

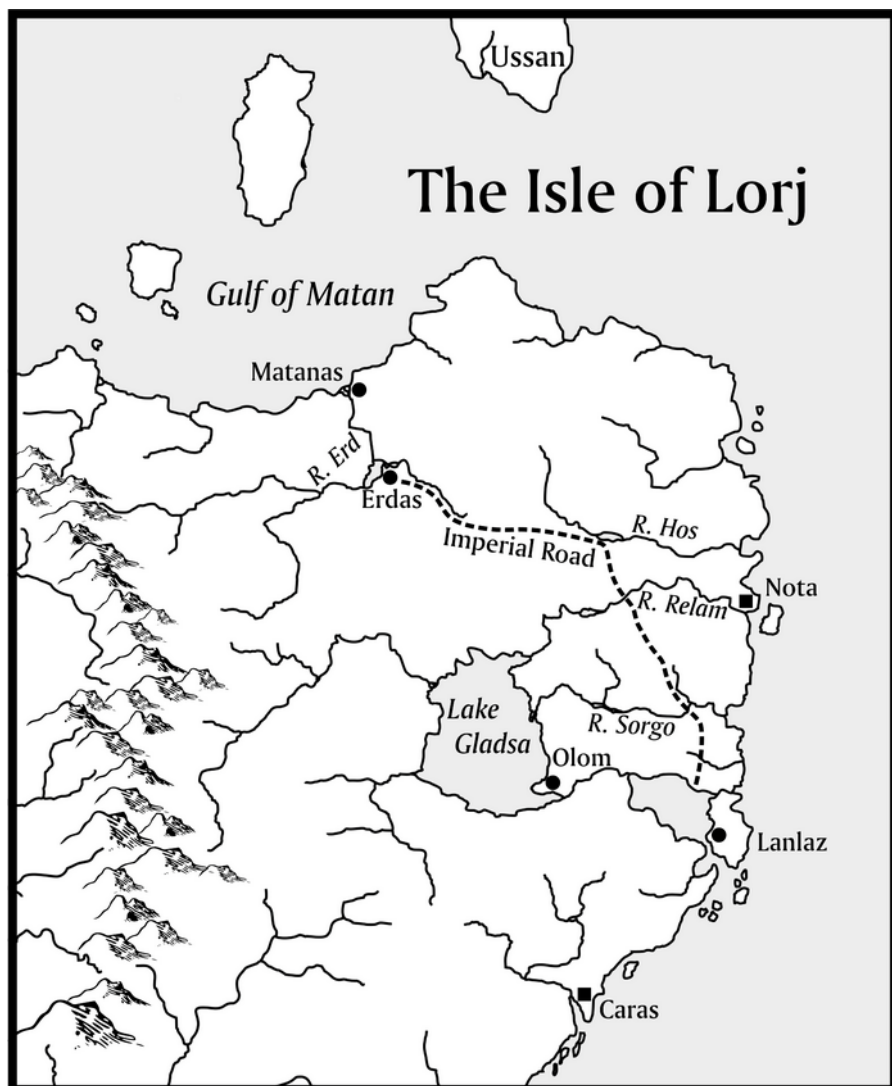
*The
Jewels
of the
Elements*

Stephen Brooke

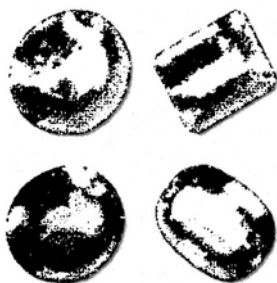
*The sequel to **The Eyes of the Wind***

**THE
JEWELS
OF THE
ELEMENTS**

I know little and with gods that is as it should be.



THE JEWELS OF THE ELEMENTS



Stephen Brooke

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The Jewels of the Elements

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The Jewels of the Elements is the second book of the Sajem Saga, following the events in *The Eyes of the Wind*.

ELEMENT I.

TAKING THE AIR

1.

“Qala is pregnant!”

That got Saj’s interest. “The admiral?”

“She thinks Xit is the father but can not be certain.” Marana returned her attention to the letter she held. “Corad writes that she spent the Yule at Sarowhem.”

Her husband raised one thick eyebrow. “Qala sitting down with your family is a bit hard to imagine.”

“I almost wish I had been there to see it. It is better to be here with you, though.” Marana and Saj smiled fondly and, perhaps, a bit foolishly on each other for a moment. “I should write back before we head south. To my family — I know Qala would never be likely to answer.”

Saj but shrugged. “It might be as easy to post from Lanlaz.” This was true; her father's contacts there would see her letters reached Sarowhem. Either way, it would be good to bid Matanas farewell and be on their way.

“Who knows if we shall have the time?” she asked. “If I write now we can depend on Nedos getting my letters back to Sharsh.”

Marana took up her stylus. A child? Even as the former pirate queen began a new life in a new land, she bore a new life within her. Surely the gods had chosen to bless her path! Marana would offer many prayers for both of them.

And perhaps the gods could also bless two others beginning new lives.

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~

Saj laid out a chart he had purchased at a shop near their lodging. The couple was to remain in Matanas for only a few more days and then take to the road, south to Lanlaz.

“I would like to turn aside to Nota,” he said, tracing the route with his finger. “It is one of the ducal cities.”

Marana peered at the scroll. She loved maps; a number were now gathering dust back in her bedroom at Sarowhem, the family estate. Nota lay a bit further up the eastern coast than their destination. It would not be too far out of the way, and Saj did like to be thorough.

“It looks like a good harbor,” she said.

“But little trade to use it,” answered her husband. He scratched at the sparse beard he had been growing since they started their journey. Muram men should not grow beards, felt Marana. Not most of them. She would let Saj know of this in time.

“Then why go?”

“It is good to know things,” was all Saj was willing to say. “I suppose a visit could wait.”

Marana only nodded. “I don’t care so much where we go, as long as we get out of this horrid town.”

Matanas was, as almost everyone had warned, no place for the newlyweds. Captain Nedos of the Muram navy, friend to Marana’s father, had given free passage on his galley when he patrolled the waters down to Lorj. Alas, he went no further than this port city.

At first sight, they were surprised at its size. It appeared nearly as large as Azer, the city from which they had departed, spread along the coast at the mouth of a wide, sluggish river. But there was hardly anything beyond those docks and warehouses, hardly any true town at all. They were told a larger town, Erdas, lay up the river a way. They would see it soon, as their road south ran that way.

Matanas was little more than a great marketplace, and part of what was sold there was men and women. As a Sharshite noblewoman,

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Marana found human bondage repugnant; her Muram husband was more accustomed to the practice but was himself disgusted by the slave markets.

“Chances are Qala brought slaves to these markets,” he remarked. “And undoubtedly the authorities winked at her pirates trading here.”

Slaves greatly outnumbered free men in northern Lorj, working the great estates along the River Erd. They were of many nations, but Sharshites most numerous, criminals, and debtors sold into bondage. Surely they hated all Mur — and the wealthy families who owned those estates most of all.

~

“I have kept my eyes open for crocodiles,” Marana told her husband. “None of any size.”

“No crocodiles in this river, Miss,” spoke the man at the steering oar, “nor anywhere in the north. Alligators only.”

Saj chuckled. “Were you hoping to catch a glimpse of Xido?”

“It could happen,” she replied. The square sail, of some course woven material — reeds, maybe? — flapped in the fickle breeze. It was fortunate that this river, the Erd, had so weak a current. Four slaves pulled on the oars from time to time.

Their olive-skinned steersman, the master of this little flat-bottomed river vessel, was of a different nationality than both slaves and passengers. Ildin, Saj had told his wife, the native people of Lorj. He had met such men in the ports of the north. Eight passengers the boat carried south, and bales and parcels of this and that.

And, tucked away on Marana’s own person, the four jewels of prophecy, the Eyes of the Wind. Xido, god-disguised-as-wizard, had made it clear he felt these were Saj’s responsibility, if only for a time. Now, the little god was gone, transformed into the great crocodile that was his other nature.

“I do not believe Xido thinks of us anymore but wanders mindlessly,” whispered Saj, “as the beast he has become. But all he told me

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makes me believe also that he will not do so forever, and will again remember being a man someday.”

“Or a god,” responded his wife.

The river opened to a great marshy lake the next day. On its far shore they could spy another town, a larger town. Indeed, there seemed to be structures all about its shores, some of them tall houses. “Are those manor houses?” Saj asked.

Another of the passengers, a trader of Mura, chuckled. “Nay, lad, the great landowners amuse themselves in yon mansions when they tire of their estates. Many should be in residence for the holiday.”

The Muram New Year, celebrated on the equinox, that would be. Marana’s New Year, the Sharshite Yule, had come as they voyaged south on a galley. There had been little comfort on a warship of the Muram navy, yet they minded that not at all. They had their cabin and they had each other. Most of all, they had their future before them, the future Saj had seen and promised.

“We’ll have you on the docks of Erdas before the noon,” promised their steersman.

2.

A swarm of ragged men descended on the travelers, touting one lodging house or another, striving each to speak more loudly than his fellows, at times elbowing each other out of the way. “They won’t actually fight,” their pilot informed them. “If one were to initiate such a thing, the others would never let him back onto the docks.” He gazed at the crowded wharves, chuckled, turned again to his passengers. “One establishment is pretty much as good as another. Or as bad! But you can stay on my boat no longer.”

Before ever they had disembarked from his galley, Captain Nedos had recommended a place, out on the southern side of the town. It was a good jumping-off place for the Imperial Road, he told them, and more suited to families than the flesh-pots nearer the docks. Marana and Saj found themselves standing before it, half an hour later, carrying all they owned.

It appeared more campground than inn. “I doubt Nedos has ever actually visited this place,” Marana whispered to her husband. “More likely my father was the source of his information.”

Saj nodded. The thegn’s agents did do business here. Lord Hurrum would have asked. A cacophony of voices greeted them as they entered its courtyard, in many languages. There were said to be more of the native people here in Erdas, the Ildin, as well as folk of Baxac speech, and visitors from many nations. “I hear this is commonplace in Lanlaz and the other cities to the south,” Saj had commented. “The Muram presence is not so strong there.”

All in all, Marana was pleased to hear that. She had the one Mur for whom she cared.

~

“It’s no more than a shed,” commented Saj, looking over their lodging. Neither minded; it seemed no problem to the young couple. The weather was dry and it was for but a night or two. They would soon — or so they hoped — be on the road with no roof at all to cover

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them. Inns did not rise along the Imperial Road as it passed through the empty lands between Erdas and the eastern coast.

A long shed it was, open on three sides, and shared with other travelers. Marana felt some certainty that it sometimes housed animals, as well. A quite similar one across the courtyard held horses. They must obtain horses.

Ah, she missed the great stallion Ri she had left with Magpie's followers! Surely they had passed over the mountains in search of a new home by now. Ri could run free there and leave many descendants in the wide valley of the Veltar.

Soon they would have their own new home, she and Saj. And many descendants too! Saj had seen them, so she knew this was so.

They chose a spot and settled in. Their bed was straw, but it seemed clean enough and pest-free. The air was not so, for great clouds of mosquitoes and biting flies rose from Lake Erd after dusk. "Be thankful the rainy season is not yet upon us," said a merchant who took the space to one side of them. "They are thicker then." He looked toward the thatched roof protecting them. "That would probably leak too."

"Saj can build much better housing than this," Marana replied. "He is a carpenter by trade." His wife had never seen anything he built but it did not hurt to let people know these things.

They must make a living in Lanlaz, after all.

~

The moon had not yet risen, but the cloudless night sky was thick with stars. Saj could glimpse them, blazing, beyond the ragged roof edge. They were beautiful, no doubt, but all that was on the Mur's mind at the moment was disentangling his limbs from his wife's so he might go relieve himself.

He sensed movement, somewhere behind him. Maybe their neighbor needed to visit the latrine as well. Or their other neighbor, a dark man who had spoken not a word to them. He craned his head,

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trying not to disturb the sleeping Marana, and saw the glint of starlight on a blade.

Saj was no fighting man; not really. He had been forced to act as one at times, over the past year, even picked up a modest proficiency with a sword, but it was in no way his calling. Nor did he now carry any weapon other than a serviceable knife.

The intruder was stooping, searching. For their bags, Saj had little doubt. A thief, then. It seemed he must awaken his wife after all.

“Thief!” he cried out, leaping to his feet. “Thief! Help!” He had his own blade in his hand at once, but did not expect to need it.

No, the man bolted. There was no direction for him to go; the solid wall of the shed stood behind him, and men and women had been aroused all around the courtyard. He was tackled as he ran for it, muscled to the presence of their landlady by a pair of burly grooms.

“A thief in my establishment!” She looked the man over. “Baxac?”

Now Saj and Marana could see him clearly, they knew this no man of the Baxac people, as were Munu’s priests. “Tesran,” murmured Marana. Saj nodded an agreement.

“I like not being awakened in the middle of the night,” the woman continued, wrapping her threadbare caftan more tightly about her, “and it’s too much trouble to call the city guards on you.” She turned to the grooms. “Take him out behind the horse shed and teach him a lesson. A good one so he knows not to come back.”

~

Past a great cape they had sailed and then a large mountainous island Captain Nedos named Ussan, and into the broad Gulf of Matan. Maps told them that gulf was part of the Lesser Sea. Never had Marana expected to look upon it in real life, rather than on a paper chart, to be rolled up, put away on some shelf. Yet there it had lain before her — before *them* — all blue and glittering in the sun.

Now a much smaller body of water lay before them, one just as

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exotic, just as unexpected. Lake Erd was filled with torch-lit pleasure barges, like a night of fireflies, in celebration of the Muram New Year.

The spring equinox was assuredly celebrated back in Sharsh. But it was not so hot at this time of year! There was much sun here, and the couple had been told it was the dry season in Lorj. “Just wait a couple months,” their landlady warned. “The monsoon rains will bring deluges near every afternoon. More so where you two are headed!”

Tomorrow they would join a caravan headed south and east, toward the coast, toward Lanlaz and the other Muram enclaves there. They could have set out on their own, had they chosen; their way, the Imperial Road, was safe, patrolled regularly. There was, in fact, little need even for this. Lorj was at peace.

But Saj had not wished to put his wife, himself, at risk — even were that risk slight. Nor did he wish to risk the stones Marana carried. He felt the presence of those jewels, always, at the edge of his consciousness. Saj was a man born with the sight. He could use the stones to help him glimpse what might be.

He preferred not to. Not for now. Marana, they bothered not the least.

When the pair had noted a saffron-robed priest among those who crowded the docks of Erdas, they were even less inclined to set off unaccompanied. The followers of Munu desired the Eyes and knew they carried them.

The attempted theft — surely of the jewels — had made the decision final.

3.

“We have funds enough for horses to carry us on our way,” reported Saj. Marana was inclined to leave money matters to her husband. A noble girl learned other skills — such as choosing those horses. Saj had no eye for such things. “No need for anything more. We can carry all we own upon our persons.”

Choose those horses she had, and now, astride them, they let the warehouses and shops of Erdas fade into the lake mists behind them.

Southeasterly led the Imperial Road, first in parallel to a tributary of the Erd. They would cross higher land as they trended toward Lanlaz; this they knew, though details were vague as to how high it might be. “But little hills,” scoffed one traveler, when someone spoke of a steep climb. One man’s hills, knew Saj, might be another’s mountains. But the mountains, the high mountains, of Lorj lay behind them, to the west.

Whatever the height of those hills might be, on the far side would be found Lanlaz, their likely new home. Some thirty men and women, and again that number in horses, traveled toward the city.

“Should you choose to turn aside to Nota, you will be on your own,” spoke one of their companions on the road. “None of us are heading that way.”

“There will be a couple of places you might do so, once we are over the hills,” added another. Traders, most of these, it seemed. Some Mura, some Sharshite, some hard to be certain of — but all spoke Muram, the universal trade tongue. All their goods were loaded on pack horses. Saj was not long puzzled as to why.

Much of this country was sand and did not seem very fertile, being clothed in scrub and brush, and the road was no more than a cleared path through the bush. Wagons might readily become stuck in the loose sand. “It will firm up some in the rainy season,” felt one traveler, as they sat in camp the first night out. There were nods of agreement from around the fire. Some had made this journey before.

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“Never easy though.” There was agreement to this too.

“Is it so everywhere in Lorj?” asked Marana.

“Here in the northeast,” she was told. “Don’t know the rest of the isle.”

A tall Sharshite trader spat and spoke. “And we won’t, anytime soon. The Mura may claim all of Lorj but they don’t really hold most of it.”

“Aye,” agreed the first speaker. “Head into the interior and you’re unlikely to ever return.”

~

“This is the highest ground we’ll be crossing. The hills be even lower, further south, but this is a convenient path.” Their road had been rising, steadily and not at all steeply. The talkative Muram merchant beside them went on. “We’ll reach the lake soon. There’s an army post there.”

Muram patrols had passed them more than once, going both directions, mounted lancers in gleaming cuirasses. Their presence certainly made the young couple feel more safe on this road, though not so long ago they would have seen such men as enemies. These soldiers did no more than glance at them as they passed.

“These are not even as tall as the hills behind Sarowhem,” Saj said to his wife.

She nodded, seemingly distracted. “I thank Esefa for the day you came over them to our gate.”

Saj laughed. “For a time, I was inclined to curse it!”

Marana joined him. “As was my father. You brought him a saddle and left with his daughter.”

A pretty good deal, all in all, thought Saj, despite a year of being on the run with a powerful noble after his skin. No, two powerful nobles — couldn’t forget Marana’s jilted groom. No running now. Though he could not glimpse his own future, he knew it to be good.

The lake their companion had mentioned lay well beyond the

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highest ridge they crossed, where the land rolled away to the east. It was little different on this side. If anything, the soil seemed even worse, the vegetation more scrubby, though there had been stands of tall pines in the high hills. Saj and Marana gazed down into its shallow valley, before continuing the descent. A good-sized stream — it could safely be styled a river — flowed down through the hills from the northwest, and out again, easterly toward the sea.

“It is here you would take the road toward Nota,” they were told. “The best place to do it, anyway. Our way now turns south.”

Saj remained undecided about this. “I have no fear of traveling alone,” said Marana. “We have done it often enough.”

Not so, he said only to himself. The pair had relied much on the presence of Xit. Xido, he should say. Perhaps Marana had never realized just how much, but Saj knew. He felt decidedly inadequate to the task of protecting her on his own.

Ha, she would be more likely to protect him. He must decide. *They* must decide, yes, but it was up to Saj to say no. It had been his idea to turn aside, after all.

There was rock here, soft limestone the water had cut through in its passage. It was good to know something lay beneath all that sand. Saj had begun to have his doubts. Low cliffs stood at the east end of the small lake, the river disappearing between them. Its water undoubtedly flowed swiftly beyond, perhaps rapids or even falls.

“I would guess this river is not navigable,” Saj remarked.

“Not up here, boy,” a trader informed him. “Or I should say it’s not practical. I’ve heard of canoes riding it down.”

The Mur nodded. “But a most excellent spot for a water wheel,” he commented. “And maybe a saw mill.”

Probably no one but Marana was listening. It was the kind of thing she was used to hearing from him.

~

There were no mills here, only an army camp with a low palisade,

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and a tiny village to service it — a store, some shacks, what was undoubtedly a bar and brothel. Several open sheds for travelers such as they stood a bit apart.

Some of their fellows would go only this far, sell or deliver their goods here and head back toward Erdas. Other travelers had come up from the south, some of them continuing forward, some going back. None were bound for Nota.

“That is a ducal city, right?” asked Marana. “Administered by a military governor.”

“A *dux*. It’s not the place for us, I know,” Saj said.

“But you were interested in seeing what was there. I understand that.”

Further south lay two other such ducal cities, Caras and then Tinaz at the far southern tip of the island. That was much further than they intended to go, though it was a major port for ships from the southern isles. But then, so was Lanlaz.

They could end up in any of them, supposed Saj, and any city in this land would do. Anywhere but Matanas!

Marana and Saj settled into one of the shelters, one not nearly so clean as that in which they had slept at Erdas. Put up by soldiers, guessed Saj, but not maintained by them. It would be for travelers to do as much or as little as they wished toward housekeeping.

Saj could not help remembering the last night spent in such a shelter. Who knew they carried the Eyes? That question kept the young Mur from slumber, going around and around in his head as he lay in the dark. The priests of Munu did, of course, and their temple was somewhere on Lorj. One of their temples. So they had stated. Where exactly, they had not.

A handful of trusted individuals were in on the secret, Qala, Marana’s relatives. And there was the Cana. She was Tesran, as was the man who had attempted to steal them back in Erdas. But surely Lura

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would not have sent him! She had freely given Saj the Fire Stone, agreeing with Xido that the Eyes should be reunited.

Moreover, the Cana was preparing to move the people she ruled, an Ildin people, across the mountains to a safer haven. Saj himself had warned her to do so, having dreamed a prophecy on their sacred mountain. No, she would not be involved.

Perhaps some wizard had sensed them and coveted them. Why, that Tesran might himself have been some sort of sorcerer. It was said fallen Tesra had been a city of wizardry.

There was no answer to any of it. There was a garrison near at hand and Marana slept; he should stop worrying and do the same. In time, he did.

4.

A young man, olive-skinned, dark-eyed, leaned on a staff and regarded them. Ildin, thought Saj. They were rarely so tall.

“I am Orro. I came in late last night.” Both face and voice were without expression. “I am told you think to travel to Nota.”

“We considered it, sir,” responded Marana. “It seems the better choice to continue south to Lanlaz.”

The stranger nodded slowly, as if this were some weighty statement he must consider. “Perhaps so, my lady.”

She was both surprised and a tad flattered that this Ildin traveler would recognize her as a noblewoman. But Marana remained cautious.

And Saj seemed thoroughly suspicious. “We are Marana and Saj,” he announced. “You are a merchant?” The question, perhaps, sounded a little too much like a challenge.

“No trader am I,” came the man’s response, the tone still even, revealing nothing, “but a priest. I travel to Nota to serve my people there.”

Marana thought this stranger in a nondescript short tunic and broad-brimmed straw hat looked like no priest she had ever seen. But she knew nothing of the Ildin or their gods. This she had to admit.

“I would welcome your company on my journey down the Hos,” continued the priest.

“The Hos?” asked Saj.

The tall man gestured toward the outflow at the end of the lake. “The river. The path parallels it, part of the way.”

The Mur gazed eastward. He is considering it, thought Marana. “If you truly wish to visit the place, my husband, I am willing,” she told him.

Saj nodded slowly. “But Lanlaz remains our destination.”

“You might want to continue to Lanlaz by water, once you reach Nota,” spoke up one of the nearby merchants, busy packing his horses

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for the journey onward. "Boats travel back and forth with some frequency."

Another of the travelers ambled over. "This is so. You would do better to sell your horses here."

"It would be good to see the coast between the two towns," said Saj. He turned to Marana. "Let's do it."

She laughed. "You are rarely so impetuous!"

"I can't always leave that to you."

~

They got a decent price for their two horses, better than Marana had expected. Not what they had paid, of course. The money might be handy when they need take passage at Nota.

By mid-morn they were keeping up with the long stride of Orro, traveling east and some south, more or less following the course of the Hos. The river lay hidden most of the way, flowing somewhere to their left. "Few use this path," the priest informed them. "Mostly soldiers."

It was a narrow sand road winding through an empty land. Much of the rolling terrain was covered with clumps of some sort of small palm, with spindly pines rising up here and there.

"Further down," continued their guide, "we turn south and cross a ridge to the valley of the Relam. That river empties into the bay at Nota."

Marana had seen maps. The courses of Hos and Relam came quite close together at one point. "Our former companions will be crossing the River Relam too, won't they? But further up."

"Indeed so, my lady. It will not be necessary for us to cross; we follow its flow down to the coast."

He took off his broad-brimmed hat to wipe his brow with a rag, uncovering a close-fitting black cap. Now that is the sort of thing a priest might wear, thought Marana. Or maybe many Ildin wore such caps. There was much to learn in this new land.

"That is one of the rivers that flows from Lake Gladsa," remarked

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Saj. He, too, had seen maps, knew of the great lake that lay in the bowl of central Lorj, between the mountains of the west and the coastal hills of the east.

“One of three,” replied the Ildin priest. “Gladsa is a very great lake, the largest of which I have ever heard.” He gazed southward a moment, his face as expressionless as ever. “I dwelt for a time on its shores.”

“You live there no longer?” asked Marana.

Did his mouth tighten just a little? “My order dwells in the mountains,” he said, turning back to the couple. “And we must journey on in the opposite direction.”

~

On the second day they did veer away from the Hos, climbing into a line of low hills — hardly hills at all by the standards of Marana and Saj. Here and there, the limestone underlying this countryside jutted up from the sand.

“It is downhill from here,” announced Orro, halting. “Down to the river and then east to the sea. This would be as good a spot as any to make camp.” There was a cleared space beside the road, showing signs of recent encampments — cold ashes in a crude fire-pit, scraps of food waste and other trash scattered about.

It seemed early to Saj, only mid-afternoon. He peered south, toward the supposed flow of the Relam. All he could really tell was that the land did slope some that way. “Couldn’t we go on for a couple hours more?” he asked.

“I walk no further today,” was all the priest had to say. As ever, there was little indication of what his thoughts might be.

Sam shrugged and smiled at his wife. “I guess it *is* as good a place to stop as any.”

“I wish there were more travelers on this road,” she replied. The last they had seen was a small troop of lancers, north-bound, that morning. Possibly those patrolling soldiers camped here.

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Orro gave her a thin smile. "I would expect none."

There seemed to be no wood anywhere near so the travelers made do with a cold supper. The soldiers would have long since picked up any fallen branches for miles around, Saj decided. Still, a fire might have discouraged some of the biting insects. Were they always this thick in Lorj?

Fortunately, a bit of breeze came up and lessened the clouds of pests as day slipped into the dark. Maybe camping at the top of the hills was a good idea. Orro knew what he was doing. He should trust the Ildin man's knowledge of his homeland.

Saj was not sure when he woke, nor why. No matter. He could roll over, get himself settled, get back to sleep. But he found he could not move his limbs, arms and legs both feeling — bound in some way. He could see no ropes but it was a dark night, a night of the new moon. Little of anything could be seen. He struggled again against the invisible bonds, to no avail.

He could move his head, at least. Saj turned to stare into Marana's eyes. She too was immobilized. Above them stood the Ildin priest, clad only in his skullcap and a loincloth, fingering a small dagger.

5.

“I shall kill you both, of course,” Orro told them. “As a priest of Asak it is expected of me.” His eyes slowly moved from the one to the other, the man savoring his power over them. “Had I the time I would torture you as long as possible. The Lord of Death asks us to make the extra effort, when we can.”

He knelt and began to methodically search their bags. “I have sensed the Jewels’ presence these days, known one of you carried them, but could not tell exactly where they might be concealed.”

“You are a wizard?” asked the Mur. It came out as a raspy whisper.

“Some might name me so, but before all I am a priest, the servant of Asak. Ah!”

He must have found the Eyes, thought Saj. He would have thought of more things had not a cheerful voice called from somewhere behind Orro.

“Ho there, young man. I do not think those belong to you.”

Saj could see a smallish man, an old man, leaning on a staff. He was wrapped in a dark cloak or maybe it only looked dark because of the night.

The Ildin turned to face him. “Begone old man,” he snarled. “This is no concern of yours.” A scornful laugh. “Or do you wish to go to Asak as well?”

“Those jewels were a concern of mine long before you were born, priest,” answered the newcomer. “And, I suspect, they will be after you die.” He slipped the cloak from his wiry body and raised his staff. Hair and beard were white and curling and neatly trimmed short, Saj could see, and his features — the dark skin, the heavy brow. He had seen such features before.

“A Tesran?” murmured Marana.

Saj only nodded. Was this man after the Eyes as well?

Orro took a step forward. With a sharp drawing in of his breath he stepped back again. Someone — something — loomed behind the old

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man. Saj could only tell it was exceedingly tall and somewhat man-shaped.

Their visitor held up a hand for it to halt. "I'll tend to this, Cory. Hmm, first those bonds." A casual wave of his hand and Saj felt his arms and legs suddenly freed. "And now, introductions. I am named Im."

"The great wizard? Impossible!" laughed Orro. "Dead centuries ago."

Im — if that was who he truly was — laughed as well. "You are free to believe what you will, lackey of Asak. But you should believe that I can best you in any contest of wizardry."

Saj sat up and grabbed the poke containing the jewels, lying where Orro had dropped it. He did not like being in such close proximity to them but best he keep them safe.

"And I'm not bad with a blade either," continued the wizard, eyeing Orro's knife. He said a few words, held out his hand, and a long sword appeared in it. "Drat, didn't want one that big," Im grumbled.

The priest of Asak answered with a wave of his own hands. Saj could actually see the magical fetters he tried to fix on his opponent, glowing a sickly green. It must be the influence of the mystic stones he held. This was why he liked to keep his distance from them!

The wizard swept the bonds away as they were nothing. "Cobwebs," he chuckled. He tipped his head and peered at Orro. "Oh, so you're going to call on your god."

Saj could see a glow growing around the priest, the same ghastly green hue as before. Im glanced toward the Mur and held out his hand. Saj knew what he wanted. But should he? Could he trust this Tesran wizard?

Yes. He was not sure why he chose his course but Saj tossed the Eyes to Im. At once, a glow sprang up around the wizard as well, a

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glow of four colors, the colors of the jewels, red and gold and green and blue.

The men advanced on each other, blades in hand, auras leaping above and around them. Saj could see the wizard's companion move forward now. Not a man, that was for certain. Its skin shone, reflecting the magical lights, so he was not sure of its true color. He *was* sure it stood a head taller than any man he had ever seen.

Orro made a sudden cast of his dagger, cursing when it was deflected by Im's aura. Im smiled and tossed his own sword aside. It disappeared a moment later, pulled back to whatever realm he had drawn it from. A dome of sorts was forming about the dueling pair, a dome of light and fire, the jewels' colors contesting with the cold pale green that must come from Asak's realm.

Now two great — creatures, shadowy, unreal, began to form above the two combatants. That of Orro was manlike but misshapen, horned and clawed and terrible. Saj suspected maybe it was the form of Asak himself. Or *a* form. Gods had forms, true forms, he knew. He had spent time around one.

The shifting colors above Im made it difficult to tell just what it was. The form was that of a man, though, that was certain, a man of white light, and a rainbow-hued sword in his hand. No, no, not a man. A woman. Wasn't it? Saj had to turn his dazzled eyes away.

When he looked back again, yes, it was a young girl he beheld. Had she something to do with the Eyes or was she of Im's making? A goddess? It mattered not right then.

Orro's demon held a sword too, a black sword with eddies of poisonous green light creeping up and down its blade. Both avatars seemed to be growing more solid, while the men below them were locked into some sort of trance. Saj realized all at once that these were manifestations of an invisible struggle going on between the two sorcerers.

Could Marana see all he did? Saj had been born with the second

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sight. He was of wizard blood. Perhaps his natural talents were modest but that did not matter. He never intended to pursue the study of magic. A gift of foreseeing was quite enough.

Thrusts and parries, feeling out the opponent. Saj suspected Orro was doing most of the feeling out. The elderly wizard Im seemed rather sure of himself. Slabs of spark were thrown up when the swords met, crashing with the sound of thunderclaps. Then a great wide swing of the black sword. Rather than ducking away from the blade, the woman brought her own weapon up and against it with all her own force. Saj was blinded for a moment. Deafened, too.

When he saw again, the demon-form, the manifestation of Orro or Asak or both, was gone, and the priest himself lay inert on the sand. The aura around Im was slowly subsiding. "Here, you'd best keep these," he called, tossing the little bag of jewels back to Saj. The Mur chose to hand them over to Marana at once. He would prefer not hold them more than necessary.

Im knelt beside his foe's body, listening to his heart. Saj could see the wizard's large companion better now but still had no idea what it was. It seemed to be reddish. "No, not dead," announced Im. "Had I not chosen to strike at only the sword he probably would be."

"You should slay him anyway," came an incredibly deep rumble from the red creature. "Safer."

"I think not. Better he return to his fellows in the high mountains and inform them who guards the jewels now."

The thing's chuckle sounded like distant thunder. "If there are any more decent wizards among them, they already know."

6.

“I felt the Jewels of the Elements had been reunited and came to see what was going on.” Im glanced toward the unconscious priest. “Best be on your way before he wakes up.” He considered this statement and added, “Our way. I should accompany you.”

Marana looked at the being standing silently, stolidly, behind the old sorcerer. “Him too?”

“It. Not him. And yes, Cory goes everywhere I do. Whether we like it or not.”

“There is a geas,” murmured the creature.

“Which we needn’t get into right now. More important matters! But allow me to introduce my companion.” Im turned to the thing. By the faintest of light, heralding the sunrise, they could see it was of faded brick-red color, with a glossy hard skin of some sort. There was no sign of musculature nor any other features. Its face — or the place one would normally have a face — was a blank.

“Qu’orthseth, I knew it as when first we met,” said the wizard. “Better known as Cahorsus these days, but I’ve called it Cory for centuries.”

Cory slowly nodded. “One name is as good as another. And none is my true name.”

“That would be its name in the world of its, um, birth. Or budding, more properly. Cory is a demon, of course, or what most would call a demon. Ready to go?”

“To Nota?” asked Saj.

“Better to cut back to the Imperial Road and on to Lanlaz, I think,” answered Im. “It’s safer.”

As they gathered their meager belongings, Marana asked, “You expect more attacks, sir?”

Im chuckled. “I would be most surprised if there weren’t any. This priest of Asak surprised me. I didn’t know his order was aware of the stones.”

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“The priests of Munu still want the Eyes too,” spoke Saj.

“And they are the least of your worries, young fellow,” Im replied. “The greatest threat comes from the followers of the latest Wizard-Lord.”

“Tesrans?” hazarded Marana. She remembered the would-be thief in Erdas.

“Probably not. But they will look like Tesrans.” Im chuckled. “As do I.”

Best not to question him about that, Marana felt. She did say, “We met a Tesran sorceress on our travels. Her name was Lura.”

Im sighed. “The great-granddaughter of my old friend Na. Na and I came to this world together, nearly a millennium ago. Lura dwells still by her sacred mountain?”

Saj seemed to hesitate before saying, “The Cana and her people are preparing to leave that refuge. I — I saw disaster if they remained.”

“Oh, yes, you’re a seer. I knew that, didn’t I?” Im seemed to be addressing the red beast, his voice a tad querulous.

“Yes, little master. One or another of your friendly gods told you.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Without further word, Im set off down the sandy road into the valley of the Relam, Cory following. The couple hurried after them, leaving the still-unconscious Orro where he lay.

“Not Xido?” asked Saj as he caught up.

“No. You spent some time with Xido, right?”

Saj nodded in reply. “He’s a crocodile now,” added Marana. “A very large one.”

“Hmm. His other nature. He’ll change back eventually. All his pantheon are like that.” Im shrugged. “So it is. But I learned of this from Banat, an Ildin deity. He is a, um, guardian of the Eyes you carry. Or interested in their safety, anyway.”

They descended for a time in silence before the wizard again spoke. “It was Xido who brought me to this world, me and the sorceress Na, from the hidden city of Hirstel. A city that no longer exists.”

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“Save as ruins,” said the demon.

“A city is its people,” Im stated, “not what they build.” He gazed at the road ahead. “We should be at the river well before dark.”

~

Neither wide nor swift was the River Relam — but wide enough and swift enough to be an obstacle. “It would be best to cross now and camp on the other side tonight,” felt Im. “We are below the last ford here. Can you two swim?”

“I grew up swimming in the Chas,” responded Marana. “This little bit of water won’t be a problem.”

Saj attempted to tamp down the anxiety that was rising in him. “There aren’t any crocodiles, are there?”

“None this far north,” Marana reminded him. “And alligators don’t dwell in this sort of river, do they?”

“I suppose not. But I’m not much of swimmer,” he admitted. The swift cold streams of Muradon had been no place to learn. He looked again across the Relam. “I might be able to make it.”

Cory let out a subterranean chuckle. “You sound doubtful, boy.”

Saj *was* doubtful. He had swam, when it became necessary, in the shallow lake of the hidden pirate base, but this flow was different.

“Can you carry us both?” asked Im, apparently addressing the demon.

“If you wish,” came the response. “Best it be separate trips. I am an old and tired demon.”

Im only snorted at this. “The boy first. Stay even with the girl as she swims and make certain she has no trouble.”

Carry me? How? wondered Saj, as Marana handed him her pack and slipped into the foam-flecked water. The river must flow more rapidly a little further up, he mused. Two thick red arms encircled him and he was lifted from the ground.

Lifted somewhat higher than he had expected. Cory was floating a couple feet up in the air. With no apparent means of motion, both

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moved out over the Relam, paralleling the paddling Marana. After his first gasp of surprise, Saj relaxed. He had seen stranger things. He also felt, for no logical reason, he could trust the wizard Im.

This demon, he was not so sure about, but it seemed to follow the old man's orders. The water was surprisingly clear beneath them, brownish-tinged but transparent, over a sand bottom. Small fish nosed about here and there, and occasionally a larger — but not really large — slender, needle-nosed form appeared and disappeared. They were nearly halfway across already.

What was that, snaking their direction? It looked all too much like the sea serpent Xido had slain back at Azer, the reason he had taken to his crocodile form. This one was not half so large but it was clearly intent on attacking the woman below them. "Look!" cried out Saj. "Stop it!"

The red demon hesitated. Perhaps it needed direction from its master — if Im was its master. Their relationship seemed nebulous. "I must drop you," it rumbled.

"Do it! Save her!" A moment later he splashed into the water. Cooler than he had expected, thought Saj, as he sank below the surface and popped back up. Two packs were going to make it even more difficult to swim. He would do well to just tread water for a minute or two.

And the current was carrying him further and further from the churning water where demon battled serpent.

7.

Marana had no idea why two bodies suddenly plunged into the river beside her, first Saj and then the creature that had been conveying her husband across the stream.

She stopped, floated upright. Where was Saj? There, bobbing down the flow and apparently making his way toward the shore. She should do the same. She would be more use there.

From the surface, no more than ten feet from her, burst Cory, wrapped in the coils of a creature twice its length. Mottled green and gray it was, and Marana recognized it at once as being the same as the bakawan that had once been sent to slay Saj. Its great paddle-like fins thrashed as the demon rose from the water with it, massive hands wrapped about the sea-serpent's throat.

Marana watched no more, choosing to swim as swiftly as able to shore. When she pulled herself out of the water, there was no sign of the struggle to be seen. Im stood on the far side, scanning the river even as she was.

Now and again, a small turbulence appeared on the water's surface. A sign of something happening below or just part of the natural flow? Marana didn't know. It was minutes — but not too many — when she saw Cory striding up out of the shallow water, dragging the carcass of the bakawan behind it. Im immediately pointed across the river to her.

The demon nodded its huge featureless head, lifted the wizard and floated across River Relam with him, depositing him beside the young woman. The body of their attacker lay halfway in the water on the far side. Already, crows were landing nearby to check out a possible meal. "Who might send the bakawan against you?" asked Im, at once.

"It must have been sent by the priests of Munu," she told him. "It is much like the one Xit, um, Xido, battled." But smaller. Maybe a full-sized one couldn't come up this shallow river. "We must go find Saj."

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“Yes. Of course.” The sorcerer turned his eyes down the river. “Let us hope —” He said no more but his implication was obvious.

Marana shook her head, smiling. “No, Saj did not drown today. He has seen our many children that are to come.”

“Ah. That is a good thing to be certain of!”

~

A weary Saj pulled himself from the water, clinging to the roots of a tree thrusting out from the undercut sand bank. Saj did not recognize what sort of tree it was, but he briefly wondered. Wood was important to him and to his occupation, and he should know what grew in this land. Both packs were safe. The Eyes of the Wind were safe.

Or what had Im named them? The Jewels of the Elements? One name sounded as good as the other. He had felt their closeness as he had carried Marana’s pack, as he had floated down the Relam holding onto it. Those stones were the one thing he must not lose.

No, that wasn’t right. Marana was the one thing he must not lose. The stones were but a distant second to that. Indeed, had he not sensed their importance to the couple’s future — and maybe a future beyond them — he would have handed them over to the high priest Kambak last year and saved himself much trouble.

Now, as he sat and regained breath and strength, he slid the Eyes from the pack, holding the pouch cradled in his hand. Saj felt a great desire to lay them out before him, to seek within them for knowledge of what was to come. How they worked, he had no idea. Nor did he understand how his own gift worked. That sort of thing the Mur would rather leave to wizards like Im.

Not now, not now, he told himself. Better to go find his Marana. He started north along the riverside. It was the same sort of scrubby countryside through which they had been passing for days. In places, the nearly impenetrable palm thickets grew right to the river’s edge and he had to slip down the bank and wade around them.

To make matters worse, the palms had thorns of some sort, saw-

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like teeth along their slender branches. Under everything lay the loose white sand. He walked through a patch of grass to find himself impaled by numerous sharp burrs. This was not at all a good place to live, Saj decided, and certainly not to farm. It had to be better near Lanlaz.

Still, the tall, straight pines grew in profusion. There was money in lumber, in ship stores. It wouldn't be difficult to cut them and float them down to the harbor at Nota. Maybe he should have gone and visited that town after all. Some day.

"Saj!" He looked up from his thoughts. Three figures ahead, one looming over the others. Saj held up a hand in greeting. Everyone safe — he had been so engrossed he had almost forgotten he had left them in the midst of danger. His heart pounded suddenly at the thought of anything happening to Marana.

They embraced quite tightly and for quite a long time when they came together. That was nothing unusual for Marana and Saj.

~

"We know the priests of Munu and their leader Kambak," stated Saj, dropping some more pine branches on the small fire. They burnt far too quickly. "We know now of these other priests, the ones who serve Asak. But who is this Wizard-Lord of whom you spoke?"

Im gazed into the flames for some time before answering. "The latest to take up power in the wastes beyond the Muram kingdoms. The strongest in some time, though I think not the equal of Torut whom we threw down centuries ago." He shrugged. "Or I might be wrong."

"Is he more powerful than you?" asked Marana.

"Im is the greatest wizard in the world," rumbled the demon, unexpectedly, "but he has never had a desire to rule it."

Im glanced sidelong at his large companion, smiling wryly. "Cory may be right about that. I don't know."

He must be very powerful, regardless, Marana told herself. Im

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hardly looked it. He didn't look like a wizard at all, not as she had always imagined them, with flowing beard and flowing robes, tall and terrible. This slight old man preferred a kilt and cloak, and neither too new.

"Sir," she said, unsure she should ask, "who was the lady who appeared when you fought Orro? A goddess? She was very beautiful."

A deep sigh. "That was the woman I once loved, the woman I married when I was young. We shared the stones once, entered them and were bonded forever." He remained silent, in thought, for some time. Marana thought perhaps he would say no more, when he began to speak again, his voice low. "A part of her remains with them, but the human Atima is long since passed. She lived a normal lifespan, and I near a thousand years now." He shook his head. "So long, so long."

Again silence, as Im stared into the fire. At last he raised his head and smiled. "I was surprised myself that her image manifested when I called on the Jewels. It was good to see her again."

8.

“We should find the Imperial Road somewhere above the Sorgo,” Im informed them. “Unfortunately, there is no road between here and there.”

“But many pathways,” said the great red demon. It had been standing silently for some time. Saj thought maybe it was sleeping – or doing something similar to sleeping.

“This is so,” agreed the sorcerer. “Some of them deer trails.”

“And some those of men. You know we are not alone in this wilderness.”

“Ildin hunters. No one lives here. Almost no one.”

Saj had felt a moment of concern at the mention of men being somewhere out there. But there were men everywhere. “Do you live around here, sir?” he asked.

“To the west,” answered Im, waving an arm vaguely in that direction. “Near the mountains.”

“Near?” Cory’s chuckle was as a rolling of distant thunder. “The higher up this wizard is, the better he likes it.”

“So, southwest we go?” asked Saj.

“More or less. You have enough food for the journey?”

“Some of it got soggy yesterday,” admitted the young Mur. “I think it will last.”

Marana spoke up. “Do you have food, Lord Im?”

“Probably more than you,” replied the wizard, lifting his bulging pack. It seemed a heavy load for an old and small man. “And please, not ‘lord.’ It seems I’ve been telling people that for a very long time.”

Another chuckle – or perhaps a snicker – rumbled from somewhere deep in the demon. “Cory knows that well,” remarked Im. “It needn’t bring any food – and refuses to carry any of mine.”

The young couple turned their eyes toward the red creature. “Cory was feeding just now,” the sorcerer went on, “drawing sustenance from the world of its origin. It is still linked to that world, so it may

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do so. We, unfortunately, can not sustain ourselves on anything I might pull from those other worlds. It will be drawn back to them in time.”

“Xit explained that to us,” said Marana. “We oft needed to rely on my husband’s skill with a sling to keep ourselves fed.”

“You should find game enough in these lands. Squirrels, rabbits. Lizards, if you are hungry enough!” Im’s smile was fleeting. “I do not eat the flesh of any animal, myself.”

“Well, perhaps I can fish in this River Sorgo when we reach it. I am a pretty fair angler, if I may say so,” declared Marana. “Let’s get going.”

~

More south than southwest they traveled, on winding tracks through the scrubby woodland. Scrub it might be, but it was alive with the calls and songs of birds. Most were familiar enough to Saj. It was good to hear the familiar cry of a jay or the whistle of a wren. This land felt less strange and more hospitable.

Im and his demon strode on before Marana and him, seemingly knowing the way to wherever they were bound. There was a sullen heat, thick, humid. The shade of the tall pines helped some there but he would give much for a breeze. Perhaps it would rise later in the day. They were close enough to the coast to be touched by an afternoon sea breeze.

And maybe an afternoon rain with it. The rainy season was starting up here on Lorj. Their path was through a gently rolling terrain; Saj was certain it had risen, almost imperceptibly, for a while and that now it was descending, just as subtly. Perhaps they had passed back over the line of low-rising hills their journey had carried them across a few days previously.

They did not reach the Imperial Road that day, but camped among the trees. It had cooled some and, yes, it had rained, thunderstorms coming and going quickly through the hours past noon, leaving them

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alternately drenched and sun-baked. "I doubt any humans will bother us here," had spoken Im, dropping his pack in what seemed as good a camping spot as any. "Nor anything humans might send. But be on guard for wild visitors. Snakes, especially."

"Snakes?" breathed Marana, her eyes darting from one clump of palms to another.

"They are all around us," Cory informed her. "I can see them hiding, though they are cold blooded. That makes it more difficult." It slowly turned its massive body in a complete circle. "Hmm, mostly not dangerous, but there are vipers there —" It pointed. Moving its arm some degrees to the left, the demon added, "And there. They are good to eat, some say. Would you like me to fetch one for you?"

"No, thank you," Saj responded immediately.

Marana gave him a peeved look. He shouldn't have answered for her. "You are too stodgy, my husband. It might be nice to try something different." However, she did not ask the red beast to catch any snakes for her dinner.

~

"Our former companions have undoubtedly passed already," said Saj, when they came upon the road the next day. Of Marana he asked, "Do you think we should wait for another party of travelers before going on? It might be safer."

"The Imperial Road is well patrolled, isn't it?" she replied. The woman did not sound overly certain. Her eyes went to Im, leaning impassively on his staff, watching the couple. He seemed amused.

"Cory and I shall accompany you a while longer," spoke Im. He glanced toward the demon. "Any objections?"

"One way is as good as another. It always has been."

"That hasn't kept you from complaining!" Without further words, the wizard turned and began walking south.

Toward Lanlaz at last, thought Saj, as they fell in behind.

9.

The four travelers gazed down from a low ridge on the thatched roofs of a village, small and spread along a stream of middling size. The Sorgo, assumed Saj. "Cory can't show itself here," Im told them. "We shall be leaving you."

Saj glanced toward the demon. "I suppose it would cause something of a commotion. Can't it just go roundabout and join us further down the road?" He felt a bit uneasy about losing the wizard's protection. Cory's too, for that matter.

"The Imperial Road grows busier beyond here. We would have to part sooner or later. Definitely before you reached Lanlaz. However," continued Im, "I shall accompany you into yon little town and see you safely to the river." His eyes turned south again. "There is a ford here. It is easy to cross."

They followed the sandy trail down toward the Sorgo. At some point, their demon companion left them. Neither Saj nor Marana had noticed when.

Marana did note a change in the countryside surrounding them. "This is better soil."

There were oaks, and tall spindly palms poking above them here and there. "Still pretty scrubby," replied Saj, "but an improvement. There are gardens here."

Vegetables of one sort or another grew in plots lying beside the collection of small wooden buildings, each roofed with a thatch of palm fronds, some fresh and still somewhat green, others faded almost gray. Construction was post and beam, with logs driven into the white sand and flimsy walls suspended between them. Sometimes, there were no walls at all, leaving them open to the hot and humid air of Lorj.

"That's the Ildin way of building," remarked Im, noting Saj's interest. "You'll see plenty of it, even in Lanlaz."

Saj shook his head. "Not from me. I intend to build proper houses."

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“Including one for us and our many children and horses and dogs,” proclaimed Marana. She and her husband once again gave each other fond and foolish looks. There had been many of those on their journey. “We are agreed on wanting this.”

“You are fortunate,” said Im. “Most people have no idea what they truly want.”

Saj’s interest was still on the houses. “Pine,” he mused. “That makes sense considering how many pine trees we have passed through. But I always heard there is cypress in Lorj.”

“There is even cypress in Sharsh,” murmured Marana. They had passed through the swamps at the mouth of the River Chas not so long ago. “It’s too dry right here, isn’t it?”

“You’ll see it further south,” was all Im had to say. That and, “I’m hungry. Let’s see if there is an inn ahead.”

~

The trio sat on the banks of the Sorgo, looking out over the ford. The banks were high here, but a way had been made for the road so it was easy to descend to the water and, apparently, easy to cross. They had watched a wagon negotiate the shallows without problem.

Admittedly, it was an empty wagon. Whether the bottom was solid was something they would learn eventually. It might be just as well to wait until tomorrow for that. For now, they enjoyed their meal of corn cakes and ale. It was decent ale and the first ale they had drank in weeks. That, undoubtedly, improved the taste.

Saj considered going back for more of it, although he had never been that much of a drinker nor even particularly fond of ale. It comforted him at the moment. There had been no inn at the village but an open stand near the ford sold food. The proprietor was a man of Sharsh, a young slender fellow come to seek his fortune in Lorj, just as had he. Saj did not think this spot was quite the best place to do it. It did have potential, though. He shouldn’t forget it.

And he had a slightly uneasy feeling that he had seen it in one of

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his dreams. There had been more of a town here, hadn't there? Something from the future, maybe, and of no concern right now.

The sun was falling into the west. There was higher ground that way, the same sort of low hills they had passed through before. Beyond, if Saj remembered right, would be the central basin of Lorj and the great Lake Gladsa. It was too much trouble to find his map right then and they weren't going that way. Not now.

A slight noise from the other direction. Someone approached, someone in the pale yellow robes of a priest of Munu. He bowed in greeting, his dark and round face expressionless, but spoke not.

The wizard cocked his head at him. "You don't like this business, do you? You followers of Munu prefer peace."

"It is so, sir," came the reply, "but Kambak maintains we must have the Eyes." He turned to Saj. "Our leader awaits you in Lanlaz. He promises no harm to you or your wife on the road there." He gave a respectful nod to Marana. There was a moment's hesitation before he stated, "He also asks that I accompany you there as proof of our intentions."

Neither Marana nor Saj seemed to think much of that suggestion. They were surprised when Im declared it a good idea. "I go no further and the priests have given their word. They can be trusted." He chuckled. "Until you reach Lanlaz."

Turning to their visitor, he said, "I know you priests did not call the bakawan. You must have a wizard in your employ." The robed man made no answer to this. "Well, don't trust him," continued Im. "The Jewels are too great a temptation for most who deal in magic."

The priest slowly nodded. "So shall I inform Kambak." Another bow and he turned and left them, as the day darkened into evening.

~

They slept in one of the open buildings that night, reasonably protected from the usual rains. These huts were intended for the use of travelers, and others joined them, men and women headed both north

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and south. Apparently there was travel east and west, as well, for Saj and Marana had spied boats tied up at the edge of the Sorgo.

Saj wondered if the river was navigable all the way up to Lake Gladsa. He would have to ask someone. But he had other thoughts, more important thoughts, as he lay in the dark. The Eyes of the Wind called to him.

“Marana,” he whispered softly, not wishing to wake her if she had already fallen into slumber.

She rolled over to face him. “I can’t sleep either,” his wife told him. “We are almost to our new home.”

“Ah, yes,” agreed Saj. Perhaps that was why he was awake. Perhaps that was why he wanted to touch the stones she carried. “I think it is time I, um, consulted the Jewels. Before we reach Lanlaz.”

“An excellent idea,” came a voice from behind him, a voice that became slightly wistful. “I — I would not mind seeing them again.”

No other travelers seemed awake and none were near them. Where the Baxac priest slept, they did not know, but he had not taken shelter here. The three sat together on the sand, facing inward, while Marana brought forth her hidden pouch.

Im had an oil lamp in his hand. Whence it had come, Saj had no idea. Borrowed from another world? It was possible — or the flame to light it might have been. He had seen Xido pull fogs and such to him, and knew these things could be done by any competent sorcerer. Im, he recognized, was somewhat more than just competent.

The jewels glittered by the faint light, red and gold, blue and green, one for each element or each wind. Or whatever. The young Mur was not overly interested in the symbolism involved. He could hear Im’s deep, measured breaths. The wizard, too, felt the power.

The green one, the Sea Stone — he had used it frequently when a captive of the pirates, reading the sea for them, watching for storms to come, ships to pass. Not so useful at this moment, maybe, but in the

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future it should be. The blue jewel was the Sky Stone. It had saved his life in battle, let him see his opponent's movements before they came.

The others? He decided, reached out and grasped the golden topaz, the Earth Stone. The Eye of the South Wind. They were headed south, after all, and the element of earth was linked with home and commerce and all the things Saj most cared about. He held it, felt it grow warm in his hand, and sought.

For nothing in particular he sought. Saj knew he could not see his own future, nor Marana's where it was linked too closely to his. Hazy images of a city? Lanlaz, maybe. Then nothing. Perhaps a different stone —

No. On an impulse, one he could never explain, Saj took all four into his hands. The power was nearly overwhelming; had he not taken firm control of his shaking hands the stones might have been scattered on the ground. There — a great port, on an enclosed harbor, a harbor like a lake. Surely the Sea-Lake of Lanlaz, the great lagoon, the gateway to the interior of Lorj. And rising up beyond it, huge black waves, ready to inundate the city, destroy the many ships with their gaily-colored triangular sails. Saj shuddered and did drop the stones this time.

Marana carefully and quickly scooped them up, returning them to her pouch. She asked no questions, nor did Im.

The wizard did, however, say, "You might try using the Jewels to spark dreams, sometime. One only, perhaps, near you as you sleep. It takes skill and training — training you have not had — to use them as you just tried."

Saj only nodded in reply. He was still a bit too shaken to come up with words.

Im continued. "Someday perhaps we can enter them together and I could show you more of their power and how to use it." He peered at the boy in the dim light. "But that does not interest you so much does it?"

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The Mur answered now. "It frightens me too. I can admit this."

"Well it should, boy," said Im, blowing out his lamp. "Well it should."

10.

“Xano is my name,” stated the priest. He lifted a plump hand. “I will try not to be a bother to you.”

Marana thought that a good thing but Saj replied, “Nonsense. We travel together so we might as well be friendly.” The three stood at the edge of the water, where the Imperial Road crossed the Sorgo River. “Now our other companion has left us it would be good to have someone to converse with as we journey. Someone who knows this land, maybe?”

Ah, so that was it, thought Marana. Her husband hoped to pick this Baxac priest’s mind. And it *would* break the monotony of travel; she might love her husband but even he became boring eventually.

“The wizard will not return?” asked Xano.

“Off to attend to his own business,” said the Sharshite woman. Whatever that might be. Im had departed with the dawn but implied they might meet again. “Is it far to Lanlaz?”

The three waded into the flow, following a pair of travelers who seemed to know what they were doing. They would do well to stick close to such travelers the rest of the way south.

“I suppose the distance could be traveled in a day by a trained courier,” replied the priest. “A runner. Or on horseback. But we shall need to take two, I think.” He hiked the hem of his robe a little higher so it wouldn’t trail in the thigh deep water. “There are places to rest between Sorgas and the Sea-Lake.”

“Sorgas?”

“The village we just left, my lady. Ah, we are past the deepest water.”

“And your fellow priests wait in Lanlaz.” They splashed ashore. Looking down the river, Saj could see a high bluff rising on the north side. It, too, seemed somehow familiar. There was no point in pondering that right then.

“A few of them. Our order has its temple in the south, where more

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believers dwell. There and along the western coast.” The priest stopped to wring water from the hem of his saffron robe. “Now, that is. Before the Mura came, Lanlaz was a Baxac town.”

“Little more than a fishing village, I have heard,” said Saj. “Lanladex it was named then, Sea-Lake Town.” He and Marana had learned as much as they could of the place. It was in Saj’s nature to be thorough and Marana’s to be curious.

Xano nodded agreeably to all this. “Lanlaz is a corruption of the old name. Officially, the Mura call it the City of the Sea-Eagle. No one actually uses that.”

They had fallen in with a small group traveling toward the south, half a dozen men and women on foot. Traders of some sort, thought Marana. Most wore large packs on their back. Baskets, actually, with straps and a couple with a tump line as well, passing across the forehead. She knew their goods would have to be something relatively valuable to be worth carrying by foot; foodstuffs and that sort of thing would surely go by wagon or on pack animals.

Or maybe, as she and Saj, they were journeying toward a new home, bearing all they owned. It would be impolite to quiz them. All looked either Sharshite or Muram. Marana did wish they would walk more swiftly. She and Saj could have been far ahead of them by now, had they not slowed to these travelers’ pace. But maybe Xano would not have been able to keep up.

“We’re going up again,” she whispered to her husband after an hour walking.

He nodded. “I’m sure we will descend eventually. Lanlaz is not much above the sea level.” Captain Nedos had told them that. “My — vision last night showed the town being flooded by a great wave. Or threatened, anyway. I am not certain.”

“Not soon?”

“I think not. A warning, maybe.” Saj seemed to ponder for a few

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seconds. “Perhaps related to those things I dreamed on the Cana’s holy mountain.”

Many years, then, Marana told herself. Years to prepare for the coming catastrophe.

The Imperial Road rose and fell in the gently rolling terrain through the day, but by evening they were certainly in a lower country than any they had passed through before. Lower than any since Matanas itself and the basin of the sluggish River Erd. There were patches of swamp, ponds where stood the cypress Saj had expected in this country. Many wading birds perched in them, mostly white. Or maybe they only noticed the white ones; they certainly were easier to pick out.

“No huts here,” the priest of Munu told them. Their companions had, of a sudden and seemingly by unspoken agreement, turned aside to make their camp. Large spreading oaks offered some shelter. There were fire pits but no fuel.

“All the fallen wood nearby was probably gathered long since,” said Saj.

Marana felt that likely. “One would have to carry ones own. The soldiers would.” They had seen soldiers during the day, on foot, not the cavalry men who had passed by them further north.

“There is a garrison at North Docks,” Xano said. “That’s where the road ends. We must take a ferry across to the city from there.”

“We couldn’t walk the rest of the way?” asked Marana.

The priest shook his head. “It is too marshy around the Sea-Lake.”

“Can be done,” said a nearby traveler. “Not worth it. Don’t worry, the boat ride doesn’t cost much.”

“It had better not,” was all Saj had to say about that.

~

There had been a small, shallow, sandy-bottomed stream to cross in the mid-morning and then a few hours more walking. The road was

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low now, and sometimes sizable puddles of water also needed crossing. "Rainy season," said someone. "Ain't like this always."

Swampland seemed to be everywhere now; the Imperial Road was practically a causeway between the low-lying stands of cypress. It probably followed a natural ridge, decided Saj. Maintaining an artificial strip through the swamps would be worth neither the trouble nor expense.

Marana nudged him and nodded her head toward something on their left. Saj couldn't figure out what was of interest for a moment. "Mangrove! We must be near the harbor."

"Nedos said the water there was brackish," she replied. There was a large inlet to the sea and the lagoon rose and fell with the tides, but it also received much of Lake Gladsa's outflow.

Xano leaned in to inform them, "There's Ladex. North Docks."

Yes, a compact group of buildings could be spied through the trees now. 'Lake Town' was the meaning of the Baxac name the priest had used. Saj knew a smattering of the language and knew he should learn more of it if he was to do business here. Ildin, too.

He noted, of a sudden, that there were paving stones beneath his feet now. When had they appeared? They were of the same soft limestone he had seen here and there on Lorj already. It probably did not hold up well to wear.

"The Muram captain here will want to know your business before he lets you go on," continued Xano. "If you have papers, you'd best have them ready." He chuckled. "And if you haven't any, you'd best start running back the way we came."

A Muram officer stood by the roadside, a little fellow with a drooping mustache and straight black hair, cropped short. He was not wearing his armor on this hot afternoon but there was no mistaking that he was a soldier and a man in command.

Most of their companions were being allowed to pass on without question. Already known here, undoubtedly, if they were traders. One

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couple presented papers. The officer glanced at them, grunted, and motioned them onward toward the docks.

He greeted the priest with a smirk. “Ho, Xano. Any new converts in the North?”

“No, Captain, but I prayed for your soul frequently.” The soldier laughed and waved him on.

His mood changed considerably when he beheld the documents of Marana and Saj, becoming respectful, deferential, even. After all, Saj was a citizen of the Empire, a true Mur in the original sense, and his wife of the Sharshite nobility. Such travelers would rarely pass his post, but come to Lanlaz by sea.

“You are expected in Lanlaz, Gentleman?” he asked.

“Indeed yes. We have friends there, sir.” Saj hoped this was true. They had been given names of men and women with whom Marana’s father did business. It was quite possible those men and women might not care the slightest about a pair of penniless new arrivals.

“Then welcome to Lanlaz,” said the man. “It will be good to have more Muram folk here.”

For a moment, Saj felt like pointing out that his wife was Sharshite but decided to let the slight pass. It was not an uncommon mindset among the Mura, especially soldiers come straight from the homeland, and there was nothing he could do about it. “Thank you,” he replied, taking their papers and heading toward the waiting ferry.

~

They had been told the Sea-Lake was large but were awed none the less. Even having seen maps. “It takes a couple hours to cross to the town,” a chatty fellow passenger informed them.

“If the breeze is good,” said another. The ferry had a pair of square sails, rising from a vessel that might best be described as a barge. There were sweeps, too, three down each side, but they were unlikely to propel it quickly. Perhaps not at all if they were headed into a wind.

And there was a definite headwind. “The afternoon sea breeze,”

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muttered Saj, mostly to himself. He would need to be aware of this sort of thing and how it impacted life in their new home.

“There is a current,” noted Marana.

The first passenger to speak nodded sagely. “That there is. It gets pretty strong in the rainy season.”

“More so if the tide is goin’ out,” added the other. He waved an arm toward the east and a little north. “There is another outlet up there. Very marshy and not easy to pass. The main channel’s down at the south end.”

They might schedule the trips to match the changing tides, thought Saj. It would make sense to so do. He could spot a number of vessels on the lagoon, some under sail. Many appeared to be some sort of canoes. More could be learned of those when they reached the wharves of Lanlaz.

“We will dock over there.” Xano pointed. Saj couldn’t make out much; they were still far away. Keeping his voice low, the priest continued, “There is a customs house there. No concern for you nor for me. The mayor’s house is over that way. The tall one.” He pointed again.

Saj was not impressed by it. He was not much impressed by any of what he could see here. Lanlaz seemed a town of decent size, houses and shops scattered somewhat haphazardly and not at all crowded. Lots of room to expand. The Mur felt he could help with that.

More interesting were the ships tied up here and there along the waterfront. Some were of a pattern he recognized; others were quite different and had the new triangular sails. From the southern isles, he guessed.

“Does the Muram navy keep ships here?” he asked, to no one in particular.

“We’re expected to patrol the Sea-Lake ourselves,” someone answered. “Galleys visits from time to time but they are based at the ducal cities.”

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“Nota,” came another voice, “and Caras.”

“Aye, Tinaz too.”

“The squadron at Tinaz is too busy chasing pirates to bother with us up here.”

Xano leaned in. “Those would be pirates of my own race, not the Muram raiders you know.” He gave them a slight smile. “And lived with, I have heard.”

“There were Baxac men among those pirates. A few.” Men of many nations, Saj recalled, but predominantly Muram. Not Muram of the Empire, as was he, but more often men from the Old Kingdoms across the sea.

“It does not surprise me,” answered the priest. “Here we are.”

The ferry’s starboard rail bumped along a wooden dock, set on piles driven into the lagoon’s bottom. Men threw ropes, tied them off, while others gathered their belongings to disembark. “We shall part now,” Xano went on. “I have no doubt you will see me and others of my order here in the town. Do not — ah, do not feel uncomfortable asking for my help if you need it.” The priest looked rather uncomfortable himself saying this. His high priest might not approve.

Saj answered, “Farewell then, Priest of Munu. I am willing to call you a friend.”

“And I would be your friend. But,” Xano added, “remember that Kambak’s promise of safe passage ends when you set foot on this dock.”

11.

Donowaith was the agent here for Marana's father, Lord Hurrum, Thegn of Sarowhem. He served in this role for several men, some powerful and some not so much, who dwelt in Sharsh or northern Lorj. Saj suspected this could lead to conflicts of interest.

But this Sharshite merchant was probably as honest as most. He would recognize that serving his clients well was to his own advantage. Donowaith was a small, fat, but energetic man with a cramped office near the docks.

"I've been expecting you," said he, motioning the couple toward a pair of crudely-made wooden chairs. I could craft better, thought Saj, even though furniture building was not one of his interests. For the right money, it could be. He tucked that idea away for the future.

"Have you lodgings yet?" asked the agent.

"We came here directly," answered Marana. Asking the way had been their first order of business in Lanlaz.

The man nodded. "You were but a child when last I saw you, Lady Marana. I stopped by your father's estate, um, nine or ten years ago it must have been." He glanced toward Saj but said nothing to him.

He wonders who I am and how I ended up wed to an aristocrat, guessed Saj. We'll have to tell our story eventually. Many times over, perhaps.

"I'm not sure I remember you," admitted Marana.

Donowaith laughed. "I would be surprised if you did. You seemed much more interested in horses than people."

"I think she might be still," chuckled Saj. Marana would not mind the mild gibe. It was a part of dealing with men such as this agent.

"Careful, Husband mine, or I might trade you for one," she bantered back.

"We will need to find a roof," said Saj, bringing things back around to their business there. Lodgings were their first concern, followed closely by employment of some sort.

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“Lord Hurrum arranged that funds would await you here,” Donowaith informed them. “If you want them. He also warned me that you two were likely to be, ah, independent.”

Marana looked somewhat sour at that bit of information. Most of the ‘independence’ was on her part. “We might be willing to accept some credit from the thegn,” said Saj, “with the understanding that it will be repaid.” He paused. “And only if we find we need it.” That should satisfy his wife — but it might be best to come back here alone to arrange it. Saj suspected they *would* need it.

“So, a house is the first order of business,” said the agent. “Or rooms, if you prefer.”

“I’ll need a space for a workshop, too,” Saj announced. “Not right away, maybe.” Saj very much intended to go into business for himself. He knew as well he might need to find a job with someone else at first. He didn’t even have tools.

“Hmm, yes. Carpentry, right?”

That must have been in Hurrum’s letter. “Among other things.”

Marana smiled knowingly. “My husband has ambitions.”

Donowaith leaned back, laughing. “This is the place for them, my lady.”

~

“A dirt floor, again,” sighed Marana.

Saj looked the house — or hut — over. “I could build a raised wooden one readily enough. But not in a place we were renting.” It was another partly-open post-and-beam building with thatched roof. Both knew they could afford no better at the moment. “And there is space enough.”

More space than needed for just the two of them. So what if the ‘floor’ were only the white sand on which Lanlaz was built? Saj could work here — as soon as he had tools and customers. “It is off plumb,” he noted. That somehow offended the artisan in him.

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“It is unlikely we shall find a better deal,” Saj continued, a tad hesitantly.

“Agreed, Husband,” said Marana. “Let’s tell Donowaith we’ll take it.” The agent had pointed them toward a handful of lodgings, including this one. It was likely he would collect a fee from the landlord.

Saj nodded. “For now. A plot of land here is not so expensive. We may be able to build within a few months.” He grinned at his wife. “Not the house you have dreamed of, but one we might sell for a profit.”

A lean olive-skinned man wandered over from one of the nearby houses, most of which looked much like this one. “Thinking of moving in?” His accent as well as his looks told Saj he was Ildin.

“Indeed we are, sir,” replied Marana. “We intend to open a carpentry shop.”

The visitor nodded, apparently in approval. “It’s a good enough spot for a craftsman. I make baskets over at my place.”

“Then this is the neighborhood for us,” said Saj. “The more shops about, the more folk will be inclined to visit.” To himself, he wondered if anyone made tubs or barrels of wood. He could compete for business with this basket maker.

“You could have lived for free further out,” the Ildin continued. Maybe he was thinking he didn’t need a competitor quite this close. “There are shantytowns all around the edge of Lanlaz. There is so much space no one bothers to throw them out. They’d just move on to another spot.”

Saj pondered this a moment. “That is good to know, Friend,” he said.

~

“Who owns all the empty land?” asked Marana.

Donowaith seemed surprised by the question. “Hmm, everything from the south inlet to the north one was included in the charter of

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Lanz as a free city. So the town owns what hasn't been sold. There are some fairly large tracts in one man's hands or another's." He shrugged. "Most of it, no one really wants. There is no demand, but there is always someone who thinks it might be a worthwhile investment for the future."

"And so there are squatters," Saj said.

"So there are. For common laborers or those without families or much in the way of belongings, it is an attractive option." He gave the two a look. "Not for a man looking to move up, I would think."

"Agreed," said the Mur, "but it is good to know these things. We will take that house." Now to find some tools. There was one good draw-knife in his pack that Saj had carried all the way from Sharsh. He could do much with just that but best he have some others. Saws, a hammer or two — whatever he could budget for right now. A length of rope; he would definitely need that.

The pair stepped down into the sand street to be confronted by three men in yellow robes. The high priest Kambak held up a hand in greeting. "I intend you no harm, Saj of Mura," he stated. On one side stood his second. Saj had never learned the man's name. On the other was their traveling companion, Xano. He looked uncomfortable about being there.

"We never wished you harm," the dark priest continued. "It was the Eyes we sought."

"Yet you sent a monster to eat me."

Kambak sounded almost apologetic. "We wanted only the jewels. After he swallowed you we would have had them."

No, you wouldn't, thought Marana. I was the one carrying them.

Saj spoke. "Our friend Xit thought they were safer with me."

A scowl from the priest. "We see now that he was something more than the minor wizard he pretended to be. A demon, perhaps." The priests of Munu believed in no gods, only the all-pervading force they

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worshiped. This did not preclude the existence of evil spirits. They did not consider such a belief superstition, as they did most religions.

“It is we who should guard them,” he went on. Kambak sounded quite certain of this.

“It is I who guards them now,” responded Saj. “I have no intention of giving them up.”

The old priest shrugged. “So be it. Know we shall not leave things so, Mur.” He bowed toward Marana, turned, and walked purposefully in the direction of the docks, his two companions scurrying behind him.

12.

“I see many Jevotes here, especially among the slaves,” noted Marana. Slaves were not that numerous in Lanlaz but there were some. Domestic servants, for the most part.

“It is a faith that appeals to them, I think,” Saj replied. “All equal before their one god.”

“But we know there are other gods.” They had traveled with one, after all.

“That does not mean there isn’t one above all the others. A god who made the gods, maybe.” Saj shrugged. “But I don’t see why anyone would bother with one so remote.”

“Not that it would do any good to pray to a deity like Xit,” Marana answered.

“That is as gods should be. Meddle only when necessary and leave men to their business the rest of the time.” He put down his draw-knife. It was safe to leave his tools here; that was one advantage to having fellow craftsmen as neighbors. They looked out for each other. “Let’s see something of this Lanlaz,” he suggested. “We haven’t even looked upon the sea yet.”

“There is not much over on the coast, I am told. Some of the wealthy citizens have retreats there.” It was to be expected that Marana, being an aristocrat, would have been sought out by those leading citizens and their wives. The wives, in particular. Never mind that she and Saj had no money to speak of — a title can carry one far and, moreover, Marana was a novelty in what was an exceedingly provincial town. “I have mentioned that you can build houses suited to their station.”

“Better that than chairs.” Saj looked over the piece of furniture he had just finished. It was plain but well-crafted. “Though it is all honest work. How do we get to the coast? Walk eastward?”

“There must be roads, but I know not where,” his wife admitted.

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"I do know we can follow the way down to the inlet and come back up along the beach."

"We should see that end of town anyway," agreed Saj. "It will be a long walk. Some of your new friends need to invite you to stay overnight."

"Or at a minimum invite us to lunch." In minutes, they were strolling south through Lanlaz. The buildings thinned out soon, until most that remained were warehouses along the edge of the Sea-Lake. The unpaved road they followed ran close to that shoreline.

Boat-building is a good trade, Saj told himself, surveying the craft tied up at the docks. For that matter, so was dock-building. There was much to which he could turn his hand in this town. Or he could hire men and turn many hands.

There were pines down here but of a different sort than those they had seen so many of further north. These were fuller in their foliage and not so straight. The breeze was coming up; their tops swayed gently. Sea crows called from the branches. Higher up, a sea eagle could be seen soaring. Surely some Muram captain had noted one here and given the city its official name.

Other sorts of birds came and went along the shore. Gulls and plovers and cormorants and some that neither of them could name. They roosted on any piling that rose from the water, as well, along with numerous pelicans, preening themselves with their long bills. The shoreline was shifting from the mudflats further back to a white sand beach. There were no longer any docks and the road seemed little traveled.

Yet here and there a fisherman's boat would be pulled up. "We must be near the inlet," said Saj. "Maybe even on it." It was wide, he knew, and not clearly distinguishable from the lagoon. Ahead stood an open hut, beside some sort of mound, piled-up limestone.

There were stacks of firewood too. "A light," he realized of a sudden. "They burn a fire here to guide ships at night."

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“It wouldn’t be very effective in a storm, would it?” asked Marana. It was a question that need no answering; obviously an open flame would not last long in rain and wind.

“This must be the passage itself, then,” said Saj, gazing south across the water. The far side was closer here than at the docks of Lanlaz; further north from the town it was no more than a suggestion of land along the horizon.

“And if we go further we will be on the beach.” Marana waved an arm toward the east. “There is the sea.”

“The Southern Sea itself,” mused Saj. He could see an island at a distance. He had heard there were isles that marked the entrance to the Sea-Lake. “It seems placid.” He turned toward the hut. “No one on duty during the day, it seems.”

“So no one will mind if we rest there a little while,” answered Marana, smiling. “This, at last, is how I envisioned our new home. Sun and water and soft breezes.”

“Indeed,” replied Saj. “I think perhaps we should stay.” He took his wife into his arms. “And this can be our house on the beach for a little while.”

It was some time before they began their walk back to their other house in the town.

ELEMENT II.

ACROSS THE WATER

13.

Saj measured along a piece of rope to three times the length of his forearm, and tied a knot. The next length he measured was four forearms; another knot, and then the same with five. "There we are," he said. "Now to peg it down."

Marana was mystified. So apparently were the two laborers he had hired. "The magic triangle," said her husband. "It's how we get the corners square."

Three weeks had they been in Lanlaz, Saj picking up a bit of carpentry here and there, crafting items for sale in his spare time. Now he had landed a true construction job; the first of many, they both hoped.

He pounded a stake into the ground about where one corner of the building should be, then lined up two more with the knots in his triangle of rope. "With the longest length on the inside, the other two will always form a squared corner," he explained. He adjusted one stake a bit and drove it into the ground, and then the other. "It won't be perfect but better than doing it by eye."

A length of rope was stretched to the next corner, to set it in line with the one just marked, and Saj again used his triangle, driving three more stakes with a heavy wooden mallet. One of his helpers carried the stakes for him; the other didn't seem to know what to do with himself and it made him nervous.

Two more corners set and Saj looked down the lines he had created. "Not too bad," he mumbled. "I could finagle with it but it might not help any."

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Marana wanted to say it was only a warehouse but knew better. Saj would always build as well as he was able. “Okay, boys,” he called out. “We get these stones into place for the foundation.” The perplexed workmen seemed happy to do something they understood and turned to a pile of limestone.

“And I will go on home, Husband,” said Marana. “I can’t lift even a one of those.”

~

Though their little house could be safely left, with all their belongings, with the tools Saj was accumulating, Marana continued to carry the Eyes on her person. They had no affect on her, except for the slightest of tingles when she held the red jewel, the Fire Stone, in her hand. The Cana had told her it spoke to her nature.

Saj had not yet attempted to use them as Im had suggested. He had too many other things on his mind, too many other things to occupy his hands. But both knew it was important they keep and guard the jewels. They were a part of their destiny.

Though Saj tended to scoff at the idea of destiny, he had seen enough of the future to admit they had one.

Saj was late this evening. Yes, he would stay at his job site until there was no more light. That was his way. But surely he should have headed for his home and supper by now.

Already, he had the walls up and would have a roof resting on them shortly. And already others were offering him work. Saj had needed to add another man to his crew. Soon, there would be more of them. Marana peered out into the darkness, beyond the illumination of her one candle. There were candle makers here in Lanlaz; she had been pleased to discover so many goods available in what she had feared would be a backwater of the great Muram Empire. Lanlaz was booming.

No sign of Saj. There were lights in some of the other nearby huts. Men and women already eating, or done eating and preparing for

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sleep. Someone was singing somewhere, an old song Marana recognized from her homeland.

When Saj had not returned by the time dawn lightened the eastern sky, she knew something was very wrong.

~

He had been walking home, through the dark streets of Lanlaz. There were no streetlights in this town, not even down by the docks, and few houses along his way. Only warehouses, closed for the night. Perhaps he should not have stayed at his construction site so late, gossiping with passers-by. But those visitors were potential clients and customers; best to let them know who he was and what he could do.

A pair of men passed Saj, dressed as common laborers, in Sharshite kilts and sleeveless shirts. He nodded politely and paid no more mind to them. When one grabbed him from behind, pinning his arms, he was taken by surprise. Saj was a muscular man, though small of stature, but he could not break loose. Not at once. The other shoved a piece of cloth into his mouth to gag him. Was there a third there too, directing them? None of them made a sound.

The man behind him put a knee into the back of his leg, forcing him to the ground. In a moment, both were atop him, and one was passing a rope around him. Still, no words spoken. A bag went over his head and hands roughly pulled him to his feet. At least they didn't use a club on me, thought Saj.

Ah, he had expected trouble eventually, but it had not been on his mind lately. Too much had been going good to concern himself with the bad! But Im had warned him, as had Kambak. Surely the Eyes were at the root of this. The men half-dragged, half-marched him along. Saj had no idea what direction they were going.

Not toward anywhere populated, he would guess. They seemed to weave back and forth, perhaps moving from the concealment of one building to another. Then something seemed to be grabbing at his

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feet. Mud. They were somewhere along the shoreline of the Sea-Lake. He could hear the boom of a bull alligator in the distance.

One of the men broke the silence for the first time. "Be careful of snakes," he warned the others. Saj could be careful of nothing. He was at these men's mercy. They were wading into calf-deep water now.

"Lift him in," said another voice, a voice that commanded. The accent was different. Ildin? Arms grabbed him at both ends and deposited Saj in what was surely a dugout canoe, narrow and with a rounded interior. Then they were gliding out onto the water. He could hear the rhythmic dipping of paddles.

Their destination? Somewhere along the shores of the Sea-Lake, obviously. Beyond that would be only a guess. Saj did not like guessing.

~

"The town guards are searching?" asked Donowaith. He sucked in his plump cheeks and leaned back. His chair was new, one that Saj had made.

"Yes. I do not think it will do any good." Marana could not tell them the whole story nor her suspicions. The guards had shaken their heads sympathetically and promised to do their best. They thought him dead, of course, mugged and his body dumped somewhere. She recognized that.

And she knew better. Saj and she had a future here. This was a setback, to be sure, but her husband was alive somewhere. "I shall have to oversee the finishing of his construction," Marana declared. "It would not do to leave it undone, no matter what the excuse." Saj should not return to find his reputation ruined, after all.

"You think he was kidnapped?"

"I know he was kidnapped. We have certain items in our possession that others covet." She was not going to say what and the agent knew better than to press her. He did know there had been some adventure

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or another involving the two back in Sharsh. Rumors made their way to Lanlaz. "I suspect the priests of Munu."

That surprised Donowaith. From his expression he clearly thought them an innocuous bunch. "The whole band of them left a couple weeks ago," he replied. "Bound for Caras? I'll have to check on that." The order had a house there, he remembered. That was pretty much the extent of his knowledge.

"I would appreciate that, sir," said Marana. She hesitated before saying more. Why not? "What they seek is not in Saj's possession but in mine. Sooner or later someone will contact me." She rose to leave the office. The merchant looked up at this tall, broad-shouldered daughter of warriors. "Of this I am sure."

14.

Saj's thoughts, perhaps not surprisingly, were the same as his wife's. Who would finish up his contracted construction job? He did not like leaving it unfinished, not at all.

His captors had landed him, still not allowed to see, on some shore or another. The Mur had no idea where, but it could be no place inhabited or they would be hiding him, rather than openly marching him forward. The bag over his head did not prevent him from sensing the sun now shone above.

He heard low mumbled conversation. Not enough to make out the meaning but enough to tell him they spoke Muram. Still three men so far as he could tell. A halt.

"We'd better lay up here until dark," came a voice, the voice that had given orders earlier. He was wrong about the accent. That was not Ildin. Saj could not quite place it. "We can unwrap him now."

Hands pulled the bag from over his head, untied the gag. It took Saj a few seconds to focus his eyes in the light. Not a strong light — they were beneath a canopy of trees, great spreading oaks draped with moss. "You stink," said one of the henchmen.

"You didn't stop so I could piss," came Saj's reply, "Nor untie my hands. What else could I do?"

"The lad's got a point," said the other. There was a touch of sympathy in his voice. Both were obviously Sharshite men.

But not he who led them. He looked like the would-be thief back in Erdas. A closer look. He *was* the thief. "I can tell you don't have what we want on your person," spoke the man. "It wasn't really expected that you would." A thin smile. "We must deal with the Lady Marana."

~

I have no idea what I am doing, thought Marana. One of Saj's workmen accompanied her home on this late afternoon. Who knew but someone might attempt to kidnap her too? The Eyes she had care-

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fully hidden; she didn't like being separated from them but thought it safer not to carry them on her person.

She would definitely not leave the safety — such as it was — of her home after dark. “We'll try to get the rest of the roof beams in place tomorrow,” she told the man as they stopped before the rented house. It had not gone well this day.

“Yes, my lady,” he replied. There was doubt in his voice. “We'll all do what we can with, um, the boss gone.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, and went in. An empty house — Marana ached for her missing husband. She ate a cold supper and, weary, turned in early. Sometime in the night the noblewoman became aware that someone sat watching her. Another someone, very tall, stood further back. “Im?” she hazarded.

“Right the first time. How fare you, Marana?”

“As well as can be expected. All this day, I have been trying to supervise Saj's work. It kept my mind from worrying; otherwise I would do nothing but wait for some message.” Marana sighed. “I fear I have too little knowledge of construction.”

“I shall come with you tomorrow and supervise. Over a thousand years, one learns a great many skills.”

“I could go right now and set all the beams in place overnight,” rumbled Corey.

Im chuckled. “I am sure you could. It would raise too many suspicions, I fear.” To Marana, he said, “My companion would never have made such an offer once. I do not think the idea would even have come to it.”

The red demon shrugged. With its blank face, it was limited in its ability to express emotions. “It would just be something to do, rather than stand here.”

“Corey won't admit that human ways have rubbed off on it over the centuries.”

“Do not insult me, little master.”

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The wizard cackled. "I am not sure you could tell if I did, demon. You had best go hide somewhere for the day. The Lady Marana and I shall have much to keep us busy."

~

One of the men brought water in a hide bag. Saj cleansed himself as much as he could with what remained after thirsts were slaked. It was good water, but tinged darkly with tannin. "From the river," he was told. "We follow it to Gladsa."

Close by, then. Surely there was a well-traveled road along the wide flow down from Lake Gladsa to the Sea-Lake. They were avoiding it, taking some more secret route. No point in asking why the lake was their destination.

On they trudged all that night and lay up again the next day. Saj remained bound as they traveled but no longer blindfolded nor gagged. The land was sometimes swampy. These men, the pair of henchmen, seemed to know their way through it, following a path that led around and past cypress ponds and marshes. Perhaps they were smugglers, men who used the route regularly.

On the night that followed they came to Lake Gladsa. The Mur could tell nothing of it, only that there was water, gleaming beneath the starlight. "We wait," spoke the leader. "The priests of Munu will come."

~

"Corey truly is quite amoral," said Im. "It has only picked up some habits of mankind. Learned how to live with us more easily." He looked up. "That's the last of the beams set. Now some cross pieces. Saj intended a thatched roof, I assume?"

"He did not want one but it was requested. It is the common practice here." Marana managed a weak smile. "And cheaper."

"A thatcher has been contracted? Good," he responded to the woman's nod. "He could start tomorrow. Or even this afternoon. You

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should contact him.” Im paused. “We might need to leave at any moment, you know.”

She sent one of the men to inform the thatcher while Im supervised the addition of the cross pieces. Most of these were little more than thin wands, notched into the sloping roof beams, to which the palm fronds would be bound. The two stepped inside. “Little more to do in here,” said Marana. “It’s to be a warehouse. One open room.”

Im looked up at the uncovered roof. “Well-designed. That’s the Mura for you.” He chuckled. “They need strong roofs with all the snow in their homeland.”

“I hear great storms come in from the sea here,” she replied.

“And their winds may tear all the thatch off, but that is easily replaced.” His voice become suddenly grave. “Your husband can not, nor you, my lady.”

“Nor the Eyes?”

“They can only be lost for a time. Best they not be, though.” He patted his belt pouch. “I will continue to carry them for you as long as you wish but, ultimately, they are yours to keep.” Im seemed to gaze at some distant place, one she could not see. “And to keep safe.”

15.

A long canoe glided toward them, across the dawn-lit waters of Lake Gladsa. Two of the men, seated in the middle and not wielding paddles, Saj could see were robed priests of Munu. The saffron color stood out before he could make out much else.

The leader addressed his pair of henchmen. "The priests will have your money and you can go your way. Best forget all of this." Saj could sense threat underlying the warning.

"No business of ours, sir," responded one man. The other grunted, somewhat noncommittally.

Saj turned his eyes back to the boat, the morning sun behind him. Neither Kambak nor Xano was a passenger, but one of them was surely the high priest's second. Ildin were at the paddles, five of them. It was quite a large canoe; the Mur had never seen one so long. He had heard great dugouts carved from the tall cypress plied the waters of Gladsa.

"Ho, Brother Adwak," called his captor.

The nondescript little priest raised a hand in greeting, and looked Saj over. His round face revealed nothing but he did not seem eager about this task. Another who thinks his high priest is making a mistake, thought the Mur.

"Master Nanos," he said, turning his attention back to the man who had addressed him. "Let's get the Mur aboard. The sooner we head back, the better." The priest did not step out of the canoe but fumbled in his robes a moment, drawing out a poke. "Here's the payment," he called, tossing it to Nanos.

Nanos did not bother to look in it, simply passing it to the Sharshites. They did look and nodded in approval, before picking Saj up bodily, one at shoulders, one at feet, and wading out to deposit him in the Ildin craft. The last he saw of them they were walking away from the shore, and not taking their time about it. Their leader helped push the canoe out of the shallow water and clambered in.

Saj sat up. There was a little difficulty with this as his arms were

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still bound. He nodded a greeting to the priests. Adwak, was it? The man had always seemed to prefer anonymity, to be the unnoticed voice at Kambak's elbow.

"He can be untied now," spoke Adwak. "There is no escaping." The other priest slid forward and loosened Saj's bonds. Nanos only watched with apparent indifference.

Saj looked toward the receding shoreline and then at the wide waters of Lake Gladsa. He could spy no further shore. Indeed, there was no escape.

~

The warehouse was finished, the work accepted, the money paid. That was all good. Marana regretted that she had to cancel any other jobs and offers. She was honest about why; word of Saj's disappearance was common knowledge through Lanlaz by now. No sense in not admitting it.

Still, no word from anyone, no ransom demand. Whoever was responsible was taking his time. "I would guess," said Im, "their headquarters are at some distance. They would want your husband delivered there before making any contact."

"It was most certainly the priests of Munu," she said. "Donowaith tells me they have a house down in Caras."

Im's heavy brow furrowed in thought. "I would agree they are the most likely suspects. I do not believe they would take your husband to a ducal city, however. It will be some place more private, some place unknown to us."

"So all we can do is wait." And they did.

~

"You are called Nanos?" asked Saj.

The man slowly turned his head toward the captive, looked at him as though he were no more than an annoyance, before answering. "It is not my name but it is the one I use. In the ancient tongue of my ancestors it means 'wanderer' or something of that sort."

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“You are Tesran?”

Nanos only shook his head and turned away. So not a Tesran, thought Saj, but quite possibly a wizard. The wizard Im had suggested served the priests of Munu, the man who had set the bakawan on him. He felt fairly sure of this.

He turned his attention to the paddlers. Ildin, they were, ‘wild’ Ildin of the interior, not the sort he had met in cities. Almost as covered up as the priests they were, in long, coarsely-woven tunics and multi-colored jackets. Protection from the sun and insects perhaps. They were compact men, mostly, and burned dark from a life outdoors.

When they spoke it was to each other and in their own tongue. Hired only, Saj felt, and not followers of Munu.

Gladsa was vast. Yes, yes, he had seen it on the maps and knew this. It was practically an inland sea. They might be days journeying across it. Nothing to do but rest. Saj reclined and was soon asleep.

~

“It’s one thing to smuggle a few items down from Gladsa, bypassing Olom or the Mura,” said the man standing before Marana. “It’s another to grab a man and deliver him up to some heathen priests. Jev only knows what they intend for him!”

“What is Olom?” she whispered to Im.

“The seat of the Ildin kingdom that acknowledges Muram sovereignty. The Lake Kingdom most call it. Its ruler accepted the title of *celos* from the empire.” There was the briefest of smiles, perhaps even the suggestion of a snicker. “In exchange, the empire recognized his rule over all the Ildin of Lorj. Those Ildin do not, of course, recognize it themselves.”

“Celos. As the Muram kings across the Central Sea style themselves.” Marana was well read. She knew as well that the name used by her friend and one-time captor, the former Queen of Pirates, was related — Qala.

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She turned back to this disreputable Sharshite. Marana was grateful for his information. She also realized he might hope to be rewarded for it. "So you took him as far as Lake Gladsa," she said, "and the priests of Munu took him from there. What of this man you say led you?"

"He went with them, my lady. Some sort of foreigner he was." He peered suspiciously at Im. "Looked a bit like the old man here."

Im and Marana nodded knowingly to each other. "And you have no idea where they were bound?" asked the wizard.

"Somewhere across the lake. That's all I know." Their informant looked somewhat embarrassed by this. Perhaps he feared it was not enough to warrant payment. "I do know there was Ildins paddlin' the canoe. Not ones from Olom either."

"Then possibly from the western shores of the lake," mused Im. "The priests must have a base there." He reconsidered this. "Or further on, toward the mountains."

Marana pondered the Sharshite smuggler. "We thank you for all of this. You have done right. Naturally, no word of it will reach the authorities." She could see he was relieved to hear that and even more relieved when she drew out a small purse. "I've little to offer you as reward," said Marana, handing him a couple silver coins. It was more than she could truly afford, maybe. "But when Saj is returned and our business is back to normal, come and see us. We might have use of a man with your talents."

The man bowed and disappeared into the night.

"It's little enough we have learned," she said, "but better than nothing."

Im said naught, but surely agreed.

~

There was the mouth of a large river hidden in these swamps, Saj decided, flowing into Gladsa. He remembered seeing such on the maps but not the exact names nor locations. The Ildin knew their way through the cypress, the channels into which they should turn. The

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water ran dark and swift beneath the canoe, becoming in time a single broad stream.

One man raised his paddle and pointed toward the shore with it. There stood a hut and, before it, several saffron-robed figures. Kambak came striding down to their landing spot, the others trailing behind him.

The first words from his mouth were, "He does not have them, does he?"

"He does not," came Nanos's answer. As both seemed to have expected.

"Then we will send a messenger at once with our demand. Xano!" he called. "You will go to the Lady Marana and tell her to give us the Eyes."

"And if she does not?" asked Nanos. There was a decidedly mocking tone to his voice.

As there was a touch of ice to Kambak's. "Then she does not get her husband back. We intend him no harm, wizard, but will keep him till our demand is met." He turned again to the lesser priest. "If she will not hand over the stones to you, and I fear she won't, then ask her to come with them herself."

"Blindfolded," added Adwak, "at first. It would be best if she had no idea what direction she traveled."

"Yes, yes, if possible." Kambak sounded as though he doubted it would be possible. He knew Marana. "She would learn soon enough, of course, and her husband already does. But try to keep the leaving of Lanlaz as secret as possible so none can follow.

"You will start back with him in the morning?" he asked the Ildin paddlers.

"As long as we are paid," came the answer.

16.

Marana chose to wait for word while Im — and Cory — went ahead. They knew the route as far as Gladsa. The wizard might attempt to search beyond that point or wait for her. That would be decided when it need be decided. Marana was again in possession of the jewels.

If necessary, she knew she would trade them for Saj. There was no question of that.

None but Donowaith knew any of this and he not much. Marana would have to depend on him to watch her affairs, and Saj's, while she was gone. That might be for a considerable time. She gave up the rented house, moved what belongings they had into one of the agent's warehouses, and took a small room near the docks. Now she could only wait.

She had chosen to.

~

"We leave here, Master Saj," Adwak informed him.

Saj had suspected this hut by the river was not their actual base. The Ildin and Brother Xano had left at dawn. Those Ildin had filled themselves with beer the night before and sang tuneless songs until late. "I do not think there is any sense in a blindfold," the priest continued.

"Saj probably has no idea where he is anyway," said Kambak. The high priest had been standing nearby, seemingly paying no attention to anything. Saj suspected he was actually paying attention to everything.

"Only that it is somewhere on the western shores of Lake Gladsa," he replied. Any fool could have figured that out and he knew himself as much a fool as any!

"And you will soon know that we go toward the mountains. First by canoe." Three dugouts, smaller than that which had brought him here, were pulled up on the bank. "This river is easy to follow once one leaves the maze of the swamp."

It was easy of passage, wide and deep, though the swift flow meant

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a hard paddle upstream. Saj chose to take a paddle himself and help. There was no real reason not to. Villages appeared here and there along the way. All Ildin, it seemed.

“None of our people dwell this far north,” Kambak told him. “Not that we are aware of. Once Baxac lived here, not many, but they were pushed out by the Ildin when they came in from the north, or have mixed with them over the centuries.”

“Across the mountains it is different,” spoke Adwak.

“Aye, and in the south.”

The river wound northward and then back toward the west, and then it seemed south again, but drawing gradually closer to the mountains. Already the land was rising, the trees along their route becoming more akin to those of a northern forest, a forest such as Saj had know in Sharsh. Not like those of his cold homeland, however. He knew he would never see the fir and larch of Muradon again.

At the joining of a good-sized tributary they turned aside. Quite a large town stood at that joining, with houses in both the post and beam fashion Saj had become used to seeing and some that were built round. He had seen houses like that in the realm of the Sharshite pretender, Flawum, where there was much Ildin blood. These people’s ancestors had migrated from there as the Sharshites and then the Mura had pushed into the area. “You’ll have to abandon the canoes in a couple days,” a friendly Ildin villager informed him. “Rapids not far up that way.”

The Ildin might be friendly here but they were not going to involve themselves with the priests’ captive. Saj considered bolting from time to time. He knew he might even be successful. These priests of Munu were not fighting men of any sort, nor skilled at tracking if he broke loose. He was fairly certain they could quickly engage Ildin who were both.

He had a pretty good idea now they were heading to the highlands that divided the watershed of Lake Gladsa from that of the River Erd.

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There was an area, a spur of the mountains, where that ridge was rather narrow and a road crossed over. Not a heavily traveled road, to be sure. There was not that much trade between the regions. Even up here, the Ildin would probably send any goods south to Gladsa and Lanlaz. It was simpler to stick to the water.

Undoubtedly, thought Saj, trade goes across the mountains too. The passes through them were only rumors to the Mura. It was an area unexplored, unmapped, and certainly not controlled — even though the empire claimed it.

On they went, two days further in the canoes and then on foot, halting for sleep, for food, and, being priests of Munu, for the prescribed hours of prayer. Nanos and Saj sat and watched those regular prayers but never spoke to each other.

Nanos did nothing that seemed wizardly. Not that Saj knew that much of wizards. Xit was not a good example. He hadn't spent enough time with Im to learn much there. He suspected the old man wasn't typical either.

Was Nanos? He seemed a thoroughly disagreeable man. No, that was being diplomatic and far too kind. Nanos seemed an evil man. Not one who reveled in it, as had the priest Orro, but one who had chosen evil, none the less. Saj did not trust him at all. The priests he considered only misguided and felt sure they would keep any bargains or promises. As had he, though he had tricked them in the process, promising only to gather the Eyes of the Wind and not to turn them over. That was shrewd business, nothing more.

Even Kambak admitted that. But it hadn't kept him from sending the bakawan after Saj, had it?

He should be thankful there were no sea serpents in the mountains.

~

It was Xano, standing apologetically at her door. A dour olive-skinned man stood behind him. "Wait," the priest had told his companion, and came into her room.

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“At last,” she said. If Saj was where she and Im suspected, of course it would have taken this long. Marana was not about to reveal her knowledge of that.

“Yes, my lady. You, um, know what we want in exchange for your husband. You could —” He hesitated.

“Just hand them over to you? You know I won’t, Xano.” She took one of the wooden chairs. Not nearly as nice as Saj made. “Have a seat,” she said, waving him toward the other.

“Then will you come with me? Bring the jewels yourself?”

“I suppose I shall have to.” But the noblewoman might not keep the jewels on her person. She and Im were going to see how things unfolded. “You must agree not to try to take them from me. You or any of your people.”

“By Munu, I swear it. Will you wear a blindfold?” Xano asked, again apologetic.

“You know I won’t do that either.”

A smile came to the priest’s plump face. “I was told to ask. Now I have.”

“And very persuasive you were, I shall tell Kambak. Can we go now?”

The priest rose and shrugged. “Why not, my lady?”

There was a small compound, fenced and set among the wooded hills. “From here we may travel north and south, and even west to our brethren across the mountains,” said Kambak. “There are other priests over there, village priests.” Though the old high priest did not say so, his tone suggested he looked down a bit on such men.

“I sense magic,” said Nanos of a sudden, his voice flat. “Dangerous magic.”

Surely not Im, thought Saj.

“Can you deal with it?” Kambak asked.

The wizard slowly nodded an assent. “Where there is magic there are sometimes fighting men to back it up.” His eyes swept dismissively across the clump of priests. “You’d best make sure you have enough of your Ildin guards on hand.”

The priest seemed perplexed. “Who else covets the Eyes?”

Nanos but shrugged. Perhaps he didn’t know; perhaps he knew but did not wish to share.

Saj was not sure he should share either. Was there any advantage to keeping his knowledge to himself? None that he could see, and it might be best if the priests of Munu knew the threat they faced. “The followers of Asak desire the jewels,” he announced. “They tried to take them on our journey toward Lanlaz.”

There was much murmuring among the priests. “Evil men,” stated Adwak. No one contradicted him. Not even Nanos.

That man did seem momentarily surprised but hid it quickly behind his mask of detachment. “The priests of Asak train assassins in their temples,” he said. “Again, be on guard.”

Saj surveyed the fence. It was of bamboo, not very high and not very sturdy. Meant to keep out animals, not men, he guessed. The compound centered on one large thatched building. That would be both temple and sleeping quarters for these priests; the handful of

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smaller huts would house the Ildin guards and servants, or serve for storage.

He turned back to the priests to find them all staring toward their wizard. Nanos was standing stiffly, his eyes unseeing. He remained so for the better part of a minute.

Then, "That was their wizard trying to test me." The voice almost faltered. "A powerful mage but not my equal. If he is their best, I shall have no trouble dealing with them."

Orro, thought Saj. Most likely. And this Nanos was a fool to engage, to reveal himself so. Better the Asakians not know his power.

What he said, however, was, "So when do we eat?"

~

A small dugout canoe slid away from the docks of Lanlaz. It was hours yet to dawn. A lantern here and there along the shore threw its path of light onto the waters of the Sea-Lake. Should she have told anyone she was going?

It probably made no difference. Marana trusted Xano not to break his oath, not to attempt to take the Eyes from her. Whether he could convince the other priests or even these Ildin who accompanied him was less certain. A second man had awaited them at the water's edge and both now paddled through the darkness.

Shrouded lamps glowed faintly across the lagoon, those who fished at night. That there were other, unlit boats, was likely, those who kept their business private. The sun found them on the far side of the water.

"This stream isn't navigable all the way to Lake Gladsa, is it?" So Marana had heard of the river connecting the great lake to the lagoon. Here, at its mouth, it was wide and almost sluggish.

"Not going upstream, madame," one of the Ildin said. "Goods are floated down through the rapids."

"We'll portage around those," chimed in the other.

They were going to carry this heavy dugout? Marana wondered if she misunderstood. And if she would be asked to help.

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Where was Im? She guessed the wizard would have traveled as far as the lake. Maybe he waited there. Maybe he had found a trail and gone on. She would learn eventually. The Ildin paddled up the dark stream.

~

When he thought none watching, Nanos again entered the trance that allowed him to bespeak other wizards from afar. Saj, however, had been keeping a surreptitious eye on the man and knew what to watch for. Whom might the priests' pet magician be contacting? Not the Asakian again, he was fairly sure. Ah, for all he knew, Nanos was just chatting with a friend. Maybe he even had a sorceress wife somewhere.

Or the man might be plotting. All that could be done was to continue his watch. There was little else to do while he waited. Would Marana be coming with the Eyes? Saj hoped she had turned them over and stayed in Lanlaz. Better he deal with trying to recover them later. Saj knew better than to think he was the more competent of the couple. Or more anything, for that matter. Still, he didn't want his wife here and in danger.

He himself was in danger, as he learned soon enough, and the priests of Munu as well. It was in the night that a trio of assassins made an attempt on them, easily passing over the fence. All priests of Asak they were, lithe Ildin men, wearing loincloths and the same close-fitting black cap as Orro. Daggers hung at their belts.

They failed to take the priests by surprise. What Kambak had learned from Nanos and Saj put him on guard. The three invaders were quickly confronted by a line of spear wielding guards. The two groups eyed each other, neither eager to attack. One on one, the trained assassins would almost have certainly overwhelmed their opponents. But this was not one on one, nor did they have any reason to fight a battle right then.

One of the men of Asak unfastened the gate and Orro strode into the compound, a smaller figure behind him. An apprentice maybe. The

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wizard-priest surveyed the huts, searching. Saj knew for what he searched. They all did. “They are not here!” he cried out.

Without another word nor even a glance at the assassins, he turned and disappeared into the night, his apprentice scurrying after. The priest-assassins of Asak were not slow to retreat as well.

“That is well,” said Kambak, when the gate was again fastened – not that it guaranteed any safety.

“But now they know the jewels are not here but most likely on their way,” Nanos observed. He turned toward Saj. “Let us hope they do not come upon your wife during her journey.”

“I shall send men back to escort her at once,” Kambak decided. “We would see no harm come to the Lady Marana.”

Nor to the Eyes, thought Saj.

~

No one had to carry any canoes. Marana found that there were men with draft animals at both the portage stages, ready to slide canoes into wagons and haul them past the rapids. This entailed some waiting until they felt there were enough vessels and enough copper coins to make the trip worthwhile.

High banks stood along much of the upper river, sometimes rocky cliffs. The water had cut through these over millennia, she guessed. Maybe once the great Lake Gladsa had not emptied into the sea at all, or only through the smaller rivers to the north. It would have been much larger then, wouldn’t it? It would have taken up most of central Lorj. There were still low marshy areas around much of its perimeter.

Marana was not quite sure when their route ceased to be river and became Lake Gladsa. They had emerged from a channel through the towering cypress and beheld the wide waters. “This is all the realm of your Ildin king, right?” she asked.

One of the paddlers spat. “Not our king. The celos is only the pet of the Mura.”

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“His capital is over that way,” offered Xano, pointing northward. “We might be able to glimpse it as we move out into the lake.”

“Not in this little canoe,” said an Ildin. “We’ll be hugging the south shore.”

Marana could see no shore, only more cypress and the water disappearing into the shadow beneath them. Were Im and his demon somewhere over there? wondered Marana as they glided by.

If they were, they were. She could not depend on them being there to aid her. All she knew for certain was that Saj lay somewhere ahead and that she was going to get him out of this mess.

18.

Nanos had felt it best he accompany the men going to meet Marana. No, it would be more accurate to say he insisted on it. Kambak had to admit it made sense; Saj, however, remembered the words of Im about ambitious wizards.

“Do you trust this sorcerer of yours?” he asked the high priest, as they watched the party disappear into the woods.

“Not in the least,” Kambak responded. “I trust in the sizable payment we promised him to keep his loyalty.”

The jewels were more valuable than any reward these priests offered. Saj knew this. Maybe Kambak did too. No sense in discussing it, the Mur decided. But Kambak went on. “He would not hesitate to break his word, I know.” He squinted at Saj. “Unlike you. You tricked me but never lied.”

“And I would again,” the priest was told, “if there were an occasion for it.” He stared down the empty path. “I suppose Nanos is your best insurance against those who serve Asak.”

Kambak remained silent for the better part of a minute. “I have heard things of you, Saj of Mura. Rumors and tales that say you have wizardly powers of your own.”

“Only the second sight,” said Saj.

“We knew something of that before we brought you into our service, that you could sense and locate the Eyes. It was Xit who told us of this.” The priest chuckled. “He was manipulating all of us! The stones boost your sight, then? No, you need not admit to this. Our sorcerer said he could feel the gift in you.” Kambak paused. “Not since you came here but when you slept with the Eyes beside you in Erdas.” Saj gave but a noncommittal nod to this. “He has also felt another sorcerer who somehow became involved with them recently. It is not Xit returned, is it?”

Saj shook his head, slowly. “So far as I know, my friend is far away,

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far out at sea.” It would do no good to tell Kambak the little god had turned into an enormous crocodile. Let him think he took to ship.

“Another then. And you are not going to tell me of him.” The high priest shrugged, smiling. “So be it.”

~

Oh, we’re in a river, Marana realized of a sudden. Out of the lake at last; the previous days had been spent weaving in and out of the great cypress that grew along Gladsa’s shores. The sun was no more than a rumor, beneath the shade of these trees. She could not be certain what direction they moved.

She could guess, however. West was most likely. On they paddled, passing huts and small villages, but keeping well away from the shore and any landing place. Marana would much have liked pulling over somewhere and stretching her legs. It was rather embarrassing, too, to attend to all her toilet while stuck on a canoe with three men. Maybe more embarrassing for them than for her, but they seemed to have orders to hurry on and take no chances.

A larger village, at last, at the juncture of two streams. Humans, going about their business, or lounging along the river bank. All Ildin – no, there was a dark white-bearded fellow who most definitely was not Ildin, sitting on a stump, idly watching them come up the river.

Xano had noted him as well, and certainly recognized the wizard. “Who is that old man?” he whispered to his paddlers. “He is not of your people.”

“The hermit Im,” one man told him. “He is known well here.”

“He lives somewhere up in the mountains,” volunteered the other.

“If he visits your village and is well known, he can’t be much of a hermit,” observed Marana. She showed none of the elation she felt at Im’s appearance. How Xano felt about it, she did not know.

“Only a part-time hermit, perhaps,” said Xano. “Let’s get ourselves ashore.”

“At last,” sighed Marana.

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~

The priests of Munu had donned their tall ceremonial masks, the ones they had worn the first time Saj ever laid eyes on them. He had been startled then. Now they looked, well, maybe a tad silly. No, he should be tolerant of these priests. They weren't such a bad lot. Kambak was just obsessed with the Eyes, and even thought he would be doing good by possessing them, keeping them from the hands of other, unscrupulous men.

The high priest had confided that it might be unsafe to keep them in Lorj at all. Too many dangerous people, like those Asakians, about. Saj watched the costumed priests wind out of their large hut, chanting in a language he didn't understand but recognized as some dialect of Baxac.

But there were also places of power here, Kambak told him, where the power of the jewels could be amplified. The great volcano named Kamazad, off to the northwest, was one. Saj understood this; he had dreamed powerful dreams on the slopes of the Cana's sacred mountain.

"There is a place, down near Caras," Kambak had said. "It looks like any other place but the fabric between the worlds is thin there. The Eyes would see far in such a place."

"But who," asked Saj, "would do the looking?"

There had been no answer to that. A circle of the courtyard and now the yellow-robed men filed back into their house.

~

Xano might or might not have noticed her slipping the pouch of jewels to Im later that evening. If so, the priest said nothing. Marana was glad the sorcerer had them when unwelcome visitors showed in the night, as they sat by a dying fire. It was good to sit so, on solid ground.

Five men, and the tall one leading them was surely Orro, the priest of Asak. He would be quite disappointed if he thought she and the

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Eyes would lack protection. Im had dealt rather easily with the man the last time they had met.

Hmm, no, not five men — the small one that stayed close behind Orro might well be a girl. The others were definitely men, lean, muscular men in loincloths and black skullcaps. They looked dangerous. Far too dangerous for Xano and his Ildin to face. The priest might realize that. There was a scornful smile on his face as Im stepped out, called for him to halt.

Orro only motioned for the assassins to deal with him. “I won’t hesitate to call Cory to give me a little help this time,” spoke Im. The red demon loomed up behind him, and Orro’s smile disappeared. He stood, looking about the darkened village for a few seconds, nodded, and motioned for the others to follow him back into the night.

“He felt the stones were here somewhere,” said Im. “They may well attempt to ambush you later. You’d best see to your priest.” He nodded toward Xano, who had apparently passed out. Whether from the sight of Asak’s assassins or Im’s demon, who could say?

19.

“We had figured out where you priests took the boy. I thought it best to wait and talk to you,” said Im. “Shall we go the rest of the way now?”

“Um, what of your servant, Lord Im? He can’t ride in the boat, surely.” Xano did not sound completely certain of this.

“It can parallel us on the bank.” Im chuckled. “Or float alongside above the water. I think that might make your men nervous.”

Marana suspected it would make the priest nervous as well. “It’s only two or three days in the canoe, anyway,” said Xano. “Then we must walk.”

“We will be vulnerable,” Marana noted.

“No more so than we were here,” Im pointed out. “No one would have come to our aid against the assassins of Asak.” He seemed far away for a moment. “One of their sort almost killed me, nearly a thousand years ago.”

“Here in Lorj?” asked Xano.

“No, no, on the mainland before the Ildin began migrating to this island.” He looked to Marana and gave her a wink. “You know the area — it’s not so far from where the Pretender now has his keep. There is a gate near there. Ah, no need to go into all that. I think it is part of someone else’s story.”

“It is now,” she agreed. “I don’t expect to ever leave Lorj again.”

They launched into the tributary stream that joined the river at that village, only the five. Cory was somewhere about, supposedly, but showed itself not. A day and part of another they paddled.

“Canoes ahead,” one of the Ildin, the one toward the prow, called out. Marana tensed and then considered the situation. The followers of Asak would not attempt to ambush them on the water. It must be some other travelers. She peered up the stream, around Xano’s plump torso.

The Ildin raised a hand in greeting. “Our own,” he said. He

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lowered the hand, shading his eyes with his palm. "And that's the wizard with them."

"How is he named?" asked Im. "He looks to be of my people."

He did indeed. A dark man, with four sinewy Ildin at the paddles, fighting men, Marana suspected. Come to escort them, maybe.

"Nanos," answered the Ildin in the bow.

The wizened wizard only nodded at the information, and watched the other canoe turn itself around. Why, that's the man from Erdas, Marana realized suddenly, the one who tried to steal the Eyes. She leaned back and whispered this to Im. Again, he only nodded.

But the wizard Nanos looked long and hard at the old man.

~

He was still guarded, of course, not that Saj was likely to attempt an escape. It would be a wasted effort, here in the middle of nowhere and with his wife most likely on her way. As many of the Ildin here, he chose to sleep in one of the open-sided huts, a roof to keep off the frequent rain but no walls to block the cooling breezes of night.

Cooling compared to the heavy humid air of the days. It was still pretty hot, by Saj's reckoning, through the night. He was a man who had grown up in a land of snows, where folk spent half the year in their sturdy blocky houses, before a fire. If they could.

It was not quite cool enough for a cover. He had a corner of a thin blanket across his midsection, allowing arms and legs to protrude. The straw beneath him felt damp from his perspiration. He rolled over again, trying to find a comfortable position, to see a figure standing over him, a tall shadow in the night.

Someone grabbed him. Someone else stuffed a rag into his mouth. Again? thought Saj. Who is kidnapping me this time? A voice, a calm voice but one full of menace. He recognized it at once.

Orro squatted down and whispered, "I would like nothing better than to kill these priests, slowly." He seemed to pause to relish the

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thought. "But we have no time for such pleasures." He rose. "Bring him."

Two men had him. Saj suspected they were the same hard muscular assassins he had seen before. They hurried him toward the gate, which hung open. A body lay in their path, a guard slain quietly and efficiently by these men. Then they were beyond the fence and into forest, slowing to a walk.

"Your wife brings the jewels to bargain with the priests of Munu," said Orro. "Now she must need bargain with me." He turned to Saj. "No more need of that." He pulled the gag from his captive's mouth.

Saj spit out dust and fibers. "And should she trust you?" he asked.

"Not at all. It is our duty as followers of Asak to do evil when we can."

"Hmph," said Saj. "Then maybe you should have lied to me."

~

Nanos and Im were clearly sizing each other up. Not a word had passed between them on the water, nor since the canoes had pulled to the shore for the night. Im is taking this man more seriously than he did Orro, Marana told herself. Had Nanos that much more power than the priest of Asak? Or was there some other reason?

At last Nanos spoke. "You carry the gems," he said, and no more.

"And I shall carry them to your high priest," Im announced. He pondered the other man a moment before stating, "I have seen your shadow in the other worlds."

"And I yours." They said no more that night, nor the next day. By the afternoon of that next day they had abandoned the canoes and a river grown impassible, for a path that wound upward into hill country. It was surprisingly nice country, felt Marana, far nicer than that through which they had journeyed to Lanlaz. The compound of the priests was supposed to be near now.

Ah, to see Saj at last! Even here, even as a prisoner, with their

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futures uncertain. Marana would just have to depend on her own abilities, and those of Saj. They had been through worse.

~

“I may send small pieces of you to your wife, so she knows I am serious,” said the priest of Asak.

“She understands business,” replied Saj. He was rather proud of the way his noble wife had picked up business sense. As he had learned from her something of a world beyond the confines of work and commerce.

As he had learned to accept that he had a destiny, of sorts. Right now, Saj only hoped that destiny included survival. A short distance outside the compound, the men and their captive had been joined by a third assassin, and by another, the slender acolyte Saj had noted before. No words had been spoken as the cloaked figure had fallen in behind them.

By the light of dawn he could see it was a girl. Young, she was, and Ildin, by her looks. That would be expected. Was she, too, a devotee of Asak? Was she as committed to evil as her master? The woman spoke not to him so he said nothing to her, nor to any of his captors.

To each other, they spoke an Ildin dialect. Saj did not know enough of the language to follow them. West, they traveled, toward the mountains, and swiftly. Meals were cold and taken as they walked; sleep was brief. Saj they led on with a rope about his neck but no other bonds.

The land seemed surprisingly dry. The mountains shut out some of the rain on this side, Saj decided. It certainly rained all over Lorj but here there was a bit of a shadow. The ever-steeper slopes around them were clad with spindly pines.

He knew their destination, though none had spoken it. The temple of Asak — or *a* temple of Asak, he wasn't sure which — lay somewhere in those peaks ahead. Surely Orro was taking him there. And then? That too would be as it would be.

20.

Nanos cursed. Marana assumed it to be a curse but it was in no language she knew. Undoubtedly Im could translate it. She did not intend to ask him.

The man is angry at himself, she thought. Had he remained here with his warriors, this might have been prevented. “And no word has come?” she asked Kambak.

The high priest slowly shook his head. “None. But we know what they will demand.” His eyes went from Marana to Im. He seemed puzzled by the old man.

Nanos noted this and ceased cursing. “He bears the Eyes,” came his curt explanation.

“As I have before, over the centuries,” added Im. He chuckled at the sudden greed in Kambak’s expression. “Come on in, Cory,” he called. The great red demon shambled into the compound.

“Ah!” said Nanos. “I thought I sensed — something on our journey here. Your servant?”

“Not exactly. This is the demon Qu’orthseth.” Cory gave a slow nod of greeting. “Or Cahorsus as most name it these days. I just call it Cory.”

Kambak had backed away two or three steps. Now he pondered this new arrival. “Your companion, then,” he stated.

“You could call Cory that. It may not like me that much but its existence here is bound to my remaining alive. Poor old Qu’orthseth would be whisked off to torment in its home world were I to pass.” Im seemed to address his next statement to the demon. “That may not be so distant an event now.”

“For both of us,” rumbled Cory.

Nanos’s eyes widened. Then, as quickly, they narrowed as he peered at the old wizard. “You are Im,” he near whispered.

“Im?” There was a querulous note to Kambak’s voice. “Do I know the name?”

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“The greatest of wizards,” said Nanos. “He who threw down the Wizard-Lord centuries ago.”

“Only to have others rise and take his place.” Im sounded weary. He let his eyes rest on Nanos for a moment. “I, too, have sensed another presence. We must talk, all of us.”

~

Orro cuffed his young apprentice, knocking her off balance. She stumbled, fell to the ground. It was not the first time Saj saw him act so. Was mistreating her a part of his commitment to evil? Or but a part of her training, maybe — either way, Saj did not like it at all.

But there was naught he could do. He seethed when the assassins laughed at Orro’s actions. The girl only picked herself up and gave her master a look of pure hatred. The priest seemed to approve of that. Like training a vicious dog, thought Saj, teaching her to expect kindness from none, to be ready to lash out at all. Teaching her evil.

They now followed a well-traveled road into the mountains. Men and women passed occasionally, usually well-laden, sometimes leading asses equally laden. They carefully avoided looking at the followers of Asak. Saj couldn’t blame them. The path led them northwestward, at times almost parallel to the mountains, it seemed. Those rose ever steeper to his left.

At last, they turned west and began to rapidly ascend. It was wild, rocky country, stunted trees arising here and there on the arid slopes. “The mountains are narrower here, but higher,” Orro informed him. “There is a good pass.” The priest of Asak looked up toward the peaks. “The road beyond leads down into the jungles but we do not go that way.”

“Your temple is in the mountains,” said Saj. So he had assumed.

“It is. Your home for a while —” Orro chuckled. “Or maybe forever.”

~

“Our friend Xido made sure the Eyes were scattered. That was

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certainly a good idea. I didn't mind, of course. They were no longer of use to me." Im lapsed into a pensive silence.

They remind him of that girl, thought Marana. The one who appeared when he battled Orro. That's probably why he wanted to rid himself of them. She doubted he would ever tell them the whole story.

Kambak seemed puzzled. "Xido, you say. The one we knew as Xit?"

"The same," Marana said. "He's a god."

Kambak did not openly scoff but the priest did frown. He did not believe in gods. "And he's been around as long as you? Centuries?" It seemed he could not quite believe in such longevity either.

"I met him nearly a millennium ago," Im told him. "He brought me to this world." Marana noted sudden interest from Nanos. This was something he didn't know. "But where I am rather long-lived — as is Cory — Xido is immortal." He gave them the ghost of a smile. "Though he believes even he will come to an end eventually."

"All things return to Munu," spoke Kambak. It seemed to reassure him to state one of the platitudes of his religion.

"And if Munu — or existence — is infinite, then none of it ever ends, maybe," Im replied. "That's no concern of ours. What is a concern is getting Saj back safely."

"And the jewels?" asked Nanos.

"They need to be kept safe. And not by you, I think." Im directed this last toward Kambak. "The Eyes were meant to come to Saj and Marana. They are the best guardians."

"And maybe another god told you this?" Kambak's voice held a perceptible trace of sarcasm.

"He did indeed," said the wizard. "Perhaps I'll introduce you sometime."

~

Kataree, the girl was named. Saj could not understand their Ildin speech but he heard Orro address her so frequently enough. She did

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not wear a black cap as did the others, but her hair was bound by a black band.

She and Orro sometimes sat for a while in the evenings, eyes closed, oblivious to the world around them. Saj has seen enough of sorcerers by this time to recognize them as such, off visiting other worlds or something of that sort. He had already known that of Orro, of course.

So, Kataree was not just a priestess in training but a sorceress in training. Their assassin companions might have laughed at her but they showed a certain deference at most times. They know she will be important one day, thought the Mur. They're not going to get on her bad side any more than necessary — but they would attempt to stay on their master's good side, too, by showing approval of his cruelties.

The pass proved, indeed, a good one, high and narrow and not very long of passage. The air was decidedly cool and felt damper on the far side of the peaks. Saj could see a touch of snow on the high places here. Below, to the west, the way would descend into a land largely unknown to the Mura. Ships that sailed up the western coast reported swamps and jungles, and few saw any point in exploring further.

As Orro had promised, they did not go west but turned northward, into the depths of the mountains.

~

"Xano will accompany you," announced Kambak. The plump young priest seemed to greet this information with resignation. "He has had more dealings with you and your husband and this, um, wizard, so he is the logical choice."

Getting any Ildin to accompany them was more difficult. "We do not wish to involve ourselves with the followers of Asak," said their spokesman. "No, not for any rewards you might offer." Most were of that mind; in the end, only two were willing to travel into the mountains, both young — and probably foolhardy — men. Nanos was upset

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that his four warriors refused to go, and more so because they could speak Muram. Fortunately, the two young volunteers knew a bit of the language.

“We may find those who will show more courage once we reach the mountains,” said Im. “I have been in contact with some who dwell there.” Nanos nodded at this, understanding it well; the rest just took his word for it.

“Then you know the way, as well,” said Nanos.

“That I do. It’s where I live.”

21.

There was no need for Cory to conceal itself, save when they met other travelers on their path. That was infrequent. Seven they were, including the demon — Marana, Im, Nanos, Xano, and the two Ildin, Oene and Dewasse.

Nanos said little the first day, and nothing to Im. He had shown a certain awe of the old sorcerer since discerning his identity. Marana thought maybe he was even afraid of Im. But he chose to speak that evening as they settled in their camp.

“You know wizards in the mountains?” asked Nanos. “Or beyond them?”

Im frowned at the man for some moments, seeming to debate whether to tell him anything. “Not true wizards,” he answered, “but priests with some small gifts, followers of Kamat or Banat. None, I think, the equal of Orro.”

“Either of us is more powerful than the priest of Asak,” observed Nanos.

“But neither of you has a troop of assassins on which to call,” spoke Cory. “I could take on a few but if the situation seemed too dangerous —” It fixed its featureless face on Im.

“You would pick me up and carry me off, leaving the others to survive as they might,” finished Im. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Preserving your life comes before all other concerns.”

“This is good to know,” said Marana. “Though I’m not sure what we can do about it.”

“We may be joined in a few days by fighting men from one of those mountain temples,” Im told her. “I should communicate with them.” He turned to Nanos. “Would you care to join the link?”

Nanos nodded. He was trying to appear nonchalant about it, but Marana was certain he was pleased, even flattered, to be asked. If Im truly were the most powerful wizard in the world, what sorcerer would not?

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The pair sat quietly for some minutes before returning. Im regarded the other wizard for a few seconds before saying, "We must speak sometime of that other who wished to join us."

"That is so," agreed Nanos.

~

Saj was not impressed. He shouldn't have expected a great temple, he told himself. He shouldn't have expected anything. It was more a crude fortress than aught else, perched above a secluded valley. He could see a few fields and houses below them. Who would live there, in the shadow of Asak's citadel? Slaves? Or people who worshiped the dark god themselves?

The temple compound became more impressive when he came to realize a warren of caves was hidden behind its walls, running deep into the mountain. Natural, perhaps, but not wholly, built upon and expanded over time. Saj was taken rather deep himself and thrust into an unlit cell. "We'll try to remember you are here," laughed Orro.

He sat some time in the darkness before rising to explore his surroundings. Irregular rock walls all around, no opening save the heavy door that had been barred behind him. The ceiling was low; he could reach up and touch it everywhere he tried. Chiseled into the rock, all of it, he guessed. There was no bedding, no furniture. He would have to sleep on the hard cold floor.

Voices. A man and a woman, it seemed, speaking Ildin. A faint light appeared around the ill-fitted door. He could hear the heavy bar being lifted. Only a bar; there was no lock. Maybe he could find some way of getting it up from in here. No, he had nothing that could be used as a tool. The cell was absolutely bare.

"Food," said the female voice. He recognized it as belonging to Kataree. "Right word?"

"It is," he replied.

"Know, um, little Muram," she said. The girl held up a small oil lamp, while a burly guard set a plate down before him. The man said

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something to Kataree. “Oh.” She set the pail she was carrying down next to the plate. “For to drink.” The girl giggled. “Not for pee-pee.”

“Then where?” asked Saj. The two Ildin conferred, and Kataree nodded.

“Hole. Somewhere.” She waved an arm at the darkness. “Find.”

“I shall try to, now I know it’s there.” Better than relieving himself on the floor, which he had feared would prove necessary.

Kataree said something, low, to the guard. He nodded and stepped out into the passageway. “Teach me better talk? I come, um —” The woman couldn’t come up with a word.

“Visit?” suggested Saj.

She nodded. “Visit. Yes.” She giggled again. “Teach me already!”

Kataree seemed to have a good start on Muram. It wouldn’t be difficult to help her build up her vocabulary. And it certainly beat sitting in the dark! “I will gladly teach you, Kataree,” he said, “if you will also teach me some of your own tongue.”

“Deal,” she replied, and followed the guard out. The soldier shut and barred the door behind them, leaving Saj again alone in the dark. Eventually he found the hole in the floor, against the back wall.

~

“A dragon!” cried Marana. Five pairs of eyes and one blank red face turned to where she pointed.

“It could be,” said Nanos, straining to make out the high-flying shape.

Im shook his head. “My eyes aren’t good enough anymore to say for sure, but it’s more likely to be a wyvern.” The two Ildin seemed to be in agreement.

As was Xano. “I’ve always heard it’s too hot on Lorj for dragons.”

“They might like it well enough in the high mountains,” Im replied, “but I’ve never known of any around these parts.”

Marana was baffled by all this. “What’s a wyvern?” she asked.

“A flying reptile,” answered Nanos. He was still looking up, trying

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to follow the creature's movement. "I've never seen one but I've read the lore. It seems to be headed away." His eyes went to Im. "Could it be spying on us? I understand they are rather stupid."

"It might have a rider," said the sorcerer. "Could you tell, Cory?"

"Too far away. Could have been one essence, could have been two."

"The priests of Asak keep wyverns, it is said," offered Oene.

Dewasse added, "And other foul creatures."

"So I have heard," said Im. "So I have heard."

~

He assumed it was three days, for Kataree had visited three times. "Good news, Master Saj," she announced immediately on entering his cell this day. "You will be to let out this, um, room!"

"Orro changed his mind about locking me away and forgetting me?" Saj asked, looking over the plate the guard had set down. It was the same hard bread as usual. The one good thing about this bare cell was that there were no vermin to get into his food, not even insects. Maybe there were not enough prisoners brought here to attract them.

"High priest order."

The guard murmured something and passed out into the hall, barring the door behind him. This had been his usual procedure, allowing Kataree to spend an hour or so with Saj.

"He is a sorcerer, like you and Orro?"

The girl shook her head. "No, no, not wizard. Asaro great assassin. Great, um —" She seemed to have trouble dredging up the right word. "Torturer. Great torturer." Kataree's eyes lingered on Saj for a rather long time. "Hope he not torture you."

Saj was quite inclined to agree. "What reason would he have?"

"No reason. Just fun. And to serve Asak."

Orro would probably do the same, given the opportunity. Saj hoped greatly that Marana would not come here to ransom him. She

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should be nowhere near these people. “Orro is the top wizard here, then?” he asked. “And your master?”

She nodded an agreement. “Orro teach me. Some-day I stronger than him.” Kataree gave a rather wicked smile at the thought. “He is brother. Or, um, half-brother, yes? We have same mother?”

This was both interesting and surprising. “Yes, half-brother. Different fathers, then?”

Kataree frowned. “Don’t know.” She spread her arms. “All priests are father.”

Maybe marriage was not a part of a priestess’ life. Was her mother a priestess? “Your mother is one of those here who serve Asak?” he asked.

“No. Priestess of Dekata! Dead now. Murdered.” She didn’t seem much bothered by that fact. “Asaro save me and Orro. We be murdered too!”

“Well, then I must give thanks to Asaro,” said Saj. And hope he does not practice his torture techniques on me, he added silently.

“The Wizard-Lord sent me here, I admit it. But why should I take those jewels back to him? Why should I not use their power myself?” Nanos attempted to sound defiant. Marana felt he did not quite succeed.

“They might not prove that useful to you,” said Im. “The Eyes are primarily tools of prophecy, though they can certainly be turned to other uses.”

“Kambak and his order shouldn’t have them. They would just hide them away.”

“Probably so,” agreed Im, “and that might not be such a bad thing. I still intend Saj and Marana to be their guardians. As do others.”

Marana decided it would be best not to ask who those ‘others’ might be. Nanos spoke again. “And I still intend to take them if I can. Not for the priests of Munu, not for the Wizard-Lord.”

“Definitely not for the Wizard-Lord,” said Im. “He gathers too much power to himself. I think — I think he may be the most powerful of his kind since Torut himself.”

“The great wizard you destroyed,” murmured Nanos. He sat silently for nearly a minute. “I am in accord with you in this. Above all, the Wizard-Lord must not have them. I have seen too much of the madness within him.” The sorcerer stared at the ground before saying, “You recognized that I had been in contact with him.”

“I did. He will learn that you have betrayed him.”

Nanos but shrugged. “He may know already.” A sigh. “I can never return to his realm, no, not even if I had the Eyes. I could not hope to match his power.” He raised his eyes to Im. “But you could.”

“I am too old,” was all Im had to say to that.

~

True to Kataree’s promise, Saj was released from his cell. He

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thought it was no more than a few hours after her last visit. It was Orro who came for him.

"You may go where you wish," the priest told him. "There is no escaping so it does not matter. But take care; there are those of our order who would find ways to amuse themselves if they got hold of you. That includes the women."

"Don't they fear your high priest?" asked the Mur.

"Asaro can't see everything, no matter how many spies he has serving him." Orro snickered. "Or thinks he has serving him."

Saj watched a pair of priestesses pass by. They seemed ascetic, austere. "Even such as they?" he asked, nodding in their direction.

"They would enjoy playing you alive, I've no doubt. They would probably use you first." The priest sounded rather matter-of-fact about this. "And maybe even while in the midst of their torture. Rape is the accepted form of intercourse in our order."

The priestesses all had the same cropped hair as the priests, and wore the same skullcaps. Those who wore the black band, as did Kataree, Orro said were acolytes; when they ascended to the priesthood, they would cut their hair short and don the black cap.

The next woman to pass them was quite different. For one thing, she was nude. Her hair was exceedingly long and quite unruly, falling nearly to her knees. She was gazing at the ground, muttering something to herself and shaking her head.

"That is not a priestess of Asak," said Saj.

"A follower of Dekata," came Orro's curt reply. He strode on.

As was his mother, thought Saj, his and Kataree's. It would be best not to press him on it, but he might say something to the girl. That was assuming he saw her again.

They climbed a rough and narrow staircase carved into the rock. "You can stay here," said the priest, leading him down a short hallway and into a room. It was hardly better furnished than the cell he had left but there was a slit of a window to the outside air and light. "Asaro

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will call for you. I do not know what he has in mind but it is not what we originally planned. Kataree will stay with you.” Orro frowned. “This too the high priest has ordered.”

Without further word, he turned and left Saj alone.

~

“You think they brought Saj this way?” asked Marana. “Xano says there is a better pass further south.”

“It is the one we use,” the priest added to this.

“And the one through which much trade passes between eastern and western Lorj,” said Im. “That should interest your husband. But the Asakians would not have taken it.”

The Ildin conferred in their own tongue. “This is the way to the mines,” said Oene. Dewasse nodded agreement. Neither seemed to like that fact.

Im nodded. “There are mines. Copper and such. Brimstone, too.”

“I’ve heard of those,” said Marana. “But aren’t most of them on Ussan?” That was the sizable island north of Lorj, the one they had passed on their voyage to Matanas.

“They are,” spoke Im. “Controlled by the Mura, worked by slaves. The ones here on Lorj are of no great importance.”

“We have heard of travelers being taken and forced to work in the mines,” Dewasse said. His voice lowered to a near whisper. “It is said they are controlled by the priests of Asak.”

“Probably so,” agreed Im. “Some of them.” He looked up. “Our companion has returned.”

Nanos gazed at the distant dark shape of the wyvern. “Definitely spying on us.” It was the third time now they had spotted it.

“Then let us continue on our way and give whoever rides yon beast something to report,” said Im. “We should be at the height of the pass by tomorrow.”

~

Asaro was not at all what Saj had expected. He had formed an

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image in his mind of the high priest as tall and severe, an assassin, a fanatic. Instead, he was of rather ordinary height and somewhat fat.

He had only one word for the priests who brought the captive to him. "Go." It was spoken softly, without inflection, but they hurried from his presence. Asaro chuckled. "Have a seat, boy," he said, waving Saj toward a comfortable upholstered chair. The room, as all those he had entered here, was sparsely furnished, with bare rock floor and walls.

The priest looked him up and down before saying, "It is good to have a reputation. I have made sure I did." He took a chair himself, slid it forward to sit facing the Mur. "Unlike those I rule here, I have no great desire to do evil, for the sake of evil. I am ambitious, Master Saj. Nothing more."

Saj nodded, unsure what the man might want him to say. "You are a wizard," continued Asaro.

"No, not really," protested Saj. He tried not to sound too forceful about it. Contradicting powerful men was a dangerous pastime.

The high priest smiled. "I know. Yet you have the power of sorcery within you — and so would your offspring. In fact, should you have children with a woman who shared your gift, it is certain they, too, would grow to be wizards."

"My wife has no powers," Saj said.

"That does not matter. You and she are done."

"You intend to — kill me?" asked the young man. Or Marana? Surely not.

"Indeed not. You are too valuable." Asaro's reassuring tone hardened just slightly as he continued. "And if you cooperate, no harm will come to your woman. Marana, right?"

He must have guessed what I was thinking, Saj told himself. "Yes, Lord Asaro," he answered.

"No titles," warned the priest. "The only lord here is Asak." He gave a small bow of his head, apparently in homage to the god. "I may

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not revel in death as do some, but I serve our god. In my own way — I am rather good at dealing with death, when need be.”

Saj believed him. “So what do you wish of me, other than the Jewels?”

“I want more sorcerers and I want you to breed them. Our order would be truly powerful were our leaders wizards as well!” The priest chuckled at Saj’s expression. “And you could start with Kataree.”

“But — does she want this?”

Asaro shrugged. “Rape her. Or maybe she could rape you. She knows all the knots a skilled torturer learns to bind her victims. Otherwise,” he said, “I might have to give her to her brother. Only my threats have kept all men from touching her so far.” He snickered. “All women too.”

Saj allowed himself to appear resigned. “If it means my wife’s safety —”

“And you might enjoy yourself. There are other women about this place to divert you during her pregnancies. The more children you can produce, the better!” He suddenly gave Saj a hard, almost menacing, glare. “And the happier I shall be.”

~

This notch in the mountains was narrow. “We’ll be descending in no time,” promised Im. “You shall see a part of Lorj that has been hidden from most Mura.”

“Sharshites,” Marana reminded him.

“On the western side of the mountains, it is more like the lands of my birth,” said Xano. “The jungled isles of the south.” The priest sighed. “I miss them. I should leave Kambak and serve some village over here.”

Im nodded in understanding. “I have visited those isles. And I have seen jungles that would astound you, in other worlds. Worlds where everything is more intense, the days brighter and the nights darker than here. A world where the purity of colors will overwhelm ones soul,

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where huge sheer gleaming cliffs rise into the clouds, and the women – ah, the women!”

“Would that be Xit’s world?” asked Marana.

“It would,” admitted the sorcerer. “Long ago, so long ago, he took me there.” He swept away his nostalgia with a laugh. “There are also murderous demons who would gladly have made a snack of me, had the Crocodile not been my companion.”

“I remember,” rumbled Cory. “Horrid place. Everything was too – alive. It blinded me. Hey!”

Something had bounced off the demon. A moment later, Oene crumpled, an arrow in his back.

23.

It was Im who recognized what was going on. “Archers behind us, one or two.” He looked up the narrow pathway through the gap. It went around a bend a few hundred feet ahead. “Want to drive us into an ambush.”

“To capture, not kill,” immediately said Marana. She knew something of tactics.

“To capture you. I don’t think they care about the rest of us.” The wizard looked about. “Over there.” He pointed to an outcropping of the rocks where they would be shielded from the arrows. “We’ll make them come to us.”

“Oene is dead,” Dewasse informed them, rising from his companion’s body. Marana noted that Cory had stood between them and the archer, like a great shield. Perhaps it was not so amoral after all. Or perhaps it had its own reasons for preserving their lives. They hurried to their protected spot. No more arrows flew their way. There would be no point now and the archers wouldn’t want to chance hitting the wrong target.

“They didn’t get us to go where they wanted,” Marana said. “Running around that corner in a panic.”

“But what do we do now?” asked Nanos.

“Sit and wait,” answered Im. To Cory, he said, “Can you tell how many?”

The red demon shook its head. “Too much rock in the way.” It looked along the way they had come. “Two archers back there. No one else.” A subterranean rumble of a chuckle came from somewhere in its massive body. “They thought to take me out first. It would take more than one of their arrows.” The creature peered thoughtfully toward the hidden archers. “When it gets dark, I could easily go remove the pair of them and you could slip off.”

Im nodded. “If we last till dark,” he admitted, “that would be a very good plan.”

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~

"I would not so much mind be with you," said Kataree. "Could be far worse things."

Saj had to smile at that. He, the lesser of evils! But to the girl he said, "I shall find a way to leave here. I have seen the many children Marana and I shall have. This I know will be."

"Oh." The girl grew pensive. Had she wanted him to stay?

Best he turn the conversation elsewhere. "Are there no others here with sorcerous powers? Only you and your brother?"

"None of, um, among the priests of Asak. Different with the followers of Dekata. The goddess attracts those who practice magic."

"Who is this Dekata?"

Kataree went to stare out of the narrow window. Saj knew there was little to see but mountains. "The Lady of the Dark Moon call her some. It is claimed she is Asak's daughter."

He had heard mention of such a Dark Lady among the Sharshites. Maybe it was the same goddess. "And your mother was one of her priestesses."

"The leader of the coven here. Murdered she was by rivals while I still a little girl. Would have killed Orro and me, too, if Asaro hadn't taken us from them."

Already planning, thought Saj. Two young wizards the high priest could turn to the service of his own cult. "The temple of Dekata lies deep underground," continued Kataree. "Remember the ways, though it is long since I pass through them."

She turned to the young Mur. "Take me with you and I shall show you way to escape this place."

~

"You might raise a fog," suggested Cory. "Both of you." Its featureless face moved from Im to Nanos.

"If we make a run for it after dark, I shall do this," said Im. "You know how?" he asked his fellow magician.

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“I do.” Nanos didn’t sound very enthusiastic about the plan. “We know they won’t wait that long.”

“Probably not, though they may wait until dusk to creep around that bend. I do not think they are eager to tackle Cory! Hmm, I think I should leave for a moment or two.” With that, Im turned from them and went into a trance.

Nanos looked askance before saying, “I can’t imagine why he would want to talk to someone from afar right now. Our problem is right here.”

Cory suddenly shook itself. “Someone is trying to bind me,” it growled.

Nanos peered at him. “Yes, yes, I see it. Orro, no doubt. He must be with those attacking us. Let me — there you are.” He considered the demon for a few seconds. “There will be more attempts, I think. I’ll keep a watch for them.”

“You are stronger than he is,” said Im, returned from wherever he had journeyed. “He knows his spells will fail. The man hopes only to distract and inconvenience us.” All eyes turned to the old wizard, all faces asked if he had any new hope for them. He but shrugged. “I spoke but I learned little. We are on our own.”

~

“Will be dark soon,” spoke Kataree. “Then we go.”

“The sooner the better,” Saj said. “We should get away before Asaro decides to, um, put his plan into action.”

The girl frowned. “Yes. And we need an excuse to go outside. Oh, I know. I give you a tour.” She winked. “Consider it a form of torture.”

“You must be very surly with me,” he told her. “Maybe slap me around a little.”

“My pleasure,” the young woman replied. He was not sure how serious she might be.

It was already mid-afternoon when they left their cell — Saj’s cell,

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but Asaro definitely expected Kataree to stay there too. “Would like to see some of the torture chambers?” asked the girl. “Maybe something interesting going on in them.”

“I’d rather not,” Saj admitted. “Say, shouldn’t I have a weapon among all your murderous priests?”

“None dare touch you. Or me. Though —” She paused, thinking of something.

“Yes?” prompted Saj.

“We go down into the caverns of those who worship Dekata, Asaro’s protection not follow us. I’ll find you a knife or something.” She already wore a rather dangerous-looking dagger on her own belt. “In here.” Kataree pivoted into a dark archway in the stone wall to their right. The way was narrow and rapidly descended, a ramp, not stairs.

Probably makes it easier to drag bodies, Saj joked to himself, and then shuddered when he realized it might well be true. “It’s dark in here,” he said. The only light was from the narrow doorway, dwindling behind them. Kataree turned left without warning. He almost missed it in the darkness. There was a dim glow, barely noticeably, close to the floor. Coals, maybe, in some sort of fire pit.

His eyes adjusted though it was still hard to make out much. One of the torture chambers she had mentioned, but not currently in use. He thanked Jov for that. Implements of pain shone dully where they hung on the walls. “Wish I could take some of the torches with us but they make suspicion,” said the girl. She thinks things through, Saj told himself. Kataree would not be a liability.

“Let’s see. Ah, this should do.” She picked up some sort of blade. “Skinning knife. I know it’s not, um, ideal.” He took the knife, showing no reluctance despite his disgust. At least the blade seemed to have been well cleaned.

“Hide inside your tunic,” the acolyte told him. “I don’t think anyone expect you be trusted with a weapon yet.” They went back up

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the sloping hallway to the outside light. "I go to take you by the pens," said Kataree. "Seems natural enough, hmm? People like to look at the animals. Especially the children."

Saj nodded. Something normal at last! "Yes, children do like animals," he said.

"When they get to old enough they are allowed to pick one out to practice torture skills on." She seemed to go into a bit of a reverie. "Pigs are best."

Saj felt almost sick. "Or so I used to think," the girl went on, her voice lower. "I been learning new ways. There is one who is teaching me."

He felt it best not to inquire about this. "Most of the beasts we eat are raised down further in the valley," she said. "These are for to sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?"

"Yes. Every torture or killing is considered a sacrifice to Asak."

The animal pens themselves were not that interesting. There were pigs, goats, even rabbits, all well cared for. It was chilling, however, to listen to children discussing their plans for one creature or another, sometimes with encouragement and suggestions from their adult mentors. That they might turn what they learned on each other sometime in the future seemed all too probable.

"I have a reason for to bringing you this way," whispered Kataree. "Path through the dark begins ahead. Beyond the rookery of the wyverns."

“They come.” Cory had sensed the approaching Asakians before any of the humans could spy them.

“These probably won’t be the highly skilled assassins we met before,” spoke Im. “Not most of them. Temple guards, more likely.”

“They could make us just as dead,” said Xano.

“Hope that they do rather than take you prisoner. Can you see how many?” breathed Nanos.

This was directed to no one in particular. It was Cory who answered. “Eighteen. Plus the two behind us.”

Im seemed to whisper something and held out his hand. As Marana had seen happen before, a sword appeared in it. None of the others had carried more than a knife, save Dewasse and Oene who had borne spears. Nanos took up the dead Ildin’s shaft. “I prefer the weapon at hand to one I might draw from elsewhere.” He barked a laugh.

The approaching Asakians could be made out readily now in the fading light, creeping along in the rocky cover on either side of the path. That must be Orro in the back and the three men with him were his bodyguard of assassins. Ahead of them came men in light armor, bearing spears and short swords. There were probably black caps beneath their pot-shaped helmets.

“Do not try to run with me, Cory,” warned Im. “You know I can resist you these days.”

“Only if it is absolutely necessary,” spoke the demon.

“Yes,” the wizard agreed, “and you must take the Lady Marana as well.”

“Very well,” rumbled Cory and turned to face the enemy. “I think I will charge first.”

~

The wyverns roosted within a cave, a great open hollow in the cliffs above the temple of Asak. Saj could smell the stench of them long before they climbed to the rookery.

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“I’ve never seen one before,” he admitted. “Nor a dragon.” He didn’t know if they looked much alike. They did have the same webbed, bat-like wings. Well, no — not so bat-like with these creatures. The drawings he had seen of dragons had fingers through the webbing, as a bat, but these had but one long expanse of skin between body and the single ‘finger.’ They were covered with a fine fur of some sort, except for the bare reptilian heads.

“Don’t get too close,” a keeper warned them. “Asaro would have my skin if anything happened to you two.” Quite literally so, Saj realized. And if they disappeared here in the rookery, as Kataree seemed to suggest they would, he might anyway.

The Mur could not bring himself to feel much sympathy for one of these Asakians. They repulsed him. So did these empty-eyed reptiles they passed. Saj was startled by the sudden appearance of a tiny, naked, pale, manlike creature among the pens. “What is that?” he whispered to his companion.

“Kobold,” explained Kataree. “We employ them to ride the wyverns. A tribe dwells further up in the mountains.”

It was quite ugly, wizened and hairless, with a great long nose, and standing perhaps waist-high on a normal man. “They serve Asak?”

She laughed at that. “They serve us if we pay them. Come on; it is time began our journey.”

He followed her into an unguarded passage at the rear of the cave, descending into the bowels of the mountain.

~

“Can it face the weapons without harm?” asked Nanos, watching Cory ready itself to rush forward.

“Pretty much,” said Im. “A heavy lance or a crossbow bolt fired close up will pierce it, yet might cause little damage. Cory has no organs but is like a plant inside.”

“Ha, I’d best stay behind the beast!” Both wizards grasped their

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weapons, prepared to follow the demon. Dewasse seemed to be gathering his courage to join them.

“You stay with me,” Marana told Xano. She used the tone she might have with a server in her father’s house, the tone a noblewoman employed when she expected her orders to be obeyed. “They will not break through but only hope to scatter our attackers momentarily.” She looked toward the fading red in the western sky. “Then maybe we can escape in the dark.” The priest only stared toward the approaching Asakians. Had he comprehended any of what she said?

“Lady Marana,” he whispered. “If those — those men take us, promise me you will put a dagger into me. I would not die on the altars of Asak.”

“Don’t fear. We’ll be alright.” But she promised herself she would do as the priest of Munu asked, if the need came. She would not let Xano go to the torturers.

She, on the other hand, they probably wanted alive. For now. If Orro got hold of the jewels, her life would no longer have any value, nor would that of Saj.

The three men rushed forward in the wake of the red beast. Cory let out an extraordinarily loud and deep war cry, more alike a thunder clap than aught else. Then it was among the enemy soldiers, thrashing with its heavy fists. Suddenly, fire leaped toward the demon, emanating from Orro. It retreated, howling.

So it was vulnerable to magic. Im could defend himself but he would be hard put to defend everyone else from what the wizard-priest of Asak might conjure. The four backed away quickly, their sortie ended. It might have bought them some time and no one was injured.

Well, maybe some of those warriors over there were. Cory had pounded some pretty hard. “In on them!” she heard Orro cry. He was not going to let them have a respite — nor his own soldiers, for that matter.

The Asakians charged raggedly toward them. “I’ll try to keep Orro

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busy,” called out Im. “The rest is up to you.” Ah, there was no way they would repulse a dozen men, men better armed than they. Marana grabbed Xano, and pulled him to her.

“Be ready to retreat,” she hissed. “Back the way we came.” It was near dark. They might elude their enemy. What was going on? She couldn’t see well but it looked like the followers of Asak were drawing back, confused, looking toward the west. Were there more men coming through the pass?

“The fighting men from the shrine of Kamat,” crowed Im. “I knew they were on their way but could get no word on when they might arrive.”

There must be as many or more of them as the Asakians. Those broke and ran eastward, past Marana and Xano. “We’re safe!” spoke the priest, standing up. He sat down again, abruptly, and slumped to the ground. A lithe assassin of Asak stood behind him, his blade dripping blood. Orro stepped forward, looked at the fallen man and then at Marana.

“Bring her,” he ordered. Then he laughed and added, “Let’s make it quietly.” He aimed a blow at her head and she remembered no more.

ELEMENT III.

GOING TO EARTH

25.

“We should to find torches further down,” Kataree assured him. “Or a lamp. We’ll need them.”

“The followers of Dekata live down here?” asked Saj.

“Hmm, mostly no. But they do spend a lot of time in these caves. It is where they hold their rites.” There was a long pause and Saj thought the girl was finished speaking. “Most of their rites. They go out into air on the night of the new moon. Dangerous to be outside then!”

It seemed dangerous to be anywhere around this place at any time to Saj. They followed the tunnel downward; mostly it sloped gradually but here and there stairs were cut into the rock. Kataree would know where and warn him, lest he go tumbling down them in the dark. “You say it has been long since you followed these ways,” he remarked.

“Not *these* ways,” came her reply. “Ways further down. Sometime follow this passage when I need a shortcut. Or — or when I want to be alone.”

She’s been alone a long time, though Saj. Her cold brother would not have been much of a comfort to her. “You lived with the priests of Asak since your mother, um, passed?” he asked her.

“No. Asaro send me and Orro to live a while by Gladsa, to protect from enemies. I liked it there and — and Orro not so bad then.” Saj was fairly certain she stifled a sob. “Orro learned wizard things from our mother but I was too little. He taught me.”

Kataree came to a sudden halt and he bumped into her. “What is it?” he whispered.

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“Shh. Thinking.” Saj stood quietly in the dark, waiting. “We turn aside here. Must be quiet. Mmm, hold onto me so to not get lost.” He got a handful of her kirtle and followed her as she turned to her left.

“Many steps,” she whispered. They cautiously crept down the long stairway. “Narrow,” came her voice. “Didn’t remember them so.”

“You remember pretty well,” Saj whispered back. Maybe they would not need a light at all.

“No more,” said Kataree. “All, um, what word. Flat?”

“Level?” hazarded Saj.

“Yes, level. All level now. Temple here.” She sounded slightly apologetic as she continued. “Must go through.”

Through the temple? That had to be risky. “We’ll do what we must,” he said, and hoped it was sufficiently encouraging.

Kataree had stopped and seemed to rummaging about with something. “Ah, still here. Torches. Two each? Yes,” she decided. “Find flame and light later.”

Saj could make out a dim light ahead, growing only slightly stronger as they progressed. Then they stepped from the passageway into a great vaulted cavern, its ceiling hidden in shadow. The temple, surely. There was a tall stone dais and a pair of oil lamps flickering before it. In the dark recesses of the far side, the Mur thought he could make out a statue, carved of black stone. Three heads?

No one around. “We light torches and go out over there.” Kataree pointed to a spot behind the idol, an apparent doorway. He could see it was a woman now and, yes, with three heads, all of them repulsive. It was deathly quiet in this cave, far beneath the mountains. Saj felt buried alive, buried with the goddess of the new moon. Each lit a torch from the flame of the lamps, and hurried toward the exit.

From the darkness of the arched passage stepped a tall, stout woman in a black robe. Kataree gasped and drew back. “It is she who slew my mother.”

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~

Her first thought was of Xano. Slain. Mourn him later, she told herself. There was a dull ache in her head. Where am I? Marana looked around. Perhaps half a dozen men she could make out. One of them gestured toward her, saying something in Ildin.

“Ah, awake.” Orro stepped into her line of sight. “We can be on our way.” He turned and gave directions to his men. Fighters who had fled the battle, and only the one assassin — the man who had knifed Xano.

“We shall have to travel roundabout, I fear,” said Orro. “Or wait a few days and go back through the pass here. The priests of Kamat might post a guard, though, or even send men to pursue us.” He hesitated, made up his mind. “Hmm, yes, best to be on a different road across the mountains.”

Marana rose, ready to go where she must. She wobbled a little, her head spinning, but kept herself erect. She would not show weakness before such as these. “The pass further south of which I have heard?” she asked.

“Too far to go and far too heavily traveled. Word of our presence would spread quickly.”

Would her companions head this way, searching for her? wondered the noblewoman. Or would they continue their journey, taking the Eyes to trade for Saj’s life and freedom? She hoped the latter.

Orro was staring at her. “It is to be assumed the old wizard is carrying the jewels,” he said. “Whether he is willing to trade them for either you or your husband is to be seen. I’ll keep you alive for now — you may prove valuable still.” Only one corner of the priest’s lip curled into the semblance of a smile. “And if not, I might not kill you at once, anyway. That would be a waste.” He glanced toward his men. “Not right away. They’d insist on sharing.”

A word of command to his men and they rose from where they squatted. One put a rope around Marana’s neck. Orro turned, began

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marching toward the north, the warriors of Asak following. Marana had no choice but to do the same.

~

Saj did not know enough Ildin to follow their exchange. He caught ‘Asaro’ and something about escaping, he thought. The woman turned to him. “Muram? You look Muram.” She spoke this in his own language.

“I am,” he replied, cautious of adding any more.

“I learned your tongue as a girl, before coming to this place. As many followers of the dark goddess, I was not born here. Come.” She slowly made her way into the temple cavern. Saj decided it best to follow, and Kataree followed him. “Many who are untrained and maddened by their power find their way here to the shrine of Dekata, for she is too the goddess of madness. Some join our order. Some we kill, as a danger to us.” She addressed the girl, who stood tensed as if ready to bolt at any moment. “But we may use them first. Your brother was fathered by one such. You, we never were certain of.”

The woman moved slowly, stiffly, taking a seat on the edge of the dais. “My days ruling from this slab of stone are numbered. I am old and walk only with an effort. So I do not care overly about you two. Escaping Asaro? No point in killing you then. I only wanted your life so you would not grow to be a rival. There is power in you, girl!” She fixed her dark-eyed gaze on Kataree a moment, before shaking her head and loosing a bitter laugh. “So end Asaro’s plans. Go your way. I would just as soon inconvenience the priest of Asak.”

Saj thought it best not to mention that slaying them would be an equal inconvenience. Did this high priestess have retainers within shouting distance or was she alone here? She certainly could not harm nor detain them on her own. Even if she were the powerful sorceress Saj assumed her to be.

“I should hate you,” murmured Kataree.

The priestess shrugged. “It would make no difference. Be on your

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way before I change my mind.” She turned her gaze to the gloom of the great cavern and spoke no more.

26.

Marana watched the winged shape spiraling down. So, as they had suspected, the wyverns served the priests of Asak. The flying reptile settled a short distance from them; a tiny wizened man leaped from its back as Orro approached. Both beast and rider were fascinating. She couldn't decide which to gaze at.

Their small visitor stepped forward and addressed the priest not in Ildin but a broken Muram. The universal trade language must extend even to whatever tribe of manlike beings he represented. Marana could not make out much of what they said so her eyes went back to the wyvern.

How marvelous it must be to ride through the sky! She had heard of men riding dragons in old tales, yes, and griffins too. Marana doubted this creature could bear a full sized human. But it could undoubtedly kill one. The narrow reptilian head bore a slight fleshy crest, rusty-red, and a mouth with many sharp teeth. It fixed its unblinking eyes on her.

Conference ended, the little man returned to his mount, taking care to keep a stout cudgel between himself and that fearsome head. Wyvern riding must have its dangers. After they rose with a thunder of leathery wing and disappeared above the mountains, Orro addressed her. "It seems your husband disappeared from the temple of Asak, kidnapping my sister. We obviously underestimated the man and paid too much attention to that old wizard. It is a good thing, then," he said, his voice remaining as flat and emotionless as ever, "I have you. It will take several days to make our way there and we haven't much food. Short rations for all, my lady."

Without further word, he motioned the men to follow and returned to his path northward.

~

"I did not know — know that about my father," whispered Kataree at last. She had led them some distance from the temple cavern,

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turning this way and then that into narrow dark tunnels. "Or about Orro's"

She thought they were priests, Saj told himself, either of Dekata or Asak. "The priestess didn't tell you anything about him," he said. "Only that he is unknown."

"And that tells much," the girl replied. "Privacy is rare here."

"A lover?" he guessed. That, as well, might be rare in this place.

"Maybe. Go down now. Many steps."

It did seem that they descended for hours, here where there was no measuring time. The torches only illuminated the stone stairway a short distance ahead of them. Interminable darkness lay beyond.

"You know about, um —" began Kataree. "You know about wizard-speak?"

"Conversing from afar with other sorcerers? Yes, I've seen it. I'm told I could probably learn it myself."

"Want me teach?" The girl actually giggled the question. It was good to see her back in a better mood.

"Maybe later. Why did you ask about it?" How much further down would they go?

"I have to go — no, not right. I have to gone? I *visited* other places. Orro forbade it but I visit them anyway!"

"And he couldn't tell? I think that takes a good deal of skill, Kataree." That murderous old priestess of Dekata was right about her being full of power.

"I meet other wizards. Learn things. There is more to the world than Dekata and Asak!" She led the way downward in silence for a little while before adding, "And I meet the sister of Dekata. She to me show many wonders."

"Sister?" Saj couldn't help but ask. It seemed astonishing.

"She is goddess of full moon. Ah, end of stairs!" Kataree giggled again. "End of stairs down. Stairs up, ahead."

Great, said Saj only to himself. What was that? It sounded like

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someone running, distant, echoing faintly down these tunnels. “Did you hear that?” he whispered to the girl.

She nodded. “There are those who lurk in depths below the temple, those driven mad, tormented by their powers.” Kataree shivered at the thought. Or maybe at the cold — it was chilly in these nighted passages. “It is good, Master Saj, that you can control your gift or you might be as they.”

“My mom taught me,” he murmured. It was true. She too had the second sight. “Mostly just how to block it all out.”

“So it comes only in dreams, no?”

“That is so.” Mostly so, until recently. He could hear footsteps again, nearer. Were those voices whispering in the dark, forms scurrying just beyond his vision? Who gathered out there?

A torch flared up, held by a naked, unkempt man. “A sacrifice!” he cried out.

Another wild, mad voice rose. “The Lady of the New Moon has sent them to us!”

How many? Ten maybe, or a dozen? Saj’s hand found the knife tucked inside his kilt. “Must run to the stairs,” Kataree spoke in his ear. “Come!”

Saj only hoped it wasn’t too far. All it would take was one stumble as that crazed rabble chased them through the tunnels and all would be at an end. He followed behind the young woman. She’s fast, he told himself, a little surprised. Saj was no great runner himself. His legs were too short.

Behind them howled the mad devotees of Dekata.

~

They had turned westerly, bit by bit, following a winding way higher into the mountains. Marana could sense the men were not comfortable traveling this road. But they did as Orro commanded.

“It is a long road,” he told her. “It is a hard road. That does not matter.” Orro stopped and looked up at the peaks. “We will cross.”

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“And come out at your temple?” she asked.

“No, north of it — a little too close to Kamazad and the other shrines for comfort. We maintain a balance of peace with them, most of the time, but if our troop were discovered in their territory, it would not go well for us.”

I can but hope, thought Marana.

On they climbed, day after day, and ever hungry. Orro was strict about rationing out their food, but made sure Marana received her share. She suspected the others would as soon have starved her. In time, they wound their way up to the height of this little used, difficult pass and peered out across the misted mountains beyond.

A great smoking cone, far in the distance, almost faded into the horizon. “Kamazad,” said Orro. “The sacred mountain of those who worship Kamat.”

It was even more impressive than the Cana’s volcano. That was a place of power. Was Kamazad, as well?

If so, Saj had best steer clear of it.

~

“Up!” cried out Kataree. The stairs, at last, through a narrow arched entry. They rose steep ahead. I could turn and defend these indefinitely, thought Saj. And would, if necessary.

He followed on the girl’s heels, their pursuers close behind. Far enough, he decided, after a minute’s climb, and wheeled about. Yes, they could only come up one at a time behind them. He waited for their leader, knife in hand, but hoped he would not have to use the weapon. It was to his advantage that these maniacs would want to take him and Kataree alive for whatever torment or sacrifice they had in mind. He brandished the knife and the lead pursuer halted, eyes on the blade. Good, they were bunching up behind him. Now don’t lose your footing! he told himself.

He pivoted, swinging his right leg out, supporting his weight on a step with his left hand, and putting all the force he could into a mighty

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kick into the man's chest. Down he went and back, knocking over those behind him. Saj listened with satisfaction to the crashing and howls of dismay as a jumble of bodies bounced down the stairs. Then he turned and sprinted back up the steps to Kataree.

"That might be enough," he said. "If naught else, it may delay them a good bit."

"More than enough, Saj of Mura," spoke the girl. "None will follow where go we now."

“It is my brother,” said Kataree. “He try to speak to me.”

Saj assumed the girl would not respond. There would be no purpose in revealing herself to Orro. “Could you speak to Im, maybe?” he asked. “Or one of your own friends?”

“Too dangerous now. Stay hidden.”

Saj hoped they would not stay hidden in these seemingly endless caves much longer. He was getting hungry. Kataree should have detoured into the kitchens in the shrine of Dekata!

There had been no more pursuit. His companion implied that even madmen were afraid to walk where now they did, through damp black tunnels that twisted and turned somewhere beneath the mountains. One miscalculation of their route and they might be lost forever. Saj worried that their torches would not outlast their journey. Two had been used up; he had not lit his remaining one but let Kataree lead on with hers. It was nearly burnt down.

What was that stench? Kataree looked back at him, seemingly as baffled as he. It reminded Saj of a polecat. Could one nest in here somewhere? If so, they could not be too far from the surface.

The scent grew stronger, near overpowering. Something stirred in the shadows beyond. A low, rumbling growl could be heard before a creature slowly crept forward to be revealed by the torch light. It was as a dragon, but much smaller, and its wings were, at best, vestigial. A blunt furred head with erect ears and glittering, malevolent eyes, preceded a sinuous body, perhaps a man’s height in length.

“A basilisk,” breathed Kataree.

All Saj knew of basilisks was that they were notoriously bad-tempered. There was some tale of a paralyzing gaze or poisonous attack, wasn’t there? But if they were kin to the polecat —

“If it turns around, run quickly away,” he told the girl. “It will mean to spray us.”

Kataree had a different idea. She ran directly at the beast, bran-

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dishing her torch before her. It hesitated but a moment before pivoting and escaping into the darkness.

Saj rarely prayed but that deserved a word of thanks to Jov.

~

Orro had spent some time sitting cross-legged, a little apart from the others, his eyes half-closed. Talking to some one else at a distance, Marana knew. Maybe Saj should learn to do that. Or maybe not.

The wizard-priest chose to speak first to her. "My sister is not to be found," he said. "I do not know why. I am certain she still lives." He shrugged. "That is as it will be. I have spoken with your wizards. Both of them — they seem to have become allies."

For now, she said to herself. There was little doubt that Nanos would try to take the Eyes for himself, should the opportunity arise.

"Anyway, they know now you are alive and my captive. So we may deal yet."

"I would assume you said nothing of Saj."

"Of course not, my lady." He hesitated a moment, stood there in thought. "There was another presence, a very powerful sorcerer, they were keeping at bay. Know you aught of this?"

She had heard Nanos and Im speak of the distant Wizard-Lord. The name was about all she knew of him. That and the fact that Nanos had once served him. Would there be any advantage in telling these few bits of knowledge to Orro?

No. Best to keep him guessing. "Nothing," she said. Orro could believe her if he wished.

"Hmm. Whoever he is, he wants the jewels too. No one need tell me that." He turned to the men and gave orders in their tongue. A couple minutes later they were again on their pathway, following their roundabout route to the temple of Asak.

The way led through a wilderness of high mountain valleys, along cliffs, around impassible ridges. Marana was surprised, at first, at how green everything was on this side of the mountains. After a few days of

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frequent rains, she realized the jungles here should be no surprise at all.

These men could eat if they just stopped and hunted a little while, Marana told herself. There was plenty of game. Why must they hurry back to their temple? Were they so afraid of the rival priesthoods?

She wished she better understood the Ildin they jabbered at each other. Only Orro spoke to her, and he not often. "It was a risk, speaking to Im," he admitted to her. "Your friends will now know for certain we are trying to get back to our home and they will guess the route."

"So you scurry home," she said.

"That we do, and feel no shame in it." The priest actually snickered. "Cowardice is a vice and therefor Asak approves of it."

Marana felt he wasn't quite serious about this. She scrutinized the tall man. He was really quite young, wasn't he? No more than a couple years older than Saj, maybe. A boy, playing a game, playing a part. Was he truly so committed to his god, to his evil — or was there ambition under all that, and a bit of cynicism?

They marched steadily on, their way meandering east and west but always south.

~

"We climb now."

The stench of the basilisk still hung in the stale air. This must be the way it went in and out of the caves. They were on their last torch and before them lay a slope of rubble. Saj was certain there was light, faint distant light, up there.

"My mother took me here," said Kataree. "More than once. I do not remember why but I did remember the way." She began to make her ascent through the rocks.

"Maybe she wanted to escape too," suggested Saj. Or wanted her daughter to be able to, someday. He followed her as she picked her way upward.

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Yes, it was getting brighter. And the air! Fresh at last. There, he could make out a patch of blue. They must have wandered the whole of night beneath the earth, and now a new day had come. Kataree scrambled up the last few yards and disappeared. A moment later Saj was standing beside her, looking out over a deep valley. No one would even notice that little hole they had climbed out of, here in this vast mountain wilderness.

“Where from here?” he asked.

“Don’t know!”

~

Orro looked up frequently. Was he expecting the wyvern to return? A pair of eyes in the sky would certainly be of use if he feared enemies were tracking him. Now and again, he would stop and go into a trance, where he stood communicating with someone. No explanation was offered to Marana.

But he was assuredly filling his men in. They did not look happy when he gave them whatever news he had.

At last, as they settled down one hungry evening — no provisions whatsoever remained — he said to her, “I have been talking with my wyvern rider.”

“He is a wizard?” That surprised Marana.

“All kobolds can do this. All those of Fay. He tells me there are patrols all around. We may not be able to elude them and —” He hesitated, frowned fiercely. “And the high priest is unwilling to send any men to help us. Not into these areas outside our own territory.”

“Then surrender,” she suggested.

It was perhaps the first genuine laugh she had heard from the man. “Maybe we should, Lady Marana.” But his impassive expression quickly returned. “But we shall not. I would sooner see you die than give you up.”

Saj took no time in fashioning a sling, using leather lacings and cloth from his own garb. Within minutes, an unwary pika fell to a cast stone. “I’ve no means of starting a fire,” he apologized. “We’ll have to eat it raw.”

In answer, Kataree nonchalantly reached out and retrieved a flaming brand from some other world. She *was* powerful. More powerful than her brother, maybe more powerful than Nanos. But still with much to learn, Saj suspected. He gathered some fallen branches and soon had a roaring fire going. The girl watched with some interest as he gutted and dismembered their dinner.

“You are good with the knife,” she said.

“I hunted plenty of small game back in Muradon,” he said. “My village was in the wooded hills, far from the cities of the coasts.”

“Why come here?”

Saj laughed, a tad self-consciously. “My mother dreamed I would make my fortune in a far land. My brother remains at home and is now the village carpenter.”

She nodded. “So you leave and one thing follows another, no?” Eyes narrowed, the girl gazed at him for a moment. “Your mother is dead?”

“She is. I would not have left otherwise.” Saj chuckled. “I wouldn’t have left her in the care of that lummo Borm!” He missed Borm. He missed his mother too, and the land of his birth. Ah, Muradon was the past; never would he return there. And he had Marana.

The pika wasn’t bad. Any food was good. Freedom was even better. They would find their way somewhere, and he would be reunited with his wife. He hoped Im was keeping her safe.

“I think I try wizard-talk now,” Kataree announced after their meal. She sat for a very short time and opened her eyes abruptly. The words rushed out. “It is your wife,” she said. “My brother has taken her captive.”

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~

“My sister spoke to someone last night,” said Orro. “I know not whom, but I could sense her passing through one of the worlds where we sometimes meet.” The priest shook his head. “Sense her, only. Kataree has grown powerful.” A slight smile. “More powerful than I am.”

He stood and assessed his squatting men. A miserable looking bunch, they were. Marana hoped he was reconsidering surrendering. “I have always known I will not be a great wizard. This Nanos rubbed my nose in that fact when we sparred.” He shrugged. “Not to mention your protector Im. So be it.” He issued orders to the Asakian warriors and they set forth on another day’s journey.

“If we can elude the Kamatians today, we may be able to reach the safety of our own lands by tomorrow.”

“Kamatians?”

“From the temple at Kamazad. Or maybe some of our pursuers are followers of Banat. Those are the two largest cults in the area, and the most likely to strive with we who serve Asak.”

She knew nothing of the Ildin pantheon. Saj had mentioned Banat, she remembered. A statue of Banat had once held the four Eyes of the Wind. They did not seem as human as the gods the Sharshites revered. Too abstract.

They tramped on through the day. Marana felt they had turned just slightly toward the east, toward the mountain crests. The road to the secluded temple of Asak must lie there. It was mid-afternoon when Orro communicated again with his kobold spy and began barking urgent orders to the the men.

They were running now, all of them. Their enemies must be near. What would Orro do if they were found? Would he truly kill her? Marana ran on with the rest, over the rocky uneven ground, and tried not to think of it.

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~

“So Marana is not at the temple,” said Saj.

“Somewhere out there,” Kataree replied, waving an arm toward the rugged landscape to their west. “Maybe they get caught.”

“There’s still light enough. Let’s head that way.” A couple hours left of day. Saj didn’t wish to waste them. Maybe it was best they put more distance between themselves and the temple of Asak, as well.

Kataree looked like she wanted to object but said nothing. She’s tired, thought Saj, and so am I. But we can go a little way. “Thank you,” he said to the girl.

“Is the right thing, isn’t it?” she asked, as they made their way down a steep slope, among towering conifers of some sort. Saj couldn’t recognize them but their fallen needles made the ground slippery. “I am not always sure.”

“It is,” he assured her. “Trust yourself.”

“When we rest I will send myself out again,” said Kataree, “and learn more.”

“That is good.” Saj could have said more, warned her not to tax herself, to be careful. Maybe he should have, but his concern for Marana pushed all other concerns aside. They traveled westward until it was too dark to travel more.

~

A war cry, to the right, men rushing toward them, silhouetted by the setting sun. The warriors of Asak were outnumbered and unnerved. A couple stood, the rest broke and ran, only to find another attack coming from the other side. Orro’s remaining assassin-priest came to his side, ready to defend him.

A curt order from Orro and the man seized Marana’s arm, his grip powerful and unbreakable. “We run,” Orro told her. The pair of Asakians turned and fled north, back the direction from which they had come, taking their captive with them. Sensible, she thought. Less likely to find enemies that direction.

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But her would-be rescuers would follow. Of that there was no doubt. The rope around her neck dangled on the ground as they ran, sometimes tripping up her feet. Orro gave another direction to his man, who stopped and turned himself to the south. A rear guard, to slow any pursuit, Marana assumed. The assassin was being sacrificed so Orro might escape with her. A fanatical faith in his god of death led the man to do this without question.

Orro had her arm now and led her blundering through the undergrowth to the right, abandoning the way north. At last he stopped, stood listening. "They follow still," the priest said. "Escape is hopeless." He looked eastward. "Ahead of us too." Marana could hear them herself, calling to one another from both sides. Orro was right.

The priest looked at her for what felt minutes but was probably seconds. Considering her fate, she knew. "It is you they want," he said at last. "I will not be pursued far if they have you."

He held his knife in his hand, looking down at the blade. "I shall break my promise to kill you, my lady. I would surely be slain as well and I am not yet ready to give up my life to the oblivion of Asak."

He laughed, a short laugh, a curt laugh. "None of that would serve any purpose. If there be purpose to any of this." Orro slipped his blade back into its scabbard, wheeled, and disappeared into the forest.

A few moments later, the warriors of Kamat came upon her, still standing there, a rope dangling from around her neck.

Marana stood for a moment, looking down at the dead assassin. "He was the one who slew Xano," she whispered. Three other men of Asak lay stretched beside his body; two who had surrendered sat on the ground nearby.

"That wouldn't have bothered me, once," spoke Nanos, almost as quietly. He sounded as if he couldn't quite believe it did now.

She only nodded in response. They had all been fond of the priest. He had been a good man.

The last of patrols was returning to the camp, ending their search through the night. "No sign of the priest," came the report. So Orro had escaped in the darkness. Marana did not care that much one way or the other, as long as he was gone.

The leader of this band, a priest of Kamat wearing light armor and a red bucket-shaped cap, came over to the bodies, Im at his side. "We'll burn these in the morning," he said, in heavily accented Muram. His eyes went to the prisoners. "Although the Asakians would murder any captive, it is not our way."

"I know this, Balase," spoke Im. "Kamat is a god of life." He, too, regarded the pair of prisoners. "But the followers of Asak will never trade for them."

"No, they are expected to give their lives for their god."

Nanos joined the conversation. "You may not be willing to kill these monsters but I would gladly slit their throats for you." Marana might not have put it quite so but found she shared the wizard's sentiment.

"Monsters?" said Im. "No more so than most men. They can never be trusted, I suppose."

"They can not," agreed Balase. He stroked his dark beard and gazed at the prisoners a while longer. Marana thought he looked more like a fighting man, like one of her father's equesters, than a priest. "They will be sold to the Mura as slaves."

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Im shook his head, clearly disapproving, but made no comment.

“Where is Dewasse?” asked Marana. She had just noticed his absence.

“He returned across the mountains after we buried his friend and Xano,” the aged sorcerer told her. “He will carry all our news to Kambak.”

“Would he carried better news,” said Marana.

~

Kataree had been exhausted by the time they made camp, too worn to attempt her magic. At dawn, she sent a part of herself out to speak with other wizards, meeting with them in little worlds that were safe places for this. The number of these available, as Saj understood it, was infinite.

She was quite a while at it, long enough that Saj began to feel uneasy. More so when she seemed to shake and mouth unspoken words, before suddenly returning to him. The girl took a moment to gather herself. “Good news,” she said. “Your wife is safe with Im and priests of Kamat.”

“Your brother?” Saj asked. He wasn’t sure what sort of news would be good there.

“Escaped. Head back for temple, I think.” Kataree smiled broadly. “We can head for Marana.”

“We might as well go then,” he told her. “I’ll watch for something I can knock down for lunch, as we travel.” Both rose. They had nothing to carry, only themselves. “You know the way?”

“Know direction. We figure where to meet when we get closer.” That seemed like leaving too much to chance, felt Saj.

“You talked to more than Im, didn’t you?” he asked after a while. She was leading him into a thickly jungled valley.

“Everyone wanted to talk!” she laughed. “All join together, priests and wizards. And —” Kataree furrowed her brow in a frown of puzzle-

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ment. "I thought maybe there was another. Not sure. He seemed to stay after others left." She shrugged. "Gone now."

That seemed a very small dark cloud in the general brightness of this day. Saj was elated. Marana and he both free, and soon to be reunited. As for the Eyes, those could be worried about later. He'd probably have to carry them all the way home to Lanlaz and try to make a fresh start there. All this had set back his business plan considerably!

He took squirrels twice as they walked. They seemed unafraid, and unaware of what a sling might do. Once, he had almost let loose a stone at another before realizing it was a monkey. Saj did not think he could bring himself to eat one. They should stop soon and prepare what he had taken, he decided. They had eaten nothing since last night.

Was that some larger creature, thrashing through the undergrowth, off to their left? The Mur immediately had his sling in his hand, a stone in its pouch. He did not know what sort of dangerous beasts might dwell here, but he could imagine!

There, a form stumbling out of the bushes. A man? Yes. The most dangerous of all beasts, but this one seemed worn, hunted to exhaustion. He raised his head to peer at them.

It was Orro.

~

"I sensed your Wizard-Lord again," said Im. "What is his name?"

"Dxukur," answered Nanos. "Yes, he was there. I think he might have touched the girl."

"As do I." Im said no more for a little while. Marana had not been paying much attention to their wizardly conversation. It had been enough that they had spoken to Saj's companion to let him know she was safe, and that her husband was on his way.

"What," asked the old wizard, "became of Leu? She ruled the wizard realm the last time I paid it any attention."

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“Overthrown and presumably murdered. Not by Dxukur. He rose to power after a few years of chaos.” Nanos noted the Ildin troop busying itself. “It looks like we’re about to go. The Wizard-Lord has ruled for, mmm, about sixty years now. Since I was a boy.”

“That long? I should pay more attention to what goes on.” Both men rose, ready to march wherever these Kamatians had in mind. The Sharshite woman came to her feet a little more slowly. She was still tired and undernourished.

“It would go on anyway,” pointed out Nanos.

Im chuckled. “True enough. I wonder if this Dxukur is one of my friend Na’s descendants. I know Leu was.”

“She was ancestor to many great sorcerers. As are you, I understand.”

“Few in that part of the world. I wouldn’t be surprised if I were somewhere in the family tree of some of these Ildin priestly wizards. Maybe even Orro and his sister.”

That surprised Marana. She realized it shouldn’t. One could father quite a few children in a thousand years. “You have lived among the Ildin?” she asked.

“More than with any other people,” replied Im. “The woman you saw when I used the jewels was Ildin. My wife.”

“I have heard that tale,” murmured Nanos. “It seemed more romance than reality.”

“Who is to say there is a difference? Ah, we’re ready to march.”

~

Orro stared at the two of them a moment before breaking into laughter. “So, whose side are you on, Sister?” he asked.

Saj presumed the priest used Muram for his benefit. Orro had reasons for his actions. He dangled his loaded sling, letting it slowly swing back and forth. Saj had reasons, too.

“My own,” stated Kataree. “I will not be servant of Asaro — nor of you!”

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“I realized I could never be your master some time back.” Orro eyed the squirrels on his sister’s belt. “Would you feed a starving man and discuss what is to be?”

“First, hand over your knife,” Saj demanded. Orro did so without objection, tossing it onto the ground before them. “And now find some firewood.” He settled down to preparing the two squirrels.

As before, Kataree brought a flame from some other world. Saj saw Orro’s eyes widen at this. More accomplished than her brother realized, he thought. She might best him in a battle of wizardry, were her heart in it.

“Someone other than me has been training you,” said Orro. “Not one of Dekata’s witches?”

“No.” She seemed undecided whether to tell him more. “I have learned from those I speak to from afar.”

Orro considered this. “And I never sensed it. That was dangerous, you know.” Saj was sure there was admiration in the man’s voice. Maybe even pride of a sort.

“More dangerous to not know things, Brother.”

The priest nodded an agreement and busied himself with half of a badly cooked squirrel. He ate slowly, deliberately, even if he had described himself as a starving man.

“Now,” he said at last, “what are we to do? Will you let me go my way and I let you go yours?”

“I know we can not trust you,” spoke Kataree. Saj silently concurred.

“I might double back with my knife — assuming you returned it — and do you harm? It is something I might consider but probably too risky. Yet you are right. You can not trust me. And obviously I could not overpower you here and now, so the only solution is for me to be your prisoner.”

That sounded as dangerous to Saj as turning the priest of Asak loose. “However,” Orro went on, “if I promise to accompany you and

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cause no trouble you must promise no harm to me from your friends.” He gave them a wry half-smile. “And to feed me. Otherwise I am likely to wander starving in these mountains,”

Saj looked to Kataree. She nodded. “Very well, Orro,” agreed the Mur. “You come with us. But any trouble at all from you, and all deals are off. Understood?”

“I understand perfectly, Master Saj.”

“As you wish, we shall head for the shrine of Banat,” said Balase. Marana was pretty sure that was what he said, although it was spoken in Ildin. She was getting better at the language.

“Cory won’t be able to get in,” answered Im, in Muram — probably for her sake. “But it is used to that. I’ve spent much time at Banat’s shrine, and it is closer than that of your god.”

“It is warded against your companion?” asked Nanos.

“Indeed it is, and well done. That is because I did it myself, blocking any possible intruders.”

Marana had not seen the demon since the attack in the pass. It must not have taken part in her rescue. That was to be expected, from all she had learned about Cory. Also to be expected was that it would remain close to the wizard. The red creature was out there somewhere.

Im turned to the other sorcerer. “There is the girl. Will you join?”

“I might as well,” said Nanos, and both sat down on the ground. For a couple minutes they remained in their trance, speaking from afar.

Nanos opened his eyes. “That was unexpected,” he murmured.

“In many ways,” agreed Im.

~

If Orro spoke to someone from afar there was nothing Saj could do about it. He couldn’t watch the man all night. Kataree had assured him there were no other sorcerers among the priests of Asak. “Only some who follow Dekata. Orro won’t speak to them.” Though the two groups coexisted they were apparently unfriendly to each other and interacted only when necessary.

What he *had* noted was Orro occasionally looking up, as if searching for something. But the priest behaved himself and was even somewhat civil, when he chose to talk.

Kataree did wizard-speak again the next morning. As she settled herself in preparation, Orro asked, “May I join you in the link?”

“They might as well know about you,” she said.

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Saj wasn't so sure about this. "You could simply tell them," he pointed out.

Orro seemed more amused by this than aught else. "Ah, you are not wrong to be suspicious," said he. "But if there is any danger, it is to me. Those two powerful sorcerers might wish to do me harm."

"I will not let them," promised Kataree. The siblings immediately went wherever it was they went. Their trance lasted no more than a couple minutes.

"So we go to the temple of Banat," spoke Orro, opening his eyes to gaze into his sister's. "I will not receive a warm welcome there."

"But no harm has been promised," she replied. "Let's go."

"You know the way?" asked Saj, as all three came to their feet.

"I did already," said Orro. "There are maps in the temple and —"

"And the kobolds have certainly scouted the way from above," Kataree finished for him.

"Even so," he agreed. "The old wizard showed you the way, as well, didn't he?"

"He did. But I may already have know too. Let's go." The woman provided no other explanation but began walking down the hillside.

As Saj and Orro followed, the priest leaned in. "There is one — with her," he whispered. "In her head." He frowned at his own words. "That is a terrible way to describe it. A tiny part of her remains elsewhere, with him, so he can remain aware of what she does. Kataree does not realize any of this."

"Another sorcerer?"

"Yes, and a very powerful one."

~

"The different caps identify the different orders of priesthood," explained Im. "Yon Belase's red pot marks him as a follower of Kamat, the god of fire. Or the sun, if one prefers, or even of life. You know the close-fitting black caps of Asak's priests."

"So the priests where we go will have different headgear?"

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“When they bother to wear it. Banat’s followers eschew display yet the have the showiest of caps.”

“The colors of those jewels you carry,” interjected Nanos. “I have read as much of the lore on them as possible.”

“You seem a scholar,” remarked Im. “Not an adventurer.”

Nanos laughed outright at this. “Ambition can make an adventurer of any man.”

“But you served another. Your Wizard-Lord.”

“So it is,” admitted the sorcerer. “I desired nothing more than to rise in his service until — until I felt the power of the Eyes for myself.” He brooded silently for a while as they walked on, following a path that wound along the sides of the steep hills. “Torut desired them, didn’t he?” he asked. “That was part of why you destroyed him.”

“Yes, a part. You know Torut was quite insane.”

Nanos nodded. “Yes, Torut wanted to destroy the world, to return to the void. Dxukur is quite straightforwardly ambitious. He wishes to rule.”

“That is a madness too, in its way. I think,” said Im, “you may share a little of that madness.” Was there a hint of sympathy in the old wizard’s voice? wondered Marana. She was not at all inclined to feel any for this kidnapper.

“I did think once to share his power. I can see how that seduced me into serving him.”

The Sharshite noblewoman thought this had gone far enough. “You were speaking of the priests’ caps, Master Im,” she said. “What others are there?”

Im chuckled at the question. “Well, if you see one purple and green, two-peaked like a jester’s cap, you will know you have found a follower of Vulata, wife of Banat, and patroness of music and mathematics and cleverness of all sorts.”

“I am glad to hear goddesses are revered too,” she commented.

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“You would like Khabata,” offered Nanos. “Goddess of poetry and writing, but also a bit of a warrior.”

Im nodded. “Her priests wear a pointed blue cap.” He seemed to be somewhere else for a moment. “One of them was the first Ildin priest I met in this world, long ago when I was young. Younger than you, my lady. Khabata spoke to me and my comrades through him.”

“I have understood,” spoke Nanos, “that these Ildin gods mostly hold themselves aloof from humans.”

“That is true. I’ve been dealing with the pantheon for a thousand years and have yet to meet some. Banat is friendly to mankind and often spends time here.”

“Asak showed himself when you fought Orro, didn’t he?” asked Marana.

“Not directly. The priest channeled some of his essence into himself.”

“Dangerous,” was all Nanos had to say about that.

“Indeed. One may become possessed completely. As are some of Dekata’s adherents.”

“Though not necessarily by Dekata. There are many powerful beings out there in the infinite worlds.”

“And closer,” said Im. “We must keep an eye on that young sorceress.”

Nanos nodded and they walked on toward the shrine of Banat.

“Asaro will surely send his best assassins after us, in time,” said Orro.

“And for now, he observes,” his sister replied.

“So it seems.” The priest shrugged. “What his intentions toward either of us might be, I can not learn.”

“It is the jewels he most desires and we do not have them.”

“So your high priest is letting things play out?” asked Saj. “He will let us go to this temple of Banat?”

“So it seems,” said Orro. He regarded the Mur thoughtfully for a few seconds. “But he does want us, all three of us, from what you told me.”

“So he can raise little wizards to serve your god. Yes.”

“He went to much trouble to get us, my brother,” spoke Kataree. “I almost wonder if he had a part in our mother’s death.”

Orro’s composure failed but for a moment. “I would not discount the possibility.”

His training tells him there is nothing wrong with that, Saj realized. Still, he dislikes the thought. Orro will continue to serve his master, ignore his doubts, for now.

And it would be to Asaro’s advantage to have a spy in the temple of Banat, if that was where the Eyes were headed.

~

“That must be a priest of Vulata, right? Green and purple.” The approaching man’s cap was indeed of those colors. He was also, Marana decided, the most handsome man she had ever seen. Tall, golden of skin, with great violet eyes and a presence she could only think of as majestic.

Nanos drew in his breath. “That is —”

“Say it not,” Im advised him. “If he wished to make himself known he would not come in this form.” He stepped forward and greeted the newcomer. “Hail, Brother Vulos. It has been long.”

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“Greetings to you, Master Im. Cahorsus is about somewhere, I would assume.”

“As ever.”

Balase joined them. “You know this man?” he asked, eyeing the priest with some suspicion. It was likely he wondered what sort of man would be wandering the paths alone. Marana was curious about that herself.

“Vulos and I are very old friends,” the wizard responded. “Let us rest here a while so I can catch up with him.”

The Kamatian commander shrugged. “Very well.” He signaled for his men to take their ease.

Vulos and Im sat down on the ground. Marana saw no reason not to join them but Nanos hesitated. Vulos looked up at him with a certain amusement. “This one recognizes me for what I am, doesn’t he?” he asked Im. “Is he in your confidence?”

“More or less,” replied the wizard. “You might as well sit with us, Nanos.” He turned back to their visitor. “Is something up, my lord?”

My lord? wondered Marana. She gave the priest of Vulata another close look. He was incredibly good to look at, wasn’t he? It was almost enough to make her forget her Saj!

“I come only to tell you not to tarry at my, ah, at the temple of Banat. Meet your friends there, rest a day but no more. It is best that this Saj continue to Kamazad.”

“A place of power,” murmured Nanos.

“Exactly, wizard,” replied Vulos. “It is likely things will come to a head there.”

“But you can not see this clearly,” spoke Im. “That is understood.”

“It is ever so,” said the priest. “The priests of Kamat will expect you.”

“And Kamat himself?” Im sounded not overly serious when he asked this.

Vulos laughed in reply. “One can never tell with him. But,” he

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added, in an only slightly more serious tone, “his wife is already involved.”

Im was surprised just enough to lift an eyebrow, but made no comment. “Shall we see you again?”

“Who is to say? Ask the gods.” Both laughed at that. The priest rose. “I shall be on my way. Or some other way. You know, Friend Im, that I can see many paths.”

“Yet can take but one.”

“In this world.” Vulos turned to Marana. “Your husband Saj can see many ways as well. He may learn to see them more clearly at Kamazad.”

“As long as he sees his way back to me, sir,” she replied. And to Lanlaz — Marana would as soon Saj be pulled no further into this wizardry and seeing and priest-business.

“Then farewell to all,” said Vulos, and resumed his way south along the trail.

Im watched him for a moment. “That’s just for show, you realize. He’ll disappear as soon as he is out of our sight.”

Nanos nodded knowingly but Marana was confused. “He is some sort of sorcerer?” she asked.

“No, my lady,” replied Im. “He is Banat, god of time, who diminished himself to human form to visit us.”

“Ah.” Nanos had apparently recognized their visitor as a deity but did not know which one.

Marana could only wonder what that gorgeous god looked like when he was not ‘diminished.’

~

“We are not going to stay at the shrine of Banat,” Kataree informed them. “This I have been told.”

“By Im?” asked Saj.

“No, though I gather he knows this. Another spoke to me.” She

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turned her head for a moment, eyes fixed on her brother, as if pondering whether to go on. "Arimanata."

It took some time for Orro to respond. "So, you have become friendly with goddesses."

Saj knew nothing of any Arimanata, though he could make a guess. "This is the sister of Dekata you mentioned?"

Kataree nodded, rather eagerly. "Arimanata is the full moon, to Dekata's darkness of the new moon. She is love to her sister's hate."

Orro barked out a curt laugh. "So it is with our Ildin gods. There are always opposites. Asak's death and darkness to Kamat's light and life. They, too, are siblings, or so it said."

"She came to me years ago," Kataree went on, "and taught me much. She said that one who cared for me asked it of her. I do not know whom she means."

Her mother, maybe? wondered Saj. He suspected Orro might have the same thought. "But we do still go to this temple of Banat," he said.

"Yes. We should be near the main roadway now, and then less than a day to the shrine." They had followed an occasionally-traveled dirt path through the thick forests the last two days, winding in and out of lush green valleys. It had rained more of the time than it had not.

The way rose now, crossing yet another low but rugged ridge. A few hundred feet ahead, Saj could spy a wider trail they would cross and, at that crossing, a group of travelers.

"Marana!" he cried out, and ran to embrace her.

“Nanos has changed,” observed Saj.

“I think he hated what he was doing and hated himself for doing it,” said his wife. “That was why he was so cold and impersonal.”

The Mur nodded. It made sense enough. “I still wouldn’t trust him.”

“Neither would anyone else,” Marana replied, her hearty laugh resounding from the roof beams.

Saj took a deep draught of his ale. It had been too long since he had tasted any! “We could just head home,” he said. “With or without the Eyes.”

“We could,” was all Marana seemed willing to say. Oh, he knew it would be best to go ahead and follow the way Im seemed to have laid out for them. Off to Kamazad in the morning, Kamat’s holy mountain and the largest volcano on Lorj. Maybe the largest for thousands of miles in any direction. Nanos claimed there were huge cones in the Great Rift, near the capitol of the Wizard-Lord, but did not know if they were larger than Kamazad. They would find out soon.

Yes, they could. “But we won’t,” he said.

“No,” Marana agreed, “we won’t.”

~

“I wish we could stay longer,” lamented Kataree. “I love it here.”

“You are always welcome to return,” the high priest told her. He was an older nondescript man in nondescript robes. Those looked old too. “As a visitor or as one who would serve Banat.” All was ready for departure.

The followers of Banat had proven to be a humble and good-natured order, folk who dressed and lived simply and almost never, as Im had assured them, donned their gaudy caps. Their fortress temple was, however, formidable, protected not only by high stone walls but by magical warding.

“No,” she replied. “I shall serve Arimanata.” The girl looked

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slightly embarrassed after making this statement and giggled out, "Sorry."

The priest gave her a little bow. "The goddess of the full moon is worthy of worship, Mistress Kataree."

Balase and his men began to march out between the tall bronze-bound gates. The Kamatians would again escort them on their journey, with some guards from this temple of Banat added to their number. Banat's people were not inclined to wage war but were ever prepared to defend themselves.

For an hour, the travelers followed the road back the way they had come, down the steep slope which the temple topped. Then they turned right, following the wide way through a gap by late afternoon to behold a long and broad valley, set high in the mountains. Much of it appeared to be in cultivation and villages could be made out.

"You have this valley to thank for that ale you enjoyed," said Im. "It is one of the few places one may grow barley on Lorj. Too hot elsewhere."

"The Laggalak," near-whispered Orro. "I never thought to see it." He lifted his eyes. "And the great Kamazad beyond."

Saj gazed out over the valley. So that was the famous peak. He supposed he would have to go to it before this business was over.

"The Good Valley, the name means," Im told them. "The Ildin have been here a long time. It was one of the first spots colonized by refugees from the north."

"Were you there?" asked Nanos.

"Yes. Yes, I was." The old man seemed distracted, gazing out over the valley. "I saw this place for them with the power of the jewels."

Saj understood this well. "Balase is eager to get moving again," he said. "Let's get on down there before dark."

~

"There is a temple of Arimanata somewhere in this valley." Kataree sighed. "I wish we could stop by it."

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“Why shouldn’t you?” asked her brother.

“She told me to hurry to her husband’s shrine. To Kamazad,” she said, turning her eyes toward the great volcano. There was no mistaking any of the other mountains for it now, from halfway down the Laggalak. It lay beyond the northern end of the valley, and west.

It was a rich valley. Fields of grain and fields of beans and fields of crops Marana did not recognize lay on either side. Further up the slopes, Balase had informed them, cattle grazed. The travelers were quite safe here, safer perhaps than any other place on Lorj. Still, it felt good to have the company of Kamat’s stalwart warriors.

Marana was uncertain about this girl. Yes, yes, she had delivered Saj from the hands of the Asakians; for that she was owed a great debt of gratitude. Yet she was one of those Asakians herself, reared in the temple, tutored in murder and torture. One did not shrug off such deeply ingrained things readily, even if one has chosen to renounce them.

“This goddess is wife to Kamat, then?” she asked. That seemed to be what Kataree was saying.

“She is. Arimanata rules the night as the Lord Kamat does the day.”

Orro snickered. “Dekata might have something to say about that.”

Kataree gave her brother a tolerant smile. “One grows in power as the moon waxes, the other as it wanes.”

A sensible explanation, thought Marana, whether she believed it or not. “Now, both these, um, goddesses — sisters, right?”

“Twin sisters,” agreed Kataree.

“Very well. They are daughters of Asak. And Asak is brother to Kamat. So Arimanata is wed to her uncle?”

“I suspect gods don’t have a lot of choices for spouses,” Saj put in. He hadn’t seemed to be paying much attention to their ongoing conversation.

Orro spoke, slowly, choosing his words. “It is understood that the

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gods do not actually know whether they are truly related to each other. They do not remember ever not existing.”

“Yet they sense these kinships,” continued his sister. “May all be abstract and allegorical.”

“As are the gods of the Ildin themselves,” said Saj. “So Im explained them to me. This is why they all are either extremely good or extremely evil.”

“Not much like the gods we know,” Marana said. “Those are more human, with both virtues and failings.”

“And I give thanks to Jov and all his unruly kin for that.”

The temple of Kamat was not on the slopes of his sacred mountain. It was, however, perched high on a neighboring peak. "Kamat always likes his shrines to be far up," explained Im. "It's not vanity, exactly, as his nature is too pure for that. It is just what seems proper to the god."

"Is he as handsome as Banat?" asked Marana. "Oh, I guess you're not the one to judge that."

"Matter of taste," laughed the wizard. "Some would find him too austere in comparison. The god of light has a certain stern beauty to him." He looked up at the heavy oaken gates opening before them. "I've never seen much of him, you understand. He does not care to walk among men as does Banat."

"Is Banat his brother too, like Asak?" asked Kataree. "No one seem able to give answer on that."

"Because they may not be sure themselves. Some claim Banat is father to Kamat but he has never said so to me."

"The god of time and the god of life," mused Orro. "Which indeed would come first?"

"Or Asak, the god of the void, for that matter," Im said. "Of course," he went on, "Banat is about more than just time. He looks all directions, forward and back, to the four elements and the four winds."

"How about up and down?" asked Saj. It seemed a practical question to him. His own Muram people counted six directions, not only the four compass points or winds, but also the vertical axis, Sky and Earth. They did not have the same concept of elements one found among Sharshites or Ildin.

"Those too, I am sure," chuckled Im. "In we go." Balase strode forward, leading the way into the compound. In a lower voice, the wizard said to Saj, "The Eyes will be safe in this place, though the priests here wouldn't mind getting hold of them themselves. But they

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are pledged to good and will do nothing. The same was true in the shrine of Banat, where they desired them even more.”

“They possessed them at one time, didn’t they?” said Saj.

“They did. I stole them from them.”

They went on to greet the waiting high priest of Kamat.

~

“I do not believe a priest of Asak has ever taken dinner here before,” said Tusrat. The chief priest did not seem overly perturbed by this fact. He was a big man, with a great curling black beard spilling over his flame-colored robe. His features suggested some Baxac heritage — not uncommon in this part of the world.

“None that you knew of,” answered Orro, deadpan. Tusrat roared at this. Saj was not fooled by the man’s manner. If he considered Orro the least danger to his temple he would have him imprisoned — or executed — without a second thought. The Mur was doing his best to follow the conversation, which was in Ildin. Marana might be doing better than he.

“Ho, Brother Gygee,” called out the high priest. “Do you think you could sense a wizard of Asak if one showed up at my table?” Tusrat turned back to his guests. “Gygee is our best seer here.”

“If they were no more skilled than this one, sir, easily!” called Gygee, from halfway down the table. “The girl — maybe not.”

Orro gave the unassuming little wizard-priest a decidedly malevolent glance. “She is good at hiding herself,” Gygee continued. “She must have practiced it when she lived at the temple of Asak.”

“Only from me did she need to hide. Is that not so, Sister?” asked Orro. His sister sat across from him, and further up the table, with only Im between her and the high priest.

“There are those more dangerous than you, my brother,” she replied.

“And the most dangerous of them all seated at my right hand,” laughed the chief priest. “It is good you are our friend, Master Im.”

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“And it as your friend I came to protect these,” spoke Im, drawing out the small, plain pouch containing the Eyes. “I think it is time you again carried these.” He slid them across the table to Saj, but it was Marana who reached out and took them.

“Better with my wife, for now,” said Saj.

“The Jewels of the Elements,” breathed Gygee. Curious eyes all turned to the little bag Marana was tucking into her garment.

“We will need to take Saj and the jewels to Kamazad in a day or two,” Im said. “Best to let us all rest some first. It has been a grueling way to this place.” He looked directly at the young Muram man. “I tend to distrust the idea of destiny but I believe it was destined that you and the Eyes would come to Kamat’s holy mountain. Or perhaps,” he finished, “certain gods helped things along.”

~

“He meant Banat, I am sure,” Marana told her husband.

“It does not matter,” replied Saj. “We are here and so it is. But I’m not certain Im himself didn’t have a hand in things.” He turned an ear toward the open window. A low rumble sounded in the distance. “I hope their sacred mountain doesn’t do that all night.”

“I do not think I would want to live so close.”

“You have to admit, the climate is nice. Especially compared to the heat in Lanlaz.”

“Yes, it is.” Marana sighed. “I hope we can get back soon.”

“As do I,” said Saj, pulling his wife closer to him. “As do I.”

~

“We have an unexpected visitor,” announced Tusrat. “The high priestess of Arimanata herself has showed up at our door. I suspect, young lady,” he said, addressing Kataree, “that it has something to do with you.”

The priests here — as at the shrine of Banat — took their meals communally, on several long tables in a vaulted dining hall. All were men here, though, Marana noted. Priests and priestesses had served

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Banat equally. Indeed, many, she had been told, were husband and wife.

“I know not what, sir,” she said.

“Then we shall have to ask her.” The high priest rose in his place, but whispered, “Move down Im. You too Saj. Three more for breakfast, it seems.”

Three they were, a slight woman in mist-hued robes, followed by a middle-aged man and a girl. All wore flat caps of a silvery-gray. “Welcome, Labaree, and welcome to your companions,” spoke Tusrat. “Come and join us.”

The priestess took her place at Tusrat’s right hand; her attendants sat directly across from her. “These are Ardis and Suppilulee,” said the priestess. “Ardis is our chief seer.”

“Ah, yet another wizard,” chuckled Tusrat. “So many at this table is also unheard of before today.”

“You come because of the jewels?” asked Im.

The woman gave him a rather fond look, Marana felt. Of course, they knew each other already. “I would like to say I came because of you, Im, but neither you nor the Eyes brought me here. My goddess sent me to speak with this young woman.” She nodded toward Kataree. “Or, more properly, the Lady Arimanata had me fetch Ardis here to speak with her.”

Labaree had a decidedly smug and secretive look to her smile. Marana turned her eyes to Ardis, who was addressing young Kataree. “You look much like your mother,” came his quiet voice.

The girl beamed. “You knew my mother? Oh, you must have spoken with her from afar.”

“That I did, and then not from afar.” His voice faltered, filled with barely controllable emotion. “I am your father, Kataree.”

Some gaped with astonishment. Orro looked as if he were going to say something but decided not. Even Im seemed surprised. Saj, having heard the girl's story, was perhaps the least surprised of all. It fitted in with what Kataree had told him.

"I was young," spoke Ardis. "Your mother was young, too, but with great power within her. Far greater than mine. She feared for herself and for her son in that place." His eyes flickered momentarily to Orro. "In the den of Asakians. She sought among the worlds, yearning, and we met — and fell in love."

He looked again to Orro. "Your brother was but a baby. She could not come to me, with him or without him. And, too, Mursilla was newly risen to rule over all the witches of Dekata. Perhaps she thought she could protect the boy from — from what was all about him. So I journeyed to her, going by secret ways she knew." Saj and Kataree exchanged a meaningful look. "More than once I went and we stole what few hours we could. And then, she told me she was with child."

Ardis sat silent for a few moments. He blinked at the tears misting his eyes. "From time to time, I did manage to see her again, after my daughter — after you were born. I wished to take her away but she feared for you and your brother. Wait, she said. Then she was gone. I knew her to be dead.

"So I asked the goddess to watch after you for me, as I feared endangering you if I revealed myself. Yes, to Arimanata I prayed and she answered my prayer and — and brought you to me."

"Both father and daughter are beloved of the goddess," murmured Labaree.

No one spoke, no one moved. Kataree and Ardis sat staring at each other. It was Orro who broke the silence at last. "There was much curiosity as to her sire when Kataree began to show sorcerous talents." He spoke this in a flat, matter of fact tone, keeping a rein on whatever emotions the tale had wakened in his own heart.

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“I have much for which to thank Arimanata,” said Kataree at last.

“As do I,” spoke her father. “Dame Labaree has granted me permission to remain here with you if — if you are willing.”

Labaree snickered. “I don’t remember anyone giving you permission to visit her mother.”

Ardis’s gray eyes went to his high priestess. “The goddess gave me leave, my lady.”

“Ah! This I understand.” She gave father and daughter a benevolent smile. “Being the goddess of love, how could she not?”

~

Though neither had a thorough understanding of Ildin nor of what had transpired over their breakfast, Marana and Saj managed to piece it together in their bedchamber. “So the girl’s story comes to its end,” said Marana. “Do you think she will go back to his temple with her father?”

“A chapter is finished, anyway,” agreed Saj. He was not so sure Kataree would be leaving them soon. “Im seems to think she should accompany us to Kamazad.” In fact, there appeared to be a tacit agreement on this among these priests and wizards.

“I understand him wanting you there.”

“Yes, it is a place of power. I could seek visions.” Saj sighed. He’d just as soon dream pleasant dreams in his own bed, his wife beside him. “I believe he thinks it might better, um, attune me to the Eyes.”

He went to the window. “It is not a long journey to the mountain. Less than a day to the shrine at its base.” Kamazad stood serene against a pale blue sky this morning, no mists nor rains obscuring the massive cone. “You could remain here.”

“Not a chance. I am never going to allow you out of my sight again, husband mine.”

~

Labaree had departed already but Ardis remained. “We spent the day becoming acquainted,” Kataree told Saj. She knows not whom else

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to confide in, Marana told herself. Not her cold fish of a brother, certainly, nor all these strangers about her. "And we explored speaking to each other from afar, for when we must to be apart."

"Not soon, I hope," said Saj.

"No. My father is traveling to Kamazad with us. After that — who knows? Perhaps I join the priesthood of Arimanata someday but first I wish to see more of the world!"

The fourth member of their group spoke for the first time. Marana had wondered if he were even paying attention, sitting there gazing into the rafters. Im looked very old, didn't he?

"Be wary of making any choice too soon," the wizard said. "You are a quite strong sorceress and have many paths you might follow."

The girl nodded, and then gave Saj a wink. "I should ask you to dream about my future."

"That could be knowledge you would regret," he replied

"Then just make up something good," Marana told him.

The girl giggled at that, and rose to her feet. "I go talk with my father again before bed." With that, she left their chamber.

"We should all get some sleep for an early start," said Saj. Maybe it was a hint for Im to depart as well. Marana certainly would not mind more time alone with her husband.

"So we should," agreed Im, but he did not arise. Rather, he leaned forward and fixed his eyes on the couple. "I insisted on Kataree accompanying us because she has become possessed. She does not know this, but Nanos and I, and even Orro, do. We recognize that the Wizard-Lord has a grasp on a part of her."

"Does her father see this?" asked Marana.

Im shook his head. "He might, in time. I hope to break the bond with the aid of the jewels." The wizard did come to his feet now. "I might even need your aid in this Saj."

"What did he mean by that?" asked Marana after Im's departure.

"I don't know. And I hope I do not find out."

They were all going, even Orro. Im had insisted on that. “The boy doesn’t belong in a temple of Kamat, anyway,” he had said. “And he might be useful in the trials to come.” The old wizard chuckled. “He’ll be talking to those spies flying above us, I am sure, but can tell them nothing of use.”

“The kobolds are still up there?” asked Saj.

Orro had listened to this with something resembling amusement. “Asaro will not give up on us so easily.”

“This Asaro played a role in your mother’s death, I am sure,” spoke Ardis. “She told me of her fears and suspicions of him.” Orro took this without comment or expression.

Out through the tall gates of the temple of Kamat they went, down the steep way that led into the valley. “Down only to go up again,” grumbled Im. “Would that Lord Kamat were willing to place his temples in more pleasant locations!”

“That will never be,” came a deeply pitched growl from behind him. “Kamat is Kamat.”

“Ah, Cory, you are with us again. I hope you have not been frightening peasants.”

“No, I only rested. Neither of us is so young, Master Im, and we must take care of ourselves.”

Ardis looked at the towering form. “I know your breed, demon,” he said. “You are far from home.”

“And glad to be so,” said Im.

Cory’s chuckle rivaled the rumblings of Kamazad. Saj was glad to see the great red creature. He felt their escort was far too small, only ten guards from the Kamatian temple, and they didn’t look like true soldiers, as had Balase’s troop. More like priests playing at being fighting men.

But, he was assured, no assassins of Asak would dare stray into the heart of Kamat’s holy land. None would approach Kamazad. The

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mountain loomed before them. As he had more than once before, Saj wished he were headed the other direction, back toward Lanlaz and his interrupted life with Marana.

~

“Orro seems on edge,” whispered Marana.

This was no news to Saj. He had noted it himself. The priest looked to the sky frequently, as he had while traveling with Kataree and himself. He had peered upward himself but couldn’t be sure whether the distant shape he spied was a wyvern or some bird of the mountains, an eagle or condor.

They were starting to move upward again, climbing toward Kamat’s sacred mountain. The pleasant farmlands of the valley were far behind, and the pleasant farmers with them; it was all dark gray rock on either side of their roadway, weather-worn, deserted. Here and there, green stood out, burst out, against it. The frequent rains must encourage exuberant growth wherever it managed to take root in this wilderness.

Cory had caused some consternation, both with the priest-guardsmen and with the peasants in their fields. But none fled from it. “The demon is known here, at least by reputation,” explained Im. “As am I.” It had trudged along, as unobtrusively as possible for an eight foot crimson monster, with the others, conversing at some length with Nanos, who was curious about its history and home world.

“So it has been a millennium since Im brought you to this world?” asked the sorcerer.

“Im didn’t bring me. The god Xido brought us both.”

“Either way it has been long since you saw your home.”

“It is. And I was centuries in the city of Hirstel, serving the Prince-Sorcerer there, before that. I will only be drawn back when Im dies; until then I am bound to him.”

“Ah, you serve him then?”

“No. I am obliged to kill him. But until I do, I am free to remain in this world. It is an arrangement that works well for both of us.”

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Orro had been listening and laughed now. It was not at all a mirthful laugh. "So if I were to slay yon Im, you would be whisked back to your unloved homeland, Demon?" he asked.

"I would, and to prison as well." It looked for some time toward the old man, trudging along a bit ahead of them. "Im may pass soon but so might I. We are both very old."

Orro looked like he might make some further remark but his face went blank of a sudden. He looked about, seemingly uncertain of something. One of his little spies must be speaking to him, Saj decided. Was something up?

The priest followed along with the others in silence, but at least twice appeared ready to say something. The Mur slipped to his side. "Speak if it be of importance, Orro," he whispered. "If you care about your sister or her fate, speak. Or if you care about your own fate."

"My fate?" sneered Orro. "What fate have I now? As any follower of Asak I have sought only the oblivion of the void." His gaze settled on the form of Kataree, walking beside Im and her father. "But not for her," the priest whispered. "Not for her."

His voice rang out. "The assassins of Asak are around us, poised to attack! Ready yourselves!"

Cory immediately began to turn about, scanning the hillsides with whatever strange sort of vision it possessed. "There," it called out, "and there." The Asakians burst from cover and rushed the party. All carried short swords. How many? Eight? But they were the highly-trained priest-assassins, not ordinary guardsmen. Saj drew his knife, the same knife Kataree had found for him in the caves of Asak's temple.

The Kamatian guards wisely did not engage their attackers one-on-one but formed a shield of spears around their charges. From a corner of his eye, Saj saw Im 'find' a sword somewhere. Then the two sides clashed.

Or they didn't. The Asakians did not press their attack but circled,

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menacingly, out of reach, after the first encounter. “Come, Brother Orro,” one called out. “Help us against these worms.”

Orro stood unmoving, staring at them. That was when Cory charged. It was probably not the best tactic but who was to stop it?

The Kamatians followed it. That was also a questionable tactic for it opened the way for a general melee, where they were at a disadvantage to the more highly trained assassins. Two Asakians drove straight toward Kataree.

“Do not let them take me back!” she cried out.

Weaponless though he was, Orro threw himself between the men and his sister, grappling with one. The two seemed loath to deal violently with him.

Another pair had driven toward Saj. They think I have the Eyes, he thought — or maybe Asaro still has plans for me. A guard who stood in his defense was cut down, a sword thrust through his throat. The Mur held his knife before him; perhaps he was a little too reckless in facing the assassins, knowing he would not die here this day. He had seen his unborn sons, grown to men, in his dreams, after all.

A wine-colored hulk careened into the two Asakians, knocking both to the ground. These attackers might well have overcome the travelers, probably would have, had they not the extra protection of Cory. Had its presence not been considered? Maybe the wyvern riders had failed to note the demon, which had kept itself apart from the others till this day.

Saj looked to the struggle around him. Everywhere, the assassins of Asak had drawn back, seeing they could not carry the day. Three lay on the ground, as did three of the Kamatians. The man grappling with Orro released his hold, stepped back, his face contorted with hatred.

“Traitor,” hissed the assassin, lunging forward suddenly, driving his sword into the young priest’s chest. Orro slumped to the ground.

The followers of Asak vanished into the landscape as quickly as they had appeared. “I could go after them and kill a few more,” suggested Cory.

“No,” Im told him. “Better to keep together.” The elderly wizard had at once taken charge and none challenged him. Two warriors of Kamat were slain, another badly — but not fatally — wounded. None others had any serious hurts.

And Orro lay dead. “Best we bear all on to the shrine at Kamazad,” decided Im. “It is not so far.”

“Are there other sorcerers there?” asked Nanos. “We could call to them for aid.”

“I would rather not call attention to us,” was Im’s answer.

Nanos nodded at this. “Probably wise,” he admitted.

Litters were quickly fashioned of the guardsmen’s spears, to bear both the dead and the wounded man. The body of Orro, however, Cory chose for some reason to carry in its arms. Kataree walked wordlessly beside the demon.

Ahead yet lay the great cone of Kamazad, now practically filling the sky. They should reach it before evening.

~

“The shrine is only a little higher,” said one of the guards. The sun was slipping below the surrounding peaks, painting them red and gold, glowing like the jewels Marana had tucked away. Red, too, was the sky above the cone of Kamazad, reflecting the fires below. Fire spoke to her, the Cana had said. It was dominant in her elemental makeup.

In the road ahead there was a shimmering of light, a luminous mist. Two figures stepped from it.

“Lord Kamat,” Im greeted them. “Lady Arimanata. I, um, we welcome you.” The wizard was clearly astonished by their abrupt appearance.

The god was big, nearly as tall as Cory. His skin was a burnished

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bronze and powerful muscles played beneath it. The female figure beside him was tall as well, taller than any woman Marana had ever seen, and seemed to have a silvery quality to her.

"I have never seen her — manifest like this before," whispered Kataree.

Both walked to where Cory held the body of Orro. The god raised an eyebrow at the demon's presence, an act that seemed incongruous on that serene and austere countenance, before bending his head to look upon Orro's remains.

It was Arimanata who spoke. "We offer you what consolation we can, beloved Kataree," she said, her voice as the sweet music of distant bells.

"At the last, he chose to serve Life, not Death. He became one of mine," Kamat added to this.

"He is with you?"

"None know where the dead go, my child. They are as arrows loosed into the night. But he chose Being over the Void, so surely he yet *is*."

"Even though he followed Asak's ways much of his life?" asked the girl.

"He may have done evil in the name of Asak but he did not believe, in his soul, his teachings. The truth is," rang the god's deep, resonant voice, "my brother Asak cares nothing about murder and torture. Indeed, he somewhat disapproves of those who enjoy such things, for he dislikes all enjoyment and pleasures. He is foremost a god of *despair*. A god of emptiness."

Im was nodding. He seemed to know this. "Will we see you again, my lord, at Kamazad?"

A sparkling laugh arose from Arimanata. "It is doubtful. You know Kamat rarely shows himself in this mortal world."

"Yet you do, my lady."

"She has a weakness for mortals," stated Kamat. "As does Banat."

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He spoke this quite seriously. Marana doubted this majestic god had any sense of irony or humor. She decided she liked his father or brother or whatever Banat was quite a lot more.

“But I shall be with you,” the god continued, “when you seek the power of my sacred mountain.”

Im replied only, “That is good to know, Lord Kamat.”

It was then that Arimanata reached out to lay her hand on Kataree’s head. “I, too, shall be with you,” she promised, and turned to join her husband. Both deities vanished as they had come.

Im chortled after they disappeared. “*His* sacred mountain. As if he and his priests paid the least attention to it before I told them of this place!” The wizard did not actually seem at all bothered by this.

How could one when a god such as Kamat was involved? The god of life and fire would take no notice. He might not, Marana suspected, even understand it.

~

“It is rare for a deity to touch anyone so,” spoke Im. They stood now before the shrine of Kamazad itself, a much smaller edifice than the temple they had departed that morning. “Not when manifested in all their power, as was Arimanata. It is different when they diminish themselves to mortal form.”

Though the wizard had said nothing more of it, Saj wondered if the hand of the goddess of the full moon had, well, transformed or transmitted or something of that sort. Maybe he would find out.

“This place reminds me of my home,” rumbled Cory. “Where rivers of molten rock flow beneath a red sun that fills half the sky.”

“And you are thankful you are not there,” Im said.

“Indeed so. I would just as soon be away from here too. I suppose there are wards against my entry —” The demon stood gazing toward the shrine and the mountain for a moment. It was an assumption that the smooth eyeless face of Cory gazed at things. “Yes, but weak.”

“You know they are not my doing,” said Im. “And I know you

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have no desire to enter.” His voice softened. “Best you lay down your burden here, Cory.”

The red demon gently placed Orro’s body on the rocky ground, and wordlessly turned from the group, disappearing into the shadows of evening.

“I’ll take care of him,” Saj told Kataree, picking up her brother’s remains. He could bear the corpse as far as the door before them, a door leading into a small building of rough stone. Kamazad at last.

The iron-bound door swung open and priests in robes of red and white came forth to greet the travelers.

ELEMENT IV.

TRIAL BY FIRE

37.

“Lord Kamat himself. That is indeed rare!”

Saj should have suspected there was more to this place than the structure they had entered. Passages and chambers had been cut into the soft volcanic rock behind it. This eating hall was quite roomy, though a higher ceiling might have been nice. It loomed a little too close for him.

“I know this well,” responded Im. He turned from their host, the master of this community, to Kataree. “How would you have us handle your brother’s remains? Are the rites of this place acceptable?”

The girl’s face was momentarily blank, as if it were not something of which she would have thought. “There were no rites in the temple of Asak. Bodies were used for practice of torture techniques and then thrown to the wyverns.” She looked to the priest. “You Kamatians cremate your dead, do you not?”

“It is customary,” he agreed. “Some bring the deceased here so they may be given to the fires of Kamazad.” A tolerant smile appeared above his pointed beard. “But any fire is as good as any other fire. It is all sacred to the god.”

“As is the earth,” Im added, his voice soft. “All things are sacred to one god or another.”

Kataree thought on this. “I think I would rather he slept in the earth,” she decided. A sob escaped, the first since her brother’s death. “Would that he could lie beside Gladsa, where once we were happy.”

“We shall place him high on a mountainside, where he may face the

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distant lake,” promised the priest. “Now eat and I shall have my acolytes show you to your lodgings.

~

“I can feel the power here,” said a subdued Nanos.

Saj felt something, but he was not sure quite what. He *was* sure he did not like being again underground after his escape from the temple of Asak. “Will we need to go, um, deeper?” he asked Im.

The old wizard shook his head. “Just being on the slopes of Kamazad is enough. We’ll not hurry into anything, boy. A day or two of rest will do us all good.”

And was necessary, if Kataree was to have a role. She had accompanied the priests who bore Orro to his resting place this day. Saj felt slightly guilty for not going with her. He knew he shouldn’t; best to leave the girl to her father.

“Will Ardis take part?” he asked.

Nanos frowned at the idea. “The priest would be in the way, I think. He has no great power.”

“Agreed,” said Im. “But if he and Kataree ask this, we will include him in the link.”

Saj still did not thoroughly understand this whole business. Maybe his companions did not either. Im spoke of Saj himself learning to better use the Jewels of the Elements. But both sorcerers were also concerned with Kataree and how she might be mixed up with this distant Wizard-Lord, and maybe they were also concerned with the Wizard-Lord himself and his plans.

One thing Saj did understand was that the stones could lead to prophecies — and those prophecies were expected to come from him. Ah, so be it. He was here and might as well see it through.

“I think it might be wise for you and I to explore the jewels beforehand,” Im near-whispered to Saj. “This evening, maybe, so you are better prepared for what will come.”

“It is always wise to be prepared,” allowed Saj. “Are we there?”

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This he addressed to no one in particular. Their guide, the master of this chapter of priests, had come to a halt.

Perse was named the priest. Perspiration glistened on his forehead. Those robes must be hot, thought Saj. He felt hot enough, himself; the air had been growing warmer as they had followed him into the heart of Kamat's mountain. More humid too, it seemed.

"We are," said Perse, allowing his vestments to fall to the rocky floor. The pot-bellied priest was considerably less impressive naked than in his red robes. "Ho, brothers," he called to other men soaking in a pool of steaming water.

"One of the most desirable benefits of living at Kamazad," spoke Im. "A hot bath always at the ready." He doffed his loincloth and joined the priests.

Nanos seemed bemused. "Not what I expected to find in the bowels of the sacred mountain," he murmured. "Hardly a place of power."

"That depends on what sort of power one seeks," replied Saj. "A hot bath has the power to dispel weariness like little else."

"Then we must consider yon spring a gift of Kamat," laughed the sorcerer, slipping out of his ragged tunic. "One we should not spurn."

Saj quite agreed.

~

"This will not be of great interest to you," Im told Marana. "Your husband and I shall simply sit here a while and stare at each other."

The noblewoman looked from the one man to the other. Saj knew she had no desire to stay with them but might consider it her duty to look after him. "Kataree should be back shortly," he said. "It would be nice if you were there to greet her." That should provide a good excuse to leave them.

Marana apparently agreed. "So I shall," she said, and left the pair alone. The stones she had carried lay between them, still in their leathern pouch.

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"I primarily wish to prepare you to protect yourself," Im began. "You are already quite good at blocking others. Too good, maybe. It might be hard to get you to open up." He dumped the Eyes onto the floor. "These, I hope, will help."

Saj eyed the four gems. He both feared and was drawn to them, and to their power. "No need to hold the gems," Im reassured him. "Just gaze into them for now. You have done that before." Saj had indeed. He had once sought the future for his pirate captors within the depths of the emerald Sea Stone.

Im's soft voice went on. "The Jewels of the Elements are, in their way, a gate to other worlds. That does not truly explain it, of course. They exist in many worlds at once, maybe an infinite number of them." There was a slight chuckle. "But also they do not in another infinite number of worlds. Ah!"

Where was Saj? He seemed to be standing in another space, not the room where he had sat with Im. Yet there was the wizard, standing before him. The light was strange here, as if lamps of many colors were illuminating them, red and green and blue and gold. The colors of the jewels. *I am in the Eyes?* he asked. It seemed as if his voice were distant, as if there was a gap between the time he spoke and when he heard his own words.

As good a way of describing it as any, said Im. There too, the words seemed to lag behind the movements of the wizard's lips. *You have entered another world. Only a part of you, understand, a very small part of you. If you can do this, then you are capable of visiting any world, anywhere.* He paused a moment, seeming to think this through, before adding, *Though being here at this place of power made it easier for you, I am sure. Easier for both of us.*

A part? Saj pondered this. *It is — it is like I am divided into two men, one here and one there.*

Exactly! You have grasped it at once. The sorcerer seemed inordinately pleased to Saj. *When we use the Eyes the next time you must*

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again enter with me, so I can protect you. So you are with me, so to speak.

Yes, came a deep yet decidedly feminine voice. There is no telling who might intrude when one is in a place like this.

Im showed his astonishment but for a moment. Lady Vulata, he said, bowing, a rare pleasure indeed.

Vulata? wondered Saj. The wife of Banat? He turned to behold the goddess.

Vulata was blue, a deep metallic blue, and fully as tall as Kamat. Her face was as that of a statue, a fixed and eternal beauty. She gave Saj a glance, her impossibly black eyes, eyes as black as the space between worlds, sweeping across him. *This is the young seer in whom my husband is interested?*

He is, my lady. Im did not bother to make an introduction. Saj suspected the deity had little desire to actually know anything of him.

Vulata nodded gravely in acknowledgment. *You have known Banat for nearly a thousand years of this world,* she spoke.

And served him as I might, my lady.

An icy laugh met this statement. *You have served yourself, Master Im, and maybe that disreputable godling, Xido, from time to time. But that matters not — you have been a friend to my husband. Mortal though you be, that is something to be valued.* She paused. Just a trace of affection slipped into her voice as she continued. *Banat will miss you.*

For a time, perhaps.

Yes, she agreed, *for a time. Let me tell you of Banat. Perhaps it is right you know these things before you pass into the night.* She paused, fixing her enigmatic gaze on the old wizard, before going on. *In some universes, the first event, the event from which all others grew, is named the 'big bang.' My husband was the big bang of his world, a world of the gods. It was he who created dimensions of space and time, giving all things a place.* The slightest of smiles graced her lips. *Or he was created along with them. Who can say? Banat remembers none of this, save in dreams, nor do any of the eldest gods. They are so intrinsic to their world that they think of themselves as always having existed. But I remember.*

Then he was the first manifestation of infinite Being in his universe. But what of you, my lady?

Banat was alone for eons. Growing, learning, for he knew nothing at

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the first. He was as ignorant as the little elementals that drift between the worlds. The slight smile returned to the goddess's face, for a moment. Yet sensing there were things he and his world lacked, he discovered others and searched through them. So it was he found me and drew me to him. His is not my universe, Im. I remain an alien despite the endless millennia I have dwelt there and guided my mate in its shaping.

Understand that I am not good, as is my Lord Banat. He is only one step away from the One, from infinite Being itself. I was all amoral, detached logic when he found me, but I have learned good from him. Thus I concern myself with what you do here. Vulata glanced again toward Saj for a few seconds. The unfathomable depths of her eyes hinted of worlds beyond worlds, worlds he could never see nor know. *And with these Jewels of the Elements that mean so much to Banat.*

I think, my lady, said Im, that he cares not so much about the jewels as he does about the role they play in this world.

Yes, he cares about you mortals. I would never have bothered with your world, had it been left to me. Again, the goddess' icy laugh. *But you know that well, Master Im.*

Yet you fear for us now. Is the Wizard-Lord so great a threat?

I do fear what he might unleash. I fear, too, our son Asak. He would let in the Void, if he might, in this world, in our world. In any world he could, even though he knows the worlds are infinite in number and always will be, no matter how many might be destroyed.

Which is why, spoke Im, most deities do not seem to worry much about such things. If one world goes there will be another just as good and full of worshipers.

It is so. But Banat loves this world and I love Banat. And, too, I would keep the balance when and where I might.

Yes, my lady, Im murmured. I know that is important to you.

Important? I know not. It is my nature. She turned her dark eyes

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again to Saj. *There is little I can do to aid you in your task, Mortal*, she said. *No, nor any other god. But we will not forget you.*

Thank you, my lady, said Saj. He was afraid it came out as a raspy whisper, not at all as he intended.

I like this one, Im, spoke Vulata. *His mind turns more to logic than most.* With that she simply faded away.

No need to disguise her exit here, mumbled Im. *I think we should get out too. That's quite enough for a beginner like you!*

Saj thoroughly agreed.

~

An hour of rest in the common room and a flagon of ale — or two — revived both men. “It was most unusual for Vulata to show herself, even in such a setting,” Im informed the younger man. “She is even less likely to do so than Kamat.”

“What about her worshipers?” asked Saj. “Doesn’t she talk to her priests or something?”

“Vulata is very self-contained, with her logic and her music. She has no need of mortal worshipers who might depend on her.” Im chuckled. “Not that she lacks for followers anyway. Most folk do like music.” The wizard sat silently for a time, sipping his ale. “I never knew the things she told us of Banat. So he is truly the first of the Ildin gods. Maybe,” he mused, “that is why he has no opposite.”

“And Kamat and Asak are their sons.”

“So it seems. Beyond that, I know little and with gods that is as it should be. Let’s go down to the front door and see if Kataree is back.”

“As good a plan as any,” said Saj.

~

“I can not tell if the girl mourns,” said Marana. “She lets nothing out.”

“She may not be sure how she feels. Her relationship with her brother was not normal. Not what we would consider normal.”

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Nothing in the temple of Asak was what Saj would consider normal. “Best to leave things to her father now, maybe.” And his goddess. Saj did not want to talk about any goddesses right then.

He did not want to speak at all of what had happened while Marana was gone, and she had recognized this. Saj would be glad to get back to a place where the official religion recognized Muram gods, gods who did not get so involved in people’s lives!

What he did say was, “It’s stuffy in here. I’ll be glad to get out of these caves again.”

“And someplace with windows,” agreed Marana. The ventilation shafts were a poor substitute.

Even the temple of Asak was better than this, Saj told himself. Better he did not say so aloud. All was well enough. They were safe here. They were together. Marana had the Eyes securely tucked away again though Saj could feel their presence on the edge of his consciousness. Was he more sensitive to them now? Maybe it was just a lingering effect of this afternoon’s session.

A part of him itched to enter those stones again. A part of him thought they might better be tossed into Kamazad. But he was going to enter them. Maybe he would even go beyond them. Soon, when everyone was ready. Everyone but him.

Saj sighed. Maybe a good night’s sleep would make things clearer.

“I dreamed again of the coming catastrophe,” reported Saj. “I think the Wizard-Lord is intertwined somehow with my visions.”

“This may be decades yet in the future,” said Im.

“Yes. But he is involved.” Saj had not slept so well the night before as he had hoped. I look tired, he thought, and added, “This place will be effected.” Maybe destroyed. The Mur was not sure of that.

“You should write down what you remember,” Im told him. “We can go seeking other worlds tonight or tomorrow or whenever we all feel up to it.”

Kataree piped up. “I am all ready any time,” she claimed. They spoke Muram this morning; both Marana and Saj were far more comfortable in that tongue. For that matter, so was Nanos, though neither Muram nor Ildin was his native language.

The sorcerer looked across the table to Ardis, sitting quietly by his daughter, and addressed him in Muram. The man only smiled and shook his head. “I think we had best switch back to Ildin,” said Nanos, “if Ardis is to be part of all this.”

Im nodded. “Even when we go seeking, yes. It may be our, ah, adversary does not know Ildin.”

Saj suddenly had an odd thought. What language had Vulata spoken to them the previous day? He could not absolutely remember now; only that he had understood her perfectly. “What tongue does this Wizard-Lord speak?” He turned to Nanos. “What is your native speech, anyway?”

It was Im who spoke first. “Some dialect of Zikem, I assume?”

“We mostly converse in Tesran in our everyday lives,” answered the sorcerer. “Many Tesran refugees came to live in our land after the city fell.”

“That’s more or less a Zikem dialect too,” said Im, and turned back to his breakfast.

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“True enough,” allowed Nanos. “Old Zikem is still spoken in the inner circles.”

Im nodded. “My own tongue a thousand years ago.”

In another world, right? thought Saj. Wasn’t that what the wizard had said? And he had come here with Cory. He wondered what the demon was up to. He should go outside and see what was going on. Get some fresh air. Maybe he would sleep better tonight.

Kataree spoke up before he rose to leave. “Your Wizard-Lord can speak Muram of a sort. He has been whispering to me in that language.”

Both Im and Nanos stared at her. “You know he is there?” asked the younger wizard.

“Ever since the goddess laid her hand on me. I could not see him before.” She frowned, two little creases appearing at the center of her smooth forehead. “He is not a very good person.”

“That,” said Im, “is most certainly so.”

~

“I like cats,” rumbled Cory, “even if they can’t speak in this world.” A small and black example of the species rested in its lap. Or the place a lap would be on a human.

“They don’t seem to mind you, either,” observed Saj.

“I am warm,” the demon replied, and released a thunderous chuckle. “Most people are loath to touch me and don’t realize that.”

Saj considered this, and reached out a hand to check. “So you are,” he said. At least its arm. “Warmer than I would have expected.”

“I have just fed.” Cory gently stroked the little feline with one thick finger. “I am full of the energy of my home world’s sun.”

They sat before a stable, half set into the side of the mountain, and containing several ponies. They were the first horses Saj had seen since being abducted from Lanlaz. The Mur had been observing his huge demonic companion, attempting to understand just how it did the things it did. “You, um, see energy? Or heat?”

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“That is close enough. My senses are not your senses. You would not understand them. Nor,” said Cory, “can I understand yours. I am incapable of reading the things mankind writes down — a book is but pieces of paper to me and I know not whether there are words on the pages.”

Saj considered that. “Much knowledge is hidden from you, then.”

The beast nodded. “It is so. Sometimes Im reads to me. He does not need to.”

No, he did not. But it would have been a bleak thousand years for the two to spend together had they not at least have attempted to be pleasant to each other. Saj still could not figure out where the demon’s voice arose. It seemed to come from its entire body.

But that was of no importance. “Your wizard is going to take me to those other worlds of his tomorrow, it seems.”

Cory slowly nodded its massive head. “You could find no better guide,” it said. Saj suspected maybe it was right.

~

“I hope to sort things out,” stated Im. “Otherwise, I would only bother with Saj.” He looked over his companions and chuckled. “Too many wizards!”

Five they were, Kataree and her father to one side of the old wizard, Saj and Nanos on the other. “So the Jewels will not be involved,” said Nanos.

Im nodded. “But you can all feel their presence, I have no doubt.”

There were murmurs of agreement. “Then we —” Saj was uncertain how to put it. “We will *enter* them again sometime?”

“Yes, you and I. That is still the important thing here, our true goal.” Im let his gaze pass over the others. “All this is far less important now we know Kataree is free.”

“But this evil one is still with her, is he not?” asked Ardis. The idea obviously upset him.

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“Only because I allow him, Father,” Kataree replied. “You are not going to lose me again.”

“So he will be with us on the morrow.” Nanos near whispered this. He still feared his master, Saj was certain.

“And we can straighten some things out with him, if nothing else,” stated Im. The Mur was equally certain the old magician did not fear Dxukur. Maybe Dxukur should be the fearful one.

“Then there is nothing more to do but get a good night’s rest and attempt this linking in the morning,” he continued. “Run along to your wife now, Saj, and let her keep you from worrying.”

Good advice, the young man felt, and he took it.

Should I let this Dxukur come in? asked Kataree.

Im considered the girl a moment. *I see there is another with you, as well.*

Yes, the goddess. I do not think she will manifest.

The old wizard nodded. *By all means, let our Wizard-Lord join us.* All five stood in what seemed a darkened room but was in truth a little universe of its own. A pale light seemed to rise from the floor beneath their feet.

Dxukur's form coalesced from the darkness around them. Saj was not surprised that he resembled Im and Nanos, dark of skin, a bit heavy in the brow. Nor was he surprised by the blond hair, as Lura, the sorceress of the mountains, had a similar curling, straw-colored mop. Nanos's was black. Im was white of beard and head; who could say what color his hair might once have been? The sorcerer addressed them in a tongue he did not know.

We'll not speak Zikem here, said Im, *nor even Tesran. Make it Muram. We are aware you know that.*

The man laughed. *No jabbering to each other in Ildin then. Let us be open with one another.* His Muram was oddly accented yet readily enough understood.

I shall have to translate for my father, spoke up Kataree.

He bowed to the young wizardess. *You have been deceiving me, I see. Our connection could have been broken at any time.* There was but a trace of mockery in his tone.

Perhaps, was all she was willing to admit.

I offer my condolences for your loss, he said, sounding convincingly grave and sincere. Quite a salesman, thought Saj. The man could make a fortune as a merchant. Dxukur turned to his erstwhile agent. *I take it you have chosen to leave my service, Nanos.*

The sorcerer only nodded. The Wizard-Lord shrugged. *So be it. But,* he warned, *should others who serve me come upon you, your life will*

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be forfeit. Believe this, Nanos. Nanos looked very much like he believed it.

Im spoke. *I know it is a considerable risk for him to enter into this conversation with you. He is far too vulnerable. But I know also, sir, you would attempt nothing with four other sorcerers here.*

Dxukur looked those four over. *Only one of whom has the power to withstand me. The rest are also at risk.* There was no mirth, no pretense in his laugh now. *I will not test myself against you, Master Im.*

Not yet.

No, not yet. The Wizard-Lord turned again to Kataree. *Do not assume I am your enemy, young sorceress. And I advise you not to make me one. My only interest is in the jewels.*

I do not think they are for you, she replied. *You would not use them well.*

Dxukur laughed aloud. *Perhaps not!* He gave his former disciple a sidelong look. *Nanos would like to take them, too.*

And probably would if we let him, admitted Im. *Ho! What is this?*

Another shape was forming among them, an uninvited guest. Not another goddess, is it? wondered Saj. If so, she was a most unappealing one, a gaunt hag of indeterminate years.

Muwanas? breathed Kataree. The witch turned to peer at the young woman, who shrank back despite herself.

I now rule in the enclaves of the goddess, stated the newcomer. *I, Muwanas, High Priestess of Dekata!*

How? wondered Nanos. *Who brought you into our link?*

I did, stated Dxukur. *Muwanas and I are now friends.* The woman spat and gave the sorcerer a malevolent glare. *Allies, perhaps I should say.*

So she who slew my mother is dead, said Kataree.

Not by my hand, though I would it were so, hissed the priestess. *The old woman took her own life, knowing she would soon be pulled down*

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otherwise. A crazed cackling laugh. So does rule pass in the temple of Dekata.

Muwanas has agreed to aid me in obtaining the stones, said Dxukur, evenly, as if in the midst of a pleasant conversation.

Once, it was our order that trained assassins. The Asakians usurped that from us. The priestess glared at each of them in turn. *But still are we deadly. Still do we know all the ways of death, aye, and of the darkest magic. I pray to Dekata we have the opportunity to use them!* She faded without a further word.

That witch is unlikely to just hand the stones over to you if she obtains them, observed Im.

I have promised other rewards to her, answered the Wizard-Lord. *We have no more to discuss do we?* He pivoted toward Nanos, fixing his gaze on him. The sorcerer staggered back, stricken somehow.

Dxukur faded, laughing.

~

“Just showing he could reach you, I suppose,” said Im.

Nanos managed a weak laugh. “I’ll enter no more links with the man.” He seemed to have recovered from whatever attack his onetime master had thrown at him. All were back in the room where they had started — the room they had truly never left.

“Arimanata was watching,” said Kataree. “Between the goddess and Im, he could not have truly hurt you.”

“I thought I — saw? Sensed, maybe. Sensed her,” Saj said. “And maybe another at the goddess’ side.” He was less sure of this.

“Her sister,” said Im. “Dekata might have been drawn there by Arimanata’s presence or by that of her priestess.” He peered at Saj. “I doubt you would have felt either of them had you not entered the Eyes the other day.”

He turned to Kataree. “When we visit them again, you should come with us.”

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~

“There is a school that holds it is not actually we that is sent but that we connect with alternate versions of ourselves,” said Nanos.

“A school with which I am not inclined to agree,” replied Im, “while recognizing it would make no difference.”

“Probably not,” admitted the other wizard. His eyes went to Saj. “You could learn some of this. It could be handy.”

“But it is not his gift,” Im stated with some emphasis. “Saj is first and foremost a seer.”

“Ah, yet even a seer could benefit from knowing how to unlock a locked door from the other side.”

It would be handy, Saj told himself. “How does that work? I know you send a part of yourself somehow — as with all this magic you have shown me.”

Im gave Nanos a disapproving look. For a moment he seemed naught but a peevish old man, but he shook his head, chuckling, and began an explanation. “The thing is to find a version of the world where the door is not locked and then send a part back from there into our own world to unlock from the inside. It is not easy and can be warded against.”

“If that sort of thing were easily accomplished we could spy on each other readily,” added Nanos.

“Not to mention cause other sorts of mischief,” Im said. “Assassinations. Rape. Fortunately, only the gods are capable of misusing their powers so.”

Saj knew the Jov who sat atop the Muram pantheon could be guilty of such things. None of these too-good Ildin deities, though. And if Asak was as his brother described him, disinterested in any sort of passions, neither would he.

“Also fortunately,” continued the elderly wizard, “the gods have infinite worlds in which to amuse themselves and rarely bother us.”

“Except when they do,” said Saj.

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“Indeed so,” Im agreed. “I’m for a good night’s sleep after all this day’s events.” He drained his mug of ale. “You’d best rest too, my boy. Tomorrow we take Kataree into the Jewels.”

He left the two men sitting in the low-ceilinged dining room. “I think,” spoke Nanos, “I envy you. I still desire those stones, yet — yet I doubt they are meant to be mine.”

“It’s not like I asked for them,” Saj replied. But he would not have Marana were it not for the Eyes. He should go to her now. Saj finished his ale and nodded a good night to his companion.

“My father just wants to be near,” said Kataree. “He worries about me.”

Ardis smiled good-naturedly. “With ample reason.”

“She’ll be safe enough,” said a preoccupied Im. “Stay if you wish.”

“Safe in here,” agreed Saj. “I wonder if those assassins are still lurking in the neighborhood.”

No one had an opinion on that. He and Kataree took places on the floor, before the cross-legged Im. The wizard held out his hand and then pulled it back. “You should handle the Eyes today,” he told Saj, his voice soft, almost a whisper. “They are to be truly yours from now on.”

But I’ll still let Marana take care of them, Saj said to himself. He drew out the pouch and emptied its contents onto the floor between them. Four gems, red and green, blue and gold. The Jewels of the Elements. He heard Ardis’s sharp inhalation. He feels them, he thought.

“Choose one that speaks to you,” said Im. “The Earth Stone for you, of course, Saj. Simply touch it.” He nodded in approval when Kataree chose the green Sea Stone. “I’ll tend to the other two.” The wizard place a hand on each, the tips of his fingers making light contact with the red Fire Stone and the blue Sky Stone.

“Long ago,” he said, “I first entered the Jewels of the Elements so, with my Atima. Follow me.”

Then they were again in that place of colors he had seen before. Kataree stood beside him — but another image, nebulous, overlaid that of the young sorceress. Saj recognized it as the woman who had appeared when Im first used the Eyes against Orro. The old man’s wife, the love of his distant youth. The young Mur recognized that it was but an image the stones had somehow preserved; there was no true part of the woman here. Surely Im could see it; Saj doubted he himself would have, once.

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And Kataree was unaware of the ghost. She was looking about them, apparently delighted by this world of the Eyes.

There was a catch in Im's voice. *Ah, Atima*, he murmured, and shook his head. *We do not seek visions now, Saj*, the aged wizard said, fixing his eyes on the Mur, *though you may glimpse things to come. I only hope to fully attune you to the power of the jewels — and you, also, Kataree, though I know not why your patroness asks it.*

Arimanata requested this? she asked.

She did. Im reluctantly turned to the girl. *She fades*, he whispered. Yes, Saj could see the image of Atima evaporating, leaving only Kataree. Perhaps it was a part of her also becoming attuned to this place.

Suddenly, he saw. He saw the girl's descendants and knew they were his descendants as well. Somewhere, sometime, their lines would merge. The vision disappeared as quickly as it came, so quickly Saj was not quite certain it happened at all.

But he guessed it might have something to do with why Kataree was here now. Im was still speaking. Had he missed anything?

Ever be cautious of entering them as we do now. Just their presence should bring the dreams of foretelling. Saj thought the old man was giving him an odd look. Maybe he knew what had just occurred. Was there going to be more? Was this all there was to being attuned?

We only stand in the light of the jewels right now, continued Im. *We have not truly entered, truly merged with them, though you have learned much from only this.* His voice faltered. *Atima prophesied with no more knowledge of them, until we — until she and I became one within them. If you fear to do this, speak now.*

Kataree actually looked eager. Saj suspected he did not look eager at all but he nodded an assent. *No one else can get in, can they?* he asked. He did not want Dxukur showing up again.

No wizards, Im assured him. *No mortals save those already attuned to the Eyes. That means you and me of all the humans in this world.*

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And me soon, piped up Kataree.

In this world? But there are other worlds, stated Saj.

Yes. The jewels exist in many universes. Im gave no indication as to whether that should be a concern.

~

It was as if they had fallen into the jewels, or perhaps into each other. Maybe it came to the same thing. We could have done that anytime, Im announced. We were blocking it, I consciously. For you two, it was part of your training and came naturally not to let the stones into your consciousness. Or your consciousness into the stones. His voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. So I gave you a little push.

Saj could see that. He saw that he could do it himself, now. Here the jewel-light swirled about them. Their own bodies seemed made of it. Atima and I fell into this place easily for we were in love and open to each other. And then — then later I needed to enter her mind to save her from the ravages inflicted by the Wizard-Lord.

Dxukur? wondered Kataree.

The one way back, Saj guessed. Torut, right?

Yes. Xido and I went in, and all three of us shared who we were. All of us learned much that day, even a certain smug god.

Kataree gasped. I can see this. It is in your memories.

Im laughed. You are both still way too adept at blocking others. Even here. Let it go and learn.

Saj wasn't sure of this. Maybe we need to be in love with you, he jested.

Then kiss me and have done, answered the wizard, pulling both their heads to his own — and then they were one. One mind, sharing all they knew, all they felt. It was too much.

Xido is here, Saj whispered.

The Xido of a thousand years ago.

Yes. I see that. So much — in both of you. And in the Jewels themselves.

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I wish I could stay forever, Kataree breathed.

Forever? Maybe not but Saj felt no desire to leave this swirling of color, this swirling of consciousnesses. Did he catch glimpses of the minds of distant wizards and gods, glimpses of their power, and of the infinite beyond them? There was knowledge both within and without, their shared mind, the uncounted worlds. He felt intoxicated by it. *We should leave soon,* he murmured, and realized it was so. But first —

Could we look for Xido? he asked.

As good a test of your powers as any. Give it a try.

Saj remembered questing the future across the turbulent seas when he was captive to Qala the Pirate Queen and her minions. Then he had used only the Sea Stone, gazing into its emerald depths. Now all the Eyes were available to him, Eyes that looked to every direction and every time. He could feel Kataree with him, though she knew not for what to search.

There, a great reptilian form basking on a white sand beach, tropical jungle rising behind it. He could see the palms. He could see even parrots roosting in the palms. And Xido the Crocodile slept, far away, somewhere in the south. The god would remain a mindless beast for a time more, it seemed, yet it also seemed for a moment as if he touched him. Was that the future he glimpsed or what was now? Saj did not know and was uncertain whether he could. The vision faded from him.

Let us return, he said.

~

They were back in the chamber of shifting lights, still in their link, still within the influence of the stones, but no longer — well, wherever that was. *It will take long to sort out all the knowledge you have imbibed,* Im told the two youngsters. *A lifetime, maybe. Certainly, the rest of my lifetime!*

And the three of us will always be linked, said Kataree.

In a sense, agreed the wizard. *I doubt any of us will ever again meet in that place. Or even this place. The Jewels of the Elements are now*

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yours to guard and use as you see fit, Saj. You definitely demonstrated the strength necessary to control them.

Guard them well. A woman spoke, but more than a woman.

Lady Arimanata! I greet you, spoke Kataree in a rather small voice, bowing to her goddess.

None of that, girl. We are pleased with how this went.

Im appeared cautious. We did not expect to meet you here, my lady.

Vulata holds and guards access to the stones in our world. It is by her permission that I am able to enter.

That we are able to enter, Sister, spoke another, stepping out of the shifting lights. Where the goddess of the full moon was silver, this woman was black. Not the black of Xido, the black of Kambak and his priests. That was a human black. The goddess gleamed like polished jet. In all other features, she was identical to her sister.

Lady Dekata, Im greeted her. He sounded even more cautious now.

The goddess of the new moon looked about. *I do not like it here one bit,* she said. Her voice held an endless weariness.

Of course not, her sister told her. *You would love to destroy the Eyes.*

Dekata nodded vigorously. *I'd swallow them down.*

I doubt that would work, said Arimanata. *And it would probably be most uncomfortable when you shitted them out again.* She turned back to the trio of mortals. *Dekata is forever eating things she should not. Like her children.*

Better than having the brats running around my cave, muttered the dark goddess.

Considering what sort of children she might have, Saj was half-inclined to agree. Arimanata only ignored her sister's statement. She probably had heard it before. *This has allowed Im to pass on much knowledge to Kataree,* she said. *You are to be important, girl, in what is to come. You too, Saj.*

I'd eat both of them too, growled Dekata.

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I am sure you would, agreed Arimanata, as both goddesses faded into the ever-shifting light of the Jewels.

“So that is done and we can head home,” said Saj.

“At last.” Marana would be glad to be underway. “Back to the temple in the morning, then.”

“Right. All of us and plenty of guards this time.”

“Perse says the best route is further south. Not the way we came.” She smoothed the red kirtle she had just slipped on. It had been a gift of the priestesses at the shrine of Banat. It was too bad it wouldn’t be stylish back in Lanlaz. Maybe she should start a new style. “And it isn’t as close to that temple of Asak.”

Saj obviously approved of the idea. She thought he approved of the way she looked too but he was always easy to please. “I’d like to see that more traveled pass.” A gong sounded somewhere, echoing and reechoing down the stone passageways, like the hooves of a herd of horses. “Supper. Our farewell here.”

“You wouldn’t think of trading across the mountains, would you?” the noblewoman asked as they started down the hall.

He laughed easily. “And leave you? Never. That’s what agents are for.”

“I wouldn’t mind coming over them with you sometime,” Marana said. “Another soak in Perse’s hot spring might make it worthwhile.” The priest had shooed all the Kamatian brotherhood out so she and Kataree could loll in them this afternoon.

“I can build us a bath house in Lanlaz,” came her husband’s reply, followed by a thoughtful silence. He’s actually pondering whether it would be a profitable business venture, Marana realized.

“It’s too hot there already,” she told him, “and people can go into the sea to cool off.”

“Hmmp. True,” he admitted. “I suppose Kataree will stay with her father now.”

“Can you, um, speak with her from afar?” Marana was uncertain

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just how much he had learned of wizardry. More than he knew before, for certain.

"I suspect so. Perhaps if I use the Eyes to help me." There was at least a trace of reluctance in his tone.

"Well, let's worry about none of that now but have a good meal and a good night's sleep."

"An excellent suggestion, my dear," he told her, as they entered the dining room.

And so they did. But in that night came dreams.

~

"We are not returning across the mountains as planned," Saj announced over breakfast. It was news to all but Marana; he had discussed this with her on rising.

"Ah, you have dreamed," spoke Im. "It is not unexpected."

He took a seat beside the wizard, but addressed all his companions on both sides of the table. "I saw Nedos and his ship, and the captain leading a party of men into the mountains. I think we are meant to go and meet them." Saj turned his gaze to the young sorceress. "And I saw you there, Kataree."

It was Ardis who spoke up. "There is no need for you to make any plan until we return to the temple of Kamat." The priest of Arimanata could not have liked hearing this of his daughter, though he maintained an outward calm.

"Indeed," said Perse, "you will find maps there that might help you choose a way."

"I know the way north to the sea well," Im said. "I could tell you the best route right now." The wizard looked a bit sour about the whole affair. "But better to be off to Kamat's shrine first."

The way proved uneventful this time, with not a sign of assassins lurking in the rocks nor wyverns in the sky. Im slipped close to Saj at one point and whispered, "I suppose I shall have to guide you on your way a bit longer. Cory and I." He glanced toward the demon, once

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again walking with their party. "We're old and don't enjoy being put out, you know."

"You have a home somewhere? The both of you?"

"A cottage near the shrine of Banat. I spend a fair amount of time in that shrine these days. But Cory can't get in, of course, and it wouldn't be right to ignore it. Not after all these years."

"And no others?" Im might be old but Saj had noted the looks the priestess Labaree had given him.

"I'm not about to bring another wife home at this point," declared the wizard. "Which is not to say I've given up female companionship." He offered no further information.

They reached the shrine as the sun disappeared behind the mountains.

~

"Something awaits me there. Saj has seen this," Kataree explained to her father. "Maybe I shall come right back. And we can speak from afar whenever you wish."

Ardis took this philosophically. "That is better than nothing, my daughter."

"And Balase will again accompany them, with twenty of his best," the High Priest Tusrat assured him. "I think our travelers may be safer taking this route than going all the way over the mountains and across Lorj to their home."

"If this Muram captain truly awaits them," Ardis pointed out.

"A Sharshite captain, Saj tells me," said Kataree. "But commanding a Muram galley."

"And a good friend of ours," Marana had to add. Of her brother, anyway. Why he would be where Saj had seen him, she had no idea.

"I suppose this is all bound up in the Jewels of the Elements," the young sorceress went on. "Our goddess wanted me to be a part of them and their destiny."

"Don't take destiny too seriously," Marana advised. "It simply

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comes and that is that.” She had been no older than this girl when she had met Saj and been swept along with his destiny. “And maybe when it is done, we can get back to normal life.”

“Normal? I am not sure what that is,” replied Kataree. “But I would surely like to find out.”

43.

Thick smoke rose from the cone of Kamazad. Saj was pleased to be traveling away from the mountain and its ground-shaking rumbles. First they would travel south, toward the center of Laggalak, the Good Valley of the Ildin and their gods, and then follow a passage northward and eastward, threading through the mountains.

"It would help if you could remember some landmarks," Im had told him. "A river, maybe?"

Saj had remembered only a broad bay of some sort. "I can make a guess where that is," said the wizard. "It might be a wrong guess."

"But the best guess," was Belase's opinion when told of it. "This route will carry us to its shores."

"As it carried your ancestors here," said Im. He turned to explain to Marana and Saj and perhaps to Kataree as well. She did not seem to know much of her people's history. "The Ildin did not come into Lorj through the plains of the River Erd, where the Mura now hold sway," he went on. "Too open, and with soil too poor for their sort of farming. This way led into the heart of the mountains, a secure new home."

"We spread from here," added Belase. "There is an, um, adequate port up there. Not used much anymore."

"Adequate is stretching it," felt Im. "It is too open to the sea. The Mura don't even bother to keep a base there."

"True. You're more likely to run into pirates than the Muram navy."

"We have a pair of experts on those pirates," chuckled Im. "They entered their lair and lived to leave it again."

"With the help of, um, Xit," said Saj. Best not use the god's real name in this company.

Belase only nodded. Maybe he'd already heard the story. "Word is the new Pirate King shifted their hideout south to somewhere on our coasts. Too hot for them on the mainland anymore."

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"Lots of places to hide on the west coast," commented Im. "Less convenient, though, to shipping on the Greater Sea."

"And closer to their Baxac rivals."

Their road ran through a series of valleys, connected by gaps, low and relatively easy of passage, carrying them mostly toward the north. Those valleys were not empty. Farms and villages lay along the way, at least at first. "It grows less hospitable further north," Im reported. "All rock and little soil."

"I hope Nedos really is waiting for us up there," said Marana.

So did Saj. Yes, he had seen the captain but he could not say exactly when the man and his ship would appear. "We could, ah, go looking for him," he said. "In the Eyes." He gave Kataree a sidelong glance.

"Only if we don't find him," spoke Im. "There is no point in calling attention to yourselves and the stones. You still have enemies. Anyway," the wizard continued, "we can follow the coast eastward if need be and reach a Muram town."

"Preferably by boat," added Belase. "'Tis a rugged way otherwise."

"But better than retracing our way," Saj said. There was no disagreement.

~

"The demon is the color of my son Sabus," came a voice from the night. Arimanata materialized amid the flickering light of their campfire, and her sister beside her.

"So he is." Dekata sounded quite disinterested in the subject.

"The god of wine," whispered Im in an aside.

"And much more, I would assume," Saj replied. He knew how these Ildin deities worked now.

A silvery laugh flowed from Arimanata. "Oh yes, also joy and revelry and sexual ecstasy. Sabus is popular, particularly among women."

Dekata made to attempt to hide her scorn. "Some women." The

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goddess seemed almost on fire, her naked obsidian body reflecting the light of the flames. She glanced at the Kamatian priest-warriors, who had immediately taken up their weapons, but said nothing of it.

Arimanata did. "My sister intends you no harm but her followers are on your trail. You probably expected this."

"As are the assassins of Asak," said Dekata "It matters little to me which side wins, but I suppose I must support my priesthood."

"Neither of us wants our father's followers to possess the stones." The silver goddess looked directly at Kataree. "Nor to breed wizards."

"That is the province of my devotees." Dekata sounded firm about this. Her own green eyes went to Saj. "I might not mind breeding some myself."

Im spoke up. "You would do better to look to your priestess' new ally."

"This so-called Wizard-Lord? Far too full of himself."

"That is something we can agree on, Sister," said Arimanata. "Best not let Muwanas hand the Eyes over to him if your people win."

A laugh like the clashing of knives erupted from the dark goddess. "Never did she intend to!" She looked over the group of travelers. "I would offer my curse to all of you and wish you failure in whatever you attempt, but the universe already takes care of all that. And my special curse to you, my love," she said, with a nod to Im. With that Dekata faded into the darkness.

"And my blessing, though it likely be no more effective," spoke Arimanata. "Especially to you, demon-the-color-of-my-son. Especially to you."

~

"I do not like gods paying attention to me," said Cory.

"I know the feeling," came Im's affable reply. "Yet we can't seem to escape them, can we?"

"We could go home right now and spend our last century or so in peace."

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“As soon as we deliver these two to their friend,” promised Im. “Or are we delivering three?”

Kataree only shrugged. “I think we shall find out when we get there. Unless Saj dreams again.”

Saj had not been dreaming at all, as far as he knew. He certainly remembered nothing. Trekking through the mountains day after day made him too weary for more than a deep sleep. Those mountains were becoming more rugged to travel; not so high as before but criss-crossed with deep gorges and sawtooth ridges. But there was a road, so others traveled this way.

“Maybe if I slept with the jewels closer,” he said. Marana had been keeping them in her pack, day and night.

“Best not,” advised Im. “We should use the Eyes only if an absolute need arises.” The old wizard rose to his feet. “It looks like we’re ready for another day’s march.”

“My father is well,” reported Kataree. “He has returned to the shrine of the goddess. He was most astonished that both she and her sister came to visit.” She smiled at the thought. For a moment, Saj thought she might giggle.

“I’m not even sure why they visited,” he told her. They had stopped for half an hour, to rest and take a light lunch. He had noticed the girl slipping into her trance state.

“Because of the Asakians, I assume,” she replied. “They both hate their father. Hmm, maybe Arimanata can’t actually hate. But she would like to balk his priesthood.”

“And Dekata hates everything, I assume,” said the Mur. “Including herself.”

“So it is.”

“Just who is their mother?” asked Marana. “I can not imagine any self-respecting goddess wanting to wed Asak.” Neither could Saj.

Kataree became quite sober and answered in a hushed voice, “His sister, Khabata. The legends say he raped her and since she has had nothing to do with anyone male.”

“I don’t blame her,” sniffed Marana.

Saj suspected this was as Vulata had told them, something so far back the gods themselves were uncertain of it. Only she, the mother of them all, remembered. He did not think he would ask her, even in the unlikely chance of being able to.

A howling arose somewhere in the distance. “Wolves?” wondered Saj. He had heard the wild packs often enough back in Muradon. This sounded different, nor would one ordinarily hear them at noon.

“Hounds.” There was no disguising the fright in Kataree’s voice. “The hounds bred in hidden caves below Dekata’s shrine. Often have I heard their wailing echo through the dark passageways.”

Im had risen from where he sat at a slight distance, conversing with

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Belase. "They have emptied the kennels," he said "and intend to hunt us through these hills."

~

Through the day they rushed forward, camping late in the most defensible spot they could find, beneath a jutting outcrop of dark volcanic rock. "We might make the coast in three days," spoke Balase, as they huddled in a cold camp. "Four, for certain."

"There are watchers in the sky again," said Kataree. "I sensed the riders speaking to each other."

Saj had felt nothing but the sorceress might be better attuned to those kobold spies. Im seemed to take her word for it. "No Asakian wizards to hear them on the ground," he noted, then looked as if he wished he hadn't. The only one who might have spoken with those riders had been Kataree's dead brother. "Yet I have no doubt assassins are somewhere out there." The wizard's eyes peered into the dark for a moment before turning to Cory. "You'll keep a watch, won't you?"

"I shall," it rumbled. "Intruders are easier to spot at night."

"The difference in temperature?" guessed Saj. The air would be colder, right?

"So it is," agreed the demon. "Some are not so discerning." Though it had no eyes, Cory's head did swivel toward Im. "Some take centuries to figure out simple things."

"Did it matter?" asked the elderly wizard. "You were going to protect me anyway."

"Will we be able to use magic to protect ourselves?" asked Nanos. He had spoken little through the afternoon, wrapped in some deliberations of his own. He has no reason, really, to remain with us, thought Saj. None of this is his battle anymore — unless he still covets the Jewels of the Elements.

"Magic? Hard to say," came Im's answer. "We might use some to obscure our track, though I don't know if that would fool the hounds."

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It would be nice if Kataree's friendly patroness gave them some aid. But her sister would come right along and counteract it. That's surely how things work, Saj told himself, so they end up leaving it all to us. And that's the way things should be.

The night proved quiet. Nanos was gone in the morning.

~

"I have made out maybe a dozen voices," stated Marana. She knew dogs and recognized each had its unique sound.

"Thirteen," Kataree corrected her. "They always hunt in packs of thirteen."

"Oh." It would have been nice if she had known that first. "You have seen them?"

The girl sighed. "I did not know there was any other sort of dog when I was little. Only those great white brutes the witches bred." Something resembling a half-smile briefly passed across her face. "My mother was one of the few for whom I ever saw them show affection. Or show affection for them."

"We'll get no affection today." Marana was certain of that. The attack would surely come soon. Before dark. Their pursuers wouldn't take a chance of losing the jewels in the night. There was a narrow way ahead, a gorge, a good place for an ambush, but those dogs were behind them. Best they hurry through it. That's what Balase seemed to think.

Marana thought it might be a good place to stand and fight, where their flanks would be protected. But also something of a trap. They jogged through the ravine, two abreast, soldiers at the front and rear of their column. The noblewoman looked up at the walls on either side. It would be a difficult shot downward for an archer but she would have placed some up there anyway. But those Asakian assassins didn't use bows, did they? She hadn't seen any.

Nor did the Kamatians who guarded them; they depended on spear and shield to provide a wall of defense. So had her Sharshite ancestors

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a couple generations back. Muram horsemen had made that tactic obsolete. No horsemen here, thank — hmm, whom to thank? Not her patroness Esefa, a goddess of love. Jov maybe. Thank Jov!

They were out into the open, entering a broader valley, when the assassins came charging from the rocky slopes. Six or seven over there? And maybe an equal number from the other side. Not a large force.

The Kamatian captain held up a hand, motioned to his men. “There,” he called, “and there. The rest of you behind them.” Twenty skilled fighting men Balase had, and Cory as well. It would take a formidable force to defeat them. Not this handful of assassins, no matter how good they were with weapons.

And these Asakians carried only swords. Cory clearly itched to charge into their midst, but held itself back, ready when the time came. Beside it, Im found another other-world sword to use if need be. “I wish I had more than a knife,” Saj whispered to his wife. As did she.

Their enemies halted before reaching them. An impasse, with neither willing to attack. Maybe the assassins hoped the Kamatians would break rank or Cory would give into his urge to fight. Lean men, wearing naught but their loincloths and black caps, they were. How could they hope to prevail against the armored warriors of Kamat?

A shadow crossed the rocky ground, and another. Marana was not the only one to look up into the sun. What was it? “Wyverns,” hissed Saj. He might not see them against the glare any better than the others but he knew of the creatures. It was a likely guess.

One of the flying reptiles stooped of a sudden, stooped on Cory, and knocked the demon from its feet. The other followed close behind and raked at Cory’s form as it attempted to rise. Marana caught only a glimpse of a wizened little manlike being on its back. As the wyverns turned for another pass, this time targeting the guardsmen, the Asakians charged.

There was a clash of sword on shield and the Kamatian line held.

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For now. “Fall back to the narrows!” cried out Balase. Sensible. The flying creatures would not be able to maneuver there. But too late.

Behind them, a pack of great white hounds came bounding through the rocks.

Many dogs but not so many humans, Saj noted. They still outnumbered their attackers. And three of the newcomers were women, there to handle the hounds, maybe. The shield wall proved as effective against dog as man but the Kamatian line was stretched thin now. And there were still the wyverns; to lift the shield in protection against their attack was to invite the enemy to thrust a sword beneath it.

Cory was back on its feet and wading into the snarling pack, tossing their bodies to either side. The hounds were not quite as large as Saj had imagined them, but still sizable dogs, and heavily built, with thick shoulder and neck. More akin to mastiffs than hounds, they seemed. They were, as promised, white. White all over, with pale green eyes. He'd never seen such eyes on a dog; they were like that flame Orro had called to himself when he battled Im.

Or like a paler reflection of the flame that burned in the eyes of Dekata. Saj held his knife ready to battle man or dog — and then remembered what else was in his belt-pouch. Idiot! he told himself, as he pulled out the sling he had made. At least there were plenty of rocks of a proper size readily at hand. “Stand back!” he called out, whirled the sling over his head, and let fly at one of the wyverns. It flinched and banked away.

“Aim for the riders,” someone said. It might have been Kataree. Yes. He was not likely to hurt one of the reptiles much but they seemed brainless creatures, directed by the kobolds on their backs. Or he could just try to kill some of their human attackers. They made easier targets.

He disliked the idea of killing women but those two wild-haired priestesses over there surely directed the pack. Another woman stood aside and behind the Dekatans. She might be the leader of them all. Hmm, too far away. He sent a stone flying toward one of the women.

Down she went. Not dead, Saj was pretty sure. He had been aiming at the torso at this range. His next stone flew toward one of the

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hounds. It leaped into the air, more surprised, perhaps, than hurt. Suddenly, he himself was knocked from his feet. Having moved behind and a little up the slope from the others to get a better shot, he had made himself vulnerable to the wyverns.

The other flying reptile had taken Cory down again. The demon was engulfed in a mass of white fury as the pack closed on it. Saj scrambled to his feet and watched one wyvern bank for another diving attack. The rider was clearly visible. He whirled his sling and let fly.

Then the rider was visible falling toward the ground. The small body hit hard and moved not. The kobold's steed rose and circled, seeming uncertain of its course. After a time, it flapped southward, undoubtedly back to its rookery at the temple of Dekata.

The fight had deteriorated into a general melee, the protection of the shield-wall largely gone, though here and there two or three Kamatians stood together, fighting on, thrusting spears at Dekatans and Asakians alike. Saj would get no more good shots.

The warriors of Dekata — no more than a half-dozen of them — had also been armed with spears. They might have been temple guards. Surely they were not assassins, nor particularly good with their weapons at all. They'd have come along to protect the dogs and their priestess handlers. That still seemed to be their primary duty and their attacks on the Kamatians were without enthusiasm. Mostly they stood back, thrusting a spear forward from time to time.

Thus it was no surprise they had lost but one man while half the Asakians were down, and many of Balase's men. Saj could spy a number of white forms scattered about too, hounds slain by Cory or the warriors. No more than four or five worried the downed demon, and none were attacking the men.

Was that Im striding forth with his sword? He waded right into the Dekatans, a pair of Kamat's warriors in his wake. Their enemies scattered, leaving another man dead behind them. Toward Cory rushed the old wizard. Saj had to turn his attention back to his own part of the

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battle then; he had taken up a fallen spear and was doing his best to fend off any attacker. None, though, seemed interested in slaying him or the women.

They want to take us alive, he told himself. At least the followers of Asak do. The Dekatans might not care. Where had the other wyvern gone? There, it was diving again on Cory, as the demon once more struggled to its feet. This time it remained on the ground, clawing and biting at the great red body alongside the remaining hounds.

Now Im was to them. laying about with his sword. The wyvern rose with a great harsh cry and winged off, not to return. The kobold rider must have had enough and saw no reason to risk his own life. A shrill whistle sounded. Saj was fairly certain it came from the woman who led the Dekatans, still standing well away from the battle, partly within the gorge through which they had passed. Two dogs and all the remaining human followers of Dekata answered that call, rushing to their leader. One other dog, too damaged to run, attempted to crawl to her, its entrails dragging on the ground behind it. In seconds, all had disappeared through the opening.

The Asakians? They fought on, yes, every man of them until none were left.

“An arm, a leg, I could regenerate. You have seen me do so. Maybe even my head. But not this.” Cory was practically torn in two. “Now I need not worry about being pulled back to my world.” Some ichor, sap-like, was seeping from its torn body. The voice was weak, a broken whisper. “My farewell to you, little master.”

Im knelt beside the demon and openly wept. He remained there as his companion of a thousand years slowly slipped away, apparently without pain, seeming to simply deflate. Cory spoke no more.

Many others lay dead on that field. Two Dekatans, all the Asakian assassins, half of Belase’s troop. And the dogs, eleven of them. Marana could now feel a certain sorrow for them; she believed all dogs, even those raised by the mad priestesses of Dekata, were born good. Kataree might have agreed with her.

They buried their own dead — or, more properly, piled rocks over them to form a communal grave — and left the others in a pile. Im and Saj attended to the interment of Cory’s remains, covering it over where it lay. “I knew one of us would precede the other,” Im had said, “but always thought it would be me.” Then all marched on a short distance to make camp for the night.

“Do you think there is an afterlife for demons?” Marana asked Saj, before falling asleep.

“I don’t know if there is one for humans,” he replied. “Even the gods don’t know.” Marana knew that was true. That was what Kamat had said. Xido had expressed much the same thought once. Their adventures with him seemed so distant now.

“But if there is infinite Being — or is that *an* infinite being? — as the gods have told you, then everything goes on, um, forever, right? We couldn’t end even if we wanted to!”

“But the Asakians hope to, it seems,” her husband replied. “Their god does, anyway. I guess we’ll just find out eventually. Or not.”

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The camp was surrounded. A Kamatian warrior, undoubtedly one of the sentries, lay on the ground. The others had been disarmed.

“Pirates,” breathed Saj. He had seen enough of pirates to recognize them. Muram, the bulk of them, from the kingdoms across the Great Sea, but with a sprinkling of other nations.

A small bandy-legged fellow with a drooping mustache whispered to their leader. That man turned a sharp eye toward Marana and Saj, and nodded. “We remembers you two,” he spoke. “The sorcerers who spirited our queen away.”

So that was how the tale had grown? Never mind that Qala had willingly taken part in their escape and now lived the life of a landed gentlewoman in distant Sharsh.

“Does we cut their throats?” asked the little pirate.

“Not yet. We’ve things what needs sorting out.” Their leader eyed the Kamatian captives. “And yon Ildin boys would be worth having on the oars. Where be our wizard?”

“Here, Captain,” spoke Nanos, stepping forward. He avoided looking at the captives.

“They’re to be carrying some valuables your master wants, isn’t they?”

“Yes, sir. Some jewels. The woman carries them. The big one.” Saj almost had to smile at the description of Marana. “It might be just as well to leave them with her until, as you say, things are sorted out.”

The pirate chieftain shrugged. “As you will. We only agreed to get them to you for your Lord Dxukur.” He looked about. “Let’s get them on a rope-line, boys, and head back to the ship.” That line included Saj and the Kamatians, but not Im or either woman. Their captors seemingly didn’t deem it necessary.

So they marched north, toward the not-so-distant sea.

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Nanos casually fell in beside Marana and Im. “These are the same

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crew that brought me to Lorj,” he said, in a normal conversational tone. Whispering would only bring suspicion. “As far as they know, I still serve the Wizard-Lord.”

Im got right to the important question. “So what are your intentions?”

“Definitely not to let Dxukur get the Eyes. Beyond that —” The sorcerer shook his head. “I’ll find out when it happens.” His eyes shifted to the broken country beside them. This area was looking a little better than what they had passed through the last few days. There were more trees. It was also warmer. “Is Cory paralleling us?”

“My friend is dead,” came Im’s curt reply. Marana wasn’t sure she had ever heard him refer to the demon as his friend.

Nanos mumbled something under his breath. A prayer? She would not have expected it from him. “Then you are on your own,” he said.

Maybe, thought Marana. She remembered Saj had glimpsed Nedos and his men. It would not do to tell this man of it while they remained uncertain of his loyalties.

It was not yet noon when the column halted. Something was happening up ahead. When most of the pirates — she had counted eighteen of them — and their captives took seats on the ground, Marana could see what was up. It was the priestess of Dekata and what was left of her troop. The two hounds, also.

A minute or two later, word came down the line to bring them forward, Saj and her, Kataree, Im. Balase, as well, but the witch took a look at him and said to take him back. She spoke in broken Muram, somewhat worse than Kataree’s. In truth, the girl had become fairly good with the language — as had she and Saj with Ildin.

“Now, Lady Kusjee,” the pirate captain explained, “we knows you are, um, allied with this Wizard-Lord, but we’ve had no orders to give you the jewels. Nor anything else.” He looked to Nanos, perhaps expecting him to ask his master about it right then and there.

She also turned to the wizard, giving him an all-too-knowing look.

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Kusjee was of middle age and, for a devotee of Dekata, rather well-groomed and even attractive. And she wore clothes. “We speak maybe leaders later?” she said.

“You are a sorceress, then,” stated Nanos.

“When need to. Me dogs do, most time.”

“The mistress of the kennels,” Kataree whispered to Marana. “My aunt, too.”

Four men had Kusjee with her, apparently all in good enough shape, and the two women who handled the dogs. Those were both young and rather unkempt. One had a cloth wound around her ribs. Saj’s work, she guessed.

The pirate leader pondered all this for a while. “Later. Good enough,” he said. “Let’s get going again.”

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Nanos spoke with the priestess of Dekata for some time before again dropping back to walk beside Marana and Im. Kataree followed behind, apparently wrapped in her own thoughts.

“This witch knows I no longer serve Dxukur but she and her high priestess see no reason to inform anyone,” said Nanos. “Maybe they hope to hold it over me.”

“Blackmail,” stated Im.

They were somewhat surprised when Kusjee also fell back. “I give you greetings, Kataree,” she said, speaking Ildin. “It has been long.”

“That it has, my mother’s sister,” replied the girl.

The woman gave a low whistle and the two white dogs, near the head of the column, pricked their ears and bounded back to her. Their handlers looked only moderately surprised. “You do not know these two but you may have petted their parents or grandparents,” spoke Kusjee.

The pair sniffed at Kataree and seemed pleased enough with her. Marana, for reasons she did not quite understand, held out the back of

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her own hand. She seemed to pass muster, too; indeed, she was soon scratching behind both hounds' ears.

Im, however, kept his distance. It was understandable. These dogs slew his companion, thought Marana. They slew his greatest friend.

"I would have you serve Dekata, if I could," spoke Kusjee. "I fear Muwanas would kill you. You are too powerful, too much a threat to her. And neither of us wants you back in the temple of Asak."

"Me, neither," said Kataree.

"If I could just get the Jewels of the Elements away from these seafarers, it would be enough. We would not care what became of any of you."

"Kataree is attuned to the jewels now," Im informed her. "If she desired it, she could readily throw down your high priestess."

"Would it were so!" The woman turned her gaze to Nanos. "I might not mind having you there too."

The wizard gave her a bow. "Your faithful hound, madame."

She sighed. "But I know it will not happen." Kusjee gazed at Im for some time. "I am sorry for the loss of your companion," she said. "Blame me if you must. Do not blame the hounds."

"I blame only the gods," he replied. "I hope we stop soon. I am too old to march all day."

Saj thought he could smell the salt air. A brisk breeze blew from the north, from the direction of the sea. Two days yet to reach it? Was that right? And then — well, who could say? The pirates were rousing themselves, the tired sentries coming in from their posts, seeking breakfast.

One fell forward, an arrow standing in his back. More shafts flew from the trees, a volley, followed by a troop of Muram marines. The pirate captain flew to his sword; he knew surrender meant only the gallows. Or worse — they might be taken back to a port for crucifixion.

“Mine,” cried out a voice familiar to the Mur. He had been expecting Nedos eventually, hadn’t he? Perhaps not so dramatic an entrance, however. A clash of swords, a couple passes, and the polished Sharshite nobleman had run his adversary through. There was no more fighting.

Nedos surveyed the captured pirates, kneeling here and there in the camp. A few lay dead — or would shortly. There would be only the mercy of a cut throat for the badly wounded. “We haven’t time for hanging,” he said. “And we need to replace the freed slaves from your galley. A time at the oars for you, my boys!”

Captain Nedos turned to the former captives. “So once again I rescue you two from pirates, eh?” He’s probably quite astonished to see us here, thought Saj. Nedos would not show it. “I must have the story of it. Women?”

The two Dekatan dog handlers were in the grip of a burly marine. “Another one ran, sir,” he reported. “She took an arrow.”

Kataree gasped. “Where?” The man nodded in the direction of a body.

Kusjee was not dead, but she would be. One could not doubt that. The two hounds were huddled by her. “You must take care of them,” the priestess rasped out. “Both of you.” She means Marana and

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Kataree, Saj realized. He was standing behind them as they attended the dying woman.

"We shall," promised Kataree. She looked on her aunt for a few seconds. "She is gone," the girl said, and rose. "Come." The hounds followed her at once.

"I turned the other two loose," Nedos reported when they returned to him. "I didn't know what else to do with them. Maybe I should release those other Ildin priests too. Of Dekata, right?"

"I would think so," agreed Saj. "They were only guards for their priestesses."

The captain nodded. "Let them go," he told his sergeant. "So where are you headed now?"

"Marana and I are with you," Saj told him. His wife nodded a vigorous agreement. "We can not speak for the others."

"I return south now with Balase and his remaining men," said Im. "My part in this is done. Perhaps my part in all things."

"Do not be so certain, Master Im," Kataree told him. "I shall inform my father you are on your way."

"And you are not?"

"Not yet. I think I need to go with Marana and Saj for now." She tilted her head, giving Nedos a looking over. "And this captain of the sea."

"So that leaves you, Nanos," said Im. It was difficult to infer anything from his tone.

"I would go with you, if I might," the wizard answered. "As far or as long as you are willing. I think — I think I have much to learn, Master Im."

"That is for certain." The old man's voice dripped sarcasm.

Nanos laughed good-naturedly. "Maybe I can learn how you managed to live so long. A thousand years is unheard of!"

Im laughed as well, for the first time in days. "Had I not spent a

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little time in the realm of a god, and eaten and drank and, yes, screwed there, I might not have lived quite so long.”

“With Xido?” asked Saj.

“Even so, my boy. I promise to go and talk sense to Kambak, so he will not pester you again. I think he will see reason.”

“It is enough,” said Saj, “that he won’t be having Nanos send anymore sea serpents after me.”

~

“We had word of a small galley preying on ships over this way,” said Captain Nedos. He looked down at the two white hounds at his companion’s heels. “That pair surely devours more than their share of rations. We’d best get back to the coast before we run out.”

“No more than your sergeant,” objected Kataree. That fellow was rather large in all directions.

“True enough,” the sailor admitted. “We took their ship where they had harbored it, with only a skeleton crew aboard. Those we hanged, after, ah, questioning them about their booty. Alas, it had already been sent off to the Pirate King’s lair.” He shrugged rather elegantly. “We came looking for the rest of the crew but also found a greater treasure.”

Kataree is eating this up, thought Marana. She had known Nedos since she was a girl and knew his ways as well. She must talk to this innocent.

“I suspect you killed the one man who might have known of any other hidden booty,” said Kataree. “Your men could have grabbed him without your display of swordsmanship.”

Oh, maybe not eating it up quite so much! “That is so,” he admitted. “But it would have been less fun.”

“Pleasure after business,” spoke up Saj.

“I like that,” Marana told him. “Someone should write it down.”

“You’ll have all the paper and ink you need tomorrow,” promised

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Nedos. "One more night on the road before I can offer the hospitality of my ship — once again."

~

"I — I love it," whispered Kataree. "I thought it would be like Gladsa but it is so much more." She stood looking out over the sea, the first sea she had ever seen.

"There's my ship," Nedos told her, pointing out the galley. "That smaller black one belonged to the pirates."

It was indeed not much of a port, Saj could see. A broad shallow bay open to the waves and weather of the Great Sea. There were better places to bring in a ship on the other side of the point far to their east, along the shores of the Gulf of Matan. Beyond that point lay a chain of isles, including the great Ussan they had coasted on their trip to Lorj. It was down that chain the Ildin had come to Lorj, to this very bay, Im had told them.

"I must sail on the sea," the girl firmly stated. "Ah, my father will be disappointed that I do not intend to return right away."

"But I would have been disappointed had you, my lady," came Nedos's reply. "Besides, there are none to accompany you. I think your father — Ardis, no? — I think your father expected this."

"I suppose," she said. "I'll tell him soon. Let's go on down to the water."

She should talk to Im or Nanos, too, thought Saj. Maybe it would be worth learning to do this. He missed the old wizard already — but not the dangers into which he had led them!

"It must be wonderful to live on the sea," said Kataree as they descended toward the little port village. Probably used mostly by fishermen, Saj decided.

"To live by the sea, yes," the captain replied. "But on it? One can grow weary of that life. One can desire to settle down somewhere." He stared out over the vast expanse of the Great Sea. "I am leaving my

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post in the navy,” he said. “There was no further advancement for me there.”

“Back to Sharsh?” asked Marana.

“As a younger son of a small landowner? No, my dear. I have been offered a position to serve as second to the Dux in Nota. Only now did I finally decide to take it.”

“I hear it is not much of a town,” offered Saj.

“But a good harbor. It will grow.”

Of course Saj had once had just such thoughts about the place. “We must come and visit you sometime,” he said.

“I dreamed last night,” Saj whispered to a barely awake Marana.

“Mmm, that’s nice. Oh.” She sat up. “One of your prophetic dreams?”

“Yes. I saw many interesting things. Some of them I should report to our captain.” And some he was sure he shouldn’t.

Their bed was on the captain’s galley. It was the same cabin and same bed they had slept in those months ago. “We’re to get underway this morning,” said Marana, yawning. “Why don’t you go bother Nedos before he is too busy and give me some privacy?”

Saj eyed the slop-bucket. “Shall I empty that?”

“I need it. You can dump it overboard later.”

He was not entirely surprised to see Kataree already standing beside the captain when he reached the deck. His visions last night led him to expect such things — as had things he had seen recently while awake. He walked up to the man and began speaking without preamble. “I had visions last night,” he stated. “There are dangers, near and soon.”

“I am told I should believe such claims,” said Nedos. “Not so long ago I might have scoffed and sent you back to your cabin. Speak.”

“The Pirate King has wind of you and sends a fleet this way,” Saj reported.

It was Kataree who responded first. “But it is not the captain he seeks, is it? He is in league with Dxukur.”

Saj nodded gravely. “We bring danger to you, Nedos.”

“They want those damnable Eyes you carry, right? That’s why those pirates went inland.”

“Yes. But whatever reasons there might be, they are headed this way and it might be best to get moving.” Saj’s eyes went to the smaller galley alongside, the former pirate vessel. “Would you mind if I went aboard that ship before we leave? It also entered my dreams last night.”

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“Half an hour and no more,” stated the captain. “Do you need a gangplank?”

“Not going — but I might coming back!” With that, he shinnied across the gap between the ships on one of the lines connecting them. “Tell Marana where I am, won’t you, Kataree?” he called from the smaller galley.

Down to the captain’s cabin. Saj had seen this way but could probably have found it regardless. Rather lavish. He wouldn’t mind having that chair. There, in the cabin wall. A catch somewhere. Ah, there it was. A section of the paneling folded down. Behind were several leather bags. Not as big as he remembered from the dream, but big enough. But how to get them back unobtrusively?

Saj stepped out into the open again. Buckets. Every ship had buckets. It didn’t take long to find a pair of good, commodious ones, oak staved. He returned to the cabin and filled them. Plenty of room — ah, but they were heavy! He tucked a rather dainty-looking pillow into the top of each. Let onlookers think he was stealing furnishings. Then back up to the deck.

Good, Nedos had put a gangplank out between the ships. There was no way he could have carried these across a rope. A few curious stares as he crossed over. “Come look at these, Kataree,” he called. “The captain needs to give his attention to getting us out of here. And,” he continued in a lower voice when she was by his side, “he may need our help soon.”

Girl following, he hauled his booty down to his own cabin and spilled the bags out onto the bed. “Hmm, gold in this one,” he said, opening one pouch.

“This one is full of jewels,” said Kataree, peeking into another. So it was with all five bags he had retrieved.

“The pirate captain’s private stash,” he said. “Holding some back from his crew, maybe, and from his Pirate King.” Saj looked up at the wide-eyed girl. “I intend to share this with you, Kataree. You get half.”

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“This should get us a few tools for you to use back in Lanlaz,” commented Marana.

“Just my thought, wife of mine.”

~

“We are not going to outrun the pirate fleet, you know,” Saj whispered to Kataree. The two stood near the rear of Nedos’s galley, looking out over the sea. “We need only to get a few leagues into the Gulf of Matan, probably. They are unlikely to pursue us far there.”

The sails of that pirate fleet had been glimpsed in the mid-morning. It was near noon now and they crept ever closer.

“So we must work a magic?” she asked.

“Mostly you,” replied Saj. “You are better at such things. But we can both go into the Eyes and use them to help us. And,” he said, a bit hesitantly, “we both have some of Im’s knowledge in our heads. I haven’t sorted it out much. In fact, I’ve pretty much blocked most of it.”

“I haven’t had much time to work through it either,” she admitted. “The Eyes should help us.”

So Saj had thought. He couldn’t begin to attempt anything magical on his own, even if he did seem to have a modest talent. But he could go into the Jewels of the Elements with this gifted young woman, help her the best he might.

There were great things in Kataree’s future. He had glimpsed that. It was enough that he could be a part of that now and go live a normal life with his Marana. That would come. All these things he had seen.

Indeed, his mother had seen some of them, years ago. And his mother was no liar!

“Let’s go down to your cabin and begin,” said Kataree.

Marana had been waiting, knowing what he intended. The mystic jewels were laid out on their bed, on the undyed wool blanket, shining from within. He wouldn’t have seen that light in them not so long ago. Marana could not see it now.

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They fell into that place lit by the jewels easily. It felt familiar now. It might not even be necessary to go further; Kataree could draw power and do what was needed. *I think a fog would be handy*, he said.

It would have to be a very great fog, the girl replied. *Not just pulling in a little as we normally might.*

That is why we need the Eyes, Saj said. He was not certain whether he was right about any of this.

I could call light, also, to dazzle, she said.

Yes. We could bring all sorts of things. I was thinking too small. I wish I could bring Xido here, he told himself. A monstrous crocodile would be just the thing.

A crocodile? asked Kataree.

I didn't know I said that aloud.

I think I saw it in your mind. We are linked forever you know. At least when we are in these stones.

They went at it, first drawing copious fogs around their ships. It would be better if they could draw them around the pirate ships, Saj decided, but that was beyond his capabilities. Just this taxed him.

Kataree decided on some lightning. That could be directed toward the pirates or at least toward their general vicinity. Saj doubted any ships were hit but it might at least disorient their pursuers. The same with the flashes of light they brought, briefly opening ways to the suns of other worlds. Again, it would have worked better if it were closer to the pirates. It might be disorienting their own crew as much or more. Marana had gone above to reassure them and Nedos that magic was being worked for their defense, but such knowledge only goes so far.

He almost missed the other presence. Kataree was too involved to notice it at all. *Dxukur*, he said.

The Wizard-Lord seemed distant, disembodied. He can't enter this place, not completely anyway, Saj thought. *You can not stop my allies*, said the sorcerer. *They will take your ship. They will take the Jewels of the*

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Elements. They have no wizard with them so I can not ask them not to take you, Kataree. I am saddened by this.

Don't let him distract you, spoke Saj. That is his only power here. He looked into himself, not into the knowledge that had come from Im, but that which had been with him since a child, the things his mother had taught him. I can block him, he thought, so — and he did. The wizard's presence faded.

Nicely done, commented Kataree. Help me pull in more fog.

I think we need to go into the Eyes, he responded. All the way.

I fear this, she said.

Not half as much as I do!

Into that other place, where light swirled, where reality swirled. *Im is here, in a way, the sorceress said. So is the seer he once loved.*

And so is Xido, spoke Saj. He could almost feel the little god's presence. A voice?

Sssaj? It was a deep, half-asleep, not-quite-human voice.

Xido. Is that truly you?

I — I am Xiido. I swim. I sleep.

We speak to the mind of the crocodile, Kataree murmured.

The pirates pursue us, Friend Xido. Friend Xit.

Eeeeat piratessss. Was that actually a crocodilian chuckle? Not Qala.

Help us if you can, Xit. We have to fight. He closed himself to the voice. Xido would be of no use today. If he even understood, he might swim in some sea a thousand miles away.

He helped Kataree pull more fog. It was easier where they 'stood' now. Smoke. That was even better, though it might choke them and the sailors they attempted to save. He saw distant volcanoes and pulled their discharges toward his own world. Would any of it work?

The ship rocked sharply over. Saj was jarred out of his trance, and Kataree a moment later. The Eyes had spilled onto the floor. He scooped them up. There was still violent motion. Had the seas grown so rough?

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And should they return to the Eyes? “I’ll check quickly,” he told his companion. What a sight from the deck! Patches of fog and smoke clung to the waves around them. The galley’s deck itself was thick with soot. If only he could have pulled in hot volcanic discharge against their enemy but it would surely have fallen on their own ship as well.

“There it is,” cried out a sailor. “It’s going after the other one!”

A pair of pirate ships were close, too close, within arrow range maybe. But one appeared — what? Crushed? As if someone had smacked its side with a great hammer. His eyes followed where the sailor pointed. There, a great dark reptilian form rising out of the water and falling on a ship. “Xido,” he murmured. “I thank you.”

~

“Both ships safe and not much the worse for wear,” said Nedos. “I am not sure how much I have to thank you two for, but I am pretty certain you played a part.” He surveyed his crew, busily scrubbing the decks clean. “I also think maybe I should put you to work cleaning up some of this mess.”

Kataree giggled. Saj noted that Nedos liked that giggle. “I think I am responsible for most of that,” she confessed. “But we must blame Saj for the volcanoes.”

“It seemed a good idea at the time.”

“It was,” she agreed. “But it was calling your — friend that saved us. He is a god, isn’t he?”

“So he claims.” Saj wondered where the great crocodile was now. Was Xido again swimming along, mindless, forgetting his godhood?

No matter. He pulled Marana close to him. “Headed to Lanlaz at last,” he said.

“We’ll be sailing down the coast to my new posting,” said Nedos. “I’ll take you at least that far.”

“So it would seem we are to see Nota after all.” And Kataree would accompany them that far. No further, maybe — he had seen Kataree

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and Nedos together, and many children. There was no need to tell anyone of that. Not even Marana.

Saj scratched at his beard. "I think I will shave this off," he said.

"It is about time," his wife replied.

EPILOGUE

UP AND DOWN

On the Lorjan shore, a small and lean black-skinned man pulled himself out of the sea. Just where am I? he asked himself. I think I was drawn here somehow. He looked down at his wet naked body. Hmm, I've been a crocodile, haven't I? How long? Maybe I should see if any old friends are alive.

He stood for a moment, seeking. Im. I won't bother him. Yes, I am sure I meant to come to this coast for some reason, but best to go home now. He poked a hole in the fabric of being and disappeared.

AFTERWORD

I hope you have enjoyed THE JEWELS OF THE ELEMENTS. This tale is a sequel to THE EYES OF THE WIND, and is set in the world of my DONZALO'S DESTINY sequence, but thirteen or so centuries earlier. The technological level is meant to be similar to that of Late Antiquity or the very beginning of the Medieval period.

The magic, however, is the same. These novels serve as a sort of bridge between my Malvern books and the Donzalo ones, but it is not necessary to read any of those to understand this one. Of course, I hope you will!

It is most likely that Marana and Saj will settle down to a peaceful life now and prosper in their new home of Lanlaz. Their sons, however, just might show up in future stories.

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Author Stephen Brooke lives in an old farmhouse in the Florida Panhandle. For all his writing, novels, poetry, nonfiction, children's books, visit the Arachis Press.

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