had called him ‘lord.’ He slowly stood and stretched.

“And I greet you, Samuc. Which all know is not your true name. Do you intend to continue to use it?”

There was no reason to, was there? Oh, one reason. “Lady Malama named me so. I think I shall be Samuc until she tells me otherwise.”

“That seems wise. The king has invited you to come and exercise with his guard, as the day cools into evening. No one expects a sensible man to do anything strenuous in the heat of noon, of course.”

A king’s invitation was as good as a command, Urtu suspected. And even if not, Malama wanted to keep Anaku happy. “His guard?”

“His personal troop here at his house, of which I am captain.”

“I shall be happy to join you then, Captain Winduku.”

“Oh, may I come too?” asked Isana.

“I am sure the king would be delighted to have you watching. Or did you intend to join us and demonstrate your swordsmanship?”

“Be nice or I’ll tell Anaku you’re making fun of me!”

And the literal-minded king might take her seriously. Urtu had to admit he didn’t care for the soldier’s patronizing tone. One would think he’d know better with an accomplished wife like Hohina.

Winduku only laughed. He was a big man, not as tall as the king but more thickly built. Urtu doubted not that he was a skilled fighter.

Tira fell in with them as they went down into the garden and then followed a pathway around the back of the house, a busy pathway. “Everyone is waking up,” observed Urtu.

“And they might even work. Those are our storage buildings over there,” said the captain, waving an arm to their left, “and the village is back that way. The barracks and exercise yards lie ahead.”

“Anaku has, um, soldiers lots?” asked Tira, who chose to walk beside Winduku while Isana and Urtu followed behind. Urtu was glad to let the wizard take the task of conversing. She was getting better at Molu.

“I say not enough but the Lady Hohina says too many. Most are not here but at the borders or patrolling.”

At that point, Isana leaned close to Urtu and whispered, “He can be addressed as Lord Winduku. The captain may not have been born noble but marrying Hohina makes him so now.” She glanced toward the captain and then back to her companion, adding, “I don’t think he cares much about it but it is good to know, isn’t it?”

“It is, and I thank you for telling me.”

That brought a smile to the young woman’s face. She must be very uncertain of things right now, he thought. Isana had erased the future written for her.

The exercise yards were more like fields. Men were practicing their arts of war in a somewhat desultory fashion, some shooting with bows, some wrestling or fencing with bamboo swords. A number sat or stood about. They weren’t all fully awake from their naps either, maybe.

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All the men were large. Maybe that was a conceit of Anaku's, to have his largest soldiers in his personal troop. The Molu here in the south, tended to be large men anyway. Large women too. Anaku stood among the tallest; he strode toward them now, naked but for a loin-cloth, sweat glistening on his athletic body.

"Oh, he is so good to look at," murmured Isana.

"He will be fat and old someday," Urtu whispered to her. He wasn't quite sure why.

"So will I." She turned to him, staring into his face. "But not you, I suppose. I know you grow older more slowly than we will but even so, you are one of those who will not let himself grow fat."

She was probably right about that. But how did Isana know of his longevity?

Oh, it wouldn't be hard to figure out for someone with a bit of knowledge and a bit of brains. "Welcome," shouted Anaku, louder than need be. "You must show us your skills, captain from beyond the mountains! And you are welcome too, Isana." He may have stood even more erect and beautiful as he said this last.

Many men liked to posture for pretty girls. That was nothing of importance. Isana was pretty; prettier in a conventional sense than Malama. To be sure, neither could match the king's sister. Urtu wondered if she came to see the men at their training. It would be very distracting.

Tira had been ignored. Urtu had no idea whether she wished to take part or would watch with Isana. "Do you shoot with the bow?" asked Anaku. "The men of my kingdom are renowned archers."

"So have I read in the histories, my lord. Molu archery began here." That pleased the king who smiled broadly. "However, I am but an indifferent archer myself," he felt it wise to add. Archery was not an art he had practiced with any diligence.

"I shoot some little," spoke Tira.

"Then let us have a match."

The bows were longer than those used in their valley, and all of wood—some of one wood only and some of two sorts, laminated. Those with which Urtu had been familiar used horn in their construc-

tion. He took a turn at the straw target and proved himself as indifferent as he had claimed.

Then Tira stepped up and released arrow after arrow into the center of the round. Urtu could hear the voices of impressed men standing near him. "I didn't know Diwalnu could shoot like that. Thought they all stuck to their spears and throwing sticks."

"He's not from the swamps. Came across the mountains like his master."

"She, isn't it?" said another. "I've heard the shaman is one so made."

"Oh? Does she serve Wenatu?"

"I know nothing of what gods they have beyond the peaks."

He should ask about Wenatu. The name seemed familiar but Urtu could not place it.

"You have bested us all," proclaimed Winduku when Tira stepped back. "Including he you follow."

The wizard looked toward Urtu and completely straight-faced, though Urtu knew there was mischief behind the mask, stated, "Samuc shoot maybe not good some of you as, but, um, wager I he shoot more far can."

It was not wise to wager with Molu. They took their gambling more seriously than other men. He had not thought to warn her of this.

"No, there will be no wagers," announced Anaku. "You all know I do not permit them here. But I would see if there is truth to this, Hucan. It is a claim I find difficult to believe."

So did everyone else, most likely. Urtu was the smallest man here. "I am willing to put it to the test," he said. "Who among you can send an arrow the furthest?"

"That would be the king," spoke Winduku. He perhaps smirked a bit.

Anaku, however, grinned broadly. "Bring me my bow!"

The bow was the longest Urtu had seen, and the arrows matched. If the king's long arms could fully draw it, the shafts would fly far indeed. He would need a bow able to match its power. Maybe not Anaku's weapon, however; it would touch the ground if he held it before him!

"Each will release three arrows," decreed the captain. "This is acceptable?" Both nodded. "You need a bow, Samuc."

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“Who here uses the bow with the strongest pull?” he asked. “And might I borrow it?”

It was duly brought forth. Still a little too long for Urtu. “And I might ask also to borrow some of your arrows, my lord?”

“You may,” said Anaku. “The ones with the blue feathers so we will know your shots from mine.” There were extra targets leaning against the fence. Urtu carried one of the straw rounds to the line and stood atop it. Yes, that gave him enough clearance.

“Is there an objection to this?” Urtu asked.

None was voiced. “Very well. The king first,” said Winduku.

Anaku stepped forward, fully drew his great bow, and released an arrow toward the horizon. He could have aimed higher, thought Urtu.

He nocked one of the king’s long arrows and drew back the string as far as the length of his arms allowed. Subdued expressions of surprise arose from the watchers. If only he had longer arms! Urtu knew he could draw this bow even further. But he had reached not only the limits of his arms but also that of the arrow. He aimed high and released.

So each continued, in turns, for two more rounds. Winduku himself went out into the field to see where the arrows had landed. He returned, carrying all six shafts—though one had splintered—and proclaimed, “Two of Samuc’s arrows flew further than your best, Lord Anaku.”

“By how much?”

“The furthest no more than three feet.”

“Ah, then we are closely matched. At least when I let you stand as tall as me!” The king spoke this in complete seriousness, though some of the men chuckled. “We must try other contests, but on other days.” That Anaku had accepted the outcome without the least rancor did not surprise Urtu at all.

For some time more, they watched the soldiers at their exercise but took no part. Anaku spoke mostly with Isana, a little apart from them.

“You defeated Anaku on technique,” said Tira. “You had the better eye for the proper angle to release.”

Urtu knew this was so. “If I had one of the powerful compound

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bows of our homeland I think I could have shot further. I might not even need to draw so deeply.”

“I would agree. You are incredibly strong, are you not? The strongest man I have met.”

“This I would doubt. I am stronger than most my size, yes.” Urtu was uncertain of his limits; he did know his greatest strength was not strength, but stamina. “One thing I do know is that you should have a bow in your hand when next we face an enemy.”

Tira would not be drawn into speaking of that. His curiosity must remain unsatisfied. “They are winding down,” he said. “Let’s go eat.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

ISANA DID NOT FIND HER way to their rooms that night. Urtu could guess where she was. Tira probably could too.

One of the household guards woke them. "It is dawn," he said. "The priestesses are coming."

The priestesses? Oh, Panaha had promised to go in search of a prophecy for him. That would have been last night. Best he and Tira go and greet them, as this man seemed to expect. Breakfast could wait.

He left his sword there. No one touched anything in their rooms. Pilferage was unheard of in the king's house. Urtu knew well it would not have been so in his home across the mountains. Oh, in the House of the Mountain things were generally safe; more so in High Sanctuary. In the old capital city of Spur Fulerad one was not safe even turning ones back on ones belongings. Why two peoples should differ so, he did not know. He did know there were reasons. There were always reasons.

But it didn't do to act on the wrong ones. That was worse than doing nothing. That seemed to have been his father's operating principle.

The Eyes, of course, Urtu carried with him.

Lady Hohina waited before the king's front doors. No others of rank. "They will not come to the house," she told them. "You must go down to Ahahuway to hear their words. I shall not intrude for the words are not meant for any but you."

Urtu thanked her. He and Tira hurried toward the lake. Were the prophetesses of the isle already there? He saw only the usual folk about their own business. There. A canoe neared the shore, three figures in it. Panaha and two others. As the women came ashore, all drew away, knowing not to intrude on the secrets of the Sacred Isle. Panaha gave Tira a glance but said nothing of her presence.

"We have stood in the places where all things are at once," proclaimed one of the priestesses.

"There we sought a prophecy for Lord Urtu," stated the other. Did they have to speak that name? At least no one was near. "Listen now."

Urtu had some idea of how their prophetic gifts worked. They did not consciously seek—or not completely consciously—but entered a trance. All of them together? Of that he was uncertain. What he did

know was the prophecy would be presented in symbolic language, most likely, condensed of what they had seen and, perhaps, not truly understood.

Panaha stepped forward.
*Gods and wizards weave their fates
 in the lands beyond the seas;
 to the shores of dawn and sunset
 eyes must look to find a home.*

His eyes? The Eyes he carried? Perhaps even Tira's eyes—who could say? But it seemed clear they were meant to cross the sea. Someone was meant to cross the sea.

The priestesses turned to their canoe. "We thank you," Tira called after them.

One leaned in toward the high priestess, exchanged a few words, and then scurried back to them. "I am to tell you Malama is well." Her giggle contrasted with the solemnity of a few seconds ago. "We can't keep her from talking about you!" With that, she returned to the others and all three took up paddles, returning to their shrine.

"I wonder what Malama thinks of that prophecy," he said to Tira. Had she taken part in the seeking of it? "I wonder what *you* think of it. I know you have gifts of prophecy yourself."

"I have attempted to ignore them but—they do speak to me in this place. The gems you carry may also have a role in that, being close to me through the nights. I dream but the dreams remain incoherent, without meaning."

"Your god has not spoken again?"

Tira only shook his head. They had reached Anuku's front porch and mounted the steps to the waiting Hohina.

"You have heard the words of Panaha?" she asked.

"We have. Understanding them may take some time."

She smiled at that. "So have said many who heard such prophecies."

"My lady," he said, "Might I ask a question? Who is Wenatu?"

She seemed puzzled and amused by the query. "The god of the rainbow and also patron of archers."

He remembered the story from the annals now. "She whom the legendary Teme served."

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"Some equate him with Balanganay, who is worshiped in the far north. They are alike in many ways."

Urtu had learned enough of the ways of gods—primarily by reading—to know they would be different entities, whatever similarities they might have. As both were very different from Woran, the Rainbow Snake of his own people.

"My husband tells me you impressed Anaku yesterday," she continued, as they entered the house. "He thinks the king will ask you to join his soldiers." A slight hesitation. "Perhaps as a captain."

A rival to Winduku? That might be the thought that had crossed her mind. Maybe even a rival to her own authority. "My duty is to the Lady Malama and her brother," he stated.

That might not have completely satisfied the noblewoman but it helped. They parted, Hohina off to whatever duties she might have deeper in the House of Anaku, they turning left down a corridor that led to food.

"This Wenatu," spoke Tira. "Did you think he might have something to do with me?"

"Not really. Some of the soldiers spoke of him." It had been only curiosity. But could there be more? "You don't think he could be your unseen god, do you?"

Tira did not hesitate in her answer. "It seems unlikely. Nor the other Hohina named."

"We may need to cross the sea to find him."

"So think I also. It is crowded."

Many were at the buffet on the porch. "And none we know. We could eat with the soldiers. Anaku is probably breakfasting with them right now."

Tira shook her head. "They were a novelty yesterday. Nothing there interests me now. And here comes someone we do know."

Isana had come onto the porch and was looking about. She, apparently, was not breakfasting with either Anaku or his soldiers. "She has spied us." The young woman headed their way.

"Which of you is going to bring me some food?" she asked.

"I will," Urtu replied. "You two claim a mat while I fill bowls."

Three bowls. And three smaller ones to eat from. He pressed into

the crowd at the buffet. "No coffee again," grumbled a woman beside him. "I'll bet the soldiers have more than enough of it," spoke another voice. Urtu had forgotten about coffee since he'd asked Malama where it was grown, days ago. Maybe he'd go looking for the plantations, just to fill these days while she healed. To be on horse again might be good. Or on a boat. That would be even better. Papaya. He took some of that. Eggs. Raw or boiled? No matter. He would learn when he cracked one! He was pretty sure they came from chickens but he had seen plenty of ducks about too. The ever-present taro paste. Might as well scoop some of that in. Oh, and the hot boiled millet gruel. Urtu had found himself fond of it. Hmm, not so hot anymore. Warmish.

Some scraps of coconut meat before he turned away. Now where were the others? Ah, Isana stood and waved to him. He threaded his way through a maze of mats and seated breakfasters. "Lady Fetua. Shall I go fetch another bowl?" He could not bring himself to feel surprise on finding her seated beside his friends.

"No, Samuc. I have eaten." Urtu sat down, placing the large bowls on the mat and passing out the smaller ones. He placed some of the millet in his own and cautiously cracked an egg. Yes, raw. He stirred it into the cereal; it was warm enough to cook it after a fashion.

"Hucan says Malama is doing well. The priestesses told you so this morning."

"It is so, my lady. I think you would be permitted to go over and visit her on the island." He looked to Isana. "Is that not so?"

"Mmm-huh," she answered, her mouth full of papaya.

"I visited once. Malama took me." Despite having claimed to have eaten, she picked up a bit of some green fruit and nibbled it. "I do not think I would intrude now."

"Neither would I."

"My brother would have you executed. It is not permitted." Once again, Fetua had easily dodged one of his jests. "Even though he likes you."

"I believe he likes Isana too."

Fetua did smile at that. "Yes. What are your plans, Isana, now you are no longer to be a priestess?"

"I wish I knew, my lady."

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“Do not fail to ask me if you need any help. I also like you.” Isana beamed like a child given a handful of sweets. “And of course I like you, Samuc. Must I call you that? Everyone knows it isn’t your name now.”

Again, this question. “I’ve no objection to it,” he told her. “I went by the name Cunos when I arrived in the empire.”

She wrinkled up her nose. Urtu thought it still was a lovely nose, even so. “I don’t think I like that as well. Coo-nose. No.” Then all of his statement sank in. “You went by the name, you say. So it is not really who you are?”

He had intended her to recognize that but also that he didn’t want to reveal his actual name. “I might tell you my name in some other place, in some other time,” he said, and hoped that was good enough.

She took it with her typical equanimity. “You will play with my brother and his soldiers again today?”

“I think not. I would rather see things. Ride or sail.”

“I love to sail, Samuc. You must come in my boat with me, and maybe tell me your name.”

Why not? Malama had said to keep her happy.

THIRTY-NINE

“URTU,” SHE REPEATED. “IT *IS* better than Cunos.” Maybe not much better, from the sound of Fetua’s voice.

“But best not used,” he reminded her.

She nodded, somewhat solemnly. “Unless we are alone. We can manage that from time to time.”

Was this when he was supposed say ‘beautiful things’ to her? Urtu wasn’t sure what those might be but he could speak truth to her. “You are as fine a sailor as any I have ever seen.”

“You are very good yourself, Urtu. Do you like my little boat?”

“I do. It handles well.” It was in part a dugout canoe but boards had been added above to deepen its hull. There was a deep keel, retractable, and a single triangular sail. It was a trim, not-too-small craft and far superior to those he had traveled in on the Gurang. They skimmed now across the surface of Ahahuway.

“There used to another island down there, with priests living on it,” she said, nodding toward the north, where a series of falls plummeted to the Teoma. “That is what they say. Only a small rock remains. The priest would have to be a hermit.” She smiled. “I can be clever sometimes, can’t I?”

“Sometimes might be best. Some try to be clever all the time.”

“Yes, I know such. They can weary me.” She turned sharply to their right, laying the little boat far over on its side. “Oops. Bail a little of that out, won’t you?”

He began scooping with a little wooden bowl. “A little bit is never a problem. It is only when the boat is full of water we need to worry.”

“I know that is very true.” Fetua made no comment on whether it was clever. Urtu himself wasn’t sure it was.

They were headed south, still well out from the shore opposite the king’s house. Somewhere over there he had spent the night not long ago, he and Malama. Near the ferry’s landing. “The ferry docks along here, doesn’t it?”

She pointed some distance ahead. “Up there. Back and forth twice a day. But many other boats cross the lake.”

“And we go the other direction, along its length.” Did Fetua intend to sail all the way to Ahahuway’s south end?

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"Yes. We could go up and down the lake all day and sometimes I do! But no further." She actually sounded a little sad about that fact.

"Would you like to sail the ocean?"

"I dream of it, Urtu. I saw it years ago but not since. Anaku says it is not safe to travel to the end of Teoma. Or Hohina says it."

"I have never seen it," he admitted. "I hope to." Soon—the prophecy bade him to, didn't it? "I lived beside a lake much like Ahahuway. But the mountains lay close beside it and it was cold and strong winds often blew. Further down the valley lay greater lakes—but large as they were, I know they did not rival the ocean."

"Were they beautiful?"

"No lake there is as beautiful as Ahahuway." No, not even Lades Zerac. "Nor any woman as beautiful as you."

He had surprised himself with that. But Fetua seemed pleased and sailed on, smiling.

"I want to visit the shrines," she announced after a little while. "It would be nice beneath the trees during the midday."

"Is there a shrine of Wenatu?" That was more a question of idle curiosity than aught else, the deity being on his mind.

"It is the first we shall see, right on the shore. That is so the priests may see his rainbow arching above Ahahuway."

"That's practical," he observed.

"Yes. I like priests to be practical." She perhaps stated this a little more vehemence than it seemed to warrant. "Gods too. You know, Malama does not honor the gods. Not really. She says Mana is higher than all the gods but I don't think I'd want to worship a—a force like that. I want a real god." She said this with some determination. "What gods do your people worship, Urtu? What god do you follow?" She eyed the wooded shore. They continued to speed past it.

How to explain that he was undoubtedly worse than Malama? "There are many little local gods in the Valley," he began. "Shrines often grow up around springs for it is dry country, unlike here where it rains much of the year and rains harder the rest of it." He gave her a sidelong glance to see her reaction to the quip. None. Her eyes were on the shore and on the sail. As they should be. "The ancient religion of the, um, commoners centers around a group of—" He searched for a

word. "Primordial beings, the chief of them being Woran, the Rainbow Snake." They weren't exactly gods, were they? Though Xido claimed to have encountered Woran. And, too, the 'commoners' weren't really commoners as there was no nobility in the Valley of Visions. Peasants maybe was more accurate.

"The Rainbow Snake. That's who Hucan follows, isn't it?"

"So it seems. Many now honor the Tetrad, four great gods who are identified with the four elements." And the four directions and other symbolism of that sort. They could even be identified with the four stones he carried, if one wished to make that leap.

"But you do not?" Fetua had turned toward shore. A sandy beach lay before them, with many canoes drawn up on it. "Stand ready to pull up the keel, will you? It's a bother to do it when I'm steering."

He had grown up honoring no gods; that was his father's way, the way of a man who knew too many gods too well. "Um—"

"Now!"

It took but a second for him to realize she meant the retractable keel. He slid it up barely in time before the craft itself slid onto the sand. "Get the sail down, will you?"

Maybe he wouldn't have to talk about his lack of religion after all. "Wenatu's shrine is right over there." It wasn't much to look at. Moreover, it was out in the open, not among the trees. "Let's go on into the groves and you tell me about your gods."

She stepped out onto the sand. Today, Fetua wore a simple loin-cloth, more practical for sailing than her usual skirt. Urtu did not disapprove. He had a few seconds now to come up with something to say of gods.

"My patron is actually a god of the Bazu." Fetua did not seem shocked by that. A little surprised, possibly. "He is named Xido. The Crocodile God."

"The Trickster. I've heard of him." It was Urtu's turn to be surprised.

"He is not one of the great gods but he has helped me at times." That, to be sure, was completely true. "One of those practical gods you prefer."

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That, Fetua laughed at. "And I follow the greatest, most lofty of all our goddesses. That is not so practical, is it?"

"I don't think it matters much. Isn't one god as likely to hear us as the next?" In truth, he had no idea whether it mattered. He had much to ask Xido the next time he was around the god. Oh, but he probably wouldn't tell him anything useful.

"Maybe so. Bavi seems the proper goddess for me so I honor her."

The Earth herself, wed to the greatest of the gods, Lahi, the Sky. "Not so lofty, if she lies beneath our feet."

"Very true, Urtu. It is good you understand such things." She pouted, very slightly. Urtu did not like the look of it on her. "Some treat me like a child when I speak of them."

"So you do not speak of them much, do you?"

"No, I don't." Nor did they speak much then, but strolled along the paths through the trees, enjoying the coolness of the shadowed ways. Here and there a shrine rose and Fetua would tell him whose it was before giving the god or goddess a moment of reverence and moving on. She knew the groves well, it seemed.

"And here is the shrine of Bavi herself," Fetua announced. Her moment of reverence was but a few seconds longer here. "We'd best get back across the lake."

FORTY

“NOT TOO CLOSE! ANAKU WOULD be unhappy if he had to execute you.”

“I wouldn’t feel too good about it myself.” Yes, there was the center of this place of power, not on the isle itself but some two hundred feet further out in Ahahuway. Urtu could feel the Eyes at his belt, vibrating in response, singing a sort of wordless song. They were alive as they had never been before.

There might even be a true gate, beneath the water. He could swim out and investigate but there would be no real reason to.

“You sail us home,” Fetua had said when they left the far wooded shore and he had cut close to the Sacred Isle to investigate this. Now they swept by it and he turned in a wide arc toward their landing place. This was not on the beach before the king’s house but at the docks just north, where the ferry and other larger boats tied up.

As they walked toward that house, he heard—or more felt—a distant rumble from the south, from the mountains. A mere murmur, a suggestion of something happening, somewhere.

He forgot it when Fetua spoke to him. “Will you share my mat tonight, Urtu?”

He had no ready answer. Yet he had known the question would come, in one way or another, hadn’t he?

“Not if it would hurt Malama,” she said. “I know there is a bond between you.”

Malama had as much as suggested he make love to Fetua. Yet he felt a certain guilt even considering it. More than she had, undoubtedly, when she shared Anaku’s mat. But Malama did not care for Anaku, not really, where Urtu was most uncertain about his feelings for the king’s sister. His respect for Fetua had grown. She was maybe a better person than any of them.

And not stupid. Oh, indeed not ‘clever’ but with her own quiet common sense. “You think long on this, Urtu.”

“I do. I worry more about hurting you than Malama.”

“You would not do that,” Fetua stated. She seemed quite sure of it, far surer than Urtu.

“Then I shall stay with you this night,” he said. “And as many nights as you wish.” He realized at once that was a promise he should not have

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made. But at that moment, he might have been willing to remain with Fetua forever. How could he have foreseen the way he yearned for her? Not only the woman but all she promised, rest, contentment. He could be contented here, couldn't he? He could forget the Valley he had left—only months ago but it seemed a lifetime. He could forget Panaymana and the intrigues and affairs of his empire, and forget a destiny beyond the sea. He could forget everything but Fetua.

He would tonight.

Servants brought food to Fetua's chambers, two modest rooms side by side. They sat at a mat on the floor, eating and speaking of things of no great import, of sailing, of which melons had the best flavor. Their hands often found each other and, when they were alone, their mouths. Then they retired to the other room and made vigorous and satisfying love, falling asleep in each others arms, waking to again share themselves. So passed that night.

Yes, it was satisfying. The lack of something he had felt with Malama was not here. To be there, to love, was enough. Fetua was enough. There had been no need to seek, to expect more.

At dawn, he whispered, "I should find Hucan. She must think you have kidnapped me."

"It was bad of us not to let her know where you were, wasn't it?" said a yet-drowsy Fetua. She sounded not at all repentant.

It was most likely Tira did know where he had been by now. "Shall I see you later?"

"Of course. But go now and let me sleep more."

Tira, not unexpectedly, was on the porch. She sat alone, her food bowl already empty. "You and Isana both desert me now," was her greeting when Urtu sat.

"She was with Anaku again?"

"I think she will be with him many more nights. The king is taken with her." She did not sound like she considered this a good thing. "At least for now."

Nor did she seem any more approving when she asked, "Is it the same with you and the king's sister?"

"It might be. We shall see."

"You do not feel you have betrayed Malama as soon as you were parted?"

Ah, there it was. "She as much as told me I should." But he would not have been with Fetua if that had been all. He would not have casually slept with her, as Malama did with her brother.

As if she read his thoughts, Tira said, "I hope you are not doing this in repayment of her being with Anaku."

Urtu had considered this himself. "If anything, that would have made me less likely to, um, stray. Just to show her up." He believed that was true. For the most part.

At last, Tira smiled. "Ah, to prove you were the more virtuous. Too late for that now."

"Chances are she has already heard of us, or will soon. I'm going to go fill a bowl."

As he chose from the buffet—it was but dawn and not yet depleted—Anaku emerged onto the porch. He was alone and came immediately to where Urtu stood. "So, captain from beyond the mountains," he said, "you and my sister. This I do not mind; Fetua does as she will. Of course, you are not one she might marry." The king started to fill his own bowl, one of the large ones used for serving. "Or I hope not! Oh. That's not what I mean, is it? I've nothing against you. This is why I often allow Hohina to speak my words for me!" He shook his head and then gave Urtu a thoughtful look. "Though if you became one of my captains, Fetua might not be beyond your reach. She would be the one to decide, anyway, wouldn't she?"

Anaku believed that. Or he believed it should be so, failing to consider all the pressures on his sister and himself. Urtu chose not to comment but to only nod his head.

"If she has not worn you out, come and exercise with my soldiers again this afternoon. Now I must run and meet an ambassador from somewhere. Why he needs to talk so early I know not!" With that—and a full bowl—the king hurried back into his house.

And Urtu returned to Tira, to find one of the priestesses of the isle seated beside her. Not Panaha but the one he had concluded was her second. She was tall and rather fat, in contrast to the high priestess, and certainly less reserved.

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But she spoke seriously now, when he took a place across from her. "There have been rumblings in the mountains. We sense great power being wielded in the land of your birth."

"This does not surprise me," he replied. "It might be expected, even." Yes, it had been expected, as wizards contended for dominance. He had not thought of these things for some time. "Volcanoes, I would guess. The wielding of power upsets the order of things."

"As a thousand years ago, claim our histories," she said. "There was great turmoil then and smoke filled the skies."

"Then but Hurasu ruled," said Tira. "None now power have his."

"It was not my father who brought about the cataclysms of that time, but they who attempted to defeat him." If he could believe his own histories. Never mind that Hurasu dictated what was written in them!

"We wish to know if you intend to return across the mountains," said the priestess.

"No. Not now and perhaps not ever. I have another mission, as Panaha knows."

"She thinks you should be away on that mission as soon as possible." The woman gave him a broad wink. "But we know you have many reasons to stay."

"Reasons to never go, maybe," he admitted.

She shook her head. "That would not be wise. But one can always return."

"Or try to," added Tira.

"True. I know of two reasons at least, Samuc, why you would be loath to travel on, and one has written you about the other. This comes from Sister Malama." She handed over a folded piece of bark paper. "And with that, I shall leave you. But not without breakfast!"

She strode with purpose toward the buffet. "She might visit her latest lover, too, as long as she is here," commented Tira. "It seems the priestesses do not lead a constricted life unless they choose to."

Yet there were invisible constraints on them. Isana had recognized them. Urtu opened the note. He was slightly surprised to find it written in Zikem but was happy he would not need to puzzle his way through the script the Molu used.

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I hear of you and Fetua, it read, and fear you may feel wrong about it. Again, you have no need. If it helps win her over to us, I am all for it. If it makes the both of you happy I am even more for it. You know I am a priestess. I can have no man as husband. That bond is not for me and I have no cause to be jealous of those who have it. Not that I expect you to marry Fetua. I should probably cross all that out and start over, shouldn't I? I must stay another week, maybe, says Panaha, and then I will come and chase you off of Fetua's mat. Does that sound better? So speaks Malama to Urtu.

He folded the paper and began on his breakfast. Tira asked nothing but her eyes were full of questions.

"Malama is well," he said. "But she is no more sure of herself than I am."

FORTY-ONE

“MY SISTER SAYS YOU CLAIM you could swim across Ahahuway.”

Had he mentioned this to Fetua? So it seemed. “I believe I can.”

“Would you wager on it?” It seemed a completely serious question. “If you lose, you must become one of my men. And if you win, I pray to Lahi you will become one!”

It was the closest he’d heard Anaku come to jesting. “But if I lose, wouldn’t I drown in Ahahuway?”

“Oh, no. I will paddle beside you in a canoe to make sure you do not cheat. And what prize name you if you win?”

“I have no idea what I might ask for,” admitted Urtu.

“Think on it and maybe we’ll test you one day. Now, let us test you in other ways.” The king considered those ways. “Sword? Spear? I suspect that you might send a spear flying further than any of us, just as you did an arrow.”

“But long arms are even more an advantage there than with the bow.”

“We rarely throw spears anyway, being great archers.” It was not quite a boast but the king was certainly proud of their skill.

“The emperor has javelin men,” said Winduku. “They use throwers, as do the Diwalnu.”

Anaku turned to Urtu. “Have you seen this? You spent time with Panaymana.”

“I did not. Some of his men did carry crossbows.”

“Pah. Any untrained idiot can use one of those.”

“Put enough of them together and give them crossbows and they become a force to reckon with.”

Winduku chuckled at this. Anaku gave him an annoyed look. “This is the same sort of thing my captain tells me sometimes. He thinks all the peasants should be trained to fight.”

“As long as they don’t choose to fight you, my lord,” said Urtu.

“Huh? Fight me?”

“He means they could rise in revolt,” Winduku explained. He was undoubtedly used to explaining things.

“Oh, they would never do that. Get yourself a bamboo sword, Samuc, and let’s see how you fare against me.”

Once again, long arms would be an advantage. Anaku had a definite

reach advantage. The practice swords were about the length of a normal Molu metal blade, suited to being wielded one-handed, with the protection of a shield. Urtu was more used to a longer sword and had rarely practiced with shield of any sort.

He greatly wished the sword of Hurasu were not still with Panaymana. It meant more to Urtu than the gems his father had entrusted to him. But now, how to spar with Anaku with what he held? He was quicker and stronger; this he knew. The king had his greater reach and far more familiarity with this sort of combat.

Anaku stepped forward and swung the bamboo shaft. Not until he dodged it did Urtu even think he should have caught it on the shield. The king did not thrust with the sword. Not yet. It might be among the tricks he hadn't used yet. A couple feints. A couple from Urtu, just to get the feel of his weapon. Then Anaku came in seriously and, yes, with a thrust. Urtu batted the sword away with his shield and brought the point of his own sword past the king's shield to just tap him in the middle of his broad chest. He looked rather surprised.

And perhaps astonished by what had happened to his sword. Anaku's weapon lay on the ground, shattered and splintered when Urtu struck it with the shield. "You have made my whole arm numb," spoke the king. It was almost a whisper and there was—what? Awe, perhaps, in his tone. "You are strong, Samuc. Too strong to play with!"

"I apologize. I've never fought with a shield before."

Anaku roared with laughter. "I do not think that was meant as one of your jokes but it was very funny."

Urtu had to chuckle. "I suppose it was."

"I would want you in the front line of any battle I fought," said Winduku.

"On our side," Anaku added.

"Yes, to be sure. I think I would run the other way if I saw him at the head of the enemy!" There was laughter from the men around them. "But," the captain asked, "can you wrestle?"

There was laughter now, too, though some of it more in the form of snickers. "Winduku is the greatest of wrestlers," stated the king.

"Would you face me?"

"What rules do you wrestle by? Is striking allowed?" If it were, Urtu

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had no doubt of his victory. If it were holds only, his strength and quickness, though an advantage, might not be enough.

"No striking," said Anaku. "Even were it permitted I am afraid you would break my captain as you did my sword."

"Indeed. I would not box you, my boy, for all the pearls in the sea. Ready, now?" Winduku began circling him, crouching slightly, watching for his chance. He was a big man, a man with thick muscles. Normally one might want to take such a man off his feet but here that might be reversed. The Molu would respect Urtu's strength and hope to negate that some by getting him on the ground—with all his considerable weight on top.

Urtu would do better to remain on his feet and attempt to throw his opponent. That Winduku was a more knowledgeable wrestler he had no doubt. He might allow Urtu no openings.

"Come on, tie up!" called someone. Both ignored him. Urtu feinted toward his opponent's legs, testing him. He barely eluded the hands that attempted to encircle his waist, ducking away. Again, he went in low but this time turned and caught Winduku's arm as he grabbed for him and attempted a toss. The leverage was poor and the man was able to turn away from him. He stumbled for a step or two, preventing him from closing with Urtu. They faced each other again. Winduku reached out his arms as if he did wish to grapple with him. To whose advantage would that be? The taller heavier man, one would think.

Urtu was not sure of that. He could use his strength. One hand came out, tentatively, ready to grip, to tie up, but Winduku ducked under it and, much more quickly than Urtu had expected, slipped behind him, put a knee into the back of his leg, and had him on his belly in the dirt. Fooled, he admonished himself. Don't let him get a solid hold on arm or leg. How did one win a Molu wrestling match anyway? Would Winduku try to pin him or would one of them have to submit? He should have asked!

Urtu's strength got him on hands and knees. Winduku at once reversed, getting his thighs on either side of his neck, wrapping his thick arms around his midsection, resting his considerable weight on Urtu's back. Breathing became increasingly difficult. Moreover, his head was stuck in Winduku's crotch, which he did not like at all. He

knew he just might be able to lift the big man from this position. Or he might not. It would take a lot of effort, either way, and an expenditure of his strength. Wait, he told himself. He'll think he's worn you down. He'll try something.

Yes, Winduku was shifting his feet, getting them under him, getting ready to spin behind him, maybe to lift and come down atop him again, maybe hoping to get a hold on one of his legs. He might even intend to simply lift him from his current position. None of those mattered if he didn't allow it! Urtu at once thrust forward and upward, grabbing a leg in the brief moment the big man's balance changed, toppling him onto his bottom. A moment later, both were standing, facing each other once more. He was sure Winduku had not expected him to react so quickly nor with such strength. The Molu would be warned now, know he must wear Urtu down more.

Urtu did not intend to allow that. Being careful played to Winduku's strengths. For that matter, wrestling played to Winduku's strengths. Would putting a shoulder into him count as striking? Best not put it to the test. He ducked and swept a leg when they came together this time, but did not follow up. Winduku rose to one knee and gave him a most thoughtful look. He might have recognized a change in strategy.

The next time he came in, Winduku neatly tossed him over his hip. He likewise did not follow up as Urtu rolled away. He's quick with his holds because he knows them so well, thought Urtu. But I'm actually quicker in movement.

And stronger. He could hurt the man, break an arm or leg. That would be no good. Maybe he should let him win? Not much better. This time he dove in and wrapped his arms around one of Winduku's thick thighs. The man didn't seem to know what to make of this and failed to react immediately. Urtu exploded from his crouch, straightening up and lifting him bodily from the ground, and dumped him over his back. It was no skillful throw, no use of leverage, but pure power. Winduku landed hard and clumsily.

"Stop," came Anaku's order. "Are you all right, Windy?"

Winduku nodded. "Need—need to catch—my breath."

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“This was only an exercise, not a match,” proclaimed the king. “We need no winner.”

“Winduku is obviously a better wrestler than I,” said Urtu. “I would hope he might teach me some of his skills.”

“And you are so strong you might well have killed my captain.”

“In an actual fight, he might have many times over,” admitted Winduku.

“Once would have been enough,” Anaku felt.

FORTY-TWO

I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE a good idea if Panahona—and Panaymana, if she thinks so—should know about the attack before a courier showed up with the news.

Xido considered this. *Not that she could do anything more about it now than in a few days. But I'll give her the story as you gave it to me. The important part, I suppose, is that Malama is well.*

It does mean we'll be lingering here longer than expected. I don't think Malama had any set plans about that anyway.

Well, hurry back when you can. I think Moyoa is trying to kill me and it would be unseemly for me to break his neck. Urtu made no answer. *Is something wrong?*

I am not sure I want to go back.

But you know you must.

Yes. Should he speak to the god of anything that had happened? Of Olun or the Sacred Isle or of Fetua? What would be the point? Do you do things you must?

I do things. Whether I must I have yet to figure out.

Perhaps mortals and gods are not so different in that.

With that, Urtu left. The little room 'somewhere' faded out and Fetua's sleeping chamber, lit by a flickering oil lamp, came into focus. He should speak to his mother sometime too. Not now.

"What were you doing, Urtu?"

"Speaking from afar." There was no reason Fetua should not know that.

"Oh. Malama does that. I forget that you are a wizard sometimes."

"I wish I could forget it. I wish you would help me forget it."

She might not have known what he meant but she knew to take him in her arms. Things might have progressed from there—they usually had these past two days—but a voice sounded outside the chamber. "Samuc! Are you there?"

It was Fetua who answered. "Go away, Anaku. We're busy!"

"That's why I didn't come in." The king said no more.

"Yes, I am here," said Urtu, not allowing a long awkward silence to grow longer and more awkward.

"There is word of raiders across the lake. Whether bandits or our

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enemies is unknown and doesn't matter! Will you come with us to fight them?"

Now? "Now?"

"My sister will be here when you get back."

The sister nodded a sober agreement to that. Urtu had to smile. "I am glad you will be," he told her, and rose to join the king. He was not surprised to find Winduku with him in the hall.

"You take all your men?" he asked as they led him somewhere. Not toward the barracks.

"Only part of the troop. Forty men. That is all my boats can carry! Winduku will remain with the others to guard my house."

"You can march a larger number around the lake," Winduku pointed out. "It would not take much more time."

"Yes, or send more over on the ferry. I know. Forty men is enough and there is another troop over there. Somewhere. You sent a messenger to find them, didn't you?"

"I did. Oh, and this is yours," the captain said, handing Urtu his sword. "I went looking for you first in your own room."

Said Anaku, "He should have known better."

Ah, they were in the great entry hall now and headed out the front doors. Many torches burned before the house and a small troop—they looked to be the forty men Anaku had promised—was assembled there, "I leave my house to you, Winduku," said the king. To the troop he announced, "Samuc will be my second. To the boats!"

"You put much trust in someone you barely know, my lord," Urtu told him, as they followed behind the man. Those moved in a somewhat organized manner in the direction of the docks. They certainly didn't march in formation but no one strayed too far. At the lake, they scrambled aboard two long dugout canoes, carved of the tall pines that grew here. As with Fetua's sailboat, boards were added above the log part, but there was no mast. These boats were driven by the paddles of many men.

"Anaku's navy," one of the men jokingly named them to Urtu. "The largest on Ahahuway!"

Urtu suspected he was supposed to be in command of the boat he boarded but let those who knew what they were doing take charge.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Each canoe carried a torch in its bow, reflecting across the dark water. He took a paddle with the others and started toward the far shore. Faint rose-tinted light lay on the eastern horizon by the time they tied up to the docks.

A pair of fighting men came down to greet them, maybe guards at the docks. They spoke with Anaku briefly, pointing here and there. By the time Urtu reached them, things had been settled. In the king's mind, they had been settled. He knew the land.

As to how well he knew the tactics of warfare, Urtu was ignorant. No one had boasted of Anaku as a leader. That meant nothing, to be sure. It could also mean much.

"One column for now, Samuc, by fours. We seek northward."

He was obviously intended to relay the king's order. Fortunately, the soldiers knew what was expected of them. They gradually moved away from the lake, through rolling country, much of it grassy. There was little to see but cattle on either side of their road.

Of those Anaku spoke. "Cattle thieves are the usual trouble over here. This seems to be more. Maybe even an incursion by one of my neighbors. Not open war but harassment. A testing of me." He allowed Urtu to think on this a moment before adding, "So I respond quickly."

"You have not come down firmly on any side, I am told."

"Oh, they don't care. They just want my lands."

It was too bad they couldn't bring horses across the lake. They would have been handy in this country. Maybe that was what Winduku had in mind. Urtu did not mind walking; he remained more comfortable on foot than in the saddle. But if the enemy force ahead of them was mounted they could be at a disadvantage on these open hills.

On the other hand, half of Anaku's men carried bows. This was good country for archers.

"You have other troops over here?"

"The borders are patrolled. Not that anyone agrees just where they are. I would like to say I rule to the high hills that divide the flow of the Teimi from that of the upper Teoma but my neighbors feel otherwise."

"They are unfriendly to the emperor, aren't they?"

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"Some in open rebellion. I have no side but that of my kingdom. My people come first."

"The friendship of the emperor could help you define your borders more clearly."

"Or I could define them myself, Samuc. But you hint of a marriage between Panaymana and my sister, don't you?" He did not wait for a reply. "Do you think this a good idea?"

Ah. Best to answer honestly. "I think it a very bad idea, my lord. And do not let Malama know I say so!"

The king was discreet enough not to ask of his reasoning. Urtu wasn't sure of that himself; he knew only that Panaymana and Fetua would be a poor match, and not to be made for a few nebulous political gains.

"So then—I understand Malama also visited Teninihitu and his daughter. What is her name?"

"Lohatini."

Anaku nodded his head. "Lohatini. Do you think I should seek her as a wife myself? Speak truly now, as my friend."

"You could do worse but I would not think her ideal. She is a bright girl and one who would assert herself. I could see trouble between her and Hohina."

"That might not be so bad a thing. My cousin sometimes thinks she is king!" He might have found that amusing but he quickly grew grave again. "Would that Malama were not a priestess. I think I could find no better wife."

In that, he might be right. "But her counsel would always favor her brother."

"Would yours?"

Urtu almost quipped that he had no intention of marrying the king, but suspected Anaku would not appreciate the joke. "I have no allegiance to the emperor."

"Moon!" called out Anaku. At once, his men spread into an arc, the archers at either end, a little ahead of those with spears and shields in the middle. They were coming to the top of a hill. More a ridge, perhaps. "You will take the left if we fight," he told Urtu. "Position yourself between the archers and the spear men."

STEPHEN BROOKE

They cautiously advanced. In the valley below lay the smoking ruins of a village. The vultures had already discovered it and were spiraling down through the clear bright skies of morning.

FORTY-THREE

"THEY TOOK MANY WITH THEM," reported one of the men, examining the tracks that led away toward the northeast.

"Slavers," said another, and spat.

This was something new to Urtu. "I have not seen much of slavery among the Molu."

"And that is as it should be," spoke the king. "I allow no slaves in my kingdom, save prisoners who serve what years we set them before being made free. This was ever the way of my ancestors and of my people—no man nor woman is a slave for life, nor is any born to slavery."

Here was Anaku the traditionalist of whom he had been told. Anaku the honorable man, too.

Most of those who remained in the village—what had been a village—were dead, men slaughtered when they had attempted to defend themselves, some women and children. Many elderly.

"They can not sell old men and women," was all the king had to say of it. Any could tell he thought of many things more. "And they would slow them down. Even so, we can travel more quickly and should follow at once. Those here must wait for burial." There had been a couple badly wounded and yet breathing. These were given a merciful death before the soldiers left; it would not do to leave them to the vultures.

They set out at a steady jog along the path of trampled grass left by the raiders. Those were depending on speed rather than stealth to get them out of the kingdom of Anaku. Their speed was not enough. The soldiers caught up in the early afternoon.

The numbers on each side might have been about equal, but the raiders were on horse. Their captives stood among them. "Those came from more than just one village," noted Anaku. "These men have much to answer for."

"They intend to fight." Urtu had half-expected them to desert their booty and run for it. That would be normal for bandits. They might yet, if their nerve failed.

"So it seems. They may try to use the captives as shields." He turned toward his men. "We stand here!"

They had already spread out in their moon formation, on the side

of a hill. The enemy lay below. Anaku and Urtu each took his place to right and left. "Arrows where you can! Shoot!"

Before the bandits did think to hide behind their captives. Instead they attempted a ragged charge up the slope. There wasn't much purpose to it; a few spears were thrown harmlessly before they wheeled and rode back. Now they did position themselves among those they had captured to prevent more arrows from finding them.

"What is this?" asked someone. A man—it seemed to be a man—stepped to the fore, but not far enough from the prisoners for a safe shot at him. He was clad not as anyone Urtu had ever seen in the land of the Molu, in a long tunic of a rusty black. Little more could be discerned at this distance. He seemed to be looking toward the sky.

A rift appeared in the air, about halfway between the two groups, and sparks and cinders came showering among the men of Anaku, along with a noxious smell. "A wizard," breathed Urtu. Pulling these things from another world, from some volcano, most likely.

"Use your shields!" cried out Anaku. "Archers move in and be protected!"

They wouldn't be of much use that way. Perhaps that was all the wizard intended with his tactics, that and maybe to awe these soldiers. In that, he certainly failed. Urtu stepped a little forward himself—not that it was necessary to do so—and went searching through the infinite worlds. Something that would not hurt those captives down there. That was what was needed. Of course.

"Stand ready," he called. "I am going to blind them!"

Smoke. Nothing was simpler, nothing was easier. Well, directing it could be difficult. That sorcerer down there had depended on the breezes blowing across the valley between them. He would pull wind-driven clouds of smoke from another world and send them against the enemy. There. A great forest fire. "Now!"

Dark clouds spewed and billowed, engulfing the men below. They milled in confusion until they disappeared into it. "Charge!" cried out Anaku. His men rushed down the slope.

"Spread out," called Urtu. "Catch them as they come out!" Surely enough, men, some still mounted, came blundering, bewildered and coughing, out of the smoke. They were cut down quickly, with spear,

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with arrow. He no longer pulled his screen from that other world; it had done its work and holding it long was difficult. A sword was what was needed now, as the smoke slowly dissipated, drifting away in writhing black tendrils.

Within a couple minutes, all the bandits who remained alive knelt in surrender. "I think one or two escaped on horse," Anaku said, wiping his bloody blade on a handful of grass. "They took us by surprise with their wizard but we surprised them back!"

The king might choose to be nonchalant about it but his men were giving Urtu furtive and perhaps fearful looks. He was sure they had all heard he was a sorcerer. Hearing of something and seeing the truth of it can be very different. "Where is their wizard?" he asked.

"Dead," said one of the soldiers, pointing. "Took an arrow."

He and Anaku walked over to look at the body. "Is he of your people? He looks nothing like Hucan but he does look a little like you."

That was so, wasn't it? There was some resemblance to his own father, the lighter skin, the prominent nose. He was sure he was not of the race of Hurasu, who had been born in another world. Neither was he Molu.

"No, not of my people. I've never seen anyone like him before."

He realized he was trembling. He sat down abruptly on the grass. "Are you wounded?"

"No, no. Such wizard work takes much out of one. It is worse than wrestling Winduku!" Rushing in and doing battle immediately after hadn't helped, either.

The prisoners, bound together with lengths of stout rope around their necks, were duly released. "It's lucky these raiders brought along some food, as we left without any," said the king. "Let's get them fed and maybe ourselves too. Now, bring our prisoners."

"What of those too badly hurt?" was asked.

"We'll decide before we travel." Meaning, undoubtedly, that some would be killed if they couldn't march with them. "Are any of ours wounded?"

"Not seriously."

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Good. Very well, eight men?” He looked over the kneeling captives.

“And four more too badly hurt.”

Anaku nodded. “You all stand, um, kneel guilty of great crimes. Cattle thieves are no great matter to me; my soldiers rout them out from time to time and we go on. But what turned you to slave taking?”

“We have only stolen cattle before, my lord,” spoke one. “But there’s more profit to be made in human cattle.”

Another added, “And Wiritangay pays well for them.”

“The king himself. That disappoints but does not surprise.”

Urtu had learned enough of the south to know Wiritangay’s kingdom lay northeast of Anaku’s. The king had not openly broken with the empire but was known to speak treason with some regularity.

“You serve Wiritangay? You there—you seem to be a leader among these men. Pah, I should not name you men!”

“The king, um, approached us about—doing business. We do not serve him.”

“And so avoids being directly involved.” Anaku turned a little toward Urtu. “You see, I am not quite as stupid as some think me.”

Urtu grinned. “I was never inclined to believe such stories, Lord Anaku.” He rose now to stand beside the king, his strength returned to him.

“Anaku?” “The king?” So went the ripple of whispers among the kneeling prisoners. To a man, they fell prostrate before him. “Mercy, mighty one,” spoke one. With their faces in the grass, Urtu could not tell which.

“Get up and speak to me. You are a northerner, aren’t you? You sound northern.” This Anaku addressed to the one he had decided was a leader.

“I am, lord. I was a sailor once and found my way south.”

“And what of the wizard?” asked Urtu. “How came he into your band?”

“A chance meeting, lord. He’d gotten wind of some sort of treasure up here and wanted to come see if he could learn anything, so we let him travel with us. Useful, he seemed.”

“He served no one?”

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"I think he talked to someone about it. I mean, wizard-style. Someone far away. He seemed plenty afraid of them, not that he wouldn't have crossed them if he had the chance." The bandit looked nervously back and forth from wizard to king. "We knew nothing about him. It's truth. Only that he had sailed from somewhere across the sea."

"And mangled Molu worse 'n ever I'd heard," said one of the others. The king smiled. "They haven't heard your friend Hucan."

"Some have told me my own accent is somewhat atrocious. With the greatest politeness, of course."

"I would never say anything of it," the king told him. "I can not speak for my sister." He returned his attention to the prisoners, looking long and sternly at them. "Slavers and murderers you are. Your brutal slaying of the elders should earn you the same."

"They wouldn't leave them to tell tales," spoke one of the rescued men. "Murdered my father!" It was not hard to tell what sort of punishment he wanted for them. He might have been quite willing to administer it himself, right then and there.

"It was Wiritangay's orders," claimed a raider.

"Ah." Anaku shook his head. "It is right that those who would sell others into slavery should be slaves themselves."

"You will not slay us, lord?" They had clearly expected an execution and possibly a painful one.

"No. I sentence each of you to nine years of slavery. You undoubtedly deserve more."

But then, Urtu asked himself, who ever got what they deserved?

FORTY-FOUR

WHO HAD THIS WIZARD FROM beyond the sea been? They did not even know his name. The man might have little or nothing to do with Olun, thought Urtu. Was it she he spoke to from afar? There was no way of telling now.

They had but started on their way home when someone—a former captive—pointed to something behind them. “Someone follows us,” called out a soldier.

Anaku surveyed the distance. “Some of Wiritangay’s troops, most likely. We stand on disputed ground. I would not be surprised if they attacked.” He showed no concern over this. “If they knew I stood among my men, they most certainly would. Ha, would that their king were with them! He would not get off as lightly as his band of slavers.”

“The bandits who escaped might have told them of us.”

“That hardly matters now, Urtu. The arrows of the past have already struck their target. What does matter is that we are outnumbered, and that we have the peasants and our wounded to consider.”

“A hilltop?” They had no choice but to make a stand.

“Yes. I will not ask you to call on your sorcery again.”

“I do not know if it would be of any more use than my sword. It rarely is. But my strength has returned if I see some way it might serve you.”

All that was true. These tricks he had used, in the Shrouded Valley, here among the hills, were no real defense against fighting men. They might at best give a little advantage. Yet he had never called anything to him on the scale of that smoke an hour or so ago. He had felt—stronger? No, that was not it. Not most of it. He had found it easier to reach out and find what he needed at once. The worlds had been more open to him than he had ever known them before. Urtu did not doubt the Eyes of the Wind were the reason for this.

“A full hundred,” was the word that passed among the soldiers as they took positions on their chosen hill. That was a normal troop; Anaku had brought less than half the one he kept at his house. And they would be fighting men, not a rabble of bandits. They would have their own archers. Only a few appeared to be on horse. Their leaders, maybe.

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"An officer should not be higher than his soldiers," stated Anaku when he spied them. "He should share their portion in all things."

"Even a king?" asked Urtu.

"Especially a king."

"It does make them better targets," said someone. With that he could agree. He was not so certain about the king's assertion.

"Here they come." A wall of shields, with archers ready behind, advanced slowly, deliberately. Then they halted, seeming uncertain. Many were looking to their right flank.

There another troop of a hundred advanced, coming around the hill. "It's about time they showed up," said Anaku.

The soldiers of Wiritangay retreated in an orderly fashion. There would not be another battle today; it would not be worth it.

Nor would there be time to make it home to Ahahuway. The little army traveled on for some hours before making camp. The lack of firewood on these grassy slopes made it a cold camp. "I'll have to work out something for those who were captured and displaced," Anaku said. "Much of it I can leave to my captains over here. The soldiers can help rebuild though they will grumble about doing such work." He went off to huddle with the captain he had available. Urtu was not yet sleepy, though weary in body. He sat gazing at the now-waning moon for a time.

Someone called. It was as if there was a light, almost timid knocking on the stout doors he kept locked.

Yet he recognized at once who it was. *Olun.*

So I call myself. You decided it was safe to speak, did you? There was a touch of mockery in the voice.

I trust my wards.

Well you should. I admit, they are firmer than ever I could breech. Unless I got you drunk first!

And now for the first time, he saw Olun. He did not know what he had expected but it was not this woman, diminutive and cheerful. She looked young though he was aware Olun was quite a bit older than he was. Maybe older than his mother. Of that he was not sure. There was a mass of curling golden hair above her dark, pleasant if not quite pretty face.

STEPHEN BROOKE

I shall be careful not to drink with you, then.

Oh, I promise I would not take advantage of you. She looked him up and down. *As much as I might want to.*

He was very much at a loss for words. This was the powerful, the dangerous sorcerer Olun? This silly, flirtatious creature?

I noticed you using your powers a little while ago, she said. That other fellow too. He isn't very good. Or is that wasn't very good, now?

Wasn't. That's not my doing. He recalled Barazes with a sudden pang. *He served you?*

She made something of a face at the suggestion. *He was someone I thought I might make some use of. Of course, he wanted those gems you carry.*

As do you, my lady.

Oh, to be sure. It would make things much simpler if you shared them with me. We could do things together, Urtu son of Hurasu. She snickered. *I can think of quite a few.*

Unfortunately, so could Urtu. He intended to keep their conversation away from anything of the sort. *Who was he?*

She might have pouted a little at his unwillingness to engage with her. *He is of a people beyond the seas who name themselves the Hildun. This, I believe, means nothing more than 'tribe' in their language. They may have cast him out for his crimes; he was not forthcoming about such things nor did I much care.*

And he came seeking the Eyes?

No, no. He knew nothing of their presence until I told him. But he had heard of them. They seem to be part of his people's lore. That makes one wonder just how your father got hold of them, doesn't it?

I will admit it does. Not that he hadn't already wondered.

Anyway, the fellow was just wandering in exile. He was a priest of one of the Hildun gods. Asak, who likes to fancy himself the god of evil.

He had to admit he was amused at the idea, and found himself answering Olun's smile. *Who would worship such a god?*

You might be surprised. What I find odder is that a god would want such a title.

My father said it was best to avoid gods of any sort. Now why had he

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said that? Hurasu was definitely a topic he shouldn't discuss with her. Not until he learned more of their history.

Yet he had a daughter by a goddess, I have heard. And you have been traveling about with a god yourself, haven't you?

Not for a while. He didn't intend to discuss the divine sister he supposedly had, somewhere.

We would be gods ourselves if we learned to use the Eyes, she said. Right now I can only speak to you of them. You are beyond my reach, whether I wanted to kill you or seduce you! But think of what I have said. She faded.

He would think, he knew, whether he wished it or not. What might an Olun do with the Eyes of the Wind? What might he do if he learned to truly use their power?

Perhaps it would be best not to know.

FORTY-FIVE

"I BECAME INTERESTED IN THIS Wenatu and had to visit his shrine, as he is god of both rainbows and archers. That seemed the proper combination for me. I—felt welcome there, Urtu. I would remain if I could but I know I must seek my god beyond the sea."

Another who 'must' do things.

"Perhaps you can come back." Perhaps Urtu could himself.

He had returned to the House of Anaku to find his friend missing. As were Fetua and Isana. It was not until the lamps of evening were lit that the three appeared, having ridden together around Ahahuway to visit the shrines of the gods.

"Fetua wanted to pray for you and her brother," reported Isana.

"You like Fetua."

"She asked me if I wanted to be one of her attendants. A girl of common birth can aim no higher."

"You are a commoner?" Urtu had assumed the girl to be from a noble family. Was not her father noble?

"My mother was and so am I. You know that is the custom of my people."

He had known that. It was part of their matrilineal tradition here in the south. Urtu did not think things worked quite the same in the north. But women had less power and freedom in the far north, which was worse.

Hurasu had ever decreed women and men equals in his realm but that had not prevented a patriarchal society from taking root. The law and custom did not always agree. One could not expect things to be so different here, though high kings and emperors came and went.

"That is one reason I chose to be a priestess," Isana continued. "Birth means nothing there." She frowned. "Though if I had children, my heritage would follow them. So that's not so good, is it?"

"No not," agreed Tira. "Other goddess, um, priestess be?"

"Yes, you certainly didn't have to be one of those prophetesses on their island."

"But I had the gifts to be one who served there. Few do. I could serve Malahina at any shrine, if I chose. But no. I am not going to be a priestess of any sort!"

"So, Fetua's attendant?"

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"No, not that either. But you should go attend to her right now. And I'd better go see to Anaku."

The girl slipped away from Tira's chamber. "We're going to leave you all alone again," Urtu told her.

"And I sometimes weary of it. Of having no place I belong. That is why the shrine of Wenatu appealed to me." She then leaned in, as if sharing a secret. "Did you know the first priest of the shrine was the lover of the Urtu for whom you are named?"

"Ruiru." He had to laugh at Tira's slightly peeved expression. "I know all about him. Well, some about him. After all, he lived two thousand years ago! The name was spoken as Oorto then."

"I think I shall call you Oorto from now on. I like the sound of it. Now get out of here."

That Fetua wanted him with her tonight he already knew. They had spoken when she returned. She had said she missed him. She said he should never spend a night away from her again. Those were words and words would be spoken and they mean something today but might not tomorrow. Their passion might be love or it might be a fire that cooled in a day, a week. And beyond that? He would be gone, anyway. That they did both know.

"I have had a dinner brought," she told him as he slipped through the entry. As in most of these chambers, there was no door. Only a few hung anywhere in the House of Anaku. "Tomorrow we must feast with my brother. He has proclaimed a victory and intends to celebrate."

"Freeing those taken captive was a victory," said Urtu, taking a seat close beside her. "It might not seem a great one but I am sure it did to them."

Fetua leaned over to kiss him. "You understand these things so well. I will say that to Anaku if you do not! Now, we have both fish and duck."

And both were good, as were the yams with coconut, the melons, whether orange or green, and, as ever, the millet beer. What followed was good too.

What followed that, in the darkness later, was of another nature.

STEPHEN BROOKE

“Yesterday, after my brother took you away from me, I went to the isle and had a long talk with Malama.”

“She is well, I would think?”

“Oh, fine. They say she can leave in two days.” The only sound for a while was Fetua’s even breathing. “I have come to love you, Urtu, but I know Malama is first. And that you will stay in the lands of the Molu for neither of us.”

“It is true that I—must leave.” He had not wanted to use that word but there it was and it was the truth. He had those things he must do.

“And sail across the ocean you have never seen. Malama told me of the prophecy you received. You do not mind, do you?”

“Of course not. I would have told you myself had you asked.”

“I envy you your journey, wherever it takes you.”

“We all journey somewhere.”

“If you say so, Urtu, though I do not understand what you mean by it. I also spoke to Malama about her brother. I will allow Panaymana to offer marriage, though I think I will not accept. But who can say?”

He would offer no advice. Not to Fetua. Malama knew his thoughts, as did Anaku. He might even share them with Panaymana. “Insist that he come visit you in person,” was all he said. “And not until I am gone.”

Urtu took her into his arms. What followed was, again, good.

FORTY-SIX

"MY WIFE HAS BECOME A little jealous of your influence with the king" spoke Winduku. "Malama was bad enough."

"I could see they are rivals. But not enemies, are they?"

"No, but not really friends either, even if friendly to each other."

"Assure the Lady Hohina that I will soon be gone. Malama too, but she will come back."

"And you will not, Samuc?"

The question he could not answer yet kept asking himself. "I am not sure. Perhaps in time but I do not think it will be soon."

The big man clapped a big hand on his shoulder. "I would greet you as a friend if you return. Ah, wife! Where is Samuc to sit?"

"At the right hand of the king. Anaku calls him a hero." It was hard to say what Hohina thought of it.

Urtu's first thought was to laugh. But that might be disrespectful of the king and the honor he would pay him. "Samuc was a hero before ever he came to us," spoke Winduku. "Others have told me of his deeds."

"That girl? She's been whispering to Anaku, I'd wager."

"Nay, his friend Hucan, who accompanied him over the mountains. That in itself is a journey for a hero."

She nodded, perhaps just a tad reluctantly. "That is so."

"I am surprised you could understand any of it," was all Urtu had to say.

"He was using me for practice. She was. I forget sometimes."

"It's the beard," said Urtu.

The captain roared. "Even so!"

"I like Hucan," said Hohina, softening a little. "Now go lose yourself for a couple hours while I get this feast set up."

Urtu returned to his own room. Things were coming to an end here and he would soon be on the way north. It would be best to speak with his mother now while he had the chance. She answered at once. They gossiped of little things going on in Hirstel, where nothing much had actually changed and no one was stepping out to look at the turmoil in the world. He spoke of Malama and the assault on her and of his adventures with Anaku and even of the wizard he had fought. Of Fetua, he said not one word.

And, at last, he asked, *Were Olun and my father lovers?*

STEPHEN BROOKE

It is said they were. He might even have taken her to wife but none are certain. Hurasu never spoke to me of her. Sunas looked as if that was all she intended—or wanted—to say of it but continued after a pause. The rumors speak of madness and jealousy and possibly even attempted murder. By both, maybe! She is an extraordinarily gifted sorceress. It is possible your father never had a wife or lover, whichever she was, with such powers.

But Hurasu lived an extraordinarily long time. And there was that goddess. *Were there children?*

There is not even a rumor of any. Does that somehow matter?

I think that is one of the reasons she hated him. Hates him still and perhaps loves him too. I spoke some with her.

That seems unwise.

So did not speaking. Oh, and is she older than you?

Much older! People do not even believe I could have a son your age.

Honestly, Mother. I should know all I can of her.

And I truly do not know. What happened between Olun and your father took place before I even met him, so I can guess she is older. Only guess.

Yes, and of course you were a child bride.

Of course. I'll ask some of those here, if you wish. Thisa and Zerana may know things.

They haven't spoken to her, have they?

I do not think so. The sisters may be happy to forget about Olun.

But they would not forget about their mother. He'd best say goodbye to his own. *I have to go attend a feast,* he told her.

In your honor?

In part, Urtu admitted. I'll tell you about it sometime. Maybe not till I'm back in the north.

Farewell then and give my best wishes to your girlfriend.

Ah, if only she knew how complicated that had become. He was glad he had said nothing of it.

Tira appeared at the door. She wore—what? Not a skirt exactly, not like what the women here wore, but a long piece of cloth, decorated with stylized flower shapes, that fell from waist to below the knees. “This is what Molu wear when they dress up,” she informed him.

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“Isana found it for me.” She snickered. “I think she borrowed it from Anaku’s wardrobe.”

Was he expected to dress for this banquet? He had but two kilts, both in the Diwalnu fashion and both somewhat worn. He had brought along the tunic he had crossed the mountains in but that looked even worse.

“She needs to go steal one for me.”

“Maybe not if you’re sitting at the king’s side. It might look familiar to him. I’ll be far down the table. Isana too.”

“Despite being his current favorite.”

“But still a commoner. They were going to put me higher but I insisted I be seated by the girl.”

Would he have done the same? Urtu doubted it. It was good to have people around him who were better than he was. That included Fetua, didn’t it?

Isana came soon after and shook her head upon taking one look at him in the less-worn of his kilts. “Didn’t you know Malama brought along clothes for you? She knew you might be present on formal occasions.”

Most of the priestess’s baggage was stored in his room. He hadn’t touched it. The girl now went through it. “Hmm, not white. That’s for religious ceremonies. Maybe for your wedding!” She laughed at that. “Here,” she said, unrolling a blue cloth and looking it over before tossing it to him. “Put this on. It’s decorated in the northern style but that won’t hurt.”

The ‘northern style’ apparently meant meaningless geometric designs. A few minutes later, all three were on their way to Anaku’s dining hall. This was a large room directly behind the high entry hall, used for receptions as well as formal meals.

And it was a great feast and many important nobles of the realm lined the low table and, yes, Tira and Isana sat near the far end, but Urtu’s eyes were only for the woman seated across from him, the king’s sister. It might be their last night together.

FORTY-SEVEN

"ARE YOU SURE YOU WISH to make this wager, my friend?" asked Anaku.

"I am and this is the day for it." He stood looking out over Ahahuway, gray, shimmering in the dawn. Malama would leave the Sacred Isle this afternoon and then all would be preparation for their departure. The isle was half-hidden in the mists.

"And what do you ask if you win? Have you decided?"

"Only the freedom of your kingdom should I ever return."

"That you would have anyway, and my friendship. But I hope you lose."

Maybe a part of Urtu hoped that as well, but he knew he would not. He stood naked by the lake, ready for his long swim. The Eyes he had left in the care of Tira, though she did not like being so near them.

He waded in to his knees, waiting for the king and his men to launch their canoe. The water was cool but not cold. It did not chill the way that of Lades Zerac did but, given time, it could still sap one of their strength. Four hours? That seemed right, if all went well. He should definitely reach the far shore before noon; if he did not, he would not reach it at all.

Then, a dive and the start of a steady slow swim. He would alternate between a more energetic overhand stroke and periods of leisurely paddling on his back. That he had the stamina for this swim, Urtu knew. It did not help, though, that he had grown even leaner than when he left the Valley of Visions and did not float at all!

He glimpsed the Sacred Isle, well off to his right. Past it now and nothing but water to see. Was Malama over there watching? Someone might or might not have told her of his plans. All the priestesses might be watching. Did they not prophecy he would travel to another land? Then he would surely win his wager today.

Prophecies did not necessarily work that way, he reminded himself. It might even have been for Tira rather than him. He was only peripherally aware that Anaku's long canoe, with six paddlers, was accompanying him. It would not be wise to expend energy trying to talk to them but it was going to be a long boring way. He should have told them to sing now and again before leaving the shore. Molu liked to sing.

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What? Someone was calling him to speak from afar? This was no time for that. He did not even lower his warding enough to discover who it might be. Olun, he thought most likely.

Flip over for a couple minutes. He could see Anaku and his men more readily now. No, he would not call for them to sing. He did not want to be distracted from the rhythm of his own strokes. It was growing lighter.

He felt that his stomach was growing empty. It would not have done to eat heavily before this swim so Urtu had only taken some coconut this morning. Last night's feast was certainly enough to sustain, though he should not have drank quite so much beer. Nor should he have spent so much of the night making love to Fetua. But how could he not, knowing he might never again?

And, of course, he had not told her of his plans for this morning. She would learn soon enough and be displeased. So would it be.

He had turned back to his stomach and was stroking strongly again. He didn't remember having done it, wrapped in his thoughts. Thoughts of Fetua, thoughts of this land. Thoughts of many things. The journeys to come, first to Panaymana's capital and then? He could not know, not yet. Maybe down the Gurang to the sea and then on ship to another shore. A far more distant shore than the one that lay on the other side of Ahahuway, and a far greater journey than this morning's swim.

It was good to have Anaku and his canoe near. Not that he would need them. His swim across the Lake of the Sky had been unaccompanied. None knew he undertook it; he himself had decided to do it without prior thought. Urtu had simply seen that expanse of water before him and dove in. He wasn't sure if he even cared whether he reached the other side. He had been restless that day, dissatisfied with his life.

Making it to the other side had helped. Was there something of that in this swim too?

He did not have to go back to the emperor. He could go down the Teoma and find a ship there, where it flowed into the sea. Over a great fall still, as it had in the time of Malvern? It would be good to see that. But the sword of Hurasu was with Panaymana, hostage against his

return. He hadn't needed to allow that. He and Xido could have liberated his father's sword had they truly wished, and gone where they would. But he had felt he should make this trip to the south, this journey with Malama.

It had been the right choice, he was sure. Or were all choices right, each leading to its proper outcome? Every journey had its end.

Then he thought not at all for a long while, only stroking on, all his mind intent on his body, his breathing, the water around him. The next time he rolled onto his back, Anaku called, "You are halfway there!"

He held up a hand in acknowledgment. He swam on.

The sun is high and I am tiring, thought Urtu some time later. How long he would not have been able to say. All of these things, his growing weariness, the brightness of the morning, were abstractions. They meant nothing. Only the next stroke mattered and then the one after it. Were there more canoes around him now? He had attracted a flotilla!

Slowly, his mind was returning to what went on around him. Yes, a number of canoes, short and long, accompanied him now. He thought shouts of encouragement rose from some of them. His ears were not working so well right then. He lifted his head and saw the shores close, the hills rising behind them. That was good; he had instructed Anaku to take a straight course so he would not stray in his swimming and it seemed both had stuck to it. For the first time, he stopped to tread water, not progressing but only gazing at the land ahead.

Urtu grinned, waved, and returned to his overhand stroke. He might even have sprinted—as much as he was capable of at that point—to the shore. He had made it before noon. That was good. "Beer!" he called out as he waded the last few feet.

His legs would carry him only a few feet more up the beach. And, to be sure, many hurried to bring him bowls of beer. Far more than he could drink! "Give me a few minutes," he told Anaku as he approached, "before I have to swim back."

There was no choice but to laugh at the king's blank expression. "Oh, you jest. I think maybe you could swim back. But my sister will take you across, I think."

THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Oh, so her little boat had been among those that had joined him. Yes, there it was, beached a little to the south. And there walked Fetua, Isana beside her.

She came up and gave him a long look, hands on her hips. She is beautiful even when she is angry with me, was the only thought that came into Urtu's head. He was admittedly still a little foggy from fatigue. "Again you made me go and pray for you!" she complained. "How can so wise a man be also such a fool?"

"Oh, my lady, didn't you know all men are fools?" asked Isana. Urtu thought that somewhat unfair. All humans were fools.

And it didn't matter in the least.

FORTY-EIGHT

"I HAVE SPOKEN WITH OLUN myself," he told them. "I can understand how she could draw one in. She seems so harmless, so inconsequential."

Neither Isana nor Malama seemed inclined to dispute him on this. "Like an eccentric aunt," said Isana.

"Who keeps a knife hidden in her skirt," Malama added. "Or did she pull it out when you spoke?"

"She did not but I very much knew it was there. She was, um, more interested in trying to seduce me, I think."

"Eccentric aunts will do that too," Isana commented.

Malama had returned from her exile on the isle the previous afternoon, before Fetua sailed him back. He had been too weary to do much more than greet her at the time and had slept long and alone in his own chamber. Now he shared a breakfast on Anaku's porch with these two as he had before, yet with all much changed.

They spoke listlessly of leaving in a couple days. "There is little more to accomplish here," said Malama. In fact there was nothing more to accomplish. They just didn't feel like going right away.

Isana blurted, "Will you take me with you?"

"What of Anaku?" asked the priestess.

The girl made a bit of a face. "He is very dull and very good to look at and, um, adequate on the sleeping mat."

Malama gave a knowing nod.

"And he is very good to me. I could marry such a man, I think, and be happy. But Anaku would never marry me so I'd just as soon not stay here and have to look at him or that rock in the lake every day and feel its presence even when I didn't see it. Or Anaku's presence for that matter!" she finished.

"You might as well come."

"We'll tell Panaymana you are the bride we're bringing to him," Urtu told her.

"He could do far worse," the girl felt.

"Indeed so. I do not think I will recommend a marriage with Fetua, but I will present it."

"I like both of them too much to wish them on each other," said

THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Urtu. "I think I need another serving of everything. I am ravenous this morning."

"Swimming across lakes will do that," remarked Malama.

"Oh, back home I swam that far and back every morning before breakfast. Uphill." With that he went to refill his bowls.

This whole day would be one to rest. Urtu had called far too much attention to himself recently, in too many ways, in feats of strength and endurance, in use of wizardry. Not that he minded some adulation. That was just human of him, wasn't it? He knew his father would have scoffed at him but it was a very, very, long time since Hurasu had been his age. Incredibly long. Immensely long. Urtu didn't know if he could find a word that actually expressed just what an expanse of time it had been. Yet, from what he had learned—all of it ultimately stemming from what his father had written or said—Hurasu had not been disdainful of such things when young. Had he not contended for power in the Atlantis of his birth? It had taken him at least a few hundred years to become as Urtu had known him.

He felt strong this morning, though still a little tired. He would need a nap later. The air is richer here than in the Valley, he told himself. It was not as thin at Per Girad as further up, but definitely not like the thick, warm, humid atmosphere here. That gave him perhaps yet another advantage among the Molu.

Perhaps some disadvantages too. Nothing comes without price. "We will have time for goodbyes tomorrow?" he asked Malama, his mind returning to the women.

"Yes. We should leave the next day but needn't hurry away. Going to go sleep some more?"

"Later. After I take a nap right here. Ah, Hucan! Awake at last?"

"I had things to think upon," said the wizard, settling beside him. She took one of the bowls he had just filled. "It was good of you to get my breakfast for me."

"What sort of things?" asked Isana.

"My god spoke to me in dream last night. He says we need to be on our way." She turned to Urtu. "I hear him now as I did the last time. Actual words."

"Did you tell him you were thinking of staying?"

STEPHEN BROOKE

"He knew. And—he understood. But I must go."

"So must I," spoke Urtu, rising. "I think I'll go relax by Ahahuway. But no swimming!"

Tomorrow he could make all those farewells, he thought, as he made his way from the house of the king. Farewell to friends. Farewell to Fetua. She was already fading as his thoughts went to the future, as all his plans crowded out his memories. But no. Fetua would remain with him always, no matter where he wandered. He took a seat, leaning against the trunk of a tall pine. A bit rough. No matter; soon he would lie down on the carpet of needles and sleep a while, knowing only their scent as he slipped away.

A call from someone. Not his mother? She might have something to tell him though he had expected nothing this soon. No, it was Olun. He might as well speak to her.

Whatever were you up to yesterday?

Swimming. It was you who called?

Yes. Couldn't you have stopped a little and talked? It was most impolite.

I was in the middle of a very wide lake. Not drowning take precedence over manners.

Oh. Yes, I suppose it does. But whatever were you doing in the middle of a, ah, very wide lake? You mean Ahahuway, don't you?

I do. And I suppose I was showing off.

To yourself.

He had to laugh at that. Mostly.

As your father would do. Others didn't see that in him but who else was he going to best but himself?

I am not my father, Olun. I will not be my father.

That is good. Were you Hurasu I would have to hate you. Look on me, Urtu. Could you love me?

She slid off the loose robe she wore. The Olun he saw, before him yet far away, was certainly desirable. But many women were and there was much more to Olun than this shapely body she showed him.

You know it is possible to make love from afar?

It is not satisfying for most, he answered. There is not enough physical presence.

THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Every young wizard wondered about it and was likely to experiment, assuming they had an equally curious partner. It was certainly possible. There was physical contact. After all, they did send a physical part, albeit slight, of who they were to another world to speak from afar.

Some sorcerers learn to send forth more of themselves.

It is not something that ever seemed worth practicing.

Well then, of course one must satisfy oneself. Which she started to do. Urtu broke away immediately. He was—astonished? Perplexed, certainly. Shocked and maybe even slightly aroused.

It was true that wizards could learn to send more of themselves out into another world. Or worlds. For some sorts of sorcery it was even necessary, such as reaching around through other worlds to undo bindings, physical and otherwise. He knew he had sent more of himself when he destroyed Barazes. He could see that, looking back—something he was uncomfortable doing but should, to understand it.

Urtu and a friend had once engaged in a boxing match from afar. Their hardest blows felt more like a pillow fight. That was typical. Practice this, he told himself. It seems a useful skill. Then he napped.

When he awoke it was mid-afternoon. He knew he was fully replenished, fully rested. However, he had no desire to do much of anything nor see anyone. He would have a meal and return to his room. Read some from his father's book by the light of an oil lamp. It had sat unopened with his things while he was here.

He guessed it was about dusk when Malama entered. This was her room too, wasn't it? Now she was no longer on the island of the prophetesses. Should he get out and sleep in Tira's room tonight?

What existed between them now? What had existed between them before? He knew they hadn't been in love, not the way he was with Fetua, but they had been searching for some other connection they didn't quite understand. And it had left them unsatisfied, still searching, when events had separated them. Perhaps it was unobtainable now; too much had changed, at least for him.

"You're not going out again?" she asked.

"I think not. Unless I need some air later or even decide to sleep outside." That was one way to avoid questions about the room.

"I didn't see you all day." She rummaged through her kit. As far as Urtu could tell, she wasn't really looking for anything.

"I sat by the lake for a long time." That could have been enough. No, he owed Malama more. They were partners of a sort, though not sharing quite the same mission. "Olun spoke to me. She attempted to seduce me again. It was enough for me to realize the woman is, um, unbalanced."

"She is. Quite mad, I would say."

"Bonkers."

"Yes, that's the proper word. I too recognized it in time." Malama giggled. "But she never tried to seduce me."

"I guess you're not desirable enough." He shook his head. "Poor, plain Malama." But hadn't Zerana and Thisa claimed Olun had seduced them? He had assumed they meant that figuratively. Now he wondered.

She left off sorting her belongings and sat down beside him. "You can make me feel better about myself, young man."

He placed a marker in the book, setting it aside. "Shall I seduce you tonight?"

"Isn't that what we've been leading up to?"

FORTY-NINE

"YOU WON'T HURT YOUR ARM?"

"The stitches are out and it's pretty much healed. They tell me I will have a scar, however."

"Ah, you can tell everyone a crocodile grabbed hold of your arm. That would go over well on the Gurang."

"The story of you rescuing me is quite good enough."

"When I wrestled the giant crocodile?"

"Oh, shut up and kiss me. Yes. You should have led with that."

A minute—or maybe two—later, Malama whispered, "I can feel your gems. Stronger than before."

Yes, he could too. "We're nearer to the place of power now. By the way, that's not on your island. It's a little further out in the lake."

"You think we don't know that after two thousand years and more? We just pretend it is there to keep you men away."

"Yet you keep leaving the isle to be with us. Mmm. Mmm-mmmh!"

"Well, we—ooh. Oh yes. We like men. For those who don't, there's another shrine. Ah. Ah. Oh, the Eyes. I—I am still afraid—but—I think we need find—ah. Find—find something in them."

"Let yourself *search*. How had that happened?"

We are—where are we?

It is not a world I know. Lights of amber and green, blue and red, played about them.

It is within the Eyes!

Yes. There was no other explanation. *I can see—everything. I can see you and me, repeated infinitely.*

And all sharing themselves. Feel the passions, Urtu! We are worlds! Worlds without end—

Worlds of passion, of yearning, of striving. Worlds of peace and rest. Words no longer were enough. Or they were too much. He could see Malama in a way he never could before and surely she saw him as well. He saw—all of her? No, not really, Much more of her. It would take forever to see all. But that is what these stones promised, wasn't it?

They could not remain forever. Not and live. Not and remain themselves.

Can we leave? came Malama's voice, faint and small.

Only by going in. Of this he was suddenly certain.

STEPHEN BROOKE

Yes. You and I.

They were still physically engaged. Oh, he could feel that! Feel it more intensely than he had ever known, more intensely than he would ever have thought possible. He must remain in control, yet let himself be carried further. The multicolored lights swelled and swirled. Their bodies shone like lamps. They *were* lamps, lighting the way, deeper and deeper.

Now each of the stones loomed up, the Golden Earth Stone, fertile, fecund, ever-growing, the Green Stone of the Sea, with vast vistas within it, the waves tumbling, calling to him. The Blue Sky Stone, towering clouds of storm, with sun and moon and millions upon millions of luminous stars to give them light. And the Red Stone, that of Fire, consuming yet giving energy to all things. Each he knew now as they whirled about them. Each had its link with him and he with it.

And all the while he and Malama in each others arms, in each other, moving inexorably toward a climax such as neither had ever known. Malama was right to be afraid. He was afraid as he had never been in his life. He was not certain he would survive this, here in this place, this place of unfathomable power where they were intertwined, even as they were in a room in the House of Anaku.

Blinding light. Two voices crying out as one, crying into the darkness, falling into it, sated, depleted, emptied and filled and emptied. Darkness.

IV. THE SWORD

FIFTY

"I *WILL* SEE THEM," SHRIEKED Panaha.

A moment later she burst into the room and glared at them. "It was bad enough you linked within those stones. But to also make love! Your passions were too great. You may have killed Sister Layat. She lies in a trance."

Anaku stood behind her, and Hohina. Both looked apologetic. They probably had no idea what had happened.

But no one stopped the high priestess when she demanded entry.

Malama looked to Urtu. "Can we do anything?"

"We can try to reach out to her. Join me." He knew this could be done, though he was not sure where the knowledge came from. Both rested their hands on the Eyes of the Wind.

And he knew it would also work only because she lay near a locus of great power. They linked effortlessly. The Eyes' presence could be sensed but it did not dominate. Was Layat's mind open? If it wasn't, they could do nothing. *The other sisters. I can feel them but they are guarded*, said Malama.

As they should be. And Layat. She lay completely open, no wards. She was not as one who slept; were that so, they could also do nothing and nothing probably needed done. Where had she gone? Was there a part of her somewhere they could find?

We must reach around through the stones, Malama said.

Ah, of course. *Yes. That way we can speak to her in this world.*

It was the Fire Stone she entered. Did it speak to her more loudly than the others? And he felt himself drawn to the Sky Stone. He sent himself there as he might to any world, and then, almost effortlessly, back again but now able to be *in* the stricken priestess, to occupy the same space.

Still unconscious, he whispered.

She is hiding in her brain. Come out, Layat!

Who?

We are sorry we upset you. It is Malama and, um—

STEPHEN BROOKE

That handsome fellow you were having sex with? It all seemed so real! It seemed like I—like I was with him too. Oh, dear, and with you also!

Maybe you were. But come back to the world now, will you? I'll show you the way if you need.

Moments later Layat was no longer with them but they could sense her among the other priestesses. Guards up, too. They returned to the room where Panaha scowled at them yet.

"I think," Urtu remarked to Malama, "in most places that would have worked only if she were in contact with the Eyes also."

"Or in close proximity, maybe. Layat is well, Panaha."

"She should not have been stricken in the first place. I blame not the boy, but you were irresponsible. I order you to leave this place immediately." She wheeled and went as far as the doorway before turning and hissing, "And I will ask that you be expelled from our order. Even if you are sister to the emperor!" With that, she was gone.

"Expel you?" asked Urtu. "Who can do that?"

Malama sat staring. It was Hohina who answered. "Only the others on the Sacred Isle. They can vote but it must be unanimous."

"It may be," said Malama, her voice dull. "Well, maybe not Layat, huh? Let's pack and get on our way."

"Even Panaha can not order you from my house," stated the king.

"But I must obey her, mustn't I? At least until they kick me out."

So they rode away before dawn, north along the flow of Teoma this time, for Malama was leery of skirting the lands of Wiritangay as they had on the way south. Six horses there were again but only four riders.

"Maybe I should sell them all and we could go by boat," she said. "Of course, they officially belong to my brother but I do not think he would mind."

"Up the Teimi to Memiuna?" asked Isana.

"Most likely. But then we'd need horses again unless we walked the rest of the way home. And I am in too much of a hurry for that."

Well before the end of the first day they halted by a low water fall. "We can rest here overnight. This village and this fall mark the northern border of Anaku's realm. It also marks the place where one can launch a boat and navigate Teoma all the way to the sea. Well,

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almost to the sea. The last few miles is all falls and rapids before it tumbles to the salt water.”

“Isn’t that area in rebellion against the empire?” Isana apparently paid attention to such things. Urtu had no idea what areas might be hostile and was completely willing to let Malama make a judgment of their best route.

“It could be,” admitted Malama. “Or maybe some of the river between here and there. It might be best to cross Teoma at this place and ride.”

They camped in the public shelters there, listening through the evening to the music of Teoma coming over the falls. There was little talk but both Malama and Urtu had much the same things on their minds.

“It will never be like that again, will it?” she asked at last

“I don’t think so. That doesn’t mean we wouldn’t enjoy it.”

“Maybe so. We have a bond now. A deep bond that is not quite the same as being in love.”

He agreed. “That we shall always have, whether we ever make love again or not.”

“Oh, let us hope that doesn’t happen!” She thought on things a little while. “I think Layat would have found her way back in a little bit even if we hadn’t helped her.”

“She was like a soldier shocked by the things he has seen.”

“So you’re saying we committed an atrocity?” Malaha made only a slight effort to sound serious.

“Panaha would say so!”

The woman chuckled but, growing grave again, said, “I think she always wanted an excuse to keep from becoming high priestess.”

Urtu had no idea whether that was true. It did seem plausible enough. “I do not believe we—either of us—will need to be near a place of power to fully use the Eyes now. We have a bond with them too.”

“But you still intend to take them over the sea.”

That was something he had been thinking on this day. “Perhaps I should stay. We could do much good with their power.”

“Would you attempt to regain your father’s realm?”

STEPHEN BROOKE

That, he had not thought on. All his mind had been on this land; it was as if the Valley of Vision was just an old dream, mostly forgotten. But he could do as she said, couldn't he? Hurasu had used the Eyes himself to help reestablish his rule long ago. "It is something I might think about in time. Not now."

"When I'm old and you no longer want to be around me, maybe?" She smiled as she said this but there was an undeniable truth behind it. These people would age far sooner than he. Probably. There was no absolute guarantee of such things. He might live hundreds of years or no longer than any man of the Molu. For that matter, an arrow could strike him down tomorrow, an illness carry him away.

He could only hope to remain. To remain with Malama, with whom he had found that completion that had eluded them before?

Had the very presence of the Eyes kept them from being satisfied, whispered that there was more they must seek? They might never have felt an absence had they come together in some other place, some other time. But those mystic stones lying nearby had caused them to yearn, yearn for something they had not recognized.

Perhaps none of it was really about them at all.

FIFTY-ONE

THE WATER WAS SHALLOW, WITH a gravel bottom, here below the falls. They forded it and rode northeastward. "This route would take us by the House of Teninihitu if we stayed with it," Malama told him. "We shall turn more west before then and follow Teimi north."

"I like not that we passed through so busy a place. It will be known where we travel."

She did not seem much concerned. "You fear an attack?"

"There are still those who oppose your mission in the south."

"Yes." This she gave more consideration. "But you too have enemies. And there are those who would like to possess our gems."

Our. Indeed, they were as much Malama's as his now, not that any man could own them. Nor any god, most likely. "Whatever way we go," he said, "we should go quickly."

"On that I agree. We will avoid all noble houses where we might guest. For now we continue north a while, where the many little streams that feed Teoma and Teimi may be more readily forded. We would have to swim across if we turned here."

"We are not far from the place my legendary ancestor was said to reside," spoke Isana. "On one of those little rivers."

Malama frowned, puzzling over the girl's words. "You mean the bard Isa? You trace your family all the way back to him? Oh, you were named for him, weren't you?"

"My father claimed descent, but two thousand years is a long time to trace such things."

"Given that much time," observed Urtu, "half the people who live around here might be able to claim descent." At least half, he told himself, given the stories he had heard of the bard. "Even as almost everyone can claim descent from my father."

"Maybe I should call you Cousin from now on," said Isana. "Do we still use Samuc?"

"We might as well." Until they returned north. Then things would change in ways he could not foresee.

They camped in the open that night, near a tiny hamlet, spreading their mats below a great tree Urtu did not recognize. It must bear fruit at some other time of year or it would not be permitted to take up space in this intensively cultivated area. Its broad fallen leaves littered

the ground, providing a comfortable if musty cushion. They rested after a light, cold meal, not yet ready for sleep.

You again? he asked. Urtu knew who was calling.

Yes. I'm sorry I scared you away last time. Olun did not sound sorry. At least she was clothed.

He was not going to waste time with the sorceress. *Have we anything to speak of?*

The Eyes, of course. I could feel something going on, even here.

In the Rift. How far away was that? Not that it made any difference at all when it came to matters sorcerous.

I have a very nice place here, she said. *You should come visit. There are—doors to allow travel to all sorts of worlds or use as shortcuts in our own. But that is something to speak of another time. You have become attuned to the Eyes, have you not? Even Hurasu was afraid to do this, though I longed for it, pleaded with him for it.*

So that was a part of the trouble between them. But with this woman there would have been trouble anyway. Maybe with any man but definitely with Hurasu. *I have entered the Eyes, yes,* he admitted. *Attuned, you name it? Maybe so.* She knew nothing of Malama having done the same. Of that he was sure and of that he was glad.

Yes, attuned is—

He broke off. That part of his mind still beneath the tree had noted something. “Arms!” he cried out, drawing his sword as two men rushed their camp. Their swords were already in their hands. He leaped up and ran to meet them.

One dodged past him as he engaged the other. The man had just enough time to prepare for his onslaught; Urtu had hoped to overwhelm him before he was ready, using his speed and strength. Now he must waste some seconds dueling him and hope Tira or Malama could deal with the second man. Or Isana? He had no idea whether she could handle a weapon. She was not a small woman, tall and rather athletic in appearance.

He deflected the attacker's first blow, missed with his own thrust. Around came the man's bronze blade again, to meet his own. Both shattered on impact. Damn all gods, he had used too much of his strength again! The man was momentarily shaken by the impact. Long

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enough for Urtu to run what remained of his sword through his throat. He turned to see the other assassin crossing swords with Tira, while both women circled, knives in their hands. It had been but seconds, he knew, since the men had charged them.

Lunging forward, he crashed into the man who, in turn, staggered onto Tira's sword.

"We need to get you a bow to carry," he said. "The sword does not appear to be your weapon." She would not have held back her attacker long. Urtu could see that.

He looked from one body to the other. Molu. That was to be expected. "Which of us were they after?" wondered Malama.

"You. This one—" He nudged the body with his foot. "I engaged at Ahahuway. He was your second assailant there, who escaped in the darkness."

Curious villagers had appeared. "Bandits," Malama called to them. "We will leave you some coins to dispose of their bodies. And you may have whatever they have on them."

"Except this," spoke Urtu, picking up the sword the second man had dropped. He needed to replace his own.

"I must get you a sword of iron when we return north," said Malama.

But that might not be necessary. The sword of Hurasu waited in Panaymana's capital.

There was Olun again. He might as well continue their conversation.

Why left you so abruptly?

Someone was trying to kill me.

Not of my sending.

I did not think so. But he had not completely dismissed the possibility.

Not that I wouldn't kill you, Urtu, if it became necessary.

You might try.

Yes. You are more dangerous now. Even more dangerous, maybe, than your father. But also more desirable to me. This I admit, son of Hurasu. We could be together, as he was not willing to be. He gave me nothing but sorrow! All our children are dead!

STEPHEN BROOKE

That was an astonishing assertion. *I thought you had no children. All those who should have been born. Dead all! Hurasu could have made them live.*

He did not understand any of this. *Live? How?*

They do in other worlds, you know. Among the infinite other worlds there are ones where Hurasu loved me and gave me beautiful and powerful sons and daughters. Why not this one? Why was I made to live in this one? I could create a world with the Eyes, a world where you would love me, Urtu, love me forever, as Hurasu was unwilling to do. Ah, I can speak no more of this. She left him.

“Was that your sorceress again?” asked Malama.

“It was. And bonkers does not begin to describe her, I fear.”

FIFTY-TWO

SWIFTLY THEY TRAVELED, REACHING THE broad shallow Teimi on the morrow and following the road north that paralleled its course, through villages, across bridges. So they passed on to Memiuna, making themselves known to none, and then across the hills dividing south from north.

They might again have heard faint rumblings in the mountains as they had traveled, but they were not so near to them as at Ahahuway. That strife and turmoil continued in the Valley, that there was war beyond those peaks, Urtu did not doubt. He felt no obligation to any there. Let them decide their own fates.

"Here I should greet the administrator of this town," said Malama, as they at last approached Intu, "and ask her to send a courier ahead of us to my brother. It would be good to hear any news, as well."

Himonacuna had gossip but not much solid news. "I've heard there was a major naval engagement but neither side can claim victory. The north remains in revolt and remains largely independent of the emperor."

"If the nobles there could put aside their own squabbles it would surely be worse," said Malama. "My fear is that a leader will arise among them."

"That is far beyond my concerns at this village, my lady. I trust you and your brother to take care of such things." Then a smile, maybe a bit sly? "And your mother."

"You hear things of Panahona?"

"Rumors and gossip. Some say she has taken a Bazu pirate as her lover." Urtu had to snicker at that, despite himself.

"If only it were true," laughed Malama. "A fleet of Bazu would be most useful!"

Himonacuna looked slightly disappointed. It was too bad they could not tell her the pirate was in truth a god. That would be gossip worth the knowing. Aye, and the telling and the retelling.

A meal with the noblewoman, a night's rest under roof. Urtu shared a room with the priestess as her lover now, not her bodyguard, and this they hid not from Himonacuna or anyone else. The administrator would have new gossip to share! They made love now, in that house, for the first time since leaving the shores of Ahahuway, making sure to

keep a little distance from the Eyes. Urtu did not think that mattered; he could feel their presence as he was sure did Malama, but that was all it was.

But the lovemaking was good, and their connection remained, whatever world they were in. It would not be wise to explore the gems further until they were safely in the capital. Would Malama ask him to use them against her brother's enemies? Would she tell the emperor of them at all?

The four would again be on their way north tomorrow. None were certain of what would come when they reached Panaymana's little town, his capital on the Gurang. A few days only—he should be on his way then, as soon as possible, and Tira with him. As for Malama, she remained sister to the emperor, whatever her status in her order.

And Isana? She had no place anywhere as far as he knew. She had taken no vows so she was not a priestess. Not his concern, either, he told himself but he knew better.

"We will stay tonight at what you called the Place of the Crocodile," Malama told him as they rode away from Intu. Early they rode, earlier maybe than any really liked. It would have been good to sleep in, comfortable in the great house. If only for the food! But also they all felt the urgency to be on their way.

"I would have no fear of the power there now," he said. "I know the Eyes. Olun called it being attuned to them."

"Yes, that describes it well, I think." She nodded in satisfaction with the word. "Are we attuned to each other too?"

"It would seem so. That is what she desires—that which we have now."

"Oh." Malama was silent for some time. "That tells me more of her than anything you have said before."

They rode on without speaking a few minutes more. "You are a more powerful sorcerer than I shall ever be, Urtu. I know this."

He was not so certain. Their training had been different, Malama being groomed for prophecy since she was a child. "I have only learned skills you have not," he told her. "Yes, I know I am more powerful than many. I do not think I could have ever have matched Olun. But now —"

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“With the Eyes.”

“With the Eyes I am stronger. As are you.”

“It is a fearful thing to have such power, is it not?”

“I think that is why my father wished me to carry them away from our homeland, where they might be misused. Whether he ever expected me to use them, I can not guess.” Hurasu certainly had not intended him to become attuned to them as he had. But neither had he warned against it, had he?

That day and another they rode, and then said farewell to their mounts, boarding one of the long, flat-bottomed river boats. The cypress rose again beside their way, the stream disappearing amid the shadowed swamp below them. It was something Urtu had seen only a little of before yet it seemed a homecoming now.

“Look,” whispered Isana, pointing east, toward the mountains. Dark clouds hung above them, black mists that would never bring rain.

“The volcanoes are spewing,” said Urtu. Was the one above the gate to Hirstel doing so? The Shrouded Valley might not be a good place to be at the moment.

“And the worst time of the year for it,” Malama said. “The winds tend to come more from the mountains during the drier season.”

“The worst time for you here. The people of my homeland probably are thankful it is being blown away from them.” Not that the winds there were necessarily as those here. He wouldn’t let that get in the way.

“And we come too,” she said, ignoring his comment. “Another black cloud!”

“I thought your mission went well, my lady,” asserted Isana.

“All things made considered,” Tira added.

That they all had to laugh at. “Well for all but me, I suppose,” the priestess said. “And I do not regret any of that. So, I must decide whether to recommend a marriage to my brother. And no, Urtu, I will not tell him we chose Isana.”

“You could do worse,” the girl stated.

“Indeed so,” felt Urtu. “It is too bad she isn’t an important noblewoman. She’d make a perfect wife for Panaymana.”

“Her birth wouldn’t matter that much, even for a first wife. But she

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would bring no political advantages with her. She would make an even better wife for you, Urtu.”

Isana and he gave each other doubtful looks.

“Since I can’t marry, I need to find someone to take care of you, don’t I?”

“I’ll admit I’d prefer him to your brother, my lady, intending no offense to his magnificence. But who are you going to recommend if I am not to marry the emperor?” She snickered a little at the thought of such a preposterous match.

“You will find out when I tell him,” she said.

They might have appeared disappointed. “Relax and float,” Malama told them. “We shall deal with these things when it is time.”

And after she consulted with her mother, Urtu thought but did not say.

FIFTY-THREE

"REPORTS HAVE COME THAT YOUR journey was more dangerous than anticipated. I should have not let you go!" As if it had been his decision.

"Cunos proved excellent protection. Pay no attention to my scar!" The pink line was still quite visible against the deep golden skin of shoulder and arm.

"If you say so, but I will want the story. We thank you, Cunos, and intend to reward you well." Panaymana's eyes went to Isana. "And is this not one of the girls who went south with you?"

"She chose not to become a priestess," Malama announced. "Isana will be my personal attendant for now." It was the first any of them, much less Isana, had heard of it.

"Ah. I thought maybe you had forgotten to leave her there. I would not want my sister to have to go back again just to deliver her!" It was unfortunate that no courtiers were present to laugh at his quip, but it did bring smiles. "Let us sit and eat. All of you. Is your Xit about, Mother?"

"He had disappeared somewhere again. He does that too often but makes up for it when he comes back."

The emperor shook his head. "I don't know how he slips away. My guards never see him!"

They took places, Malama and Panahona again on either side of the emperor. "No, not behind me," Malama told Isana. "You are guest and friend tonight, not attendant. And we did not so these past weeks!"

The girl went to a place a little further down the low table, across from Tira. She is much aware of her status as a commoner here, Urtu told himself. As a priestess it had not mattered; all were equal. She might have some regret over her choice. It was also likely she would so choose again.

"I have heard there was fighting at sea," said Malama, as servants began placing bowls and platters before them.

Panaymana waved a dismissive hand. "Far north, off the cape. We stopped a fleet but did not pursue, for our own losses were high. At least they won't be sailing up the Gurang!"

We? wondered Urtu. Surely Panaymana didn't sail with them? He

did not doubt the emperor would go to battle himself if he could but his advisers and officers would discourage it.

"That is good to know. It would be inconvenient to leave again right away. If you do not mind, I think I shall reside here in your keep for a while, rather than at the shrine."

"Of course not. It's not as comfortable though."

"My current status as a priestess is, um, not as it was. It seems unlikely I shall ever be high priestess on the Sacred Isle now. I would let things sort themselves out some before returning to the shrine."

Panaymana raised one thick eyebrow. "I will not pry into that, my sister, though rumors reached us here. But is that all there is to it?"

"There is Isana. She has no other place to go and she could not serve as my attendant at the shrine. And, of course, Cunos could not stay with me there either."

The emperor's other eyebrow went up. Pahahona seemed taken by surprise too. This topic apparently had not arisen in the discussion she had earlier with her daughter. "I guess that all makes sense," said Panaymana. "To someone! Now—tell me if you found me a wife."

"I would recommend you seek the hand of Lohatini, the daughter of King Teninihitu. I do think it an excellent match. But I am bound to mention that the Lady Fetua will allow you to approach her."

"I remember Lohatini. She was just a little girl when last I saw her."

"She is still little, my brother, but a woman."

He thought on that a few seconds, perhaps imagining what a grown Lohatini might look like. "I always liked her. Bossy, though."

"That she is. Almost as bad as your mother and I." While Panaymana giggled over that, Malama addressed herself to his pair of concubines. "She would probably try to lord it over you two if she married the emperor. Don't let her get away with too much." Both smiled and bowed their heads. Perhaps they were not accustomed to her being nice to them or even noticing them.

"Then let's not bother with this other woman. Though—she is beautiful, I hear?"

"The sister of Anaku is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And one of the most dull." Urtu thought that unkind but was not about to contradict her.

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"As dull as her brother? I've met Anaku."

"Duller."

The emperor made a face. "That would be no good. She might give me dull children and who would want that?"

"Dull fathers!" chirped Isana.

"But of course! I am glad you brought this one back, Malama."

"So am I," the girl agreed. "Um, your magnificence."

No business other than food took their attention the rest of the evening.

Even if Panaymana was now aware he and Malama were lovers, it would be too complicated to share her room tonight. Better to let everyone settle in. The chamber he had shared with Tira and Xido on first coming here was as when they had left; ostensibly, it remained the quarters of all three but only Tira was likely to occupy it with any regularity.

"Xit returns," announced Tira, as Urtu prepared for sleep. He was not overly surprised to see Xido emerge from the shadows.

"I hear you have been wandering."

The god took a cross-legged seat on the floor. "I go here and there. Places in this world, places in others. There was not much to hold my attention here with you gone."

"Panahona had best not hear that," noted Tira.

"She's the only reason I've stayed at all. Ah, do you hear that?"

Faint distant rumbles from the mountains. "We've been hearing those for some time," said Urtu.

"And I would wager you'll be hearing them for some time more." He glanced at the young man and then gave him a more thorough scrutiny. "I didn't expect this," he said. "Not this soon, anyway. You've been inside those jewels, haven't you? You wouldn't catch me doing that!"

"It was not quite intentional." Not really. "Malama and I."

"Oh-ho. I won't ask for details not that I can't imagine some. Hmm, I must have been in my own world or I would have felt something of it." He frowned. "Maybe. I know less about them now than you."

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“And that is almost nothing. So, have you found anything to amuse yourself while we were gone, other than the emperor’s mother?”

“The emperor himself. I’ve been teaching the boy some of the, ah, arts of war. He had some training, of course, being noble and all. His hangers-on did not at all like me being near him with weapons.” The god seemed to relish that fact. “With a nudge or two, he could be a warrior and a true leader. Not that it is any particular concern of mine.”

Urtu suspected the god liked the young emperor. And, yes, his mother.

“I don’t think he would want to let me go,” continued Xido. “Not that he can prevent me. You, he can. Be aware of that. Now, give me the complete tale of your travel to far and exotic lands. I’ll bet there were exotic women, too.”

Women, yes, but the one with whom he had fallen in love was exotic by no stretch of the imagination. “It’s going to be a long story,” he informed the god. “And therefore its telling must wait until tomorrow.”

With that, he went to his mat. He heard Xido leave just before he drifted into sleep.

FIFTY-FOUR

"PANAYMANA IS SET ON KEEPING you here. He sees our, ah, union as a stroke of luck, a means to entice you to serve him."

It had been a few days now and things seemed to be settling. The emperor had sent Moyoa off almost immediately to present a formal request to meet with Lohatini. Permission had already been granted to 'approach' her with matrimony in mind; Malama's visit had taken care of that first step. "Moyoa has been moping about this place for weeks. I felt it was a good idea to send him somewhere for a while," Panaymana had said.

Before Xido killed him, had been Urtu's thought. The captain had not the least idea how dangerous he was.

Isana had fallen into the role of attendant to Malama, the place Fetua had once offered her. It was a role most loosely defined by both women, although there rose no question of who served whom.

They sat together now in Malama's chambers, sharing a breakfast. There was tea, for which Urtu was grateful. He had missed it more than he realized. A servant at the door. "I have messages for you, my lady," she announced. "Two. I'm told they came from the south."

Two folded papers, both sealed, one with red wax, one with yellow. None would dare break the seal on a message intended for her eyes. No, not even her brother. The first she opened announced that Malama had been expelled from the Priestesses of the Sacred Isle. "And I though Layat enjoyed herself," muttered Malama.

"And my sister who traveled with us! How could she be so ungrateful?" Isana added.

"She is not yet a full priestess and had no vote. Someone will have to die so she can take her place." Then she laughed. "I guess my place is open!"

"Oh. Still, I am disappointed in them!"

"Panaha probably made them fearful of me. I can understand this. By the way, our sister chose the name Valani. Let's see what other bad news I have received."

The second was a formal proposal of marriage from Anaku. He had wasted no time. "Maybe I should consider it," she mused. "And wouldn't Panaha be peeved!"

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Isana pointed out, "But you have still taken vows, my lady. You remain a priestess, do you not?"

"That is so. I would have to ask to be released." She pondered this and then shook her head. "It is too much to even think on right now, much less to decide anything. I would guess he also sent a message to my brother."

"You do not love Anaku, my lady," stated Isana.

"I found I liked Anaku more than I had realized. Love him? No, I think not." She turned inward for a minute or more, seeming to consider something, before raising her eyes to Urtu, saying, "I am fairly certain I conceived in the House of Anaku. I do not know if you or Anaku is the father."

"But you will name him, won't you?"

"It might be wiser." Then, perhaps in a burst of pique at the demands suddenly made on her, "Not that I need name any man!"

The practical Isana reminded her, "If you married the king, he would be the father." Her head suddenly came erect, her face alert. "What is all the racket?"

A shout. A cry of anguish. Urtu drew his new iron sword—though he wished he had his father's blade. Panaymana continued to hold that hostage. He looked out into the hallway. A man ran by. To or from something, he was unsure, but by the look on his face he guessed the latter. He rushed by an approaching guardsman and disappeared. The guard might have considered pursuit but, seeing Urtu, came to him instead.

"Do you know what's going on, sir?"

"I only heard noises."

"Me too, Quite a commotion it was." He paused, listened. "Nothing now."

"Only one way to find out what happened."

The man gave a nervous laugh. "Let someone else look and tell us?"

"All right, two ways! Come on."

It was not necessary to go far. Around the next corner they encountered Xido, two bodies lying at his feet. They were bent in improbable ways.

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"There was another. He ran off that way." Xido nodded the direction from which they had come.

"I think we saw him. These ones look, um, broken."

"I didn't want to get my blade dirty so I snapped their backs. They had daggers, as you may see." There *were* daggers on the stone floor. Nicely made iron ones. Not cheap.

"They tried to assassinate you, Lord Xit?" asked the guardsman. "Oh, stupid question. Of course they did. The emperor isn't going to like this one bit." He turned to Urtu and confided, "Lord Xit and the emperor are close, you know."

"Why don't you go find someone in charge and tell them about this?" asked the little god.

The guard turned at once, but halted, saying, "Oh, my ladies, I don't think you want to be seeing this."

"Nonsense," muttered Malama, pushing by him. "I've probably seen far more death than you." Isana, however, looked a bit sick and fled back to their chambers.

Malama looked the scene over. "Moyoa?"

Xido nodded. He seemed far too blasé about all of it. "I've little doubt he was behind the attack. It is convenient that he is off running an errand for the emperor while his friends do him a favor!"

Urtu stared. "All this because you supplanted him with Panahona."

Malama and Xido looked at each other, shaking their heads. "Naive boy," said Malama. "My mother is but a small part. It is your influence with my brother that is at the root of it. Xit's and yours both."

"He *is* an innocent about such things," Xido told her.

"Wasn't there intrigue such as this in his father's house?"

Xido chuckled. "Everyone was far too afraid of Hurasu for that. They only intrigued at great distances."

At that, Urtu had to chuckle as well. "It is true. We worried about wizards, not daggers."

An officer hurried up at that moment, accompanied by four guards. He looked like he might join Isana but looked away from the bodies and seemed to get over it. "You did all this, Lord Xit?" He cast a furtive glance toward Urtu. Most likely he thought he had helped. "Assassins. Well, let's get them out of here. You men carry them away. Down to the

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courtyard for now.” He considered the daggers on the floor. “Nice blades.”

“Yes,” agreed Xido. “Too nice to let lie here.” He stuck one in his belt and handed the other to Urtu. “Never let it be said that Xit doesn’t clean up after himself.” He surveyed the stones. “Not one drop of blood.”

“How considerate,” said Malama. “Let’s go finish our breakfast.”

FIFTY-FIVE

“I HAD AN IDEA YOU’D figured out I was a god,” said Xido.

Malama wore something of a self-satisfied smile. “Let us say I had strong suspicions.”

“And now others may. Perhaps not of being a god, which sounds rather far-fetched, but they’ll suspect something. I really shouldn’t indulge in displays such as I just did.”

“A god?” whispered Isana. They had decided it might be best if she knew. She was privy to most of what they did and said, anyway.

“Yes, and almost a benevolent one, when the mood takes me.”

“I think that happens every century or so,” Urtu interjected.

“And here I’ve been helping this young fellow. Humans used to be so much more grateful. Why I remember four or five thousand years ago when—”

Isana interrupted. “You look so much like a man. Um, yes. A man.”

“But a small and ugly one who appears to be a Bazu? I become human and walk among you sometimes, so I do not forget what it is like to be a mortal. That is all too easy to do, forgetting all that lies beyond our own worlds, forgetting time itself. I have known gods who have forgotten their own names.”

“So you are a man right now.” This from Malama.

“Not so much. I am in pretty much full god mode. That is, as much as I can be in this human form in your world. I’m more powerful in my own world, as you might expect. But I can diminish myself, even become almost human. This is something I’ve chosen to do a few times when I wearied of being a god and chose to live a while among you and as one of you.”

Almost human. “Can you be—slain then?” Urtu asked. “If you don’t want to tell us, we would certainly understand.”

“That’s no problem, my boy, but I thank you for thinking of it. It doesn’t seem I can be, in any form, but I can get pretty banged up. I’ve felt like I wanted to die once or twice! But I heal or I go back to being a god and heal even more quickly.” Xido paused; though he had claimed it was not a problem, Urtu felt there was some reticence about continuing. “I do suspect that were I on the verge of death in some world, I would be drawn back to my own. There all my powers are strongest. I have regenerated limbs in my home universe. I think even if this body

were destroyed, I would grow back into my self in time. My other self would still exist."

"The crocodile!" exclaimed Malama. "I was right about that, wasn't I?"

"Exactly. It always exists elsewhere and it is also I. Maybe if both could be destroyed simultaneously, I would die. I wouldn't expect that to happen until my world, my universe, comes to an end."

"That wouldn't be soon, would it?" Isana sounded yet tentative, timid, but got her question out.

"Billions of years. Or tomorrow. Both if one assumes there are infinite versions of it."

Urtu laughed. "Just as this one." That sort of thing was basic to their understanding of all sorcery. Not that one needed to know any theory at all to wield its power.

"Oh, infinite worlds. As those in which we seek our prophecies." The girl frowned. "But I won't be doing that any more."

"You needn't be a priestess to use your powers," Xido told her. "That you should always remember. It is your gift, no one else's." He took a long look at her, long enough to make them all a little uncomfortable. "And you do have a considerable gift. Even if Malama hadn't gotten herself into trouble—"

"That was Urtu's doing," Malama informed him.

"Yes, of course. Even if Urtu hadn't gotten her into trouble, I think you would have been the more likely one to become the next high priestess."

"Hmm. That wouldn't have been any better, really. I'm happier every day not to be stuck on the island!"

"You know, so am I," said Malama. "I am going to petition to be released from my vows. Beyond that, I've not decided."

"And so we all will move on," said the dark god. "Urtu must leave this place in time. Soon, I would think, and Tira with him."

"Hucan," Urtu corrected him.

"Right. Where is she anyway?"

"Visiting across the river. She's become interested in the Diwalnu and how they are related to us."

"Related but long divided. At one time, far back, some contact was

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maintained through Hurasu's road across the mountains. There is, of course, less of your father's heritage among them than in the Valley."

"But there none the less."

"That's true anywhere in this world. And some others. We've gotten off the subject, haven't we? The two of you need to move along."

"Panaymana doesn't want us to. I fear he will continue to hold my father's sword to keep me here."

"He's rather enamored of the blade. I think he wants it for himself."

"That will not happen. The sword of Hurasu will be at my hip when I leave this place."

"Then you need to figure out how to put it there."

"More racket outside," complained Isana. "What is it this time?" She decided to answer her own question and went to the window. Malama, to the surprise of absolutely no one, occupied one of the choice suites on the outer wall.

"Oh, it's Moyoa returning. We'll soon know what the Lady Lohatini has decided. Oh!" She suddenly began laughing, laughing as if she could not stop. "The bodies. Those of his friends! They are laid out in the courtyard and, oh, how is staring at them!"

Said Xido, "I like the young lady's sense of humor."

FIFTY-SIX

"I STILL THINK PANAYMANA WOULD be better off marrying you." Urtu joked but he also thought it true.

"He likes me." Isana looked into the distance, across the Gurang. "He offered me a place as one of what he calls his attendants."

"A concubine."

"Yes. Oh, don't look angry, Urtu! He meant no harm and you know it. But that is not something I would do. Maybe if he offered to make me a second wife—no, probably not even then." To his surprise, she began to sob. "If Malama goes off and marries Anaku, what becomes of me? I would not go back to Ahahuway, even to serve her."

"Then come with me and Hucan." This he said without thinking it through or, in truth, without thinking at all.

"Across the sea? I've never seen anyone from across the sea except a few Bazu sailors." She giggled, tears forgotten. "Does everyone there look like Xit?"

"Not the women." He recalled the sorcerer Anaku's men had slain. Hildun? That's what Olun called him, wasn't it? Where did the Hildun live? For that matter, where did the Bazu live? He wished he had studied the maps in his father's library while he had the chance. The book he carried had too many gaps and the maps were often no more than sketches.

The marriage of Lohatini and Panaymana seemed a certainty now. Below them, the emperor was boarding a boat to carry him to the daughter of Teninihitu. Not all the way to the king's house, to be sure. Even had he been willing to go so far, all warned that it was far too dangerous to travel deep into the south.

"But if we do agree to marry, I will go to the House of Teninihitu to claim her," he had told his advisers. "I will not appear afraid to travel in my own realm!"

"Is on his way he yet?" Tira came and leaned on the parapet beside them.

"Still sorting themselves out. They're going to take a lot of boats up the river."

"And then march all the men to Intu," added Isana.

"It seem a place, um, sensible, to meet," allowed the wizard. "Ho,

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come the rest of us.” The rest of us being the emperor’s sister and mother. Not Xido.

The god expected Moyoa to make another attempt on his life with Panaymana gone. He seemed to be looking forward to it.

“If they have children they won’t inherit much of anything, will they?” asked Urtu. “It doesn’t seem like such a great alliance from that viewpoint.”

“No, a child of Lohatini and Panaymana would have no particular claim to anything,” answered Malama. “Her mother is of a moderately important noble family.”

“That is perhaps a more useful alliance in the long run than with her father,” said Panahona.

“And a son would be noble, of course, and might have some claim to one small estate or another. Through her mother’s family, of course. Teninihitu’s successor will come from a different line. Does he have a sister, Mother?”

“No, they would have to go to a second cousin, most likely.” Panahona addressed Urtu. “He’ll want you along when he goes south again for the wedding. Or to fetch his bride if they wed here. He would be likely to take Malama too.”

“Then I should leave this place before then.”

“And I,” said Malama. “I have decided to accept Anaku’s offer of marriage.”

“Your vows?” asked Isana.

“The high priestess at our shrine here sees no problem with releasing me. She never sees a problem with anything our family wishes.”

“Do you think Xit will go as well?” asked her mother. She said this to no one in particular but it was for Urtu to answer.

“I know neither his mind nor his plans but I doubt he will remain here.”

She sighed. “As do I. Ah, they are starting.”

The boats, five of them, were moving into the river, sails spread, oars dipping. It might be as much as two weeks before they returned. Could they, too, depart before then?

There was no more to be seen; the three Molu women went inside.

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Urtu took a seat on the stones. "You are going to speak with someone, aren't you?" asked Tira, taking a place beside him.

"It is time I spoke with my mother." It was likely she was listening for him, leaving an almost infinitesimally small part of her in their meeting place. Yes, there she was.

She appeared worried. *How fare you, my son? There is much going on in the world and I fear you are caught up in it.*

You remain hidden in Hirstel?

I do. No one is going out, even though the soldiers fled when the volcano rumbled too loudly!

I have returned to the House of Panaymana. Safely. All of us.

And you and the Malama I met are together?

For a little while. She has decided to wed another. It was not unforeseen by either of us. We both knew I must continue my journey and—and she hers.

I can not tell you I am not disappointed. I will expect the story of your journey so far, when you have the time. Thisa and Zerana have spoken to Olun. The sorceress may not trust them completely but has gossiped with them about you.

He could imagine. *Do they know aught of her past? Um, with my father.* Urtu might already have learned all he wanted or needed of that.

Their mother had told them things. I think Olun was very young when she was with Hurasu, but she is still older than me. She had a different name then. I am sorry but there is little more. Except—the sisters say Olun has studied the Eyes more thoroughly than anyone else alive. She surely knows them better than you.

Yet all that knowledge was nothing compared to what he had gained by entering them. *Do you think you could find your way to Acnaxula?*

I think so. But why? Most of what was she is gone.

Perhaps I can find that which was taken away. I have new—um, abilities. I am now attuned to the Eyes of the Wind. It is what Olun wanted of Hurasu. A part of what she wanted. Urtu had not been sure he was going to share any of this but it had rushed out of him.

And now she thinks to have it with you. Or does this new power

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speak to you more strongly than Olun? Does it seduce you as she sought to?

I intend still to take the gems across the sea, and not to our homeland.

Had he not entered the Eyes with Malama, had they not shared in becoming one with them, might it have been different? He, alone with all that power. Yes, it might have seduced him. He might have returned to the Valley of Visions and ruled as his father before him, destroying all those who opposed him.

As he had destroyed Barazes. No, he was not tempted. He was not Hurasu. Again, he would not be his father.

After all, he added, I received a prophecy. That is always reassuring.

It is more reassuring to hear you jest of it. Dealing with Olun at all is dangerous, yet I do not think a mother's words can dissuade you. Now—how do we go about saving Acnaxula?

FIFTY-SEVEN

IT IS DANGEROUS FOR THISA and Zerana. They will be vulnerable if Olun realizes what is happening.

When she realizes what is happening, said his mother. *It can not be hidden long. We must hope Olun's attention is all turned to you and they can escape quickly.*

The daughters of Acnaxula had simple enough a task yet a difficult one. They must distract an incredibly powerful and dangerous sorcerer just long enough for Urtu to act. Olun might have been suspicious of them after Barazes was killed but didn't know they had switched sides. Nor did she know they were aware of their mother's fate.

Why did he do this? It would gain him little. It would make the daughters of Acnaxula useless as spies. It would reveal more of his power to Olun. Maybe that was enough, to let the sorceress know he could do such things at will. Unless, of course, they failed. Maybe he only did it for his mother. Maybe because it seemed the right thing.

And maybe because he wished to test the limits of the Eyes. They lay before him on a mat, their luster subdued in the dim light. Tira and Malama sat across from him. Tira he would not involve in this; she had not the skills. But Malama—he did not like the idea of her entering the jewels with him, of following him into peril. He had warned her to remain in the background, to not act unless he asked. She might have listened to him.

Thisa and Zerana sat similarly in a room with his mother, in another world. *They are speaking from afar,* she reported. *We must assume with Olun.*

Come to us. He and Malama placed their hands on the gems, he on blue and gold, she on red and green. At once they stood in a room of shifting lights, another world, one that existed within the Eyes. They were not part of the gems here, only standing in their light. Sunas appeared and looked about.

Show me the way, he said to her.

A dim room. *This is where we would meet. Some of Acnaxula is here yet.*

A woman lay on the floor, staring upward but unseeing. Her form seemed almost transparent. That she sat in another room in the world they had left behind, he knew. Somewhere in the Rift, it seemed likely.

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Not completely blasted but without thought, able to eat and to live but little more.

Until this moment, Urtu had not been sure what might work, what course he would have to take. *We must be one with the Eyes, he said. You need not join me.*

Don't be a fool, responded Malama.

The link came surprisingly easy and at once they could be—everywhere at once. In a manner of speaking, a manner quite inadequate to truly describing it. He-she-they could see Acnaxula here and in the Rift and all the other places Olun had sent her.

That which was Acnaxula could never be completely separated from her, only scattered and entangled so it could not easily be retrieved. With the Eyes, he could even have found what he took from Barazes and returned it to him. A bit damaged, perhaps. He hoped what they brought back of this woman was not too warped.

This is like seeking through the worlds for prophecy, came Malama's voice. Or was it his voice? *But we need no longer stand in a place of power.*

Sunas was somewhere far behind them. He wondered how much of this she could see, standing in the world of the Eyes.

There. And there, floating in worlds of utter darkness. They pulled those parts of the stricken sorceress to them, restored them to her. Her eyes opened. *Where?*

Sunas's voice rose. *What Olun blasted from you has been restored. Now you must hide from her before she knows of it and returns.*

Yes, said Urtu. It was only his voice. Why? Oh, because the part of him that stood in that little world with Acnaxula and his mother spoke. *You must close yourself completely. Hide yourself, body and mind, and escape that place.*

I have friends who could help me. They too oppose Olun. But oh, they fear her!

Go now.

He could see the woman nod before she faded. There was no more to be done. *You go too, Mother.* She did, immediately.

Was that Sunas? I knew she used to visit Acnaxula before I had to, ah, deal with her. Olun had materialized. He and Malama at once

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removed themselves to that place within the gems, but not before the sorceress could follow.

So this is what it is like? No, of course not. This is only a reflection of the greater light. The light you two share. You didn't tell me about her, Urtu.

He has told me of you, said Malama.

I can imagine! I would destroy you where you stand, girl, not as I did with Acnaxula but truly blast everything away that makes you who you are. But you are protected here. And now Acnaxula has warded herself and will try to escape. Let her! Let her cross the wastelands if she will.

Could he blast Olun himself? Rid them of her forever? But no, the Eyes were not a tool for that, though he knew he could twist them to it. *We are utterly safe here but you are not,* he told her, his voice cold.

But you will not do anything. Oh, those deceitful girls! They had better watch their warding in the future!

And she was gone.

Let's talk to your mother before leaving.

They went to the place where he had conversed with Sunas, sensing that a little of the world within the Eyes traveled with him. Did it make moving to another world just a little easier? He could not be certain. Nor could he guess whether Malama and he were any safer.

Is all well? he asked. *Thisa and Zerana?*

They are unharmed and exceptionally grateful to you, my son.

Malama was as much a part of it as I. We were as one being.

Oh. I did think you looked a bit odd, what I could see of you. I shall tell them to thank Malama as well. Yet you two are not together?

She's going off to marry a king.

And Urtu is in love with his sister.

Oh, dear. I suppose that is a story for another time! The sisters told me Olun actually dangled their mother's life as bait for them, saying she was with her but not telling of what she had done to her.

There will be no more speech between them and Olun, I am sure.

Not if they value their souls. I think I'll go speak with them some more. Face to face! Goodbye to you both, whether separate, together, or even one person.

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An anxious Tira smiled to see them return. "It worked?"

"Perfectly," Malama told him. "Did you sense another, just before we left?" she asked Urtu.

"Sarad. A wizard of the Valley. I am not certain he serves Olun but he is involved with her somehow."

"Oh, so just scouting the situation, maybe. But he would know we used the Eyes now, wouldn't he?"

"But only that, not that we are attuned to them." He mulled over that thought for a moment. "Even one not attuned could do much with the Eyes."

"I've no doubt those are his own thoughts."

FIFTY-EIGHT

"THEY RECOGNIZE ME AS A shaman and ask me to remain with them. I am tempted, as I was to stay at the shrine of Wenatu."

"But?" asked Xido.

"But I must follow my god's call."

"I am curious to know who this god might be. That is unimportant now."

What was important was that Tira's new Diwalnu friends could get them to the sea by secret ways through the swamps. Their ancient ways of hunting and gathering being neither as practical nor profitable as once, many had taken to smuggling.

"We will need to move soon," Urtu said. "Things are rushing forward here." Not one marriage but two. Panaymana had been greatly surprised when they first told him of her and Anaku.

"I had just gotten used to the idea of you and Cunos," he had said, looking from one to the other, thoroughly puzzled by this shift.

"And me keeping him here so he could be a great captain leading your armies?"

"Well, yes, that was part of it. But I like you too, Cunos. And Xit."

But the emperor had no objections. Even he recognized the political advantages of the union. He also recognized the futility of opposing his sister.

Of course, Urtu had to move out of her chambers. Malama went to live in her mother's house, taking Isana with her. That she continued to visit him more nights than not, all carefully avoided noticing. That too would end. Neither was willing to say when.

The child Malama now carried might one day be successor to Panaymana, whoever its father was. Or one of those that were likely to follow once she was married to the king. Of this child, few knew yet but it would eventually let the world know of its presence.

Urtu could be on the other side of the world when it was born. The other side of the sea, anyway. He knew it was a wide sea but little more. Tira was certain only that they must pass west over it.

"Moyoa is plotting against our lives again," Xido announced.

"Maybe we should let him know we intend to leave," said Urtu. "He might even be eager to help us on our way."

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"No, I think I will kill him one of these days. I would not leave such a man to misadvise Panaymana."

"His wife can do that now." He felt neither of his companions appreciated the quip. "And without much opposition maybe, with Malama gone."

"Not yet," spoke Malama herself, coming into their chamber. "What, you didn't save any breakfast for me?"

"That's what happens when you sleep in your mother's house."

"Xido slept there too," she reminded him. "But I suppose we shouldn't allow you to. A message just arrived from Hohina." She held up the paper. "We disturbed the priestesses again, she says. And frightened them even more than the last time. Olun is scary, it seems."

"Any dead?"

She took a seat by his side, the paper held loosely in her hand. "She doesn't say so. Nor even driven mad."

"No harm then."

"She also wants to set a date for Anaku's wedding."

"You have one in mind?" The thought of the wedding didn't bother him, exactly. Still, he'd just as soon *not* think of it.

"I do but I believe I should wait for Panaymana to return before suggesting it. Hmm, so shall I write her."

"He should return tomorrow," said Tira. "Maybe even late today."

"Yes. Will you walk with me, Urtu?"

"Always." Xido looked like he wanted to make a rude comment but restrained himself. A couple minutes later they found themselves on the ramparts.

"It is too soon to see my brother's boats but I think I shall watch anyway." And so they did for a little while, the dark green-brown Gurang below them, boats passing both up and down stream. Crocodiles, too, floated. They looked all the same to Urtu though he had been told several varieties lived in the river. "Do you feel as torn apart about this as I, Urtu?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"I could blame you and your quest across the sea. But for that, might we have stayed together?"

"But for it we would never have met at all."

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"And but for who we are and what our mothers and fathers did and the fact that it rained last week?" Malama's laugh ended almost with a sob. "All things are linked together."

"And we more than most. That we can not deny."

"It's almost as if we loved each other."

"That seems unlikely."

"Oh, you idiot," she said, laughing. "You know very well we'll always love each other and I fully expect you to yearn for me constantly on those, um, shores of dawn and sunset."

"And you will think only of me when Anaku holds you in his arms."

"Well—maybe I won't go quite that far. You will speak to me when you have gone? You must teach me better how to do that before you leave."

"I promise I shall. I'll tell my mom too, also. She seems to like you for some reason. Hmm, someone is calling to me right now. Trying to call to me. My defenses are up solidly."

"Another woman you have on the side, I'll wager."

"There is only you. And Fetua. And of course Olun, and—"

"Shush, before I punch you. You know I will. So who is it really?"

"Sarad."

She was taken a little aback. The rescue of Acanaxula was yet fresh in her memory. "The wizard who watched us?"

"Who attempted to watch us. I'll ignore him."

"He is no danger to you, is he?"

"Not in the least." Which was a lie; any wizard can be dangerous if one slips up.

"Then find out what he wants. He may just intend to congratulate the bride!"

Urtu shrugged. He might as well. He was not even positive Sarad was an enemy. An active enemy.

Sarad.

Lord Urtu. I thank you for deigning to speak with me. There was not the slightest sarcasm evident in his voice.

It was the first time Urtu had seen him. He was a big man, still

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handsome though going to fat. The dark beard did not fool him; it was too uniform not to be dyed.

I ask you right now: do you serve Olun?

I serve myself, Lord Urtu. This I will not deny nor will I deny that I am but a middling sorcerer. I could not hope to match either you or Olun. Maybe not even that young woman who was with you.

She is with me now but I do not think I will let you speak to her.

That is probably wise. I am not to be trusted. Not that I have any reason to hurt her or anyone else. I am, as wizards go—well, rather sane.

And am I?

If you are like your father you are saner than any of us!

There was truth in that. So, why should I care about you, Sarad?

Because I am a good politician. I am a good tactician and a man who understands intrigue. I know those who now seek power in the valley of the Tez. I am a man who could be useful to you when you come to reclaim Hurasu's realm.

And you do not think Olun could make just as good use of you?

Olun, he said, is definitely not sane.

This man was amusing. Dangerous, surely, but amusing. Then we are in accord on at least one thing. But she still considers you an ally, does she not?

Well, um, yes. I suppose so.

Urtu nodded in a fashion he intended to imply both wisdom and approval. *Keep her thinking so. We can talk again, Lord Sarad.*

He broke the connection abruptly. Before he broke into laughter, he hoped.

Malama gave him a bemused look. "What did he want?"

"To offer his services to me." It was something to shake one's head over, so he did. "And he is apparently every bit as mad as Olun."

FIFTY-NINE

"WE WERE READY TO SHARE a chamber right then but everyone said we shouldn't. For being an emperor I get ordered around an awful lot."

"For once I wasn't the one doing it!" remarked Malana. "So I take it you approved of my choice?"

"Lohatini is perfect," he claimed. "And so am I, or so she says! She is very smart, you know."

"Yes, I noticed. And you also approve of me marrying Anaku?"

"You know I do, my sister. I approve it and will announce it at once, if you wish."

"The sooner the better, since I am with child." It being the first he had heard of it, there was a moment of astonishment. That quickly became joy and an enveloping hug. "Oh, careful, Panny. We don't want it to pop out right here. That's better. Perhaps we should wed at the same ceremony. It could be held at the House of Teninihitu. The nobles of the south would eat that up, wouldn't they?"

"That they would," said their mother. "And it would save money. You know I must be there too."

The emperor turned his gaze to the fourth there. "I feel sorry for you, Urtu. Maybe I shouldn't make you come along."

"I might be more useful keeping your house safe, your magnificence."

"Yes. So be it."

That was easy enough. If they didn't leave before Panaymana journeyed away again, they would while he was gone. Most of their plans were in place. They needed only the sword.

"Of course, Xit will come along," said the emperor. "He must make old Teninihitu jealous!"

And that presented no problem. Xido could fade away at any time and come back to the fort. He might even go back then and attend the wedding! Urtu knew the god did not intend to accompany them onto the sea but he had promised to help send them off.

But that sword. He approached the god about it that evening. He barely caught him before he was off to the house of Panahona.

"Could you not retrieve it?" he asked. "Reach around through the worlds?"

"Oh, I wouldn't need to reach, boy. I'm a god. I can simply walk

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through those worlds. But—and it is a very large but, I am afraid—if I brought the sword here by such paths, it would eventually be drawn back to where I found it. Even though it is in this world.”

Urtu considered this no more than a moment. “That makes sense. So we’ll have to unlock some doors, won’t we?”

“Yes, and let us hope there are no bindings nor alarms on any of them. It would seem unlikely here. These folk do not employ sorcerers for such things.”

“I could probably do it myself.”

“I would think so, though you haven’t practiced the art. I’ve done such things, well, more times than I can remember. I’ll be here to help, that I promise. Now let me get to my woman. I don’t intend to abandon her for a couple more weeks.”

And he would be abandoning his even sooner. They were abandoning each other. This night, or another soon, would be their last.

Malama, he called.

You again?

You told me to make you practice. So practice.

He spoke to her from within the Eyes. He knew they were safe there.

Will we always talk here?

You and I will always be safe here.

And if you dispose of the Eyes across the sea? I know that’s what you plan, Urtu.

It’s not really a plan. We just know we’re supposed to take them there. Leave them? Who knows? I do think, what with us being attuned, we could always enter the jewels, wherever they were, no matter how far away.

So we’d better hope Olun doesn’t manage to attune herself somehow. I’d hate to come here and find her waiting!

Malama was not bad at warding, in honesty. She had practiced speaking from afar long before Urtu had come along, after all.

Are you coming tonight?

Oh, so that’s what this is about! Yes, my Urtu. I don’t want to waste any of what we have left. She laughed. *Even if we are scandalizing poor Panaymana.*

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I haven't seen him give up his concubines.

We'll leave that to Lohatini. Hey, I should call your mother. I could practice outside these gems with her. I have to admit, I'm getting tired of the lighting here.

You're right. We'll have to go out and explore a bit. But now, why aren't you on the way here?

Silly, I've been walking this whole time and I'm right outside your door.

That took a surprising amount of skill. He'd probably fall over his own feet on the first step or two. *Then goodbye and hello.*

He had learned all about warding, keeping one individual out, letting another in, as a child in the Valley of Visions. Most wizards there did. But here no tradition of sorcery existed. The prophetesses of the Sacred Isle opened themselves to infinity only occasionally and kept a tight lid on it the rest of the time, never speaking from afar.

That might have been one reason Malama was resented. The things she knew were too different from that tradition.

Later, in the dark, he asked, "Do you think it could be harmful to the one who is inside you? Not the sex. I mean the Eyes." He was aware of them in the room. Surely Malama was as well.

"I am certain they had no effect when we bonded within the jewels, whether I conceived then or a few days earlier. There was no mind yet. If it happened now? I am not completely sure. It is still very early."

"Very well. I won't experiment on your baby."

But there were echoes of their bonding, of their attuning to those gems, every time the two made love. Would that happen if the Eyes were not close? It might all be within them now. They were the harmony to the tune the jewels sang.

He still heard that tune sometimes, as when he first felt the Eyes humming at Ahahuway. He never found himself able to repeat it, to remember how it went.

Did it sound faintly now, as he fell into sleep? Or was that only the creatures of the night, the measured breathing of Malama, the wind softly calling across the hills? Maybe that song had always been there.

SIXTY

"I BELIEVE YOUR SORCERESS ENTERED my dreams last night. She claims we are connected." She shook her head. "No, not exactly. I heard no words. No voices. But I am sure it was she who sent images of Woran to me. A great rainbow across the sky, sometimes standing as an arch, sometimes writhing as a serpent, a road I could follow to my own place of peace and power, my own time of dreaming. I understood this though I am not sure how."

Olun's name suggested a link to the Rainbow Snake but Urtu had assumed it was but a pose, no more than a way to bring followers to her. "Do you think she has studied the ways of the shamans?"

"Undoubtedly," said Tira. "And more deeply than I. This does not mean I believe anything she showed me."

"It does give us a new understanding of her. She must have studied after the time when she was with my father. She changed her name then too."

"And I mine only months ago. Anyone can do it."

"You really don't want there to be any connection, do you?"

"Not with her."

"Yet I am connected to Olun in many ways. We are all connected to each other."

"So some like to say." Tira was not going to give him this, was she?

"I am forever connected to Malama through the Eyes of the Wind. None can deny that."

"I might," spoke Xido, who had seemed to pay no attention to this point. "Forever is a might big word."

Urtu had laugh and admit it was so. "Infinite, isn't it?"

"That could be argued too. It is a measure of time and time is finite."

Tira gave the god a frown. "But doesn't it go on, well, forever?"

"Only in potential. But never mind any of that—it's the sort of thing my siblings like to debate until I have to leave my world to get away from them. I'm not going to let you chase me away from this one while I'm having fun."

"But you are going to leave," said Tira.

"Tomorrow, though I suspect you're not talking about that."

Tomorrow. Urtu looked down at the boats being prepared at the

docks. Tomorrow, everyone would go. The marriage plans had been worked out exceedingly quickly, as quickly as couriers could ride from north to south and south to north. Tomorrow, Malama and Panaymana, Panahona and, yes, even Xido, would board those boats and start the journey toward the House of Teninihitu. A week of travel? Maybe a little more. In two weeks, Malama could be traveling with her husband to Ahahuway.

And Panaymana would be headed back here but he would be gone, he and Tira and Isana.

"But you will return to your world? Your home?" asked Tira.

"Despite siblings?" added Urtu. "I say, are they crocodiles too?"

"They are not. Only I am so blessed. My sister Mawa is a great black spider who would mate with you and then suck all the juices from your body." He gave them sufficient time to let that sink in before saying, "Though in human form men find her quite attractive. Women too, I've heard."

"And she debates philosophy?"

"One must have hobbies. Especially when one lives, ah, forever. I'm sure to pop home sometime soon. I might wander elsewhere in this world for a while first or even some other worlds." He rose from his seat on the parapet. "I'd best go make a semblance of packing and get down to the boats. Remember, two nights. Two nights after I leave. That wouldn't count tonight."

"We've got it, Xit. We'll watch for you."

And make their own preparations. He must be sure Isana was ready. She was nervous now that it was coming down to the time of departure, and well she should be. The girl was going to jump off the edge of the world with them, perhaps never see her friends, her homeland, again.

There was little else to do but wait. Malama was gone already, really, though her boat had not yet departed. Their true farewell had been last night; this evening all would be formal, impersonal. The imperial family would feast with their great nobles—some of whom traveled south as well—and be away before dawn.

He would not watch them slide away from the docks, he decided. To take his mind off things, he spoke from afar for a while with his

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mother. Did she recognize the heaviness of his heart? He should not have bothered her, maybe. She seemed happy in Hirstel. He might never see her again, either.

Have you ever heard anything about Olun's connection with the cult of Wöran? he asked. He'd almost forgotten about that. *It probably came after the time she was with my father.*

Let me call Thisa or Zerana in, she answered. Both joined them.

She liked to talk about that, said Zerana.

Yes, she said the Rainbow Snake showed her the way when she was lost. Or some claptrap like that.

We didn't pay much attention to it.

So she actually was a believer of some sort. Is a believer. That changes my understanding of her.

But she never mentioned any of it to you, Sunas pointed out.

She knew her audience.

That could have been a dig at us, said Thisa.

Oh, you know we were gullible, her sister told her. *Maybe Mom was too.*

Have you heard from her?

His mother answered. *Not a word. It a long and difficult journey from Tul Sunac. More so when one is trying to hide. And now you begin a long journey.*

But not difficult, we hope, chimed in Zerana.

That I shall have to learn.

The one here had been long enough. Difficult?

Only now as it ended and another began.

SIXTY-ONE

EITHER XIDO OR URTU COULD reach around and unfasten. Or Xido could simply 'go' and open the doors to them, unfasten the cabinets. Urtu knew exactly where the sword was kept; Malama had told him, knowing well he intended to take it and leave. That had been no secret.

"Quickest and easiest for me to undo things from this side. Popping in and out of other worlds can be fatiguing, even for a fit god like me." The place seemed deserted, with Panaymana not holding court. One sentry drowsed at the door. "We don't want to kill him, do we?" asked Xido. "Though I know you can be nearly as coldblooded as your father."

He would not become his father, he told himself once again.

And of course the god was playing with him, testing him, maybe for some reason, maybe just for his own amusement. "I could clout him," he said. "To be sure, that might kill him too."

"That it might. You hit hard. Let's just sneak up and gag and tie him." He held up the necessary cloths and ropes. Obviously, it had been his plan from the start. With just a smidgen of fog pulled from somewhere to obscure them, they incapacitated the fellow quickly and left him trussed on the doorstep. "Remember," Xido told him before stepping in, "Lord Xit is in the south with the emperor so he can't be here. You wouldn't call Panaymana a liar, would you?" The guard shook his head with vigor.

The door was opened with ease. "Hardly worth the name 'latch,'" sniffed Xido. The sword wasn't locked up at all, leaning inside a cabinet.

The god looked around. "As long as you're at it, you might as well help yourself to a little of Panaymana's gold. I know you carry a fair amount already but you might find it useful."

He did carry gold. Much of it had come with him all the way from across the mountains. But there was plenty here and it wasn't locked up either. A bag or two wouldn't hurt Panaymana. He might be bothered enough about losing the sword he wouldn't even notice.

Then down to the docks, down the deserted main street, a lamp only here and there. Why bother to light it up when there was no business and the emperor was gone? Tira and Isana waited in the shadow of a warehouse, just above the ladders.

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Isana was sobbing. "I miss Malama."

"Do you want to go south to her?"

To his surprise, she became angry. "Don't be stupid! I'm going with you!"

"Are you now?" came a voice from the darkness. Moyoa stepped into the feeble light. There might be five or six men in the shadows behind him. "I don't mind you leaving at all but we have scores to settle first." He looked the group over. "In fact, my only score is with the Bazu baboon. The rest of you can go if you leave him to me."

Urtu drew the long shining blade of Hurasu. "Get Isana down to the boats," he ordered Tira.

Xido might have been amused. "You know I can handle them without that much difficulty. But if you want to help—" With that he leaped forward, skewering the nearest henchman with his bronze sword. Urtu was but a step behind and cut down his own man before the others reacted.

The two who survived a few seconds later reacted by running away, quickly. Perhaps Moyoa might have as well, given the opportunity. But Xido held him up by the scruff of his neck, looking him over. Xido being short and Moyoa fairly tall, his toes managed to touch ground at times, first one foot, then the other.

"No," Xido decided. "I won't kill you. I'll let my brothers and sisters have you." With that he took hold of an arm and leg, gave one swing, and sent him flying far out to splash into the Gurang. There were other splashes for a while, then only the normal sounds of night, the insects, the frogs, the bellowing of the bull crocodiles. It was quite a cacophony, really. Urtu had never noticed quite how loud nights on the river could be.

Xido grinned at him. "Who would suspect me? I am far south with the emperor."

Urtu wanted no more trouble, no more fighting, only to be on his way. He pulled shadow from another world, not a great mass of it, just enough to obscure them and the boat they now approached. A pair of Diwalnu sat patiently in it, not noticing them until they were almost upon them. It took a certain amount of low and soothing assurances

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from Tira to keep them from paddling their long dugout away right then, not waiting for the ghosts who had sneaked up on them.

Diwalnu, it seemed, prided themselves on being able to sneak up on others. Then out onto the dark river. There was little Urtu had needed to carry with him. Hurasu's book and Hurasu's sword. The four gems in their pouch at his waist, as ever. Yes, some gold.

Before dawn, canoe and passengers had disappeared beneath the tall, moss-draped trees of the swamp.

SIXTY-TWO

URTU WAS LIGHTER THAN TYPICAL of his people but not unusually so, especially those of the upper valley. He had something of the heavy brow of the valley folk. But he would stand out among the Diwalnu in a way Tira would not.

"It shouldn't matter," his friend told him. "There are many of mixed heritage, even among the tribes that dwell deep in the swamps. And pretty much everyone speaks the Molu trade speech you've been using, even if they have their own dialects they use at home."

That trade speech had grown into a more sophisticated Molu in the months among these people. He might never have reason to use it again. Except to Isana. She didn't fit in among the Diwalnu at all!

Xido was gone. Back to Panaymana? So he had said but it was understood he would not remain long. The god had made no promise they would ever see him again.

They were slowly making their way west through the mazes of the swamp, down to the mangrove country nearer the mouth of Gurang, where a smugglers' ship awaited. Here a pair of smaller dugouts would carry them; there, a flat-bottomed boat such as plied the river. They slept in villages rising on stilts above the still, dark water and found friendly greeting everywhere. In part, Tira's status as a shaman—everyone seemed to agree he was one—was the reason for this, but Urtu's gold didn't hurt.

Tira assured him these people would not think of robbing him but he slept with his sword anyway. He was overjoyed at having it again. They slept on one of the open bamboo platforms one night, the third perhaps or maybe the fourth, a smoky fire smoldering in a clay ring to keep away the insects. Urtu couldn't tell that it worked but maybe the buzzing clouds would be greater without it. Tira was close; the Eyes lay between her and Urtu.

Both at once? I've never heard of such a thing!

Olun? said Urtu.

Olun? said Tira.

Somehow I've gotten into both your dreams at once. It must be those Eyes. Hmm, and you're in each other's dream too, aren't you? Fascinating!

Why are you here this time?

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That must be Urtu. He's crabby. I can't really tell which of you is talking, it seems. Anyway, I was planning to send some, uh, images to our friend Hucan. I really do think we have a connection, young woman. So imagine my surprise when I could actually speak to you and got Urtu in the bargain.

I believe nothing you say to me or show to me.

Oh my, you can be crabby too! I'm really rather curious about what you are up to. Are you actually leaving that lovely country you've been in lately? It looked very nice.

So take a vacation.

Now that is Urtu, without question. Maybe I should. The Rift is incredibly dreary but it is my workplace, so to speak. You're planning to take those jewels somewhere, aren't you? You should know, Hucan, that they are also sacred to Woran. They are as primeval a force as the Rainbow Snake, and akin to her.

They are akin to many things in many places, came a new voice, deep, grave, resonant.

My god! He speaks!

Yes, my daughter, I speak. Do not be dissuaded from your mission. Carry the Jewels of the Elements across the sea, where they will be safe and you may find peace. A great golden face, grave and handsome and benign, beamed at them for a moment and faded.

Now that's a hard act to follow, said Olun, who also disappeared.

It was a week, maybe more, before they came to a secluded anchorage in the mangroves, near the maze-like mouth of the Gurang. There waited a ship. Not a great ship; in fact, Urtu might have been inclined to call it a boat.

Urtu?

It was Malama, being careful and calling from within the Eyes. It proved she could still do so at a great distance.

I am here.

And where is 'here,' if I might ask? I know you busted out of my brother's place. Couriers came with wild tales.

I am at the coast, hiding among the mangroves. We've boarded a smugglers' boat and sail away tonight.

Across the sea?

THE WALLS BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Only to Pupu now. I'll buy a better vessel there. Not necessarily a bigger vessel but one more seaworthy.

Pupu. Why that's in your valley, isn't it?

Only by a great stretch. It is at the mouth of the Tez, true, but further away from my home than the place I stand right now. He was not absolutely sure of that. It was certainly quite a distance and again he regretted not looking closer at maps. My father never ruled that far down the river. Not directly. And where is 'here' for you?

I'm still at the House of Teninihitu. I got married yesterday.

I envy Anaku.

Well you should! Is Isana with you? Is she all right?

She is both. She is anxious, of course, about her future. I plan to teach her to speak from afar better so she can bother you from time to time. What? Oh, she says you must say hi to everyone for her. Your husband included.

I'll say hi to Fetua for you.

That—I would not mind that. Will she understand how I do it?

You told me she wasn't stupid. She does know sorcerers speak from afar with each other and probably understands it as poorly as everyone else.

Don't we send pigeons back and forth? They fly so fast no one can see them.

But they have to watch out for the hawks other wizards send after them. Oh, Xit disappeared but it doesn't matter. Mother and Teninihitu are back together and she intends to live with him. At least some of the time; she does have to keep an eye on Panny, after all, since I'll be busy keeping an eye on Anaku! Who knows, they might even get married.

He would like that. For a while.

My thoughts exactly. Oh, here's my husband. What do you bet he wants to make love? Bye now!

The crew was hoisting a pair of trapezoidal, battened sails. "Cast off," called the Molu skipper. There was no anchor; a line had been run to the nearby mangrove. Urtu's first glimpse of the ocean was a great dark expanse beneath the stars. He was not disappointed.

SOME WORDS AFTER

As one might guess, we are not done with Urtu. His adventures and his mission will continue in the novel 'The Shores of Dawn and Sunset.' When will that appear? Impossible to say, impossible to promise. The novel you have just finished (I am hoping) was one I had no idea I was going to write. It rushed out of me more quickly than any other I've completed but that is no guarantee the sequel will come as easily. I hope you have enjoyed 'The Walls Between the Worlds' and will wish to read more.

On Tira: I've never written a transsexual character before or, at least, not a major character (If minor characters in other books were trans, it had no bearing on the stories nor was it mentioned in the texts. Only the author was aware of it.). Nor would I include one now for the sake of being 'inclusive' or anything of that sort (such as attracting an audience among LGBT readers). She fitted the story; it is as simple as that. There is a tradition in many societies, as far apart in space and time as the modern Philippines and the ancient Scythians, of transsexual individuals becoming shamans and priests, of having a special insight into the spiritual world. Be that as it may; I do not claim this for Tira even if she is a wizard and prophet. She is an individual, a character in my book, and that is all I intended.